



Deselection from elite Australian football as the catalyst for a return to sub-elite competitions: when elite players feel there is 'still more to give.'

Deborah Agnew, Andrew Marks, Philippa Henderson & Carl Woods

To cite this article: Deborah Agnew, Andrew Marks, Philippa Henderson & Carl Woods (2018) Deselection from elite Australian football as the catalyst for a return to sub-elite competitions: when elite players feel there is 'still more to give.', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 10:1, 117-136, DOI: [10.1080/2159676X.2017.1380074](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2017.1380074)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2017.1380074>



Published online: 18 Sep 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 251



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



Deselection from elite Australian football as the catalyst for a return to sub-elite competitions: when elite players feel there is 'still more to give.'

Deborah Agnew^a, Andrew Marks^b, Philippa Henderson^a and Carl Woods^c

^aSchool of Education, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia; ^bWest Adelaide Football Club, Adelaide, Australia;

^cDiscipline of Sport and Exercise Science, James Cook University, Townsville City, Australia

ABSTRACT

Career transitions in sport are inevitable and can be normative or non-normative. Thus, retirement experiences are significantly dependent on how the athletes perceive the circumstances surrounding their retirement. While the discontinuation of a sports career is an important transition, it is not the only transition faced by athletes. The aim of this study therefore, was to investigate the experiences of Australian footballers who are deselected from elite competition and return to sub-elite competitions. This study utilises narrative inquiry through a life history approach to explore the transition experiences of Australian footballers who return to the South Australian National Football League (SANFL) sub-elite competition. Ten footballers took part in semi-structured interviews covering topics including experiences in the national Australian Football League competition, the difficulties faced by footballers during the transition process back to the SANFL competition, the support needed by footballers during this period and the responsibility for player well-being. Lacking control over the timing of their transition compounds the loss experienced by the footballers. However, returning to state based competition offers important avenues for the reconnection of former support networks which can be a protective factor in achieving a smooth transition out of elite sport. This study highlights that the current processes for maintaining contact and supporting transitioning footballers are ineffective therefore proposes that the development of an exit transition programme would be beneficial.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 January 2017

Accepted 12 September 2017

KEYWORDS

Career transitions; sports retirement; narrative inquiry; Australian football; elite sport; athlete welfare

Introduction

Australian football is a sport that is uniquely Australian. The elite level Australian Football League (AFL) competition is full time paid employment for players (Hess and Stewart 1998, Kelly and Hickey 2008, 2010) whereas second tier competitions such as the South Australian National Football League (SANFL), West Australian Football League (WAFL) and Victorian Football League (VFL), while paid, are semi-professional (Palmer 2010) and not considered full-time employment (which the remuneration reflects). Participants in the sub-elite leagues often have a full-time vocation in other industries in addition to playing in these competitions (Turner 2014). In order to become an elite level Australian footballer young men enter a national draft, typically in their late teens and early 20s with the aim of being contracted to one of 18 clubs that make up the national (AFL) competition. Hickey and Kelly (2008) suggest that

the pathways leading to being drafted (contracted) to an AFL team allow young men to develop a firm belief that they can make a successful career from football. The reality is that less than 10% develop long and sustainable careers in the elite national competition and extend their careers beyond 10 years or 200 games (Hawthorne 2005, Johnson 2014).

Hickey and Kelly (2005) state that from the moment a young man is drafted to an AFL club, he is constantly being told to prepare for life after sport through mandatory player development programmes. These programmes are conducted by the AFL Players' Association who is the advocating body for elite Australian footballers (AFL Players' Association 2013). Therefore tensions exist between the acknowledged need to pursue interests outside of football and the desire to give the sport 'everything' in order to succeed (Hickey and Kelly 2005). Retirement from elite sport can be voluntary or involuntarily through deselection or injury. Those who are able to voluntarily retire from the national elite level Australian football competition experience smoother transitions into life after sport than those who are delisted from their AFL club or are forced into retirement through injury (Fortunato and Gilbert 2003, Kelly and Hickey 2008, Agnew 2011). Depending on the surrounding circumstances the athlete is faced with the decision to stop playing immediately or to transition into life after sport and continue playing at lower or sub-elite levels of the sport until complete retirement at a later date (Ellis 2015). Fortunato and Gilbert (2003) found that footballers who had been deselected from AFL teams still had a desire to remain involved in the sport which had been an integral part of their life. Therefore it is plausible that if deselected footballers are unable to secure a place on another team in the elite competition, they may continue their involvement in sub-elite competitions because they wish to remain involved in the sport.

A report by Professional Footballers Australia (2015) stated that sporting bodies in Australia are not adequately looking after their retired players, particularly given that one in five retiring athletes experiences significant difficulty transitioning out of elite sports competition. Their report into the transition experiences of soccer players in Australia found that almost half of transitioning players indicated difficult to very difficult experiences when leaving the elite competition, one in five had chronic health problems from sport, 65% indicated a negative impact on their ability to study due to elite sport commitment and almost 20% experienced mental health and well-being issues (Professional Footballers Australia 2015). Ellis (2015) states that retiring athletes are most vulnerable to mental health and well-being issues when they retire from sport. The loss experienced by athletes at the end of their elite career has been likened to the same loss people feel as they grieve the loss of a loved one (Ellis 2015). Given Australian football is the most popular of the football codes in Australia, it is arguable that because of the popularity of the sport and the hero status afforded to the players (Fortunato and Marchant 1999), the experiences of transitioning soccer players may be heightened in transitioning Australian footballers, yet very little is known about their experiences.

The average AFL career is approximately 6 years (Heffernan 2014), therefore, the men are relatively young when retirement from elite competitions occurs. A significant issue for retiring footballers is not that they cannot do anything else but they do not *want* to do anything else (Kelly and Hickey 2008). Given the average career is relatively short, and therefore the men have a significant period in which to forge an alternative career (McPherson 1980), not being prepared for the subsequent career can perpetuate the difficulties faced through the transition period.

Deselection from the team can be considered a non-normative transition (because it is less predictable) and is the most common cause of forced retirement from elite sport (Petitpas 2009, Stambulova 2010). Deselected athletes often face the most difficult transitions because they have little control over the career transition process (Wylleman *et al.* 2004, Stambulova *et al.* 2009). Elite sports careers can provide athletes with a culturally valued position in society, prestige and a high income (Butt and Molnar 2009), therefore forcing athletes to retire through deselection can mean the loss of these valued characteristics. Petitpas (2009) states that the group most vulnerable to difficult transitions out of sport are the athletes who are not guaranteed regular selection on the team. Fear of deselection can cause the athletes to dedicate even more focus to their sporting career in attempt to prolong their careers, thus planning for life after sport is further delayed (Petitpas *et al.* 1992, Petitpas 2009). Butt and Molnar (2009) argue that when an athlete is no longer perceived to be capable of fulfilling the demands of sport,

they have failed, regardless of how successful their sports careers have actually been. This perception can heighten the difficulties faced by deselected athletes whose exit from sport may be unexpected, abrupt and potentially humiliating (Butt and Molnar 2009).

Athletes forced into retirement often face greater emotional and social adjustment difficulties because they have little control or choice over the circumstances (Lavallee *et al.* 2000). Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) stated that retiring athletes can experience a 'social death' because they are isolated from their former in-group. For footballers, being socially isolated is problematic because the demands of football subordinate all other aspects of life (such as study, alternate employment and relationships) (Kelly and Hickey 2008), and so the transitioning or retiring footballer not only loses their employment but also a significant proportion of their friends and support networks as well (Kelly and Hickey 2008, Agnew 2011). While the footballer is contracted to the club, his well-being is a key priority for the organisation. However upon the termination of the contract the club absolves itself of responsibility at the very time the footballer is most vulnerable (Ellis 2015). Schwab (2014) acknowledges that those who supported the footballer during his career still care but suggests this care is without the former eagerness and urgency that is now required because they no longer have any contractual responsibility for the athlete. Athletes must then ask for help during this difficult time which they are often not prepared to do (Agnew 2011).

Park *et al.* (2013) state that career transition literature has evolved from the consequences of retirement sport to differentiating between transition types within the life course of a sports career. In addition, they suggest the literature recognises that transition can occur within sports careers and not solely out of elite competition. For example, Lavallee *et al.* (2000) state that athletes can move up, down or horizontally across the sports system. However, of the research that discusses transitions at the end of careers, very little considers the option to continue playing at semi-professional or non-elite levels. The current body of literature suggests that athletes leave sport entirely which contradicts Hickey and Kelly's (2008) assertion that end of career transitions are a process. Only one thesis (Huang 2002) and one book (Fortunato and Gilbert 2003) has been found that examines athletes' continued involvement in sport following retirement from elite competition.

The experiences of athletes who leave elite sport but continue to compete in lower grades are therefore unknown. There is no literature on Australian footballers who decide to continue their sports careers in sub-elite competitions such as the state based competitions SANFL, VFL and the WAFL. This research therefore adds important insights into the experiences of these footballers which may inform the availability of support services during the transition period. Understanding the transition process from AFL football to sub-elite competitions may provide important information for organisations, such as the AFL Players' Association (AFLPA), to assist in developing programmes for these young men, irrespective of how many games they have played. Research on who is responsible for the well-being of transitioning players is scarce, therefore this study offers an important and unique insight into transitions through, and retirement from, sport.

This study was an investigation into the transition experiences of elite Australian footballers who transitioned out of the national level AFL competition to the second-tier state based competition, the SANFL. It investigated the current culture and practices of elite level AFL football and explores findings that suggest that the current approaches leave young men unprepared for life after elite sport.

The research questions were:

- (1) What are the transition experiences of footballers who return to state based (sub-elite) competitions following a career in elite Australian football?
- (2) Who is responsible for the well-being of transitioning Australian footballers?
- (3) How does the culture of Australian football contribute to difficult transitions?

Methodology

Gordon and Lavalée (2012) state that traditionally, sports transition research has been conducted using theories from outside of the sporting context. Most notably, social gerontology, or ageing theories of activity, disengagement, subculture, continuity, social breakdown and exchange have been used to explain the athlete transition process and difficulties associated in adjusting to life after sport (McPherson 1980).

Another common theory traditionally applied through sports retirement research is thanatology, or the study of dying. This theory has some relevance to sports retirement through the development of career assistance or counselling programmes (Gordon and Lavalée 2012).

Coakley (2006) and Kelly and Hickey (2008) argue that retirement from sport should be viewed as a process rather than as a single moment. A successful transition through the retirement process can take anywhere between a few months and several years (Stambulova 1994, Brandão *et al.* 2001, Agnew 2011). Therefore, both thanatology and social gerontology theories which perceive retirement as a single moment (Gordon and Lavalée 2012) are limited in their ability to provide insight into sports retirement. Further, Gordon and Lavalée (2012) maintain that retirement from sport is not necessarily an entirely negative event which further restricts the applicability of both of these theories. This echoes Coakley (1983) who stated that retirement can provide the opportunity to pursue other activities that were not possible during their athletic careers.

More recent sports retirement literature considers transition models as an avenue through which to understand the experiences of retiring athletes. Grove and Lavalée (2012) state that career transition research does not currently include stage-in-a-life-cycle concepts with regard to sports transitions. They suggest that investigation of this may be a useful addition to the current body of literature on sports transition research. The current study investigates the experiences of athletes who may have involuntarily retired from the national competition and return to state-based competitions, therefore they have not yet transitioned fully into life after sport. For the context of this study, narrative inquiry utilising a life-history approach (which can potentially capture the state-in-a-life-cycle influences) provided an appropriate avenue through which the transition process could be understood.

Narrative inquiry involves the telling of people's lived experiences through stories which occur within specific places or situations (Webster and Mertova 2007, Creswell 2012). Life histories are part of narrative inquiry and allow for individual or group stories to be told in order to gain an understanding of individual or group experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell 2012). Qualitative descriptive studies often draw on the general principles of naturalistic inquiry, in that there are no pre-selection or manipulation of variables to study, but rather a commitment to study something in its natural state (Sandelowski 2000). The narrative inquiry from a life course perspective captured the men's reflections of their elite football career, and their transition experiences from elite sport to sub-elite football competitions.

Narrative research is a particularly useful method for this study as it allows for the understanding of experience and the ways in which the meaning associated with these experiences change (Webster and Mertova 2007). One of the benefits of narrative research is that it allows for meanings to be created and highlighted therefore the personal and social experiences athletes face can be explored (Smith and Sparkes 2009). In this study, it is the athletes' experiences of the transition process that are investigated with the aim of understanding what challenges and opportunities deselection from elite sport brings. Further, retirement from sport is personal as are narratives (Smith and Sparkes 2009). Given athletes who return to sub-elite competitions following deselection are an under-researched group, narrative research allows for the collection of detailed, personalised stories to be gathered to provide important understanding of their lived experiences.

Participants

Ten footballers, who had retired from the AFL and were currently playing in the senior team of an SANFL football club, took part in this study. The footballers were aged between 20 and 31 years of age and had played in the national AFL competition for between 1 and 8 years. Three of the footballers, while drafted to an AFL side had not played a game in the elite competition and only 2 had played over 100 AFL games. Nine of the footballers were forced into retirement from the national AFL competition through being deselected from the AFL team and one chose to return to the SANFL after contract negotiations with their AFL team did not conclude satisfactorily. The AFL careers of all participants ended at the conclusion of the AFL season between October and December. Participants were recruited purposefully (Patton 2002) through the football managers in the SANFL clubs who invited the footballers to take part in the study and provided the contact details of the researchers to those who were interested. The football managers were provided with an information letter detailing the study which was forwarded to the footballers in their clubs who had played in the national AFL competition.

Procedures

Participants took part in a semi-structured interview which lasted between 28 min and 1 h. The length of the interview was influenced by the comfort level of the participant with the topics and the level of self-reflection they felt was necessary (Polkinghorne 1989). A semi-structured interview guide was utilised to ensure similar questions were asked of participants, however also allowed for the interview to be directed by participants depending upon their responses (Patton 1990). Each interview explored topics including experiences in the national AFL competition, the difficulties faced by footballers during the transition process back to the SANFL competition, the support needed by footballers during this period and the responsibility for player well-being. Example questions included: 'Can you tell me about life as an AFL footballer?'; 'what were the circumstances surrounding your retirement?'; 'Can you tell me about life after AFL football?'; and 'what issues/difficulties have you faced since leaving AFL football?'. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participant and transcribed verbatim. Transcription of the data elicited 127 pages of transcription totalling 64,125 words. The average pages per interview was 12.7 and approximately 6412 words.

Analysis

Bold (2012) argues that there are multiple strategies for analysing and presenting qualitative data and the analysis may begin at any point within an iterative process. The most common method of narrative analysis is the general approach (Riessman 2008). Through this method, the form of the narrative is not the important aspect, rather the thematic meaning of the text is what interests the researchers. A thematic analysis is useful where participants may have similar lived experiences and the common components across research participants is sought (Riessman 2005, Bold 2012). Individual stories are grouped together through thematic categories and occurs retrospectively after all the data has been collected (Riessman 2008, Bold 2012). Using this content analysis, the independent themes that emerge from a narrative are contextualised (Smith and Sparkes 2012). In thematically analysing narrative data, Riessman (2005) suggests the 'emphasis is on the content of a text, "what" is said more than "how" it is said, the "told" rather than the "telling"' (p. 1).

The data were analysed through the three step inductive thematic analysis process outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). Following the line by line coding of the individual interview transcripts the codes were arranged into descriptive themes. These initial themes were then analysed in accordance with the research questions to provide a data synthesis approach to the analysis (Thomas and Harden 2008). Through this process initial themes may be merged or separated to provide a more complete overview of the emerging concepts (Thomas and Harden 2008).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is achieved when 'researchers show that their data were ethically and mindfully collected, analysed, and reported' (Carlson 2010, p. 1110). This study exceeded Creswell's recommendation of a minimum of two (of eight potential) strategies identified to be utilised to ensure validity in qualitative research (Creswell and Miller 2000, Creswell 2013). The three strategies used in this study were member checking, peer review or debriefing, and the establishment of an audit trail.

According to Harper and Cole (2012) member checking is an 'important quality control process' in qualitative research (p. 1). The benefits of member checking include the ability to verify the information and the interpretation and representation of the data are accurate and complete (Harper and Cole 2012). However, while Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated the most important criterion for credibility in qualitative research is member checking, more recent critiques have highlighted that this method of establishing trustworthiness can be ineffective (Smith and McGannon 2017). In particular, questions have been raised regarding the ability of both researcher and participant to independently separate themselves from the social reality, therefore it is difficult to establish objective knowledge through member checking (Braun and Clarke 2013, Denzin 2017, Smith and McGannon 2017). Despite these highlighted shortcomings in using member checking, the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council 2015) states that respect for participants should be considered through requiring that 'the accuracy or completeness of each interview transcript should be verified by the relevant participant before analysis is complete' (p. 23). In addition, Rager (2005) and Harper and Cole (2012) have highlighted that the benefits of member checking extend beyond establishing methodological rigour and offer participants a therapeutic benefit that their feelings are validated. Therefore, in order to adhere to the national ethical standards, in this study, the member checking process involved participants being provided with a copy of their interview transcript (appropriate informed consent was gained at the time of the interview) and invited to contact the researcher to request changes. No such requests were made, indicating that the transcripts were considered to be accurate representations.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the debrief or peer review process as involving external checks. For example, the peer reviewer role includes questioning the researchers' methods, meanings and interpretations and acting as a sympathetic listener for the researcher (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Creswell 2013). Throughout this study, the primary researcher (DA) maintained regular contact with an established Australian expert in player welfare to discuss the process and findings. In this way, the researchers have adopted a critical friend to engage in the dialogue through the reflective process, rather than rely on inter-coder reliability and agreement to establish rigour (Smith and McGannon 2017).

An audit trail is recommended by Ary *et al.* (2010) as a means to ensure trustworthiness and dependability in the research process. Thus, an audit trail was also established in this study with detailed records kept in a well organised and retrievable form which including written accounts of meetings with the key expert, details about decisions about who, what, and why to interview, the hypothesis developed from raw data and the subsequent refinement, and the coding process.

Results and discussion

This article is part of a larger project on the transition experiences of Australian footballers who leave the elite AFL system but continue to play at sub-elite levels. The scope of this paper is limited to the initial transition period out of the AFL system and the responsibility for player welfare during this period. Three themes emerged from the data relating to the transition experiences of elite Australian footballers; (i) unfinished business, (ii) difficulties faced alone and (iii) responsibility. Each of these themes had several sub-themes which will be discussed in detail below. Burnard (2004) and Burnard *et al.* (2008) state that in qualitative research there are two common approaches for reporting the data: reporting the findings on their own with a separate discussion section or; combining the findings and discussion together.

For this paper the findings and discussion have been combined in order to discuss the results as they are presented (Pitchforth *et al.* 2005).

Unfinished business

A common thread throughout participants' narratives was the belief by the footballers that despite their elite careers being over, they were not yet finished playing sport. All 10 participants acknowledged a significant influencing factor in the decision to return to the sub-elite competition was that they felt physically and mentally capable of playing at a high level. Continuing to play in a high quality competition for some was also perceived by half of the participants ($n = 5$) as a means to an end in assisting them to get back to the elite level.

Still capable of playing at the highest level

One of the difficulties faced by deselected athletes is the dissatisfaction with their elite sports achievements (Hatamleh 2013). For the men in the current study, being deselected from an AFL club meant they had little control over the timing of their retirement and provided a strong factor in the decision to return to the SANFL and keep playing. A recurring notion throughout the 10 interviews was that the decision to come back to SANFL was due to still wanting to play football at the highest level. If that was not the AFL, then playing in a high quality competition like the SANFL was the next best option. The men described wanting to continue to challenge themselves at the highest level, and since they felt physically capable of continuing to play they should 'get the best' out of themselves while they still had the ability. The following narrative summarises the common desire to compete and motivations for returning for the SANFL:

Interviewer: Why did you choose to go back to the SANFL competition?

Participant 2: I still wanted to play at a high level and I still wanted to test myself and to prove to people that I could still play pretty good footy ...

Interviewer: Is that because you started here?

Participant 2: Yeah so I originally started at [name of club] and they gave me the flick in Under 17s and I moved to [new club] from there. They gave me an opportunity and I just wanted to come back and sort of repay the favour so it's been good.

Playing at the highest level possible was a key determinant in the decision to play in a state-based league such as the SANFL as opposed to playing with a country football team where the financial reward would be significantly higher (Agnew *et al.* 2016). It was recognised by the majority of footballers that opportunities to play football at the highest level are limited therefore they should make the most of the opportunity. As described by one of the footballers who had recently been deselected and was returning to the SANFL for the upcoming season:

Interviewer: So what made you decide to come back to SANFL as opposed to doing nothing or playing country footy?

Participant 1: I just thought I was, I felt my body was too good and I was too young to go out into the country and not play at the highest level. I'm pretty keen to go back there and play with my friends back home but that's not going to go anywhere. So I just thought I still want to get the best out of myself and push my body. So you don't get to play at the highest level too often so this is the highest level I can play it at the moment so I might as well.

Other factors in the decision to keep playing football included wanting to lay the foundation for a career in football (in a role other than football player), ($n = 2$) for financial reasons ($n = 2$) and because they still enjoyed playing football ($n = 10$). In a systematic review of career transition literature, Park *et al.* (2013) confirmed that financial strain can cause more difficult transitions into life after sport. This is confirmed through the current study in which financial reasons provided a strong motivating factor in returning to state-based competitions. At the time of their deselection 8 men in this study had not yet

completed qualifications in an alternative area, therefore while not full time employment, playing in the SANFL provided at least some income while they searched for employment elsewhere. In justifying why he did not withdraw from football completely after his deselection one of the men who had played over 100 AFL games stated:

Interviewer: So what made you decide to come back to SANFL instead of just quitting footy altogether?

Participant: Because I still wanted to play at a good level of football and I still love playing footy and I've - still want to play at the highest level possible but probably aside from that setting myself up to stay involved in football as well once I've finished playing so certainly being in the role that I've been in this year under [development manager] and that's opened a few doors and I've learned a lot but yeah if I didn't play footy I probably would have struggled financially to get through the year.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant 7: It's - yeah it's - I don't want to say I'm sort of trapped into footy but it does sort of feel like if I just quit playing football to get a - it's sort of like well where do you got to because I know football and I can sort of work in the football industry but apart from that I'd be doing labouring jobs or stacking shelves or something.

For the footballers who had moved interstate to play AFL, coming back to play in the SANFL was partly due to coming 'home' ($n = 5$). Returning to the SANFL clubs they were originally drafted from also enabled them to reconnect with former teammates who were still playing at the SANFL level which assisted in the transition out of the AFL. The reconnection with former teammates provides an important avenue through which social support can be gained, which can alleviate the isolation felt by transitioning athletes (McKnight *et al.* 2009). In addition, playing football gave the men an avenue through which to stay busy. It is well recognised that the transition out of elite sport can be a difficult time for athletes which was echoed by participants in the current study (Taylor and Ogilvie 1994, Cević Erpič *et al.* 2004, Lavalley 2005, Park *et al.* 2013, Agnew and Drummond 2015a). For the men in this research, continuing to play at a sub-elite level provided a protective measure against engaging in not so positive behaviours. In the initial few weeks following their deselection all ten of the footballers recalled the difficulties with 'doing nothing for a while,' which meant they had a significant amount of time to reflect on their situation. The lack of routine was also difficult to become accustomed to and so being involved in a semi-elite competition was one way to positively deal with the change in daily routine. As one of the men explained:

Interviewer: What made you decide to keep playing at VFL, or SANFL level? As opposed to just nothing, I don't want to do anymore footy?

Participant 10: I guess I still wanted to - I guess the first year or two out I did want to still probably get drafted and get back in. So I did want to play at a reasonably high level, so that was definitely part of it. Yeah - so that was probably a driving motivation probably more than anything. And I wanted to get the most out of myself as well, and I didn't want to get to old, and think I left it all behind I want to try and be the best I can be at whatever level I can do it at.

Interviewer: Okay, did you find that, that helped you to transition out of AFL football?

Participant 10: It's good as in- in terms of you don't have too much time on your hands, and you want to stay fit, and all that sort of stuff. So that's a positive in terms- as I said before not having people around sort of keeping an eye on you., and that you can definitely get caught up in the drinking, and other things, nightlife, things that comes along with that. So it's is good to have that- something that keeps you in check a little bit, that sort of footy. And- yeah I think that's a good thing.

Trying to get back to AFL

Half of the participants in this research ($n = 5$) returned to the SANFL with the hope of getting redrafted back to the AFL. These footballers expressed a desire to still play at the highest level because they were relatively young when they were deselected, and therefore believed their AFL career could be revived. This supports Butt and Molnar's (2009) findings, whereby a significant difficulty associated with involuntary retirement from sport is the unrealised expectations. It is plausible that the distress faced

by deselected athletes is compounded not only by their perceived failure but the hindering of their career goals (Butt and Molnar 2009). However, in the current study the fact that their career goals had not been achieved proved to be the driving motivational factor, in their push to get back to the AFL level, rather than a source of distress. The SANFL was perceived by the footballers as being the premier state based competition, therefore returning to this league maximised their chances of being redrafted. When asked why they returned to the SANFL as a strategy to return to the AFL one footballer stated:

Interviewer: So did you – when you came back to the SANFL was that voluntary or you were delisted-?

Participant 3: So I got delisted and then nominated again and didn't get picked up, and yeah [SANFL club] expressed their interest so I decided I'd come back home and yeah so I moved back within a couple of weeks of after getting delisted.

Interviewer: Okay so why did you decide to come back to SANFL as opposed to just saying I'm not going to play football again?

Participant 3: Because I was only young, so in my mind I'm still trying to have another chance at playing at AFL, and I just thought SANFL in my opinion is the best state league in Australia. So I thought why not come back and if I can have a good year it might give me more of a higher change of getting picked up, and then also family and everyone's back here as well. So it made the decision a lot easier.

Having been in the AFL system once, all of the men who were hoping to be redrafted ($n = 5$) declared they would do things differently if they received a second chance. Participants discussed being more relaxed and applying a 'don't care' attitude to the AFL system should they be redrafted. However, the biggest change they would make would be regarding preparing for life after football so that if their career back in the AFL was not long they would be more financially secure than they currently are. Athletes who have adequately prepared for life after sport experience smoother transitions than those for whom retirement is unexpected (Fortunato and Gilbert 2003, Kelly and Hickey 2008, Agnew 2011). The importance of preparing for life after sport was confirmed by participants in this research who would have to go through the process again should they be re-establish their elite level careers. One of the footballers hoping to be redrafted stated:

Interviewer: Is there anything that you think you could have done to better prepare yourself for life after footy, or AFL footy?

Participant 3: Yeah just savings I think was a big one for me, sort of like I said you go from 18 years old and you've got all this money coming into your account you can, if you're not smart with your money you can blow a lot of it and I think that's what I – I didn't save up anywhere near as much as what I should have, but yeah. So that's probably the big one for me but still had fun along the way, which is one of the main one as well.

Interviewer: Okay. So if you had, if you got the chance to do it again, would you still go down the AFL path, or would you choose the apprenticeship?

Participant 3: I'd go AFL definitely, but like I said, I'd be a lot smarter with my investments and stuff like that. So say you do get delisted you've got a lot more savings to fall back on, and the fact you don't have a job isn't as crucial. But yeah, I'd definitely- AFL was an amazing experience and sort of changed my life, and changed me a person. So I would definitely do it again if I had the chance.

While the goal for half of the footballers was to be redrafted to the AFL, they were realistic about their chances of achieving this goal. The men stated their desire to get back to the AFL but also admitted that it would be very difficult for them to be redrafted back to the elite level competition. Therefore, subsequent goals for this group of footballers were to enjoy playing football in the SANFL, and compete at the highest level they were capable of with their friends. One of the footballers admitted:

Interviewer: Is the plan to play in the SANFL with the goal of getting back to AFL?

Participant 1: It's not the be all and end all but there's, I guess there's a possibility but I'm not expecting that or I'm not, I came here to yeah play at the highest level I can, have fun and I guess yeah still push myself to some sort of limit.

For the other five footballers however, getting re-drafted back to the national AFL competition was not the reason they returned to the SANFL. These men recognised that part of the reason they were deselected was due to injuries and therefore not being able to remain competitive within the AFL competition. Coming back to the SANFL provided an opportunity to still play football at a high level while allowing their body to recover from injuries. When asked whether he wanted to get re-drafted, one of the footballers who had sustained a lot of injuries which led to his deselection stated:

Interviewer: ... is one of your goals this year to play well and then re-enter the draft and try and get back to AFL?

Participant 9: No, that's not my goal. My goal is just to get my body right, as good as it can, which fingers crossed it is at the moment, have the best year I can have, and team wise I just want to win a premiership. I don't even really care personally, I just want to win a premiership and have good team success so that's my- getting drafted is not on the agenda for me.

While the cause for their retirement from elite sports competition was non-normative (Stambulova 2010), these findings suggest that the footballers who are not seeking a return to the AFL are working through the career termination stage in the life cycle of their careers. Ebaugh (1988) suggests the last stage of role exiting is the stage of creating the ex-role. While this stage can be difficult for athletes who are unable or unwilling to accept they are no longer athletes (Butt and Molnar 2009), for the footballers in this research returning to SANFL football has offered them a means through which they can maintain their athletic identity whilst negotiating the reconstruction of who they are away from sport.

Difficulties faced alone

It was highlighted through the footballers' narratives that the Australian football environment perpetuates a culture of silence. It was clear that retiring footballers must ask for help which they were not prepared to do. Petitpas (2009) states that deselected athletes may be more bitter towards their sports than athletes who are able to voluntarily retire, therefore this may further discourage footballers from asking for help from their sports organisation. This study found that it was common for footballers to attempt to face the issue alone which made the transition process more difficult. Eight footballers stated they did not want to ask for help from within the sport, nor did they want to burden their family and friends with their issues.

Asking for help

Eight of the participants in this research perceived help to be available to footballers who needed it, but recognised that the footballer had to ask for help and that this was not regularly done. The difficulties associated with being deselected from a football club began before the deselection actually occurred. Butt and Molnar (2009) state that involuntary retirement can often be abrupt and unexpected, therefore can heighten the distress experienced. However, some of the footballers ($n = 4$) in this study admitted their deselections did not come as a surprise and that the possibility of being 'cut' from the team was affecting their enjoyment of football. However, because they were concerned about how they would be perceived if they asked for help they kept quiet. This finding suggests that even if involuntary retirement is not unexpected, the lack of control over the timing of their retirement can still have negative consequences. Petitpas *et al.* (1992) stated that one area of support that is lacking for many athletes is emotional support. They claim that the support systems for athletes are generally aligned with competition rather than retirement. Reflecting back on the decisions they made, many of the footballers determined they should have asked for help but did not, which compounded the issues they were facing regarding the end of their AFL football careers.

Interviewer: Actually there's a lot of research to suggest that men don't tend to ask for help.

Participant 2: Well I must admit if found it difficult but I needed to talk to someone because like I had my girlfriend there at the time and I didn't want to upset her and talk to her about that sort of stuff but I just hated being there and thing life kind of thing, so I must admit it was very hard for me to go to up to [staff member] and say 'look I'm struggling a bit.' I can completely understand there are others out there

that would possibly be in the same position and not wanting to make that initial step and talk to someone about it but I must admit when I did start talking to those people from the AFLPA I felt a lot better- I was able to get a lot of stuff off my chest.

The concept of mandatory counselling or 'check-in' sessions with player welfare managers brought mixed reactions from participants. The men could see the value in meeting regularly with dedicated player welfare officers at the clubs but also recognised that there was an element of risk involved as well because a player might appear to others to be experiencing difficulties but may not perceived themselves as going through a difficult time. Two of the footballers argued there should be mandatory sessions as they believed this would lead to more of the men talking about their issues and therefore providing avenues of support. The following narrative highlights the two footballers' perceptions regarding having to ask for help:

Interviewer: Did anyone pick up on the fact that in your last year at the club that you were in a bad head space and if you needed you could talk to someone about it?

Participant 2: Yeah I spoke to [club official] about it and I did start speaking to someone who was set up by the AFLPA once a week which was helpful, but looking back now I don't know I don't think he really helped me that much.

Interviewer: Did you have to ask for it that help?

Participant 2: Yeah I went to [club official] and I said 'Mate I'm struggling here – like I am just hating being here pretty much'. So he rang up the AFLPA and they sent out a couple of people to chat to me.

Interviewer: Do you think it would have been more helpful if you didn't have to ask for it?

Participant 2: Maybe if the club said every fortnight or once a month said how is everyone's headspace king of thing. We've got people here to talk to. I think more players would be more forthcoming if they were asked those sort of questions. I felt bad going up to [name] and saying look I hate being here because there's lots of people out there that would die for the opportunity I was getting but I just wasn't feeling it because I didn't want to sort of be there.

Another participant supported the notion of mandatory sessions but argued this should be for first year footballers who have just entered the AFL system. Mandatory sessions were not supported by eight of the participants. Some footballers already had processes in place at their AFL clubs which provided avenues for the men to receive support when required. However, despite knowing about these processes some participants argued they still would not use them:

Interviewer: So if you wanted help you generally have to ask for it? Nobody's going to come up to you and say, 'I think you need to see this person'?

Participant 9: There were pathways but was I going to openly talk about it? No, not with people at the club anyway.

Surujlal and van Zyl (2014) suggest that mandatory counselling programmes should be provided by sport governing bodies early in an athlete's career to encourage the continual preparation for life after sport. Hickey and Kelly (2005), however, maintain that from the beginning of their careers AFL footballers are continually being told to prepare for life after football. Hickey and Kelly (2005) further argue that this is problematic as it creates a tension between wanting to give their sport career 'everything' and recognising that retirement is inevitable. Supporting Agnew *et al.* (2016), this study indicates that footballers would benefit from having regular meetings with a counsellor or other recognised professional throughout their careers but that it is important that this person is removed from the team selection process. Having player welfare officers who are employed by the club may be problematic because they may be required to share the information with coaching staff and may therefore indirectly affect team selection.

Silence

The culture of silence extends into retirement following deselection from an AFL club. Five participants in this research recognised that it is common practice for young men in particular to not talk about how they are feeling. These findings are consistent with O'Neil (2008) and Wester and Vogel (2012)

who suggest Western cultural norms portray the need for men to be strong and in control of their issues without requiring or asking for help. Addis and Mahalik (2003) further argue that even if men are experiencing distress they still may not ask for assistance which is consistent with the findings from the current study. When asked why footballers do not ask for help one of the footballers stated 'because they are young men- that's what men do- they don't talk about it- well I didn't.' These sentiments were common responses from the footballers despite recognising that perhaps they should talk to someone. Petitpas *et al.* (1992) suggests the sporting environment socialises athletes to 'tough it out' therefore they may not be comfortable in seeking help. This is supported by this study as it was clear through participant responses that the current culture of AFL football perpetuates the need to 'tough' and that this contributed to the silence participants kept. Particularly given the men are required to ask for help and it is not mandatory, participants in this research determined that it would have been extremely difficult for them to admit they were experiencing difficulties with the AFL club environment. As one of the men suggested:

Participant 10: I think even just with that talking to people is a positive thing, just getting it off your chest really helps instead of trying to holding those feelings down, and cover them up with alcohol, and going out, and all that sort of stuff.

Interviewer: Do you think some players do try and deny what they're feeling because you're men, and men tend not to show their emotions too much?

Participant 10: Yeah it's definitely a thing for sure. Yep, people and players won't open up, I think- I guess in that environment as well it comes across you've got to be a bit of a tough guy, and all that sort of stuff. So it's going to be harder for a player to admit that they're probably hurting about the past and all that sort of stuff. And- yeah that that is probably tough to deal with yeah.

The men in this research commonly cited team selection as a reason not to admit they might be experiencing emotional distress while they were playing in the AFL. Emotional distress was perceived as being the equivalent of an injury, therefore admitting they were experiencing distress was not common. The footballers argued 'if you want to play you have to be ready to play,' thus talking to club officials about the difficulties they were experiencing could lead to deselection. While the men were not concerned with AFL club officials sharing their distress with others, they were concerned about whether the sharing of this information would have an impact on their selection in the team. Therefore, in order to protect their position in the team the footballers kept silent. When reflecting back on why they remained silent during their AFL careers and therefore not receiving the appropriate support participant 9 stated:

Unless you say something, and you don't want to say that I'm struggling with football. Not that you're afraid they're going to tell someone but you just can't do that because that impacts you getting selected I think.

It is evident from this research that footballers may be unaware that medical staff are bound by ethical codes of conduct which prevent them from disclosing information without consent. Waddington *et al.* (2001) suggested that seeking medical assistance from outside of the sports club is discouraged. In addition, Martin *et al.* (2004) found that the type of sport athletes are socialised into may have an influence on their willingness to seek professional assistance. Participation in physical-contact sports such as American football (and arguably Australian football) appears to perpetuate a negative perception towards seeking psychological assistance. The current research supports Hughes and Coakley's (1991) recommendation that football clubs should provide the names of external practitioners whom the players can see independently. This would minimise the concern felt by the players regarding team selection.

Footballers also commonly denied physical pain to officials because this could also lead to deselection. The demands of football, such as maintaining certain body weights or body fat percentages, led to one of the footballers staying silent on the discomfort he was in because he did not feel comfortable talking to anyone at the club. He stated:

Interviewer: would you have asked if you wanted help?

Participant 5: Well I didn't but I should have?

Interviewer: Why?

Participant 5: Just I don't know because you're new and yeah – felt a bit out of place.

Interviewer: And did they do the same thing for weights and stuff like that in the gym?

Participant 5: Yeah because I was putting on too much weight and it was too late before I told them and it was affecting my footy but I didn't feel like comfortable enough telling them that I can't do weights.

This study supports previous research by Petitpas (2009) which found athletes who may be facing deselection due to lack of skills or injury are highly vulnerable because in an attempt to extend the length of their careers often become more focussed on sport to the detriment of other life factors. Sentiments such as the footballer (above) denying physical pain could not only increase the risk of acute injury but could also lead to long term health implications as evidenced by Agnew and Drummond (2015b).

Responsibility

From the beginning of their AFL careers, footballers are afforded many different services, such as physiotherapists, dietitians, and psychologists. Elite competition occurs within a structured environment in that athletes know when and where training and competitions take place and are often used to a predictable, set routine of practice (Petitpas 2009). After they had been deselected the men in this study claimed they had 'to do everything by myself' which had the potential to create challenges and cause anxiety about their own ability to cope with the demands. The unstructured, unpredictability of life after sport can be a significant difficulty for retiring athletes because they are unprepared for the uncertainty they may face in retirement (Petitpas 2009).

Support

It was recognised by the footballers in this study ($n = 4$) that 'in the AFL everyone does it for you.' At the beginning of their careers AFL footballers are required to participate in a mandatory induction programme. These programmes are run by the AFL Players' Association and cover a range of topics including media training, financial planning, and career planning, respect and responsibility and alcohol and drug seminars. The men perceived this programme to be useful at the beginning of their careers to provide some direction as highlighted by this participant:

Interviewer: Did you do stuff like financial planning or anything that might help you prepare for life after football? Did you do anything early on in your career?

Participant 9: Yeah so once again teed up a welfare [officer], so psychiatrist to come in. They teed up a financial advisor; one was [name], who was really good. and then we had an AFL, they had a 360 module or the- some module which was just pretty much just a basic plan of what you're doing right now, what you hope to be doing, what you're studying outside, what you want to be in five years' time.

Interviewer: Did you feel prepared for the end of your AFL career?

Participant 9: I was only there for one year so I probably didn't have enough time to – I probably didn't have enough time for either/or. Was I prepared or was I not? Because I guess I only got a taste of it. It's a bit different for guys I guess if they're in the system for five or six years.

While the participants were well aware of the programmes offered to help them transition into football at the beginning of their careers, they admitted they had not realised the extent of services available to support transitions from football. Participants commonly mentioned they 'thought' the AFL would assist with funding for university study but only two of the men had accepted this assistance at the time the study was conducted. One of the footballers stated:

Interviewer: In your opinion do they have a responsibility to check and make sure that you're okay?

Participant 3: I'd say so, for a certain amount of time after, but yeah, I guess that's, like I said they've got a big club and a big company to keep going, so they can't be calling up and checking up every week I guess.

Interviewer: So has someone from the AFL Players Association contacted you?

Participant 3: I didn't realise until after I got delisted how many, so like what was available for you, so like I said in terms of, you get health benefits and doctors and stuff like that, you get a lot cheaper and – well for free- just because you were in the AFL system, which is good.

Given their lack of awareness about the services that are offered to footballers transitioning out of the AFL system two participants suggested that a transition programme out of elite sport could be beneficial. The men argued that a mandatory 'next step' programme involving planning and support for non-sporting goals and then showing them how to achieve those goals may assist smoother transitions out of sport. This programme could incorporate current initiatives such as career planning advice which several of the footballers had undertaken with a representative from the AFLPA. Grove and Lavalley (2012) outlined a variety of career transition programmes which are currently in place in other sports and countries which could be adopted as a starting model for a transition programme out of the AFL. Career transition programmes traditionally focus on lifestyle management, the development of transferrable skills, and career planning such as assistance with the development of curriculum vitae, interview techniques and how to search for jobs (Anderson and Morris 2000, Gordon *et al.* 2006, Grove and Lavalley 2012). These areas were consistently mentioned by the footballers in the current study as areas they believed transitioning footballers required assistance with.

Needs of footballers

The footballers in this study expressed a need for the AFL to be realistic about the length of AFL careers. Hickey and Kelly (2007) found that the demands of football subordinate all other demands and thus footballers are often unprepared for retirement from the sport. This was echoed by the current study. Participants highlighted that young footballers, in particular, rarely consider the possibility of having their career in the AFL cut short by injury or deselection and that this is problematic for the transition out of sport because they do not have alternative plans:

Interviewer: Do you think that the AFL headquarters, AFL Players' Association or past club that you're at have a duty of care to make sure that the footballers are okay?

Participant 9: I think they do. Definitely they do, especially kids that are coming out of a list, say 20, 21. Like I know guys that have been on a list and didn't go to uni and didn't save one cent. They spent all their money on clothes, drinks, whatever it was, ... and where are they now? They're no good from when they entered the system.

Given the focus of footballers is predominantly on their sport, participants argued that those who leave the AFL competition without any qualifications need additional support from the AFL to forge an alternative career. The men argued they did not want to be handed a job or university degree but would appreciate assistance in finding an alternative pathway through the connections the AFL may have. In addition a common sentiment was that footballers need to be given the opportunity to pursue interest outside of sport as a 'back-up' plan for when their AFL career is over. One of the ways that was suggested as being supportive of a balanced lifestyle and give footballers the opportunity to pursue outside interests was to have a set rostered day off per week which would enable them to attend university or do work experience. The participants stated that their training schedule could change based on the day of the week their match was scheduled. Even clubs that usually had the same day off during the week still made changes based on the competition schedule, which makes planning to go to university difficult. All of the participants argued that it would be much easier to complete qualifications with a set day off during the week, as highlighted by this narrative:

Interviewer: So did you have the same day off each week, or did it depend what day you played on the weekend?

Participant 2: So yeah generally the same day off, unless, I think it was a Wednesday, so unless we had like a Friday night game they might change it to a Tuesday but yeah it was pretty, they didn't like to change it around too much it's sort of pretty set

Interviewer: Is that because they wanted people to be able to go to Uni?

A: I think so, that and just yeah because if you start changing your days off and your Uni lessons and stuff like that well it all jumbled up, so I think the less they mess around with the better.

Scarf (2008) suggests that the expectations placed on athletes are in excess of those placed on employees in other professions. Due to the focus on their athletic career athletes can be unprepared for life after sport because they do not have alternative qualifications for a subsequent profession. Therefore in light of the expectations placed on them by the AFL, the men in this research believed it was then appropriate for their sport governing body to assist them with future direction once they leave the AFL. Pink *et al.* (2015) stated that Australian football clubs have an ethical responsibility in facilitating dual career activity to allow footballers to prepare for life after sport. They further stipulate that achieving sport and off-field activity balance promotes positive well-being as well as on-field performance. Thus providing avenues for the footballers to pursue interests outside of football may in fact prolong AFL careers and allow footballers to better prepare for the retirement transition process. The current study supports the facilitation of dual career activities by football club. As stated by one of the participants:

Interviewer: So what sort of things do you think footballers should be doing to prepare for life after football?

Participant 6: I think they just need to be shown more in-depth about what it is actually like outside of football and that yes this is great fun at the moment but what's your back-up plan and you need to do like life activation sort of plans. And they say what do you want to do when you are outside of football and how you're going to achieve that and what would happen if you break your leg and you can't play anymore? Like really in your face- oh crap what happens when you break a leg? Kids don't think about that.

Interviewer: And is there anything you think the Players Association could do better in terms of supporting you as players?

Participant 6: I guess maybe they could have part of that sort of – that next step program sort of thing about what do you want to do; show them how they can achieve it ...

Another aspect commonly cited by participants was the contact received by footballers following their deselection. The men argued that more regular contact was needed from either their former AFL clubs or the AFL Players' Association to provide assistance through the transition period. This supports previous research by Surujlal and van Zyl (2014) who stated ongoing support from sport governing bodies can significantly benefit transitioning athletes. Currently, footballers who retire or who are deselected should receive a phone call from the AFL Players' Association (J. Hinge personal communication, 17 November 2015), however half of the participants in this study ($n = 5$) were unaware that there was a representative who would ring them and had not yet received a phone call despite having been deselected up to six months beforehand. Many of the footballers suggested that to promote positive well-being and smooth transitions out of the AFL competition there should be a system through the AFLPA where 'their role was just consistently keeping in touch with these guys once a month, or whatever it was just to make sure they are going okay' and were surprised to learn that there is already a system such as this in place. This comment was supported by another participant who suggested:

Interviewer: Is there anything in terms of player welfare that the AFL or the SANFL from both your experiences, is there anything that can be done better to help players?

Participant 10: Yeah I guess we spoke about that. Keeping that connection with freshly finished players I think is quite crucial to- yeah making sure they make the right decisions moving forward just after they come out of that environment where it's so structured ...

Common responses ($n = 5$) from the footballers regarding whether they received a phone call from the AFL Players' Association following their deselection included 'you get nothing. No phone calls, no help, nothing.' Their lack of awareness about the current system indicates that it is perhaps not operating as effectively as it could be and that players are being overlooked with regard to assistance through the transition out of elite competition. It was stipulated by the footballer that it would be best if a psychologist rather than a development manager made the phone calls to deselected players

because they have the training to recognise warning signals and to ask the appropriate questions to elicit enough responses to know whether the footballer is experiencing difficulties. Wrisberg *et al.* (2010) found that assistant directors appeared to view assistance from sport psychologist consultants positively when related to the demands of competition but less favourably when regarding broader life-related services. Attitudes towards seeking psychological assistance also vary among athletes who are more likely to perceive performance related assistance favourably (Martin *et al.* 2002). These sentiments are supported in the current study which found that support services during the transition process and were therefore unrelated to performance and competition had to be independently requested by the footballers and as a result were under-utilised. The players' lack of awareness of the support offered by the AFL Players' Association, the lack of support from the footballers' AFL clubs, and the footballers' unwillingness to ask for help has led by default to the footballers responsibility for the welfare of footballers transitioning out of the elite competition through state based competitions being shifted from the AFL to the state based club. Participants argued that following their deselection their AFL clubs 'did nothing' but their SANFL clubs have provided support and assistance. When asked if they have had any assistance through the transition back to SANFL the footballers commonly cited the Football Operations Manager at the SANFL club as the person helping them find employment and even with writing their resume as highlighted by this participant:

Interviewer: so who do you go to for things like nutrition advice and help with resume's and if you wanted to go and do an apprenticeship. Who would you go to for advice on that?

Participant 3: So we've got a couple of people here in the club that I see, so [football operations manager], I speak to regularly, so he was a big part of me getting drafted. So I speak to him and anyone that works in the office here, they're always up to help you out, so it's- like I've just finished printing off a heap of resumes and [football operations manager] going to help me finish them off again so that yeah, couldn't ask much more help from them.

Interviewer: Okay, is there any other support that you feel you need at the moment?

Participant 3: From?

Interviewer: From the club or from the AFL, the AFL Players Association?

Participant 3: No I don't think, I think the biggest most important time is in that first year after. So this is coming, yeah starting my second year, so I think finding your feet, probably the first couple of months after delisted, finding your feet, getting a job, stuff like that, getting settled in and getting yourself back into a routine is the most important time I think there.

Conclusion

The transition experiences of footballers who return to state based competitions are extremely difficult because most are forced into retirement from elite competition due to deselection. Given they still perceive themselves as being capable, returning to state based competitions allows footballers to continue playing at the highest level available to them. In addition, maintaining a routine through training and competing as well as the support received from team mates provides the transitioning athlete with protective factors during this difficult time.

The current culture of Australian football perpetuates an environment of silence. While there are staff members such as the football operations managers and football development managers who are available for the players to speak to regarding well-being issues, they are still employed by the football clubs. Therefore it is difficult for the footballers to admit they are experiencing difficulties because they are concerned this will affect their selection in the team. The distress associated with being deselected from the team often begins well before the deselection actually occurs, thus it is important to provide external counsellors or psychologists who do not have the potential to affect team selection for the footballers to talk to. These are currently provided by the AFLPA, however this study suggests their services are not being utilised by the footballers because they are either unaware or unwilling to use

them. Further research into the attitudes of AFL players towards the services provided by the AFLPA is warranted in order to redevelop current strategies with regard to retirement transitions.

This study indicates the current process of contacting retired footballers is ineffective. Following forced retirement the footballers believed they had to ask for help and were largely unaware of the support provided by the AFLPA. The responsibility for the welfare of footballers who retire through state based leagues therefore appears to shift to the state-based club who might not have the staff or resources to adequately assist the men in dealing with the difficulties they are facing. More support needs to be provided by the AFL to assist deselected footballers who are transitioning into state based leagues, or into life after sport. Given that footballers must complete a mandatory induction programme when they enter the AFL system it would be advantageous to also have a mandatory transition programme to be completed following the forced termination of a career in elite Australian football. Given that athletes are most vulnerable to mental and well-being issues upon retirement from sport (Ellis 2015), the transition programme should be completed within the first three months following deselection and include components on career planning, emotional distress, transferrable skills and financial planning.

All of the men participating in this research were still playing football at the SANFL level. In order to understand whether retiring from elite competitions through sub-elite competitions creates smoother transitions out of elite sport, further research should include following up with the athletes when they retire from the sub-elite competition and those who exit out of football entirely about where they are receiving support from.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Deborah Agnew is a lecturer in the School of Education at Flinders University in South Australia. Her research interests include Australian football, masculinity, sports retirement and men's health. She is a member of the Flinders SHAPE (Sport, Health and Physical Education) Research Centre and teaches in the Bachelor of Sport, Health and Physical Activity.

Andrew Marks is the Football Operations Manager at West Adelaide Football club. His interests include Australian football, athlete well-being, sport psychology. Andrew was a primary school teacher for 21 years prior to taking up his position at West Adelaide.

Philippa Henderson has a Master's degree in public health and teaches across a wide variety of health topics in the School of Education and the School of Health Sciences at Flinders University in South Australia. Her research interests include sport, physical activity and well-being as well as the health and well-being of children.

Carl Woods is a lecturer of Skill Acquisition and Motor Learning in the Discipline of Sport and Exercise Science at James Cook University. His research primarily focuses on talent identification, talent development and coaching in junior team sports; with a particular interest in Australian football. He currently provides research support to Australian football State Academy programmes; with this being oriented around different aspects of performance analysis, skill acquisition and coach education.

References

- Addis, M. and Mahalik, J., 2003. Men, masculinity, and the contexts of help seeking. *American psychologist*, 58, 5–14. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.5.
- AFL Players' Association, 2013. *About us* [online]. Available from: <https://www.aflplayers.com.au/about-us/> [Accessed 12 Jan 2017].
- Agnew, D., 2011. *Life after football: the construction of masculinity following a career in elite Australian Rules football*. Thesis (PhD). Flinders University.
- Agnew, D. and Drummond, M., 2015a. Always a footballer? The reconstruction of masculine identity following retirement from elite Australian football. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 7 (1), 68–87.

- Agnew, D. and Drummond, M.J., 2015b. Australian football, masculinity, and the acceptance of pain and injury as a career norm. *The international journal of sport and society: annual review*, 6, 9–23.
- Agnew, D., et al., 2016. *Integrity, well-being and player welfare in the South Australian National Football League*. A report for the SANFL.
- Anderson, D.K. and Morris, T., 2000. Athletic lifestyle programs. In: D. Lavallee and P. Wylleman, eds. *Career transitions in sport: international perspectives*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, 59–80.
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. and Sorensen, C., 2010. *Introduction to research in education*. 8th ed. Wadsworth: Belmont.
- Bold, C., 2012. *Using narrative in research*. London: Sage.
- Brandão, M.R.F., et al., 2001. Career transitions of former Brazilian top level athletes. In: *Proceedings of the 10th World Congress of Sport Psychology*. Skiatos, Greece: International Society of Sport Psychology, 1–2.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2013. *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: Sage.
- Butt, J. and Molnar, G., 2009. Involuntary career termination in sport: a case study of the process of structurally induced failure. *Sport in society*, 12 (2), 240–257.
- Burnard, P., 2004. Writing a qualitative research report. *Accident and emergency nursing*, 12 (3), 176–181.
- Burnard, P., Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E. and Chadwick, B., 2008. Analysing and presenting qualitative data. *British Dental Journal*, 204 (8), 429–432.
- Carlson, J.A., 2010. Avoiding traps in member checking. *The qualitative report*, 15 (5), 1102.
- Cecić Erpič, S., Wylleman, P., and Zupančič, M., 2004. The effect of athletic and non-athletic factors on the sports career termination process. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 5 (1), 45–59.
- Coakley, J., 1983. Leaving competitive sport: retirement or rebirth? *Quest*, 35 (1), 1–11.
- Coakley, S.C., 2006. *A phenomenological exploration of the sport-career transition experiences that affect subjective well-being of former National Football League players* [online]. Available from: <https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/umi-uncg-1099.pdf> [Accessed 12 Jan 2017].
- Creswell, J., 2012. *Educational research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. 4th ed. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Creswell, J., 2013. *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Creswell, J.W. and Miller, D.L., 2000. Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into practice*, 39 (3), 124–130.
- Denzin, N.K., 2017. Critical qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative inquiry*, 23, 8–16.
- Ebaugh, H.R.F., 1988. *Becoming an ex: the process of role exit*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ellis, L., 2015. Clarke Carlisle has spelt it out: retiring from sport can be a traumatic loss. *The Guardian* [online], 6 Feb. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/05/clarke-carlisle-retiring-sport-professional-athletes-depression> [Accessed 12 Jan 2017].
- Fortunato, V. and Gilbert, K., 2003. *Reconstructing lives. The problem of retirement from elite sport*. Altona: Common Ground.
- Fortunato, V. and Marchant, D., 1999. Forced retirement from elite football in Australia. *Journal of personal and interpersonal loss*, 4 (3), 269–280.
- Gordon, S. and Lavallee, D., 2012. Career transitions. In: T. Morris and P. Terry, eds. *The new sport and exercise psychology companion*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, 567–582.
- Gordon, S., Lavallee, D., and Grove, J.R., 2006. Career assistance program interventions in sport. In: D. Hackfort, R. Lidor, and J. Duda, eds. *Handbook of research in applied sport psychology*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, 233–243.
- Harper, M. and Cole, P., 2012. Member checking: can benefits be gained similar to group therapy? *The qualitative report*, 17 (2), 510–517.
- Hatamleh, M.R., 2013. The life transitions of high performance athletes retirement from sport. *European scientific journal*, 9 (11), 336–353.
- Hawthorne, M., 2005. Little binned soldiers. *The Age*, 26 Feb.
- Heffernan, M., 2014. AFL players on the ball with \$30 m retirement fund. *The Sydney Morning Herald* [online], 3 May. Available from: <https://www.smh.com.au/business/afl-players-on-the-ball-with-30-m-retirement-fund-20140502-37nci.html> [Accessed 16 Jan 2017].
- Hess, R. and Stewart, B., 1998. *More than a game: an unauthorised history of Australian Rules football*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP.
- Hickey, C. and Kelly, P., 2005. Professional education and training for early career players in the Australian Football League: Footy first, second and third. *AARE Annual Conference*, Sydney, Australia, 1–13.
- Hickey, C. and Kelly, P., 2007. Education or regulation: managing behaviour change in the AFL. In: *AARE 2007: proceedings of the 2007 international educational research conference*. Fremantle: Association for Active Educational Researchers, 1–16.
- Hickey, C. and Kelly, P., 2008. Preparing to not be a footballer: higher education and professional sport. *Sport, education and society*, 13 (4), 477–494. doi:10.1080/13573320802445132.
- Huang, Z., 2002. *Athletic career transition in former Chinese elite athletes: An empirical investigation and cross-cultural comparison with finding from Germany (Unpublished doctoral dissertation)*. Bundeswehr, Germany: München University.
- Hughes, R. and Coakley, J., 1991. Positive deviance among athletes: the implications of overconformity to the sport ethic. *Sociology of sport journal*, 8 (4), 307–325.
- Johnson, B., 2014. *Off-field focus a key to success* [online]. Available from: <https://www.aflplayers.com.au/article/off-field-focus-a-key-to-success/> [Accessed 12 Jan 2017].

- Kelly, P. and Hickey, C., 2008. *The struggle for the body, mind and soul of AFL footballers*. North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly.
- Kelly, P. and Hickey, C., 2010. Professional identity in the global sports entertainment industry: regulating the body, mind and soul of Australian Football League footballers. *Journal of sociology*, 46 (1), 27–44.
- Lavallee, D., 2005. The effect of a life development intervention on sports career transition adjustment. *The sport psychologist*, 19 (2), 193–202.
- Lavallee, D., et al., 2000. Intervention strategies for athletes in transition. In: D. Lavallee and P. Wylleman, eds. *Career transitions in sport: international perspectives*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, 111–130.
- Lavallee, D., Wylleman, P., and Sinclair, D., 2000. Career transitions in sport: an annotated bibliography. In: D. Lavallee and P. Wylleman, eds. *Career transitions in sport: International perspectives*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, 29–44.
- Lincoln, Y. and Guba, Egon G., 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Martin, S.B., et al., 2002. Development and psychometric evaluation of the sport psychology attitudes – revised form: a multiple group investigation. *The sport psychologist*, 16 (3), 272–290.
- Martin, S.B., et al., 2004. Attitudes toward sport psychology consulting of adult athletes from the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany. *International journal of sport and exercise psychology*, 2 (2), 146–160.
- McKnight, K., et al., 2009. Life after sport: athletic career transition and transferable skills. *Journal of excellence*, 13, 63–77.
- McPherson, B., 1980. Retirement from professional sport: the process and problems of occupational and psychological adjustment. In: E. Dunning and D. Malcolm, eds. *Sport, critical concepts of sociology*. London, UK: Routledge, 412–428.
- National Health and Medical Research Council, 2015. *The national statement on ethical conduct in human research*, 2007. Canberra: The National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Research Council and the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee.
- Ogilvie, B. and Taylor, J., 1993. Career termination issues among elite athletes. In: R.N. Singer, R.N. Murphey, and L.K. Tennant, eds. *Handbook of research on sport psychology*. New York: Macmillan, 761–775.
- O'Neil, J., 2008. Men's gender role conflict: 25 year research summary. *The sport psychologist*, 36, 358–476.
- Palmer, C., 2010. Football's 'culture of intoxication': implications for health promotion. In: A. Pereira and R. Garcia, eds. *A Social Perspective on Sport, Health and Environment*, 7th European Association for Sociology of Sport Conference A social Perspective on sport, health and environment 5th – 9th May. Portugal: Porto, 73–77.
- Park, S., Lavallee, D., and Tod, D., 2013. Athletes' career transition out of sport: a systematic review. *International review of sport and exercise psychology*, 6 (1), 22–53.
- Polkinghorne, D. E., 1989. Phenomenological research methods. In: R.S. Valle., M. King and S. Halling, eds. *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience*. Boston, MA: Springer, 41–60.
- Patton, M., 1990. *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Patton, M., 2002. *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Petitpas, A., 2009. Sport career transition. In: B. Brewer, ed. *Handbook of sports medicine and science: sport psychology*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 113–120. doi:10.1002/9781444303650.ch11.
- Petitpas, A., et al., 1992. A career assistance program for elite athletes. *Journal of counseling & development*, 70 (3), 383–386.
- Pink, M., Saunders, J., and Styne, J., 2015. Reconciling the maintenance of on-field success with off-field player development: a case study of a club culture within the Australian Football League. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 21, 98–108.
- Pitchforth, E., et al., 2005. *Writing up and presenting qualitative research in family planning and reproductive health care*. Available from: <https://ira.le.ac.uk/bitstream/2381/309/1/Qual%20research%20paper%204%20final%20revised.pdf>.
- Professional Footballers Australia, 2015. *Retired and transitioned players report 2015*. Melbourne: Professional Footballers Australia.
- Rager, K.B., 2005. Self-care and the qualitative researcher: when collecting data can break your heart. *Educational researcher*, 34 (4), 23–27.
- Riessman, C.K., 2005. Narrative analysis. In: N. Kelly, et al., eds. *Narrative, memory and everyday life*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield, 1–7.
- Riessman, C.K., 2008. *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. London: Sage.
- Sandelowski, M., 2000. Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in nursing and health*, 23 (4), 334–340.
- Scarf, M., 2008. The dethronement of dubious didacticism: exposing the real justifications for drug-free sport. *Essays in sport and the law*, 231–241.
- Schwab, C., 2014. The long goodbye. *The Age* [online], 2 Mar. Available from: <https://www.theage.com.au/afl/afl-news/the-long-goodbye-20140301-33t7h.html> [Accessed 12 Jan 2017].
- Smith, B. and McGannon, K.R., 2017. Developing rigor in qualitative research: problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology. *International review of sport and exercise psychology*, 1–21.
- Smith, B. and Sparkes, A.C., 2009. Narrative inquiry in sport and exercise psychology: what can it mean, and why might we do it? *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 10 (1), 1–11.
- Smith, B. and Sparkes, A.C., 2012. Narrative analysis in sport and physical culture. In: K. Young and M. Atkinson, eds. *Qualitative research on sport and physical culture*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 79–99.
- Stambulova, N.B., 1994. Developmental sports career investigations in Russia: a post-perestroika analysis. *The sport psychologist*, 8 (3), 221–237.

- Stambulova, N., 2010. Counseling athletes in career transitions: the five-step career planning strategy. *Journal of sport psychology in action*, 1 (2), 95–105.
- Stambulova, N., et al., 2009. ISSP position stand: career development and transitions of athletes. *International journal of sport and exercise psychology*, 7 (4), 395–412.
- Surujlal, J. and van Zyl, Y., 2014. Understanding the dynamics of sport-career transition of Olympic athletes. *Mediterranean journal of social sciences*, 5 (20), 477–484.
- Taylor, J. and Ogilvie, B., 1994. A conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes. *Journal of applied sport psychology*, 6 (1), 1–20.
- Thomas, J. and Harden, A., 2008. Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC medical research methodology*, 8, 22–2255. doi:10.1186/1471-2288-8-45.
- Turner, M., 2014. SANFL needs to pay players more to end exodus to country and local clubs, says Chad O'Sullivan. *Messenger Community News, The Advertiser*, 17 Nov. Available from: <https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/messenger/north-northeast/sanfl-needs-to-pay-players-more-to-end-exodus-to-country-and-local-clubs-says-chad-osullivan/news-story/95e6991f089acfa135a546a8e4b9f54>.
- Waddington, I., Roderick, M. and Naik, R., 2001. Methods of appointment and qualifications of club doctors and physiotherapists in English professional football: some problems and issues. *British journal of sports medicine*, 35 (1), 48–53.
- Webster, L. and Mertova, P., 2007. *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: an introduction to using critical event narrative analysis in research on learning and teaching*. Abington: Routledge.
- Wester, S. and Vogel, D., 2012. The psychology of men: Historical developments and future research directions. In: N. Fouad, J. Carter, and L. Subich, eds. *Handbook of counselling psychology*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 371–396.
- Wrisberg, C.A., et al., 2010. An exploratory investigation of NCAA division-I coaches' support of sport psychology consultants and willingness to seek mental training services. *The sport psychologist*, 24 (4), 489–503.
- Wylleman, P., Alfermann, D., and Lavallee, D., 2004. Career transitions in sport: European perspectives. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 5 (1), 7–20.