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Empowering Elite Athlete Education in Australian Professional Sports

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Abstract: This article discusses the practical and ideologically nuanced factors that shape professional athletes' engagement in tertiary education programs. Utilizing the insight and experiences of 132 current professional athletes and thirty-six current player development managers working across the five leading Australian top-division sporting codes (Australian Football League, National Rugby League, A-League [soccer], Super Rugby, and Cricket Australia), we questioned the ways in which professional athletes are both inhibited and empowered to succeed in their education pursuits. Data was informed by a uniform survey of qualitative and quantitative measures, undergoing a detailed thematic analysis to organize findings into discussable categories. Results revealed that athletes are significantly disadvantaged in the education space. Participants reported the rigidity of sporting schedules, contract duration and insecurity, physical and mental fatigue, the transient nature of careers, and the challenge of managing studies in addition to an existing full-time commitment as the most prevalent barriers. Flexibility was cited consistently as an effective intervention and management strategy, where tailored education programs and suitable delivery modes were suggested as an effective way to meet the unique needs of professional athletes. The role of player development managers was also seen as a meaningful facilitator and crucial personal support throughout the athletes' education journey.

Keywords: Professional Sport, Elite Athlete, Player Development Manager, Education, Holistic Wellbeing, Organizational Logic

Introduction

Evidence accruing across the professional sporting landscape in Australia understands that holistic approaches to wellbeing support,² in acknowledgement of the unique circumstances in which the athlete experience is often made complex, is a progressive movement toward better health and performance outcomes (Stansen and Chambers 2019; Grey-Thompson 2017; Poczwadowski, Sherman, and Ravizza 2004). Advocates claim that across individual and organizational contexts, significant gains can be made in compatibly engineering wellbeing and performance frameworks. In doing so, administrators acknowledge and empower the inextricably linked nature of athletes on-field and off-field identities to the benefit of wellbeing, performance and commercial interests.

For professional athletes, transitions out of sport are in need of further nuanced considerations (Hickey and Kelly 2008). As a time in the athlete's career that carries immense personal, social, financial, and environmental change, discussions regarding duty of care are attracting considerable interest. Indeed, the professional sports industry has made substantial investment in supporting athlete wellbeing across the lifespan of their careers and beyond—

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² Holistic wellbeing is a term used across theoretical and practical spaces as an approach to athlete development that encompasses and balances the personal and professional lives of athletes. It recognizes the uniquely multi-dimensional needs of professional athletes and perceives the responsibility for duty of care to be shared between players, their employers, and governing bodies (Stansen and Chambers 2019; Stambulova and Wylleman 2014).

namely, the employment of player development managers,³ sports psychologists, education grants, wellbeing programs, transition supports, and career coaching (Park, Lavallee, and Tod 2013; Petitpas et al. 1992). Yet despite a growing professional field of Player Development Managers and the wide gamut of vocation and education programs available to athletes, there remains a robust resistance to engage in pre-retirement planning (Hickey and Kelly 2008). Investigations attribute a lack of cognizance to the benefits of pre-retirement planning and off-field engagement as a major barrier, where misconceptions amongst players and coaching staff that pre-retirement planning serves as an inhibiting distraction to a performance-focused rhetoric. Certainly, such beliefs hinder athletes' opportunities to pursue education where on-field regimes remain dominant at the expense of all else (Park, Lavallee, and Tod 2013; Petitpas et al. 1992).

This study explores these understandings through a phenomenological epistemology that encourages critical reflection and creative problem-solving from participants. Maintaining a strengths-based approach, we wanted to document the various factors that inhibit and empower athletes engaging in education and to subsequently use that information to develop intervention strategies targeting improved participation, retention, and achievement rates.

Background to Research

Impact of Education on Performance

Recently published research by Lavallee (2019) evidences the relationship between preretirement planning and performance gains. Through a longitudinal analysis of 632 top-flight professional athletes from Australia's National Rugby League (NRL), including 28,516 performance selection observations across 3 seasons (2014, 2015, 2016), Lavallee (2019) demonstrates a positive link between pre-retirement planning with measures of team selection, team tenure, and career tenure.

Understanding how a competitive edge can be fostered through these spaces may go a long way toward encouraging athletes, coaches, and administrators to engage in education. Crucially, as Lavallee (2019) explains, the vicarious impact of this relationship will only occur once pre-retirement planning is valued greater than the pressures to focus exclusively on sport performance. Here lies a significant industry barrier.

Impact of Education on Wellbeing

It is commonly thought that a thriving career in professional sport comes with many liberties of privilege and prestige. However, for the vast majority, an athlete's time at the elite level is shaded by the ongoing threat of job insecurity (Hickey and Kelly 2008). Such are these circumstances that the average Australian Football League (AFL) career is as short as 2.9 years (twenty-four games), with less than 5 percent making the ten-year milestone (Hickey and Kelly 2008; Hawthorne 2005). For the NRL, the average career is just forty-three games over three to four years and, in most cases, these careers end involuntarily for a variety of reasons, such as injury and player turn-over (Stansen and Chambers 2019; NRL 2012). Reports that one in five athletes experience distress following retirement emphasizes their unique vulnerabilities (Park, Lavallee, and Tod 2013). Moreover, a general over-representation in mental health-related issues, such as anxiety and substance misuse, further exposes the pressures that athletes endure (Rice et al. 2016; Gouttebauge, Frings-Dresen, and Sluiter 2015; Gulliver et al. 2015).

³ Traditionally, sporting organizations have provided wellbeing support with career coaches to assist players through retirement planning (Stansen and Chambers 2019). Over time, these positions have evolved into "player development managers," whose support is dynamic across the full scope of the athletes' life.

Through an early intervention and prevention approach, pre-retirement planning is used as a risk management strategy against these vulnerabilities (Hickey and Kelly 2008). Indeed, Lotysz and Short (2004) demonstrate how preparing for life after sport empowers and facilitates athletes' adjustments through retirement—as Lally (2007) states, the sooner the better. The role of player development managers, sports psychologists, career coaches, and a plethora of workshops and other programs available to athletes collectively reflects sport's growing awareness and sense of responsibility (Stansen and Chambers 2019). However, in the competitive business of professional sport, engaging in education for the purposes of preretirement planning is easily made dispensable by players' ambition to maintain a career at the elite level (Hickey and Kelly 2008). Indeed, pressure from coaches contributes to this stress, as athletes are afforded very little flexibility against the demands of their sporting schedule (Cosh, Crabb, and Tully 2015). In this regard, athletes are expected to rely on their own resources to manage these challenges independently from their sport (Morgan and Giacobbi 2006). These barriers continue to pervade the day-to-day operations of sporting organizations and prevent effective delivery of the pre-retirement planning intervention strategy.

Impact of Education on Brand

Under the prevailing influence of commercialization, the corporatization of contemporary professional sport has expanded its jurisdiction far beyond the boundaries of the field (Giulianotti and Robertson 2004). Sport is a lucrative business and for sports organizations, like any other for-profit industry, managing a brand and circulating a product is imperative to its function. In this way, athletes are commodified, used to enhance public image and as a tool to accrue social capital (Smart 2005). Athletes' personal lives are entitled very little privacy, with their off-field activity often consumed by the media and public with equal attention to their on-field performance (Giulianotti and Robertson 2004). In the contemporary sports entertainment industry, these expectations around what constitutes a person and player as “professional” create an additional set of demands for athletes.

In efforts of risk management and public relations, sporting organizations promote a version of professionalism that recognizes and stipulates off-field attitudes and behavior, and for many codes, engaging in pre-retirement planning initiatives is regarded a pre-requisite (Hickey and Kelly 2008). Not without concern, Stansen and Chambers (2019) query whether commercial interests in the personal lives of athletes' risk misconstruing the intentions of organizations in supporting pre-retirement planning initiatives. Their findings highlight how for athletes, partaking in such programs is often motivated through compliance rather than personal investment or interest, leading to passive participation and low achievement rates. Implementing strategies to allow athletes to participate in negotiations around their commercial duties and purposefully supporting meaningful off-field activities may mitigate such pit-falls.

Impact of Sporting Career on Education Engagement

During the early stages of an athlete's professional career, off-field engagement is sparsely considered a priority, according to Hickey and Kelly (2008). They explain that developing athletes to adapt to the physical and mental intensity of training and competition requires extreme levels of investment of time and energy, particularly for young athletes. Matching performance-related activity with an interest in career-transition is not only considered unviable, but irrelevant. For to ‘make it’, means disregarding a sense of sport/ life balance—a rhetoric readily exploited by coaches (Hickey and Kelly 2008). In the instances where athletes were able to engage in education, however, their dependence on good-will from teachers and institutions to be flexible around the demands of their sporting careers was regularly cited. Concerningly, Cosh, Crabb and Tully (2015) revealed that amongst their sample of student-

athletes, a staggering 40 percent had felt forced to transfer into less-intensive courses just to maintain their participation.

For mid-career athletes, the preparedness to engage in education was symptomatically improved through a greater sense of career stability; whereas for late-career athletes, the pressures and anxieties of a looming life after sport was viewed as the variable factor (Stansen and Chambers 2019). Naturally, in situations where an athlete retires abruptly (either through injury or other means), this pressure was amplified (Lotysz and Short 2004). In general, however, the nature of careers—short-termed, insecure, and transient—makes engaging in long-term education an impracticable task for the vast majority athletes (Hickey and Kelly 2008). Moreover, the rigidity of training schedules, time and energy demands of performance, and a disassociation with life after sport, all contribute to the substantial structural barriers disadvantaging athletes.

Summary Statement

Ultimately, whether sporting organizations feel motivated to support their athletes through a sense of duty of care, see it as an opportunity for a competitive edge, or value it as an avenue for commercial prosperity, there is a convincing argument to be made for meaningful and effective investment in off-field athlete development. No doubt, a performance focus will always remain imperative to the functions of elite sporting environments, however research is suggesting this focus may not need to be at the detriment or expense of off-field engagements. To the contrary, advocating for education and vocational training in preretirement planning programs through its wellbeing, performance and commercial enhancing properties makes for a logical strategy addressing these existing barriers.

Methodology

Our research is an Australian cross-code investigation into the conditions that facilitate and empower professional athletes' pursuits in education specific programs. Through an anonymous survey of qualitative and quantitative measures, we interviewed 132 current professional athletes (approximated to be equal parts male to female participation) and thirty-six current player development managers across the five top-division professional sporting codes in Australia: Rugby League (NRL), Soccer/ Football (A-League), Australian Football Rules (AFL), Cricket (Cricket Australia), and Rugby Union (Super Rugby). Data was collected between October 2016 and October 2018, originally used by One Wellbeing for the purposes of feedback and reporting.⁴

Theoretical Position

Under the premise of a phenomenological epistemology, we operated through a research framework that as O'Leary (2004, 10) states, "accepts that personal experiences are the foundation for factual knowledge." Fundamentally, phenomenology is a methodological approach to research that focuses on understanding a phenomenon through the lived experiences of the affected population (Heidegger 1962; O'Leary 2004; Savin-Baden and Major 2013).

⁴ One Wellbeing is a private education provider delivering TAFE (Technical And Further Education) certificates in fitness, personal training, and community work to elite level athletes. TAFE is a government run education provider delivering skill-specific short courses to post high-school students in vocational areas. TAFE is often regarded as a pathway into university levels of study.

Hood (2015) advocates that critical approaches to research which values data produced from a variety of sources and backgrounds is the most effective approach to phenomenological research. In doing so, we explore the intersubjectivity of experiences between player development managers and the athletes that they support, and their corresponding organizations. Our analysis unpacks how the mixed contributions of these stakeholders collectively construct an understanding and reality that shapes education in sport. In this way, our research is placed between individuals (agents) and their context (structures). O’Leary (2004, 122) details this approach as consisting of two key components:

1. “Constructed,” which outlines the role of the individual in creating an understanding of the world that is solely relative to them; and
2. “Intersubjective,” which highlights how the experiences of individuals and their interactions with the world contribute to that understanding.

Data Collection Methods

Mixed-methods research is used to explore and explain phenomena through a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) suggest, it uses the strengths of one method in compliment to the other. This practice was implemented in accordance with Padgett (2008), who identifies the following three justifications for carrying out mixed methods studies:

- Triangulation: comparisons for corroboration (see Morse 1991).
- Complementarity: for enhancement or clarification because “qualitative and quantitative sub-studies represent different pieces of the puzzle” (Padgett, 2008, 222).
- Expansion: a broader theoretical understanding can come from juxtaposing two perspectives (see Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, 1989).

Our research collected data through two participant groups—athletes and player development managers—and through the use of both qualitative (open-response questions) and quantitative tools (multiple-choice, Likert scaling, and ranked responses).

Survey questions were designed to motivate critical reflection, with qualitative opportunities used to further explore the contextual factors underpinning quantitative selections. Response options were formed based on what is currently significant within the literature; the example question below was designed to mirror what is known about the patterns of athletes’ engagement with education and to add further nuance to those understandings:

- Q.10.1. Why do you believe athletes engage in education?
- a. Player development manager recommendation
 - b. Personal development
 - c. Improve as an athlete
 - d. Prepare for transition out of sport
 - e. Additional income
 - f. Other: _____

- Q.10.2. Could you please explain your reasoning?

Our survey used the above question format to explore the following factors: course duration, study load, cost, location of courses, the onus of responsibility to engage and resource education, goals of the player development manager, nature of athletes’ relationship with player

development managers, player development managers' desired feedback from athletes, and otherwise common barriers and facilitators to educational achievement.

Data Analysis

All recorded data underwent a detailed thematic analysis consistent with O'Leary's (2004) account of data handling and coding. Thematic analysis is regarded as the process of pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns within data that are important to the description of the phenomenon that the research aims to explore (Walter 2013; O'Leary 2004). This model for data analysis was selected for its coherence and applicability in analyzing qualitative data, particularly that which has been developed through a phenomenological lens (Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

Coding is the process of indexing data into retrievable concepts, reflecting the researchers' interpretation of meaning found within participant responses. First-order coding is conducted by labelling and categorizing information with descriptive language, before it is processed through second-cycle coding, which as O'Leary (2004) explains, refines abstracted concepts into theoretical displays. Conversely, it is what Punch (1998) refers to as a "meta-code," a more inferential progression focusing on patterns between major themes, adding consistency and depth to the critical component of analysis. An example of first-order coding can be found in Table 4.

Critical to the analysis process, O'Leary's (2004) "second cycle" highlights how thematic analysis can be partnered with phenomenology to broaden the understanding of a context premised by multiple unique experiences. O'Leary (2004) explains why it is necessary to explore the potentially different ways of experiencing a phenomenon by being conscious of the range of experiences related to the phenomenon itself. Consider the following question, which explores the variation in perspectives between athletes and player development managers understanding of internal and external forces influencing the educational environment:

Q12.1. Please rank your expectations of education in order of significance from the list below (1 = most important)?

- Completion within a year
- Cost
- Course delivered at club facilities
- Enjoyment
- Expert trainers
- Flexibility around sport
- Improving reading and writing skills
- Individual learning support
- Job placement on completion
- No home study required
- Pathway into university levels of education
- Recognised RTO

As a case for example, in this instance, athletes identified pathways into university levels of education as the third highest expectation of their education experience, however, was ranked thirteenth by player development managers. A second-cycle of analysis looked across all qualitative responses that pertained to this interest, with "incongruent perspectives" highlighting the ways in which player development managers often stigmatized the ambition and work-ethic of athlete-students. As O'Leary (2004) would attest, rather than simply screening for variations between these experiences, which can produce fairly one-dimensional results, the second cycle of analysis took our interest to what sits between these variations, highlighting the sub-influences across these direct themes. We believe this approach has strengthened the focus of

our data analysis, reduced irrelevant dissimilarities, and integrated the essential information of various descriptions.

Results

Our research should be regarded as a scoping study investigating factors that facilitate and inhibit professional athletes from achieving in the education domain. We have leveraged off what is currently available through the literature to form the basis of our survey questions and subsequently looked to use the analysis of our data to draw further hypotheses and inform future iterations of this project. The following “summary of results” provides a brief outline of key findings, before presenting the nuance of data in greater detail throughout the remainder of the article.

Summary of Results

The unique and complex arena of elite sport contains an array of facilitating and inhibiting factors impacting athletes’ engagement in off-field education. For athletes and player development managers, “flexibility” was cited as the most significant to both. Commonly, this was attributed to the “always fluid and changing nature of elite sport programming.” Interestingly, no major discrepancies were revealed through cluster-sampling athletes by their respective sporting codes. In all cases, feedback was seen under the premise that athletes are disadvantaged and under-performing in the education space, and that completion rate is a priority area for improvement.

Flexibility was defined in various ways, most categorically in terms of *delivery mode* and how well programs were *tailored to the athletes’ needs*. These two themes broadly help us to contextualize what was implied by use of the term flexibility, and, as such, frame the lower-order themes detailing this concept. Duration and study load, cost, and education environment underpin the discussion within these categories.

The *role of the Player Development Manager* was seen as a crucial factor in the athlete’s journey, contributing the second higher-order theme of this study. The nature of personal support and attitudes of empowerment were significant to these results. Incongruent perspectives between athletes and player development managers’ perspectives were also apparent, particularly with regard to athletes’ ambition to pursue higher-education, and expectations around enjoyment and self-directed learning.

Why Athletes Engage in Education

Understanding why athletes engage in education provided a valuable starting point of inquisition in laying the foundations for this report. Results revealed athletes’ cognizance of the risks associated with transitions out of sport and the need for pragmatism in purposeful preretirement planning efforts.

In response to what motivates athletes to engage in education, player development managers and athletes collectively reported pre-retirement planning as the most significant causal factor, with 71.43 percent and 53.81 percent of participants (respectively) identifying “transition.” For athletes, these results increased by a difference of 14.79 percent when asked what might motivate their future engagement in education. These results are largely consistent with the views of existing literature, which considers transitions out of sport to be an anxiety-inducing and high-pressure experience motivating actions of preparation (Stansen and Chambers 2019).

Table 1: What Motivates Education Engagement (Athlete Responses)

	Rank	Count	Percent
Transition	1	62	53.91%
Personal development	2	60	52.17%
Become a better athlete	3	27	23.48%
PDM recommendation	4	17	14.78%
Job while playing	5	12	10.43%

Source: Lane et al.

As highlighted above in Table 1, “transition” and “personal development” were ranked well ahead of the field. The following quotes provide further context to these results:

- Players are more aware of the need to be prepared for transition.
- There is a lot of anxiety about life after sport.
- NRL stands for “not real long.”

Player development managers were mindful of the pressures that athletes receive to participate in pre-retirement planning (often acting as the initiator) and expressed concerns over futile participation moved through compliance. Their reflections suggested that the degree of pragmatism attached to a course was an important measure of value and success in mitigating these risks. Pragmatism was defined by an intention to use a qualification, how workplace ready an athlete is, the transferability of knowledge to skill, and the vicarious but tangible impacts on other areas (such as, developing a healthy non-footballing identity, sense of self and self-worth, wellbeing, and performance gains). Athletes reiterated the importance of pragmatism through their emphasis on job placement, with 33.33 percent stating some form of placement/internship as an expectation in their education experience. Asked what feedback would be most valuable from athletes, responses were often framed around those concerns:

- How confident do you feel in pursuing a career in your chosen vocation?
- How can you use what you have learned?
- What difference will your education make for you?

Higher-order Theme: Flexibility

Tailored to the Athlete’s Needs

When asked about the ideal duration of a degree, athletes preferred options within a twelve-month period. Table 2 demonstrates an overwhelming 86.35 percent majority of responses preferring this time frame and just 13.62 percent electing a course beyond the twelve-month threshold.

Table 2: Ideal Course Duration (Athlete Response)

	Rank	Count	Percent
24 weeks	1	52	39.39%
12 months	=2	31	23.48%
12 weeks	=2	31	23.48%
18 month	=4	9	6.81%
>2 years	=4	9	6.81%

Source: Lane et al.

Player development managers reiterated this belief and were assertive in their justifications that contract duration places a significant limitation on athletes’ long-term education pursuits. More

than 50 percent of qualitative responses explicitly cited contract length and the transient nature of a career in professional sport. Consider the following statements:

- You're not going to get anything over twelve months with the nature of contracts.
- We don't know where they will be in two years.

Furthermore, the expense of time and energy required to maintain a high standard of performance in professional sport was cited as a major inhibitor to full-time study. In consideration of these factors, athletes and player development managers were unanimous in their estimation that seven hours per week spent on study was an achievable target. Problematically however, these rates fall considerably short of a full-time university (35–45 hours per week) and TAFE (18 hours per week) study load. These concerns, in combination with the instability of contract length and the transient nature of careers, leave athletes with exceedingly restricted education options. These issues are of significant consequence to athletes and may help us to understand their over-representation in diploma and certificate levels of part-time study (Hickey and Kelly 2008).

Delivery Mode

Athletes valued courses that provided greater personalized support over expenditure when the two were considered in relation to one another. Given a set of hypothetical scenarios detailing different delivery modes, just 6.82 percent of athlete participants preferred the cheapest option under the sacrifice of individual support. This perspective was shared by player development managers, who across 84.61 percent of qualitative responses regarding delivery mode discussed individualized support as a key strategy toward increasing completion rates, despite an expected increase in expenditure. Player development managers specified that due to the many financial options available to athletes (both of their own accord and through their association funding agreements), cost was not considered a major inhibitor. The following quotes exemplify these findings:

- We would pay higher if the emphasis is on outcome, being job ready, having opportunities and placement.
- It is our [player development managers] job to get athletes into work, and it is starting and finishing that counts.
- Money is not an issue for full-time athletes.

Flexibility was again highly regarded throughout discussions concerning learning environments, with courses accommodating face-to-face sessions within club facilities nominated as the most effective strategy to accessing and retaining athletes in education.

Table 3: Preferred Delivery Modes (Athlete Responses)

	Rank	Count	Percent
Face to face at club	1	75	56.82%
A flexible course where you can complete both in class and correspondence learning	2	67	50.76%
Blended (face to face and self-learning) off site open to everyone	3	40	30.30%
Face to face at an allocated classroom	4	35	26.52%
Distance education	5	25	18.94%
Virtual classroom (workshops over ZOOM)	6	24	18.18%

Source: Lane et al.

Given the same set of hypothetical scenarios detailing different delivery modes, 71.3 percent of player development manager responses gave preference to the course which provided most flexibility around sporting schedules. The idea that “flexibility is the number one key to completion” was reiterated almost unanimously amongst qualitative responses exploring these preferences. Technology-based platforms in a virtual classroom environment was identified as a possible strategy in achieving flexibility, however ranked lowest in order of athlete preferences (as seen above in Table 3). Converse perspectives exposed minor discrepancies amongst the sample, where the onus of responsibility between education providers and athletes was drawn under question with debate over athlete accountability and claims of “special treatment.”

Higher-order Theme: Role of the Player Development Manager

Personal Support

Survey data highlighted the multi-dimensional spaces in which the player development manager operates. Participants described their role as a task-oriented position with practical duties and responsibilities, while concurrently maintaining their identity as an informal personal support that sits outside of the sporting realm. Interestingly, 88.24 percent of player development managers declared it was necessary that they be involved in the athletes’ education endeavors. The terms of their role was discussed as strictly limited to communicating scheduling information and responding to progress reports, while otherwise supporting their athletes in an external, personal capacity. Take the following quote, for example:

I believe that wellbeing managers should be communicating schedule changes and assisting from the club end with providers but I want to keep my role as a positive role and not a regulator one.

On average, player development managers felt that monthly reporting from the education provider was a sufficient level of communication. Generally, participants indicated that progress reports should include information on “how the athlete is progressing (managing study load), their level of academic achievement, and any extra support they may need.”

Empowerment

In discussing the nature of personal support, player development managers demonstrated a distinguished comprehension of their roles with a focus on empowerment and strengths-based practice. Consistent was their desire to remove themselves from the success of their athletes and minimize dependence on their support wherever possible. The following quotes are a demonstration of such values:

- I don’t want to be remembered as the support person. I want the athlete to feel that they have achieved it all, all by themselves.
- I want them to know that there is a plan and pathway that they have come up with.
- I want to help the player take ownership of life after sport – helping them choose what they want to do – if I can do this, my job is done.

Table 4 represents results from the thematic analysis of player development managers’ responses to “What do you want to achieve in your role and what do you want to be remembered for?”

Table 4: Impact of Role (Player Development Manager Responses)

Over-arching theme	Coded items
Life after/ outside of football	Career transition, personal development, off-field engagement
Impact of Role	Wellbeing support, education support, resourcefulness, providing access to opportunities
Interpersonal characteristics	Values person over player, enjoys role and relationship, develops trust, gives guidance, demonstrates respect and commitment
Empowerment	Supports capacity to thrive, fosters independence, and confidence across all contexts

Source: Lane et al.

These results demonstrate the strengths of the player development manager's relationship with athletes and the privileged position in which they occupy. Unexpectedly, reports from athletes indicate it is an under-utilized resource, with an over-whelming 76.04 percent believing more support from player development managers would be beneficial. These findings may be revealing of the 81.82 percent of athletes who reported that a disassociation with life after sport was the most debilitating factor when it came to meaningfully engaging in education, and may underpin the low preference rate for online classrooms (as seen in Table 3). Realizing the impact of the player development manager's role and increasing their involvement in the athlete's journey into, through, and out of education, might help to instigate athletes' engagement in education and maximize their capacity for academic achievement.

Incongruent Perspectives

While findings were relatively consistent across both athlete and player development managers' perspectives, there were instances in which these groups were incongruent with one another, particularly with regard to athletes' ambition to pursue higher education, motivation for self-directed learning, and expectations of enjoyment. Table 5 represents highlighted inconsistencies across athletes and player development managers' responses to the question, 'what are your expectations with education'.

Table 5: Education Expectations (Ranked Selections)

	Athletes	Player Development Managers
Enjoyment	2	8
Pathway into higher education	3	13
No home study	13	2

Source: Lane et al.

Of some concern is that a minority of player development managers displayed stigmatizing beliefs towards athletes' education capacity for study. The following quotes reveal some of these views:

- They aren't built to study (mostly), unless they are university types.
- Self-learning and work in their own time... Funny, 1–2 hours most.
- They fall behind unless staff at the club follow up!

It is critical that player development managers appreciate the important role they have in shaping the narrative that sport builds around education. Being aware of stigmatizing views (such as those highlighted above) and how they distract from the real disadvantage that athletes experience is vital. While these views surfaced in just a minority of results, it is nonetheless crucial that player development managers remain collectively robust in their approaches to

empowerment and strengths-based practice, as doing so works towards redressing the negative discourse that continues to pervade this space.

Discussion

The landscape of professional sport is evolving. “Holistic wellbeing” and our understanding of sports duty of care to athletes is advancing health and wellbeing outcomes. Yet with such complexities comes a need for nuanced understandings, and analyzing approaches that synthesize the on-field professional with the off-field personal is in need of further investigation. As our research shows, for professional sport to adequately equip itself in managing and supporting the expectations it places upon athletes, it must first be clear on what it represents.

Certainly, athletes and player development managers do not dismiss the unavoidable fact that performance is the core business of sport and they do not attempt to detract from this logic; they do, however, uniformly emphasize the ways in which professional athletes are disadvantaged when it comes to education (contract duration and insecurity, the physical and mental demands of sport, the transient nature of sport, and the burden of managing pursuits outside of a full-time commitment). For sports regulators, the impetus to creatively work around these limitations with flexible strategies that enhance engagement, retention, and success, is needed. For if sport wishes to meaningfully and effectively support the person as well as the player, it must be prepared to invest its resources holistically around the multi-dimensional needs of athletes, as represented in our original model below.

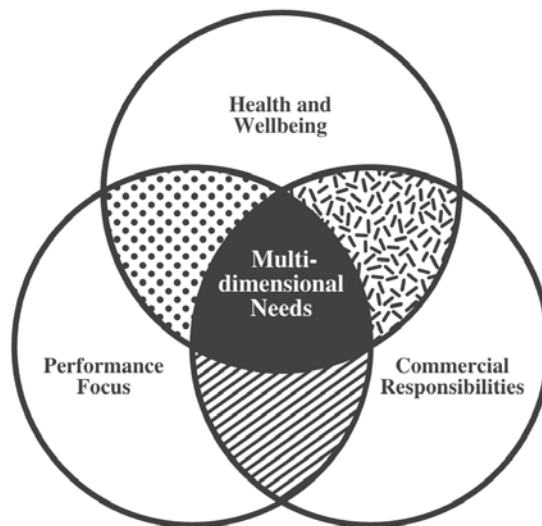


Figure 1: A Model for Conceptualizing the Multi-Dimensional Needs of Elite Athletes
 Source: Lane et al.

This model has been derived from the findings of this study, in order to propose a way forward for maximizing elite athletes’ holistic wellbeing and development through education. We suggest the first step for professional sport is to challenge its existing discourse. Despite the prevalence of anecdotal and evidence-based endorsements for education, there persist strong reservations regarding the validity and legitimacy of its benefits. This does not mean contesting the performance-focused rhetoric, but rather as our results indicate, exploring the space in which sport can position itself as a pluralistic institutional environment. This involves

strategizing to amalgamate its varied interests in a way that makes them compatible, rather than in conflict.

In this way, organizations will engage in a process of “hybridity,” meaning, the extent to which they address multiple agendas and hold them at equal esteem (Besharov and Smith 2014). Take the following matrix as way of explanation:

Table 6: Education in Sport—Hybridity

	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Application</i>
<i>Compatibility</i>	Concerning the relationship between varying interests of organizations and the extent to which they are consistent/ in compliment to one another.	Preretirement planning is positively correlated with performance indicators for professional athletes; flow-on impacts into social and commercial gain may also occur.
<i>Centrality</i>	The degree in which varying interests are treated with equal validity.	Empowering athletes to engage in education and vocation training, without compromise to their performance, around sporting responsibilities.

Source: Lane et al.

Our findings suggest the following pathways will empower athletes capacity to succeed in their education pursuits: 1) producing clear and substantiated messages about the diverse benefits of education; 2) utilizing the relationships between athletes and player development managers to nurture pragmatic and purposeful engagement in education; 3) investing in the provision of readily accessible face-to-face support, through flexible scheduling around the athletes duties within their sporting complex; 4) foreseeing and liaising with providers over the potential impact of relocation, considering correspondence learning and transfer options prior to commencement.

Limitations and Future Research

We recognize that the interests of the research partners have influenced the survey design and consequently led our results to being largely representative of certificate and diploma levels of education. We suggest that given the under-representation of professional athletes at a university level of tertiary education that future research consider focusing on these issues. Additionally, we believe that research exploring the role of technology and alternative education environments in developing flexible delivery models in sport is worthwhile.

We recognize that a major limitation of this study is the absence of demographic data. We suggest that future research consider capturing participants age, gender, income, time in professional sport, and chosen sport. This information is critical in understanding the variations between experiences of professional athletes. Furthermore, we believe it important to acknowledge that while the participants in this study include both male and female athletes (estimated equal split), given the status of gender inequality in professional sport, it is worthwhile exploring experiences relative to these significant differences.

Lastly, we acknowledge that all the athlete participants within this study are either currently or have previously engaged in education during their sporting careers, and as such, may not be representative of the general athlete experience, particularly those athletes who are not currently studying or have not previously. Naturally, we encourage future research to explore these experiences and the factors inhibiting athletes from engaging with education.

Conclusion

The future of sport is pluralistic, dynamic, and nuanced across an intricate yet complex set of interests and needs. To adapt, life inside and outside of sport can no longer be disassociated from one another. With credit to Lavalée's (2019) research, academically validated evidence has demonstrated the potentially significant gains that can be made in meaningfully supporting athletes' off-field pursuits. Advocacy and education appear the foremost steps into progress. Ideally, and perhaps more provocatively, this involves critically assessing sports operational systems, measuring the inhibiting and facilitating factors that influence education programs, and planning flexible interventions to address those challenges. Crucially, these discussions are incumbent upon the meaningful involvement and participation of education providers with sports stakeholders. This will not be a quick fix, but it will be sustainable. For to do this, organizations not only attempt to improve the attitudes and behaviors that impact engagement, but reshape the landscape of elite athlete education in a way that empowers achievement in these spaces.

Declaration of Interests

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