The Life Cycle of the AFL Footballer: If you sell your Body, Mind and Soul what is left when the cheering stops?

Peter Kelly  
School of Political and Social Inquiry  
Monash University  
Peter.Kelly@arts.monash.edu.au

Christopher Hickey  
Faculty of Education  
Deakin University  
chick@deakin.edu.au

Abstract:

In this paper we will draw on research conducted for the AFL which, in part, illuminated aspects of the Faustian pact that many young men enter into in order to become an elite level, professional footballer in what is increasingly a global sports entertainment industry. In order to develop an identity as an AFL footballer these young men willingly sell their body, mind and soul to one club, or to many. For varying lengths of time these pacts can have significant payoffs - in terms of a sense of self, and in monetary terms. For many though, these payoffs are limited and must be accounted for sometime in the future - an accounting that in Faustian terms, can carry significant costs to the body, mind and soul long after the cheering has stopped, and when the benefits come mainly in the form of memories. In this paper we argue that elements of these pacts can be identified and analysed via the following: understanding AFL as a sports entertainment business; using Foucault’s work on the care of the self to explore what it means to be an elite level professional and the demands made by others on the body, mind and soul of players; and the idea that a career as an elite level professional footballer has a number of phases (early, mid and late) in which the nature of a professional identity – shaped by different demands on the body, mind and soul – changes.
Introduction

Many Australian Football League (AFL) footballers enter into a Faustian pact in order to become an elite level, professional footballer in what is increasingly a global sports entertainment industry. In pursuit of an identity as an AFL footballer these young men willingly sell their Body, Mind and Soul to one club, or to many. For varying lengths of time these pacts can have significant payoffs - in terms of a sense of self, and in monetary terms. For many though, these payoffs are limited and must be accounted for sometime in the future. An accounting that in Faustian terms, can carry significant costs to the Body, Mind and Soul long after the cheering has stopped, and when the benefits come mainly in the form of memories.

In this paper we argue that elements of these pacts can be identified and analysed via the following themes: understanding that AFL as a sports entertainment business: exploring what it means to be an elite level professional, and the demands made by others on the Body, Mind and Soul of players, via Foucault’s work on the care of the self: and the idea that a career as an elite level professional footballer has a number of phases (Early, Mid and Late) in which the nature of a professional identity - shaped by different demands on the Body, Mind and Soul – changes.

The AFL and the Business of Sports Entertainment

At the start of the 21st century elite level, competitive, physical contact, male team sports, particularly the variety of football codes, have long ceased to be mere games, and have developed into sports entertainment businesses with varying profiles in the hyperreality of global and regional media markets (Baudrillard 1992; 1993; Giulianotti 2004). In these media markets the performers who compete and dream of competing at the elite level of these sports are more than mere football players. Indeed, many of the elite performers in different industries have evolved into celebrities: they exist as images, icons and brands whose every thought, action, change of style or partner is commodified and consumed (Smart 2005; Cashmore 2004; Miller 2001). This commodification of the sports star as celebrity has substantial payoffs for elite performers in terms of sponsorship and/or endorsement agreements with local, regional and global brands.
Against this globalised backdrop the AFL is the premier sports entertainment industry in Australia. As a consequence of this media and brand profile AFL players are well paid by Australian wage and salary earner standards. However, their incomes from playing contracts and what the AFL calls Additional Services Agreements (ASAs) place them in the minor leagues of global earning and celebrity stakes. (AFL 2006; Mann 2006; Grant 2004; McGuire 2004; Buckley 2002). Player recruitment by clubs is also regulated by a draft process based on an allocation of selection priorities determined by the finishing position in the competition each year. The draft of beginning players is complemented by a process of trading established players - for other players, or for selection order in the draft. These equalisation policies have significant impacts on the length, and the profile, of players’ careers.

However, the most significant element of a player’s capacity to establish and prolong an AFL career is the durability of his body. Put simply, playing AFL football is a health hazard. As a contact sport AFL football is one of the most physically demanding codes of football that is played anywhere in the world. Sports sciences have impacted on conditioning, preparation and recovery in the AFL, yet such are the playing and regulatory demands of the game that the average AFL playing career is now only 2.9 years or 34 games – less than 5% of players extend their career to 10 plus years and 200 games or more (Hawthorne 2005). So, how do we understand the lifecycle of an elite performer in this sports entertainment environment?

A Professional Identity: Play Now, Pay Later?

Richard Guilliat (2005; 26) has touched on aspects of the points we want to develop here. He suggests that the physical and mental toll from a prolonged AFL career is ‘akin to a Faustian pact’ for many players. ‘Defying severe injuries to take the field will win’ elite performers in this sports entertainment industry ‘honour and acclaim, but come retirement in their 30s, they’re left with the broken, crippled bodies of old men’. He illustrates his argument through the example of ex-Melbourne 258 gamer Stephen Febey – an example that reveals a litany of major and minor soft tissue and skeletal injuries throughout Febey’s career that have a range of ongoing consequences for Febey’s physical and mental health (Guilliat 2005: 26-27).
Febey’s example, and that of many other ex-players, illuminate aspects of the pacts many young men willingly enter into in order to develop and maintain an identity as an AFL footballer. Guilliat (2005: 27) suggests that for Febey, and many like him, the amount of money he made from playing football was unimportant in relation to the ‘sheer intoxication of pulling on the red and blue jumper, running onto the MCG…with his mates and having 50,000 people cheering him on’. One tension in any analysis of these sorts of issues relates to the apparently willing participation of elite footballers in the processes of talent identification, forms of regulation, coaching, strength and conditioning regimes, recovery programs and medical interventions that characterise an AFL career.

Drawing on the governmentality literature (see, for example, Barry et al 1996; Burchell et al 1991; Cole et al 2004; Dean & Hindess 1998; Rose 1990, 1999), and Foucault’s (1978; 1983; 1985; 1986; 1991; 2000a&b) later work on the care of the self, we understand these processes in terms of Foucault’s discussions about the ways in which we develop a sense of Self, and the ways in which Others seek to govern us in relation to ideas about the particular characteristics that this Self should exhibit. Foucault’s work has energised governmentality studies (Foucault 1991) in a variety of fields in the social sciences – work that has, as Rose (1999: 3) indicates, concerned itself with the myriad of ‘endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others, whether these be the crew of a ship, the members of a household, the employees of a boss’, or footballers in a professional competition. These analyses are further concerned with the ways in which ‘one might be urged and educated to bridle one’s own passions, to control one’s own instincts, to govern oneself’. What is of interest in the particular cultural, regulatory and sports entertainment context of the AFL, are the ways in which a sports entertainment business generates a series of expectations about appropriate behaviours and dispositions that serve to identify a person/player as professional – or not. Foucault’s work enables us to identify and analyse how relations of power, forms of regulation and arts of governing a competition, a Club, a team, an individual, yourself, intersect and interact in ongoing attempts to make up the professional footballer (Rose & Miller 1992). In the next section we will argue that a professional identity for elite performers in the AFL can be identified and analysed as a complex, contested, fluid process in which different phases in a career
intersect, and overlap, with diverse elements of the Body, Mind and Soul – to produce an array of ideas, demands, expectations, attitudes, behaviours and dispositions that mark the elite performer as professional, or not.

**The Life Cycle of the AFL Footballer: Early, Mid and Late Career Phases**

Elsewhere (Kelly and Hickey 2005 a&b; Hickey & Kelly 2006; 2005) we have discussed the findings of qualitative, interviewed based research with AFL Industry officials, Club officials, and players, that was conducted during 2004. Thirty six players, 21 Club based coaches and administrators, and eight officers of the AFL Executive and AFL Players’ Association (AFL-PA) participated in semi structured, one-to-one and focus group interviews. The research explored the emergence and evolution of a *professional identity* for AFL footballers. The research and analysis was informed by the view that to develop an identity as an AFL footballer means bringing together, or developing different elements of the person. The concept of *Body, Mind and Soul* attempts to name the separate, but intimately connected elements that constitute the self that is a professional AFL footballer. In this context the *Body* of the AFL footballer presents itself, and what it can do, as something that can be objectively and scientifically defined, described and developed. It can be made stronger, repaired, trained, cared for, understood by the individual and by others whose job it is to get it out on the field each week. The *Mind* of the player also presents itself as something that may be described and understood in these sorts of scientific frameworks. It can be developed by concerns for decision making, accountability and discipline – both on and off the field. The *Soul* of the professional footballer presents itself as something that is obvious, but hard to describe. Words such as character, attitude, work ethic, courage, moral judgements indicate what we are describing here. The Soul is an intangible concept that presents great problems for measurement and regulation (Rose 1990; Loehr & Schwartz 2001: 120-128).

Pre-research discussions with the AFL-PA, and subsequent discussions with participants, were important in developing our categorisations of distinct phases to an AFL playing career. These phases provide a framework for thinking about how one to four year players, for example, may have different ambitions, hopes, needs and motivations, to players who have been AFL footballers for eight or nine years; and whose conditioning,
recovery, training and playing may be understood and managed differently. From these discussions we determined that it was appropriate to describe these phases in the following ways:

- Early Career players – zero to four years as an AFL player (some players we interviewed were in their 1st pre-season after drafting)
- Mid Career players – 4 to 8 years as an AFL player
- Late Career players – 8 plus years as an AFL player

Our research indicates that although the boundaries of Early, Mid and Late Career are fuzzy, they provide a useful framework for thinking about the stages of a player’s development, and the ways in which the Body, Mind and Soul are thought about, developed and managed in different ways across the career conceptualised in this manner.

Early Career Players

Many of the Early Career players we spoke to recognised that their commitment to football had implications on their capacity to pursue other activities, such as education long before they were drafted. A number of Early Career players talked about the dedication that was needed for them to make it onto an AFL list: many spoke of the difficulty they had in keeping up with schooling while trying to excel at the elite, underage level:

    Year 12. No I didn’t try. Only thing I was thinking about was footy that year. It didn’t worry me how I went. Mum and Dad didn’t hassle me, they knew all I wanted was to be an AFL footballer. They’d given up on trying to get me into study. They were at me a bit, but they knew that I had it in my heart to be a footballer (Early Career player).

Many Early Career players talked about the need to give football everything they had. Within this mindset, activities that took their attention away from football were generally unwelcome. For many young players this created a tension between the wisdom of having something outside of football and the need to make the most of the opportunity they had to make it as an AFL player. Early Career players generally understood their lack of readiness for AFL football in relation to the limitations of their body, not their
mind. Young players generally understood the first phase of their participation at an AFL club as a time dedicated to developing the physical condition and skill level to perform at the top level. For many draftees, keeping up with the intensity and frequency of training sessions was an all-consuming demand:

Nothing can prepare you for the intensity of the training. The first two years I was here I just used to go home and lie on the couch between training sessions. You’re just bloody exhausted. I started a course doing something, marketing I think, but to be honest I didn’t give a shit about it. I was just flat out keeping up with the training (Early Career Player).

Mid Career Players

Most players that get to the Mid Career phase have, to greater or lesser extents, made it. Having been on an AFL list for up to eight years, all of these players had achieved their childhood ambition to play AFL football:

It’s a different feeling when you become part of the team and you stop having to worry about whether you will get a game, or even stay at the club, any more. I don’t know when it happened but all of a sudden I knew I could compete at the top level and wasn’t worried about that anymore. I guess that’s when I started to think about other things, things outside of footy (Mid Career player).

As a group, however, they were far from content with this sense of achievement – the nature of the industry is such that any level of achievement is, fundamentally, provisional, and liable to be short term, or interrupted, even ended, by processes and decisions beyond a player’s control:

It came as a bit of a shock when I was told I would be traded. My immediate thoughts were bitter and angry, then I guess there was lots of self doubt, like, ‘who’s going to want me’? (Mid Career player)

Presented with an opportunity to set themselves up for life, many Mid Career players spoke of an unwillingness to get involved in activities that could distract them from their football. Acutely aware that it wouldn’t go on forever, they were of the collective mind to make the most of their opportunity. Their ability to sustain, even improve, their status as regular AFL footballers would undoubtedly further their social and financial capital. The motivation to consolidate their status as established AFL footballers was as powerful as ever:
For the first few years I didn’t do anything except try and improve my football. I did a couple of courses but I didn’t really achieve much. Not sure I even finished some of them. But in the last few years I’ve been busy building up some investments and trying to get myself set up. I own my own house and have a couple of units and stuff. (Mid Career player).

**Late Career Players**

Players that had been on AFL lists for 8 years or more were generally well established and respected. They shared a general feeling of privilege and good fortune at having established a long career as AFL footballers. During their years of involvement they had seen many players come and go. Knowing that they too could have fallen foul of injury, form or opportunity, their identities as (Late Career) AFL footballers made them household names in the media markets where AFL has a high profile:

I’ve always played like it could be my last game, or year. Being a Late Career player doesn’t change that. I could’ve done a knee or something years ago and just disappeared out of the game. I’ve seen a…lot of that over the years. There’s a fair bit of luck involved in playing football for a long time (Late Career player).

Though this group collectively acknowledged that their playing days were limited they were unanimous in expressing their desire to keep playing as long as they could. The Body was in sharp focus among players in this group. The rigours of a long football career were generally felt in their bodies. The same wear and tear was not identifiable in their Mind or Soul. Their commitment to football was as strong as it ever had been:

I haven’t seriously thought about retiring yet. I’ve heard others talk about it but I haven’t actually said anything about it yet. I’d like to think that I’ve still got a year or two left. I guess I’ll sit down with the Club at the end of the year and talk about where I’m up to. (Late Career player).

The spectre of retirement was, for many Late Career players, powerful motivation to work thoughtfully toward increased longevity. Their knowledge of the game was an advantage in careful and considered conditioning of their aging bodies. Life after football was something to be worked through, but for now their emphasis was on maintaining their football careers for as long as they could. They generally felt that they would know when their time was up and they would move on. When it happened they would be plenty
of time to think about what they wanted to do next.

**Conclusion: What is left when the cheering stops?**

AFL players willingly participate in the processes of talent identification, forms of regulation, coaching, strength and conditioning regimes, recovery programs and medical interventions that characterise an AFL career. In order to develop an identity as an AFL footballer these young men willingly sell their Body, Mind and Soul. Our analysis indicates these pacts can have significant payoffs for a sense of self, and in monetary terms. However, the *nature* of this sports entertainment business is such that for many these payoffs are limited and must be accounted for sometime in the future. Indeed, the longer a career lasts the greater the potential costs to the Body, Mind and Soul.

Our analysis of phases to a playing career highlight the overriding compulsion to play, to be part of the team, to continually affirm an identity as an elite performer in this sports entertainment industry. For many players, planning to *not* be a footballer doesn’t compare – in terms of a sense of self – to doing whatever it takes to be a footballer. This *at any cost* attitude has benefits for Clubs chasing success in an industry where the average career span is in decline; and where long term players often retire with the battered bodies of old men. In this context what responsibilities do different parties – the AFL, AFL-PA, Clubs, individuals – have when the accounts are to be settled, when the cheering stops?

**References**


