

Support Structures for Indigenous Athletes in Australian Football

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Indigenous athletes have played a unique role in shaping Australia's sporting history, yet have faced racism on and off the sporting field and have been treated as inferior, particularly considering the pay and support afforded to non-Indigenous athletes (Tatz, 1995). While their achievements have been examined within an historical context (Gorman, 2005; Tatz et al, 1998) very little research has been conducted from a management perspective. The Australian Football League (AFL) is Australia's most popular and successful professional sporting league. In 2008 there were 704 registered professional AFL players, of which 10% were Indigenous. By contrast, Indigenous people represent 2.5% of Australia's general population (ABS, 2008). As the AFL has become increasingly professionalised over the last 20 years, the league, its constituent clubs and the AFLPA (union) have developed a broad range of support structures and mechanisms for AFL players. However, the nature and efficacy of these support structures, and within other professional sport is under researched, particularly in relation to Indigenous athletes in Australia and internationally.

Despite significant debate about the term social support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Goldsmith, 2004; Veiel & Baumann, 1992), there is general agreement that the infrastructure of social support is made up of tangible and intangible networks and that these networks have value. These networks can have positive effects on the health and wellbeing of individuals and have been used as an intervention strategy to reduce stress and assist in trauma recovery (Goldsmith, 2004). The notion of social support within organisations has been conceptualised as part of an exchange relationship between employee and employer, with most research focussing on perceived organisational support (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Somewhat surprisingly, the nature, extent and efficacy of support structures or services have not been a focus of organisational support research. Research into social support within sport has largely focussed on injury and injury recovery (Bianco, 2001; Hardy et al, 1991; Junge, 2000; Petrie, 1993) or has been contextualised within broader examinations of negative aspects of elite performance, such as anxiety and stress (Hardy et al, 1991; Petrie, 1993; Smith et al, 1995; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). There is limited research that has investigated the characteristics of support structures for elite athletes. Rosenfeld et al (1989) examined sources of social support used by college athletes, identifying providers of social support and the types of support they provided, while Robins and Rossenfeld (2001) investigated athlete perceptions of social support provided by coaches and trainers prior to injury and during rehabilitation. In the Australian context, Noblet et al (2003) examined the predictors of strain experienced by professional Australian footballers, of which social support was one element, while Dagley (2004) examined elite athlete satisfaction with the national 'athlete career education' program. Literature related to support structures for Indigenous athletes is almost non-existent; the notable exception a Canadian study that revealed Indigenous athletes use culturally specific support systems and have difficulty adjusting to and feeling accepted within mainstream sport (Michel et al, 2006; Schinke et al, 2006).

Given the lack of research into support systems and structures within professional sport, particularly in relation to elite Indigenous athletes, and the commercial and cultural significance of the AFL in Australia, this research sought to answer three research questions: (1) What are the current support structures and who are the providers of support for elite Australian Indigenous athletes within the AFL?; (2) How effective are the current support structures utilised by these athletes?; and (3) What impacts do the current support structures have on the athlete's career? As the research involved investigating an aspect of the lives of a minority group, the researchers adopted a method that enabled an in-depth exploration of cultural differences and issues that Indigenous athletes face in adapting to and being successful within mainstream sport. Furthermore, the nature of the research questions did not lend themselves to the application of a quantitative research design, such as the application of the SSI (Brown et al, 1987). Focus groups were conducted with Indigenous players within 7 of the 16 AFL clubs; 24 players participated, equivalent to 34% of all Indigenous athletes within the AFL. The focus groups were digitally recorded, transcripts were produced and the data was coded according to the procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1998).

The research results were as follows. First, providers of support were found within the club, within the league and the players' association and external to the sport. Although coaches were identified as a significant source of support, fellow Indigenous teammates were the most important source of support within the club environment. The Indigenous manager with the players' association was identified as the most important football related support provider outside the club, while family, community and community elders played a significant support role that was essential to Indigenous players, but was little understood by non-Indigenous teammates and club staff. The athletes who participated in the study experienced a strong cultural connection that extended to their families, home communities and fellow Indigenous athletes, which was instrumental in constructing their

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professional, personal and cultural identities. Second, the athletes believed that the support structures improved their motivation and commitment, reduced their stress and improved their performance. However, the athletes also believed that the support structures were deficient in several key aspects, the most significant being a lack of support to deal with the disconnection from family and community once they had been drafted, and a lack of cultural understanding and awareness among teammates and staff once they arrived at their new club. Finally, the athletes saw great potential for the employment of Indigenous people within the football departments of the clubs, in order to strengthen the support structures for Indigenous athletes and focus on the cultural connection and shared social reality that was essential to the efficacy of these structures.

In conclusion, the research revealed that Indigenous athletes within the AFL appear to need more culturally relevant and specialised support structures, and human resource management practices must be tailored to meet their needs if professional sport organisations seek to maximise performance. Furthermore, unlike previous research, this study illustrated that teammates of a similar cultural background were the most important club based providers of social support, and that Indigenous led and implemented support structures and programs were most likely to be successful in supporting Indigenous athletes within the league. In addition, the study highlighted that the family and community connections held by Indigenous athletes are little understood by the clubs or the league, yet they form an essential network of social support that provides the foundation for Indigenous participation and success.