The psychological contract is a theoretical framework popularized by Rousseau which has been used to understand mutual obligations between an employee and an employer (Rousseau, 1996, 2001; Turnley & Feldman, 1998). Based on these beliefs, employees make inferences about what employers have promised them as organizational inducements, in return for the work-place contributions that employers expect of them (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002). Although psychological contract literature within the sports industry has given considerable attention to psychological contract violation (Barnhill & Turner, 2013; Pate, 2006; Rigotti, 2009) psychological contract breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997), organizational relationships and productivity (Matthijs Bal, Chiaburu & Jansen, 2010; Nichols, 2013; Barnhill & Turner, 2014; De Ruiter, Schalk, Schaveling & van Gelder, 2016; Rayner, 2017) there are limited theoretical and empirical insights into the psychological contract when measured in alignment with career development in professional sport.

Career development research has illustrated that employee beliefs, attitudes and needs vary within different stages of an employee’s career (Lam, Ng & Feldman, 2012; Lee, Kossek, Hall & Litrico, 2011; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) Low and Bordia’s (2011) research illustrated two theoretical mechanisms to explain how career stages and psychological contract preferences may be linked. Firstly, by defining the employee’s role within the organizational context a set of expectations develops on how they should behave (Parker, 2007). These role expectations exert normative pressure on employees’ attitudes and behaviours and illustrate how beliefs, responsibilities and concerns could vary in different career stages (Biddle, 1986; Callero, 1994; Neale & Griffin, 2006). Secondly, Low and Bordia’s (2011) work identified how employees’ career stages and preferences for contributions and inducements can be linked using the idea of the ‘self’ concept. Whereas role expectations exert normative pressure externally on individuals, the ‘self’ concept acts as an internal regulator that guides individuals’ beliefs (Kawakami, Phills, Greenwald, Simard, Pontiero, Brnjas & Dovidio, 2012).

It was therefore the central objective of this study to examine the role of different career stages and the impact upon psychological contract preferences within professional rugby union. The sport of rugby union has undergone a constant growth in international competition, deregularization and globalisation during the twenty-two years that it has been a professional sport. Consequently, the fluctuations in market conditions have caused the professional clubs to become more flexible and responsive to market conditions to increase productivity. Subsequently, this has seen the traditional variants of contract design, such as casual, temporary and fixed-term, attached to the professional player contract. These varying types of contract not only cause a reduction in job security, psychological and emotional problems for the professional rugby player, but a professional club can also suffer by employing the use of such contracts (Barnhill & Turner, 2014; De Ruiter, Schalk, Schaveling & van Gelder, 2016; Rayner, 2017). These issues faced by both the professional rugby union athlete and the professional clubs make the psychological contract of employment and career stages a critical topic of research within professional rugby union.

Psychological contracts, career stages, self-concepts and role identity are complex, intra-personal concepts that play dynamic interconnected roles in career pathways. Consequently, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted to explore how the psychological contract was shaped by career stages within professional rugby union. In order to explore these concepts, semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty-eight professional rugby athletes from the twelve full-time professional rugby clubs within England. The athletes were purposefully recruited to ensure that the participants were employed on a full-time professional contract and recruited based on tenures of employment to ensure career-stage diversity (i.e. Less than two years employed on a professional contract, between two and four years employed on a professional contract, between four and eight years employed on a professional contract and
finally between eight and twelve years employed on a professional contract).

During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to express their views on their psychological contracts, career stages, self-concepts and role identity. Sample questions include: ‘How would you describe your role in relation to the players within the club?’ (organizational role); ‘If you are given a choice, what would you prefer to contribute to your club?’ (preferred psychological contract contributions); and ‘What do you think are the incentives that your club can provide to further motivate you?’ (preferred psychological contract inducements). Additionally, at the end of the interviews the participants were presented with a description of Dalton, Thompson and Price’s (1977) career development model and asked to choose which stage best described their present career situation.

Interview transcripts were subsequently analysed inductively using thematic analysis to generate codes and clustering the codes into central organizing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). The themes identify variances in the ‘self’ concept and organisational roles when aligned to the career stage model by Dalton et al (1977). The findings also demonstrate the significance of the psychological contract amongst professional rugby union athletes by illustrating the work-place contributions that the athletes would willingly make to their employers and the organizational inducements that they felt their employers should provide them at differing stages of the career stage model.

Although there is research (Low & Bordia, 2011: Low, Bordia & Bordia, 2016) proposing a link between the psychological contract and career development stages, this research is the first empirical study examining role identities, self-concepts and the psychological contract associated with career stages within professional sport. Understanding professional athletes and their preferred psychological contract elements at various stages in their career development could improve attraction and retention of players by providing work conditions that meet employee preferences, and thereby form psychological contracts that strengthen employer–employee relationships (Conway, Guest & Trenberth, 2011; Schein, 1965).