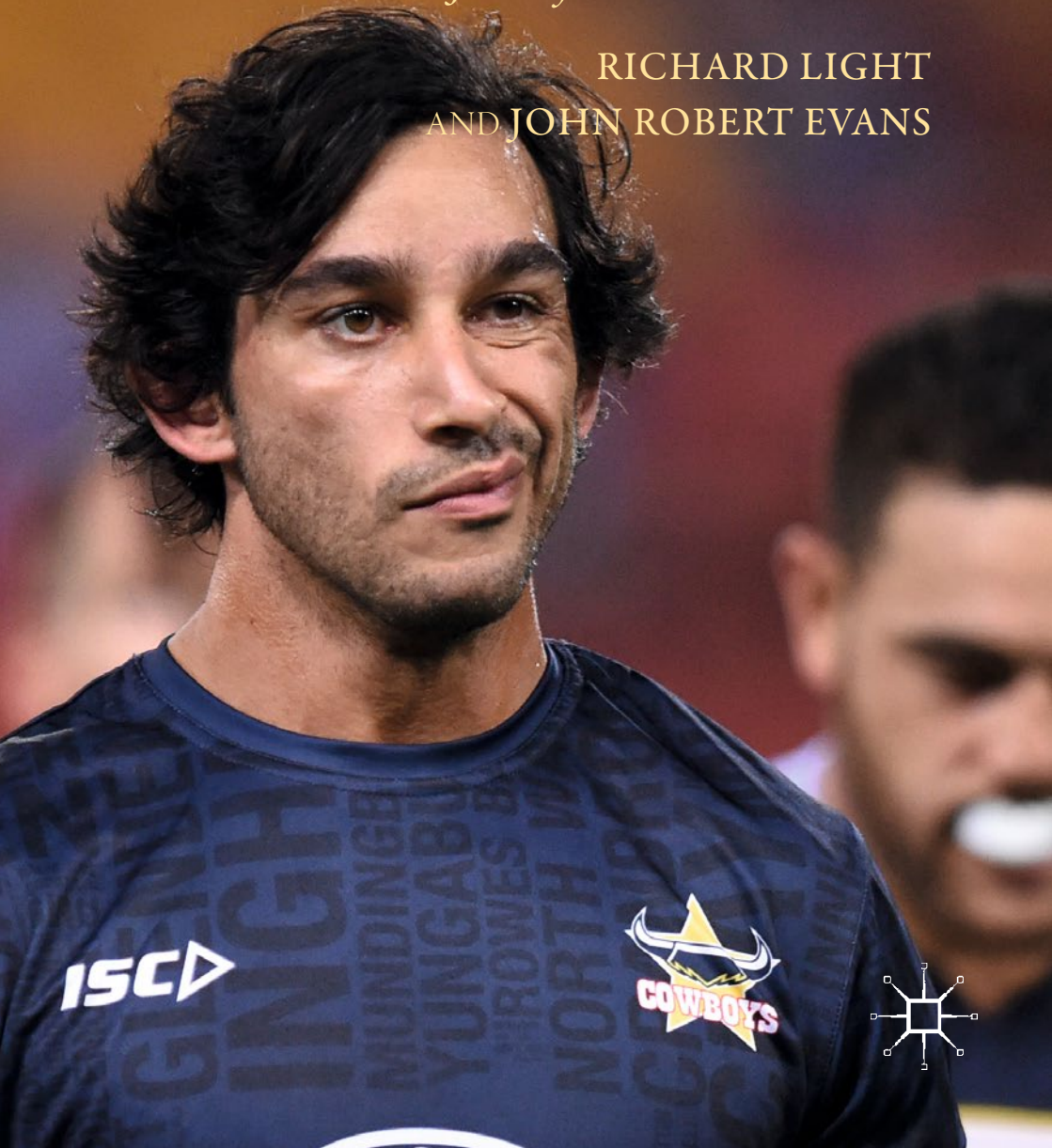# Stories *of* Indigenous Success *in* Australian Sport

Journeys to the AFL and NRL

RICHARD LIGHT
AND JOHN ROBERT EVANS

Stories of Indigenous Success in Australian Sport

"The research presented in this engaging and important book provides invaluable understanding of the meaning Australian football and rugby league holds for Indigenous Australian athletes and its inseparability from Aboriginal culture. Guided by the important and profound Indigenous methodology of *Dadirri, Indigenous stories of Success in Australian Sport* provides deep insight into what enables Indigenous Australians to thrive in sport by embracing our humanity and capacity to be exceptional and by offering us hope rather than entrenching despair. It also suggests the potential that taking this approach to understanding Indigenous Australians holds across a wide range of issues that include but are not limited to sport."

—Chris Sarra, *University of Canberra, Australia, National Rugby League (NRL) Commissioner and Founding Chairman of the Stronger, Smarter Institute*

"A fascinating, well-written, entertaining and significant study. *Indigenous Stories of Success in Australian Sport* is a timely and perceptive personal understanding of Indigenous experiences in both the AFL and NRL. Light and Evans provide rare insights into considering the importance that sport plays within Indigenous communities. A very welcome addition to Indigenous sports literature."

—John Maynard, *University of Newcastle, UK*

"The narratives of the outstanding sportsmen in *Indigenous Stories of Success in Australian Sport* are immensely interesting, beautifully written, neatly structured and provide fascinating insight into the development of elite Indigenous sportsmen and the role Aboriginal culture plays in it. This book is more than a chronicle of Indigenous success in sport. It is an incisive and original exploration, and critique, of a country with a proud history of sporting prowess. It also presents a passionate plea to sports administrators, educational leaders, and policymakers, to 'listen to culture'."

—Angus Hikairo Macfarlane, *University of Canterbury, New Zealand*

"*Indigenous Stories of Success in Australian Sport* is an exceptional book. Readers of the volume cannot fail to be impressed by the depth of the stories presented in Parts II and III, each of them fascinating in their own right, but when considered collectively, provide a compelling perspective on how Indigenous Australians develop sporting expertise and succeed in transitioning in professional sport."

—David Lavallee, *Limerick University, Republic of Ireland*

Richard Light • John Robert Evans

Stories of Indigenous Success in Australian Sport

Journeys to the AFL and NRL

palgrave
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Foreword

The 2015 NRL Grand Final goes down as one of the greatest and most historic; not only was it an exceptional game won by the North Queensland Cowboys after the final siren, but it was also the first time both teams had Indigenous captains. I was at that game in my capacity as an Inaugural Australian Rugby League Commissioner. The NRL is the first national sport to have an Indigenous Australian on the commission, the highest level of corporate governance in the game. As an Indigenous Australian and as an educator, I am proud to fulfil that role.

At that very game, Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull asked me 'What are three things we must do to make a difference in Indigenous policy?' It is indeed a complex question but in contemplating a profound response I realized the answer to his question was being played out on the field before our very eyes. Eventually, with the answers being played out before me on the NRL field, I responded to the Prime Minister by articulating three key elements for success on the Indigenous policy landscape:

– Embrace our humanity and our capacity to be exceptional;
– Bring us policy approaches that nurture hope rather than entrench despair;
– Do things WITH us, not TO us.

The Indigenous policy landscape has always been complex. The enduring and parlous statistics for Indigenous people reminds us that we still have a long way to go before we remove this dreadful blemish from the fabric of our Australian nation. Conversely, the representation of Indigenous players in our two most prominent Australian football codes, that *Indigenous stories of success in Australian sport* focuses on, shows that within the confines of these games, we are getting something right.

I have always maintained that the football field is a tremendous analogy that offers a glimpse at what a fair, equitable and exceptional society can look like. The playing field is level. Racism might exist there but it is dealt with promptly as there is literally no place to hide. Most importantly, if Indigenous football players, or indeed any player, are prepared to work their guts out, turn up, be a cohesive team member, and commit to the pursuit of excellence and winning, then usually they will succeed. If only the rest of our society could understand how to create such a societal culture that embraces Indigenous Australian culture and enables us to move well beyond surviving, to thriving.

In this engaging book, Light and Evans bring to life their research into those very elements that enable success for Indigenous Australian NRL and AFL players and offer deep and valuable insights into notions of Indigenous cultures within football culture. Drawing on their innovative, three-year study, they note that for many Indigenous players, football is not just a physical activity, but a cultural practice whose meaning is shaped by historical and social contexts.

The findings of the three-year study presented in this book help us understand more deeply how Indigenous Australian athletes can thrive in Australian football and rugby league by embracing our humanity and capacity to be exceptional and by offering us hope rather than entrenching despair. An added bonus for readers of *Indigenous stories of success in Australian sport* is the valuable insight it provides into a profound Indigenous methodology, referred to as Dadirri. Dadirri encourages us to learn through non-intrusive observation, deep, active listening that challenges us to hear with more than our ears and build knowledge through sensitivity and awareness and develop understanding after deep contemplation and reflection. It is from this perspective that Light and Evans have been able to offer such deep and enlightening insights into what

enables Indigenous athletes to thrive in Australian football and rugby league while locating their experiences in the bigger picture of global sport. It suggests the potential that this approach to understanding Indigenous Australians holds across a wide range of issues that include, but are not limited to, sport.

Chris Sarra

Preface

This book presents the findings of a three-year study on the journeys of 16 Indigenous Australian athletes from their first touch of a football to the highest levels of Australian football and rugby league, conceptualized as a process of learning. Given the acute disadvantages Indigenous Australians suffer across a range of key social determinants, their success in Australian football and rugby league is something of an anomaly that invites investigation but from a more sophisticated perspective than reductionist views of the 'natural athlete'. The study we report on in this book inquired into the development of sporting expertise as a process of culturally and socially situated learning with the central research question being: 'What pedagogical factors enabled male, Indigenous athletes to become elite level players in Australian football and rugby league?'

The combined narrative inquiry and grounded theory methodology we used aligned with the Indigenous Australian cultural concept of *dadirri*, which encouraged us to listen deeply and attentively and strive to wholly understand. Individually, the life stories told to us by 16 elite-level Indigenous athletes provide fascinating insights into experience, culture and learning. Collectively, they provided deep understanding of the powerful influence that Aboriginal culture exerted on the participants' development of expertise and their journeys to the top of their sports while locating individual experience and agency within larger economic, cultural and social considerations. We wrote this book in a way that attempts

to capture the unfolding of understanding that came from listening and thinking about the stories told to us, and the use of formal theories to further develop this understanding. It locates detailed individual experience of learning within an Aboriginal culture of sport in local communities and locates the participants' journeys to the AFL and NRL within the tensions between a local Indigenous culture of sport and the global culture of the sport industry as shaped by economic rationalism.

Focused on Indigenous success in two of Australia's biggest sports, this book makes a contribution towards knowledge in Indigenous studies across a range of issues that include, but are not limited, to sport. At the same time, it makes a significant contribution towards knowledge about the development of expertise and particularly up to the ages of 12 or 13 in team sports by confirming much of the literature in this area while emphasizing the importance of culture.

Christchurch, New Zealand   Richard Light
Sydney, Australia   John Robert Evans

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the assistance and cooperation of people who helped make this book possible. This begins with the eight AFL and eight NRL participants who took time from their busy lives to tell us their stories and to answer questions we had in following up on those interviews. We thank them for being prepared to share their life experiences with us as strangers and appreciate their trust and cooperation. Each of them spoke at length about their lives and journeys to the AFL and NRL in ways that were honest, sincere, positive and inspiring. Without exception, each of them had faced great challenges over their journeys to the highest level of their sport in Australia that highlighted their courage, resilience and commitment to realize their dream and which we feel could inspire other Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) Australians to reach their goals in life. For the first author, who is not Indigenous, these stories provided enlightening insights into Aboriginal culture, spirituality and the importance of community and identity as an Indigenous Australian and the role these played in assisting them succeed.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

AFL	Australian Football League
AGSV	Associated Grammar Schools of Victoria
CLT	Complex Learning Theory
DMSP	Development Model for Sport Participation
GBA	Game-Based Approaches
NSW	New South Wales
NSWRL	New South Wales Rugby League
NRL	National Rugby League
QLD	Queensland
SANFL	South Australia National Football League
TAC	Transport Accident Commission
TGfU	Teaching Games for Understanding
VFL	Victorian Football League

Part I

Introduction

Despite being acutely disadvantaged in comparison to non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Australians punch well above their weight in sport and particularly in Australian football and rugby league. Although only comprising 3 per cent of the Australian population, they account for between 10 per cent and 14 per cent of the elite player population in the |NRL (National Rugby League) and the AFL (Australian Football League) (Harvey and Halloran 2010; Sheedy 2010a, b). Approximately 22 per cent of players in the annual rugby league State of Origin series (NSW Vs Qld) are Indigenous with one-third of the Queensland team typically Indigenous. As we outline in more detail in the following chapter, sport has long had an important place in Indigenous Australian culture but access to elite-level sport for them is a comparatively recent development. Rugby league was first played in Australia in 1908 but it was not until 1960 that Lionel Morgan ran on the field as the first Aboriginal to play for the Australian national team to be greeted with boos and pelted with objects by spectators. Over half a century later, the participation of Indigenous players in rugby league and Australian football at their most elite levels is significant enough for the annual promotion of 'All Star' games between Indigenous and non-Indigenous players, leading into the respective playing seasons.

Indigenous players are not only very visible in the AFL and NRL due to their numbers but also due to what is seen to be a distinctively Indigenous approach to play that is commonly described as being intuitive, creative and free flowing with Indigenous players displaying superb skills, anticipation, awareness and a remarkable sense of the game that escapes most non-Indigenous players (see Hallinan and Judd 2007). In AFL this reflects what Butcher and Judd (2016) describe as an Aboriginal 'football ethic' that is evident in weekend gatherings in central and northern Australia where the role that culture plays in the development of an Aboriginal is also evident. These important cultural events in central and northern Australia celebrate sport, culture and community with an approach to play that, 'stresses attack in a style that is characterized by high-speed running quick scoring and minimal body contact' and one in which, 'giving expression to the game is given priority over any desire to win' (p. 173).

The rugby league All Stars pre-season game is a highly anticipated event between two reasonably evenly matched teams but with the Indigenous team being dominant over recent years. The Indigenous All Stars had an emphatic win in 2013 with the Festival of Indigenous Rugby League programme replacing the All Stars game in 2014 because this was the year following the Rugby League World Cup. In 2015, the Indigenous All Stars defeated the NRL (non-Indigenous) All Stars 20–6. A World All Stars team narrowly defeated the Indigenous All Stars 12–8 but in February 2017 the Indigenous All Stars overpowered the World All Stars team to earn a convincing 34–8 victory. In the same sport, up to 35 per cent of players in the Australian national rugby league team (the Kangaroos) are Indigenous (Evans et al. 2015) with this figure rising up to 46 per cent of players in the Australian run on side for the 2015 ANZAC day test match. The presence and influence of Indigenous players is very evident in both sports. So is their distinctive way of playing.

In Australian sport, it is widely accepted that Indigenous Australians bring something special to the NRL and AFL and display outstanding skill, knowledge, ability and a sense of the game but little research has been conducted on how this expertise is developed. Most commonly, this aptitude to rugby league and Australian football and subsequent over-representation in the AFL and NRL is simplistically explained as being

racially inherited 'natural talent'. While there is likely to be some genetic influence, this is a simplistic and inadequate explanation that has been widely criticized (see Adair and Stronach 2011). A tempting alternative explanation might lie in the body of work on the broader development of sporting expertise in sport but its lack of attention to culture limits its ability to explain the success of Indigenous Australians at the highest levels of two major Australian sports and how this distinctive style of play is developed.

Natural Athletes?

As Adair and Stronach (2011) suggest, the concept of the 'natural' Aboriginal athlete as a biological, genetic and 'racial' explanation for innate sporting acumen is pervasive in popular culture, whether in Australia, the USA or elsewhere. In Australia, this belief in Indigenous athletic ability being genetically inherited is not only uncritically accepted among non-Indigenous Australians but also among Indigenous Australians. Described by Godwell (2000) as 'folkloric theory', it encourages belief in the existence of an innate athletic ability in Aboriginals as a simplistic explanation for their success in sport that ignores their efforts in developing their talent as a process of learning and the influence of Aboriginal culture.

Racial inheritance explanations of sporting success are not limited to male Indigenous athletes. Indigenous females also accept this explanation of their success in sport as being naturally occurring as well as accepting that characteristics of performance in sport such as being instinctive, magical, inventive and having a 'sixth sense' are also genetically passed on (Stronach et al. 2016; Hallinan and Judd 2007). While there are likely to be genetically inherited capacities that provide some advantage for Indigenous Australians in rugby league and Australian football (and other sports), this view of the natural athlete is too simplistic and dismissive of individual contributions to the development of expertise in sport and the influence of socio-cultural contexts. It fails to recognize the lifetimes of learning and the contributions of other people involved in these players' development into elite-level sportsmen. It also fails to recognize the role

that Aboriginal culture plays in this process and the meaning and value of sport in Indigenous communities (Butcher and Judd 2016; Light and Evans 2015, 2017).

Developing Expertise

Not only is recognition of the ways in which cultural context shapes and influences the development of sporting expertise lacking in research on Indigenous sport but also in sport more broadly. This is not to say that it is ignored because the last few decades have seen increasing consideration of how social and cultural contexts shape the development of sporting expertise but knowledge in the biophysical sciences in sport continues to dominate thinking about how expertise is developed. Recent explanations of expertise and performance in sport, in general, recognize and account for the interaction of genetics, environment and experience over time. As Côté et al. (2007) suggest understanding how expertise is developed in sport involves determining, 'the relative contribution of genetic and environmental/experiential factors to high-level human achievement/work that has emanated largely from the nature/nurture distinction first proposed by Sir Francis Galton' (p. 184). Genetic inheritance may play a significant role in the development of expertise in Indigenous athletes but, as research suggests across a range of cultural settings, the experience that they have from an early age, 'is enormously influential in determining to what degree individual potential is realised and expertise attained' (Côté et al. 2007, p. 184). Genetically inherited talent, capabilities or physical attributes alone are unlikely to take anyone to the most elite levels of their sport. Some work on the development of expertise in sport identifies how genetically inherited abilities and capacities are complemented by experience, formal practice and socio-cultural contexts but it is not merely the quantity of practice that is important as is suggested by the notion that 10,000 hours of practice is required to become an expert performer (see Ericsson and Charmness 1994).

The reductionist contention that 10,000 hours of practice is required to become an expert performer refers to deliberate practice that is high in effort, low in inherent enjoyment and designed to purposefully address areas of weakness (Ericsson and Charmness 1994). Recent developments

within the motor learning field have led to a more inclusive notion of what constitutes practice and consideration of the breadth of experience that contributes to the development of expertise, which is evident in recognition of the development that arises from participation in 'deliberate play', as play-like, loosely structured activities. The term deliberate play refers to activities that are fun, enjoyable, engaging and which promote intrinsic motivation. Deliberate play includes the informal pickup games often played in the local neighbourhood or after school and usually as small-sided games with peer designed rules and managed by the players. While they are not designed or played with any specific intent for performance improvement, they make a significant contribution to the development of expertise and particularly in regard to improving perceptual capacities and decision-making (Berry et al. 2008).

Some studies on the development of expertise have identified how expert decision-makers in elite-level team sports such as Australian football invest more time in deliberate play than in structured practice (see Berry and Abernathy 2003). Motor learning theory recognizes how deliberate play contributes to the development of performance but it is seen to be less important than deliberate practice as athletes focus more on one sport in the transition from the sampling phase (5–12 years) in the Development Model for Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté and Hay 2002) to the specializing phase (13–16 years). However, we suggest there is a need to look beyond motor learning theory to better understand how experience beyond the training field contributes to the development of expertise as a lifelong process of learning and how culture influences this development. In this book, we do so by drawing on learning theory that sits upon constructivist epistemology and accounts for experience and culture and complements the social theory of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu.

Developing Expertise as a Process of Situated Learning

As Kirk (2010) argues, seeing improvement in sport as a process of learning is invaluable for being able to identify and consider the wide range of environmental and interpersonal factors that shape it. Contemporary developments in theories of learning that have been drawn on to inform innovative approaches to teaching and coaching sport and other physical

activity identify and account for the culturally and socially situated nature of learning (Light 2017). They also identify the implicit processes of learning that occur through participation in practice within particular social and cultural settings ranging from Bourdieu's concept of cultural fields (1984) to the tighter focus of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice. They offer more sophisticated and effective ways of understanding how Indigenous Australian football and rugby league players succeed in making it to the pinnacle of their sport than seeing them as natural athletes or by measuring how many thousands of hours they spend in deliberate practice. The idea of learning as a lifelong process we refer to here is different to that of lifelong learning that forms an aspect of formal education policy in many developed countries (Light and Kentel 2010). Our view of learning as a lifelong process sees it as an inescapable aspect of social life expressed by Begg (2001) as living = learning, and which includes the implicit, embodied processes of learning gender and culture (Light and Kentel 2010).

Seeing the development of expertise by Indigenous Australian AFL and NRL players as a process of learning facilitates accounting for the powerful influence of culture, of the extended family and of the importance of relationships and interaction for Indigenous Australians. It also assists in recognizing the complexity of how they learn to succeed. In this book, we see learning as an ongoing process throughout life that is shaped by experience and context and not restricted to formal settings such as schools and universities. Taking a socio-cultural perspective on the development of expertise in Australian football and rugby league as a process of situated learning, we set out to answer the core research question of: 'What socio-cultural factors most enable the male, Indigenous athletes to develop into elite level players in Australian football and rugby league as a process of learning?'

The Study

Outlined and discussed in more detail in Chap. 3, the study drawn on in this book generated data from the stories told to us by the 16 participants about how they learned to play 'footy' from their first experiences of games and sport as very young children through to being drafted into the

AFL or NRL. We kept the stories whole but after identifying ideas, concepts and/or themes emerging across the participants' stories, we shifted to a grounded theory approach beginning with initial coding developed from the life history interview transcripts and then focused coding (Charmaz 2006). Following focused coding we used short, focused interviews to develop substantive categories through constant comparison within and between categories and memo-ing. We then moved from substantive to theoretical coding through the introduction of formal theory and concepts for theoretical integration.

This combined narrative inquiry and grounded theory methodology is an interpretive approach aimed at providing an inside perspective and a holistic understanding (Lal et al. 2012). Its use of a life history type interview and its emphasis on locating theory within a narrative allowed us to keep the stories intact while identifying emerging themes from which we developed theories grounded in the data. The combined, methodological approach complemented the importance of telling stories in Australian Aboriginal culture (Bamblett 2013) while also aligning with an Indigenous approach to research known as *dadirri* (Atkinson 2000).

According to Atkinson (2000), *dadirri* proceeds inductively and requires a degree of empathy, sensitivity and openness on the part of the researcher who must remain non-judgemental. Information and understanding are generated through non-intrusive observation, deep, active listening that involves 'hearing with more than the ears', building knowledge through sensitivity and awareness, and developing understanding by contemplation and reflection (Atkinson 2000, p. 16). In the later stages of the study, we asked the participants to not only check the accuracy of facts but also comment on the substantive themes that we had arrived at. The ways in which the findings provide understanding of Indigenous learning provide us with the opportunity of meeting a requirement of *dadirri*, which is to act upon the understanding developed from listening, reflecting and interaction. We act on this understanding by initially suggesting in the closing chapter of the book how the understanding and knowledge developed from the study could be used to inform policy and strategies involved in improving Indigenous formal education in the hope that we might be able to contribute to this aim in some practical way.

The delayed use of formal theory and literature in the grounded theory process is reflected in the increased use of the literature and formal theory in Part IV of the book. The study identified two distinct stages in the participants' journeys to the NRL and AFL that we focus on in Chaps. 12 and 13. Chapter 12 focuses on how the participants laid the foundations of expertise and a distinctive Aboriginal style of play. Chapter 13 focuses on the cultural transition from around the age of 12 or 13 to the participants' entry into the NRL and AFL. Chapter 14 locates the detail of individual experience and learning through participation in practice within the broader dynamics of cultural fields by drawing on the concepts of Bourdieu. The methodology employed highlighted the pivotal role that culture plays in this learning and how the challenges of adapting this to non-Indigenous professional sport involved processes of athlete cultural transition from the local culture of Aboriginal sport to the culture of professional, commodified and globalized sport.

The Book

This book is divided into four parts.

Part I

Section 1 begins with Chap. 1: *Indigenous Australians and Sport,* which discusses some of the relevant literature for the study that is divided into the four sections of:

1. Indigenous Australians: Issues and Challenges
2. The Place, Meaning and Importance of Sport in Indigenous Culture
3. Indigenous Knowledge, Culture and Learning
4. Aboriginal Approach to Playing Australian Football and Rugby League

The first section covers broad issues for Indigenous Australians including the extent of their disadvantages when compared to non-indigenous

Australians. The second section critically examines the place and function of sport in Indigenous culture and communities, their historical involvement in it and the ways in which it can operate to exacerbate disadvantages and/or help to fight against it. Section 3 focuses on Indigenous learning and culture with section 4 identifying characteristics of how sport is played by Indigenous Australians with a focus on Australian football and rugby league. Chap. 2: *Sport, Experience, the Body and Learning* continues and extends the discussion on developing sport expertise touched on in the introduction to examine and critique commonly used theories of motor learning for explaining the development of expertise in sport and to emphasize the influence of culture. It suggests more appropriate explanations of learning that are drawn on in this book and which can account for the development of expertise as a lifelong process of learning that is culturally and socially situated. Chap. 3: *The Study* presents the rationale for the study and its aims. It then explains the methodology used which is a combination of narrative inquiry and grounded theory that aligns well with the Indigenous *dadirri* approach as explained in the introduction.

Part II

Part II comprises four short, individual stories of success told by Indigenous former AFL players to us over the duration of the study (Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11). We wrote up the stories of all 16 participants (8 AFL and 8 NRL) and used them in the grounded theory process from which our two core theories or themes were developed but only present four AFL and four NRL stories in this book. Each initial life history type interview (Goodson and Sikes 2001) forms the main source of data that was developed through a grounded theory approach involving a number of subsequent interviews focused on testing emerging ideas and themes from our reading of and listening to the initial interview data. Each one of these stories provides insights into how the development of the participant is tied into their life stories, culture, family and significant other people in their lives. Each one of these stories is fascinating on its own but when considered collectively, they tell a powerful and compelling story about learning to perform at the highest level in both sports that is deeply situated in cultural contexts.

Part III

Part III comprises four stories of success (Chaps. 8–11) told to us by former NRL players that are presented in the same way that the AFL stories are in Part II. They offer the same engaging insights into individual stories and a compelling story of struggle and success that is deeply situated in Aboriginal culture and Australian social life. Collectively, it varies a little from the stories of the former AFL players, which is something we explore in Part IV.

Part IV

Part IV: *What these stories tell us* presents the analysis of the study divided into the two main themes of (1) how the foundations of expertise were laid through experiences from the first touch of a footy to around the age of 12 (Chap. 12) with four sub-themes and (2) how they had to learn to adapt an Aboriginal and culturally distinct approach to play to the constraints of non-Indigenous, professional approaches to training and playing as a process of cultural transition with two sub-themes (Chap. 13). The book concludes with Chap. 14, which locates the detail of personal experience within larger social, cultural and economic considerations by drawing on the analytic concepts of Bourdieu and with a focus on the tensions between local Aboriginal sport and the global culture of commodified sport (see Stewart 1987), shaped by economic rationalism.

Chapter 12 identifies how the foundations of expertise were laid during what the Development Model for Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté and Hay 2002) refers to as the sampling phase (5–12 years) during which the participants developed their talent for footy and a distinctively Aboriginal approach (AFL and NRL) within small communities where Aboriginal culture profoundly shaped their development. Chapter 13 examines and discusses the other main theme of how the participants had to learn how to adapt an Aboriginal approach to playing footy to the constraints of non-Indigenous systems and ways of doing things at elite, professional levels. Here we draw on some of the sport psychology literature to conceive of this as a process of cultural transition that involves a

degree of personal agency and locate it within the structure of larger cultural fields by drawing on Bourdieu's key concepts in Chap. 14. *Concluding Thoughts and Implications* summarizes the findings and suggests what the implications are for knowledge in Indigenous studies and policy-making, sport coaching and the sociology of sport.

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1 Indigenous Australians and Sport

This chapter begins with a general discussion on Indigenous Australians in contemporary Australian society and the major issues and the challenges they face, which is followed by an outline of the place, meaning and importance of sport in Indigenous culture and communities. It then discusses Indigenous knowledge, culture and learning before finishing with a discussion of a distinctive Aboriginal approach to playing sport focused on Australian football and rugby league.

Indigenous Australians: Issues and Challenges

When Australia became a Commonwealth in 1901, the then government decided to exclude Indigenous Australians from discussions and decisions that led to the formation of the first Parliament for which Edmund Barton was appointed as the country's first Prime Minister (Reynolds 2006). This exclusion of Indigenous Australians from early nation-building denied them their rightful place in Australian society and continued government decision-making based on Terra Nullius, used to take possession of Australia. Derived from Latin, Terra Nullius means a land belonging to no one, which was clearly an unfounded assumption that

was later successfully challenged in the High Court by Eddie 'Koiki' Mabo.

Early policy developments in Australia after the 1901 Federation were framed by colonial views and professed an egalitarian society for white people that was not abolished until the 1960s (Hickey et al. 2011). Thinking about Indigenous issues and policy at this time was heavily influenced by Charles Pearson and his 1893 publication, *National life and character* within which a key principle was the notion that the servile (Indigenous) races were to be kept under tutelage and included people other than those from the British Isles. By servile races it meant those who were ostensibly non-white. This included immigrant Chinese miners who had been savagely mistreated in the gold fields, pacific islanders who had been used as free labour in the cane fields and Indigenous Australians who were portrayed as undesirable and not part of Australia's emerging progressive society (Choi 1975; Hickey et al. 2011). Post 1901, the general view was that Indigenous Australians were a dying race that no provision should be made for them in the future (Reynolds 2006).

May 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, which conferred citizenship rights on Australia's Indigenous population but the period between 1788 and 1967 resulted in significant and irreversible impact on Indigenous Australians, which included the stolen generations, ongoing dispossession of land and deterioration of health standards. It was during this time that Indigenous Australians were subjected to the forced removal of children and punitive segregation (Reynolds 2006) that would later cease but its impact would be felt for generations to come with most Indigenous families experiencing some type of intergenerational damage (Commonwealth of Australia 1997).

In contemporary Australian history, the result of the 1967 referendum marked an important change in the political environment and self-determination of Australia's Indigenous population. Almost immediately after the 1967 referendum, there was a palpable change in the broader Indigenous community influenced by an emerging civil rights movement overseas that led to the establishment of Indigenous community controlled advocacy organizations, initially in the areas of health and legal

representation. There was also an air of optimism in 1975 when the labour Prime Minister Gough Whitlam returned traditional land to Vincent Lingiari, a Guringi man from the Wave Hill Cattle Station. This was the first formal declaration of land rights in Australia but did not translate into universal land rights across Australia (Hokari 2000). It was at this time that Indigenous communities began organizing their own sports carnivals and festivals (Judd 2005; Norman 2012).

Although uniform land rights has not been established in Australia, one conciliatory development was the 1992 Mabo decision which overturned the previously accepted doctrine of Terra Nullius and in its place was the formal recognition of native title. While native title was an important legal precedent of Indigenous people's ownership of the land prior to colonization, it did not make available land rights to all and excluded many people due to Liberal Prime Minister John Howard's 10-point plan and the codification of native title in 1997 (Bartlett 2015). In February 2008, that is, 11 years after the Bringing Them Home Report, The National Enquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their Families, was presented to the Commonwealth Government, the then labour Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a national apology for the catastrophic impact of the stolen generation era.

What emerged from this period of government was the bipartisan political movement centred on 'Closing the Gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across a range of key social determinants, which emphasized practical solutions to overcome underlying conditions (HEROC 2005). The National Reform Agreement (2009) established by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) identified six agreed targets and included improvements in life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational achievement and employment outcomes (COAG 2014) to 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes in 25 years. Early analysis indicated that many of the goals, while aspirational, would be difficult to achieve with education having the best chance of closing the gap (Altman et al. 2009). The commonwealth government's most recent report confirms these early predictions (Commonwealth of Australian 2017).

The Place, Meaning and Importance of Sport in Indigenous Culture

While most of the social indicators in Australian society indicate that Indigenous Australians face significant disadvantages (Carson et al. 2007), one of the areas which does provide access and opportunity is sport and physical activity although there have been compromises and difficulties (Judd 2010; Maynard 2012). Prominent Indigenous academic Chris Sarra (2011) posited that the sport of rugby league has had an emancipatory impact on the lives of Australia's Indigenous population with legendary AFL player Michael Long supporting this contention by suggesting that, 'Sport has been our greatest ally' in changing the circumstances of Indigenous Australians (Gorman 2011, p. 1). Prior to colonization what could be seen as sport and physical activity was part of the social fabric and played an important part in community life (Haagen 1994).

Sport-like games often figured in records of contact between Europeans and Indigenous communities. For example, William Blandowski's meticulous records of the places he visited in Victoria and New South Wales often depicted community life as he saw it and captured people engaged in sport-like games that predated European settlement (Allen 2010). Other authors such as Ken Edwards have also relied on similar records and community consultation to construct perspectives on Aboriginal Traditional games (Edwards 1999).

In traditional times, Aboriginal games were not only enjoyable but also functioned as pedagogical tools designed to pass on important life skills and culture essential for growing up and surviving (Edwards 1999; Haagen 1994). From well before the introduction of Anglo Celtic sports and recreational activities, sport has been a part of cultural life for Indigenous Australians with growing evidence suggesting the influence of traditional game, Marn Grook on the development of Australian football. Tom Wills, who has been accredited as the main architect for the formation of Australian rules football, spent a considerable amount of time in Indigenous communities, mainly western Victoria, where he learned language, was privy to cultural practices and witnessed people at

play. There is now convincing evidence that the modern game of Australian rules football is linked to Marn Grook which originates from Western Victoria (Sutton 2017). The recent archival research that examines documents related to Tom Wills and his family suggests a clear association between the types of play experienced in Indigenous communities to the modern game of AFL. This is contrary to the previous position advanced by academics such as Gillian Hibbins who suggests that such an association between Marn Grook and Australian football has been romanticized or is mythological in nature (Hibbins 2008).

The symbolic nature of Indigenous representation in elite sport, especially the professional football codes, is juxtaposed against the important contribution that sport makes at a grass-roots level in many Australian communities. Sport and the introduction of Indigenous Sport Development officers was one of the recommendations implemented by the Commonwealth Government in response to the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Harding 1995). In 2012, the Australian Government recognized the importance of sport at community level and was identified as a potential lever in closing the gap (Australian Government 2012) as outlined in strategies by the Council of Australian Governments (Ware and Meredith 2013). The advancement of sport in Indigenous communities has been posited as an area where leadership has led to health- and education-related interventions, such as in domestic violence, diabetes and smoking cessation (Doyle et al. 2013; Norman 2012; Tatz 2012). Tatz (2012) makes the case for sport as he points out that:

> Sport is a major element in contemporary Aboriginal life: it provides meaning, a sense of purpose and belonging; it is inclusive and embracing in a world where most Aboriginal youth feel alienated, disempowered, rejected and excluded. (p. 922)

The role of sport and its place at community level is reflected in the historical antecedents to the formation of Indigenous sports clubs and their role in community development activities. Indigenous clubs such as rugby league's Redfern All Blacks and La Perouse Panthers as well as Australian football clubs such as the Fitzroy Stars and the Rumbalara Football and Netball club provide havens where Indigenous people have

been able to access support services not available in the wider non-Indigenous community (Hartley 2002). The emergence and longevity of sports carnivals such as the Koori Knockout (NSW), Murri Cup (Queensland) and the Koori Cup (Victoria) demonstrate Aboriginal passion for rugby league and Australian rules football (Norman 2012) as expressions of culture and pride (Slater 2010). While sport has become an important activity for access, social collectiveness and competition, there are limitations to its impact on universally reducing the disadvantages (Browne-Yung et al. 2014).

Indigenous athletes have been hugely successful in sport and have made an impact in the sports introduced to Australian society when given the opportunity. The first cricket team to leave Australian shores in 1868 was an Indigenous cricket team made up of Jardwadjali, Gunditjmara and Wotjobaluk men from the western districts of Victoria which had a highly successful tour of England that predated the first white team to tour by a decade. Participation by Indigenous players in rugby league and Australian rules can be traced back to when both sports were codified in the period after Federation in 1901 and before the 1967 referendum. Up to 1967, Anglo Celtic descendants of the colonizers dominated rugby league and Australian football and despite both sports having strong links to the working classes, they simultaneously facilitated and denied broad-based participation by Indigenous Australians at community and elite levels.

The impact of segregation and the inability of Indigenous Australians to exercise full citizenship rights coupled with racism meant that access was conditional on local attitudes towards Indigenous people. Even when full citizenship was conferred on Indigenous Australians from 1967, this did not automatically translate into increased participation in rugby league and AFL as preconceived ideas about Australia's first peoples remained in place and are still evident in contemporary Australian life. During the 1970s, both sports became more professional with selection based more on talent which provided increasing opportunities for Indigenous players with significant increase in opportunity for Indigenous players over the 1990s facilitated by a number of significant events and developments.

In 1993, the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, AFL player Nicky Winmar made one of the most powerful displays of activism against racism seen in Australian sport when he lifted his shirt in

defiance of racist taunts from Collingwood supporters as an event that would reverberate through Australian sport for decades (Klugman and Osmond 2009). The ensuing media attention this generated made this incident a seminal moment in Australian states sporting history. It leads to the AFL introducing racial vilification rules, commonly known as Rule 30, which bans the vilification of players based on race or religion (Gorman et al. 2015) with this ban on racial vilification extended to all sports in Australia.

The Nicky Winmar incident saw the AFL embark on a campaign to engage with the Indigenous community aimed at improving its relationship and opportunities for Indigenous participation. The introduction of racial vilification codes across sporting jurisdictions has not completely eradicated racism in sport with Indigenous athletes experiencing racism from both fans and insiders. Adam Goodes, Eddie Betts and Timana Tahu are recent examples of players who have been subjected to racist taunts, which were reported in the media and were not resolved satisfactorily (Hinds 2015; Kogoy and Read 2010). Matt Rendell, a recruiter for the Adelaide Crows, made the claim that he would not recruit Indigenous players if they did not have a white parent. The inference was that they would be too challenging and risky propositions if they did not have a steadying white influence. Under considerable pressure, Rendell subsequently resigned from his position (Rucci 2012). Both sports have demonstrated a commitment to the recruitment of Indigenous players and should be commended for the introduction of racial vilification laws. The next area which poses challenges is to eradicate structural and institutional racism which sees Indigenous athletes as physical capital within the sports but not worthy of other roles within the sport such as coaches, administrators and managers (Butcher and Judd 2015; Hallinan 2015; Maynard 2012). There still exists a significant power differential, which sets boundaries for Indigenous people in both sports.

The second factor, which has significantly impacted on and enhanced participation by Indigenous players at an elite level, has been the expansion of rugby league and AFL to establish national competitions with a number of expansion teams being located in areas that have large Indigenous communities. This has created additional opportunities for the recruitment of Indigenous players with participation by Indigenous athletes now accounting for between 10 per cent and 14 per cent of the

elite player population in rugby league and Australian football (Harvey and Halloran 2010; Sheedy 2010a, b). Indeed, the participation of Indigenous players in both codes is big enough to sustain yearly 'All Star' games between Indigenous and non-Indigenous players, leading to the respective playing seasons. The rugby league version of this event, in particular, is a highly anticipated event between two evenly matched teams. Against a World All Stars team, this year's game (2017) was won emphatically by the Indigenous All Stars. Given that Indigenous Australians make up only 3.0 per cent of the total Australian population, they are clearly over-represented at elite level in these sports. Indigenous players do not just participate in these sports. They are considered amongst the very elite. In 2015, the Norm Smith and Clive Churchill medals for best on ground in the Grand Final went to Indigenous players Cyril Rioli and Jonathon Thurston, respectively.

In 2010, the highly respected AFL coach, Kevin Sheedy, made the following observation about the contribution that Indigenous players are making to the sport of Australian Rules football. 'Thank you for the way you play our game of AFL. You have made coaches think differently about the game and you lead the way' (Sheedy 2010a, b). The transition from the once marginalized group of participants to the leaders in the game rests upon a view that Indigenous players have a unique skill set and bring a distinctive style or approach to playing Australian football and rugby league. Indigenous players have been recognized for the mercurial and sublime skills often reported as flair or an uncanny ability. In the past, this distinctive style or approach was responsible for limiting the range of positions that Indigenous players were recruited to and these were considered to be non-decision-making or positions with less responsibility (Hallinan 1991).

Indigenous Knowledge, Culture and Learning

There has been an international groundswell of Indigenous academics who have championed an alternative view of how learning takes place in Indigenous settings (Chilisa 2012; Smith 2012; Wilson 2008) among which there is recognition that learning and development is profoundly

influenced by socio-cultural settings (Nakata 2002; Sarra 2011; Yunkaporta and McGinty 2009). Central to these views is the notion that learning is holistic, complex and rooted in local contexts. These views about teaching are not new but neither are they universally recognized or taken up in teaching institutions and in sports organizations. Since the 1980s, there has been growing interest in addressing Indigenous education in the Australian school systems, which in 2015, translated into the mandatory introduction of Indigenous perspectives across all key learning areas of the National Curriculum (NC) (ACARA 2012). The new Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) curriculum will include the introduction of Indigenous Games and Sports. This departure from previous approaches to teaching sport in schools recognizes that an alternative epistemology and ontology underpins Indigenous participation in education and in organized sports-based activities. Indigenous games were used prior to colonization as pedagogical activities to teach life skills, which were imperative for people to co-exist in small families or extended family groups.

The works of Tyson Yunkoporta and Chris Sarra provide insights into how learning from a sport perspective is reflected in the stories of the participants in this book and how they have been shaped since early exposure to sport and community values about the place of sport in communities. Yunkaporta's eight Aboriginal ways of learning framework has its heart a pedagogical framework that illustrates a number of conditions that reflect the circumstances that have contributed to how Indigenous players have learned to play rugby league and Australian Rules football. Yunkaporta suggests that Indigenous learners respond to holistic approaches that privilege learning the whole rather than discrete decontextualized components, local community conditions create the values for learning and that learning can be non-verbal (Yunkaporta 2009). Such holistic approaches to learning have also been argued for in sport coaching more broadly over the last couple of decades (see Light et al. 2015).

Sarra's philosophy about learning rests on the recognition that learning occurs most effectively in environments where there are high expectations for achievement and in which peoples' identities are recognized and celebrated. Players in the study we report on in this book learned to play

sport in circumstances where there was an emphasis on play and fun and where the community valued their participation in sport. Their identities were also shaped by participation and being successful in sport. This has previously been identified in research by Stronach and Adair (2010) in their examination of the backgrounds of Indigenous athletes transitioning into the community after the completion of professional sporting careers.

Aboriginal Approach to Playing Australian Football and Rugby League

Popular media commentators and researchers alike have marvelled at the skilfulness of Indigenous AFL and rugby league players and their distinctively Aboriginal style of play, suggesting that these skills are not present in the same way in the wider football population (Hallinan 1991). Indigenous footballers have been described and venerated for having the uncanny ability to read and know the game, meaning that they appear at the right time and execute the right skill, have exceptional speed and agility and an exuberance and passion for their chosen football code. This had led to a view that Indigenous players have a style or way of playing that is highly distinctive and has forced non-Indigenous coaches to think differently about the possibilities in their code of football (Sheedy 2010a, b). These attributes or traits are derived from local socio-cultural contexts from an early age when they enter into an environment where sport is a 'dominant cultural practice' (Light and Evans 2017, p. 4). From an early age, they are encouraged to take risks and chances in order to express themselves especially in trying to win the contest in backyard games and competitions (Gorman 2011). The will to win, the desire to take risks and have fun is also very evident in Gorman's (2011) book which detailed the early stage of development in the famous AFL Burgoyne brothers who competed with each other on a daily basis in backyard games. The participants in the study we report on in this book believe that similar experiences were in part responsible for them being able to enact similar responses in elite professional sport. Important community sports events

such as the Koori Knock and Murri Cup tournaments in rugby league and the Koori cup Australian rules competition have also provided opportunities for players to express their talents and their culture in a supportive environment (Slater 2010). These grass-roots competitions organized and delivered at a community level re-affirm the place of sport in Aboriginal culture and communities.

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2 Sport, Experience, the Body and Learning

Knowledge from the natural sciences has long dominated thinking about learning in and through sport, with motor learning theory having had a powerful influence on sport coaching and the teaching of physical education and other activities (see, Kirk et al. 1996). However, the past few decades have seen growing influence of, and interest in, other perspectives on sport, learning and athlete development informed by knowledge from the disciplines and sub-disciplines of sociology, anthropology and education (see, Cassidy et al. 2009; Jones et al. 2011) that has provided more sophisticated understanding of how and what people learn from participation in sport. As we suggest in the Introduction, developments in motor learning theory that recognize the complexity of learning (see, Berry et al. 2008) increase its ability to explain the complexity of learning in sport but remain limited in their capacity to help make sense of the ways in which individual experiences interact with particular socio-cultural settings to shape what is learned and how it is learned. From the beginning of this study with its focus on Indigenous Australians, we suspected that we would need explanations of learning through participation in activity and the ways in which this is inseparably tied into socio-cultural context that recognized this complexity. As the study progressed and particularly as we progressed towards theoretical integration, it appeared to us that motor learning theory could

not offer adequate explanations of what and how the participants learned their sporting expertise over their lives.

Our focus in the study was on listening carefully and attentively to the stories of elite-level Indigenous athletes as a way of developing an understanding of how their experiences of growing up in their communities, playing their sport, contributed to their development of expertise. The combined narrative enquiry and grounded theory approach we adopted delays the use of formal theory until the later stages of the study when we integrated the theories grounded in data through the use of formal theory and concepts. As the study progressed, it identified the important influence of culture, family and social relationships on learning expertise in the participants' sport, which suggested to us that we needed to draw on theory that could account for these cultural, experiential and social factors shaping the 16 participants' development into elite sportsmen from a more humanistic and holistic perspective.

Over the past two decades, the sport coaching literature has increasingly recognized the complexity of coaching and athlete development with growing interest in knowledge and research methodologies from the social sciences such as sociology, anthropology and education (see, Cassidy et al. 2009; Jones et al. 2011). Research on, and thinking about, learning in and through sport and physical education has traditionally drawn on motor learning theory and more recent yet related theory such as constraints-led theory (see, Renshaw et al. 2010) with a focus on skill acquisition, but the past two to three decades have seen increasing interest in education theory and explanations of learning (see Jones 2006). There is also growing interest in the influence of socio-cultural contexts on coach and athlete learning (see, Hassanin and Light 2014). As the most influential thinker on education over the twentieth century, John Dewey stresses the links between experience and context for learning, but for him, the environment (physical and socio-cultural) cannot be separated from experience and learning because 'experience is a matter of interaction of organism with its environment' (Dewey 1933, p. 246). The *true* environment is not what surrounds the agent/learner but, instead, is what the agent interacts with. The *true* environment comprises interaction between the agent/learner and the environment *as one phenomenon*.

The use of the term athlete 'learning' in some of the coaching literature reflects growing recognition of what educational concepts, learning theory

and social theory have to offer for gaining an understanding of how athletes develop expertise and how this learning is socially and culturally situated (see, Jones 2006; Kirk and Macdonald 1998). The notion of athlete learning opens up the development of athlete expertise to educational theory (Kirk 2010; Light 2013; Tinning 2008). It also offers a way of moving beyond folk pedagogies (Bruner 1996) and the notion of learning styles (see, Fleming et al. 2005; Penney 2006). These simplistic conceptions of learning reduce it to a simple unproblematic task by ignoring its complexity and the importance of the environment within which it takes place (Davis et al. 2000).

Over the past couple of decades researchers in physical education and sport coaching have increasingly drawn on a range of learning theories such as constructivism (see, Chen and Rovegno 2000), complex learning theory (CLT) (Light et al. 2014), constraints-led theory (Renshaw et al. 2010) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning (Kirk and Kinchin 2003). The combined narrative inquiry and grounded theory approach we adopted in this study develops theory grounded in the data but involved theoretical integration of theoretical categories through the use of formal theory in the later stages of the study. At this point we drew on socio-cultural constructivist perspectives on learning and approaches and concepts that sit on the same epistemology, such as apprenticeship learning, community-of-learners and situated learning as well as explanations of learning that account for the body's role in it (see, Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 2003). In this chapter we briefly outline the theory we drew on to enhance our understanding of the ways in which experience and context contributed to the development of expertise by the participants and to them successfully negotiating the athlete cultural transition from their small communities to the cultures of the AFL and NRL.

A Socio-Cultural Perspective on the Development of Expertise in Sport

A socio-cultural perspective on learning in and through sport takes into account the inseparability of learning and behaviour from the individual's social and cultural context. This is evident in socio-cultural constructivist

theories of learning originating in the work of Vygotsky (1978) and developed by others such as Bruner (1996) who argues that, 'learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting, and always dependent upon the utilisation of cultural resources' (p. 4). Social constructivism stresses the fundamental role of language and other social interaction in learning and cognition and the role that communities play in meaning making and learning culture. It offers a useful framework for understanding and explaining how the learning of expertise occurs over time through interaction that stresses the inseparability of culture and learning (Bruner 1996).

Sport is a social practice, with recent research on the development of expertise recognizing how the interaction between sport and social life facilitates and shapes the development of expertise in sport across a wide range of cultural settings (see, Côté et al. 2005). By expertise, we refer to its definition in the English Oxford dictionary as *the enactment of expert skill or knowledge in a particular field.*

Considered along with the social nature of team sports and the social interaction from which socio-cultural constructivism suggests learning arises, this highlights how the family, schools and other communities all significantly shape experiences of participation and the development of talent among young people (see, Côté 1999; Kirk and MacPhail 2003; Light 2016). Research in this area highlights the pivotal importance of socio-cultural context for learning, motivation and participation in sport among children and young people and the contribution that this makes to the development of talent (Côté and Haý 2002).

Constructivism

A constructivist perspective on learning contends that it occurs by doing rather than observing as a process of knowledge construction shaped by previous experience and knowledge. A range of forms of constructivism are considered to fall into the two main camps of (1) psychological (also referred to as individual, personal or cognitive) constructivism and (2) social (or socio-cultural) constructivism.

Psychological Constructivism

Psychological constructivism was developed from the work of Swiss biologist, Jean Piaget, who rejected the traditional idea that learning involves the passive assimilation of objective knowledge that informs belief in learning as being the transmission of knowledge as an object. Piaget believed that learning involves processes of cognitive adaptation to a 'perturbation' that disturbs the individual's state of cognitive equilibrium through which the learner draws on existing knowledge and experience to maintain or re-establish cognitive equilibrium (Piaget 1957/85). Piaget theorized how this can involve processes of *assimilation* and/or *accommodation*. Assimilation involves modifying the new knowledge or experience with accommodation involving changing his/her existing knowledge and cognitive structures (schema) to *accommodate* this new knowledge. Psychological constructivism emphasizes the intrapersonal dimensions of learning as a process of personal meaning making and cognitive adaptation. It recognizes the importance of experience for learning to suggest that instead of thinking and learning being restricted to the mind they extend to the body and its senses (Davis et al. 2000).

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism finds its roots in the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky who stressed the central role of social interaction and community for learning and the inseparability of learning from culture (Vygotsky 1978). His theory for the development of higher cognitive function in children stresses the importance of practical activity because of the way in which reasoning emerges from it within a particular sociocultural environment. While Piaget ignored culture, Vygotsky emphasized the role of language in learning and the influence of cultural practices on it.

The social constructivist perspective sees learning as a collective process spread across the individual's world and strongly influenced by culture with understandings and capabilities that emerge from social interaction

within a group greater than those at an intrapersonal level. Vygotsky proposes that learning is co-constructed through interaction between the learner and other people. This means that the knowledge constructed by the learner reflects something of the culture in which it developed, which contrasts with Piaget for whom the learner's knowledge is culture free. The interpersonal aspects of learning through which individuals absorb the habits and culture of their environment in a spontaneous, non-conscious and embodied way play a significant role in learning. This has implications for how we understand learning/improvement in sport and the ways in which we coach. It suggests the need to re-position the coach and his/her role in learning so that athletes are afforded the opportunity to make decisions independent of the teacher/coach through interaction with their peers. This includes being given the chance to reflect on experience, make meaning of it and re-constructing knowledge.

Complex Learning Theory

CLT was proposed by Davis and Sumara (2003) as a way of circumnavigating contradictions between different forms of constructivism and is influenced by their work in complexity theory. Complexity theory describes the ways in which a range of phenomena and systems comprise collectives of interrelated, dynamic systems that cannot be reduced to discrete parts (Davis and Sumara 2001). Although it has been applied to education and physical education (see, Ovens et al. 2013), it is not a theory of learning. Davis and Sumara (2003) propose three core principles of CLT as a theory of learning, which are: learning is a *social* process of *interpretation* and *adaptation* that have been applied to learning in and through physical education and sport (see, Light 2014; Light and Kental 2015).

Adaptation

CLT sees learning as an ongoing process of adaptation and a complex, multi-faceted and continuous process of change but with adaptation

involving more than just a cognitive adaptation to a perturbation. It involves the whole person as a complex process with the learner inseparable from his/her environment (physical and social-cultural).

Social Interaction

Reflecting the influence of social constructivism, CLT sees cognition as a process in which, various thinking agents are inseparably intertwined with personal knowledge and activity being enfolded in, and unfolding from, social interaction, collective knowledge, knowing and activity. This principle of CLT emphasizes the notion of learning being a social process to suggest how it is deeply tied into social experience, not only at the site of the specific learning experience, but also in the individual's participation in the social and cultural practices of larger social and cultural settings.

Interpretation

In CLT learning is seen to involve change resulting from interpretation and making sense of learning experiences. It rejects conceptions of knowledge as a representation of an external reality, learning as its internalization and the assumption of a pre-given external reality. Instead, it sees learners as constructing meaning and knowledge and interpreting learning experiences as a process that is deeply dependent upon perception.

Situated Learning

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of situated learning, communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation emphasize learning as a fundamentally social process shaped by the socio-cultural context rather than being something that occurs solely in the learner's head. Lave and Wenger see learning as being a situated activity that has as its central defining characteristic a process they refer to as legitimate peripheral

participation within communities of practice. Members of the community first enter as peripheral participants but become more deeply involved through increased participation in the practices of the community. Used in conjunction with the key concepts of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation, situated learning offers a means of understanding how and what children and young people learn over time through participation in sport within sports clubs, Surf Life Saving Clubs and other communities of practice (see, Light 2006). It is very helpful for understanding how learning to play footy and culture were inextricably intertwined in the small communities that the participants in this study grew up in.

Apprenticeship Learning

Theories of learning through apprenticeship and apprenticeship thinking (Rogoff 1990) attempt to account for the development of mental structures (schema) that represent individual interpretations of experiences and which frame a person's conceptualization of reality. It is a holistic approach to understanding learning in which the learner develops a schema that begins to incorporate the intricacies of his or her environment and allows them to make sense of it and improve participation in its practices. From this perspective, the development of expertise by the participants in the study we draw on in this book can be seen as a socially and culturally situated process of learning (see, Sheets-Johnson 2000). Apprenticeship learning involves complex processes of socialization (Wackerhausen 1997) with learning dependent upon foundations developed during early socialization through interaction and social relationships as infants in which people learn through, and about, their bodies, situated within particular cultures (Light and Evans 2017; Sheets-Johnston 2000).

In the study we draw on in this book, the participants learnt to play footy (Australian football and rugby league) as a 'natural' part of social life in their communities and cultures with support from others they trusted, which range from Indigenous communities in northern Australia to communities in suburban Melbourne and Sydney with few other Aboriginals. This provides an example of how 'people develop as participants

in cultural communities' (Rogoff 2003, p. 3) and how 'Their development can be understood only in light of the cultural circumstances of their communities' from an apprenticeship learning perspective (Rogoff 2003, p. 3). This approach to learning also suggests the cultural roots of the distinctive game style of Indigenous AFL players and the 'sixth sense' they are seen to have.

The Body, Experience and Learning

Davis and Sumara (2003, p. 22) suggest that up to 80 per cent of what we learn occurs at a non-conscious level: 'most learning is not conscious and there are limits of human awareness.' This implicit, embodied learning is very powerful because of how it operates unnoticed at a level below the scrutiny of the individual's conscious mind (Bourdieu 1990). The concept of cognition and learning underpinning this conception of learning rejects the division of the mind from the body to see learning as a process shaped by aspects of the living, experiencing body. This is evident in Bourdieu's challenge to the cognitive bias in the social sciences within which his concept of *habitus* assumes a central role. It is also evident in the concept of 'situatedness' as an agent embedded in and shaped by his/her environment, and in Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning. These concepts also highlight the implicit learning (embodiment) of culture that occurs through participation in practice within socio-cultural settings such as cultural fields and communities of practice.

The concept of embodied learning refers to the long-term implicit learning occurring at an embodied level and has received increasing attention in the physical education literature (see, McMahon and Huntley 2013). It extends beyond specific learning such as how to kick a footy to the cultural, social and personal learning involved in cultural reproduction. Stolz (2015) suggests that psychological approaches to learning fail to provide an adequate explanation of how we come to understand meaningfully because they are disconnected from the role the body plays in learning and the notion of embodied learning. He argues that the notion of embodied learning offers a more useful and holistic conception of the whole person as an 'acting, feeling, thinking being-in-the-world', rather

than the view of people being made up of separate physical and mental qualities 'which bear no relation to each other' (Stolz 2015, p. 474).

Embodiment

According to Husserl (see, 1962), the body is a locus of distinctive sets of sensations that can only be experienced first-hand to allow us to experience our situated, practical-perceptual lives. His notion of 'kinaesthetic consciousness' refers to a subjectivity that is characterized by the ability to move freely and responsively with his phenomenology of embodiment placing the body at the centre of experience. The body is thus something that is *lived* through its ability to move and its distinctive sets of sensations that are central to influencing how we encounter and relate to others and how we learn.

The ideas of the embodied mind and embodied cognition challenge the separation of mind from body by considering the body and the corporeal aspects of learning (see, Lackoff and Johnson 1999; Varela et al. 1991). Embodied cognition refers to the ways in which cognition is shaped by aspects of the physical body that include high-level mental constructs and human performance in cognitive tasks. These concepts originate in the philosophy of Kant and Merleau-Ponty, who was influenced by Husserl (see, 1962) and his concept of phenomenological embodiment. Developed across a range of disciplines and sub-disciplines including cognitive science, social psychology and sociology, the notion of embodied cognition recognizes the inseparability of mind and body and how the mind is not only connected to the body, but how it cannot function without the body.

Enactivism

The concept of *enaction* emphasizes how the world experienced by the individual is determined by interaction between the physiology and biology of him/her, their sensori-motor circuit and environment. The concept of enacted cognition ties thinking and learning to action as opposed to the idea of a pre-existing, external reality that is internally represented

by the learner. Varela and colleagues' approach to embodied cognition draws on Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenological idea that cognitive agents 'bring forth' a world through the *activity* of their situated, lived bodies.

Enactivism proposes that cognition is grounded in sensory behaviour and motor actions with Holton (2010) suggesting that it can be seen as the integration of constructivism and embodied cognition. The notion of *agent* is central to enactivism in which learning is defined as a change in the internal structure of the agent but it is the internal structure, or *internal dynamics,* of the agent that determines learning more than the environment stimulus (Proulx 2004). The internal dynamics of the agent shape the environment as the agent experiences it. This means that the same stimulus experienced a second time will not necessarily result in the same response for the same agent because the agent's system is continuously changing and she/he will have already learned. This is explained by the fact that experiences are understood and interpreted on the basis of the agent's existing knowledge and prior experiences—much as constructivism suggests it is.

Enactivism emphasizes the role of action and the body in learning with knowledge defined as, *adequate/viable action in the world* (Proulx 2004). Cognition is not limited to the mind but is, instead, related to the extended body and its actions with the starting point of enactivism being the interaction between an individual and his/her environment. The learner is considered to be an autonomous, self-creating agent who *enacts* a world of meaning through his/her actions. Social interactions are seen to be structured processes that emerge from the dynamics of the participants' coordination with each other that allow for building a form of intersubjectivity. They are dialectically structuring processes in that social interactions affect the construction of meaning and the actions of individuals (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007).

Bourdieu's Key Concepts

Within a broad conception of learning, Bourdieu's intellectual project offers a macro view on learning that can locate it within larger social and cultural arenas and change. The attention he pays to the implicit pedagogy

of social life, to culture, the body, action, and practical disposition, as well as his interest in sport, offers a valuable perspective on learning in and thought sport. Rather than offering a formal theory Bourdieu offers a number of core analytic concepts as part of his 'intellectual project' that Jarvie and Maguire (1994) suggest are good to think with. His core analytic concepts that are most relevant to the focus of this study are *habitus, field, practice* and *capital*, which are briefly explained below.

Habitus

Habitus is the workhorse of Bourdieu's concepts as 'a system of dispositions individuals develop in response to the objective conditions of the field in which they are participating' (Bourdieu, cited, Duncan 2016). With objective social structures absorbed into a personal set of dispositions, the subjective nature of individual actions reinforces the characteristics of the field and the relationships within it. The actors/agents within that field gain capital and the power arising from its and its conversion into more powerful (economic) forms as a result of their *habitus* and its fit with the *field*. In other words, the individual's 'feel for the game' and struggles for capital are both enabled and constrained by the dominant characteristics of their surroundings and which reproduce the characteristics of the *field*. Having absorbed objective social structures into a personal set of dispositions, the subjective nature of an individual's actions reinforces the characteristics of the field and the relationships within it.

Field

Bourdieu perceives the social world as being comprised of multiple *fields* with Duncan (2016, p. 46) suggesting that, 'A field is any structure of social relations in which citizens compete for capital and, in doing so, struggle against each other to establish their positions within that space.' Examples of some of the main *fields* are the arts, education, law, politics, business, sport and economics. Fields are autonomous but are not static with tensions between some of them. Webb et al. (2002) provide an example of

how this tension can lead to the formation of new fields or subfields by explaining how the field of sport as business arose from the intrusion of the field of business into the field of sport. According to Bourdieu, the struggle between individuals for power is constrained by the limited characteristics and rules (*doxa*) of the field they participate in and serves to reproduce the existing, dominant structure of the field and the relevant positions of agents in them. The struggle of agents to attain the most dominant forms of capital can also change the structure and characteristics of the field from within. The field of economics is the most powerful and influential field and any other field it merges with will mirror aspects and *doxa* of the economic field.

Capital

Drawing on Marx, Bourdieu identifies four types of capital that determine the agent's power or position in a particular field or subfield to suggest that it is 'impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 241). Their relative value varies according to the field or subfield with the individual able to exchange less valuable forms such as embodied cultural capital for more powerful forms such as economic capital. The four types of capital are social capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital and economic capital. Social capital consists of resources based on group membership, relationships, and social networks and influence. It is 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 249). Cultural capital exists in embodied forms such as manners, ways of moving, speaking, eating, demeanour and so on and is the most significant form of capital in this study. It can also occur as objective institutional capital such as a university degree and includes the forms of knowledge, skills, education that people might have and which can give them higher status or power in society or a section of society. Symbolic capital refers to the resources available to individuals on the basis of

honour, prestige and/or recognition. Economic capital is the most powerful form as economic resources and which includes salary and financial assets such as property and shares.

Practice

Practice is a philosophical term that refers to 'human action on the natural and social world' and which emphasizes the transformative nature of action and the priority of action over thought (Marshall 1994, p. 414). It is most often associated with the early work of Marx and that of Antonio Gramsci and later sociologists such as Bourdieu, whose work is influenced by Marx's thinking. The Greek word *praxis* (doing) is used to convey the same concept of purposeful human activity, practical human action on the world or the practical transformation of the world as suggested by Satre (Macey 2000).

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3 The Study

This study set out to answer the central research question of: 'What peda-gogical factors have enabled male, Indigenous athletes to become elite level players in Australian football and rugby league?' It challenges reduc-tionist assumptions about Indigenous achievement in sport as being a reflection of inherited or innate qualities by conceiving of the partici-pants' development into expert performers as a process of learning to provide a more sophisticated understanding of Indigenous athletes' achievement and development of expertise as a process of situated learn-ing. It adopted a positive approach with a focus on what enables the achievement of excellence in sport by the participants instead of focusing on 'barriers' and factors that impeded achieving success. This is not to say that we ignored factors that interfered with or impeded their journeys to the AFL or NRL. Indeed, all of the participants faced very significant challenges and particularly for those who had to move to cities far away from home and the demands of highly structured training environments. However, our focus was on how they succeeded in dealing with these challenges as well as who and what helped them. We focused on what facilitated their achievements in footy and enabled them to climb to the highest level in their sport.

Our use of combined narrative inquiry and grounded theory methodology required us listening to understand and being open to what arose from the participants sharing their stories with us and avoid imposing any predetermined views, opinions or theory. We had to be patient to let the data speak and hear the participants' voices. We had to let them take us along with them and avoid shutting down possibilities for understanding by pushing them in a direction we were interested in. Our decision to adopt a positive approach in this study was an easy task for us because, despite the challenges that all the participants had to face to succeed, they focused on their achievements and who helped them when telling their stories instead of talking about how they had been disadvantaged or what barriers stopped them achieving. For example, there can be no doubt that racism in Australia still operates to disadvantage Indigenous Australians in many aspects of social and sporting life. One only needs to recall the iconic 1993 photograph of Nicky Wynmar responding to racist taunts from rabid Collingwood supporters (see Klugman and Osmond 2013) as discussed in Chap. 1. More recently, racist attacks on Adam Goodes remind us of its lingering presence but only one participant in the study made specific mention of racism.

Developing understanding by careful listening to individual stories and engaging in dialogue with each of the participants allowed us to understand the importance of cultural and social contexts and relationships with other important people to emerge as being pivotal to understanding how they learned the expertise needed to make the AFL or NRL. As the study progressed, we increasingly needed to consider and pay attention to how Aboriginal culture and institutional contexts influenced their learning and how this included significant people, relationships and communities as pedagogical influences that assisted the participants in achieving success.

In this study, we adopted a broad notion of pedagogy that extended well beyond the learning of skills, developing fitness and knowledge for footy through formal coaching to include explicit and implicit pedagogy. We see the intended and articulated (explicit) pedagogy used by coaches and teachers (and others) as being: 'any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another' (Watkins and Mortimore 1999, p. 3). Beyond this, we recognize and account for the implicit pedagogy of participation in the practices of social life (including sport) within particular

social and social contexts (see Bourdieu 1984; Lave and Wenger 1991). In recognition of the wide range of deep and lasting learning occurring at a non-conscious level through extended participation in sport we adopted Bourdieu's conception of implicit pedagogy. This allowed us to include the range of unintended, unnoticed learning that occurs through participation in day-to-day social life that Davis and Sumara (2003) suggest which comprises 80 per cent of what we learn. This focus on non-conscious, embodied learning provides a useful means of accounting for the learning that occurs through long-term participation in the practices of sport and related activities and how it is shaped by institutions such as schools. It also suggests the inseparability of personal, social and cultural learning over the lives of the participants from what and how they learnt about and from footy.

A view of developing expertise in sport as a process of learning reflects contemporary developments in research on the breadth and depth of learning in and through sport that can account for its complexity, the influence of context and the socio-cultural nature of participation and learning in sport and physical education (see Quay and Stolz 2014; McMahon et al. 2012). This work typically focuses on the nature of experience, the role of the body in learning and the socially and culturally situated nature of learning which can provide detailed and nuanced understandings of how sporting expertise is developed over time. The integration of social theory and learning theory used to enhance our analysis in the latter stages of this study is a recent development in the physical education and sport coaching fields (see Light 2011).

A significant body of research in the physical education and sport coaching fields has drawn on Bourdieu and his key analytical concepts (see Cushion and Jones 2006; Hunter et al. 2015; Light and Evans 2013; Taylor and Garrat 2010). His attention to sport offers researchers working in sports coaching, sport sociology and physical education a way of capturing and highlighting the 'common sense' or taken for granted assumptions of social practice and how they are developed. His emphasis on developing a theory of action provides insights into how non-conscious knowledge is acquired through experience within particular social and cultural fields, subfields and communities of practice (see Light and Evans 2013) to shape behaviour, thinking and action.

Theoretical Framework

Grounded theory delays the use of formal theory but we were positively disposed towards using learning theory that sits upon constructivist epistemology, which is something that is accounted for in constructivist grounded theory with its emphasis on interpretation (Charmaz 2006). During theoretical integration, late in the study, social constructivism appealed to us because of the way in which it can account the inseparability of learning from cultural and social contexts as outlined in detail in Chap. 2 (see Bruner 1996; Dewey 1916/97; Vygotsky 1978). The theoretical framework we worked with in the theoretical integration stage of analysis in this study drew on learning theory informed by the assumptions of constructivist epistemology, including social constructivism, complex learning theory, apprenticeship learning (see Rogoff 1994), communities-of-learners (see Rogoff 2003) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of situated learning, and the social theory of Bourdieu.

Learning theories that sit upon a constructivist epistemology see learning not as a process of adding on new information, but rather as one of adaptation and transformation through the learner's construction of his/her own knowledge. This perspective rejects the notion of knowledge as an object and any separation between knowledge and the knower. It recognizes the centrality of the learner's activities and the existing knowledge and experiences that learners draw on to interpret learning experiences and make sense of them (Biggs 1996). As explained in more detail in Chap. 2, social constructivist perspectives do not view learning as simply occurring in discrete, prescribed and formal contexts, but instead, as something that is ongoing, constant and shaped by social interaction and culture (Light and Wallian 2008). This is how we saw the participants' learning as to how to be expert players occurring in this study.

The focus of Bourdieu (1972), Lave and Wenger (1991) and others on practice emphasizes the non-conscious, embodied learning which makes up the bulk of what we learn (Davis et al. 2000) and the role of the body and culture in learning. Theories of practice such as those of

Bourdieu, Lave and Wenger and Marx (see McGill 1944) focus on how humans, as social beings with diverse motives and intentions, make and transform the world in which they live by establishing a dialectic between social structure and human agency. Given the very physical nature of participation in sport and the range of implicit learning arising from this participation, the key conceptual concepts of Bourdieu and Lave and Wenger offer useful ways of conceiving of, and accounting for, the embodied learning that occurs through playing sport over time (Light 2011)—as does the apprenticeship learning that we drew on to enhance our analysis of how the participants learned up to 12 years of age.

Bourdieu (1978) makes significant reference to sport in his work and uses the term 'le sens pratique' (practical sense) to describe how people develop a natural feel for expert participation and skilfulness in sport (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 129) as an analogy for mastery of social life. The notion of *habitus* supports the need to understand the players' lives when we consider the powerful contribution to development into elite athletes made by life histories, experiences arising from participation in social practices within particular social fields and subfields, and informal learning in their day-to-day activities. In the latter stages of the study when we felt the conceptual abstraction we had developed through the coding process had reached theoretical saturation, we drew on formal theory to integrate and connect the core concepts we had developed. In this process, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* was helpful for understanding how the participants' sets of durable dispositions had been constructed through participation in practice within broader Aboriginal culture and their specific communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Mutch 2003).

The integration of social and learning theory provided a framework for understanding the ways in which learning occurred for the participants as a social process that was deeply situated in social and cultural contexts. We have previously used this same approach in research on coach development (Light and Evans 2013) with a similar approach recently used to explain Indigenous boxers' difficulty with post-career transition and decision-making (Stronach and Adair 2010).

Research Design

This study aimed to answer the central research question of: 'What pedagogical factors enabled male, Indigenous athletes to become elite level players in Australian football and rugby league?'. It focused on listening to the stories of 16 elite Indigenous athletes in Australian football and rugby league (eight participants in each sport) to understand how they were able to make it into the most elite levels for their sport. Australian football and rugby league are two of the highest profile sports in Australia with the highest participation rates at the elite level by Indigenous Australians (Evans et al. 2015). Of the 18 teams in the AFL, 9 are based in Melbourne (50%) and of the 16 teams in the NRL (National Rugby League), 8 are based in Sydney (50%).

The study focused on the participants' pathways and the experiences arising from their journeys from invariably humble backgrounds to elite-level, professional sport. We traced the experiences of the 16 participants from their introduction to their sport as children to them reaching the elite level of their sport by playing in the AFL or the NRL and their first few years in it with a focus on identifying the pedagogical factors that most contributed towards their learning over this period. Although we considered the pedagogy used by their coaches and any teachers or other people such as parents, we identified how this was a less significant influence than we expected it to be. Coaches had little to no influence on learning up to the age of 12 or so and even when some participants noted the significant influence that a particular coach had on them, it was more in terms of the relationship between them and life learning more than aspects of their coaching for performance.

We focused on anything that emerged as making a positive contribution towards their learning to be expert players, which included the implicit pedagogy of participating in the practices of social and cultural life and experiences that made less obvious contributions to learning. This is something identified in other research in the development of expertise such as that of Côté and colleagues' (Côté et al. 2005) study on athlete development that explored the individual biographies reflecting the lives of athletes and how their life experiences shape their development of knowledge and practice. Although our study draws upon this and

some similar research, it is focused exclusively on Indigenous AFL and NRL players to inquire into the relationship between their life experiences and learning shaped by Indigenous culture.

Methodology

The study drawn on in this article combined narrative inquiry and constructivist, grounded theory methodology to provide an inside perspective and holistic understanding (Charmaz 2006; Lal et al. 2012). Lal et al. (2012) use the term 'combined methodological approach' to attract attention to the complementary nature of the historical, theoretical and philosophical aspects of narrative inquiry and grounded theory methodologies. This combined methodology was employed to gain an understanding of experiences in particular socio-cultural settings over extended periods of time from childhood to playing in the AFL or NRL and situations that facilitated the participants' development of expertise. Its use of a life history type interview and its emphasis on locating theory within a narrative allowed us to keep the stories intact while identifying emerging themes from which to develop theories grounded in the data.

The methodology we used also complemented the importance of telling stories in Australian Aboriginal culture (Bamblett 2013) to align with an Indigenous approach to research known as *dadirri* (Atkinson 2000), which is also a feature of Aboriginal culture (Farrelly 2003). *Dadirri* proceeds inductively and requires a degree of empathy, sensitivity and openness on the part of the researcher, as does the combined narrative inquiry-grounded theory approach we used in this study. With *dadirri* the researcher(s) must remain non-judgemental with understanding generated through non-intrusive observation, deep, active listening that involves 'hearing with more than the ears', building knowledge through sensitivity and awareness, and developing understanding by contemplation and reflection (Atkinson 2000, p. 16). This was something that provided valuable understanding for us but challenged us to be quiet, to listen, be patient and let the data speak. As ideas and themes emerged from our analysis, we took them to participants for their input and contribution to the understanding it was producing.

There are many different approaches to grounded theory but in this study we used an approach that could be described as constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), using inductive logic, as a central component of grounded theory, to develop and interpret findings as reflections of the participants' stories. We followed the constructivist grounded theory approach, which sits between realism and postmodernism. From a constructivist grounded theory perspective, instead of being *discovered*, data and theories are co-constructed by the researcher(s) and participants through their interactions and shaped by the researchers' prior experiences and dispositions (Charmaz 2000).

The categories developed in the study were inductively generated, using labels and codes developed from the participants' voices. We moved from initial coding to focused coding, categories and theoretical sampling as an ongoing process used to build theoretical insights. Throughout the study, we used memo writing and found it particularly helpful for facilitating the shift from the description of data (initial coding) and the development of substantive theories towards thorough conceptual understanding and the development of conceptual theories. The memos we wrote were creative, unstructured notes made on emerging ideas that are used as a type of coding summary that contributed towards the generation of concepts and theory, which is the aim of grounded theory. We used memo writing to capture and record our thoughts about data as they were formed and in ways that were unrestricted by concerns with grammar and institutional conventions. This helped sensitize us to emerging categories and ensuing theory (Glaser 1978).

We used the formal theory and analytic concepts outlined earlier in this chapter to enhance understanding and develop conceptual theories in the latter stages of the study as part of theoretical integration. Theoretical integration uses formal theory and analytic concepts to integrate substantive theories into larger conceptual theories. Unlike other qualitative methodology, grounded theory does not begin with a theoretical framework. Instead, the researcher strives to be open to the identification of themes that emerge through analysis of the data that are tested and compared in a process that identifies and develops themes and categories to a point where they are substantive. As Kelle (2010) suggests 'the development of categories from empirical data is dependent of the availability of adequate theoretical con-

cepts' (p. 206). Through this stage of the use of grounded theory in the study, the formal analytic concepts and theories provided a theoretical explanation of the themes identified. While the knowledge we brought to the study and our experience of using formal theories provided the necessary theoretical sensitivity needed to achieve theoretical saturation, it also shaped and influenced our inclination towards it but this is accounted for in constructivist grounded theory.

Each participant's story was treated as an individual case, using open and then initial coding after which progressed through the grounded theory process using shorter, focused semi-structured interviews to generate new data and test emerging ideas, categories and theories.

The Participants

Sixteen Indigenous players participated in the study with eight having played, or playing, in the AFL and eight in the NRL. One participant had retired approximately fifteen years before the study began but none of the other participants had retired more than ten years prior to the study, with five having retired within the three-year period before it and four who were still playing at the time the first interviews were conducted. Within the AFL cohort, four players were initially approached through the Indigenous manager for the Australian Football League Players Association with what could be described as a snowball sampling approach used to recruit the other four through Indigenous player networks. The participants in the NRL component of the study were initially purposely sampled by the second author after which the remainder were sampled using a snowball approach through introductions from the first two participants who provided access to Indigenous player networks.

Data Generation and Analysis

Data were generated using an initial life history type interview of approximately one hour in which the participants were asked to tell their story from their first exposure to their sport to playing in the AFL or NRL, as the elite level of these sports. During this interview, we limited questions

to getting clarification in detail that we needed by asking questions such as, 'how old were you when that happened?' or 'was that before you went to Adelaide or after?' Analysis of these data identified some emerging theories across all participants that were explored with two rounds of shorter, focused, semi-structured interviews used to focus on common emerging themes but which kept the stories intact. These questions were aimed at developing emergent, and then substantive, theories grounded in the data that were connected with the theory outlined in detail in Chap. 2, in the latter stages of the process.

Use of the DMSP

As the grounded theory approach was developed, we identified two distinct stages of learning. These were from the participants' early involvement in sport as young children to around the age of 12 and from 13 or so onwards that aligned with the Development Model for Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté and Hay 2002) sampling and specializing/investment phases. DMSP was developed from a body of research on sport participation and has been widely used in sport coaching research. It sees children and young people being involved in a process of socialization into organized sport during which they pass through three distinct stages but during which they can drop out or move into more recreational activities. The three phases are the sampling phase (5–12 years), the specializing phase (13–16 years) and the investment phase (16+).

The sampling phase is a period during which children typically sample a range of different sports with families, significant others and the general social and cultural environment within which it is situated having a powerful influence on the nature of participation, desire to continue and the development of talent (Côté 1999; Côté and Frazer-Thomas 2008). During the specializing phase, young people move from deliberate play to deliberate (structured) practice, aimed at improving performance and begin to specialize in one sport. They 'invest' in a single sport.

In this study, there was good alignment between our findings and the DMSP's sampling phase (5–12) as the period over which the participants laid the foundations of expertise and this is why we drew on it. There was

also recognizable shift in the specializing phase (13–16) and from the ages of 14–16, there was some evidence of entering an investment phase (16+) as they moved into higher performance environments such as in state leagues and private schools focused on footy. Certainly, by the time they entered the NRL or AFL, from as young as 17, they seemed to have entered the investment phase but the clear distinction between experiences in the sampling phase and specializing phase was not as evident as in the transition from a specializing to an investment phase.

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Part II

4 Alvin: 'It's Our Life'

Alvin grew up in Darwin in the Northern Territory in a socio-cultural environment dominated by footy. He came, what he described as a 'big footy family', with his father and his maternal uncles, committed footy players in local leagues, which he suggested was the origin of his fascination with footy:

> Up in Darwin in the Territory my dad was a footy player and my mum's brothers were footy players as well so it was a big footy family on both sides and I think it was just more driven from there I think. As kids you learn and are exposed to your uncles playing footy and more often than not your dad playing footy. You want to be like your dad and if not then like your uncles.

Footy formed a dominant cultural practice in the community that Alvin grew up in. Playing footy was not a conscious choice made by the young children in Alvin's community where it was just 'what you do': 'You go there, watch your uncles play, your dad played and I think you don't even think about it, it's just I guess like a religion, that's how it is. It's our life.' Alvin could not remember his first touch of a footy or his early experiences of it because learning in such communities of practice involves an

'encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities' (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 4). For Alvin, there was no conscious decision made by him or his parents for him to play footy. It was just common sense and part of his growing participation in the practices of the community.

From early childhood, Alvin was constantly playing games related to footy with his cousins, older brothers and other children in his community. When he found himself alone, he would make up activities related to footy to challenge him and hone his skills:

> … I'd always go out into the yard, my uncle would kick the footy up, and my other brother Alan, we used to play one-on-one and just all these little things that we went along with and even up until teenagers, anything shaped like a football, that's how bad we were.

During breaks at school, after school and over the weekends, Alvin played with friends and relatives in activities to develop skill and modified footy games. From a very young age, footy was his life and all he really wanted to do: 'as a kid growing up I always wanted to play footy, I loved it, never thought about anything else.' The games he played as a child were created and managed by Alvin and the other boys playing them and with very little instruction or intervention from older members of the community and particularly while they were very young (see also Light and Evans 2017). He felt that he learned much of his footy through playing these informal games on his own and with relatives and friends that had helped him learn things that 'don't get noticed', as a reference to implicit learning.

Not having a footy did not stop Alvin, his friends and relatives playing games or engaging the physical 'conversations' of kicking a footy back and forward (see Light and Fawns 2003). After watching local adult footy games and games on the television, Alvin would go out into the backyard where he would kick anything that he could use in place of a footy when one was not available:

> This (plastic) bottle – it's shape – so we used to kick around two-litre coke bottles, there was always these special little ways to make it a lot

more harder so it's better to kick but we just had to be aware, I guess, of hitting the wrong tip of the bottle but we kicked toilet rolls, stubby coasters in the house, put goals everywhere in the yards and that's just how it was.

When recounting how they used an empty coke bottle, Alvin went into some detail about how they would get the best out of the bottle by screwing the top tight and leaving it outside in the hot Northern Territory sun. Even when he did not have any friends or relatives to play with, Alvin would play on his own for hours, experimenting and testing out ideas on technique: 'I'd actually go outside and play footy on my own and I'd kick around and even up until I was a teenager and I found out things for myself, just little things'. As a young boy, his family and relatives were very important for him. In particular, the support of his mother was pivotal to his success in footy, which was even more valued by him after his father's death when he was nine. He felt that his mother had educated him from a young age to deal with the challenges he experienced on the road to the AFL and during his long career in it.

Alvin was very grateful for his mother's help, in particular, and wanted to be the best he could to make her proud while also feeling a debt to his community. When asked to nominate the people who most assisted him in making it to the AFL, he was quick to nominate his mum:

> Well my mum, like I said, that's the thing that sort of stuck in my mind is that I wanted to make my family proud. Like the people up in Darwin – make a name for myself but also the big drive thing was to make her proud and pretty much say thank you in a way because you can never thank your parents enough.

At the age of 12, Alvin and his mother were committed to him making it to the AFL. At the age of 12 and approaching his 13th birthday, he began playing footy in a regional town in Victoria for six months of the year where he would attend a local school and return to Darwin to play for the other six months of the year. Travelling a distance of 3632 km between this town and Darwin, and the disruption this caused for his schooling, certainly suggests his and his family's commitment to him succeeding in

Australian football. When in E-town, he stayed with an uncle who was the coach of the under 14 team he played in and was an important connection for Alvin. His uncle cared for him, coached him and acted as a mentor for him who helped him adapt to different social, cultural and physical conditions and more structured ways of training. The competition in E-town was played in what was the 'off season' in Darwin:

> I'd gone through the stage where I was playing footy 12 months, all the year round, so then I flew down there for six months, did schooling down there and I played footy for M-town Football Club with my uncle, he was coaching the 14's then, then I'd fly back to Darwin.

Alvin did this for two years, after which he stayed in Darwin to play junior footy and during the off-season play rugby league to keep fit instead of playing two seasons of footy. He was soon a regular selection in Northern Territory representative teams and two years later was approached by a talent scout from a major team in Adelaide:

> I went back and started playing junior footy again and in the off season played a bit of rugby and then we had the Territory (representative) sides and all the squads that we were getting picked in and that. At 16 a bloke from (a professional Adelaide team) came up to speak to Alan (his younger brother) and myself.

At the age of 16, a talent scout from an Adelaide club offered Alvin a place in a U-17 team in the SANFL (South Australian National Football League), which he elatedly accepted:

> So straight away I just come, I'm coming down. As soon as the season finished in Darwin I went down and played for (Adelaide club), in the under 17's and my footy just grew from there so then I stayed with an uncle in Adelaide.

The potential stress involved in moving from a small community in Darwin to a large city in South Australia was reduced through family connections. In Adelaide, Alvin stayed with an uncle who looked after him and helped him adjust to the different ways of training and playing

and different ways of living. Even though he was playing football at a higher level than he had been, Alvin would still return to Darwin in August and September and play there to keep in contact with his mother, family and community. In his second and third years in Adelaide, he played mostly in reserve grade but played nine games for the seniors. At his first AFL draft opportunity, he was overlooked and was very disappointed. A friend of his from Darwin who was playing in a Melbourne VFL team suggested he could try to find a way into an AFL team by coming to Melbourne and asked about his interest in playing with his club. After expressing his interest, Alvin was offered a place in the team by their recruitment officer.

Alvin had thought deeply before deciding to move on to Melbourne because he knew he was taking a big gamble in accepting the offer and would be taking his wife and new-born baby with no guarantee of being drafted. His wife was prepared to take the risk of moving to a bigger city with no guarantee that he would make it to the AFL which he felt was like 'going into the unknown' to realize his ambition of being drafted into the AFL that he had since he was 12.

> She (his wife) was pretty much, was going into the unknown because I didn't know if I had a draft so that was a gamble that we took, I guess a massive risk and so we moved down here to Melbourne …. So to cut a long story short, I played for (a VFL club) and this one day – I don't know what it was but I played the best footy of my life. At the end of the day, it was a good move (from Adelaide). Even more so it was even better being under the eye of AFL actual talent scouts so that was a smart move as well.

At the age of 20, Alvin was drafted into a Melbourne-based AFL team that he stayed with for his long and successful career.

Significant People

When asked to reflect upon the people he considered who had most helped him on his journey, Alvin quickly identified the pivotal role his mother had played in supporting him on his long journey from his local

community in Darwin to becoming a high-profile AFL player. He said that after his dad had died, she gave everything to ensure that the family of five children had what they needed and had given him a life education that allowed him to achieve his dream. Much of his satisfaction he felt from having a successful AFL career came from the feeling that he had been able to repay some of the debt he felt he had to his mother:

> … you get trials and setbacks and if you're serious of what you want to achieve, and I like I said, I was strong on what I wanted and the thing behind it all was my mum, just to pay her for everything that she'd done for me …

He also identified how important his uncles, who had cared for him and mentored him when living away from home, had been in assisting him develop his career and how they had helped him adjust to the very different approaches to training and coaching compared to what he had been used to in Darwin.

His (non-Indigenous) AFL coach was also someone who had been central to his success in the AFL and who he felt had taught him more than just how to play good footy. He spoke very highly about the help he had received from him in developing as a player and as a person and how much he had inspired Alvin:

> Day one I got drafted, shy kid, loved joking. I'm a clown but then we'll have all this positive stuff and getting stuff from (his coach). I still remember him saying, one day you'll be a great leader for your people and I sort of had a giggle at the time, just thinking yeah, and you'll potentially be the captain of this club one day. I sort of had a bit of a chuckle. I was thinking no way will I get be getting up speaking in front of people or media or whatever but I just sort of grew into it.

Summary

Alvin became a high-profile and popular player in the AFL who gained considerable formal recognition of his success as a player and as a leader of, and inspiration for, the Indigenous community in and

around Melbourne—as his AFL coach had told him he would. He grew up in a small, isolated community that lived and breathed footy. He could not remember his first touch of a footy because his participation in footy was a 'natural process' with no real marker of his first engagement in it. It was part of his growing participation in its practices as a community of practice from his early legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) where playing footy was 'just what you do'. As he said about footy in his community: 'it's our life.' Playing informal games of footy wherever and whenever possible and with whoever was available was part of his daily life in his Darwin community.

When there was no ball available, he and his friends and relatives would use an empty plastic coke bottle to play some form of footy and it seems that this environment played a significant role in his development as a creative player with wonderful speed, awareness, anticipation and game sense. It seems to reflect something of what has been referred to as an Aboriginal ethic in football as practised in remote Aboriginal communities in central and northern Australia as something embodied in 'qualities that include those of mobility, immediacy and intimacy that, stresses attack in a style that is characterized by high-speed running quick scoring and minimal body contact' (Butcher and Judd 2016, p. 173.)

Alvin's mother sent him to stay with an uncle in a regional Victorian town to play in the local footy competition at the age of 12 in the Territory 'off season'. He would then return to Darwin to play in a local team, which saw him playing footy all year round for two years. At 16 years of age he moved to Adelaide to pursue his goal of making the AFL and at age 20 took a gamble of moving with his family to Melbourne to play with a VFL (Victorian Football League) team and was drafted into an AFL team at the age of 20. His story seems to be one of immense talent intimately shaped by a distinctive Aboriginal approach to the game and early collective commitment by him and his wider family and community to realizing his potential as a player and the drive and support of his mother from as far back as he can remember.

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5 Max: 'Dad Wanted Me to Try a Lot of Different Sports'

Max was born in Darwin but his family soon moved to A-town (a pseudonym), which is one of the larger towns in the Northern Territory with a population of approximately 10,000 and several hundred kilometres from Darwin. As a child, he enjoyed playing a wide range of sports including soccer, athletics and cricket that, he felt, were very helpful for his development into an AFL player. His memories of growing up in this community were dominated by playing sport as part of any social gathering such as at the regular family barbecues where he played with his cousins and brother, suggesting that this is where he developed the foundations for his success in footy:

> … because I had a lot of cousins around me. We were always doing stuff down at the place called the low level and we'd all have barbies and that and that was it. That's where you learned all your skills, you know, you'd chase your older cousins around and that sort of stuff so I think that was massive in obviously the early development (of my footy skills).

While Max was in primary school, his family moved back to Darwin where he began playing rugby union and rugby league because his older brother had moved to Darwin to play rugby at a private boarding school. Max was introduced to footy in primary school:

> My brother was already at boarding school in Darwin so he was playing rugby league and rugby union at boarding school so once I moved to Darwin, that's what I took up, both league and union. I was first introduced to AFL football in primary school.

Max limited his participation in footy to playing at school because of the influence of his brother who felt that footy was a 'girl's game' when compared to rugby. He focused on playing rugby through his primary school years but his father, who had played footy and cricket, encouraged him to play more footy and to focus less on rugby: '… he wanted me to try a lot of different sports. I just wanted to play rugby and that was it. But dad forced me to play footy. I said I'll play it for one year and that's it.' At age 13, he had his first experience of being in a footy club when he went down to a Darwin club where he really enjoyed the experience:

> … I always played rugby when I got to Darwin, I was a sort of rugby man and then it wasn't until I was 13 that I actually went down to the local footy club and started playing footy for (a) Football Club and then I played until I was 17, 18 in Darwin.

Max felt that a lot of the skill and understanding of footy he developed as a teenager came from his wide experience of different sports and his exposure to low key footy at primary school. He spoke of endless hours of practice and play with his brother in one-on-one rugby (union) and rugby league games and competitions they would create in the backyard, local parks and in spaces such as the goal square of a nearby soccer field:

> He used to get me in the backyard and we'd just do that. So after school we'd go down to the local footy oval and there used to be a soccer field marked out but we used to use the goal square of the goalkeepers box. We used to play just one on one, against each other in rugby, so we'd play sort of touch against each other so all the chip and chasers.

Max was convinced that these experiences of playing modified games of rugby league and union with his brother exerted a powerful influence on how he played footy later in his life and on the development of his capacities and skills in footy. He said that he thought his experiences of

playing a range of sports gave him a good base for his rapid development into a skilful footy player during his high school years as a member of a footy club that was boosted by a growth spurt: '… then I had a bit of a growth spurt and that sort of stuff and kept kicking the footy with the boys at school and just developed pretty quickly and I tend to pick up things pretty quickly.'

By the time he turned 17, Max had developed into a very skilful and promising footy player who accepted an offer to move to South Australia to play in the SANFL in Adelaide as a way of developing his career. However, he did not want to compromise his education, which was something his father was concerned about: 'I just basically organized it myself. I basically told dad one day I'm moving to Adelaide and he wasn't too happy with that. I said I've already organized it all.' In this study, mothers all strongly emphasized the importance of getting a good education for their sons' futures but in Max's case, his father put more emphasis on education because of his own experience. In his mid-30s, his father had successfully taken on the challenge of enrolling in formal education and had experienced the boost it provided in career options and financial security for him and his family. From his own experience, he was convinced of the need for Max to get a good education and was concerned what effect moving to Adelaide to play footy might have on his education but Max had made up his mind to go. He did, however, continue his schooling in Adelaide.

In Adelaide, Max stayed with the family of a good friend with whom he had played cricket in Darwin and who had moved to Adelaide:

> That move to Adelaide, and I was lucky enough, because the bloke I'd played footy against, and cricket with actually, represented the Northern Territory, he was living in Adelaide so I stayed with him and his family for the first year.

As with most of the other participants in this study, developing his career in footy and aiming to make the AFL meant significant disruption to Max's life and education due to the frequency of changing location and the increasingly significant cultural and social differences involved. Moving from home in Darwin to South Australia involved a huge change

in his world but being able to live with the family of an Indigenous mate from Darwin helped him deal with this challenge. He not only applied himself to developing his footy but also kept up his studies.

During this time, he divided his schooling between Darwin and South Australia to complete year 12. In his final year at school, he would go to Darwin in the first and fourth terms and when the SANFL footy season started, he would go to a school in Adelaide for the second and third terms. At the age of 19, he was drafted to a Melbourne AFL club where he stayed and played for ten years. He had adjusted to cultural change in Adelaide, to living a much larger city than Darwin, and to the very different approach taken to coaching and training compared to what he had grown up with but did not speak as though he felt this had been a major problem or somehow unfair for him. When he first moved to Melbourne to begin playing with an AFL club, he had to adjust again to a much larger city than Adelaide, a different cultural and social environment and to the rigours of training and playing at the highest level in his sport. Again, he felt he was lucky to have someone to help him adjust, make the transition and fit in for his first year in the club. This time, it was the brother of his sister's boyfriend:

> I was lucky enough my sister was dating a boy and the boy's brother played for (the same AFL club). I was living there and he kinda took me under his wing. I lived with him and his partner for the first year then he got delisted and I moved out to live with someone that I played footy with that (first) year.

Max considers himself to be something of a loner. With all his moves between the Northern Territory, Adelaide and Melbourne, he would get homesick like the other Indigenous players in the study but he did not feel a strong need to be in an Indigenous community or to be in the company of Indigenous people like most of the other participants in the study did. However, the arrival of one particular Indigenous player, who was to become very well known, changed this. Max developed a very strong relationship with this player and said that this encouraged him to begin to connect more with his Aboriginal roots because both of their families knew each other from the Northern Territory. Conversations and sharing

stories with each other helped develop a strong friendship, while also stimulating a stronger connection with his Indigenous culture and with the communities he had grown up in: '… once (he) got there, it was great because I was able to share stories and talk about people from back home and he knew all the people so that was great having him there.'

Significant People

When asked about the people who had made the strongest contribution towards his journey from the Territory to the AFL over his life, Max nominated his coach of the U14 team he was in during his first year of playing in a formal footy competition. In particular, he enjoyed the ways in which the coach would give the players challenges to meet and extend themselves in training and in competition games such as making them kick the ball with their non-dominant foot when playing weaker opposition to both develop skill and to make the game more challenging:

> My under 14's coach [name], he was probably a massive [influence] because I remember we used to dominate the under 14's competitions. It got to a point where he'd make us kick on our opposite feet pretty much after the first quarter. We'd be ten goals up after the first quarter and then after that we'd have to learn how to kick with our opposite feet and that sort of stuff. So that was something that made a significant influence on my footy.

He also nominated his under-17 and under-18 coach of the Northern Territory team who facilitated his move to Adelaide through contacts and his brother who taught him how to tackle and with whom he would play one-on-one in the park in the Territory: '… my older brother because he was five years older than me, he was the one who taught me how to tackle properly …'. This is likely where Max developed the aggressive tackling that he became well known for in the AFL and which is unusual for Indigenous players who tend to be less physical in defence (Butcher and Judd 2016). Max gave much credit to his intense one-on-one rugby practice games that he played with his brother for his development as a footy player but not so much in terms of developing specific footy skills. It was

more in general terms of awareness, vision intensity, concentration, determination and developing a sense of the game:

> So I think that's where I learnt a lot of the skills, marking, obviously peripheral vision and that sort of stuff. We used to have this competition, me and my brother, we'd put up the bombs and whoever didn't mark it got the penalties and that sort of stuff, so that's where I sort of learnt a lot of that stuff, just from following my brother.

Summary

Max made a late start in footy. Although he had been introduced to it in primary school, he did not join a footy club until he was 13. However, his progress from then on was rapid with him moving to South Australia to play in the SANFL and being drafted into an AFL club at the age of 19. Although he had not played in club footy until 13, Max played a range of other sports such as cricket, basketball, soccer and rugby with a focus on rugby due to his brother's influence. Max felt that these early experiences of different sports provided him with the broad knowledge and understanding of sport that enabled his rapid improvement in footy. He did not feel that, in any way, his late start had disadvantaged him. In fact, Max felt that his early experiences of practising rugby and playing impromptu games with his older brother assisted his development as a footy player. This supports research on sport participation and the development of talent that suggests playing a range of sports during the sampling phase (5–12 years of age) contributes positively towards enjoyment and the development of expertise (Baker et al. 2003; Côté et al. 2007; Côté and Hay 2002) and supports Max's suggestion.

Any young Indigenous boy growing up in the Northern Territory with aspirations of an AFL career faces the demands of considerable travel and the disruption that comes with it. As a young child, Max had moved with his family from Darwin to one of the Northern Territory's larger towns and then back. At 17, he moved to Adelaide to play in the SANFL where he continued his schooling to complete the important year 12 (final year) while playing in the SANFL. During this testing

year, he would spend his first and fourth terms in Darwin and when the footy season began he would travel to South Australia for the second and third terms. His efforts over this demanding year saw him complete his secondary schooling and develop his footy well enough to be drafted into the AFL at 19 years of age with him moving to Melbourne. Moving back and forth between Darwin and South Australia over a two-year period and then to Melbourne presented many challenges for Max. These included being separated from his family and community and dealing with radical changes in lifestyle and in ways of training and playing very different from what he had grown up with and learned through in the Northern Territory.

As a self-described 'loner' who was not as dependent upon Indigenous links and culture, Max felt he dealt with the challenges involved in adapting to these different environments reasonably well but did identify the importance of support on a personal and professional level from people who performed what could be seen as mentoring roles:

> Knowing anyone in being in an unfamiliar place, and you see someone you sort of know you go up to him and are you from Darwin and stuff. When I played in South Australia there were a lot of other Northern Territory players there playing for different clubs. Played against them in Darwin but once I got to Adelaide you bonded a lot more because you know him and you are around the same people. Same thing happened when I came down here. I was introduced to the other Indigenous boys – once I got to Melbourne through – the other footy club – you form that bond. And yeah that's what I try to do with young fellas now. I try to introduce them to the other players.

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6 Toby: 'Bring Your Own Flavour'

Toby is the only child born to a white mother, who is a teacher, and an Aboriginal father, whom he had never met. He grew up in Western Sydney living with his single mother and not mixing with any Aboriginal boys or girls of his age where he enjoyed playing impromptu, 'knock up', modified games of rugby league at school and after school with his friends. He wanted to join a rugby league club to play on the weekends with his friends but his mother would not allow him to. He was a lean boy and she was worried about him being hurt by boys who were much bigger and stronger than him. This meant that his involvement in rugby league was limited to the informal games he and his friends created and played during recess and lunchtime at school and after school as well as in his backyard with friends or out in the fields behind his house when not at school.

Toby's introduction to Australian football was through the son of a colleague of his mother's. His mother was happy for him to be active and play with his friends but preferring him playing footy because she thought it would be 'softer' and safer than rugby league:

> I wanted to play rugby league and mom wouldn't let me because she thought I'll get snapped in half…I just mucked around in the backyard like playing rugby playing informal touch or whatever. It was one of mum's work colleagues – Mum was a teacher. Her (mother's friend) husband was from South Australia and his son played AFL and mum, not knowing much about AFL, sort of was – a bit of softer sport no injury and that sort of stuff like that so mum got me to do that.

At this young age, Toby continued playing informal, modified play games of rugby league and touch rugby with his mates but also began training one day a week in footy and playing competition games on the weekend during the season in a local club:

> My first real memories were always having a footy in my hand but actually playing more informal rugby league with the kids from my street out the back of the house … playing fields were right behind our house and so I'd just be out there playing touch or informal rugby all week and on Wednesday night I would train AFL and on Saturday I would play.

When reflecting on his experiences of playing rugby league growing up in the Western suburbs of Sydney, he did not think he had wasted his time because he believed that these early experiences of rugby league made a valuable contribution towards his development into an AFL player. Indeed, he was convinced that playing those informal games of rugby league made a very important contribution to his development as a footy player. As was the case with most of the other AFL participants, he felt that playing a different sport (or sports) when young made him a better player. In particular, Toby focused on the lessons he learned about being efficient in using the limited space available to him in rugby league and how he felt this forced him to think intently about space and time. When telling his story, he also made frequent references to the implicit learning that is evident in his discussion about learning to use space:

> … because there are so many more restrictions on the way you play (rugby league) and even though it's informal it's such a restrictive game that to be really good at it you actually have to think. When you don't have much space you learn how to use it. I think just mucking around trying all these

different things actually helped me because when I came into the AFL you instantly see like a little loophole and space a little better. At the start I had to think about it but then it just became so I learned that it just happened, like yeah I got space. It's so hard to explain, it's like the intrinsic stuff that you can't coach.

Tony was studying for an undergraduate university degree at the time of the interview with concepts he was familiar with in his studies informing his thinking and reflections on how and what he learned growing up. It also helped him articulate his ideas and thoughts and think through concepts. He described this early learning that transferred into footy as 'embodied learning' in reference to learning which is not noticed until, in Toby's words: 'you reflect upon something you did in a footy game and wonder where that movement, tactical knowledge or use of space came from.' His studies seemed to have provided him with concepts and ideas he used to understand and articulate the range and depth of implicit learning that occurred for him through informal games and activities:

> There's a lot of embodied learning. All embodied learning but I didn't know what for …. The amount of times you find yourself in that situation you never been before and you just react more often than not you get it right.

At 11 years of age, he moved away from Sydney to a small Victorian country town where he began to focus more on footy and to become immersed in it. This was a huge change for him from living in Australia's biggest city with a population of five million people to a tiny country town:

> We (he and his mum) moved to a little town called B-town, which is just out of W-town – (population 90,000) about half an hour northwest. So it was a massive cultural shift going from the metropolis of Sydney to a town of 25 people.

In B-town, his week was filled with playing footy at school, training after school and playing competition games on the weekends:

> I would play, say once I started going to high school, I would like – school footy whenever there was school footy on and then there would, be Saturday … and Sunday football in town. Because when you're young you can just play forever.

While telling his story, he recalled playing and enjoying free flowing and exciting modified games of footy in and around school that involved having to change the rules of the games to prevent anybody becoming 'super dominant' because this would shut down the enjoyment of the game for everybody. He said he and his school mates would be creative with rule changes in these games by picking up and applying rules from other sports such as netball to make them more fun to play and to adapt to the constraints of the playground space, number of players and other conditions.

> But then, of course, all day at school, before school, lunchtime, after school, all you do is play footy, but all different types of footy you know? You change it to netball you can only take two steps, at lunchtime and stuff, or everybody has to touch it before you can – you know …. So you put all these different paradigms on yourself because when you're in school there's always one kid who is super dominant or something you somehow have to curtail the rules against him.

He enjoyed school but said that had he not been so involved in sport and not made such meaningful friendships through sport, he would have dropped out: 'I would have just dropped out school, not because I didn't enjoy school, but I liked my mates more and that was what my mates were doing.'

At high school, Toby had considered dropping out but two important factors prevented him from doing so. One was the fact that his mother was a teacher who was 'very serious about education' and who understood the importance of receiving a good formal education for his future. The other factor was his love of sport and of footy, in particular. This opened up a pathway for combining the development of his footy with a solid education at a respected school when he was offered a place in a prestigious private secondary school after gaining the attention of their coaching staff that we refer to here using the pseudonym the *Elite School* (ES):

So I started to show up a bit in football so – so mum said Elite School has a pretty good reputation. She sent me down there to finish school but also because Elite School had a good reputation, it was two birds with one stone …. And once I got there it became quite football heavy, football focus ….

ES had a strong sporting association with the Associated Grammar Schools of Victoria (AGSV), was known for a large number of students who went on to play in the VFL and AFL and was of a high academic standard.

Toby had made very good friends at his previous school through playing footy at school and on the weekends and largely through the very social nature of the modified game they played in and around school. He also made friends at ES through footy but his move into it was very much focused on developing a career in footy and in a less playful, more serious, environment: 'I got some great friends there (previous school) and then again when I went to Elite School but that was purely from a schooling and footballing perspective.'

Playing footy at Elite School not only involved playing at a higher level but also exposure for Toby to a different way of training and playing that was much more structured than what he had grown up with and which initially challenged him to fit into:

… because when you're playing there even then there was a certain level of structure … the structure that you have to be in certain positions, certain roles, the guys had to adjust certain positions different to what I was doing in (his previous school) and stuff which was basically scrapping the rules to making our own and trying to make it fun.

While at Elite School, he would also play in the TAC cup, during which he developed good connections with another Indigenous player and began to think that his footy had an Aboriginal flavour and to feel a connection in play with this Indigenous player. He felt they had an uncanny awareness of each other and connection between them, reflected in always knowing where each other would be in the game and anticipating where they would be:

> There was another indigenous guy and we just use to – we just had this weird kind of thing like somehow almost every time when I got the ball he ended up with the next or vice versa …. Just stuff that's so hard to explain or put into words it's more than saying that there's a connection.

Raised by his white mother, Toby had never met his Aboriginal father. Up until the age of 11, he had grown up in the Western suburbs of Sydney where none of his friends were Indigenous but he said he always felt most comfortable with other Indigenous people and had always strongly identified as Aboriginal:

> I haven't grown up in it …. I've always strongly identified. And I've always have never felt more comfortable than when I'm in a room full of indigenous people. I was just home with mom very comfortable obviously but it's so weird because in a weird way my Aboriginality is what defines me.

Typically finding himself in social contexts where he was the only Indigenous person or one of very few and being an only child to a single mother meant that he often felt lonely but filled this emptiness by making up and playing games:

> I've always had an affinity any indigenous guy I met I think this is the way we all are. I've never really had a big family I'm an only child as well …. So I just used to stick around by myself and you know we had a basketball court at the school and I'll go there and kick goals and I wouldn't leave the court until I kick the ball in the ring you know? When you're kid it's like your mind is endless all you do is just look at stuff and all right I'll make a game out of it. All I remember from my growing up there is having a footy kicking it over and around and just coming home as soon as it started getting dark.

Toby was drafted by an AFL club in Adelaide at the end of his schooling. The very day he received his final, end of high school, assessment, he flew to Adelaide to begin as a professional footballer. His effort and improving performance was rewarded with many emergency spots in the lineup for an AFL team in Adelaide. However, he found his move into footy at this elite level very challenging due to its highly structured and managed approach when compared to how he had learned to play up to this point in which: 'I just kind of do my own thing and just kind of go do what I

thought was best rather than necessarily play within a structure.' He already had to squeeze his way of playing and training into the more structured way of playing and training at the Elite School but this was a considerable step up in structure:

> … you've been making decisions for years about everything. As we spoke about things that you just do you can't say how you did them or why. But before I got there I was just kind of just blowing in the wind almost.

He began to think that he was not ready for such a structured approach to footy and the constant scrutiny he was under as a professional footballer. He said his training and play felt really 'inconsistent' but the help of an Aboriginal mentor, Allen, was pivotal to his being able to adapt and flourish. In his early years, Toby lived in Allen's house with his family. From this experience and Allen's mentoring, he learned how to live on his own and how to fit into a structural footy environment without losing the special skills and ability he had learned while growing up and that were valued by his AFL club. Toby said that Allen helped him to see that his way of playing and the structure of footy could actually co-exist and make him a better player: 'Even when I got there (AFL level) I was still really, really loose, not in terms of loose like going out but really loose in terms of …. I still wasn't great with structure.'

Allen helped Toby adapting to the AFL without losing the special set of skills and abilities he had developed over his life. Toby had immense respect for Allen and gratitude for how he had not only helped him make it into the AFL but also how he had taken him into his home and family and helped him grow as a man.

> He became like a brother or father or father figure you get put in that kind of space that was what his family did as well. It was only when I got there that I actually really, really flourished …. I almost solely put it down as being with Allen. He taught me how to cook, how to clean, how to pay my own bills told me all these things. But then he also taught me how everything that I've learned learn or all the skills that I've picked up by myself along the way they told me that they can coexist within a structure.

Having never met his father and growing up in non-Indigenous settings, Toby had grown up knowing little about his Indigenous culture

and his origins and sometimes felt a sense of shame about this. With his mother's support, Allen helped him find his 'mob' and where his country was which meant a great deal to him. Toby went on to play for three AFL clubs over his career and has made a successful transition from sport that involves studying for a university degree.

Summary

For so many young people, Indigenous or not, sport can help them find themselves and give meaning to their lives and this seems to be the case for Toby. Like all the participants in this study, he had talent for footy that he seems to have developed over the sampling phase from 5 to 12 years (DMSP; Côté and Hay 2002) through informal games with a strong play element that generates interaction and promotes the development of positive relationships (see Hendricks 2006). During this period, he learned special skills and abilities that set him apart from most non-Indigenous players in footy through participation in creative, informal games that required and generated vision, anticipation, game sense and communication as skills commonly attributed to Aboriginal AFL players (Stronach et al. 2016; Hallinan and Judd 2007).

There were considerable similarities between Toby's story and those of the other AFL participants but one thing that was different for Toby was his consistent and unsolicited articulation of what and how he learned from this informal play right up until being drafted into the AFL club at 18 years of age. He also suggested that this was where Aboriginal AFL players learned their flair:

> I was learning all of these skills – learning them through games. Without even realizing …. I have done that a million times and that's why I'm good at that. It's another conversation that frustrates me when indigenous players are just all seen as being that freakishly talented.

For this same reason, Toby also articulated the challenge that Indigenous footy players face when having to fit in to the highly structured approaches to coaching and playing at the highest levels. He clearly explained how, guided by his mentor, Allen, he learned to fit in while retaining his special

talents: He said he learned that, 'You do need to conform but conform just as much as you need to. These (ways of training in AFL clubs) are non-negotiables. We had to do these but bring your own flavour.'

We finish Toby's story with his explanation of how he adapted to the AFL while keeping what clubs value so much in Indigenous players:

> Like I said I was often … really inconsistent …. I didn't really know how to harness what I had and apply it to the situation I was in. Once I got there and it just became, 'Oh that's kind of how it works'. There is no reason why these two things can't coexist.

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7 Carl: 'Geez—I'm Not Too Bad at This Caper'

Carl grew up in the northern suburbs of Melbourne where he started playing footy at five years of age in the under ten years team of the same club his father had been a member of: 'If we actually talk about the first time I actually picked up a football … under ten's at only the ripe age of five years.' He joined the club just to be part of the group of boys in the neighbourhood and to mix with the older ones. Joining the under tens at five years of age meant that he did not have a lot of game time but was happy to just be part of the group and mix with the older boys:

> It was more about being involved in a group, heading down there to training, being a part of the bigger boys and all those sorts of things. So that's when I really started enjoying football – just sitting on the bench and being the bench warmer.

Carl's motivation to join the club was largely social at an age when he was probably more interested in rap and break dancing as he suggests when talking about sitting on the bench during competition games:

> I wasn't interested in what was going on with the football so there was a bit of dancing going on at one end of the ground because at that age, I really liked the rap dancing and all that sort of stuff, the break dancing.

Carl stayed in the under tens for five years after which he graduated to the under 11s and under 12s. The last year or two in the under tens and his experiences of playing in the under 11s and 12s among boys, his own age allowed him to think that he had talent and skill and encouraged him to think about a future in footy. He thought that he was 'quite good' at footy and that he could be very good at it if he put in the effort. This led him to begin to set himself goals and commit more time and effort to being better at footy and to be more excited about it:

> I played in the (under) 11's, under 12's, then started maturing a little bit more. I started getting a little bit more of the football and sort of thought, geez I'm not too bad at this caper so I started committing to it a little bit more, got more excited.

 Staying in the same club, he played in the under 14s and was selected in a combined team playing for a District Football League, which is a Victoria wide age group competition made up of representative teams. This environment allowed his talent to emerge and be visible to others with him receiving the player of the series and other awards that confirmed his ability as a footy player for him.

> I'd done about three or four of those and ended up getting the player of the series and those sorts of awards came my way without even not realising what I was actually doing.

Carl's realization of his talent was encouraged by the people around him who recognized this talent. From the age of 12–14, he and his family started to think that professional footy was a viable option as a career for him:

> I thought, well – and dad started realising; and everyone started realizing; that there's a bigger picture at the end of the road sort of thing. So footy started becoming a lot more serious.

He recounted the joy and excitement he felt when he received a letter from the School Boys representative team for the area where he lived notifying him of his selection in the team. This was a very satisfying achievement for him and one, which further encouraged him to commit to footy but his experiences of playing in this team were frustrating for him.

Carl had developed his skills and ability to play footy growing up and playing with the local boys in parks and backyards with few and flexible rules, and enjoying free flowing, fast paced games. Even when he joined the local club at five years of age, training was loose and not too different from his informal games in the local park. This is how he learned to play as a child but it contrasted with the training with the representative School Boys team and the game style, which was highly structured. He struggled to adapt to this approach to training and play due to its comparatively tight structure, when compared to what he considered to be 'conventional' footy. It constrained him and took the joy out of footy for him, which led him to leave the team and return to his local club where he played in the U-16s:

> … zones came into it, you know, how to play forward pocket. It wasn't just your conventional game of football … there was more structure to it so I didn't adapt to that too well and then went back to (his local club). Played in under 16's as a 15 year old and along that journey with (his local club) won three or four premierships through 12's right up to 16s.

Carl's journey to the AFL had stalled due to his inability to adapt his Aboriginal way of playing and training to footy increasingly influenced by the professional approach. He retreated to his local club where his team had won three or four championships from the U-12s to U-16s and at the age of 15 was asked to play for the U-18 team. After performing well in the U-18s, and still only 15, he was invited to play in the club's senior team but his father intervened to look after his welfare to insist that Carl could only play in the top team and not in the reserve grade team due his knowledge of the rough and foul play at this level:

> So then when I got asked to play senior football, that's when dad came into the scene and said he can only play one's, not reserves because he'd played many games of seniors and reserves and there's a lot of thugs in the reserves, we don't want him to play reserves.

Carl played four or five games for the seniors' first team over the season and felt that he had 'done okay'. At 16, he was called up midseason to play two games for The Wallabies (a pseudonym), which was a team playing in the TAC cup as a competition for under-18-year-old players played across Victoria. During the season, he was selected to play in the Teal Cup representing Victoria. The Teal Cup is now known as The NAB AFL Under-18 Championships and operates as the annual national Australian football championships. It is seen to be one of the main pathways towards being drafted into a team in the AFL. After that he kept playing for The Wallabies that made the finals in the same year.

During breaks from footy he enjoyed playing, '… little bit of cricket, but mainly basketball, skateboards, pushbikes and motor bikes.' He echoed the thoughts of the other participants to suggest that these sports and basketball, in particular, helped him improve his footy:

> My basketball playing at school, playing just at club level, had a massive influence (on my footy) to actually work out angles, be able to bounce the ball and look up and do three things at once … it actually made you multitask altogether and I think the beautiful thing about football is that if you're carrying the ball in your hand, you don't have to bounce it so there's only one thing to think about, how you're going to execute that ball.

He also suggested the regular 'backyard games' he played with friends and family made a contribution to the development of his footy:

> I think it was just playing … playing those backyard games, when you're watching the finals, when you're playing. I learned to keep my feet …. Well we played on asphalt roads so you go up for a mark, you learnt to actually not fall down … you learnt to keep your feet.

Carl made a point of suggesting how growing up playing these impromptu games modified to suit resources at hand and to ensure an engaging

competition, made a significant contribution towards his rapid rise as a football player at such a young age:

> That's where you learn that sort of backyard skills and it just becomes natural, it just all happens and you don't think about it because you're playing with your mates and playing with cousins, you're just enjoying it and it's not really structured.

That year, The Wallabies won the championship and at the age of 17 Carl was drafted into an AFL club but had some problems settling into how things were done. Just as he had struggled with too much structure in the representative School Boys team at 15 years of age, he struggled with the emphasis placed on fitness, conditioning and the demands for meeting measurable standards. Wanting to make a success of the AFL, he worked hard to fit in and described himself as a 'workhorse' at training but also as someone who really looked forward to getting the footy in his hands and displaying skills that he thought were far superior to all the other players:

> I just done whatever was put in front of me, just went and done what I had to do and got involved and done the training, done the running and I was probably at the back end of the running all the time but then within the football skills, once the footballs came out, I could just see I was well above everyone, ahead of everyone else but if you look at the athletic, you know, the three K (kilometres) time trials – all these. The speed I was okay at, the weights? I wasn't lifting the heaviest weights, but as soon as the footballs came out, there was a sense of – how would you say it? I was comfortable.

His whole extended family was 'into footy' and all contributed to his development as a footy player but he felt the most important people in his life were his mother, Nan (his grandmother) and aunt, with whom he would share a love of footy. For example, they would all go to watch Carlton (a Melbourne-based AFL team) games after which there would be in-depth discussions about, and analysis of, the game among them:

> Would go to watch Carlton on a regular basis on a Saturday afternoon with my mother, my Nan and my aunty …. I'd get the prep talks on the way

there, on the way home and the dissecting of the game and of how Carlton went and how bad they went and how good they went … these three ladies, my Nan, my aunty and my mother, sitting alongside them and listening to them barrack a lot about football was certainly a good insight to me on the way that females seen football and they would, from time to time, get into arguments with other men around.

These women also provided support for him growing up in a 'tough' neighbourhood and tried to keep him on track once he and his family had all begun to focus on him making it to the AFL. His father had been a good footy player and encouraged Carl from an early age but his guidance and support was focused on Carl's behaviour and mental/emotional state:

Dad had been involved in football through my whole career, from the early days, but never interrupted, never got really involved in terms of this is how you play, this is how you do it, and all those sorts of things. The only time dad gave me advice was when I either lost my temper and how should I go about it … dad would have had a big influence, a massive influence just on me in terms of keeping your cool and keeping your temper.

Carl grew up in a lower socio-economic part of Melbourne with significant potential to divert him from his growing commitment to being a professional footy player. During an interview, he spoke about the tensions between the local boys and the police and joked about developing his speed around the ground by regularly running away from the police: 'We were always being chased by the police – that's how I learned to run so fast.' Within this environment, his father focused on Carl's personal development through footy such as self-control and keeping calm when temper to let anger take over from clear thinking.

Carl also identified the second coach he had in the AFL team he was drafted into as having a major influence on his footy and development as a person. This was mainly in helping him to adapt to the highly structured nature of training and ways of playing at the AFL level. He said that this coach helped him understand the 'structured side of footy' as important for assisting him in making the adjustments needed over his first years in the AFL:

Over those five years … (he) just painted the canvas of what you need to do to win AFL games. So I started realizing what I needed to do and then what my team mates needed to do and just painted a clear picture on how football is played.

Summary

From an early age, Carl showed raw talent but of course talent alone is not enough for athletes in any sport to make it to the top. Among other requirements, talent must be augmented by effort, guidance and support, which is evident in Carl's story. He did not grow up learning to play footy in an Indigenous cultural environment, as was the case with many of the other participants in this study. In fact, he was usually the only Indigenous boy in his social groups and in most of the teams he played in but his development as a footballer was shaped by the influence of his extended family through social interaction and the discourse of Aboriginal culture and values. This seemed to have some indirect influence on his way of playing which helps explain, to some extent, how he seems to have developed an Aboriginal approach to play without growing up in an Indigenous community. The ways in which he learned through playing informal games and the loose approach to coaching in his local club also facilitated the development of an Aboriginal style of play. Footy, and his ability to play so well gave Carl direction, allowed him set goals to strive for and achieve which gave him confidence in his ability to achieve and get somewhere in life.

The emergence of his talent and potential as a footballer at around the age of 12–14 changed his life. His realization of his abilities in footy and the recognition of it by significant people around him such as his mother, father, aunties, friends and coaches made him think that he could make it as a professional footballer in the AFL. This belief in himself and the support of important people in his life and footy motivated him and he made rapid progress in footy to be drafted into the AFL at 17 years of age. It was not, however, without its challenges, which included the distractions of growing up in a 'tough' neighbourhood and problems adapting his free flowing, instinctive, highly skilled and fast paced approach to

play to the tight structures and discipline of the high-level teams outside his local area. This was made more difficult for him by the absence of any mentors to significantly help him deal with this transition until the arrival of his second AFL coach. One of his coaches in his local club's senior team did try to help him after he returned from the representative School Boys team after not being able to adapt to its structured approach to play and training but it seems that the person who helped him most was his second AFL coach.

Part II Discussion

The four stories told here reflect how the journeys of all eight AFL participants to the AFL began in humble surroundings where they developed the fundamentals of their footy skills and ability up until around the age of 12. It also seems that during what Côté and colleagues (see Côté and Hay 2002) refer to as the sampling phase in the DMSP they developed personal qualities and strong values that enabled them to deal with a wide range of challenges as they moved into different ways of training and playing from the ages of 13–15 as they approached making it to the AFL. Each of these four stories tells us of resilience in dealing with very significant challenges and suggests the role that mentors and life learning in their families and communities played in this. These moves included moving back and forth between the Northern Territory and Victoria or South Australia at the age of 12, completing year 12 (final year of secondary schooling) over 30,000 km from home while playing professional footy, or being thrust into the demands of AFL football as a teenager in a huge city far from home and crying every night due to loneliness and separation from family and community.

Relatives such as older brothers, uncles, aunties, grand parents and coaches played important roles in helping the participants meet these life and footy challenges but all of the participants identified the pivotal role

their mothers played in their development into elite-level footy players and in growing up into capable young men able to deal with life's challenges. Their mothers invariably emphasized the importance of education for them and in many cases, pushed their sons to stay in school and succeed while also supporting the development of their footy talents as they emerged. Although footy soon became more important than school and became the obvious pathway to a financially secure life, most of them completed year 12, with three completing tertiary studies and one was enrolled in a university degree at the time of the study.

For all four AFL participants whose stories are told here, their mother was the most important person in their world and encouraged them to chase their dreams while keeping their feet on the ground and making immense personal sacrifice for them and their siblings. Their motivation to keep pushing and not give up when faced with obstacles or challenges was assisted by a deep and powerful sense of obligation to their mothers and a belief in their ability to succeed developed in their families and communities. Alvin made this very clear when saying that he was motivated by wanting to: '… make a name for myself but also the big drive thing was to make her proud and pretty much say thank you in a way because you can never thank your parents enough.'

This important role is typical of Aboriginal mothers whom traditional roles typecast as being 'enablers' or 'helpers' (Stronach et al. 2016; see also Maxwell et al. 2017). With one or two exceptions, the importance of mothers in the lives of all eight participants was increased by the common absence of a strong and present father. While in many cases, uncles, a big brother or a grandfather compensated to a degree the mothers took on this extra responsibility, which did not go unnoticed by the participants.

For all eight AFL participants, their foundations of expertise in Australian football were built upon learning from informal, impromptu, self-organized and managed games played among relatives and friends and from playing a range of different sports, but most commonly basketball and cricket. Most of the participants explicitly identified the central role that informal games played in developing the foundations of their expertise with many also suggesting this is how the Aboriginal approach to playing Australian football is developed. For example, Toby talked of

the implicit learning that occurred through playing informal games and how it was a feature of Indigenous game style:

> I was learning all of these skills – learning them through games. Without even realising …. I have done that a million times and that's why I'm good at that. It's another conversation that frustrates me when indigenous players are just all seen as being that freakishly talented.

These eight participants grew up and learned to play footy in small communities, many of which were predominantly Indigenous and isolated but also within small communities located in larger city suburbs and in the case of two participants, in communities with very few, if any, other Indigenous people their age. For all of them, sport was their life and one of the prime ways in which they interacted and learned. They all articulated a strong belief in the central role that playing informal games played in their early development in footy but many also articulated a belief in the role that involvement in sports other than footy played in their development of expertise in footy. For example, Carl suggested the important influence that basketball had on his development into an expert footy player: 'My basketball playing at school, playing just at club level, had a massive influence (on my footy) to actually work out angles, be able to bounce the ball and look up and do three things at once.'

Research on the development of sporting expertise from childhood identifies conditions that enhance the development of expertise and that resonate with the environments in which the eight participants grew up and developed their expertise in footy. The broader coaching research suggests that smaller communities tend to provide conditions that favour the development of expertise compared to larger cities (see Cōtè et al. 2007) and identifies patterns among elite sport performers who grew up in smaller communities that are evident across the eight AFL participants in this study. These include (1) spending more time participating in deliberate play and deliberate practice and (2) having more opportunities to get involved in sport.

Research conducted by Carlson (1988) in Finland and Belarus found that elite-level athletes predominantly came from rural areas, with Cōtè et al. (2007) suggesting that this 'birthplace effect' favours smaller

communities. This is because of the quality and quantity of play available for children in such communities, the way in which they are more conducive to unstructured play, reduced concerns by adults about safety and how they provide easier access to open spaces. Smaller towns and communities such as those that the participants grew up in are typically more intimate with a less competitive psychosocial environment. They also provide more opportunity for success in sport at an early age and for interaction with children of different ages and with adults through which they learn not only how to play sport but also the culture that shaped their world and social lessons (Kyttä 2002) and are all evident in the lives of the participants during the sampling phase (5–12 years). They also seem to be facilitated by Aboriginal culture and the place of sport in Aboriginal communities (Light and Evans 2017) and even for the two participants who did not grow up in predominantly Indigenous environments. Carl grew up in a Melbourne suburb, playing footy and other sport with friends among which he was the only Indigenous boy but had regular and intimate interaction with his relatives that included watching and talking about AFL footy. Toby had not ever met his father, was an only child and had a white mother but always felt most comfortable with Indigenous people that he increasingly met as he grew older.

From the age of around 12 years of age to 14 or 15, the participants' recognition of their own talent for footy, and the recognition of it by others in their families and communities, encouraged them to think about a career in the AFL. From this point, they all invested the majority of their time, effort and focus on making it to the AFL due to the realization of their talent and the encouragement of others around them who also saw their talent and ability to make it into footy to the highest level. For example, Carl identified how his success and feeling that he had talent excited him and encouraged him to be more committed:

> I played in the (under) 11's, under 12's then started maturing a little bit more. I started getting a little bit more of the football and sort of thought, geez I'm not too bad at this caper so I started committing to it a little bit more, got more excited.

This typically involved moving away from home but with their family or mother in a couple of cases. For most they were separated from their small communities and their family, which presented a significant challenge for them to adapt to and particularly when as young as 12 years of age. Here, connections with their community played an important part in making these moves successful through having relatives or other Indigenous people to live with and provide support. In one case, the relative was also the coach of the team the participant was playing in. In this transition, mentors proved to greatly facilitate their success in dealing with the challenges involved.

The four participants' stories included in Part II tell us of experiences of moving away from home as they approached and then joined an NRL or AFL club also involved adapting to different ways of training and playing. This was the beginning of a process of having to adapt a free flowing, expressive and intuitive style of play to the constraints of a far more structured approach to play in which the sense of connection, understanding and anticipation between teammates was much reduced. They also had to adapt to training approaches that were more like work that the play-like nature of the ways in which they had developed their skills, understanding and game sense as children. Indeed, this notion of having to move from participation in footy having had a very strong play element (Hendricks 2006) towards it being a form of work is a strong theme across all participants from 12 years of age onwards. It is a process through which learning through 'deliberate play' and playing competitive games for enjoyment, connection and expression had to give way to working harder as they moved towards full-time employment as an AFL player. This was a process of cultural transition from the familiar environment of local communities and an Aboriginal approach to footy to the very different culture of professional, non-Indigenous sport.

In explaining how he dealt with this cultural transition, Toby said that his Indigenous mentor in Adelaide had told him that he needed to adjust to the 'non-negotiables' of training and playing in a professional team but needed to maintain his special talents that he brought to the team. He had also helped Toby find his country, which meant a great deal to him in the formation of his personal identity. At this stage of their careers, mentors and coaches played a very important part in helping the

participants adapt to challenging environments for living and playing footy, which is an issue recognized by the AFL as is evident in the proliferation of welfare officers at club level in the AFL. They were not all Indigenous and at the higher levels most were not but they were people who the participants felt cared about them as people. This is something that some suggest in the coaching literature is an important aspect of good coaching anywhere, and with any athletes (Jones 2009; Light 2017). Coaches with an understanding of Indigenous culture who took the time to care about them as individuals and help them adapt made very positive contributions towards the realization of their talent and the contributions they were able to make to the team. For those who had particularly difficult struggles at elite levels, the absence of such a coach was a contributing factor.

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Part III

8 Danny: 'Rugby League's a Religion for Aboriginal People'

Danny grew up in Abercrombie (pseudonym) which is a small regional city in rural New South Wales (NSW) where he said that: 'Rugby league's a religion for the Aboriginal community and my dad played, my uncles and grandfather, everyone in the town played so we were born with footballs in our hands.' He played and enjoyed a wide range of sports, but from childhood his main sport was rugby league. He first played organized competitive footy in the under sevens, but had been involved in playing forms of rugby league from his earliest memories of childhood: 'As soon as we could stand up we were playing footy… I'm crazy on rugby league since as long as I can remember.' These early experiences were the beginning of learning to play footy that was strongly influenced by Aboriginal culture:

> It's part of our culture to do things as a group, to enjoy each other's company and all that sort of stuff and I think that's what comes into why Indigenous people play football the way they do and why they enjoy training the way they do. It takes them back to those cultural ways that our people have, you know, and I think competitive games and stuff like that.

He lived and breathed rugby league and felt that he had talent for it from an early age, dreaming of playing in the National Rugby League (NRL) and was obsessed to the point that he read anything he could on footy:

> I sort of just loved everything about rugby league… all my reading at school was the rugby league books. When I'd get money on weekends I'd save my money up and buy a footy book…I used to go to newsagents every Wednesday when the Big League and Rugby League Week came out and I'd stay in there for 40 minutes and read the whole thing from front to back but I was a big collector of books, footy books, and I read every book on every player back in the days as a young guy.

As he progressed through the ranks of junior footy he was regularly selected in representative teams and when he was 14 a scout from a Sydney-based NRL team, the Rangers (pseudonym) came to Abercrombie to watch him play. He was then invited to a trial game in Sydney that he excelled in and was selected in a senior representative team at the age of 15, which encouraged him to see making the NRL a realistic goal.

Moving to Sydney

At 17, Danny moved to Sydney to join the Rangers NRL club. Despite being excited he was anxious about leaving his family and community and the massive challenges that he felt he would face in adapting to a completely new life. He played in the Rangers Premiere League team, which was one level below the NRL and comprised NRL reserve grade teams and teams representing clubs that once competed at the first grade level in the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) Premiership, but no longer fielded NRL teams.

He felt that the way in which his parents raised him prepared him for the challenges of living in Sydney, going to a new school and handling the pressure of making the most of his opportunity to play for the Rangers NRL team. In his first few months in Sydney, he lived with an Aboriginal rugby league legend, Andy Brown (pseudonym), who had travelled to Abercrombie to talk with Danny and his father about him moving to Sydney to play with the Rangers:

> Andy Brown came to my house, he flew up to Abercrombie to come and see me and then come and meet my dad, meet my mum, and that just sealed the deal like that I was going to the Rangers then.

For the first few months, he lived with Brown after which moved out to live with a slightly older Aboriginal player who played in the Premier League with the Rangers. The Rangers enrolled Danny in a private school where the culture of the school was vastly different to that of his local schools in Abercrombie where he enjoyed strong social networks and a sense of belonging. At Madison College (pseudonym) he found the culture of the school exclusive and felt isolated. Not only did he have to face the challenges of being separated from his family and community in Abercrombie but also from his teammates at the Rangers:

> The school was one of the toughest changes 'cause, you know, I went from a public school back home in Abercrombie where there was – you know – everyone was my best mates and we all knew each other and it was great. Great community feel to the school. And then I went to school down here and went to Madison College and I just couldn't get over the, you know, the fact that people stuck to themselves a lot and there were not many people to interact with and so I used to spend a lot of time in the library by myself. None of my teammates went to that school so there was no one there to sort of guide me through those early days at Madison.

His flat mate helped him a little in dealing with this loss of connectedness and social networks but it was his enjoyment of the footy environment at the Rangers that gave him pleasure and satisfaction and which provided meaning and direction for him. This included the facilities and what he describes as the 'professional' approach at the club as well as his coach in the Rangers Premier League team:

> Footy was good for me because I'd come down to a good coach. Really appreciated the fact that I could really rip into some of the training and all the facilities and opportunities that it gave me so I was really motivated and that's what helped me the most.

Footy as Work

Danny learned his footy through informal games and activities related to footy with friends and relatives that he thoroughly enjoyed and in a way that was shaped by Aboriginal culture:

> I learnt all my footy on the sideline at the A-grade games and over the back fence and all that. Playing in the backyard. We were just rugby league crazy in Abercrombie and there was always a game of footy on and you'd always be practising the skills and it was all about expressing yourself with the way you play. It was more about being tricky and smart and freakish plays and you know, trying things and stuff like that so it was a real like extension I suppose of traditional Aboriginal culture. You know, about expressing yourself and having fun and working with team mates so you know where the toughness and the aggression. Like that's probably an individual style of playing rugby league where we were more about, you know, having fun linking up with each other and things coming off. So the way I played footy and the way I've always looked at footy is it's an extension of that.

For Danny, footy was always play and never a form of work until he moved to Sydney where he thought that the way 'city kids' played footy was 'too serious':

> Football was fun there (Abercrombie) and it was fun for a long, long time. But I even notice now that city kids are too serious about their rugby league at 13, 14, 15, where, in the bush, it's a fun game, you travel with your mates.

At the Rangers, he adjusted to the more work-like approach to footy and at times felt he was living his childhood dreams of playing in the NRL in an environment far removed from his experiences of playing footy at Abercrombie, but at the end of the season he thought that his dream was shattered:

> I was playing with some of the most talented young kids in the competition… then at the end of that year the Rangers cut me. I remember thinking I could go home or I could stay and just, I don't know, fight for it.

He now had to make a big decision. Should he give up and return to his hometown or stay and find a way of making it to the NRL?

Fighting Back

Andy Brown and a senior figure in the club encouraged Danny not to give up and asked him to join the pre-season training squad to fight his way back into the Rangers reserve grade squad. Driven by deep obligation to his mob and his family to succeed in Sydney, he decided to fight his way back into the Rangers by beginning in the off season and to put in his best effort in the pre-season training and trials:

> I always wanted to be a footballer and then it was like, 'okay now here's your opportunity, you've got to work hard and you've got to train hard and put in to make it. This is going to help you achieve your goal' so that's how I looked at it. It was like this is you – know – my opportunity now to be trained properly, to know that you get to do what everyone else is doing, to be on that equal footing 'cause in the country you don't always feel like that's the case you know you feel like you're disadvantaged a bit because of the facilities and the coaching that the city kids get.

Reflecting upon this setback and how he responded, he said that being able to 'bounce back and not take no for an answer sort of kept me to be able to outlast it and have a career from it'. He committed to being as fit and skilful as possible by training during the off season when others were resting in preparation for the next season's pre-season. He committed to training diligently for the pre-season that he said involved, 'working my backside off' and which led to very impressive performance during the pre-season and results he was very pleased with:

> Then I turn up for training and just killed it from day one and then obviously the next year was really good for me I got the player of the year for reserve grade, made my first grade debut and just turned my whole season around. Turned my whole career around.

Danny continued to play in reserve grade for the Rangers and play games in first grade (NRL) for two years before moving to another Sydney NRL club where he was a regular feature of the first grade team. He enjoyed a long career, later joining a third Sydney NRL club and then moving to the UK to play in a Super League team.

Culture and Community

Danny had very strong connections with his family and his community in Abercrombie that sustained him in Sydney and often spoke of the importance of his mob in his life and of an Aboriginal way of playing and learning to play and the importance of belonging to his mob:

> I've got a real passion for just seeing our mob do better, to see myself do better, to improve, to become better at things, you know what I mean, to sort of push yourself and achieve great things and I think that's a good start. Everyone really got on well and shared that common love for rugby league so everyone down there just … you were treated equally, people loved, you know, our club was you know probably forty, fifty percent Indigenous so you just fitted in really well.

He gained confidence from his connections at home and felt that his mother and father had helped him develop traits such as resilience that allowed him to deal with the challenges that he had to deal with. The regular trips home the Rangers organized for him helped him stay in touch with his mob and his Aboriginal culture. He was also able to play in the annual Koori Rugby League Knockout and play for his mob. The Knockout carnival is one of the biggest Aboriginal gatherings in Australia and was developed to provide opportunities for Aboriginal footballers who had been overlooked due to racism and/or a lack of country-based recruitment. It was a very important event for Danny:

> It has always been that goal at the end of the year. Everyone plays footy all year in different competitions and stuff like that but in the back of your mind you've got that Knockout that you want to win with your mob.

He was also motivated by his desire to give back a little of what he had gained from his community by succeeding in the NRL.

> Having strong connection to your community is something I'm really passionate about and really proud of. All my mob back home are very important to me about whether they're family or they're not family. When I go back it's about trying to inspire them to be better and to do better in their lives.

Danny was sustained during the range of challenges he had to deal with between arriving in Sydney and making the NRL as a regular player by a strong sense of obligation to his community:

> I always felt like that I was doing it for my community in Abercrombie and always representing them and all my family and stuff like that…and had it in the back of my head the difference you could make in the community and that I was doing it for everyone in Abercrombie like there were a lot of great footballers in Abercrombie in the '80s but none of them ever went on to play NRL.

Important People

Danny's father had the biggest influenced on his development into and NRL player through setting an example and involving Danny in serious rugby league from a young age:

> My dad was a coach and he was a player so I'd always been at training sessions and around stuff and always jumped in and even as a really young kid you know I was nine years old, jumping in the training sessions and trying to be involved and all that sort of stuff so …I was sort of like ahead of my time I suppose in the stuff I knew about training and being in teams and I was that crazy about rugby league that it was just a natural transition.

Danny also felt that the personal development and 'character' that his father and mother had helped him develop assisted him in dealing with the range of challenges he faced developing into an NRL player:

> My dad was always tough on me but fair and always you know encouraging and got out there and trained with me and pushed me in a lot of different ways and led the way for me a lot. And then my mum just so strong on education and hard work and just the fact that, you know my mum's always been a person that I've always been scared to let down so it was just, you know, that upbringing come into play because now I'm all by myself, I've got choices to make every day but I still didn't want to let either of them down and I had them in the back of my mind, everything I did so I think that's why I was able to just stay on that track.

All the people that Danny identified as having helped him develop his NRL career pushed him and encouraged him to always do his best but also supported him and cared about him as a person. This included a junior coach in Abercrombie and his wife who he felt were dedicated volunteers who cared about all the boys in the club. He also nominated two men who had been working as volunteers in his Abercrombie junior rugby league club, as '…two great guys that would bend over backwards for all the young Indigenous kids up there and help out and do whatever they can to make footy a fun thing for young kids like me'. He also named Andy Brown who had come to his home in Abercrombie to encourage him to join the Rangers at 17, looked after him for the first few months in Sydney and encouraged him not to give up when he was cut from the Rangers.

Summary

Danny grew up in a tight knit and supportive community and family where he learned to play footy through the same informal games identified by all participants in this book, but he emphasized the role of Aboriginal culture and ways of playing and learning that distinguish it from non-Indigenous approaches. He identified the need for Aboriginal players to be intellectually engaged in training and for it to have a strong social element including verbal and non-verbal interaction to make it fun:

> We just love being out there. We grew up being on a park or playing in the backyard, just constantly for hours and hours so going to training and doing training for hours and hours on end sort of doesn't worry us too much, our bodies and our make-up sort of.

This contrasts with the dullness of mindless repetition such as in fitness drills that, from the participants' perspectives, characterize non-Indigenous training with Danny suggesting that, 'Aboriginal people get bored with that sort of stuff where, in more stimulating training like games and competitive runs and game simulated fitness drills our boys shine, they work harder than all the other guys.' There is a substantial body of literature on game based approaches to coaching sport and teaching physical education across a range of cultural settings that suggest that extended repetition of 'skill drill' is not only boring and de-motivating for Indigenous Australians. They lie in stark contrast to the intellectual engagement and social interaction typically involved in game based, athlete-centred approaches to coaching such as Game Sense (Light 2013; Evans 2012) that seem to be very similar to the practices through which the participants in this study learnt to play footy. For Danny this began from an early age where games had to have an expressive element and be fun for anyone to play them:

> You don't last long playing footy in the backyard if you're out there just to bash and hit the ball up and not do anything, you know, expressive. If you're not playing to have fun and try things and risk-take and do all that you know the game in the backyard only lasts a couple of minutes 'cause everyone gets bored so you got to play so that kids can stay and play.

Changing from an Aboriginal approach to training and playing at age 17 to far more structured approach was made more difficult by moving to Australia' biggest city from his community and family and having to complete year 12. Here, important people who acted in a mentor type role such as Aboriginal legend, Andy Brown, and to a lesser extent, his flat mate, Pete, helped him make the transition. Andy also helped him

deal with being cut which was a critical incident for Danny. His positive response and commitment to succeeding here was also facilitated by his strong family and community connections and the self-belief he felt his father and mother had helped him develop.

References

Evans, J. R. (2012) 'Elite rugby union coaches' interpretation and use of Game Sense in New Zealand', *Asian Journal of Exercise and Sport Science*, 9(1): 85–97.
Light, R. L. (2013) *Game Sense: Pedagogy for performance, participation and enjoyment*. London and New York: Routledge.

9 Ryan: 'Having Good Relationships with People Who Believe in You and Believe in Your Ability'

Ryan grew up in North Queensland where he played a range of different sports with relatives and friends from early childhood that included rugby league and variations of it. His memories of playing sport as a child were of playing 'knock up' inventive games played in the backyard with cousins and uncles as an important social practice of the local community:

> My earlier days of playing sport would have been in the backyard with my cousins and my uncles, looking up to them and experiencing holidays where we play sport every day, whether it Easter or Christmas, we'd all get together and throw the football around or play cricket. We loved sport and sport was pretty much a part of our culture. Pretty much going to parties, going to barbeques, cousins, uncles and it would be always sport.

Ryan believed that these early experiences were pivotal for his development of skill and understanding that formed the foundations for the expertise that took him to the National Rugby League (NRL):

> When I was young I could catch, I could pass, could kick, could step and that all came naturally to me. And the fact that we were doing that every day, with your cousins, with your friends, it just made you work on that skill and you're really hone in to that skill and it kind of just sets off.

He led a very active life in which sport formed an important practice but which also included a range of physical activities. This active life of movement and social interaction was the context within which he engaged in rugby league and learned his skills and understandings of it:

> We'd always be exercising, whether it was riding our bikes to the local creek or whatever, swinging on trees, jumping out of trees, doing bombs. We used our bodies. We didn't sit down and sit in front of the TV.

This active way of life and love of sport continued upon entry into school where it was encouraged by being with so many children of the same age and the spaces and times available to play and learn. For Ryan this was a highlight of his memories of school and was an important practice at school:

> As soon as we'd get to school we'd always play games. We'd always play football. We'd love to get into school early because we knew that we'd play football with all our mates. We were always running and always being active, which is quite different to today, but, yeah…that's how we learnt.

His first experiences of playing organized footy were his introduction to rugby union at the local rugby park. He was curious about the sport and asked his father about it because he had some friends who were playing rugby union so his father took him to the local rugby club to play junior rugby from the age of six or seven. He enjoyed playing rugby in a club setting saying that, 'it was great, loved it, loved running around.' Despite his enjoyment of playing junior rugby, his cousins and uncles played rugby league and he wanted to follow them. He played rugby league at his primary school and in year 6 (11–12 years) he was selected in the school team.

> So then it was rugby union, it wasn't that big in (his hometown) and a lot of my … lot of cousins and uncles, they all played rugby league, so naturally I just wanted to follow in their footsteps.

The following year in grade seven (secondary school) he was selected in the Queensland under 12 Schoolboys' team, which was a big step up from the level of competition he had been used to. The Queensland team he was in travelled to play interstate games in Sydney, the ACT, the Northern Territory and West Australia, which exposed him to the world of rugby league in Australia and encouraged him to think of a career in professional rugby league.

Ryan felt that over years eight and nine at secondary school, he had not played as well as he could because he had not put in the effort required to take advantage of his ability as a player. He felt that, 'My attitude wasn't probably right, I didn't care, but being a natural teenager you just like, it's just hanging out with your mates, which was good enough for me.' At this time, he began to think about his future and how rugby league might figure in it. He was sure he had the ability to do well but knew he needed to work much harder on his footy to step up and realize his dream of making the NRL that he recognized was shared by so many young Indigenous boys: 'It was always a dream of mine, but it's everyone's dream, you know, every indigenous kid always dreams about playing in the NRL.' In year 10, at the age of 15 and disappointed at not making the under 15 Queensland Schoolboys team, he thought critically about his footy and decided to take it more seriously. He decided to work harder and do the best he could to develop as a footy player.

Ryan's development as a footy player was boosted by the offer of a scholarship for year 11 and 12 at an elite-level private school in the area that had an outstanding record of success in schoolboy rugby league. With high quality coaches, excellent facilities and great pride in the school's result in rugby league Emanuel College (pseudonym) provided Danny with an ideal environment for 'getting serious' about his footy and seeing how good he could be:

> In Year 11 and 12 I started to look at ways on how to become better and those ways were to train more and to become more disciplined and to really think about what I was eating, what I was drinking, what I was putting into my body.

He excelled at the new school and in year 11 he was selected in the Queensland under 17 Schoolboys team and the Australian Schoolboys team as well as making a very significant contribution to his school winning the national under 18 cup. At seventeen Ryan had an outstanding year that set him up to play in the NRL:

> Year 12 – I excelled. Played Queensland Schoolboys, played Australian Schoolboys and then had clubs wanting me to sign up to them. So there was about four clubs that wanted me to sign up and one of them was the Coburg Cougars (pseudonym). Ever since I was seven years old, I followed the Cougars. So they flew me and my dad down to Coburg and we checked it out, checked out the facilities, spoke to the coach, training staff and that and just signed up.

Footy in Sydney

At 17 years of age Ryan moved to Sydney to join the Coburg Cougars NRL club. He responded to the professional atmosphere and the culture of the club with enthusiasm. This was further boosted by the relationships built with other young recruits that he spent his time with and by seeing tangible improvement in his performance at training:

> So I thought well, I'll train and I'll see where it takes me. And the fact that I was hanging around the right people. I had the right mates that also wanted to train, so we'd go down to the local gym, most of all we just mucked around, but we ended up getting a little bit stronger and then we'd go out on the footy park and you'd see that strength and we started dominating.

Training with the club he had followed all his life, soaking up the feel of an NRL club and the path he could see to first grade excited him. His enthusiasm for training enhanced his individual talents and attracted the attention of the first grade coach which led to him being elevated to first grade the following year as an 18-year-old:

The coach at the time, he must have saw some ability and he just said … asked me to come in every morning … 'obviously you're not going to be in the full-time squad, but whilst you haven't got a job, you can come in and train with us'. So I learnt very quickly what it takes to get there… I was only 17 but the following year was my first year of first grade.

Ryan was a confident young man and excited about making first grade so soon but was anxious about playing at that level against 'fully grown men'. This was the first time he had ever played against men and at a level of rugby league far above anything he had previously played at. He soon suffered a dislocated shoulder. This injury at the start of his first grade career meant he had to have surgery to reconstruct his shoulder and after it had healed, play in the Cougars' under-19 team:

For me it was a big thing playing against actually men, 'cause that was my first time to actually play against men. So that started out, but then my body wasn't strong enough, I dislocated my shoulder twice, so I had to get a reconstruction, kind of, set me back.

After dropping back to playing in the under 19s he played consistently well with the team winning the national under 19 rugby league competition. His success in the under 19s was noticed and he was told that he was the next player in line to be elevated from the under 19s to first grade but, again, he dislocated his shoulder.

We went all the way and we won the (national under 19 competition) cup and then it was all kind of happening because I got … I was like the next player that's going to move into first grade, that's how they saw it but the following year, it didn't eventuate that way because I dislocated my other shoulder twice… I was 18, I played five first grade games, but I just wasn't ready mentally, physically, it felt like there was a long way to go.

After all this disappointment he lost his drive and started to party. He told himself that his ability would get him through but was shocked to hear that he was going to be to cut from reserve grade. His response was to put his head down and work hard. He thought about all his friends

from his hometown that had low paying, low status and uninteresting jobs and how rugby league was his only way of avoiding being in the same position:

> I remember going back to (his hometown) and seeing the people that I used to grow up with and looking at what they were doing and it wasn't … I was thinking to myself, well, if I come back, I'm going to be doing what they're doing and there wasn't much behind that. So I thought to myself and it just really hit me. The penny just dropped and I've gone, well, if I don't give this a fair crack and do something about my life then I'm going to be in their position.

Critical reflection upon what opportunity he had in front of him for a satisfying and exciting life in the NRL and upon his attitude and behaviour jolted him and put him back on track to establishing himself as a regular a first grade player:

> I was in the reserve grade team, but my attitude wasn't really that good and the coaching staff and the CEO saw it and they were thinking about getting rid of me and thinking about letting me go, and lucky enough I just kind of … just, I put my head down and kept going at it and got another chance and just after that cemented that spot.

Three years after his debut for the Cougars Ryan established himself as a regular first grade player and soon became a crowd favourite due to his exciting style of play and his ability to score tries. He played for the Cougars for a decade and then moved to a second Sydney NRL club in a career that included playing state of origin and winning a premiership.

Important People

For Ryan his people, his family, community and his country provided the foundations of him as a person that enabled him to succeed in rugby league. As a young boy he remembered watching his relatives play and listening to them talk about footy and the enthusiasm for it by his female relatives:

> I watched my uncles… four uncles (play footy). My mum was one of ten (children) and they were very big on rugby league… my nana, who looked after ten kids and saw rugby league as … rugby league to her was her passion and she made sure all her boys played. So we all, at first played for the same club, the uncles played for the same club and, even my dad played for it. So … it was our culture to play for this club and my nana was kind of like the head of the family and we all did what she said and she loved the game, so we wanted to make her proud.

While growing up in north Queensland and learning to play footy, the support he felt from his family and community, and the security it provided, helped him to develop his skills and understandings of footy. His experiences of growing up in this environment developed his confidence in his ability to succeed and helped him to deal with adversity at the Cougars to avoid being cut and not only establish himself as a regular in first grade but to also develop as an outstanding player. This and his strong identity with his country and people prevented him feeling alone or vulnerable:

> Mum and dad and all the cousins and that and they were all always supportive, we all stuck together, whether it was family gatherings, barbeques, Christmas, Easters, doing things together, was a big thing. And being (his people) having that belonging is a big thing for indigenous people. We all stuck together, so and on top of that I had good friends who still remain to be my mates today. It's just having those good relationships with people who believe in you and believe in your ability.

Within this supportive and comforting environment his relationship with his father made the strongest contribution towards his development into an NRL player:

> It was good hanging out with dad and we had a good bond where we'd go every … I think it was every Saturday morning and hang out together… they'd give out a man of match prizes and sometimes I'd win that and so me and my dad … that would be like a voucher to one of the nearest service stations where we'd go down and have a hamburger and milkshake, so it was pretty good times hanging out with your dad.

Summary

Ryan grew up in North Queensland learning to play rugby league through informal games and activities where he realized some special ability he had for rugby league that he developed as he grew up. His talent and ability was evident in his achievements from his mid-teens when he applied himself to develop his talent, being asked to join the NRL club that he had followed from childhood. The ways in which his early development arose from playing a range of creative and dynamic games and being constantly active certainly formed a valuable basis from which he developed his expertise but the social and cultural dimensions of these activities and their place in his community seem to have been equally as important. His ability as a player earned him an invitation to join an NRL club at 17 and a debut in first grade at 18 but it seems to have exposed him to a level of physical demands that were too much for him. His ongoing problems with shoulder injury was frustrating for him, slowed his progress and led to him dropping his commitment to a point where he was about to be cut and sent home. These are big challenges for a boy in his late teens who is 1500 km from home and family but Ryan had what it takes to be critically reflective, change his attitude and behaviour and do what had to be done to succeed.

Although the physical demands of playing first grade at the Cougars seemed to be too much for his young body as a teenager, his response suggests 'mental strength' and self-belief ahead of his years and which seems to have come from the strength of his connections with his community, family, people and country. This gave him a strong sense of identity as an individual and of belonging and being part of an important collective. Research on the development of expertise in sport generally suggests that elite-level sports people tend to have grown up in smaller communities and learned primarily through 'deliberate play' (Côté and Frazer-Thomas 2008) but in Ryan's case, and that of others in this study, Aboriginal culture played a significant part in this learning. It seems to have played a vital role in preparing him to face the challenges he did in making it as an outstanding NRL player, which is something he strongly believed. The group orientation of Aboriginal culture that many

participants in this study refer to also seems to have been at play with Ryan from the day he arrived at the Cougars with his focus on and commitment to the team:

> It helped identify me, being part of something where all your effort goes into physically and mentally, it's hard to explain to someone that's never been in that environment because every single day, every single emotion, every single thing that you're doing is for the team and when you're … when you get success it's like, wow, you can celebrate every single moment you just had with those boys and being a part of that.

Reference

Côté, J., and Frazer-Thomas, J. (2008) 'Play, practice, and athlete development', in D. Farrow, J. Baker, and C. MacMahon (Eds.) *Developing sport expertise* (pp. 17–28). London: Routledge.

10 Bernie: 'I Knew What I Wanted and I Was Willing to Do Anything to Get It'

Bernie grew up in a large Indigenous community in Sydney where he played games of modified rugby league from as young as he could remember, after which he progressed to playing organized footy in two local, junior rugby league clubs. He loved sport in general and rugby league in particular, with his talent in, and commitment to, it earning him a place in a specialist sports high school (secondary) in his local area. He grew up in a socio-cultural environment that he described as being a 'big rugby league community' in which all sport was valued with rugby league being the dominant practice. Within this environment, where his father played rugby league, sport was his life and his focus was rugby league:

> We all played sport' cause my family were really orientated with sports so as a young kid it was just engrained in me that that's what we did. We played sport. We didn't have much technology or other things to do so I was all I did was play football, cricket, soccer, you know, whatever sort of ball we could get our hand on. And my dad was a rugby league player so I wanted to be like him.

Within this community day-to-day conversation was typically about rugby league and was the constant focus of interaction within his family. His father being a rugby league player in the local area had a powerful influence on Bernie and exposed him to life as a league player from the age of four to five years of age as a type of legitimate peripheral participation in the practices of his community:

> Every weekend I went and watched my dad play football and travelled with him to go to knockouts, and that's all anyone ever spoke about when they come to my house. I think that's why … that's all I wanted to do in my life was be a rugby league player.

His own physical participation in league began in backyard games from which he learned his skills, decision-making, tactical understanding and an Aboriginal approach to play. He also felt they made him 'tough' due to playing with local boys much older than him:

> Them backyard games and stuff, they toughened you up. Like, you'd be seven years old and there'd be kids in other teams, 12, 13 years old, and you learn how to cop a hit, you learn that if you did something wrong you might get into a fight. But them backyard games, just mucking around having fun, that built your skill set.

Bernie suggested that the skills, understandings and a feel for footy he developed through playing backyard games greatly assisted him once he had joined his local club at the age of six to play in an organized competition:

> Every time I went and played in the backyard, I was always playing footy. If I went to school, we were playing footy. I was learning to pass. It just becomes like a second instinct, and then once I did progress and start playing in rugby league, things just started to happen for me that I've packaged my whole life, 'cause I've been doing this since I was six years old.

Bernie emphasized how the roots of his ability and approach to play that enabled him to make the National Rugby League (NRL) were to be found in his early experiences of backyard games. In doing so he sug-

gested that this is broadly the case for all Indigenous sports people as an explanation for their distinctive ways of playing rugby league and other team sports characterized by intuition, an amazing 'sense' of the game, anticipation and communication:

> …I'd done it in the street my whole life, so them small things you learn good habits from the start, and you learn to express your skill. You start to see things happen before they even happen, and you see so many Indigenous people with that same sort of skill set, that they see things happen before they happen because they've seen it happen before, and also too, playing against these kids with high skill at high speed, high agility, you've got to adapt to that as well and it makes you a better player. You know, it's not like you've got to think about it, it just becomes second nature to you.

By the time Bernie entered secondary school he was immersed in rugby league and playing rugby union as well. He played rugby union on Saturday, rugby league on Sunday for his (community based) club and for his sports school of Friday where he described training as being 'pretty hard' while also playing touch football at school everyday during lunchtime. He played in representative rugby league teams from the age of 13–17, which encouraged him to think about the possibility of an NRL career as his ability developed and he regularly tasted success:

> Probably fourteen through to about eighteen I thought I was destined to play rugby league. I went to a sports high school at Year 7 and since that day I think I developed the confidence in playing against the best players at your age and to be able to compete with them.

From Play to Work

At 18 Bernie was selected to play for the local NRL club in the Premier League development programme, which is the level blow the NRL and is used to develop promising players for the NRL. Bernie adapted very quickly and after only two games was selected in first grade (NRL). He brought with him skills and abilities rooted in his early experiences of

playing backyard games and honed in local junior clubs and at school. He did, however, find himself short of the mark in terms of his physical development and challenged to take a more work-like attitude to training to build his muscle mass, strength and improve his fitness:

> My body was nowhere near developed, so especially competing against other guys who were in their fifth and sixth year of the NRL, that was a bit of a shock to me, and it was a really good learning curve 'cause it made me understand exactly what it took to be an NRL player, and I had to work really hard to try and put weight on to get stronger faster, fitter, and it did take me a little bit of time.

The repetition and sustained commitment required for Bernie to build strength and muscle mass as a young man in his late teens took time and contrasted with the ways in which he had developed as a skilful, creative and intuitive player. The field training was different as well. It was far more structured with performance monitored on a daily basis but it was the strength and conditioning element of training that was most foreign to him and most challenging. He recognized that he needed to pack on significant muscle mass and build his strength and power to develop the confidence in contact that came from knowing he was physically ready:

> Once you get to that level physically, then you know mentally when you step onto the field that you can compete against other guys. I think I played my best footy in the centres at 98kg, so that's a 12kg difference (gained). And again, just the repetitions, you know. Having that hardened body so that you can cope week to week.

Bernie applied himself to the strength and conditioning programmes and built up muscle mass, strength and power. Putting on muscle mass and getting stronger in contact situations helped his confidence which allowed him to play more freely and to draw on his talents to play in a more natural way:

> I think just once you got that physical side to the point, I think mentally then there was never an issue mentally because you'd know you've done all the work, you're on the same level. So that's when you can then revert back to your natural ability.

Bernie saw footy in the NRL as work, a career and a business in which players have to make the most of the ways in which they convert their physical capital into economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) due to the short professional careers they have:

> Once you do get into that professional arena, it becomes a business, and it becomes your livelihood. So basically, if you don't perform or you're not up to scratch, then you could obviously lose your spot in the team. The average rugby league (career) span is 15 … 50 games for an average NRL player, so you've got to take the most of the opportunities you're presented.

Bernie had grown up playing rugby league for excitement, a way of expressing himself and his culture and of building and enhancing relationships. In this form rugby league for him can be seen as a form of play that changed in meaning and practice as he approached the NRL into a form of work. Despite him recognizing the change from play to work as professional player and the need to work hard Bernie felt that it was still necessary to have fun in footy to keep motivated:

> Your life changes a bit 'cause everyone wants to give you their opinion of what they want, what they expect of you and how they think you're playing, so it's just a matter of managing it all, but still keeping that fun side of it too, still really enjoying what you're doing, being excited for games, wanting to work harder every week to get better, and just the challenge of it all is the main thing.

Growing up in his community footy was part of life and culture and was always enjoyable but in the NRL it was demanding work his love of the game and the thrills it provided him were still there at this level. For Bernie the biggest challenge he had to face was the need to do his best, day in and day out in a highly competitive environment in which failure or sub standard performance was not tolerated:

> I think it was just the expectation of you know… on yourself that you just had to be *up* everyday. You had to be *on* everyday, and you just had to compete everyday. I think that's just the point where … that's when it becomes the challenge of it. Once you get there, it's a matter of staying there, yeah.

In reflecting upon what was required for him to succeed in the NRL Bernie identified a common theme in this book of not being able to rely only the skills and Aboriginal flair developed from early childhood through experiences and shaped by Aboriginal culture:

> I think the discipline of training and the discipline of staying at it, of overcoming obstacles, of not just relying on your talent and relying on your skill set. I think it's when you get to a point, you've really got to … to be able to compete at a level and if you see the best players in the world, physically they're either fast, they're either strong, they're either fitter than everybody else, and then their skill sets can sort of take over then.

Determination, Willpower and Support

Reflecting upon his experiences of making it to, and playing in, the NRL, Bernie spoke about what he had to do to negotiate the 'hurdles' that confronted him, identifying the need for willpower and a determination not to give up and to keep improving as the key to success.

> I know some things are going to become an obstacle but you've just got to really work on your weaknesses. You've got to continually build this willpower up that you're not going to stop, and then you're just going to continue to just try and improve each day.

He thought that learning to succeed in the NRL taught him lessons for life outside and after an NRL career and this was mostly concerned with the challenges he had to face in making it to the NRL and succeeding as an NRL player:

> Once you do overcome them hurdles, then you know that other stuff in life isn't as difficult because you overcome them sort of things in the rugby league sort of side of things. If you teach yourself good habits with rugby league in regards to discipline, training hard, working hard, and then you take them into real life where you do get a job, you're up early, you need to be disciplined, you need to be working hard, you know.

Bernie felt that his connections with his family and community were central to his being able to negotiate the hurdles that stood in between him and success as a NRL player. He had remained in his local area up until the end of his five years at his first NRL club and in contact with his family and community, which he felt had kept him grounded and gave him the confidence to deal with what was in front of him:

> I think just on the mental side of things to … first of all, to keep you grounded. You know, you do go into this world of where you're on TV and people are seeing you and there's this big expectation, and also just to the point where they keep you confident during tough times and adversity.

Bernie drew on his family and community for support and guidance over his journey to and through the NRL with his ability to give back to his community through his success in rugby league also motivating him:

> You go back and see a lot of your family, they're very proud of what you've done, and you can see that it inspires others around them so that it can create positive change in a community or in some individual's lives, and that's probably the biggest part of our rugby league, was my impact on other people, and to try and help and change their lives.

The opportunity of passing on his lessons to young Indigenous people provided Bernie with a sense of purpose and motivation to succeed as a way of giving back to his community:

> (Rugby league) teaches you really good life lessons, and being a role model to these kids, I try to install some of the things that I've learnt over the years to try and empower them to do the same things in their life.

Important People

Bernie's father most influenced his interest as a young boy in rugby league. Bernie respected his strong and honest guidance:

> He was very passionate about rugby league, it's all he spoke about, and it was all we did I think 'cause my father pushed me so hard and was critical, he was probably my biggest supporter and also my biggest critic as well and he was very honest and upfront with me, and if he didn't like something that I did or he didn't see it as the right thing to do, then he'd tell me.

His father also 'made mistakes in his life', that saw him later retreat from Bernie's life. His father's passion for rugby league and his standing in the community drove Bernie's enthusiasm as a young boy and, as Bernie grew up he learned from the mistakes his dad had made in his life:

> A lot of people said, your dad had the ability to play first grade but he never committed himself and he was too worried about partying. I learnt from his mistakes and I was one of them people that whenever we had free time I would go and practise whatever I had to do. Whenever I had an opportunity to do something in regards to rugby league I'd do it. I sacrificed going out and partying and all that sort of stuff at a young age 'cause … I've got a single mother, we didn't have much and I thought my only way for me to become someone or to make money in this life and to live it.

Bernie's grandmother also had an important influence on him as a person to develop the 'character' to stay on track and work hard to succeed in the NRL:

> Well my Nan (grandmother), she was one of the first Indigenous people to get into university and to complete a degree so I really looked up to her and she educated me and taught me what I needed to know. She took me in as sort of like a second sort of mother. She sort of held the family together. She seemed to have everything that I sort of wanted and that I didn't see from other people in my family. So I sort of seen, if you do the right thing then you can get what you want to get and achieve what you want to achieve.

Bernie's best friend's father Mal (pseudonym) and his coach in year 7 at school also positively influenced Bernie:

> Mal used to take us to all the games every weekend. He was my coach at the time for (his first club) and he sort of acted as that sort of digger, and

when I went to (the sports high school) in Year 7, (his Indigenous coach in year seven) was a former NRL player, was our mentor there. He gave me that belief 'cause he'd done it before so he could bounce ideas off him and he could show you where you were going wrong and he could understand where you were coming from too being, 'cause when you look at me now I look like an Indigenous bloke.

Summary

Despite his father's retreat from his life, Bernie had a stable life spent in one area of Sydney up to making the NRL. In this local area he learned through backyard games as a child, then in junior rugby league in clubs and at school as he grew up and spent his first five years in the NRL at the local NRL club. He grew up and developed into an NRL player in the same community and family environment, which provided constant support for him. Even when he made it to the NRL he was able to visit his family and community when he needed to. He was able to keep his connections with his community by mentoring and inspiring young Indigenous players as a way of giving back to it, which assisted him in making the transition from local community based ruby league clubs and a school league to the NRL. He seemed to be able to adapt to different approaches to field training and playing style in the NRL but was challenged by the highly structured and monitored nature of the strength and conditioning programme in his first NRL club. Here he drew on what he had learned from his father when young, his grandmother and his community, as well as from coaches who had helped him, to find the will and determination to adapt and succeed in clearing this hurdle.

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11 Zac: The Road Less Travelled

Zac's story is unusual for a National Rugby League (NRL) player due to the fact that his journey to the NRL began in the Northern Territory, which is a road to the NRL very much less travelled. He grew up in Ingleview (pseudonym), which is a suburb of Darwin where his earliest memories were of playing outside with his friends and a lifestyle that was relaxed and carefree. Before beginning school he played modified games of Australian football with close friends in a small tight knit community where it was, 'it was about having fun I didn't play organized footy until later but it was kinder like just kicking the footy around.' His earliest memories of sport as a young child were of playing informal backyard versions of Australian rules with other children in the community:

> I guess (my) earliest memories are really just playing in the yard kicking the footy. Obviously being up there you grow up AFL so we always had the Sherrin (AFL ball), kicking the footy in the backyard and that type of stuff.

He has fond memories of footy as being a central cultural activity in a friendly and supportive social environment where he was surrounded by family and friends. It was a place where Zac felt connected, comfortable and at ease as an environment that was:

> Pretty relaxed. I guess it's not the biggest place (Ingleview), its pretty spread out but everyone's friendly and I guess it's an easy pace compared to here (Sydney), so cruisey. You pretty much know a lot of people, you always know of someone.

His introduction to sport was through participating in play like versions of Australian football rather than rugby league and in thinking back to those early experiences he remembered the expansive open spaces that he played in. Although the dominant football code in Darwin is Australian football rugby league is also played and at different times of the year to Australian football, which provided Zac with the opportunity to play both codes with his friends on a regular basis:

> Yeah, I just played rugby league and AFL. I loved them both because obviously you have a group of mates that did play both and then some that didn't and it was good interacting and mixing with the both of them. It worked out because over the summer you got the AFL competition and then over the winter you got the rugby league competition.

Entering primary school at five years of age exposed Zac to a range of sports including, volleyball, basketball, rugby league, Australian rules and athletics played in a more formal manner than the 'knock up' games played in his community. However, sport at primary school was more about 'fun and enjoyment' for Zac and the excitement of trying different activities. Even at this early age he was drawn to team sports such as volleyball, basketball, rugby league and Australian rules football rather than individual sports such as athletics. He said he, 'got a better feeling from sport in a team environment'.

Zac's first exposure to organized club sport was at six years of age when he participated in the Auskick programme organized by his local club the Northern Seasprays (pseudonym). Auskick is a highly successful national and international programme designed by the Australian Football League (AFL) to teach the basic skills of Australian football to boys and girls aged between 5 and 12 that is also offered in New Zealand and South Africa. He continued to play Australian football, but increasingly drawn to rugby league, he joined a local rugby league club at the age of seven.

As was the case with all of our 16 participants, Zac's earliest memories of playing sport were of informal backyard versions of Australian football designed to suit whatever the conditions were and managed by the boys playing them. From the age of around six he was gradually exposed to more formal forms of sport participation through primary school and community based clubs, beginning with a focus on Australian football but with growing interest in to rugby league and him joining a junior rugby league club at seven years of age. He continued to play Australian football, informally and formally, but gradually focused more on rugby league. Zac said that rugby league appealed more to him because of the competitive intensity created by the comparative lack of space available and the heavy physical contact that is central to it:

> It's (rugby league) more – I guess it's more of a – it's a battle, head on, whereas I guess you could say AFL's similar but it's more, I guess, everyone's all over the place. It's not bang, bang, going at each other

Specializing in Rugby League

By the time he entered secondary school, rugby league was Zac's game and he was thinking about the possibility of a future in professional rugby league. He continued to play the sports on offer at school but only saw a future in rugby league due to the emergence of his talent for it, support from his family and his understanding of the pathway to the NRL from the Northern Territory. He played at school and in a local club but when asked how he developed his talent he did not identify any particular coach or coaches as having played a significant role. He talked more about the continuing importance of informal learning that he had referred to when discussing his early learning experiences from around the age of three or four. He said that he developed his talent for rugby league through the daily experiences of backyard games that were a central part of his life and which continued through his secondary school years. Through these backyard games he mimicked his NRL idols that he watched on television:

> Yeah, well I guess that's where you learn how to play it. Every day after school we'd have a park up the road and everyone after school would all go down to the park and we'd all play a game. There'd be about 30 kids on one side and 30 kids on the other side and you'd just crash through each other all day. And then yeah I guess re-enacting different things you'd see on television and that type of stuff. So that was probably where you learn it, I guess.

This quote reflects the importance of local gatherings to play footy in his life, his enjoyment of intense competition and the influence of media representations of footy in learning to play rugby league. Zac had a number of players from the NRL Brisbane based Broncos team who he admired and he would often emulate things they did as well as referees in the games he played with his friends:

> Like when I was young I loved a lot of the Bronco's (a Qld team in the NRL) players, Darren Lockyer for one and Tallis and Webcke and those type of fellas. I just – I don't know, I just admired a lot of the Broncos players, Yeah and then obviously emulating the referees and they also – that's like no try and be a ref and that type of stuff.

By the age of 16 Zac's talent for rugby league had emerged and was well developed with him tightly focused on a pathway to the NRL and developing a deep attachment to rugby league. From a DMSP perspective he has entered the investment phase (see Côté and Hay 2002). His selection in Northern Territory representative teams confirmed his ability as a rugby league player for him and others around him and provided him with exposure to the talent scouts that regularly came to the Territory. He and his family had invested all in him achieving his goal of becoming an NRL player but when telling his story of developing over this period he emphasized the importance of having fun and being able to be creative and experiment without the pressure of a competition game or a formal training environment:

> I don't know, I guess because you enjoy it, just the fun of it. It was fun and I guess that's where you get enjoyment out of it, yeah. I guess there's no pressure and you can try different things and I guess you build the skill over – just by being able just to muck around.

He made little reference to the influence of coaches on his development over his developing years until his transition into a professional NRL where he said that he felt his coaches provided him with the 'polish and little technical details needed to improve your game'.

Moving Towards Professionalism

Growing up Zac was only interested in the two sports of rugby league and Australian football, which were the sports that all his friends and relatives played in his local area. At the age of 16 he had decided that he wanted an NRL career—he 'wanted to give it a crack'. With Darwin being predominantly an AFL town he was conscious of being disadvantaged due to a lack of opportunities to attract the attention of NRL clubs. Unlike in Sydney where young players are seen by agents and recruitment managers on a regular basis Zac had to ensure that he was able to attract attention in a geographical location that was largely 'off the radar' for selection. The only way in which he thought he could attract attention to his ability from NRL clubs was through being selected in representative teams but was initially disappointed at not being selected when 14: 'well I missed out on a few odd rep teams like the Northern Territory (under-15s team), trying to make the state team.' Despite early disappointment, one year later this changed:

> I didn't make it when I was younger and then I made the team when I was about 15 and then so when you get picked for the state team you go down and play in the Affiliated States competition to make that. And then yeah went down to play when I was 15 and made the Affiliated States Team so that's like a – I don't know if you know, it's like a combination of Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, Northern Territory.

By the age of 16 Zac was playing in the under-18 competition in Darwin. He and his parents were confident that he had the talent to play in the NRL when he was selected in the Northern territory team to play in Adelaide.

I can remember it clearly. This was the year after I played the under 15s and then – so I was in the open comps – all the open comp. I was 16 and was playing the under 18s. By then I made the team to play for the Northern Territory and we went down to Adelaide and was playing in the first states comp. And I remember I wasn't a really good trainer. I was always – I was a good player over the talent and we had a new coach at the time, David Smith (pseudonym) who was a former (NRL) player and I had a good relationship with him.

Zac then participated in a number of representative teams and in an Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) programme that further moved him towards an NRL career:

Then I think the next year…I was 16 and then the AIS had a program and then they pick from Brisbane and remote New South Wales country, I think, and then they pick a few from the other states as well.
    Then, yeah just did that and then I was also playing some state and then when I was 17… I played for the Northern Territory and then went down to the Affiliated States Comp and made that team. In the under 18s you – they pick that team and then you go and play in the championships against the other teams like CHS and COS and that.

As Zac moved through increasingly higher performance environments he struggled with some of the structured approaches to training and the demands in placed on him, which held up his selection to play until he had an opportunity to play his (Aboriginal) game:

And then I was a bad trainer and then it come to the first game and we were all there waiting to go and I sat on the bench the whole game, didn't get the opportunity and then come the next game I ended up getting a crack off the bench and just ripped in, just obviously played my game. And then it wasn't until after the game afterwards we got back and he goes, I didn't know – because he'd never seen me play before, I didn't know you could play like that. And he goes, because what you show me at training is just, I don't know, you don't really show anything.

It was at this stage of his development that he recognized the importance of his coach who acted as a mentor and changed his attitude and application to training:

And I guess from that day and then onwards he gave me the push to train harder and then I think it was at that stage it clicked for me to

Entering the NRL

After successfully trialling for the Rangers NRL club development squad at 17 Zac moved to Sydney where he completed his secondary schooling at a local high school that was steeped in rugby league culture and history. He moved in with a family who had strong ties to the Rangers NRL club and his new school. The father was a volunteer at the club and was a teacher at his new school. When recounting this part of his journey Zac made it clear how important this 'homely' situation was in providing support assisting him in the transition from life, school and footy in Darwin to living, training and studying in Sydney.

In Sydney Zac spent one year playing in the SG Ball Cup, which is a junior, under-18 competition played in NSW that includes junior representative teams of NRL and NSW Cup clubs that do not field a team in the NRL competition. He then played two years in the under-20s competition before debuting in the NRL as 21-year-old. At the completion of his debut season, he felt that the number of talented players in his position limited his chances of establishing himself there so transferred to another Sydney based NRL team.

I don't know, I just had this feeling that I just had a bit of a – the club was at a bit of a logjam in my position. It was strange because – I don't know, I was just playing and then the opportunity come up, my manager said there's an opportunity if you want – we think we can have a look at it, to come across. Yeah and they had a few injuries and there was the opportunity to come across so I don't know, we talked about it and weighed it up and it seemed like a good option. So then yeah we're going to be come across.

Adapting to Professionalism

Prior to moving to Sydney to take up his NRL contract Zac had made the transformation to being a diligent trainer. From his own admission, he

had not been a good trainer in the past, which he felt had limited his opportunities. When he arrived at the Rangers club to start the season his approach to training had already changed dramatically to become more professional in his application. Zac said that in the NRL 'everything's more into detail', describing how the training environment is geared towards extracting the best possible performance from players as part of a system that is highly organized and structured. When asked about transferring what he had learned growing up to the professional game he said:

> Maybe. I guess you try – you sort of do still try to play as you do as a kid but I mean it gets a bit harder as you get on because everything's so, I guess, structured and you lose a bit of that part, the park footy sort of stuff.

Here he notes the difference between the structure of the NRL and the informal learning through games influenced by Indigenous culture. From early in his NRL career Zac had to moderate his desire to be spontaneous and play his natural game in order to fit in to the NRL team structure. He had to learn to find a balance between the discipline of the professional team structure and his desire to be creative which is something that became more important as he played in increasingly structured teams.

Influential People

Parents

When Zac discussed the main influences on his development into an NRL player he was emphatic in singling out his parents: 'my parents – one hundred percent parents'. When his dreams of making the NRL looked like becoming reality he was initially apprehensive and worried about leaving his family and community but his father showed confidence in his ability to succeed and meet the challenges that would confront him. His father provided the encouragement and direction for his son to go and treat is an important experience in his life: 'my dad was pretty – he was pretty certain on – he said it'd be a good thing to go and

have the experience.' At first his mother was nervous about him leaving home but after being reassured that he would be looked after by the club who had arranged 'house parents and a local family' she was satisfied and very supportive. His father provided encouragement and feedback on his performances during his formative years and was always there at his Australian rules and rugby league games. He said his dad was:

> Always encouraging me – and my dad was always there. He's always be there – come through and I guess in the junior games and halftime he'd always pull me aside, tell me what I'm doing wrong, what I can do better.

His Coach, David Smith

David Smith was one of Zac's coaches who exerted significant influence on his growth as a player part and his journey to the NRL. Recognizing Zac's potential, David connected him with recruitment staff at the Rangers NRL club and facilitated the opportunity to trial with them. Zac valued the relationship he developed with David and saw him as a mentor who helped him make the necessary adjustments to professional approaches to training from Northern Territory representative teams to the NRL:

> I guess giving it to you straight, not beating around the bush and that type of stuff, just like it's giving me a straight answer and that type of stuff. And having that good connection as well is pretty good as well.

Zac kept in contract with David after becoming an NRL player and valued David's ongoing advice as a former NRL player. He said that, 'we talk here and there and that type of stuff'.

Summary

Zac's journey was enabled by his strong family connections, his relationship with one coach and his learning through playing informal, play like games of footy (both codes) from the age of three or four to his mid-

teens. His pathway into the NRL is unusual as he is one of a handful of players to be recruited from Darwin in Northern Territory, a state where the dominant code is Australian football. This allowed him to be a part of organized club rugby league competitions from seven years of age but informal, backyard games were the platform of learning for his development. This environment promoted his creativity and an Aboriginal approach to playing rugby league while helping him emulate the skills and attributes of his role models in the NRL.

As he transitioned into professional rugby league he experienced highly regulated systems designed to achieve the best performance from players and their team that were foreign to him. This presented something of a challenge for him that was helped by the mentoring of his Darwin coach, David. Zac was aware that a key component of his future success was the requirement to train hard and accept the structures that were in place with David's assistance playing an important part in helping him adapt.

References

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Part III Discussion

The stories of the four NRL participants in Part III are very similar to those of their AFL counterparts in Part II but with a few differences. The NRL participants all learned an Aboriginal approach to play through playing informal games from a young age in communities that were shaped by Aboriginal culture. From the ages of 12–14, they also had to transition from local cultures of footy to increasingly structured approaches as they moved towards and into professional rugby league. While the early learning up to around 12 years of age is very similar to the four AFL stories there were some differences in their transition towards and into professional sport.

The distances travelled by the NRL players when moving into the elite, professional level of their sport were typically shorter than for the four AFL participants in Part II and they moved less frequently. The AFL stories tell of multiple moves to develop into an elite footy player from as young as 12 years of age and travelling across thousands of kilometres but the NRL participants living in rural NSW and Queensland only moved once when taking up an offer to join an NRL club in Sydney. In Bernie's case he did not move at all until after playing five years in the NRL. The cultural differences in their transitions from

mostly rural communities to Sydney were also less pronounced than for the AFL cohort. This was largely due to them being generally closer to their communities, being able to return to them regularly and to being able to play in the annual NSW Koori Knockout, which held powerful meaning for them. Owing to the fact that his first NRL club was in his local area where he grew up Bernie was able to maintain his connections with his community and, after making the NRL, give back to his community and feel a strong sense of satisfaction from it. Danny had a similar experience due to his NRL club sending him home to his community regularly to stay in contact and allowing him to play in the NSW Koori Knockout. For both Bernie and Danny this enhanced their ability to draw on community support and learning form their community to meet the challenges of their first years in the NRL. Coming from North Queensland, Ryan was not able to visit his community as frequently but still said he drew on learning from, and connections with, it.

Like the AFL participants, the NRL participants had to deal with the constraints of a professional approach to playing footy and training for it that made it less social, less exciting and more like work but the four NRL players whose stories we tell here found this less of a challenge than the AFL participants and particularly those from the Northern Territory. In part, this may be due to the difference in dynamics between Australian football and rugby league that is tied into their histories.

Rugby league is characterized by heavy contact, intense competition for small amounts of space and, having been developed from rugby union, reflects something of the nineteenth-century British military approach to battle. In rugby league players 'bleed' for metres of ground in attack and defence. As Toby and Zac note, it develops sensitivity to small amounts of space and skill in how to use it. On the other hand, Australian football is a bigger and constantly free flowing game that reflects the diversity of Victoria in the nineteenth century aimed at adopting the virtues of rugby and football (soccer) while abandoning their vices. It is a truly 360-degree game played on fields of any size in which players run between 7 and 15 km a game or more. Its ongoing economic rationalization has reduced some of its freedom and the creativity it encourages but the way it is played by Aboriginals, particularly in central

and northern Australia, retains the freedom and spirit of the original game (Butcher and Judd 2016).

This different nature of the two sports suggests that the adjustments required by the AFL participants might have been more challenging that for the NRL participants due to the different nature of the two games. Certainly the NRL players seemed to have had fewer problems with adjusting to increasing structure as they approached and entered the NRL when compared to the experiences of the AFL players. For example, Bernie noted how he was constrained and controlled in both training and the way he played but said he adjusted to these demands while keeping the fun and excitement of footy:

> …everyone wants to give you their opinion of what they want, what they expect of you and how they think you're playing, so it's just a matter of managing it all, but still keeping thatfun side of it too, still really enjoying what you're doing, being excited for games, wanting to work harder every week to get better…

One area where the NRL players struggled more in adapting to professional sport than the AFL players was in adjusting to the increase in the intensity of contact at that level. There are few sports with as much intense, direct and frequent contact as rugby league, and with so little protection for the players. This aspect of rugby league disadvantaged young Indigenous boys who tended to be of a lighter build, more mobile and be skilled in evasion than the non-Indigenous players. Few had ever been exposed to significant weight training regimes to build up bulk, strength and power when young and even as they approached the NRL. This meant that they were relatively unprepared for the heavy contact of rugby league in the NRL or the grade just below.

In most cases, coming into professional rugby league and playing against what Ryan called 'fully grown men' at the age of 17 as relatively lean and inexperienced young Indigenous boys lead to serious injuries that stalled or threatened their careers and added significantly to the enormous stresses involved in transitioning into the NRL and the communities surrounding them. Injuries early in their career were reasonably common among the eight NRL participants. Ryan suffered a serious

shoulder injury his first year playing in the NRL that required surgery and saw him demoted to the under-19s. When he was about to be promoted back up into first grade he dislocated his shoulder a second time at the age of 18. These problems have since been redressed by state and national governing bodies in rugby league and were far less of a problem for the younger participants such as Zac who is a current NRL player.

The other major difference between the NRL and AFL players was the role that fathers played in their growth into young men and professional footballers. Among the AFL participants' mothers were central to their development into elite footy players and young adults. There was some early positive influence by some of their fathers but from their early teens their fathers seemed absent. This was something we felt we probably should not directly ask about and none of them offered an explanation of why dad was not around or what mistakes he had made. None-the-less, fathers featured more in the stories of the NRL participants and seemed to influence their growth as players and people further into their lives.

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Part IV

What These Stories Tell Us

Introduction to Part IV

In Parts II and III we presented eight participant stories of individual journeys from the first touch of a footy to making the AFL or NRL and the first few years playing at this level. Guided by narrative inquiry methodology, we kept these stories in tact to give the participants voice and to help us understand the nature of their journeys. Although we presented only eight stories, the analysis of the study presented in Part IV (Chaps. 12, 13 and 14) was developed from all 16 stories told to us and written up. Following on from Bruner (1990), we see narrative as a powerful tool for the sharing of knowledge and communicating meaning, which is why we chose to use narrative inquiry as our prime means of data generation. We used the stories told to us, and the subsequent interviews, to provide insights into life experience and the meaning of footy in the participants' lives and to identify the main pedagogical factors contributing to their success as a process of learning and a way of sharing knowledge.

We avoided interfering with each of the participants' stories as we tell them in this book and leave reporting on the analysis until now in Part IV. Here we suggest what we can make of the 16 stories on both an individual and collective basis by outlining and discussing the themes and sub-themes that we arrived at through the combination of narrative inquiry and grounded theory. It reflects our focus on careful listening

encouraged by Indigenous *dadirri* methodology with the intent of understanding and letting the participants and the data speak instead of imposing pre-determined assumptions and forcing the data to fit with pre-determined theory and expected outcomes.

In Part IV we present the two major themes to emerge from the study. In Chap. 12 we focus on the first theme, which was how the culturally situated experiences of learning to play footy laid the foundations of expertise in their sport and promoted a distinctly Aboriginal approach to play. This chapter includes the four sub-themes of (1) learning through informal games and play, (2) playing a range of other sports within a culture that valued sport, (3) the influence of community and Aboriginal culture, and (4) the influence of mothers and other significant people.

Chapter 13 discusses the second major theme, which is how the participants had to adapt these Aboriginal approaches to play and learning had to be adapted to non-Aboriginal and professional ways of training and playing as a process of cultural transition from local Aboriginal culture to what can be seen as the culture of the global sport industry. This chapter includes the sub-themes of (1) the influence of mentors, and (2) drawing on learning from family and community. Chapter 14 draws on the analytic concepts of Bourdieu to locate the detailed individual experiences of the 16 participants within larger social, economic and cultural contexts and consider the influence of tensions between local and global sporting cultures. The book finishes with concluding thoughts about the study's finding and our suggestions about what the implications of our findings are for Indigenous sport and education, knowledge of the development of expertise and for the interaction between local and global cultures of sport.

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12 Laying the Foundations of Expertise

The stories of all 16 participants suggest that the foundations of expertise were established by around the age of 12. This aligns with the sampling phase (5–12 years) in the Development Model for Sport Participation (DMSP) to support research suggesting that interaction between participation in sport and social life facilitates and shapes the development of expertise in sport across different cultural contexts (see, Berry et al. 2008; Côté et al. 2005) This study offers detailed examples and accounts of how this occurred for Indigenous athletes and how it was profoundly shaped by culture. Their stories collectively suggest the ways in which sociocultural environments where Aboriginal culture formed a highly significant influence generated distinctly Aboriginal ways of playing rugby league and Australian football (see, Stronach et al. 2016; Hallinan and Judd 2007) that Danny (National Rugby League [NRL]) describes as 'playing with flair'.

The four subthemes generated from the grounded theory process as most contributing to developing the foundations of expertise in their sport are presented here in order of importance as:

(1) Learning through informal games and play
(2) Playing a range of other sports within a culture that valued sport
(3) The influence of community and Aboriginal culture
(4) The influence of mothers and other significant people

Learning Through Games

Research conducted on the development of expertise that accounts for the influence of context suggests that 'deliberate play' during the sampling phase (5–12 years) makes a significant contribution to the development of sporting expertise in later life (see, Berry et al. 2008). For all 16 participants their experiences of playing informal games and play-like activities were central to their development of expertise from their first touches of a football as young boys (Australian football or rugby league).

Sport was a dominant practice in the participants' communities that was full of meaning and central to their lives from childhood. Danny (NRL) described rugby league as a religion for Aboriginal people, saying that, 'we were born with footballs in our hands' with Alvin (Australian Football League [AFL]) describing footy as a religion and suggesting that it was, our life' in his community when he was growing up. Most of the participants talked about playing a range of sports which were most commonly cricket, basketball, rugby union and football prior to focusing on footy and of always being active and having some sort of a ball in hand. Desmond (NRL) was always, 'on a park or playing in the backyard, just constantly for hours and hours'. They learned from older brothers, fathers (when young) and in some cases, uncles. A few also learned from coaches of teams they played in at school as they approached 12 years of age but it was participation in informal games that most learning emerged from. From five years of age and younger these games formed important activities though which important social and cultural learning took place and through which they developed the skill, game sense, anticipation, communication and free flowing Aboriginal style of play.

When telling us their stories many of the participants emphasized the central importance of modified games and play-like activities for their development of skill, decision-making, awareness, tactical understanding

and an Aboriginal approach to play. Carl (AFL) believed that he developed his expertise in Australian football by watching good players and by playing backyard games with friends and relatives. He suggested that the knowledge developed through experiences of playing backyard games was enacted without any conscious or rational thinking:

> That's where you learn that sort of backyard skills and it just becomes natural. It just all happens and you don't think about it because you're playing with your mates, playing with cousins, you're just enjoying it and it's not really structured.

Within the culturally shaped games they played in their communities the participants interacted with older boys such as their older brothers from whom they learned by playing with them, watching them play and imitating them. This is a feature of apprenticeship learning (Sheets-Johnston 2000) as one explanation of how they learned to play footy. While some noted how these experiences toughened them up most suggested a range of important learning that emerged from playing with and watching older brothers as Barry (AFL) explained:

> So you'd learn from some of the older boys there, some of the skills that they had, you just sort of mimicked them I suppose and that's how you learned and I think that was mainly how it was done, but with two older brothers that sort of helped.

Learning to Play with Flair

The physical and socio-cultural environments within which the participants grew up promoted the ingenuity, creativity and remarkable sense of the game that are commonly regarded as markers of Aboriginal ways of playing Australian football and rugby league. Influenced by the place and the meaning of sport in Aboriginal culture, adapting to the physical conditions they played in, and finding solutions to the challenges of limited resources, the participants played creative and highly interactive games that reflected an Aboriginal approach, shaped by the place of sport in Aboriginal culture and as a form of cultural expression (see, Butcher and Judd 2016).

Most of the participants grew up in 'humble' conditions with little technology or anything else to distract them from sport, which was the prime vehicle for interaction and learning culture (Evans and Light 2016). Many grew up in remote communities that, for a number of the AFL players, were in the Northern Territory where they had few, if any, facilities and sometimes did not even have a ball. This required developing solutions that both reflected and promoted creativity and which ranged from playing modified games of Australian football in squash, basketball and netball courts to playing with a plastic coke bottle in the absence of a football, as Alvin explains:

> …there was always these special little ways to make it (the coke bottle) a lot more harder so it's better to kick but we just had to be aware, I guess, of hitting the wrong tip of the bottle but we kicked toilet rolls, stubby coasters in the house, put goals everywhere in the yards and that's just how it was.

All the participants recounted playing games modified to suit the particular conditions, or resources available such as how many were available to play and what space they had to play in. Reginald's (NRL) description of learning through creative play captures the ways in which the typically creative ways in which the participants drew on whatever resources were at hand to enable engaging games but not always clearly linked to rugby league or Australian football:

> …like all our cousins would come together and whether it was a ball or a stick or anything we could get our hands on, if there was a game you could make out of it, we'd look at making a game out of it. So whether it was throwing this or who could make the stick hit the tree or take bark off the tree or hit the hornet's nest or hit the bee's nest or who could stand as closer to the bee's nest and not get stung, sometimes it was quite dangerous, but we learned from our mistakes.

In reflecting upon their experiences of learning to play footy as children the participants made limited reference to being *taught* by anyone how to play beyond getting some tips from the older boys and brothers they played with. The influence of parents and other adults such as aunties and

uncles on their development was very strong but not as 'parent coaches' (Light 2016). Instead, they provided support and promoted the development of 'character', positive personal traits such as resilience, self-control and respect for others and the values of Aboriginal culture.

The informal games played and managed by the participants as children provided fertile ground for the emergence of the creativity, intuition, anticipation, game sense and flow that Aboriginal players are renown for in Australian football and rugby league. Detailed accounts of using coke bottles as replacements for balls and playing modified footy on a squash court or basketball court suggest the development of creative and collective solutions to problems, restrictions or what is termed as environmental or ecological constraints from a constraints-led perspective on the development of expertise (Araújo et al. 2010). From this theoretical perspective, 'aversive' environmental constraints such as those identified in this chapter exert a powerful yet implicit influence on the development of expertise in particular sports such as Brazilian football (Araújo et al. 2010). From a social constructivist perspective, these constraints present problems that are collectively solved through interaction and drawing on existing knowledge that is shaped by dispositions developed over time.

Playing Other Sports

Two decades ago studies on children's participation in sport suggested the importance of playing a range of different sports, not just for enjoyment and what Dewey (1911) refers to as human development, but also for the development of expertise (see, Côté et al. 2005). Subsequent studies confirmed how playing more than just the one sport is not only more fun but also how it makes a better contribution towards developing expertise than exclusively playing one sport (see, Baker et al. 2003b; Côté and Hay 2002). Although some of the participants focused on footy from a very early age they all grew up in environments within which they played a range of sports, as Malcolm (AFL) makes quite clear:

…it wasn't just football, it was everything, so cricket, backyard basketball. We had a post up and we'd shoot hoops. But a lot … I guess my earliest memory is just a mob of people in the backyard, whether it was a barbeque party or whatever it was, there was always a lot of people throwing or kicking a footy.

They all led very active lives as children with most of their free time spent playing some kind of sport or competitive games. As a child Malcolm (AFL) always had some sort of ball in his hands to play with and even just walking to school:

There wasn't a day that I don't think I touched the footy or a ball. So we'd play sport all the time. The cricket was on in summer. You'd watch the West Indies come and play… I would be out the back playing cricket.

For those who lived in communities significantly shaped by Aboriginal culture and the place sport held in them it was the focus of social gatherings for them and not just footy as Austin (NRL) explains:

…it would be always sport, whether it was the game we used to play, fly, or we'd play other games, ball games, soccer, cricket, cricket was a big thing. We'd always have two teams and cricket would go all day, just in the backyard…and we'd play cricket morning 'til sunset and, yeah, a lot of it was around sport.

The AFL participants who grew up in the Northern Territory also tended to play rugby league in the off season for fitness and to play competitive sport in the off season.

Perceived Benefits

Most of the participants made reference to the importance of playing a variety of sports when young for their development of expertise in footy (both codes). In many cases they specifically identified what they thought they had learned from playing a range of sports as children and

how it contributed to their development into AFL and NRL players. For example, Barry moved interstate to rural Victoria at ten years of age, having not previously played footy but felt that his extensive experience of playing football (soccer) helped him learn to learn to play footy quickly. Carl felt that he was able to transfer what he had learned through his commitment basketball as his other sport made to footy and that it made a significant contribution towards his development into an AFL player:

> Playing basketball at school, playing just at club level, had a massive influence to actually working out angles (in footy), to be able to bounce the ball and look up and do three things at once. You've got to bounce the ball. You've got to look at where your teammates are so it actually made you multitask altogether.

The overlap between basketball and Australian football for Barry was evident in the game of 'court footy' he played with friends and relatives on a basketball court. For several AFL participants, such as Mick, their involvement in basketball was strong enough to make them have to make a difficult decision about whether or not they would commit to footy or basketball in their mid to late teens.

Austin (NRL) felt that playing a range of sports that included Australian football when young helped him develop the skills and knowledge that enabled him to make the NRL:

> I think growing up and playing a lot of sport, I think it helped develop my hand/eye coordination and my probably aerobic capacity. In high school I wasn't physically as strong as everybody else, but I knew I had the skills, you know, the skills to play the game, so the things I was doing without even knowing were helping me become an NRL football player.

As a child Toby (AFL) first played informal games of rugby league in Sydney but when he and his mum moved to the country he began playing Australian football. On reflection, he suggested that his experience of playing modified games of rugby league as a child taught him valuable lessons about using space in Australian football:

There are so many more restrictions on the way you play (rugby league) and even though it's informal is such a restrictive game that to be really good at it you actually have to think. When you don't have much space you learn how to use it. I think just mucking around trying all these different things actually helped me because when I came into the AFL you instantly see like a little loophole and space a little better. At the start I had to think about it but then it just became so I learned that it just happened, like yeah I got space. It's so hard to explain, it's like the intrinsic stuff that you can't coach.

The game based approach (GBA) to coaching focuses on locating learning within modified games for team sports for player motivation and for holistic learning that is transferable to competition matches because of how it involves awareness, decision-making and tactical understanding (see, Bunker and Thorpe 1982; Light 2013). Teaching Games for understanding (TGfU) and Game Sense recognize that although there is little transfer of skill or technique across different team sports, tactical knowledge is transferable across different sports within the same game category. Both Australian football and rugby league are in the invasion games category as are basketball, soccer and rugby union, which suggests that tactical learning, the development of awareness and decision-making in footy were likely enhanced though playing other team sports.

Community and Culture

Research on sport participation and the development of sport expertise suggests the importance of early childhood experiences of sport (see, Kirk 2005) and of early and regular exposure to sport as a base for development as elite-level athletes (Baker et al. 2003a). It also suggests that individual development into expert athletes varies according to the opportunities available to learn as children and the nature of the psychological environment, both of which are relevant to this study.

All sixteen participants grew up in socio-cultural settings within which they were immersed in their sport from an early age and this was particularly the case for those who had learnt to play footy in the Northern

Territory and remote regional locations in New South Wales due to the small size of the communities and the strong influence of Aboriginal culture. With his father and uncles all playing footy Alvin (AFL) said that, 'as a kid growing up I always wanted to play footy, I loved it, never thought about anything else.' In this setting and those the others grew up in, there were very few choices to be made about whether or not to play sport and what sport to play as children.

The AFL and NRL participants who had grown up in the suburbs of Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney, and in Victorian, NSW and Queensland rural cities and towns were also deeply immersed in cultures that valued sport generally and in which footy was dominant. They had been introduced to it informally at a very young age but in environments that were different to those in which the participants from the Territory had learnt to play. Some of these communities were strongly influenced by Aboriginal culture such as Danny's (NRL) hometown in rural NSW and Ryan's (NRL) community in Sydney but Carl (AFL) and Toby (AFL) grew up having little contact with other Aboriginal boys yet were influenced by Aboriginal culture. Carl joined the Australian football club his father had been playing in for over 15 years, growing up immersed in footy culture strongly influenced by Aboriginal approaches to training and playing. He was also constantly involved in interaction with his family and relatives related to footy as the most common focus of conversation. Toby had very little interaction with Aboriginal people in Sydney and had never met his Aboriginal father. He had, however, always felt comfortable in the company of Indigenous people and being identified as an Indigenous Australian. His move to the country and into playing Australian football exposed him to more Indigenous people and to Indigenous ways of playing that he quickly connected with.

Early immersion in the culture of footy as young boys, involvement in daily discussions about footy and in informal games and activities provided the participants with what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as legitimate peripheral participation in a community built around the practices of footy. For most of the participants these communities were predominantly Indigenous but all of them grew up in communities within which footy was the dominant cultural practice. In these contexts there was typically no conscious decision made by them to play footy

because it was common sense as Austin (NRL) confirms by saying that he played different sports, 'cause my family were really orientated with sports so as a young kid it was just engrained in me that that's what we did'.

In his recollection of growing up playing sport as a cultural practice, Danny (NRL) articulated the cultural significance of sport for Aboriginal people and the place it holds in their culture:

> It's part of our culture to do things as a group, to enjoy each other's company and all that sort of stuff… Indigenous people play football the way they do and enjoy training the way they do. It takes them back to those cultural ways that our people have, you know, and I think competitive games and stuff like that…we just love being out there.

Most participants also felt that the values and character they learned from their families and communities prepared them to face the significant challenges involved in making it to the AFL and NRL and in adapting to such markedly different environments. This was evident with some of the AFL participants such as Mike who struggled once in the AFL with separation for his people and community. It is equally evident in how Danny (NRL) dealt with ongoing injuries at his NRL club by drawing on what he felt he had learned from his community that was significantly helped by his club sending him home for regular visits.

Studies on non-Indigenous communities suggest that motivation among children and young people to commit to a sport is shaped by positive experiences such as good relationships with coaches, encouragement from older siblings, early success, excitement and enjoyment (see, Côté 1999; Light 2016). Apart from the general absence of formal coaching from adults for the participants as children these factors are all evident in this study and were enhanced by the nature of the communities the participants grew up in. A body of work on how birthplace influences the development of sport expertise (see, Wattie et al. 2015) that has extended to investigating the influence of experience of elite athletes' development of expertise in their first club (see, Cobley et al. 2014) has significant relevance for this study.

The findings from research on birthplace helps explain some of the ways in which cultural context enhanced the participants' development into elite-level players with Côté et al. (2003) suggesting that smaller cities and communities enhance the development of expertise in sport because:

1. Learning in less structured settings such as learning through informal games as opposed to adult controlled and regulated practice.
2. They provide more variety in player size and ability in small communities where children gather from the local area to play together independent of age and ability.
3. Expertise is enhanced though opportunities to play with older siblings and adults.
4. They provide more opportunity to experiment with different sports in different settings as is typical of sport in rural areas with some evidence that rural athletes are over-represented in elite, professional sport (see also, Carlson 1988)

The Influence of Aboriginal Culture on Learning

The participants learnt to play footy as part of social life in their communities and cultures with support from relatives and other members of the community they trusted. This provides a good example of how 'people develop as participants in cultural communities' and how 'Their development can be understood only in light of the cultural circumstances of their communities' (Rogoff 2003, p. 3). All the participants learned to play footy through games that they designed to suit their needs and the resources at hand. They modified footy games to squeeze them into a basketball court or a concrete squash court. They made up simple game-like activities to develop skills in pairs or on their own. When short of a ball they used an empty plastic drink bottle and developed special techniques for kicking it with bare feet by drawing on their creative resources and growing, practical knowledge enacted in games. In all these

modified games the emphasis was not only on developing a challenging contest but also on having fun, on cultural expression (Butcher and Judd 2016) and, as Danny (NRL) suggests, doing 'things as a group, to enjoy each other's company'.

Until joining formal clubs later in the sampling phase for some, and during the specialising phase (13–16 years) for others, the participants were free of adult interference and the imposition of adult values that can kill spontaneity, creativity, joy and freedom in games. This approach to learning also suggests the cultural roots of the creativity, awareness and game sense described by Hallinan et al. (2005) as a 'sixth sense' that Aboriginal AFL and NRL players are seen to have.

Despite some similarity with the modified games used in games-based teaching and coaching (see, Light 2013), the informal games through which the participants learned to play footy could be seen more as cultural activities located within particular settings and contexts. Indeed, as Maynard (2012, p. 988) explains, there is a long history of playing games within Aboriginal communities that predates white settlement:

> Aboriginal people had a sporting culture before 1788 and played a variety of games that assisted in preparing young people for their life as hunters and gatherers. Traditional sport incorporated self-reliance, discipline, and instilled the concept of a well-organized group or team approach to life.

For the participants, learning to play footy was, however, not limited to these informal games because they operate as cultural activities situated within local communities and larger cultural and social arenas. The skills and knowledge that enabled the participants to become elite-level players were learned and developed within, and shaped by, the larger field of Aboriginal culture and an identifiable Aboriginal way of play (Butcher and Judd 2016). This specific and identifiable learning was intertwined with broader, implicit cultural learning through participation in the practices of a community and a larger cultural field (Lave and Wenger 1991; Bourdieu 1986a, b). The nature of the social and cultural settings within which they learned to play footy as young boys facilitated this learning— whether in the suburbs of Melbourne or Sydney, rural NSW or Victoria, or in an isolated community in the Northern Territory.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of legitimate peripheral participation, communities of practice and situated learning are useful in explaining the learning we identified in this study that included cultural learning through participation in footy as a practice of the community. From the same epistemological perspective, implicit learning through sport has also been conceptualized as apprenticeship learning (see, Kirk and Kinchin 2003; Cassidy and Rossi 2006). As we suggested earlier in this chapter, this is a useful way of thinking about how the participants in this study learned to play footy but we need to be careful here in what we take apprenticeship learning to be.

The concept of apprenticeship learning involves complex processes of socialization (Wackerhausen 1997) with learning dependent upon foundations developed during early socialization through interaction and social relationships as infants in which people learn through, and about, their bodies situated within particular cultures (Sheets-Johnston 2000). This then suggests that, for the participants in this study, learning by watching others play footy was more complex than we might initially assume it to be as a case of 'modelling'. Imitation learning is a complex cognitive process that involves realization of a correspondence between one's own body and that of the model(s) that is deeply situated in culture (Sheets-Johnston).

Parents and Other Influential People

Mothers

In this study the participants' mothers were central to their success in making the AFL or NRL. This was more marked with the AFL participants because the NRL participants' fathers seeming to have been more present and having had more influence on their development. The participants felt gratitude and an obligation to repay the debt they had incurred due their mothers' efforts, sacrifice, guidance, belief in them and love of them by making it to the AFL and NRL. There were other people in their lives who had played important parts in helping them and facilitating their achievements in footy but without exception mothers

were the key to their success. Without exception, mothers also drove home the importance of getting an education for their futures.

Alvin (AFL) had a very strong connection with his community in the Northern Territory and said that much of his motivation came from wanting to make his community proud of him but it was his mother who most helped him and who he was most motivated to make proud of him:

> I wanted to make my family proud, like the people up in Darwin, make a name for myself but also the big drive thing was to make her (his mother) proud and pretty much say thank you in a way because you can never thank your parents enough.

People in the lives of the participants when they were young boys played a significant part in encouraging them and motivating them. Most of them were relatives and family members or adults close enough to be referred to as uncle or aunty but it was the role that mothers played in the participants' development into elite-level professional athletes that was central their success.

When Barry (AFL) was 'straying' a little his mother would remind him of how successful his older brother had been which he said helped him realize how much he could get from footy if he had the right attitude:

> …mum sort of sat me down as well and said look, you can either do this or you can play footy and we can see how successful your brother's been in getting drafted and playing good footy. You know, if you want to knuckle down and do that you can do that or you can run amuck with your mates and not achieve too much in sport.

Fathers

The father's influence seemed to be stronger with the NRL participants but across all participants it was most evident in their early childhood, after which they seemed to fade away. In striving to listen carefully to the participants' stories (with more than our ears) and to understand we followed their lead, avoiding dragging them off track from their stories. This meant that, while some implied the absence of their fathers from around

their teens onwards we did not seek detail. We did not specifically ask why, or for any details because they had not raised this in their narratives. Certainly, the absence of fathers seemed to place greater stress on mothers, which created greater respect from the participants who were raised by single mothers. In these cases grandmothers, grandfathers, aunties and uncles filled some of the gaps created by fathers' absences in addition to strong support from their respective communities.

The early influence of fathers tended to be more on their footy than with the mothers but many of the participants also emphasized developing 'character' that they felt helped them deal with the challenges involved as they moved towards and into the AFL and NRL. For example, Danny (NRL) said that: '(my dad) got out there and trained with me and pushed me in a lot of different ways and led the way for me a lot.' In Carl's (AFL) case his father encouraged him as a boy but focused on developing strength of character and appropriate behaviour on the field, which he felt prepared him for more competitive footy as he grew up:

> The only time dad gave me advice was when I either lost my temper and how should I go about it and if I was getting supporters on the other side of the fence getting into me or players getting into me, dad would only give me advice about how to go about that, not about how to actually go about play.

Max's (AFL) father encouraged him to play a range of different sports when young and he took a liking to rugby but his father wanted him to try footy. He agreed to try it for a year after which he stayed with Australian football: 'So dad was of the opinion that he wanted me to try a lot of different sports. I just wanted to play rugby, that was it but dad forced me to play footy. I said I'll play it for one year and that's it. So I went down there and enjoyed it.'

With all participants their father's influence on their footy was strongest up until the age of around 12. The NRL players in particular identified their fathers as exerting the strongest influence on their footy up to around 12 years of age with Ryan (NRL) fondly remembering 'hanging out' with his father, having a good bond with him and sharing a burger on many Saturday that was purchased with a coupon he was awarded as man of the match. For Bernie his father also had the most influence on

his development as a rugby league player: '…my father pushed me so hard and was critical, he was probably my biggest supporter and also my biggest critic as well and he was very honest and upfront with me.'

Older Brothers

Many participants emphasized how growing up playing with older brothers and other older boys had helped them learn. Indeed in a follow up interview with Max (AFL) he asked how many participants had grown up with older brothers in the study because of how his older brother had helped him develop his footy. It helped them learn skills and tactical knowledge from the older boys with three AFL participants telling us that that their older brothers had made a very strong contribution to their development as footy players as Barry (AFL) suggests here:

> I obviously picked up the skills pretty quickly and obviously having two older brothers, that's all we did in the front yard, and cousins as well, and just go down to the river on the grass just doing markers up and kicking and sort of honing the skills if you like.

A couple of participants also suggested that an older brother who had 'taken the wrong path' had positive influences on their commitment to sport through emphasizing the mistakes they made asking their younger brothers not to make the same mistake:

> (His older brother) sort of fell off the way and chose the wrong path and hung around with the wrong people. He came of age and sort of pulled me aside and said 'look, this is what I did, I don't want you to do this' and that really sort of set me straight. Using his story and his experience steered me in the right way. (Barry, AFL).

Considering the nature of apprenticeship learning that seems to have been at work in the participants' communities, older brothers likely played an implicit role in learning to play footy. This imitation learning is not easy for them to recognize and, as Sheets-Johnson's work (2000) suggests, is deeply situated in Aboriginal culture.

Chapter Discussion

The identification of how the foundations of expertise were developed up until the age of around 12 supports a body of research conducted on the conditions that enhance the development of elite athletes but with some significant differences that were specific to the context within which the participants in this study learned to play their sport. There is also a difference in the theory that we draw on to understand how the participants in the study developed their expertise. The bulk of work on sport expertise tends to draw on motor learning theory or on theories that sit on the same epistemological assumptions and ontological positions such as constraints-led theory (see, Renshaw et al. 2010).

The role of participation in a range of sports and the prominence of learning through unstructured, informal games and activities with a strong play element and free of adult interference also supports the findings of research on the influence of context in the development of elite-level athletes (see, Berry et al. 2008; Côté and Frazer-Thomas 2008). However, in this study learning through play or 'deliberate play' was far more marked than it tends to be in the research conducted across a range of other cultural and social settings in this body of work (see, Côté and Frazer-Thomas 2008) due to an absence of structured training/practice during the sampling phase (5–12 years) in the DMSP). The powerful influence of culture on the development of sport expertise is also very evident among Brazilian football players. A study by Fonseca and Garganta (2008) identified how elite-level players had learned solely through street games and had not been exposed to structured training until their teenage years. They also identified how much the players valued the contribution these early experiences made to their development of expertise. Elsewhere, Araújo et al. (2010, p. 169) suggest that in Brazil, 'The pleasure and the passion that a child gains from playing football and the possibilities for exploration, creativity and goal achievement… are considered essential for football expertise.'

Considering the development of expertise as a process of learning allows us to draw on socio-cultural learning theories to understand what was learned, how it was learned, and the role that Aboriginal culture played in shaping this learning. Socio-cultural learning theories can account for the powerful influence of implicit, non-conscious learning,

the role that practice plays in it and the influence of cultural context (see, Vygotsky 1978, Bruner 1996). From this perspective, laying the foundations of expertise from the first touch of a footy up until around the age of 12 can be seen as learning through participation in the practices of a community (Lave and Wenger 1991), as apprenticeship learning (Rogoff 1990). It can also be seen as learning from living in a community of learners (Rogoff 1994). Such conceptions of learning can account for cultural context learning through participation and for the importance and significance of embodied, implicit or non-conscious learning. As is the case with all socio-cultural learning theory, the notion of a community of learners is based on the premise that learning is not the result of transmitting knowledge but, instead, the result of participation in shared endeavours and taking active roles in socio-cultural activity (Rogoff 1994).

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13 Transitioning into the Culture of Professional Sport

By the age of 12 the participants in this study had laid the foundations for expertise in Australian football and rugby league through a process that involved the embodiment of culture and Aboriginal approaches to play. However, as they approached the AFL (Australian Football League) and NRL (National Rugby League) they were increasingly faced with the task of adapting this approach to the structures and constraints of non-Indigenous, professional sport that can be seen as a process of athlete cultural transition (see, Ryba et al. 2016), developed from a body of research on transitioning (see, Schlossberg 1981).

Schlossberg's (1981) work on transitioning offers a useful way of conceptualizing the challenges faced by the participants in this study in adapting to an increasingly professional culture of sport and to living in non-Indigenous culture and the factors that facilitated this. Defining a transition as any event experienced by the individual that significantly changes relationships, routines, assumptions and roles, Schlossberg proposes four factors that assist in coping with them as being: the situation, self, social support and strategies for coping.

As the participants moved into organized sport from around the age of 12–14 and towards making it to the AFL or NRL they were increasingly faced with the challenge of adapting their Aboriginal approach to a very

different culture of sport and getting used to new ways of doing things. They had to adapt the culture-specific abilities they developed to far more structured and monitored approaches than those that had shaped their learning as children growing up in small communities. They had to adapt to the world of individual accountability, measurement, statistics, the structures of large clubs and detailed team tactics in the pursuit of success that Duncan (2016) argues characterize contemporary, commodified sport and which Huizinga (1938/1949) suggests, mirrors the economic rationalism of the capitalist world.

Adapting to the culture of the AFL and NRL and to the cultures of large clubs did not only involve changing technique and skill or learning new tactics. It also required adapting an Aboriginal approach that was open, free flowing, creative, intuitive, displayed a 'sixth sense' of the game and was expressive of Aboriginal culture (Hallinan and Judd 2007) to a more structured, professional approach to play shaped by global developments in sport. Although typically valued by coaches and clubs in the NRL and AFL (see Sheedy 2010a, b), this style of play had to be adapted to the far more structured approaches to training and playing of the NRL and AFL to make it into, and succeed in, these leagues. From the mid-nineteenth century Australian football developed as a game with more spontaneity than most other football codes and encouraged players to play with flair and freedom (see, Murray 1994), which is how Indigenous Australians play in central and northern Australia (Butcher and Judd 2016). It does, however, contrast with contemporary AFL in which, 'teams have set plays, game plans, specific structures and instructions players are to follow, all of which reduce the creativity and inventiveness of players' (Duncan 2016, p. 62).

There is a body or work in sport psychology on the challenges facing transnational athletes as a process of cultural adaptation that we drew on to better understand the process of adapting an Aboriginal approach to professional and commodified sport as one of cultural transition (see, Agergaard and Ryba 2014; Ryba et al. 2016; Schinke et al. 2013). This work focuses on the psychological adjustments required by athletes to culturally transition within the global, transnational sport industry and on their implications for both sport performance and their lives outside sport (Ryba et al. 2016).

The challenges involved in having to adapt to more structured approaches to training and playing tended to have been more of an issue for the AFL players than the NRL players, which may be due to Australian football being a more open, free flowing and expansive sport than rugby league. The NRL participants relocated less than the AFL participants, and over smaller distances, which caused less disruption in their lives and less separation from community and family. Typically they only made one major move on their journey to the elite level, which was when they moved from the NSW (New South Wales) or Queensland country to Sydney to join an NRL club.

Learning how to adapt to a different culture of footy was critical to the participants' development into expert players at the highest levels in Australian football and rugby league from the age of around 12 onward. In this chapter we first discuss the process of adaptation required for the participants after which, we discuss two sub-themes as the socio-cultural factors that most facilitated this adaptation. The two factors were (1) having effective mentors to assist in this transition (2) drawing on learning from family and community for the strength to overcome the challenges involved in adapting to a different approach to footy, its change in meaning and to the culture surrounding it. This involved dealing with what Ryba et al. (2016, p. 8) describe as the 'mismatch between their own mode of being' and their new social and cultural context.

Adapting to a New Culture

When Toby moved from country NSW to Adelaide to play in the SANFL (South Australian National Football League), and then in the AFL at 18 years of age his Aboriginal mentor told him that he needed to accept the 'non-negotiables' of training and playing in a new environment without losing his special skills and abilities.

After growing up with their ways of playing footy as a meaningful practice in their communities and culture, the participants' movement towards and into the AFL and NRL involved increasing exposure to the practice of footy with different meanings and within different socio-cultural contexts. They had to adapt to very different ways of playing and

training with most participants also moving away from family, small communities and the culture they had grown up in into bigger, foreign and confronting socio-cultural environments. This was particularly marked with the AFL players who had grown up in the Northern Territory in isolated Indigenous communities but was significant for most participants in the study.

The AFL players tended to have moved about more often and further away from home with most of the NRL players only moving when they took up an invitation to join an NRL club at around 17–18. This involved moving from country towns in NSW or Queensland to Sydney but one did not even have to move from the part of Sydney where he grew up until five years into his NRL career when he changed clubs. Being separated from family and community was a significant challenge for most participants and for a few it tested them to their emotional and psychological limits.

Two participants told us about being so lonely that they cried every night for the first year or two of being in an AFL club with others (AFL and NRL) feeling the displacement, isolation and alienation that research on transnational athlete transition identifies (see, Ryba et al. 2012, 2016; Schinke et al. 2013). Some of the NRL players were also intimidated by playing against experienced, hardened, 'grown men' at 17 or 18 years of age. They also suffered serious injuries in their first couple of years in the NRL, which led to them being dropped to a lower team or competition. Injury is a common concern for any professional athlete but is accentuated for those transitioning into different cultures with the threat of being dropped (see, Ryba et al. 2016). Succeeding in the AFL or NRL required being able to deal with significant personal, psychological and emotional challenges involved in transitioning into the culture of professional sport and the culture surrounding it. These are also experiences that would be similar for non-Indigenous players from the rural areas moving to the bigger cities in Australia but without the added and imposing challenge of adapting to such significant cultural differences.

After growing up learning footy in the culture of a supportive community, the more individualized approach to training characterized by constant measuring and monitoring of performance and fitness, individual accountability and the need for individual discipline, was confronting for

most participants. As Bernie suggested with the NRL, having to be 'up' and 'on' every day in a highly competitive environment without a sense of community, was a hurdle he had to clear and a challenge typically faced by Indigenous players (Schinke et al. 2006). In the AFL, Carl struggled to deal with structure as soon as he began to play in higher-level teams, which led him to quit a representative schoolboy team to return to his local club at the age of 15. A senior coach in his local club helped him begin to adjust a little to this approach and two years later he was drafted into an AFL club in Melbourne where he again struggled with adapting to the highly structured approach, without the help of an effective mentor. Like others, such as Ryan (NRL) he initially struggled with the emphasis placed on fitness, strength training and demands for meeting measurable standards but enjoyed anything where he had ball in hand and related to playing the game. This was also where he felt he outperformed the other players.

Adapting to the culture of professional footy involved it losing some of the cultural meaning it had and for them and the cultural experiences it provided for them as they moved from playing footy for enjoyment and cultural expression to playing footy for work (see, Schinke et al. 2006). All the participants had grown up in cultures and communities within which footy formed a central practice full of meaning that offered a means of culturally expression. Within these contexts they not only learned the techniques and skills of the game but also important cultural lessons through participation in the practices of a community that Bruner (1996) suggests cannot be separated from other learning.

With two exceptions, each one of the communities that the participants grew up in was profoundly shaped by a broader notion of an Aboriginal approach to playing team sport. This was particularly evident in the communities that the participants from the Northern Territory and in the rural communities they grew up in but was also evident in Indigenous communities within the major cities of Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. Carl and Toby did not grow up in Indigenous communities but had strong identities as Indigenous Australians and played with other Indigenous Australians as they developed. Tony also explained to us how his mentor in Adelaide had helped him find his people and country and how this had helped him deal with the challenges of fitting in by affirming his sense of identity as an Aboriginal.

The challenges involved in adapting to the constraints of increasingly structured playing and training environments from their early teens to making it into the AFL or NRL varied among participants. This also differed a little between the codes they played and the degree of isolation of the communities they came from but for all of them it involved a decline in the excitement, interaction, meaning and expressive nature of footy as it shifted from a form of play towards becoming work that required discipline, effort and individual responsibility.

Considering the change in meaning and experience of games for children as they pass through the education system and the role of play in social and cultural learning among young children across a wide range of cultures (see, Gaskins and Miller 2009) is helpful for understanding changes in the meaning and nature of participation in footy for the participants as they moved towards and into the AFL and NRL. The games that young children create and play form important learning experiences that generate heightened emotions and interaction but as they progress through the schooling system the joy, spontaneity and interaction declines as teachers feel increasingly obliged to 'teach' them how to play correctly (Light and Light 2016). Typically this involves games changing from free play to the pursuit of perfecting an ideal 'correct' form of game skills through monitored repetition.

The loss of meaning games hold and the excitement they generate for children as they pass through school is made evident by comparing the free games played at lunchtime in a primary school (when permitted) to the disengagement of students standing in lines waiting to dibble a ball around cones in a physical education or sport coaching session.

Hendricks (2006) argues that the games young children play can constitute 'aboratories of possibilities' in which they develop creativity, intuition and learn valuable lessons about sport, culture and themselves. These games can form important early learning experience, but as children progress through the schooling system, the joy, spontaneity and rich social interaction that characterizes them declines as teachers and coaches feel increasingly obliged to 'teach' them how to play correctly as they are encouraged to conform and are exposed to more control (Light and Light 2016).

The ways in which the participants in this study all learned to play footy up until the age of around 12 seemed to offer 'laboratories of possibility' in which the characteristics of Aboriginal play that is widely respected in Australian sport, such as creativity, intuition, anticipation and having a 'sixth sense' of the sport (Hallinan and Judd 2007) flourished. The processes of learning involved in this can also be seen as learning through participation in a community of learners (Rogoff 1994) or participation in the practices of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) as two perspectives that recognize the social nature of learning, how it is situated in particular socio-cultural settings, and the central role that participation in activities plays in learning.

The community-of-learners model is an instructional model that is based upon a view of learning as a process of transformation of participation instead of one of transmitting, acquiring or discovering knowledge with the intent of fostering responsibility and autonomy among learners (Rogoff 1994). Although there was very little explicit pedagogy used to achieve intended learning outcomes for the participants up to the age of around 12, the notion of learning as a transformation in participation that underpins the idea of a community of learners and Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of situated learning in a community of practice is helpful for understanding how their learning was inseparable from culture.

The Influence of Mentors

Opinions on the use and effectiveness of mentoring in education are widespread and diverse with some controversy on its efficacy, its meaning and the differences between mentoring and coaching (Bodkin-Andrews et al. 2013). Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2013) also suggest that, in relation to the use of mentoring to improve Indigenous educational outcomes, understanding of the term mentoring must extend well beyond a simplistic view of it as merely being a process of role-modelling. In the sport coaching literature mentoring is seen as a role played by coaches in developing their athletes beyond the improvement of technique with the term generally taken to refer to guiding and supporting them (see, Chambers

2015) with Lyle (2005) suggesting that the term, mentor, might better describe the more holistic and 'person-centred' role that characterizes contemporary coaching. Whether used in relation to a coach or someone else who guides an athlete the term mentor implies a close and familiar relationship with a focus on more than merely developing skill and technical competence. It suggests a holistic development of the athlete and that mentoring inherently involves relationships of trust and respect (Bloom 2013). On a similar theme, Bloom et al. (1998, pp. 211–278) propose that mentor coaches develop, 'trusting relationships with athletes to nourish and catalyze their personal and athletic development'. While the mentors identified in this section of the chapter included coaches and some non-coaches they all fulfilled the role described above.

Having a mentor at critical stages of their careers from the age of 13 onwards seemed to have made a significant contribution towards most of the participants' ability to adapt to more structured approaches to training and playing and particularly around their entry into the NRL or AFL. As the participants approached the NRL or AFL they were not just learning new techniques and tactics but were also making sense of a different culture of footy. For this reason, mentors who knew both cultures and/or were sensitive to the participants' needs to adjust to the cultural aspects of non-Indigenous footy were most effective. The degree to which mentors facilitated the participants' development varied according to their cultural knowledge, the stage of the participant's development and the magnitude of the adjustment needed.

Alvin's (AFL) commitment to footy from an early age meant that he was very mobile and had to adapt to the demands of different social and cultural environments and approaches to training and playing footy. Having willing and able mentors helped him to meet the challenges involved in moving locations and to develop his footy from the age of 12. In Victoria he lived with an uncle who was also a coach of the team. He played in with the family giving him support. His uncle helped him adjust to training and approaches to play that were more structured than what he had been used to. At the age of 16 he stayed with the family of another uncle in Adelaide who acted as mentor and father figure cared about him and knew what was involved in adapting to a more structured approach. After being drafted into an AFL club his (non-Indigenous)

coach acted as a mentor for him and was central to his success as player and his development as a person:

> I still remember him saying, one day you'll be a great leader for your people, and I sort of had a giggle at the time, just thinking 'yeah', and you'll potentially be the captain of this club one day…I was thinking no way will I get be getting up speaking in front of people or media or whatever but I just sort of grew into it.

Alvin trusted this coach and enjoyed a close relationship with him. As Bloom et al. (1998) suggest, a good mentor coach does and this coach also nourished his personal and athletic development.

When he moved to Sydney Danny (NRL) lived with an Aboriginal league legend, Andy Brown (pseudonym), for a few months and stayed in contact with him after that. Andy helped Danny adjust to the structured approach of the NRL but his main contribution to Danny's success was in encouraging him to persevere after being dropped from the squad. Up until being drafted into the AFL Toby did not have an effective mentor but his transition to structured ways of playing and training was assisted by his experiences of playing in an elite-level non-government school famous for its production of talented footy players. This meant that his move into an AFL club in Adelaide immediately after completing year 12 did not involve as big a change as it had for others in the study. None-the-less, without the help of his Indigenous mentor, Allen (pseudonym), he said he might have given up:

> He became like a brother or father or father figure you get put in that kind of space that was what his family did as well. It was only when I got there that I actually really, really flourished…I almost solely put it down as being with Allen.

Max's (AFL) adaptation to the culture of professional sport with its more structured training and ways of playing began with moving from the Northern Territory to Adelaide in 1912 and then to Melbourne to play in the AFL. Prior to being drafted into an AFL team he had not had any explicit footy mentors but the support he gained from being able to live with a family he knew in Adelaide helped him to adjust to a different way

of living and to the demands of non-Indigenous footy. When he moved to Melbourne to play in the AFL his sister's boyfriend's older brother was at the same club and took him 'under his wing' to help him fit in. While he was at the club a high profile Indigenous AFL player who arrived provided Max with a way of adapting to life in the AFL and connecting with his community in the Territory, which he said helped him with his development as an AFL player.

Carl (AFL) had immense talent that was evident from a young age but struggled with the processes of transitioning from the Aboriginal culture of footy to the culture of commodified, professional footy from the age of 13 onwards. He quit a schoolboys representative team because he felt the structure took the joy out of footy: 'It wasn't just your conventional game of football…there was more structure to it so I didn't adapt to that too well and then went back to (his local club).' His club coach made an effort to help him but it was not until making I to the AFL that he felt he had an effective mentor who could help him transition into the culture of professional footy with his second coach in the club:

> (He) just painted the canvas of what you need to do to win AFL games. So I started realizing what I needed to do and then what my teammates needed to do and just painted a clear picture on how football is played.

Malcolm lacked an effective mentor until he had been drafted into the AFL with his coach 'pushing' him to develop a better work ethic that would allow him to realize his talent. Mick's most effective mentor was his coach from the age of 14–18 who helped him make the AFL. This coach taught him what he felt were the most important lessons about stepping up to more competitive environments and taking his footy more seriously. He also cared about Mick as a person and treated him with respect and consideration, which are the characteristics of a good mentor coach (see, Bloom et al. 1998; Lyle 2005). At 18 he was drafted into an AFL club but struggled with the increased structure, constant monitoring of performance and need for individual responsibility. He did not have a mentor to help him adjust to this change, which contributed to him playing a limited number of AFL games.

Bernie (NRL) also had very strong support from his family and community and saw his best friend's father and his high school coach as mentors who advised him, guided him, and encouraged him over his high school years. This was no so much a case of having to suddenly adjust to more structured approaches to training and playing because this was the approach taken over his years at a specialist sports school. As he adjusted to the demands of the NRL he was supported by his family and community as well as by his former coaches at school but he did not have an explicit, effective mentor in the NRL.

Mark (AFL) did not have a particularly effective mentor but his experience of playing footy in Sydney while attending an elite independent school from the age of 12–18, and his experience of boarding at the school assisted his cultural transition from an isolated Indigenous community in the Northern Territory into the practice of sport shaped by the professional model and into mainstream Australian society. His adaptation to life at an elite independent school in Sydney and to footy there and significantly helped by the support of his Aunty and one of his teachers, contributed to his reasonably smooth transition into AFL football. His aunty and a mother of one of his schoolmates also advised and encouraged him in regard to his footy. Barry (AFL) also lacked any significant mentors over his career, which may have contributed to him taking so long to make the AFL. He had a very talented older brother who guided him when he was young but who was not around as Barry developed after being drafted into an AFL club at 17. His mother and other people helped him on his AFL journey but there was no one who acted as an effective mentor for his development as a footy player.

Ryan's (NRL) move into year 11 and 12 at a non-government school, well known for its excellence in rugby league, exposed him to more structured ways of training and playing as preparation for making it to the NRL at 17. The coach of the first grade team encouraged him to work hard on his strength and fitness and took some interest in him, which saw him selected in first grade at the age of 18. When Ryan suffered serious injury, and in the absence of a mentor he had to rely on his own motivation to come back from injury and work his way back up into first grade.

Drawing on Learning from Family and Community

All of the participants identified the life lessons they learned in their communities and/or families as making a contribution (to varying degrees) towards their ability to adapt to new environments for living and playing footy. They had to adapt to living in rural towns, regional cities and large capital cities in which they were removed from their families and the communities they grew up in. For some this included adapting to a new, and very different, school environment. This typically presents a challenge for any young person, in any country (see, Engec 2006) but was accentuated due to the other challenges involved in their cultural transitioning (see, Schinke et al. 2013). Contacts such as uncles or aunties, a brother or a boyfriend of a sister or the family of a friend were of great help in adjusting to new environments for some but a few others had no mentors or contacts to help them. In these cases they said they relied on what they had learned from their families and communities to give them the strength to endure and succeed, which included aspects of Aboriginal culture. Those who had significant support from mentors also emphasized how important the life lessons they had learned from family and community were for their success in adapting to new life styles and to the demands of more structured and constraining approaches to footy.

Family

Mothers were most commonly identified as being central to provide the participants with the ability to succeed in meeting the challenges they faced in adapting to non-Indigenous ways of training and playing. Understandably, this was particularly so for those with single mothers. Alvin emphasized the pivotal role his mother had played in supporting him on his journey from his community in Darwin to the AFL. This was largely in reference to the values and attitudes she had helped him learn. He said she had given him a life education that allowed him to achieve his dream: '…you get trials and setbacks and if you're serious of what you want to achieve, and like I said, I was strong on what I wanted and the thing behind it all was my mum.'

Barry's mother encouraged him from when he was a child to focus on his goals in life and footy and on what was possible for him if he put in the effort and stayed on track. Like all the mothers of the 16 participants, she emphasized the need for a good education with Barry gaining a solid tertiary education as a back up to his aim of making the AFL. As was common with participants from single mother families, Mick's mum had the most powerful influence upon his development as both a footy player and as a person and although she had always encouraged him to do well at school she was a driving force in his development into an AFL player.

Many participants spoke of how important the learning their families provided was in helping them meet the challenges of adapting to footy outside the community with Malcolm identifying the implicit nature of this learning. He felt he learned life lessons from his uncles and grandparents but nominated his mother as having the most significant influence on his learning of life skills: 'I was learning lessons that I didn't know I was learning, and about responsibility… So these little things I learned along the way and I think she's been an inspirational person in my life.' Danny was also confronted with significant emotional and physical challenges upon joining his first NRL team that required strong 'character' and confidence in his ability to succeed that he said that his father and mother had helped him develop. Carl's father had supported his footy from an early age but had not attempted to be a 'parent coach' (Light 2016). Instead he had focused on Carl's attitude and behaviour on the field:

> The only time dad gave me advice was when I either lost my temper and how should I go about it…dad would have had a big influence, a massive influence just on me in terms of keeping your cool and keeping your temper.

Danny felt that the way in which his parents raised and prepared him for meeting the challenges of living in Sydney, going to a new school and handling the pressure of making the most of his opportunity to play for the Rangers (pseudonym) NRL team. Mark's biggest challenge on his journey into the AFL was moving from a remote community in the Northern Territory to spend six years in an elite independent school in Sydney where the support he received from his Aunty was pivotal to his

success at school and in footy. Like some others, his older brother had also helped him develop as a person and a footy player by imploring him to not make the same mistakes he had had and to make the most of his chances. Barry's brother had also exerted a positive influence on him growing up but has far less influence from the time he had been drafted into an AFL team at the age of 17.

Community

Danny (NRL) had very strong connections with his family and his community in the NSW country that sustained him in Sydney. He felt that his mother and father had both helped him develop traits such as resilience that helped him to deal with the challenges he was faced with. For him, the values of his 'mob' and his connection with them gave him confidence and the ability to deal with the challenges he had to face. This was greatly assisted by his regular trips home that were arranged by his NRL club. For Ryan, his people, his family, community and his (Aboriginal) country made him the sort of person who could succeed in rugby league. His strong identity with his country and people prevented him feeling alone or vulnerable. His experiences of growing up in this meaningful and supportive environment promoted confidence in his ability to succeed and helped him to deal with adversity at the Cougars in the early stages of his NRL career.

Ryan also identified the group orientation of Aboriginal culture that many participants in this study suggested helped them to succeed in rugby league through commitment to and identity with the team:

> …it's hard to explain to someone that's never been in that environment because every single day, every single emotion, every single thing that you're doing is for the team and when you're … when you get success it's like, wow, you can celebrate every single moment you just had with those boys and being a part of that.

Bernie had remained in his local area in Sydney up until the end of his first five years in the NRL and stayed in contact with his family and community. He felt it kept him grounded and gave him the confidence to

deal with what was in front of him with his ability to give back to his community also motivating him:

> You go back and see a lot of your family, they're very proud of what you've done, and you can see that it inspires others around them so that it can create positive change in a community or in some individual's lives, and that's probably the biggest part of our rugby league, was my impact on other people, and to try and help and change their lives.

Transnational athletes transitioning into new cultures deal with a range of challenges similar to those that the Indigenous Australian participants in this study were faced with. Among these are feelings of being lost and disconnected, of not knowing or understanding the new culture(s) that have no meaning for them and of a loss of identity (see, Ryba et al. 2016; Schinke et al. 2013). The participants in this study who were most successful in making the AFL and NRL felt that the grounding they learned from their communities and their mothers in particular helped them maintain their identity and assisted them in making sense of their new environments. Even for the AFL players who had not grown up in Indigenous communities such as Toby and Carl, their families and their strong sense of Aboriginality gave them strength when they needed it. For Toby, finding where his country was made a significant contribution to this sense of Aboriginality. For the NRL participants this was assisted by frequently returning to their communities and, in particular, playing at the annual NSW Aboriginal Knockout.

Chapter Discussion

This chapter identifies and discusses the two factors that most assisted the participants' cultural transition to the AFL and NRL. As other research suggests, the difficulties faced by athletes when leaving family and community to relocate are accentuated when their identity and culture are tied to a specific and very different geographical area or region (see, Dudgeon et al. 2000; Ryba et al. 2016). A study by Campbell and Sonn (2009) focused on Indigenous players' transition into the AFL. It fol-

lowed up on the AFL's 2000 inquiry into the challenges involved in making this transition with the AFL identifying a lack of family support, racial abuse and inadequate financial management, the need to promote education and training and the need to pay attention to issues of numeracy as issues in need of attention. Racism did not arise as a major issue for the participants in our study with them adopting a positive approach when telling their stories but the importance of family (and community) support was a strong theme with evidence of the need for support with formal education also evident.

Playing footy out of the cultural contexts where it was learned and which gave it meaning to playing in very different settings was a challenge for the participants as they navigated their way from one world view to another (Schinke et al. 2013). It was also marked by reduction in the excitement and joy they felt when playing footy with other Aboriginal boys and the degree to which it offered a medium for cultural expression. The experiences of Brazilian footballers provide examples of similar situations in which culture plays a central role in athlete development. Brazilian footballers are renown for a style of play that resonates with that of Aboriginal styles of play in Australian football and rugby league and which is predominantly learned through participation in informal, unstructured games, shaped by local culture (see, Araújo et al. 2010; Fonseca and Garganta 2008). In Brazil, elite-level players learn primarily through street games for the first half of their career after which they are exposed to structured practice (Fonseca and Garganta 2008) as they move into professional football, which is much like the experiences of the Indigenous athletes in our study. Brazilian footballers also seem to struggle to meet the challenges involved in transitioning into foreign football cultures with sixty six percent of 1029, who went overseas to play in 2010 returning to Brazil before completing their first season (Brandão and Vieira 2013).

Despite the similarities between the cultural transitions of transnational athletes and the Indigenous Australian athletes in this study there were significant differences. The cultural transition that the Indigenous athletes in this study experienced was not from one country to another. Instead, it was a transition from a local culture of sport to a professional

culture of the same sport and in the same country but one strongly influenced by the globalized and commodified sport industry. Although neither Australian football nor rugby league is a genuine global sport they are intimately shaped by global developments in sport as a commodity—of sport as business. As Duncan (2016) suggests, the shift towards economic rationalism in the AFL is a 'reflection of the economic landscape in Australia and, indeed, in most of the Western world'.

This suggests that the experiences and significance of participants in our study in transitioning from footy as a practice of local culture to the world of professional footy is situated within larger sociological considerations of the interaction and tensions between local and global cultures of sport. Drawing on Huizinga (1938/1949), Duncan (2016, p. 43) suggests that modern sport such as the AFL and NRL is now like business and is 'restricted by structure, analysis, and a desire to succeed or not fail'. In this study this was something to which the participants had to adapt with Bourdieu's (1984) work on the reproduction of culture and his key concepts of cultural *fields*, *habitus* and *practice* helpful in locating the details of experience and learning within larger sociological contexts and movements that we develop in the following chapter.

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14 Locating Learning in the Bigger Picture

The study we report on in this book aimed to identify the main socio-cultural factors that facilitated the success of the 16 participants in making their journeys to the Australian Football League (AFL) or National Rugby League (NRL) as a process of learning. The methodology we used required patience, careful and attentive listening and being open to where the data driven, grounded theory approach would take us. Although we were positively inclined towards particular theories and concepts, the methodology employed delayed the use of formal theory and concepts until the latter stages of the study, which is reflected in how we have written this book. After telling eight stories in Part II and III, Part IV presents the integration of the theories we developed through the use of formal theory and concepts. It presents the two main themes developed which were (1) the development of the participants' abilities in footy up to around the age of 12 (Chap. 12) and, (2) how they met the challenges involved in the cultural transition from small communities shaped by local, Aboriginal culture to professional sport shaped by a the culture of a global sport industry (Chap. 13). The contrast between learning to play footy as a cultural practice in small communities and a form of play and the highly structured nature of the AFL and NRL as sport-for-business

reflects something of what Huzinga (1938/1949) argues is the transformation of the play element in society into sport as a commercial commodity.

In this chapter we pull back a little further from our focus on the nature and meaning of individual experience in local contexts to provide a more macro view that further integrates the theories we have developed by locating them in larger, dynamic social and cultural arenas through the use of the key concepts of Bourdieu (see, 1984). In it we focus on the construction of the individual *habitus* of the participants to locate it in cultural or social *fields* or *subfields* to identify the significance of the tensions between local and global sport cultures for the participants transition into professional sport.

The Construction and Influence of *Habitus*

A study the first author conducted on Japanese high school rugby identified the ways in which culture shaped the training methods of Japanese school rugby was embodied and expressed in styles of play that were both culture and class specific (Light 2000). It identified how a culture-specific approach to rugby was expressed and reproduced through styles of play and the rituals surrounding the match with there seeming to have been some of this at play in this study on Indigenous athletes. In the latter stages of the study we report on in this book we drew on Bourdieu's key analytic concepts that complemented the learning theory we used to make sense of how this embodiment occurred and to move on further in developing substantive theories into conceptual theories.

Strongly influenced by the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merluau-Ponty, Bourdieu's (1977) focus on the body, action and practical disposition is manifested in his concept of *habitus* which offers an appealing means of understanding how the participants in this study learned to play footy in an Aboriginal way and the challenges involved in adapting it to professional sport. As we have suggested before, the concept of *habitus* is the workhorse of Bourdieu's intellectual project (Light and Evans 2015) and, along with its related concepts of *practice, field* and *capital* offers a way of locating the complex processes of individual cultural

transition within tensions between cultural *fields* or *subfields.* As the embodied social history of the individual, the *habitus* reflects how the body not only exists in society but also how society exists in the body with practice mediating between the *habitus* (collective and individual) and the *field* or *subfield* (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu's concept of cultural *fields* provides a macro view within his attempt to reconcile structure and agency and emphasize the influence of structures on individual development but Mutch (2003) suggests that examination of how context influences the construction of the *habitus* can extend to using the tighter focus of a community of practice and how its practices mediate between context and the construction of the *habitus.* This allows for more focus on individual action and agency and is something we have previously done in a study on Australian and New Zealand rugby coaches (see, Light and Evans 2013). It encourages us to suggest the strong influence of the communities that the participants grew up in on the construction of their *habitus* and the challenges faced by them in making sense of and adapting to the challenges of different socio-cultural environments of the clubs they played in on their way to the NRL and AFL as well as the cultures of these organizations. However, we do need to recognize how larger *fields* and *subfields* shape these communities.

The *habitus* is a generative structure that does not determine action and thinking but does *structure* it. Constructed implicitly over time, and operating below the level of the conscious mind, the *habitus* exerts a durable and powerful influence on behaviour, inclinations, taste and dispositions (Bourdieu 1984). The durable nature of the *habitus* helps explain the challenges that the participants in this study faced in adapting to play in professional Australian football and rugby league as a process of cultural transition due to the powerful ways in which it structures action and behaviour at a non-conscious level. It is also helpful when we recognize footy, not just a 'physical activity', but as a cultural practice whose meaning and practice is shaped by historical, social and cultural contexts. The concept of capital (Bourdieu 1986) is also helpful for understanding the significance of the challenges that many participants in the study were faced with in adapting to the AFL or NRL in ways that allowed them to fit in while still maintaining what Toby (AFL) referred to as their own 'flavour'.

Seeing the skills, abilities, knowledge and 'feel' for the game that the participants developed as embodied physical (cultural) capital facilitates an understanding of how changes in context and the value attached to this physical capital can change. Cultural capital constitutes the *habitus,* which is fundamentally linked to *field* and *practice* because of how *practice* mediates between the *habitus* and *field* (Bourdieu 1990). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital was developed from Marx's concept of capital but is more than something that is used to advance or maintain the individual's position and power in a field. From the perspective of Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital it can be seen as being sets of dispositions that are inculcated through interaction and participation in the practices of the individual's family, community and class. These dispositions do, however, vary in how they are expressed at an individual level and can be exchanged for other types of capital such as social capital and the more powerful, economic capital such as the wages earned by professional sportsmen and women (see, Webb et al. 2002).

Context and *Field*

In this study we identified how a broad Aboriginal culture exerted a powerful influence on the participants' learning of the skill, understanding and sense of the game that Indigenous AFL and NRL players are renown for (Adair and Stronach 2011; Hallinan et al. 2005). It also figured in the life learning that many of the participants drew on to meet the significant challenge of adapting this Aboriginal approach to the structures of the AFL and NRL and in adapting to living in very culturally different environments. The participants' development of the foundations of expertise up until the age of around 12 supports the broader literature on sport participation and the development of sporting expertise. It identifies conditions promoting the development of expertise from a young age and the role that playing informal games with older participants, sampling a range of different sports, living in smaller communities and having the support of the family and community played in this (see, Côté et al. 2008; Côté and Hay 2002). It also highlights how the journey from small communities in the Northern Territory, West Australia, rural NSW and Queensland, and the suburbs of Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, to the

AFL and NRL involved more than just the development of expertise in their sports.

Increasing recognition of the influence of culture as a 'determinant' of expertise in (Baker et al. 2003) research on sport expertise over the past two decades usefully recognizes its influence but this study suggests that it played a far more important role in the development of sport expertise for the sixteen participants. Indeed, it played a pivotal role in developing expertise and a distinctive Aboriginal approach to play as well as in the participants moving from local communities into the AFL and NRL. This we identify as a process of cultural transition that involved adapting the participants' abilities in their sport to new environments and adapting to new ways of living.

The social constructivist perspectives on learning that we draw on to understand how the participants developed expertise in their sport, learned to play footy in an Aboriginal way and then to adapt it to new environments emphasize the inseparability of culture and learning (see, Bruner 1996). This is also a feature of Lave and Wenger's (1991) key concepts of communities of practice, situated learning and legitimate, peripheral participation. Their concepts have been used to explain the implicit learning that occurs within the communities of sports clubs through participation in practice (see, Light 2006) and are helpful in understanding how participation in the practice of footy involved implicit learning and embodiment of culture within small communities. The detail that the study provides on individual experience and learning and how it was shaped by local culture highlights the significance of social and cultural context for learning but late in the study we drew on Bourdieu's work to locate them within the bigger picture of cultural *fields*.

The focus of Bourdieu's intellectual project on practice and the implicit learning emerging from participation in it (Mahar 1990), offers a sociological explanation of the embodiment of culture and the challenges of transitioning from an Aboriginal approach to a professional approach, shaped by global developments in sport-as-business that Duncan (2016) describes as a shift from being play to display. It offers a means of locating the details of individual experience and learning that we have identified in this study within the larger cultural spaces (structures) of *fields* and *subfields* and the dynamic and evolving tensions between a local sporting culture and global sport culture.

AFL is the dominant media–sport in Australia but its popularity does not extend beyond Australian shores. Despite having a world cup and being an well-established sport in Australia, New Zealand and the north of England, rugby league would also struggle to be considered a global sport but both sports are strongly influenced by the global development of sport as a commercial commodity within the context of the intensifying globalization of media and sport (Tomlinson and Young 2006). The term, commodification, refers to processes through which sport at elite levels has become a commodity traded for profit and subsumed into the logic of the marketplace as a consumer product (Stewart 1987). The interdependencies, between sport as a commodity, the media and marketing organizations at a global level increasingly exerts a powerful influence over professional sport that extends to Australian football and rugby league (Duncan 2016; Maguire 1991; Nauright 2004; Raney and Bryant 2009).

On a global scale, the growing links between contemporary, professional sport, culture and media promote the development of sport as a global commodity with values that can contradict those of sport-for-sports-sake (Bourdieu 1978; Rowe 2004). Focused on the play element in culture and society, Duncan (p. 41) draws on Huizinga to suggest that in pre-industrial revolution communities play produced culture but has since become commodified to become, 'more organized, structured, and influenced by economics' as part of the 'culture industry'. This perspective on the economic rationalization of play is supported by a large body of research and writing in the sociology of sport on the commodification of sport (see, Maguire 1991; Rowe 2004; Stewart 1987). Viewed from this perspective the cultural transitions the participants undertook to make it into the AFL and NRL were not only shaped by moving from Indigenous culture to mainstream culture but also by tensions between local (Aboriginal) sport culture and a global culture of commodified, media–sport. (Maguire 1991)

Local and Global Sporting Cultures

Webb et al. (2002) use Bourdieu's concept of *fields* to explain the tensions between the traditional role of sport as a vehicle for social and moral development (sport for sports sake) and the notion of sport-as-business

and professional sport (see, Bourdieu 1978). They identify tension between the *doxa* of the *field* of sport-for-sports-sake (or sport as education) and the *doxa* of the *field* of sport-as-business which suggests that a *habitus* constructed within the *field* of sport for sports sake (including the subfield of Australian Indigenous sport) is unlikely to be a comfortable fit with or be in tune with the *doxa* of the field of sport-as-business. The term *doxa* refers to the beliefs and assumptions, the taken for granted, accepted and unquestioned truths of a *field* or *subfield* that make the natural and social world appear as being 'self-evident' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 164). The *doxa* of the world in which most of our participants grew up in is very likely to have been very different to the world of professional, globalized sport that they moved towards and into from around the age of 14. *Doxa* allows individuals to develop a *sens pratique* (practical sense) of their field as an arena of practice that would have been less evident and possibly absent as the participants moved towards and into professional sport shaped by the field of sport-as-business and its different *doxa*.

Fields are relatively autonomous but not static with tensions between them. Webb et al. (2002) provide an example of how fields can change by suggesting that the field of sport-as-business was created by the intrusion of the field of business into the field of traditional sport-for-sports-sake with their very different and conflicting *doxa*. *Fields* such as the field of business, science or the *field* of sport arise from, 'an historically generated system of shared meaning' and can be divided into sub fields (Iellatchitch et al. 2003, p. 732). The social and cultural interaction of individuals such the 16 participants in this study within cultural *fields* and the possibilities for action for them are shaped by *doxa* as sets of *field*-specific rules that are internalized by the individual to act implicitly and form the individual's (or agent's) sense of place and sense of what is possible and what is not. The participants in our study had a *sens pratique* of Aboriginal culture and approaches to play within their communities and within what might be considered to be the subfield of Aboriginal sport. However, they felt far less comfortable and less part of footy with its different meanings in settings that were increasingly professional and shaped by the values and beliefs of sport-as-business and the culture of global, commodified sport as they approached and entered the AFL and NRL.

This suggests the complex influence of culture in developing the skills, knowledge-in-action and a sixth sense of the game within small communities

shaped by an Aboriginal culture and then having to adapt them to the professional and commodified practice of their sport in the AFL and NRL. It also suggests that the challenge of cultural transition extended beyond bridging the gap between Aboriginal culture and mainstream Australian culture to dealing with a mismatch between local and global (sporting) cultures.

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Conclusion and Implications

From the beginning of this study we were sensitive to the significance of socio-cultural context and the inseparability of individual experience and learning from it with a focus on Aboriginal culture and an Aboriginal culture of sport. While there is a wide range and number of Indigenous countries within the Australian continent and diversity in language groupings and tribal divisions that reflect a range of individual cultures we can speak of a broad Australian Aboriginal culture characterized by practices and ceremonies centred on belief in the Dreamtime, reverence for the land and an emphasis on oral traditions (Hammond and Fox 1991). This has also been usefully seen as Aboriginal spirituality that is common across all countries, languages and cultures (see, Edwards 2002; Grieves 2008; Hammond and Fox 1991). Grieves (2008, p. 363) suggests that 'Aboriginal spirituality is the philosophical basis of a culturally derived and holistic concept of "personhood," the nature of relationships to others and to the natural world and the core of Indigenous knowledge for the country and the people. It is crucial for applications in academic research and all areas of Aboriginal and Australian development.'

Within this broad Aboriginal culture here is also a distinctly Aboriginal culture of sport that is manifested in a way of playing Australian football Butcher and Judd (2016) refer to as the Aboriginal ethic and which most

participants in the AFL and NRL made mention of. Underpinning the individual stories of success told to us by the 16 participants in rising to the most elite levels of their sport and how they dealt with its challenges is a sense of this Aboriginal spirituality or culture. In summarizing interviews with members of an inner city Aboriginal community in Sydney Grieves (2006, p. 52) suggests Aboriginal spirituality is:

> …about being in an Aboriginal cultural space, experiencing community and connectedness with land and nature including proper nutrition and shelter. Feeling good about oneself, proud of being an Aboriginal person. It is a state of being that includes knowledge, calmness, acceptance and tolerance, balance and focus, inner strength, cleansing and inner peace, feeling whole, an understanding of cultural roots and deep wellbeing.

The notion of Australian Aboriginal spirituality is inseparable from Aboriginal culture, which has been identified in this study as making a significant contribution to the participant's development into elite level players in their sports. The pivotal influence of Indigenous culture and spirituality on success in team sport at the most elite levels is of course not restricted to Australia. It is also very visible and explicit with Māori success in rugby union as another heavy contact team sport. Leading up to the 2017 New Zealand Māori rugby match against the touring British and Irish Lions, Māori All Black, Liiam Messam, confirmed the pivotal importance of culture and identity for Māori in rugby by suggesting that, 'Its all about culture, identity and who you are as a person. That plays a big part. The rugby side is about expressing yourself' (Napier 2017). His reference to playing rugby as a way of expressing himself and Māori culture resonates with the meaning and experience of playing footy for the 16 participants in this study.

   In this study we focused on individual experience, relationships, social interaction and learning within local communities. At the beginning of each life history type interview we asked the participant to tell us their story from their first touch of a footy to entering the AFL or NRL. Using these interviews as our main source of data and, in the spirit of *dadirri* (Farrelly 2003), carefully listening to them provided us with rich insight into the nature of their experience and understanding of the ways in

which the participants developed the expertise required and then negotiated the transition from their local communities to large professional AFL and NRL clubs in Australia's biggest cities.

This focus on individual experience and the development of expertise and a distinctly Aboriginal approach to play in Chaps. 12 and 14 confirms much of the broader literature on the development of sporting expertise and particularly that, which recognizes the influence of socio-cultural environment. This clearly has implications for coaching Indigenous and non-Indigenous athletes and students at all levels and ages from introducing children to sport to coaching at the elite level of sport such as in the NRL and AFL. The way in which this study highlights the profound significance of culture in laying the foundations of expertise and in transitioning from small communities to the AFL and NRL provides compelling evidence of the central role that culture played in the participants' journeys to the AFL and NRL. Informed by the work of social constructivists such as Vygotsky and Bruner, it identifies the inseparability of experience and learning from culture in the development of expertise and suggests the need for holistic approaches to research on Indigenous sport and experience.

Seeing the development of expertise as a process of situated learning draws attention to the social and cultural nature of the environments in which the participants learned to play footy that typically extended to their communities and the other socio-cultural environments they spent time in over their journeys. Stepping back to locate this experience, learning and the immediate settings they were situated in within larger *fields* and *subfields* illuminates how culture, society and economics shaped experience and learning at an individual level to locate the individual detail of human experience within the big picture. From a sociological perspective this focus on fields could be seen to emphasize the role of structure over agency but we feel our use of Bourdieu's key concept of *habitus* helped us avoid the dualism of structure versus agency that he seeks to reconcile in his intellectual project and with his analytic concept of *habitus* in particular.

The use of Bourdieu's concepts to locate the two main theories or themes we developed within cultural fields and subfields identifies how the two core themes of the study were shaped and influenced by tensions

between local and global sporting culture and the influence of economic rationalism. This approach allows for the provision of detailed and deep insight into individual experience shaped by community but to illuminate how these are not isolated occurrence but, instead, part of larger social, cultural and economic movements and the tensions within them.

Implications

We conclude this book with some brief suggestions for the implications it has in a number of areas, as we see it, while recognizing that there would be implications we have not recognized, identified or not paid attention to.

Focused on the situated nature of individual experience and learning, this study provides deep insight into how Indigenous Australians develop the expertise required for playing at the highest levels of their sport and an understanding of how they dealt with the range of challenges involved in adapting this learning to the cultures of professional, commodified and globalized sport. This clearly has significant implications for the organization, management and coaching of Indigenous sport in Australia and possibly for Indigenous sport in other countries such as New Zealand, Canada and the USA. This knowledge might be useful for coaches and managers of Indigenous teams or clubs and of teams and clubs with Indigenous players in them, whether for children's sport in schools and community-based clubs or at the most elite levels. It is knowledge that could also assist parents of young Indigenous people playing any sport at any level.

Beyond a focus on Indigenous sport, this study also has implications for sport coaching across a range of levels from primary school physical education to elite level sport and possibly for the teaching of games in physical education and curriculum. This would not only be for young Indigenous people, but for young people across a wide range of cultural and institutional settings. This is due to the ways in which it lends support to the growing body of work on game-based approaches to sport coaching and teaching in physical education and the need to help athletes make sense of the game instead of telling them what to do and using drills isolated from the joy of the game. It does so by highlighting the central role that informal, learner-driven and managed games played in

the participants' enjoyment of footy, their development of expertise through these games and their development of the flair, creativity, anticipation and game-sense that Aboriginal players are renowned for in Australian football and rugby league.

Although we identify the pivotal role that Aboriginal culture played in the development of their expertise, the literature on games-based approaches (GBA) to coaching and teaching suggests that such approaches can promote similar enjoyment, social interaction, meaning and improvement in performance across arrange of cultures, sports, institutional settings and levels of skill (see Chappell and Light 2015; Harvey et al. 2010; Jones 2015; McNeill et al. 2010). The contribution that playing a range of other team sports made towards their development into elite athletes also supports the literature on the development of sporting expertise that accounts for context and which we refer to in the introduction (see, Côtē et al. 2007).

This study was conducted on the very specific group of participants but, as several of them noted in interviews, these ways of learning to play their sport can also be applicable to non-Indigenous people and other sports. Indigenous Australian players in AFL, NRL and other sports are respected for their expertise and their distinctive style of play that is effective and entertaining. Despite the very strong influence that Aboriginal culture played in their development, we suggest that the detail provided in this study on how they learned to play encourages some thinking about what non-Indigenous coaches and teachers might be able to learn from Indigenous ways of learning to play team sports. While the study focuses on how the participants had to learn how to adapt Aboriginal approaches to the culture of commodified, professional and non-Indigenous sport, we could think about what mainstream sport could learn from how Indigenous approaches to developing the qualities that are so highly valued in the AFL and NRL.

The Development of Sport Expertise

This study provides a particular perspective on the development of sporting expertise and the importance of the socio-cultural environment that is a little different to the majority of the substantial body of work done in this

area. We suggest that this arises from the inductive methodology used and the application of learning and social theory later in the study that assisted in identifying the central role culture played in both developing the foundations of expertise and adapting it to the culture of professional sport. Our findings on the development of expertise do provide strong support for much of the research conducted on sporting expertise over the past few decades but in very culture-specific settings that should make a useful contribution to this body of work. However, our emphasis on socio-cultural context and culture through the use of constructivist learning theory and the social theory of Bourdieu generated knowledge that sits upon different epistemological assumptions to those that underpinning the bulk of the sporting expertise literature. For us, the implication of this is that further research on sporting expertise conducted from this socio-cultural perspective would make a valuable contribution to a broader and deeper understanding of how expertise is developed and how it can be enhanced.

Culture, Sport and Learning

In identifying the central role culture played in the participants' journeys to the AFL and NRL, this study highlights the limitations of considering only individual expertise and how making it to the top of their sports involved far more than a specific set of skills and ability. Locating individual experience in cultural *fields* and *subfields* also allowed us to identify the influence of global social, cultural and economic developments and dynamics on individual development and endeavour. Drawing on Bourdieu's analytic concepts in the latter stages of the study allowed us to locate the detail of individual experience within the dynamics of large-scale social and cultural shifts without losing our humanistic and detailed individual focus on experience and learning. This allowed us to step back and identify how these agents' experiences and development occurred within the context of tensions between the local culture of Aboriginal sporting culture and the culture of globalized, commodified sport. The implications of this may be that it provides an example of effective cross-disciplinary research that locates a detailed micro focus on human experience and learning within larger macro focus on society and culture through the use of Bourdieu's concepts and approach.

Indigenous Education

Debate about Indigenous education in Australia is complex and contentious and we will not attempt to engage in it too deeply here but do make some suggestions about how the understanding emerging from our study might inform or at least be relevant to some of the current debates and thinking about formal education. The core idea to emerge from this study was that the development of expertise in Australian football and rugby league is a lifelong process of learning. That is to say that it is a form of education that involves learning by doing, which is supported by Dewey's (see, 1916/97) proposal that education is not just limited to school and the classroom and that experience is central to learning. This study highlights how learning to play footy did not occur in defined contexts or time but instead, was tied into, and inseparable from, a range of other learning that included the learning of culture.

Learning for any children and young people is not limited to the classroom in isolated episodes. For our 16 participants learning to play footy formed part of broader learning that is not measured, tested or even identified in or out of schools. This is also the case for learning mathematics, English or science in schools for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with Mellor and Corrigan (2004) suggesting the need to include research on Indigenous education in broader research discourses such as those of social psychology and sociology and public and community health. While our study does not focus on formal education or academic learning, its focus on the processes through which the participants learned to play footy and the role of culture and community in it seems to meet this need for a broader consideration of learning.

The challenges of transitioning from playing and learning footy shaped by Aboriginal culture and into the global culture of professional, commodified sport and the tensions between Aboriginal ways of learning, playing and knowing are not far removed from similar issues in formal Indigenous education. Indeed, there seems to be a parallel between this cultural transition and the challenges faced by young Indigenous people who must adjust to a 'hegemony of academic knowledge and theory and a loss of the natural wisdom in everyday life and its mechanisms of consultation and transmission in everyday life' in a schooling system that increasingly prioritizes scientific rationality (Fatnowna and Pickett 2002).

The ways in which this book identifies the challenges of this transition and the ways in which mentors and life learning from community and family assisted the participants' success not only support existing literature on this issue for Indigenous youth and children but offer a different perspective also.

Where to from Here?

For over three years we have been engaged in this study as researchers seeking to generate understanding and new knowledge that began by listening to the personal stories of the 16 participants. Over this time we learned much about how the participants succeeded in climbing to the most elite levels of their sport in Australia, how they developed their expertise and the role that Aboriginal culture played in this learning. We also learned about what the methodology we used has to offer for research on Indigenous people, how to use it to effectively achieve our aims and how it aligned so well with the Aboriginal cultural concept of *dadirri*. We are one non-Indigenous Australian and one Indigenous, but both with a deep desire to develop our understanding and contribute to knowledge about Indigenous Australians and sport and about developing expertise in sport more broadly, which was further stimulated over the course of this study. The combination of using inductive methodology and of being guided by the concept of *dadirri* encouraged a very open-minded approach to the ongoing analysis of data and particularly through the shift to grounded theory from narrative inquiry that is reflected in the way we wrote this book.

The inductive approach we adopted aimed to generate new understanding and knowledge with an open-minded disposition towards letting the data speak and letting it lead us into understanding. The careful listening with more than the ears, empathizing, being patient and showing respect that *dadirri* requires complemented the combined narrative inquiry/grounded theory approach we took to keep generating understanding and knowledge.

The implications we have briefly suggested in this chapter would logically be areas worthy of further inquiry and likely fall into the three areas

of Indigenous studies, sport coaching and the sociology of sport. Within the field of Indigenous studies our study invites research on how the knowledge we have generated might be used in studies on the contribution of sport to Indigenous health, wellbeing, education and sport in and outside schools. As we have already suggested, this study should stimulate thinking about coaching for Indigenous Australians of any age and with more attention paid to Indigenous females and sport. It should also encourage consideration of what can be learned from how our participants developed expertise for any coaching and the use of games and play in this process. Its strong focus on culture and its influence on developing expertise might also encourage paying more attention to culture and context in the sporting expertise literature. Its focus on the central importance of culture also provides a particular example in the sociology of sport of the tensions between local and global sporting culture and their implications.

Afterword

Indigenous Stories of Success in Australian Sport: Journeys to the AFL and NRL is an exceptional book, and I am privileged to have been one of the first to read it. In this brief afterword, I have taken the opportunity to reflect, to look back on what has been achieved and consider what else could have been written.

One of the most impressive aspects of this book is the approach taken by the authors in communicating the stories told to them by the study participants about their experiences across their sporting careers, from when they first learned to play through to becoming an AFL or NRL player. The reader of the volume cannot fail to be impressed by the depth of the stories presented in Parts II and III of the book. Each one of these stories is fascinating in its own right, but when considered collectively they provide a compelling perspective. The authors ambitiously located the theory being developed *within* the narrative. This allowed for a key aim to be realised, which was to "generate new understanding and knowledge with an open-minded disposition toward letting the data speak and letting it lead us into understanding". I am full of admiration for the authors have very skilfully kept the stories intact while identifying emerging themes from which theories grounded in the data were developed.

This approach has so much to offer, and I suspect it is not employed more because it is a very difficult task.

This book has international appeal and will help further promote interest among scholars of Indigenous sport, sports coaches, students and policy makers. In offering a holistic perspective this book will also appeal to readers beyond sport with an interest in lifelong learning in a range of contexts and settings. The approach taken by the authors as noted above does, however, present readers with a challenge. It requires the same patience and immersion in the stories told by the participants that the authors have clearly shown in conducting the research and writing the book. The final section of the book begins to point to some implications of the study for the potential readership, but was rightly left open-ended to allow the stories to remain the heart and soul of the book. Just as the authors have done, readers will need to engage in *dadirri* to actively reflect and interact with the stories in order to draw relevant implications.

To conclude, and in reference to a topic from the current volume— cultural transitions in sport—transitions are considered as *an event or non-event which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships*. It is probably fair to say that Indigenous sport, is itself, in a period of transition in Australia. There has perhaps not been a specific event which has led to this transition, but a greater acknowledgement of the central role culture plays in the development of sport expertise will help manage the corresponding changes required over time.

David Lavallee
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