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ROLE TRANSITIONS OF ELITE AUSTRALIAN RULES  
FOOTBALLERS

by

Vanda Fortunato

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## Abstract

Research on the retirement experiences of elite athletes supports the claim that the transition out of sport can have serious psychological sequelae. Further research is needed to explore the effects of retirement more deeply. This thesis employed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to examine the role transitions of 48 elite Australian Rules Football Players. All footballers had played senior football for one of the 15 AFL clubs. Using in-depth interviews 18 players who had voluntarily retired, 15 players who had retired due to injury, and 15 players who had been deselected were interviewed. The study, through these in-depth interviews, examined nine propositions which were identified as significant in the review of literature. These propositions, while not directly being examined, provided the bases to form the interview guide. From the data collected, nine major themes emerged. The nine major themes were: (i) reason for retirement, (ii) football identity, (iii) satisfaction with football career, (iv) length of retirement, (v) continual involvement in football, (vi) social support, (vii) career outside football, (viii) preparation for retirement, and (ix) age at retirement. These nine themes were explored in detail and provided the study with a focus. The nine themes were significant to the retirement process of the players interviewed in this study. All players spoke of reason for retirement and this was related to how footballers accepted their retirement. Reason for retirement primarily related to feelings of control, with footballers who retired voluntarily discussing feelings of control over the decision to retire, while players who retired due to injury or deselection discussed feeling a lack of control in the decision to retire. All players discussed their lives as footballers and acceptance of

being non-footballers. Players who had voluntarily retired discussed positive feelings in relation to being footballers, while players who had retired due to injury or deselection, while they stated that they enjoyed playing league football, spoke of the difficulties they were experiencing now that they were no longer footballers. Satisfaction with football career was dependent on reason for retirement. Players who voluntarily retired discussed feelings of satisfaction with their football careers, while players who retired due to involuntary reasons spoke of dissatisfaction with their football careers, especially in relation to not being able to fulfil their football ambitions, for example, winning awards and playing in grand finals. The issue of social support appeared to relate to being ready to accept social support, with voluntary retirees feeling well supported, and involuntary retirees feeling a lack of support and understanding, while suggesting that it was hard for them to accept support from family and friends. While all players were employed at the time of interview, having a job did not ease the retirement process for players who had involuntarily retired. The decision to remain involved in football at some level was not influenced by reason for retirement, but was rather an individual choice, with some players expressing the need to be involved in football to help ease the retirement process, while others wanted no involvement in football, feeling it would be too difficult to handle. Players who retired due to injury and deselection spoke of being unprepared for retirement, while players who had retired voluntarily felt well prepared for retirement. Some players who had voluntarily retired gave increasing age as a reason for retirement, while players who had retired due to injury and deselection felt that they were too young to retire. The use of in-depth interviews enabled a rich understanding to be gained of how footballers negotiate their retirement from elite level competition. A number of valuable distinctions were made and several implications were proposed for future research and for practice.

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# Dedication

I wish to dedicate this thesis in the loving memory of my dearest dad, who passed away as I was preparing to submit this thesis. He sacrificed so much, so that I could have so much. I was fortunate because I was able to call him dad. I will always love you and never forget you, fond memories are always ours.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

As individuals we all have roles in life and, at various points of the life cycle, these roles change; for example from being a student to a worker, from being single to being married, from being a child to a parent, from being a worker to being retired. Consequently, life consists of a sequence of societal roles, many of which are associated with family and work, which cohorts enter then leave (Rosow, 1976). This is known as "role transition". George (1990) found that role transitions can be stressful life events. A major topic of interest amongst gerontologists has been the problems assumed to be associated with adjusting to retirement from one's occupation. This (voluntary or non - voluntary) social event has been viewed as a major transition stage for many people with the potential to precipitate adjustment problems for the retiree (Mcpherson, 1983).

Retirement from one's major occupation usually occurs when people are in their early and mid 60s. In sport, retirement from high level competition often happens when people are much younger, usually in their early 30s. It is not clear whether the retirement process of a 30 year old footballer is the same as that of a 60 year old factory or office worker.

This thesis is about retirement from elite sport. In examining the retirement from elite sport, this study examines the retirement experiences the retirement experiences of a group of elite Australian Rules Footballers who retired from playing elite level football either voluntarily or due to involuntary reasons, such as injury or deselection. More specifically, it is about the issues facing footballers as they retire from elite competition. The

study researches areas which footballers rarely talk about, and thereby offers the occasion to open new avenues for discussion about sport retirement research.

### Statement of the Problem

Role transitions of athletes is an issue which has been generally overlooked as an area of specialist research in the past. Due to the development of elite sport, with the associated increase in money involved in sport (e.g., sponsorship, wages), an increased number of elite sports performers training and competing full-time, and ever expanding media interest, increasing attention is being paid to the issues surrounding athletes who are in transition into, out of, or from one role to another in their sports (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blann & Zaichkowsky, 1986, 1988, 1989; Coakley, 1983; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Within this particular "population", and its associated career transitions, it is perceived that coping with retirement might be especially difficult. Typically when athletes retire they are relatively young and generally not prepared for retirement and its consequences. In contemporary western society, financial demands may be imposed on the individual, such as loss of income, possibly for the first time, and there is often a perceived loss of status and self esteem (McPherson, 1980).

Retirement has been traditionally associated with the end of a long working career that has involved financial and life-style planning aimed at helping the older retiree to adjust to the challenges of full-time leisure. A relatively long working career allows the individual to anticipate the likely or expected demands and challenges emanating from retirement. When

elite athletes retire from their careers, however, they are generally quite young. This can make them vulnerable, should they be involved in expected or unexpected termination from their sporting careers.

Vulnerability stems from the fact that many young athletes are generally unprepared for the life-cycle changes of retirement (Blann & Zaichkowsky, 1986). Loss and grief outcomes could be expected as the athlete faces the prospect of loss of identity, self-concept, status and financial security.

### Background to the Problem

Within Australian culture, sport, especially spectator sport plays an important role (Stoddart, 1986). Perhaps no sport receives as much media attention, and attracts such large crowds as Football (Stoddart, 1986). The two codes of football played in Australia are Rugby played in New South Wales, and Queensland, and Australian Rules which dominates Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory (Pascoe, 1995). Australian rules football which was invented in Melbourne in 1858, was originally known as Victorian Rules (Pascoe, 1995).

Australian Rules football was originally a suburban based competition, with each state fielding teams in their major leagues with additional minor and country leagues. In the early 1980s, the then Victorian Football League (VFL) which was by far the strongest state competition in Australia, began fielding teams in other states, with the aim of establishing a national competition (Pascoe, 1995). Country football was in a poor state generally, and mergers were common in some regions as clubs struggled to cope with population shifts and the decline of industry (Pascoe, 1995). By 1990 the Australian Football League was established, replacing the

Victorian Football League. During the evolution from a suburban-based competition to a national league, the role of players changed dramatically (Pascoe, 1995). For example, players earn more money, are expected to spend more time training and attending promotional ventures for their respective club, play more competition based games, and an increasing number of players are now full-time footballers (Pascoe, 1995). Although, these changes have increased the status and the financial standing of players within the sport, no study has been conducted, and no information is available on how players cope with retirement from football.

### Importance of the Research

Most studies conducted on retirement of elite athletes tend to be quantitative in nature. This does not allow for an in-depth understanding of the retirement process of a particular cohort. Using a qualitative, in-depth research technique, the aim of this thesis was to explore and develop an understanding of the transition process of a group of elite Australian Rules Footballers. To achieve this I have utilised a grounded theory methodology. This method of collecting and analysing data has not been utilised in the literature on retirement of elite athletes. The grounded theory methodology not only provides a new technique for examining the retirement process of elite athletes, it also enhances the available literature on retirement, by examining the retirement process of elite athletes from a different perspective to most existing research. It also provides an in-depth examination of the issues associated with retiring from AFL football. This thesis is also the first to study the retirement process of elite Australian Rules Footballers.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter examines the available literature on retirement from elite sport. In particular, the chapter discusses the lack of a theoretical base for looking at retirement in sport. Early work in the area of retirement led researchers to consider sport retirement process from the social perspective within the gerontology field, which examined in-depth the retirement process from the workforce. This literature review first examines the social gerontology theories and their application to sport. As retirement has become topical in recent years, the focus on retirement from sport has developed, leading researchers to raise a number of issues on retirement in elite sport which have then been examined further. This literature review includes; the models which have been developed in an attempt to explain retirement from sport, research on career transitions in sport, studies examining athletes preparation for retirement, and career programs for athletes. This chapter then discusses the aims of this thesis, and states the nine propositions which will be examined in this thesis.

### Social Gerontological Theories

In social gerontology, one of the major topics of interest has been the problems associated with adjusting to retirement. This "social event" has been considered to be a major transition stage with the potential to eventually precipitate adjustment problems for the retiree. Six gerontological theories of retirement from the workforce have been developed. They are: (1) activity theory; (2) disengagement theory; (3) continuity theory; (4) subculture theory; (5) social breakdown theory; and

(6) exchange theory. Each of these is reviewed with particular reference to its applicability to sport.

### Activity Theory

Activity theory was the first theory to attempt to provide a description for successful or ideal ageing in the later years of life. The idea of slowing down, but keeping active, in order to adjust successfully to ageing was suggested by Havighurst and Albrecht (1953). They studied a stratified random sample of 100 individuals, drawn from 670 persons aged above 65 years in a small mid-western town in the USA. Data was gathered by interview methods. This was primarily a cross-sectional study, although some interviews were repeated. There were three measures. One was a "role instrument" consisting of a set of 13 role areas with 10 levels of activity defined in each role area. Havighurst and Albrecht also employed two measures of personal adjustment. One was an attitude inventory, designed to measure feelings of happiness, usefulness, and satisfaction with activities, health, and economic status. The other was the Cavan Adjustment Rating Scales (Burgess, Cavan, & Havighurst, 1940). Questions about socially approved activity and health were also included. Findings indicated that, in general, a high degree of activity in one role was associated with a high degree of activity in other roles. Mean role activity scores were higher for women than men, and a gradual decrease of role activity with age, associated with declining social status, was noted. Married participants showed higher activity scores. As some roles decreased, compensation was made by increasing other activities. Positive correlations were noted between activity levels and attitude and adjustment scores. The major concepts in activity theory are activity and life

satisfaction. Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson (1982) presented a formalised statement of activity theory that linked activity theory with role theory and included some concepts of role theory. The definition of activity theory omitted the definitions of role support, and role loss. Their definition is as follows:

Activity, is any regularised or patterned action or pursuit that is regarded as beyond routine physical or personal maintenance. Three types of activity are defined: informal - social interaction with relatives, friends, and neighbours; formal - social participation in formal voluntary organisations; and solitary - pursuits, such as watching television, reading, and engaging in hobbies of a solitary nature (p. 511).

Burgees (1960) suggested that old age should not be viewed as a "roleless role," but that individuals should replace lost roles or social activities with new roles. Activity theory argues that individual adaptation involves continuing an active life replacing lost roles, by either re-engaging in earlier roles or engaging in new roles.

The basic assumptions of this theory are:

1. that the middle-aged and the aged have identical psychological needs;
2. that individuals will resist giving up roles in order to stay active;
3. that successful ageing involves a substitution of lost roles (spouse, friend, or worker) or lost activities (work, child bearing, or sport) with new roles or activities in order to maintain the

self-identity;

4. that suitable roles or activities are available, and
5. that the individual has the capability to become involved in these new domains.

Thus, the basic proposition of the theory is that high activity and maintenance of roles is positively related to a favourable self-concept, positive adjustment, and life satisfaction (Burgees, 1960). Life satisfaction is viewed as the degree to which one is presently content or pleased with his or her general life situation (Lemon, Bengston, & Peterson, 1982).

### Disengagement Theory

Disengagement theory derives from developmental psychology and structural functionalism. Cumming & Henry (1961) developed it as a vehicle to attack activity theory. Disengagement theory, according to Cumming and Henry, operates on the premise that the individual and society seek the maintenance of equilibrium. This can only occur, if there is a progressive loss of social roles and partnerships with age. This process of disengagement is the mechanism by which society enables the replacement of the old by the young with minimal disruption to the functioning of the social system. Disengagement is regarded as a functional necessity because of the inevitability of death, the presumed decline of abilities in old age, the value placed on youth, and the society's need to ensure that roles are efficiently filled and tasks completed. Irrespective of how withdrawal takes place, it is assumed to be mutually satisfying to both the individual and society because it provides relief from normative obligations for the individual and allows younger members of the system to enter functional

roles. The general outcome is that society operates effectively. In this framework, 'successful' ageing is achieved by the older person reducing both activity and effective involvement, seeking more passive roles, and becoming progressively more preoccupied with the inner life.

Disengagement is therefore viewed as appropriate, adaptive behaviour and considered normal, universal, inevitable, and personally satisfying. It is also regarded as a two-way process in which the individual not only withdraws from society, but society also withdraws from the individual. For the society, equilibrium and stability are maintained because older members are replaced in functional roles prior to death ( Aroni & Minichiello, 1992).

Cumming and Henry (1961) based this theory on data from a six year, descriptive study of adult life involving a stratified random sample of 279 Kansas City residents. Participants were physically healthy and middle class with no major economic problems (as determined by the questionnaire). The sample consisted of 172 people aged 50 to 70 years. To include participants over the age of 70, three interviewers were asked to find a group of people over the age of 70. This sample comprised 107 people aged 70 to 90 years (38 of these subjects were over the age of 80). The methodology used was a series of five interviews conducted at 6 month intervals; during each interview, various data was gathered and tests were conducted. Social-structural variables, orientation-attitude variables, and personal variables were measured to determine their correlation to chronological age and to successful ageing that was defined as "morale" (Cummings & Henry, 1961). Three measures or characteristics of disengagement were identified: chronological age (over 65), lack of a central task (i.e., work, marriage, family), and decreased ego investment or object cathexis. Disengagement was postulated to occur in stages. In the

first stage, the fully engaged person was not of advanced age, was involved in work, marriage, and/or family, and had their ego invested in material aspects of life. In the second and third stages, the individual had one and two characteristics of disengagement respectively. The fully disengaged person had all three characteristics. The study results suggested a stable period of morale in the late 40s and 50s followed by a period of crisis between ages 60 and 65. This was followed by a time of relative contentment, after which the crisis was resumed in the person's 70s. Again, following this, a period of good morale was restored throughout very old age. This was interpreted to indicate that highest morale exists among those at the beginning and end of the disengagement process whereas lowest morale is found among those in intermediate transition stages (Cummings & Henry, 1961).

Subsequent to the emergence of disengagement theory, Havighurst (1968) further analysed the data from the Kansas City study. The sample they reported on, consisted of 55% of the original group, described by Cumming and Henry (1961). A total of 159 men and women served as the study group. Data consisted of lengthy and repeated interviews covering aspects of the respondents' life patterns, attitudes, and values. Engagement was divided between psychological and social engagement, and each was measured separately. The two measures of social engagement identified were: (1) amount of time spent in social interaction each day, and (2) role activity, ego-investment, and change in role activity since age 60 (or last 10 years) for all specified roles.

Psychological engagement was measured by responses to the Thematic Apperception Test indicating ego energy and ego style (active, passive, or magical). These measures provided evidence for the process of

disengagement. For the dependent variables, life satisfaction, affect regarding present level of activity in life roles, and affect regarding change in role activity were measured. The Life Satisfaction Index (LSI; Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961) was used for the first measure. The components of the LSI included zest, defined as taking pleasure from everyday life, activities, resolution, and fortitude. Zest was conceived in terms of several characteristics. These included regarding life as meaningful and being accepting of what life had been. Another aspect of zest was the congruence between desired and achieved goals, operationalised as feeling successful in achieving major goals. Positive self-concept and mood tone, defined as maintaining happy and optimistic attitudes, and mood, completed the conception. The second measure of psychological well-being looked only at affect regarding present role activity, that is, how the respondents felt about their present activities. The third measure evaluated how the respondents felt about changes in their role patterns.

Havighurst et al. (1968) indicated that the data provided convincing evidence of disengagement as a process associated with ageing. They noted a decline in both social and psychological engagements with increasing age. They concluded, however, that neither activity theory nor disengagement theory accurately accounted for their findings related to life satisfaction. Those older people who continued with the most activity generally had greater psychological well-being than those with lower activity levels. The relationship, however, was inconsistent, and all four combinations of activity and satisfaction existed, high-high and low-low being the most frequent; neither activity theory nor disengagement theory offered satisfactory explanations for this diversity (Havighurst et al., 1968). It was speculated by Havighurst et al. that the relationship between life satisfaction

and activity was probably influenced by personality type. There was evidence that in normal men and women, there was no sharp discontinuity of personality with age, rather increasing consistency. Personality was considered the important factor in describing patterns of ageing and in determining relationships between role activity and life satisfaction, but no specific personality variables were identified.

Activity theory and disengagement theory appear to describe the outcome of a process like retirement rather than the process itself. A person, according to activity theory, will always adjust and continue, whereas a person, according to disengagement theory, will always disengage. These two theories have not been used to explain an "either/or" situation, where a person may either experience activity or disengagement. In particular, these two theories provide few mechanisms by which to predict whether activity or disengagement will result. Nor do they propose the circumstances under which the retirement transition process will be smooth as opposed to problematic.

### Continuity Theory

Continuity theory argues that as individuals age, they strive to maintain continuity in their lives (Williams & Wirths, 1965). According to the theory, individuals adapt most successfully to ageing if they maintain a lifestyle similar to that developed in the early and middle years. Continuity theory suggests the pattern of adjustment to ageing, and whether it is successful for the individual or not, is highly related to maintaining consistency. As a result, planning for the later years should involve knowledge of, and adherence to, a lifestyle established by the middle years

(Atchley, 1971). Like many social theories of the time, activity theory is a homeostatic or equilibrium model. It assumes that when change occurs, the typical response is to restore the previous equilibrium. Ageing, however, produces changes that cannot be completely offset, so continuity theory was developed as an alternative perspective (Atchley, 1971, 1987; Fox, 1981; Morgan, 1976; Rosow, 1963).

Continuity theory assumes evolution, not homeostasis, and this allows change to be integrated into one's prior history without necessarily causing upheaval or disequilibrium. An evolutionary theory allows the individual to have goals for the direction of development. Continuity theory offers a parsimonious explanation for, and description of, the ways adults employ concepts of their past to conceive of their future, and structure their choices in response to the changes brought about by normal ageing (Atchley, 1989). Continuity is a subjective perception that changes are linked to, and fit with, individual personal history (Cohler, 1982). Continuity can be either internal or external. Researchers have shown that both internal and external continuities are very common aspects of ageing (Atchley, 1987). Internal continuity is defined by the individual in relation to a remembered inner structure, such as the persistence of a psychic structure of ideas, temperament, affect, experiences, preferences, dispositions, and skills. Internal continuity requires memory. Internal continuity is a healthy capacity to see inner change as connected to the individual's past and to see the individual's past as sustaining, supporting, and justifying the new self (Lieberman & Tobin, 1983). External continuity is defined in terms of a remembered structure of physical and social environments, role relationships, and activities. Perceptions of external continuity result from being and doing in familiar environments, practising familiar skills, and interacting with familiar people. External continuity is,

thus, the persistence of a structure of relationships and overt behaviours. These patterns can be seen by others, but the existence of continuity in them can be validated only by making reference to the person's own internal set of ideas about what is typical for him or her (Atchley, 1989). The degree of continuity attributed by an individual to his or her life can be classified into three general categories:

1. too little continuity, which refers to life seeming too unpredictable to the individual;
2. optimum continuity, which means that the individual sees the pace and degree of change to be in line with personal preferences and social demands well within his or her coping capacity;
3. and too much continuity, referring to the individual feeling uncomfortable, that there is not enough change to enrich life.

These are subjective category definitions that cannot be used to classify people with regard to the degree of continuity. Instead, individuals must classify themselves based on their own interpretations of their own standards. Although there are regularities or normative standards with regard to perceptions of continuity, the assessment itself must still be made by the individual (Atchley, 1989).

### Exchange Theory

The basic proposition for an alternative interpretative theory is that human beings engage in social interaction in which they attempt to influence one another. This is done by exchanging rewards. It is assumed

that humans seek rewards from each other and are therefore forced into exchange relations. Thus, the primary focus of microsociology is the study of social interaction and the exchanges it entails, and the explanation of the regularities or patterns (or lack of them) arising from such interactions and exchanges. Interaction between human beings is the fundamental social process for microsociologists. At least two microsociological theories have developed in the study of ageing. In social gerontology, de Beauvoir (1972) and Dowd (1975) applied exchange theory to explain the status of the elderly. This theoretical approach was drawn originally from anthropology (Maus, 1954), behavioural psychology, and utilitarian economics. It was first advanced as sociological theory by Homans (1961) and Blau (1963). It is based on at least four basic assumptions:

1. individuals try to choose interactions from which they will 'profit' in some fashion - be it economic, psychological, or social. Individuals and groups attempt to act rationally in order to maximise rewards or profits to themselves and to minimise costs. Reciprocity is regarded as implicit in such interactions;
2. individuals assess their past experiences of exchange in order to predict the outcomes of exchanges in the present and future and they do this by using a cost/benefit analysis;
3. it is assumed that interaction between individuals will be sustained as long as it is judged to be more rewarding than costly;
4. and power is derived from imbalances in social exchange where, if one individual is dependent on another, the former loses power whereas the latter accrues it.

Social-exchange theory has been used to explain the structured inequality between different age strata. Simmons (1945) pointed out that the status of the aged was directly tied to the relationships that older people maintained with other generations, particularly their ability to sustain them as reciprocal relationships. One of the first pieces of research which applied social-exchange theory to the study of older people was conducted by Martin (1971). In an examination of family visiting patterns, Martin concluded that the only source of power held by older family members was to remind others of their obligation to visit which, in effect, put the older family members in a dependent and deferent position. Alternatively, some older family members did hold other sources of power in their interactions, such as providing an inheritance or telling interesting anecdotes. More recently, Dowd (1975, 1980) advanced a theory of ageing as exchange, where social interaction between individuals is derived from attempts to maximise rewards and minimise costs, whether they are material or non-material. Dowd stated that balance occurs when:

both parties in the exchange relation are equally dependent upon each other (that is to say, they both are equally desirous of the rewards offered by the other and have similar outside resources from which to obtain the reward)...(pp. 588-9).

Social interaction involves reciprocity, with each actor in the relationship attempting to achieve a favourable balance of costs and rewards. Power is derived from the ability or inability to reciprocate. Dowd argues that when individuals enter their later years, they have fewer resources, other than experience, to exchange. As a result of this, their relative social power diminishes and this causes them to become more compliant. This is illustrated by their involvement in unequal relationships

where they incur greater costs and fewer rewards. Dowd (1975) argues that the "aged have very little to exchange which is of any instrumental value and that the only elements of 'social currency' available to them are compliance and esteem" (p. 590). It is often argued that a primary reward or benefit desired by the aged is autonomy, yet they do not have access to the resources in society that are used to gain and maintain independence and autonomy (Clark, 1972; Russell, 1981). In other words, older people lose power or the ability to control their own environments when they are forced to accept the retirement role in exchange for pensions and limited social services. They cannot participate in the labour market and therefore lose access to two highly valued power resources: positions of authority and material possessions. Even so, most older people try to maintain a degree of reciprocity and sustain an active, independent role in the management of their own lives. Dowd (1980) suggests that in order to develop effective policies and services for older people, strategies to increase or maximise their resources, that is, those resources that are valued highly by society, should be adopted.

### Subculture Theory

Activity, disengagement, and continuity theories are the most discussed theories in the gerontological literature. Exchange theory is adequately discussed in the gerontological literature, but subculture and social breakdown theories are often neglected in the literature. These two theories have not enjoyed the popularity of the other theories, however, a brief summary of the two theories is provided and, later, their application to sport retirement is discussed.

Subculture theory (Rose, 1965) builds upon activity theory and adds the possibility of subcultural norms that are different from those of the encompassing society. Thus, it is possible for an older person to be less active and well adjusted to old age. Rose emphasised that declining activity is a cultural norm. As this theory has not been popular in the gerontological literature very little research and theoretical analysis has been conducted on this theory.

### Social Breakdown Theory

The social breakdown theory was initially developed to help explain the genesis of mental disorder in a general population. It was then adapted to ageing by Kuypers and Bengston (1973). The theory proposes that with role loss, for example, retirement or widowhood, one becomes increasingly susceptible to external labelling. If the prevailing social evaluation of one's status is unfavourable, one withdraws and reduces or eliminates certain activities. The skills for these activities then atrophy, 'proving' that one is indeed no longer fit for such activities. This can promote further role loss or withdrawal and the cycle continues. Kuypers and Bengston propose a "Social Reconstruction" cycle to restore and maintain a more positive self-image. Image-enhancing mechanisms include alternatives to the traditional work ethic, increased self-reliance, and maintenance of skills. Thus, counselling and other forms of external intervention can combat the social breakdown cycle. As with subculture theory, this theory has also not been popular within the gerontological literature and thus little research is available on this theory.

## Social Gerontological Theories Applied to Sport Retirement

Even though not empirically testing them, Rosenberg (1981) examined several prevalent gerontological theories for their suitability of application to athletic retirement. Rosenberg stated that disengagement theory offered little to the understanding of retirement of athletes, because it proposes that the mutual withdrawal of society and the ageing individual is beneficial to both. Rosenberg noted that few athletes willingly withdraw from their sports, therefore, disengagement theory is inappropriate. Activity theory, Rosenberg claimed, is based on the belief that a smoother transition occurs when there is no appreciable change in the retiree's level of activity. Rosenberg, stated that for most athletes, such a situation is nearly impossible, as few non athletes are as physically active as are athletes, and the in-season practice and travel schedule for an athlete would be hard to duplicate outside of sports. In looking at continuity theory, Rosenberg stated that as this theory stresses that the major role of the retiring person is redistributed among remaining roles, no specific substitution is needed, as in activity theory, but there is a more subtle shift of energy and interests. The less dramatic the change, the more continuity in the life of the retiree, and the higher the probability of a better adjustment. Rosenberg believed that because sport is such a major factor in an athlete's life, a simple redistribution of energy is extremely unlikely. Rosenberg provides some interesting comments on the use of gerontological theories in trying to explain athletic retirement, however, his claims are largely based on assumptions with little citation of empirical research to support them. In addition to failing to examine his claims empirically, Rosenberg can be criticised on the basis of his interpretations of the theories or their applications to sport. Disengagement by older adults in many cultures involves a powerful social construction. That is, it has been, and still is by

many, believed that withdrawal is natural and inevitable, and this belief is communicated to older people. Society socialises many older people to disengage. Still, many people are reluctant to retire and would not voluntarily do so in many cases. No such strong societal imperative applies in sport, rather society may be reluctant to lose its sporting heroes and pressures are often brought to bear through the media to reverse decisions to retire. In any event, Rosenberg confuses the decision to retire with its consequences. In sport he is referring to the athlete's decision. In the case of retirement in old age, there is rarely a decision or choice to be made and the theory refers to the process of adjustment to being retired so the focus is on the post-retirement period.

Rosenberg's criticism of activity theory is even less persuasive. Activity theory does not refer to the amount or intensity of physical activity, as in the sense of physical training and competition. Rather, it refers to the proportion of the person's time spent in identifiable instrumental or social interaction, fulfilling various roles that replace the lost role. One possible operationalisation of this in the case of retirement from elite sports performance is the acquisition of large amounts of coaching or administrative work in the sport, ensuring the person remains equally active in the sport in activity theory terms, that is, in terms of the amount of their time, though certainly not expending as much physical energy.

A similar argument can be used to refute Rosenberg's (1981) criticism of continuity theory. Not only is the ex-elite athlete who goes into full-time coaching active in the sport at around the same level as before, in terms of time not energy expenditure, but the transition also involves a minimum of disruption to the individual's main realm of activity and

experience, that is, a high degree of continuity, compared with the athlete who moves out of sport, completely.

Lerch (1981) attempted to use continuity theory, as a model in explaining adjustment of athletes in retirement. He tested his application empirically. His sample comprised 511 male baseball players, who completed a mail questionnaire. He divided the sample into three groups according to the present job status of the athlete and time since the end of his playing career. For the permanently retired respondents, who had been out of baseball for at least 20 years, the variables of present income, health, and preretirement attitude were strongly related to life satisfaction (LS). Level of education was moderately related to LS. For the athletes who had been retired from baseball for at least 20 years but were still working, the variables of present income, preretirement attitude, and level of education were found to be strongly related to present life satisfaction. Finally, for the athletes who were employed but who had been out of baseball for less than 20 years, the variables associated with LS were present income and level of education. Lerch found that none of the variables were directly related to a continued commitment to sports. This finding was a direct contradiction to continuity theory. It should be noted that although Lerch's findings were a contradiction to continuity theory, the methodology chosen for the study focused on adjustment at a time significantly removed from active competition, and does not allow for a direct comparison with the early stages of the transition process. The person's reaction to athletic retirement, may also be confounded with present feelings about recent or impending retirement from work in older members of Lerch's sample.

It could be argued that the gerontological theories have some application to retirement from sport, but it must be noted that these theories

have been disputed in the gerontology literature, and are generally regarded as not providing an adequate explanation of the retirement and ageing process (Marshall, 1986; Matras, 1990; Minichiello, Alexander, & Jones, 1988). A major criticism of these gerontological theories is that they derive from structural functionalist theory. This sociological perspective has received wide criticism in the sociology literature (Cuff & Payne, 1984; Dahrendorf, 1959). The premise of structural functionalism is an over emphasis on social order. The perspective is concerned with equilibrium, conformity, and the status quo, thus neglecting social change and social conflict. The conception of the self and social action is somewhat over determined. Individuals are presented as having little ability to create or negotiate reality. They are portrayed as passive and culturally naive, simply absorbing and internalising societal values. There is little room for explaining the continuous development and change produced in society by individuals and their social action. Rather, structural functionalism tries to explain the maintenance of institutions in terms of needs of society or the contribution of the institution to social integration. Such explanations are also criticised on the grounds that they attribute needs or desires to "society", as if it were an autonomous thinking being with an independent existence separate from its individual members.

More pertinent is that these theories attempt to explain retirement and ageing in older people. They were not designed to explain retirement in younger cohorts and, as in most cases athletes retire at a relative young age, it becomes difficult to adapt theories of ageing and retirement to a much younger population. It might be argued that the gerontological theories provide some useful insights into the understanding of retirement in sport, but their applicability must be questioned.

## Social Death Theories and Sport Retirement

Social death theories derive from the science of thanatology, the field of study which examines death, dying, and grief. Social death refers to the condition of being treated as though one were dead, while still being physiologically and intellectually alive. There is quite a considerable difference between actual death and retiring from sport, thus the concept is only used as an analogy, particularly in designing career assistance and counselling programs. Perhaps the two most interesting thanatological theories, which are discussed by Lerch (1982), provide some useful insights into sport retirement. These are the "awareness context" notion of Glaser and Strauss (1965) and, perhaps the most popular thanatological theory, "stages of dying" developed by Kubler-Ross (1969).

Glaser and Strauss (1965) in their classic study on "Awareness of Dying", examined the communication patterns between dying persons and those interacting with them. They identified four awareness contexts, defined as "what each interacting person knows of the patient's defined status, along with his recognition of others' awareness of his own definition" (p. 10). These four contexts are:

1. Closed awareness: The person does not know that they are dying even though medical personnel and family members know it.
2. Suspected awareness: The person does not know but suspects, with varying degrees of certainty, that they are dying. The medical staff and family know that the person is terminally ill.
3. Mutual pretence: The terminally ill person, medical

personnel, and family know the person is dying but there is tacit agreement to act as if this were not the case.

4. Open awareness: The patient, medical personnel, and family recognise and openly acknowledge that the patient is dying.

Gordon (1995) provides a summary of the Glaser and Strauss (1965) theory as applied to sport. He discusses how closed awareness could apply to situations where an athlete is unaware of plans of being cut, or traded, because failure or deterioration in form is rarely discussed in competitive sport. Although team mates may have seen "the axe" approaching, the player concerned is often surprised and shocked. Suspected awareness is often seen when the athlete suspects that they are about to be cut, and their suspicion is confirmed by the non-verbal communication between themselves and the coaching and administration staff. Mutual pretence, is analogous to make-believe, where all people concerned with the athlete - managers, coaches, trainers, and the athletes themselves - know that no matter how well the athlete performs, their career is nearing its conclusion. If this is not sustained, mutual pretence can only change to the final context, open awareness, where both the athlete and others know that career end is inevitable and they openly acknowledge the fact.

In her classic book entitled "On Death and Dying", Kubler-Ross (1969) delineated five stages to describe the dying person's progression toward acceptance of their impending death. These are:

1. Denial: This stage is typically the initial reaction to the diagnosis of a terminal illness. It is characterised by the statement "No, not me, it cannot be true". Denial is the initial

- defence mechanism used to deal with news of impending death, but it is rather quickly replaced by partial acceptance.
2. Anger: This stage involves feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment as the dying person attempts to answer the question, "Why me?"
  3. Bargaining: This stage involves an attempt to postpone the inevitable by asking that death be delayed in return for such things as "a life in the service of the church" or similar promises.
  4. Depression: This stage is marked by two types of depression. The first is reactive depression, resulting from losses that are experienced as a part of the illness, and the second is preparatory depression, which anticipates impending losses such as separation from family.
  5. Acceptance: This stage is marked by "a degree of quiet expectation". The individual no longer actively struggles to survive.

Lerch (1982) suggests parallels with athletes coping with social death. In the first stage, denial, the athlete may make statements such as "no, it's not true", "I'm still fit". This may be followed by anger where the athlete may ask such questions as "why me?, why now?". In the next stage, which Kubler-Ross describes as bargaining, the athlete may make statements such as, "I'll do anything to stay in the game". Depression is the next stage and the athlete may make statements such as "I can't bear the thought of not playing". Finally, the acceptance stage occurs, where the athlete accepts his career has ended and may make statements such as "It's happened, my competitive sport career is over", and may ask the question "What now?". Rosenberg (1982) and Lerch (1982) state that the analogy of

the concept of social death can be useful in explaining athletic career endings, especially when retirement is involuntary.

### Models of Retirement in Sport

Due to the lack of satisfaction with the gerontological and thanatological theories, sport researchers have sought other approaches in an attempt to explain retirement from sport. One such approach has been to develop models based on the sport context and existing research on athletic retirement. Sussman (1971) was an early researcher who developed a model that presents a range of factors that affect an individual's retirement. The variables included personal factors such as life-style, needs, goals, problem-solving skills, and personal values; situational and structural variables, such as circumstances of retirement, preretirement preparation, and retirement income, and boundary constraints such as societal definitions and professional organisational postures. Sussman also suggested that these variables will influence the perception of the situation and the choice of options, use of previous experiences, and anticipatory behaviours. The perception, then, results in the use or non use of linking systems, including voluntary organisations and friendship groups. Sussman's (1971) model has been applied to describe the factors associated with the retirement transition without making any predictions about the ease of transition or the outcomes of career transition of the elite athletes. The model has been used as an analytic device for the study of retirement from a sociological perspective.

Hill and Lowe (1974) used Sussman's (1971) process model for transition from sport, in a questionnaire study of retiring athletes. They

concluded that the age of the athletes, their life-style, and their unusual development left them vulnerable to a stressful retirement process.

Retirement thus marks the first time in the athlete's life when he is deprived of the satisfaction which sport has always given him. It is in his adjustment to a lifestyle in which he cannot rely upon sport to provide these satisfactions that the athlete experiences difficulties in retiring gracefully. Such a compounding of difficulties is not encountered in the retiree of 60 or 65 years.  
(p. 6)

This perhaps is not an accurate assessment by Hill and Lowe, as for many people their work role is closely linked to their status, self-concept, financial security, motivation and interests, thus regardless of age, these people experience difficulties when they retire from the workforce (Rosow, 1976).

In her transition model, Schlossberg (1981, 1984), theorises that three interacting factors affect adaptation:

1. characteristics of the transition, e.g., the trigger, timing, source, and duration of the transition, role changes, current stress involved, and the individual's previous experience with transition;
2. characteristics of the individual, e.g., personal and demographic characteristics, socio-economic status, sex role, age and stage of life, state of health, as well as psychological characteristics such as ego development, personality, outlook, and coping skills;

3. and characteristics of the environment, e.g.. social support networks and options available for the athlete outside sport.

All three interacting factors are viewed as potential assets or liabilities, depending upon the individual's appraisal of the situation (the transition), self, and personal environment, and may provide a clear, flexible, and multidimensional approach to the understanding of variables related to successful adjustment (Crook & Robertson, 1991). The tenets of transition models are supported by both Pearson and Petitpas (1990) and Ogilvie and Taylor (1993b), who suggest that experiences and responses to transition may be differentiated on the basis of whether or not athletes "retire" because of deselection, age, or injury.

Researchers have attempted to explain retirement of elite athletes by developing models. Using models from Crook and Robertson (1991), Pearson and Petitpas (1990), Ogilvie and Taylor (1993b) and Schlossberg (1981, 1984), Gordon (1995) developed a conceptual model of the career transition process in competitive sport. The model illustrated the causal factors that initiate career transition, factors that may differentiate responses to transitions, tertiary factors that might mediate the trauma associated with transitions, and interventions or treatment modalities for career transition and career assistance. Models such as these enhance the literature in the area of career transitions of athletes and provide an avenue for discussion, but data supporting or refuting these models also needs to be provided. Presently, the number of studies that have examined retirement from sport from the perspective of such models is small. In order to provide a detailed account and analysis of retirement, in-depth research using qualitative methods needs to be undertaken.

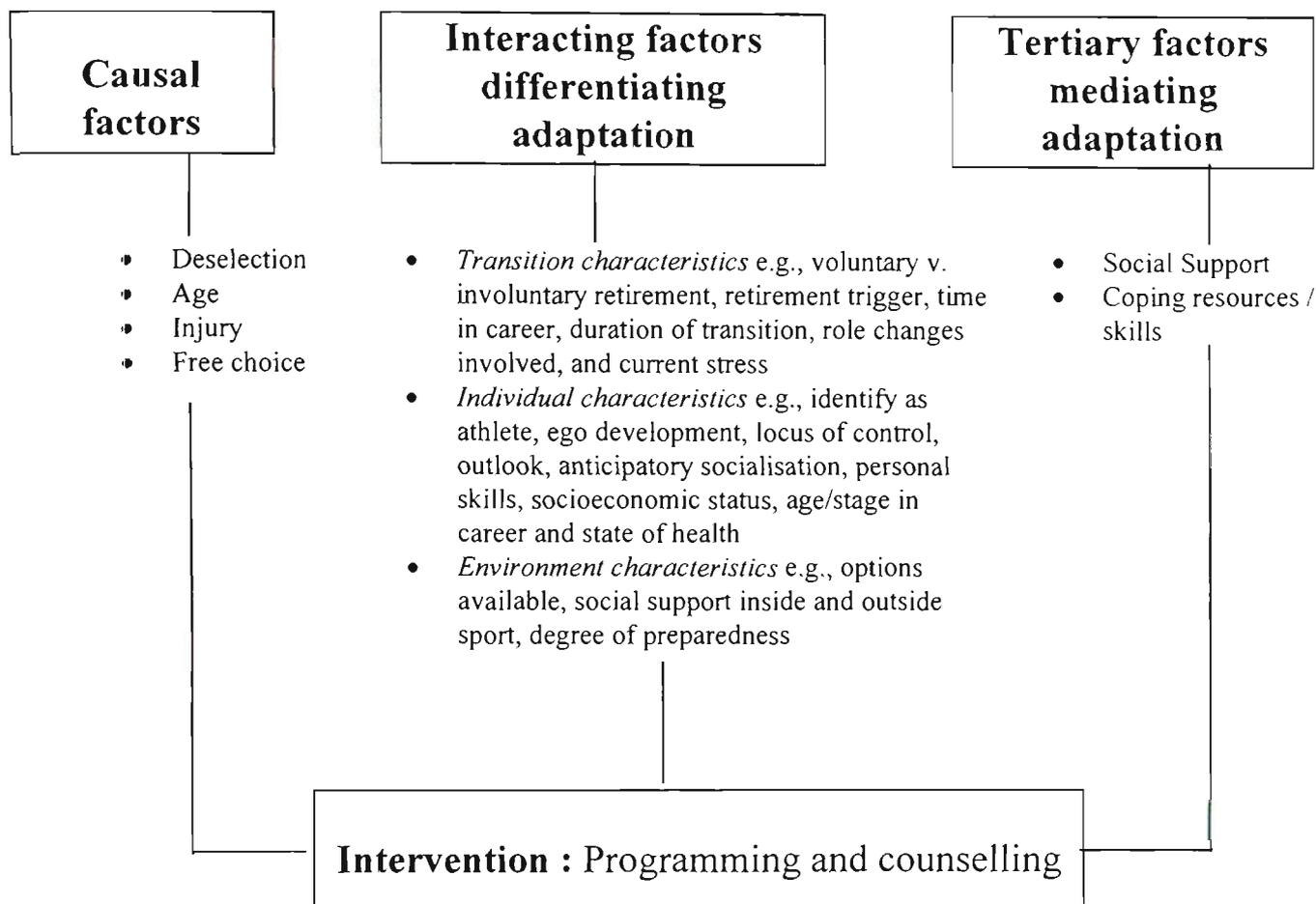


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the career transition process in Competitive Sport (Gordon,1995).

### Research on Career Transitions in Sport

The available research on career transitions in sport suggests that the process of "career transition" for many athletes may be difficult and disruptive (Baillie & Danish, 1992). The popular reason given regarding the existence of "difficulty" at retirement for athletes, is that it is a result of the developmental history of involvement and socialisation in sports competition (McPherson, 1980). In an analysis of the socialisation features of participation in sports, McPherson (1980) suggested that socialisation into sport is a process that begins at primary school. Early activity and involvement in sports are reinforced by significant others. This process, combined with success in sports, leads to a state of "prestige," which in turn

"leads to a definition and ego-involvement of the self as an athlete" (McPherson, 1980, p. 127). McPherson noted that the most serious consequence is that the athlete expends a great deal of mental energy. That energy is so directed toward sports that the individual's self-esteem becomes based on athletic performance and that little energy remains for other areas of personal development. It would appear that the athlete is so focused on sport that it is "often to the neglect of education and participation in other social domains" (McPherson, 1980, p. 128). As a consequence, McPherson (1980) suggested that once athletes become established in the role, then their attention is on success in the respective sport. The athletes do not consider that their career is likely to be brief and, therefore, do not develop any contingencies or post-career plans. McPherson (1980) also suggests that retirement poses a threat to the athlete's identity.

The athlete experiences this loss of self-respect and the need to be socially significant. In the case of the athlete, the problem is more critical because he or she has become accustomed to living in the public eye and because retirement before 35 years of age is not normally socially sanctioned. (p. 130).

McPherson (1980) also summarised major decision-making factors that are involved in the retirement process:

Barring serious injury, the decision to retire is normally delayed as long as possible and is influenced by the level of educational attainment, the present and future financial position, the awareness and acceptance of declining athletic skills, the perceived career opportunities after the athletic career, and the

amount of anticipatory socialisation for the post-playing stage of the life cycle (p. 133).

Studies of the process of role transitions of athletes were rare before 1980. The two most commonly cited papers in the literature were those of Haerle (1975) and Mihovilovic (1968). Haerle (1975), conducted a study involving 312 retired baseball players in the USA. The study focused on the preparations athletes make for their retirement and on their attitudes when the event occurs. The results of this study support the anecdotal notion that athletes only begin to consider retirement when it becomes imminent. Of the respondents in the study, 75% did not even begin to consider the post sports life until they were in the last quarter of their playing careers, usually in their early 30s. Results also showed that 50% of the athletes were more psychologically oriented toward the past (clinging to the sport) than to the future at the time of retirement; only 25% were future-oriented (accepting their retirement and making suitable plans). Haerle found that fame in baseball was the most significant factor only in attainment of the first post playing job. Educational attainment was more significant in predicting later careers. In addition, Haerle found that those players who chose to stay in baseball faced a less stable career path than those who withdrew completely from the sport.

In a study based on the use of questionnaires and interviews, Mihovilovic (1968) asked 44 male Yugoslavian soccer players, about their post-athletic careers. The three-part study analysed the reasons for career termination, the reactions of peers, and the ways the effects of retirement could be eased. Mihovilovic (1968) found that only five percent of the players retired voluntarily; other players retired as a result of injury, age, club conditions, or elimination by younger players. For 52% of the players,

retirement was a sudden event and highly correlated with illness, family issues, or age. For the remaining 48%, the retirement was gradual. Of the players forming the sample, 66% had retired after their skills had begun to decline; 34% retired at their peak. Of significance, the study also revealed that there had been various attempts by members of the retired group to block the success of younger players, with examples of sabotage or boycotting, indicating the unwillingness of the older players to accept the new team members. In respect of the players whose transition from active play was gradual, Mihovilovic (1968) offered two explanations; (i) that players were simply holding on for as long as they could; and (ii) that the gradual transition was an easier one for the athlete to accept and was, therefore, the preferred one.

In the end, though, the athlete who stayed on despite declining skills left his career planning in the hands of management, making a sudden cut all the more likely. The participants suggested that a smooth transition for an athlete could be facilitated by maintaining contact with his former club, by participating in tournaments, by public recognition from the club, or by being used in coaching or other capacities that made use of his experience. Mihovilovic concluded that the transition from active sports to other employment was a serious social problem that required recognition and correction. This was a rather strong statement made by Mihovilovic, considering that the questionnaire and interview study was based on a small sample and involved only one sport. It did, however, show some foresight.

In a survey of 28 retired female tennis professionals, using open-ended items in a mailed questionnaire, Allison and Meyer (1988), found that 60% of the 20 respondents commented that they had never intended to become professionals and had stayed in the sport longer than was originally planned. Fifty percent expressed feelings of relief upon retirement because

they had high levels of frustration while on tour; 30% reported initial feelings of isolation and loss of identity upon retirement. This is an atypical study, because of the lack of intention, however, it is worth noting that there were still some problems for a significant number, 12 of the 20 respondents.

In a study using open-ended interview questions to examine the transition of 28 Canadian Olympians, Werthner and Orlick (1986) suggested that there are seven factors that appear to have "an important role in determining the nature of the transition out of sport for a great number of athletes" (p. 351). The seven common factors were: (1) new focus, which related to whether the athlete had alternatives or options to sport participation, this appeared to allow for a sense of redirection of attention and energy that had previously been consumed by the sport; (2) a sense of accomplishment, which related to whether the athletes perceived that they achieved their goals from their sport; (3) coaches, whereby it appeared that the transition was more difficult if the athletes perceived that they had few good coaches or had conflicts with their coaches; (4) injuries/health problems, such that players who had their careers prematurely terminated due to injury had negative experiences in their transition from sport; (5) politics/sport-association problems, where there was a perception that the sport was influenced by politics or problems with the sporting association had negative influences on the transition; (6) finances, so that retirement due to the lack of funding and the high costs involved in training and preparation resulted in negative consequences for the athlete and a sense of bitterness; (7) support of family and friends, such that athletes who received social support from family and friends reported this support as a positive factor in their transition, whereas athletes who did not receive this support reported more difficulties in the transition process. Werthner and Orlick (1986) found that most of the athletes remembered their lives as elite

athletes in positive and enjoyable terms and that most reported experiencing difficulty in their "transition from international athlete to ordinary citizen" (p. 360). This study which used open ended interviews provided athletes with the opportunity to discuss in some detail the factors which affect athletic transition and retirement.

In a study of ex-elite Canadian athletes, Svoboda and Vanek (1982) found that 83% of these athletes admitted to a variety of psychological, social, and vocational conflicts upon retirement from sport. Asked to rate their coping skills, 38% stated that they were able to confront and deal with the termination immediately; 15% took less than six months; 8% one year; 17% up to three years; 4% more than three years; and 18% admitted they were still in the process of trying to cope after more than three years.

Baillie (1992), studied 260 former elite and professional athletes, surveying them in relation to their experiences about leaving sport. The adjustment to the transition from competition was measured by such variables as level of family disruption, feelings of loss, acceptance of the situation, valuing new pursuits, and self-rated satisfaction with the transition process. Using these criteria, Baillie found that athletes tended to adjust better to the end of their sports careers when they had:

1. retired by choice
2. accomplished their goals
3. been able to remain as involved in their sports as they would like
4. completed college undergraduate programs, and
5. been able to disengage from their sports at or shortly after the peak of their careers (p. 78).

Baillie proposed that the adjustment of the athlete is dependent on the way the transition is structured.

Wylleman, de Knop, Menkehorst, Theeboom, and Annerel (1993) in their study involving 44 Belgian ex-Olympic athletes, found that 45.5% reported:

lack of pre-retirement planning and the failing of official organisations such as sports federations, the Olympic Committee, and the Flemish Bureau for the Top-Level Sport, had the most influence on the way in which their career termination and the following phase of adaptation and social integration evolved (mostly problematically) (p. 904).

On the bases of all this research, it appears that the major conclusions are that retirement from elite sport may be difficult for many athletes, that sport provides athletes with identity, status, self-concept and financial security, that for most athletes retirement is only considered when it becomes imminent, and for many athletes retirement is a sudden event.

#### Studies Examining Current Athletes Perceptions and Preparation for Retirement

McFadden and Tucker (1986), in their survey of the membership of the National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA), administered questionnaires to 274 players and 90 wives or girlfriends who attended career-planning seminars. In the sample, 93% of the players and 91% of the

wives or girlfriends felt that it was very important to plan for retirement from professional hockey. The remaining percentage felt that it was moderately important. Ninety-six percent of the players stated that they thought about the financial adjustments to retirement sometimes or often, and 93% expressed the same frequencies of thought toward family and lifestyle adjustments. Lowest in frequency in the results was the frequency of thoughts about emotional and psychological adjustments after retirement. Interestingly, only 17% of the players thought about these adjustments often, 26% stated that they did not think about them at all, and 57% thought about them sometimes. Although 58% of the players stated that they were taking concrete steps to prepare for a post-hockey career, 83% expressed the view that they had not devoted enough time and energy to such planning. Only 37% of the players felt that it was important to start planning for retirement from hockey prior to entry into the NHL. An additional 49% thought that it was important that such planning start during the first half of their NHL careers. This study produced some interesting findings. The most significant finding was that, while it remains a popular belief that elite athletes do not consider retirement before it becomes imminent or is forced upon them, this study indicated that the majority of athletes considered it very important to plan for their eventual retirement.

Using Blann's (1984) Professional Athletes Career Transition Inventory (PACTI), Blann and Zaichkowsky (1989) surveyed 117 National Hockey League (NHL) and 214 Major League Baseball (MLB) players. Responses of these highly paid, professional athletes on both career awareness and career transition needs are summarised in Figure 2.

The two most helpful career planning programs, perceived by both the NHL and MBL players, were seminars and individual counselling to

help players understand their personal strengths, interests, and skills related to careers, and assistance to help players develop and carry out education/training programs and career action plans. The two least helpful types of services were arranging for jobs during the off-season, and help in developing and carrying out job search campaigns.

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**In relation to career awareness:**

1. 53% of NHL and 70% of MLB players delayed planning for post-sport career;
2. 46% of NHL and 27% of MLB players stated knowing resources to use to obtain a job;
3. 23% of NHL and 28% of MLB players claimed to knowing personal background related to best suited job / career options; and
4. 43% of NHL and 36% of MLB players engaged in off-season career / work.

**In relation to career transition needs:**

1. 37% of NHL and 25% of MLB players had a post-sport career plan;
  2. 85% of NHL and 97% players wanted help with post-career planning;
  3. 54% of NHL and 19% of MLB players claimed to have adequate financing for two years start-up for a new career / retirement;
  4. 68% of NHL and 67% of MLB players believed post-sport career planning as being critical to life satisfaction after sport.
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Figure 2. National Hockey League and Major League Baseball career awareness and career transition needs (Following Blann & Zaichkowsky, 1984).

Hawkins and Blann (1993) completed a survey of the career transition needs of a sample of elite male and female athletes. Following pilot work to establish "cross cultural equivalency" in items from the Professional Athletes Career Transitions Inventory (PACTI; Blann & Zaichkowsky, 1986) adapted to suit Australian participants, The Australian Athletes Career Transition Inventory (AACTI) was administered to 124 elite amateur athletes (69 males; 55 females) from the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) and Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS). The sample represented 19 sports including a broad range of individual and team sports. The main purposes of the survey were:

(1) to develop an instrument to assess Australian athletes' career development and awareness needs; (2) to assess athletes' levels of career awareness needs, (3) to assess athletes' levels of career awareness, post-sport career planning involvement, and career transition needs, (4) to elicit views on the types of programs most useful in meeting career transition needs; and (5) to explore perceptions of life satisfaction after sport (projected in the future).

Hawkins and Blann (1993) reported that: (1) athletes in general had a higher awareness of the need for career development than did their coaches, although there were gender differences in this awareness, (2) male athletes generally expected a prolonged athletic career, which was often unrealistically long for the majority of athletes, but they also had more specific career goals than did the female athletes, (3) male athletes were more interested in internship programs and specific job experiences than the female athletes; (4) female athletes were more interested in assistance in identifying their personal qualities, and the career that best matched those qualities, compared to males, (5) both males and females agreed that programs using individual counselling or small group counselling would be

most effective and that such programs would be most helpful if delivered both during and after their sport careers. While this study did not involve AFL players, it is of significance to the current thesis as it used an Australian sample. Hawkins and Blann provided much needed research into the thoughts about and planning for retirement of Australian athletes, as this area of research had been previously neglected in the literature by Australian researchers.

### Career Programs for Athletes

The available literature on career transitions of elite athletes emphasises the need to develop programs and services for these athletes to help them cope with the transition process (Gordon, 1995; Murphy, 1995). One such successful program was the Career Assistance Program for Athletes (CAPA) which was developed in 1988 with funding from the United States Olympic Foundation and the Olympic Job Opportunities Program. The program was developed following a needs assessment survey among approximately 1800 Olympic and Pan-American Games team members who had participated internationally from 1980 to 1988. A small group of counsellors, sport psychologists, sociologists, elite athletes, Olympic Training Center personnel, and career development specialists met to design the program. The group decided that a life-span developmental model (Danish & D'Augelli, 1980), focusing on "preparation for transition" and "enhancement of personal skills" would be the appropriate framework. This program was closely tied to the idea that athletes can increase their sense of personal competence through understanding and identifying the transferable skills they acquire through sports participation (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1990). In a life-span developmental approach three types

of intervention are provided; (1) enhancement of coping skills to deal with future transitions; (2) social support systems in place while the athlete is making the decision or is forced to retire; and (3) counselling, that allows athletes to share their feelings after, as well as before, a transition (e.g., retirement) takes place.

These interventions are reflected in the philosophy of the CAPA workshops, seminars, and workbook content and material, which athletes were introduced to in lectures and through small group discussions. Workshops focused on three main topics: (1) managing the emotional and social impact of transitions; (2) increasing understanding and awareness of personal qualities relevant to coping with transitions and career development; and (3) introducing information about the world of work (Petitpas et al., 1992).

The initial responses of the 142 athletes (77 males; 65 females) who participated in a formal evaluation of the first CAPA workshop were very positive. Seventy-two percent were very satisfied with the workshop, 84% felt it met or exceeded their expectations, and 98% indicated that they would recommend it to other athletes. Small group discussions, sharing feelings with other athletes, and presentations on transferable skills were rated most valuable and useful workshop activities, although some participants felt that there was too much information given in one day. Subsequent to this positive feedback, CAPA staff developed additional resources, such as a revised CAPA Workbook, a CAPA Workshop Presenter's Guide, and a Group Facilitator's Guide. In 1993, however, funding for the program was suspended.

In 1990 the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) developed the Athlete Career Education (ACE) program. Athletes who hold VIS scholarships are eligible to enrol in this program, which offers 27 workshops on various aspects of career education and personal and social development. The program includes four areas: (1) seven workshops which cover Presentation; (2) four workshops on Career Planning; (3) nine workshops on Personal Development; and (4) seven workshops on Education. Athletes also attend monthly counselling sessions to assess needs and priorities, to set goals and to review progress. Currently the VIS has over 450 athletes who are involved in this program. The program is now also a national program with all state based institutes of sport offering a similar program (Fortunato, Anderson, Morris & Seedsman, 1995).

While these programs are most important for athletes, there are four points to consider:

1. At present the number of career education programs for athletes is limited.
2. There remains a degree of uncertainty as to what services these programs should be providing, especially to minimise retirement problems.
3. Although these programs do exist there are a lot of athletes who will retire without receiving support, so there is still a need for a program for post retirement counselling for these athletes.
4. Even among those athletes who experience a career education program, it is likely that some athletes will still experience problems when they retire.

These points reinforce the need for further research to be undertaken on the retirement process. It is only by continuing to increase the understanding of the retirement process and those factors that affect the experience of retiring from elite sport that more effective preparation and remedial counselling will be developed.

### Present Thesis

A review of the literature provides a framework for the importance and relevance of studying the retirement of elite athletes. The purpose of this thesis was to examine the role transition and retirement process of a group of elite Australian Rules Footballers. The practical outcomes of the study were intended to be to:

1. assist footballers, coaches, and administrators to understand the experiences of retirement from AFL football;
2. add to the literature on retirement from elite sport;
3. provide information on the issues associated with retiring from elite football and elite sport in general;
4. suggest further research in the area of retirement from elite football and elite sport.

### Propositions

The following nine propositions, which were generated from previous research, models, and theories, are included to give further direction and focus to the study. All nine propositions are to be examined and reflect certain assumptions about the research.

1. AFL footballers who retire voluntarily experience a smoother transition than those who retire due to injury.
2. AFL footballers who retire voluntarily experience a smoother transition than those who retire due to deselection.
3. Similarities in the transition process exist between AFL footballers who retire due to injury and those who retire due to deselection.
4. Level of football identity influences the transition process of AFL footballers.
5. Social support from family and friends mitigates negative perceptions of retirement from AFL football.
6. Social support from the club or AFL mitigates negative perceptions of retirement from AFL football.
7. Continued involvement in football eases the retirement process from playing AFL football.
8. Satisfaction with AFL football career eases the retirement process from playing AFL football.
9. Satisfaction with outside football career eases the transition from playing AFL football.

These are really generalisations to be tested and they function not as precise indicators of the issues affecting retirement of AFL footballers but as guidelines in assisting the better understanding of the problems associated with the retirement process. In accepting these nine propositions it should be made clear that I am not inferring that they will determine a complete picture of the nature of the problem.

## Conclusion

Recently, there has been an increase in studies attempting to describe the retirement of elite athletes. These studies have tended to use a quantitative methodological approach, based on questionnaires. This chapter has reviewed a number of theories and models that have been applied to athlete retirement and a range of studies which have been conducted on role transitions and the subsequent retirement of elite athletes.

The available literature on sport retirement has provided the bases for undertaking this study. It was noted earlier in the chapter that even though there have been studies conducted on the transition process of elite athletes, these studies have generally been quantitative in nature. A need exists to develop an in-depth understanding of the transition processes of elite athletes. This thesis, using a qualitative method, aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of the retirement experiences of elite Australian Rules footballers. Instead of a theoretical approach, that is, an approach that tries to fit sport retirement in a procrustean manner into a gerontological or thanatological framework, a qualitative approach may help to contrast a truer picture of elite athlete retirement.

# Chapter 3: Method

## Introduction

The review of the literature revealed some important factors concerning the nature and experience of retirement; such as whether retirement was voluntary, forced by injury, or precipitated by deselection. The issues which appear important in the career transition experience, need to be studied in greater detail. This qualitative study, using in-depth interviewing, examined the career transition experience of a number of elite Australian Rules Footballers who retired between 1992 and 1994.

The rationale for comparing AFL footballers who retired from playing AFL football voluntarily with those who retired due to injury or deselection is that the literature on retirement from elite sports suggests that choice in the decision to retire is an important factor in contributing to a smooth transition out of elite sport (Murphy, 1995). I wanted to establish whether differences in attitudes towards retirement, and issues seen as relevant to their retirement experience, exist between AFL footballers who retire voluntarily, and those who retire due to an involuntary circumstance, such as injury or deselection.

Although, there has been a significant increase in the literature on the retirement experiences of elite athletes, few studies have been conducted from an in-depth, qualitative perspective. The rationale for conducting this study from a qualitative perspective was that I wanted to apply an in-depth analysis to the meanings and processes that AFL footballers identify as significant to their retirement process. A grounded theory methodology was

chosen as it was felt that this would best allow the group of footballers to identify their own perceptions and experiences in the retirement process from AFL football.

### Sample

The sample for this study was chosen to reflect a diverse range of transition situations in which elite Australian Rules Footballers may find themselves, once they retire. Informants were also selected to cover a diversity of transition circumstances which have been identified in the literature as possibly influencing the experience of retirement from elite level sport. The categories included:

1. Australian Rules footballers who retired from playing football at elite level voluntarily.
2. Australian Rules footballers who retired from playing football at an elite level due to injury.
3. Australian Rules footballers who retired from playing football at elite level due to deselection.

The sample was chosen by a combination of two approaches. First, some of the informants contacted were from a pool of players whose names were provided by the Australian Football League. Second, other informants were contacted through a snowball sampling technique. In this technique, each person interviewed was asked if they knew someone else who had played league football, who had been retired for less than 18 months, and who they felt would agree to participate in the study.

The sample consisted of 48 former elite Australian Rules football players. The informants were all males who were aged between 26 and 36. In particular, these footballers had all played senior football for one of the 15 AFL clubs. Eighteen players were chosen who had voluntarily retired, 15 had retired due to injury, and 15 had retired due to deselection. It was decided that only footballers over the age of 24 would be interviewed, as it was felt that it would be difficult to analyse whether adolescent footballers who retired would be going through a similar career change or maturation process. It was felt that adolescents, might still be at the stage of life where careers are being chosen or they may still be at school or in a developmental stage where basic attitudes and beliefs about work are being formed. Also, due to the nature of football, players under the age of 24 have a strong possibility of being re-drafted, (i.e., being selected by another club). Due to the nature of Australian Rules football, an upper age limit was not required, as most players retire voluntarily in their mid to late 30s.

### Research Design

The research design used in this study was a grounded theory approach. This qualitative logic was introduced by two sociologists, Glaser and Strauss (1967). The grounded theory research method uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The major emphasis of grounded theory is to move around a chosen empirical field sampling and analysing data, often sentence by sentence, or phrase by phrase from the field notes, interviews or other documents. Data as small as a single word can be considered. Each sentence, phrase or word is considered in detail, to identify aspects which may be relevant to the analysis. Each piece of data

can be contrasted with other pieces of data by imagining one piece in alternative contexts, or by drawing on relevant theoretical issues. The aim of this analysis is to generate theory which is fully grounded in the data. The analysis refers to development of a theory by drawing or teasing it from the data gathered. Once the categories which have been teased from the data have been developed, the analysis can identify the most relevant categories for further elaboration, and finally proceed to a more integrated analysis around the core categories which emerge from this process (Dey, 1993). The collection of data in each category continues until theoretical saturation occurs. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe theoretical saturation as occurring when:

- (1) no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category;
- (2) the category development is dense, in so far as all the paradigm elements are accounted for, along with variation and process;
- (3) the relationship between categories is well established and validated (p. 188).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) go on to state that "...Unless you strive for this saturation, your theory will be conceptually inadequate" (p. 188).

The methodological thrust of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data is towards development of theory, without any particular commitment to specific kinds of data, lines of research, or particular theoretical interests. Grounded theory is a style of qualitative analysis that includes a number of distinct features, such as theoretical sampling (which refers to sampling the data on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretically relevant to the evolving theory), and certain methodological guidelines, such as the making of constant comparisons and the use of a

coding paradigm, to ensure conceptual development and density (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### Pre Fieldwork

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the research was gaining access to the research setting. This occurred because of the sensitive nature of the research and my attempts to ensure that all ethical considerations were taken into account.

The first step was in seeking a person within the Australian Football League (AFL) to support the study. I made initial contact with a senior staff member, we met and discussed the nature of the study. At that stage, this person seemed very positive about the research and fully supported the study. This was important because by virtue of the office which he held, he had the authority to act as a "gatekeeper" to the footballers (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). This office gave him the power to either support or reject the claim for entry to the research setting. Fortunately, he was extremely supportive and gave much assistance and guidance to entry into the research setting.

One area of major concern was confidentiality. Due to the fact that footballers lead quite a public life, maintaining their anonymity was of extreme importance. In order to maintain confidentiality, while the AFL provided names and addresses of players through the football clubs, neither the AFL nor the clubs are aware of who participated in the study. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, fieldnotes, especially personal and analytical logs, were only used by myself to "make sense of the data", and

as discussed by Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander (1990) were not reproduced in any form.

The other concern expressed by the AFL was possible "trauma" to the player in discussing a retirement that may have been difficult. For example, a player who had been deselected by a club may have issues resulting from the retirement that were not resolved. For this reason it was agreed that counselling would be provided to any player who felt that participating in the study raised issues that had not been resolved and/or were traumatic.

#### Nature of the Data Collection Process

Data was collected through in-depth interviewing, using a recursive model of interviewing. The recursive model of interviewing refers to a form of questioning which is consistently associated with most forms of in-depth interviewing (Minichiello et al., 1990). Recursive questioning relies on the process of conversational interaction itself, that is, the relationship between a current remark and the next one. The recursive model is the most unstructured method of conducting in-depth interviewing; it is also the preferred interviewing technique when using a grounded theory approach (Minichiello et al., 1990). In using this method of questioning, the researcher first needs to decide to what extent prior interaction in an interview session will be allowed to determine what is asked next. Secondly, the researcher decides on the extent to which the experiences and information of previous interview sessions with an informant will be allowed to determine the structure and content of the interviews that follow with other informants (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979).

I utilised an interview technique called transition to refocus the informant's attention on the topic or issue at hand. Interview transitions are accomplished by connecting something that the informant has said previously with the topic at hand (Abrahamson, 1983) and must be distinguished from role transitions, the topic of this research. A distinct advantage of this method (recursive model) in the present context is that it allowed the interviewer to elicit, directly from the informants, the meaning they attached to transitions from elite football and to alter the line of questioning and understanding in the light of information fed back during the research process itself (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). The recursive model of interviewing enabled me to follow a more conversational model of talking and allowed me to treat people and situations as unique. Using this method, the interaction in each interview directed the research process (Minichiello et al., 1990).

### Interview Content

General demographic information was collected at the beginning of each interview on the informant's age, marital status, education level, and occupation (Appendix 1). This data was gathered to establish an informant profile. For the qualitative data collection, I used an interview guide which consisted of a list of general issues, topics, problems, or ideas that I wanted to make certain were covered by each respondent. The interview guide was used to remind me of the issues that I needed to cover. The interview guide consisted of questions which were related to the topic of transitions from elite football. Additional questions were asked, as a result of the interactive nature of the conversation. In general, the guide included the following questions:

1. Can you tell me about your football career?
2. How long has it been since you retired?
3. Why did you retire?
4. Can you tell me about the events leading to you retiring from AFL football?
5. On reflection how did you feel when you first retired?
6. How do you now feel about having retired?
7. When you first retired did you in any way remain involved in the club you played for or in football in general?
8. Do you now have any involvement in football?
9. Did you receive support from the club in making the decision to retire?
10. Did you receive support from your family, spouse, friends in making the decision to retire?
11. Did retiring change any of your family relationships?
12. Did retiring change your relationships with your teammates and club?
13. Were you employed while you played football?
14. How important was your job outside football while you played football?
15. How important is your job now?
16. Has your life changed in any way since you retired from playing AFL football?

The aim of this qualitative interview was to allow informants to freely discuss issues relating to their transition out of AFL football. The first question "Can you tell me about your football career?" was asked to allow informants a free rein of the issues they felt were relevant in their football careers. The question was also asked as I felt that this question

would allow informants to appreciate that the interview was about themselves and that they would be able to discuss issues relating to themselves and their football. This question also provides insight of the informant's perspective, that is, how he felt about his football career, and how important football was in his life. A broad question such as this first question also allowed informants to relax and feel at ease with the interview, giving them an opportunity to talk about a topic with which they were very familiar. Question 2, "How long has it been since you retired?", was asked to determine individual length of retirement. The question was also of relevance in establishing whether length of retirement was significant in individual feelings about the transition process. Question 3, "Why did you retire?", explored perceived reasons that informants had for retiring. The question is of particular significance to assist in establishing whether the informant retired by choice (voluntarily) or was forced to retire (non - voluntary). This is an important aspect of the study because the sport retirement literature suggests that athletes who perceive that they have a choice in their retirement decision cope better with retiring than athletes who perceive that they were forced to retire, but the research is still equivocal. Question 4, "Can you tell me about the events leading to you retiring from AFL football?", was asked to ascertain whether the retirement process had progressed through stages. Question 5, "On reflection how did you feel when you first retired?", and Question 6, "How do you now feel about having retired?", were probing questions to establish how the informant first felt when he retired, and to then establish how he felt about having retired at the time of interview. This was to explore whether time impacts on players' feelings about retirement. Questions 1 to 6 related to the retirement or transition process.

Further questions were asked relating to the informant's social context. Question 7, "When you first retired did you in any way remain involved in the club you played for or in football in general?", and question 8, "Do you now have any involvement in football?", were asked to establish the extent of involvement in football immediately after retirement and at the time of the interview. This is of relevance in trying to establish whether continual involvement in football in some form aided the transition process. Question 9, "Did you receive support from the club in making the decision to retire?", and Question 10, "Did you receive support from family, spouse, friends in making the decision to retire?", were selected to establish whether and to what extent informants received social support in the decision to retire. This is of importance in establishing whether support networks either from within football or external to football mitigated the transition process. Question 11, "Did retiring change any of your family relationships?", and question 12, "Did retiring change your relationships with your teammates and club?", addressed the issue of whether informants perceived that their relationships within their social networks and within football had changed after retirement. This issue of changing relationships was explored in determining whether informants felt that their relationships within or external to football were based on them playing or not playing elite football. Question 13, "Were you employed while you played football?", question 14, "How important was your job outside football while you played football?", and question 15, "How important is your job now?", addressed whether the informant had employment at the time he retired, whether he was satisfied with his employment, and whether this eased his transition. Question 16, "Has your life changed in any way since you retired from playing AFL football?", was asked to establish informants' perceptions on their life after football.

## Gaining Access

After selecting a list of informants, each informant was sent a letter by me (Appendix 2). This letter explained who I was, what my research was about, its significance, and how I had obtained their address, either through the AFL or from the player who provided their name. A cover letter from the Australian Football League endorsing the study was also sent (Appendix 3). I then telephoned each informant, again explaining the nature of the study and asked whether they would agree to an interview. At this point informants were given the opportunity to ask questions and express any concerns that they may have. Informants were told that the data would be collected through a taped, in-depth interview which would take one to two hours to complete. When the informant agreed to an interview, a convenient meeting time was arranged. I phoned the informant the day prior to the interview to confirm the appointment. Interviews were conducted at the homes of informants, their place of work, or my office; the informants chose where they preferred the interview to be conducted. Informants were reassured that no names would be used in the report and that they were free to withdraw at any time. On arrival at the interview they were then asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 4). As indicated to the participants, interviews lasted on average one and a half hours.

## Data Collection Process

After arriving at the interview, I introduced myself, and a general conversation was started. The aim here was to gain the informant's trust and confidence. I then explained the nature of the study, its relevance, and the process. Informants were then reminded that they were free to withdraw at

any time and that their data would be confidential. They then signed consent forms if they were still happy to volunteer for the study. The informants were once again asked if they were happy for the interview to be audio - taped. All informants agreed to this. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, so that the documents could be given to the respondents and verified as a true record of the interview. This followed the guidelines laid down by Spradley (1979), where he notes the importance of an accurate record of the interview and advises that this is best achieved by tape recorded sessions. Questions were asked from the interview guide and further questions were asked and probing enquiries were made, based on the informant's answers. At the end of the interview, informants were thanked, and questions relating to the research were sought. All participants were informed that it was agreed with the AFL that should they (the informants) feel that the interview raised issues relating to their retirement, then counselling would be provided. All informants were told that if they felt issues or concerns arose as a result of the interview, then they should feel free to contact me to discuss them confidentially.

### Fieldnotes

Burgees (1982) discussed the relevance to effective interview practice of making field notes relating to the research process which had occurred for each informant. The researcher kept three types of fieldnote files: 1. personal log; 2. analytical log; and 3. transcript files, to support and illuminate the interview process and content.

Personal log. The researcher kept a personal log. Personal logs, as discussed in Minichiello et al. (1990) include issues, such as those relating to getting in, ethical considerations, interview issues, maintaining relations, and getting out. In the context of the present research these personal log issues focused on the following:

1. Getting in - this describes the process of establishing initial contact with the informant to the point of organising an interview.
2. Ethical considerations - in this section I reflected on issues such as informants' privacy and confidentiality.
3. The interview - here I considered the start of the interview, the conduct of the interview, and reflected on the conduct of the interview after the interview was completed.
4. Maintaining relations - here I reflected on what further interactions I would have with each informant. For example, in some cases a further contact was made by me to clarify issues in the transcript, while in other cases counselling was provided or referrals to other sources, while information was provided for some informants on request.
5. Getting out - here I considered in each case how I would detach myself from the informants.

Analytical log. I also kept an analytical log. As discussed in Minichiello et al. (1990), the analytical log comprised reflective notes on the questions asked and ideas emerging from the data. At the end of each interview I would reflect on the questions that I asked and how the informant responded. The analytical log enabled a review of questions after

each interview. I was also able to identify questions that needed to be included in the following interviews.

Transcript file. The transcript files contained the conversation that was reproduced from the tape recorder. This was an exact reproduction of all the verbal interaction of the interview. The transcript file was organised to enable coding of data for analysis. This included several components: First, there was a cover page, which is found at the beginning of each transcript. The information which was included on the cover sheet included a code for the informant (no names have been used as confidentiality was promised), the number of the interview, the date and place of interview, the length of interview, and background information about the informant including demographic information.

The transcribed file then included the text, that being the reproduction of the interview, which was centred in the middle of the page with wide margins on both the left and right hand of the page. The text identified who said what by the use of initials. The left margin was used to reflect on how I conducted myself during the course of the interview. The right margin was used to write ideas and methodological notes. These were summarised notes, which comprised the information from the personal and analytical files. Transcript files, which formed the raw data, were typically 35 to 50 pages in length for each interview.

### Validity and Reliability

A major aim of in-depth interviewing is for the researcher to try to stay close to the empirical world in order to ensure a close fit between the

data and what people actually say and do. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), this is achieved by calling things by the right names or being concerned with the validity or correctness of one's understanding of the informant's perceptions, view, attitudes, and behaviours.

...our ability to identify a perverse use of terms as perverse depends on the assumption that there is such a thing as calling things by their right names, and this in turn depends on the assumption that there is a common world and that language's relation to it is not wholly arbitrary (Graff, 1979, p. 90).

In-depth interviewing involves constantly engaging in checking perceptions and understandings against a host of possible sources of errors to draw tentative conclusions from the current understanding of the situation (Kirk & Miller, 1986). To ensure validity, the two types of checking that I undertook were recursive interviewing and probing. These methods allowed me to discover the discrepancies in the informant's story. The reason for checking for such discrepancies is that interview statements should not be treated as accurate or distorted versions of reality. As Silverman (1985) argued, "interview data display cultural realities which are neither biased nor accurate but real" (p. 176). Silverman (1985) also stated that:

The researcher's focus should be aimed at analysing the moral and cultural forms that are displayed as they can provide a rich source of data on how people account for both their troubles and good fortune. Therefore, bias and accuracy are still relevant issues. However, they should rather be seen as problems arising only in

the analysis of data, not in the form or content of data (except insofar as participants are troubled by bias or accuracy) (p. 176).

A major concern in qualitative research is that the researcher can never be certain that they have understood all the meanings and cultural implications elicited in the in-depth interviews. Kirk and Miller (1986) suggest, "the sensitive, intelligent fieldworker armed with a good theoretical orientation and good rapport over a long period of time is the best check we can make" (p. 32). Enhanced validity is one of the legitimations for the enhancing of rapport and building a good relationship with your informants. I achieved this rapport by conducting face to face in-depth interviews, this according to Kirk and Miller (1986) is a most effective way of achieving rapport with your informants.

Reliability in research lies in whether the research can be repeated or replicated. It is often pointed out that "the claim to fame" of qualitative research is its ability to provide valid understandings of the meanings informants attach to behaviour, events, attitudes. It is also claimed that its major flaw is in providing and assessing reliability, because of the difficulty of replicating such research. Following Kirk and Miller (1986), who stressed that documentation of the research procedures enhances reliability, I was careful in documentation of all my procedures so that the research conducted could be replicated.

Two main tools for assessing the validity and reliability of qualitative data are the application of techniques termed "reflexivity" and "triangulation" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Reflexivity is the attempt to render explicit the process by which the data findings were produced.

Hammersley (1979) identifies three distinct aspects of reflexivity. These are that:

1. Firstly, it refers to a continual monitoring by the researcher of actions and interpretations in the course of the research of which the researchers' reflection of the role in the data collection was paramount.
2. Secondly, it refers to the ethnographers' recording of the reflections alongside the data which was collected to provide a basis for later methodological assessment.
3. Thirdly, the term reflexivity can refer to the need to make available to the reader, as far as this is possible, the reflexive account of the roles of the individuals in the research and the recorded data which form the basis for the analysis (p. 26).

In the collection of data I was particularly careful to pursue the personal and analytical logs, which enabled me to constantly reflect on my interpretations of informants' direct quotes. I was able to cross check the direct quotes with notes made in the personal and analytical logs which assisted in giving meanings to the direct quotes from reflective notes made in the logs. Thus, the process of constant comparative analysis was directly linked to the triangulation process within the research.

Triangulation is considered to be the most important tool for assessing the validity of qualitative data. This technique combines dissimilar methods such as interviews, observations, and physical evidence to study the same unit (Merriam, 1988). Thus, the flaws of one method are often seen as the strengths of another and, by combining the methods, observers can achieve the best of each, while overcoming their unique

deficiencies (Denzin, 1970). To achieve this, some of the inferences which were drawn from one set of the data collection were cross checked against the data collected from other sources. This was extremely time consuming, but overall it allowed verification of particular sources of data to be assumed as true. Lever (1981) indicated that what is involved in triangulation is not just a matter of checking if inferences are valid, but of discovering which inferences are valid. Within this study, because of the sensitivity of the data, all poignant inferences were followed through by the process of triangulation.

### Data Analysis

Principally, the data collection and analysis followed the path laid down by Glaser and Strauss (1968). There are, however, several issues of significance which need to be mentioned. By far the bulk of the analysis of the data and the crystallisation of categories took place after I had left the field. This is symptomatic of the work of Hammersley and Atkinson (1983). Based on the experiences which were encountered, it is believed that it would have been difficult to have carried out a complete system of analysis whilst collecting data. Thus, a more rigorous analysis was completed periodically to allow the categories to develop, and was the preferred method of data analysis.

The raw data was coded following Strauss' (1987) open coding system. Open coding refers to the part of the analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorising of phenomena through close examination of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In coding the data, I broke the data down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for

similarities and differences, and asking questions about the phenomenon as reflected in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As stated by Strauss and Corbin (1990), it is through this process that the researcher's own assumptions about phenomena are questioned and explored, leading to new discoveries. Here I was able to ask myself questions such as; Why is this issue relevant to the informant?; Is this issue relevant to other informants?; Am I giving this issue a particular meaning based on the informant's perceptions or based on my own perceptions?

The first step that I took in coding the data was to develop a list of coding categories. The Bogdan and Biklen (1982) list of categories was applied to develop codes. By this means a list of codes to categorise the data was derived using the following categories:

1. Setting/content codes: general information on the setting, topic or participants;
2. Definitions of the situation codes: how informants define the setting or particular topic;
3. Perspectives held by informants codes: how informants think about their situation;
4. Process codes: refers to activity over time and perceived change occurring in a sequence, stages, phases, steps, careers;
5. Event codes: specific activities;
6. Strategy codes: ways people accomplish things;
7. Relationship and social structure codes: regular patterns of behaviour and relationships.

Once developed, the list of codes, which was also entered into the analytical log, was revised, looking for overlapping categories that could be collapsed into one. Each code was then given a name, that was closely related to the concept it was describing, and the name was prefixed with numbers for distinguishing subcategories.

The second step involved coding the data in the transcript file according to the list of codes in the analytical log. Once the codes were assigned, the next step was to assemble all the data coded to each category and sort it into subfiles. This was done by writing out the codes on index cards. Each index card contained the identification label for each informant, the coding category, and the relevant unit of analysis for each category (that is, what the informant actually said). Each index card was filed in the index card box under the appropriate category (Minichiello et al., 1990).

In the categorisation process there were a number of different steps. First, I needed to conceptualise the data. In this process I took apart each observation, sentence, or paragraph and gave each discrete incident, idea or event, a name, something that would represent the phenomenon. This was achieved through asking questions: What is this?, and What does it represent? (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The next step in the coding process was the discovering of categories. In this part of the process, similar concepts were grouped together. Once particular phenomena were identified in the data, concepts were grouped together around each of these phenomena. The next step was naming each category. The name given to a category was one that represented the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Following detailed consideration of the material, from all 48 informants, involving a number of reorganisations of the material into different categories, collapsing of related categories and division of other categories, and reflection on the nature of the categories derived in view of the phenomena being examined, nine categories were derived which appeared to reflect the main themes emerging from the data. Using this method the data were coded in terms of:

1. reason for retirement
2. football identity
3. satisfaction with football career
4. length of retirement
5. continued involvement in football
6. social support
7. career outside football
8. preparation for retirement
9. age at retirement

### Generalizability

The strength of qualitative studies, by their very nature, lies in the high inclusiveness and ecological validity based on naturalism and representativeness. This study was able to create a representative picture of the issues that has real meaning and significance to a group of recently retired elite Australian Rules footballers. This was based on data collected amongst footballers who had retired from elite competition either voluntarily or due to involuntary reasons, such as injury or deselection. The information, however significant to the informants, is not to be viewed as

generalizable. Some may view it as exclusively idiographic; that is, descriptive of particular situations and that its strength lies in a greater understanding of the situation. Others may prefer to view ethnography as nomothetic because these approaches need not be mutually exclusive. Some aspects of the present study are essentially idiographic, that is, the findings that eventuate are in essence idiosyncratic to the group of AFL footballers who participated in the study, whilst other findings will have other contextual and epistemological features in common with other elite athletes. Thus, the findings synthesized in the final chapter could possibly be generalised to elite athletes other than the AFL footballers who participated in this study.

### Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the methods of the research and the techniques and issues which have underpinned the gathering of data for this study. It emphasised the appropriateness of a qualitative methodology. Principally, I followed the guidelines of Glaser and Strauss (1968) and Glaser (1978) in the data gathering process, and applied those methods of Glaser and Strauss to the problems which were identified in the research questions. The chapter also emphasised the methods which supported the data gathering process of the study. It described in detail the courses of action taken while collecting data. It emphasised the need for ethical considerations to be taken into account throughout the research process. Indeed, the inclusion of this material relates highly to the epistemological evidence, management, and ethics of the research. In many ways, the chapter highlights the problems involved in qualitative research and the strategies used in this study to overcome those problems. This chapter of

the study highlighted the actual framework of the study so that a clear picture of the research methods could be viewed and understood by other researchers and replicated in the future.

# Chapter 4 Experiences of Retirement

## Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the issues associated with retiring from AFL football. The chapter discusses each of the three categories which were found to be relevant in the transition process. First, the chapter considers the transition process of 18 football players who voluntarily retired from AFL football. This is followed by a discussion of 15 footballers who retired from AFL football due to injury. Finally, the transition of 15 football players who retired from AFL football due to deselection is examined. The final chapter (Chapter 5) provides a general analysis of the nine propositions which were associated with retiring from AFL football.

## Voluntary Retirement

The sample for this category consisted of 18 recently retired AFL Football players. All players had retired voluntarily (i.e., players did not retire due to injury or deselection, but rather players had retired for personal reasons). Within this group all players had played over 100 senior (i.e., elite level) games, and had elite football careers which spanned from 8 to 16 years. Players ranged in age from 30 to 36 years of age. All players had been retired for less than 18 months. All players were currently employed either in or out of football. For example, a number of players were coaching at a lower level, or were involved in football administration, three players were employed by the media, other players were employed in other

professional careers, for example, teaching, computer programming, allied health professions, and private business.

These players gave three reasons why they retired:

- 1). family commitments;
- 2). age;
- 3). pursuit of alternative careers either in football or outside of football.

Typical responses from three informants who gave family commitments as a reason for retiring were:

"I had always felt that I hadn't really spent much time with my wife and children, as I was always busy with football. I decided after talking it over with my wife, that it really hadn't been fair on her and the kids, and it was perhaps time that I spent more time with them".

"My wife and I never had the opportunity to do normal things like travel, because of my football commitments, I wanted us to start having a normal sort of life".

"I felt that I was missing out on so much with the kids growing up, I wanted to be part of their lives".

Age appeared a strong factor in why these players retired voluntarily. All players in this group spoke of age as a contributing in making the decision to retire. Typical comments were:

"I felt that I was just getting too old, there are a lot of young blokes out there, and you have to realise that you just can't play football forever".

"The games appeared longer. I knew it must be age".

"The seasons were just getting too long, and I was getting too old to keep up with the pace".

"I don't think that I was losing skill, I was however, definitely losing pace with increasing age".

Responses amongst three footballers within the voluntary category who gave a reason for retiring as the pursuit of an alternative career in football were:

"I needed to make the decision, that if I wanted to start a coaching career it was not feasible for me to continue playing. I was lucky enough to be asked to take the assistant coaching position, and I felt that the time was right".

"I always thought that I wanted to coach. When the position became available at another club, I thought it was worth trying it out".

"I didn't want to play forever, but I always knew that I wanted to somehow be involved in football, that's why I took the job as a club administrator".

Responses from four players who had retired from football to pursue careers outside football were:

"I was really enjoying my work (outside football), and felt that I was not able to give the time commitment that my job required. I wanted to make this my career, but while I was playing AFL, I just didn't have the time, as football takes up a lot of time. The decision wasn't that difficult, it just got to the stage where I was enjoying my job more than I was enjoying football".

"I needed to devote more time to my job and couldn't spend as much time on football".

"The demands of both my job and football were increasing, I knew that one had to give, I decided that after 12 years of league football, it was time to hang up the boots".

### Reason for Retirement

Typically, players within this group discussed the reasons for retiring as being due to a realisation that they could not play football forever. Even though most informants pointed out that they felt that they were still playing football well, feelings of lack of desire to play were expressed by most players.

"The past few seasons were beginning to get harder. The pre-season was hard, the season felt long. I had to realistically look at how much more football was really left in me. I couldn't see

myself play at the top level for another four or five years. You see so many players playing longer than they should, the club carries them or worse still the media hounds them then the club eventually drops them. I didn't want that to happen to me. I wanted to retire when I was still playing well. I looked at the season I had and thought I was lucky to get through the whole season without a drop in form or an injury and thought the time was right. I wasn't getting any younger. Now was the time to retire, while I was still on top".

"I wasn't enjoying playing football as much as I had in the past. One morning I woke up, and the first thing I thought of was that it was time to retire. I discussed it with my wife first, she was happy, and that was that".

For some players the need to do things that they felt they had missed out on because of football was perceived to be a valid reason to retire.

"I knew that I couldn't play football forever, and that I needed to spend time on things outside football".

"Football had taken up a lot of my time. I really felt as though I had missed out on things, that other people my age had the opportunity to do, as I had been playing league football (AFL) since I was a teenager. You know most of my friends outside football had gone to uni (university) then travelled, but when you play league football you don't get the opportunity to do that. That was my biggest desire, to travel and do the things that I had seen my friends do that I hadn't yet done".

Although voluntarily retiring, most players discussed the decision to retire as being difficult, and feelings of needing to spend time with family was a major issue.

"It wasn't an easy decision, I was torn between wanting to play, and knowing that I needed to spend more time with the family; the family won out".

"It was a difficult decision to retire from league football but I always thought that it was hard for my wife to raise the kids on her own. Football takes up a lot of time, and I never really got to spend much time with my family".

"I had been thinking of retiring for the past two seasons. It took me that long to make the decision. It was a really hard decision, and I knew that once I had retired there was no going back, but I also knew that I needed to spend more time with my family".

### Football Identity

Football identity appeared as a strong recurring theme amongst this group of footballers. All players interviewed in the voluntary retirement category discussed the significance of football in their lives.

"For a long time football was the most important thing in my life. I knew what I was doing every weeknight and every weekend".

"Football was a very important part of my life. As a child I always knew that one day I would play league football, it was my one big aim in life."

The fact that football played a major role in the lives of these footballers is perhaps not surprising given that most of these players had enjoyed fairly illustrious football careers. Given that being a footballer is perceived as a positive role and footballers enjoy a hero status, being able to identify oneself as a footballer can provide positive affirmation of one's self-worth.

"I enjoyed everything about football, not only playing but what it meant to play. People think that you're somehow different, that you're special... People would always stop me in the streets and say hi, or wish me luck and the kids would ask for an autograph".

"It felt good being a footballer, especially when your team is doing well, and you are playing well, people write to you and wish you well, its a nice feeling".

"When you played a good game, it was always good to read about it in the paper, you feel kind of special".

Apart from their social identity, these footballers also discussed how football was a major income source. This relates to identity as these footballers spoke of the financial benefits of playing football and the impact of this income source on their life.

"You don't play for the money, but being a footballer does give you the opportunity to earn money. I was lucky because I also won a lot of awards which always involved extra money or other prizes like one year I won a car for some media award. The money from football meant that because I was a footballer and quite a high profile footballer I have been able to afford quite a comfortable lifestyle".

"It was good getting an extra income from football, it made life quite comfortable".

Interestingly all players interviewed within this group discussed their identity as footballers from a positive perspective. Most players discussed how football had provided them with opportunities that may not have arisen had they not played football.

"I really liked being a footballer. Sure the training is hard and nowadays the season doesn't really end as you play more games and pre-season starts soon after the season ends. But when you're a part of it it's great. You know that you get to do things like travel, and getting invited to functions because you're a footballer, I know this because my friends outside of football didn't get these same opportunities. I think that being a footballer was a great part of my life, and I wouldn't have changed that for anything".

"I really enjoyed every aspect of being a footballer. It was a great experience in my life".

"Football gave me lots of opportunities that if you don't play you're just not exposed to them".

### Satisfaction with Football Career

This group of footballers discussed how satisfied they were with their football careers. Most players discussed how they had achieved all they wanted from football. Typical responses from this group of footballers were:

"I felt that I had achieved all I wanted to from football... I knew that now I had to move on to something else".

"I had achieved everything I wanted to out of football. I no longer needed to play".

"I think at the moment I feel that I had a successful football career, and I guess that is really all that really matters".

Players within this group also discussed their satisfaction with football in relation to their achievements within football.

"Football provided me with lots of achievements, I really enjoyed all I got out of football, but I also knew that I couldn't play forever".

"I really never wanted to play football, it just sort of happened. The fact that I was good at it (football) came as a total surprise to everyone, including myself. I won every award you can win in

football. When the time came to decide to retire, I felt totally satisfied with what I had achieved in football. The decision to retire was not that difficult".

While most players discussed satisfaction with their football careers, for some players there were personal disappointments with their career. The most discussed disappointment within this group of players came from the players who had not played in a grand final.

"My only regret with my football career was that I never got to play in a grand final. I would have done anything to have had the opportunity to play in a grand final".

"It was always a dream of mine to be able to play in a grand final. My only disappointment from my football is that I was never able to play in a grand final, I think I would have done almost anything to have been able to experience a grand final".

"I even changed clubs in the hope that I would be able to play in a grand final, but that never eventuated".

While these feelings of disappointment were expressed by players who did not play in a grand final, all players who were interviewed who had played in a grand final discussed the grand final as a highlight in their career.

"The highlight of my career was playing in a grand final. The feeling of running out onto the ground with 100,000 people cheering in the stands is the most amazing feeling that you can

possibly imagine. That sort of feeling stays with you for a long time".

"There is no better feeling, nothing compares to playing in a grand final".

"If I think about it I can still hear the crowd roaring and the special atmosphere you only get at a grand final. It is a magical feeling. By far being able to have played in a grand final stands out as the highlight of my career".

### Length of Retirement

Most players interviewed discussed the initial difficulties with being retired.

"At first I felt quite lost, my life was so controlled by football. As time passes I find things to replace football with".

"I did miss it at first (not playing) but then as the season goes on and the weather gets colder and grounds get heavier, you sort of feel glad that you no longer have to be out there".

"The first game you go to as a non player I feel is the hardest, then as time passes you get used to the fact that you are no longer a footballer".

As the following quotes suggest, another common feeling amongst these players was having to come to terms with the fact that they were no longer footballers.

"I had retired over the summer and I got a job with one of the radio stations as a football commentator. The first game I was to commentate was my old club. I arrived at the ground and my initial reaction was to go to the club rooms. It felt so weird. To make things worse my team was actually losing, and I felt as though I should be out there helping them as I could see the mistakes they were making and knew that I could do better than how they were playing. As the season progressed it became easier, my job now was as a commentator and not a footballer".

"It felt really strange that I was no longer a league footballer".

"It was a real strange feeling sitting in the stands and no longer being part of the game".

"For the first few games, I felt like running out on to the ground, it's really hard to sit in the stands knowing that you are no longer part of the game, and that you will never play league football again".

For some players who had only retired during the off season there was a feeling of anticipation of what being retired would be like once the season was under way.

"At the moment I feel fine, however, I haven't been retired yet during a football season. At the moment I don't miss training, I might feel different when the season starts and I am sitting in the stands and no longer able to run onto the field".

"It's really nice at the moment to have a summer with no training. I might feel different at the end of the summer and the football season is about to begin".

"I've been so busy with work that I haven't had time to miss football. I might feel different when the season starts".

### Continued Involvement in Football

Seven players discussed the need to have some form of involvement in football as a total break from football would have made the retirement too difficult.

"I see it as a gradual moving out of football. First I played AFL, now I am playing country football, then I think I might like to try coaching. It's like slowly moving out of football. I think that it would be too difficult to go from that high level involvement in football to suddenly having no involvement in football".

"At first I wanted a total break from football, but as the season began approaching, I realised that I really wanted to play at some level. I was still fairly fit so that wasn't an issue, so I began

playing country football, and playing country football doesn't require the same commitment as AFL".

The media appears to attract former elite athletes as commentators and presenters for their telecasts and reporting of sport. This is also the case in AFL football, with most media commentators being former players. Three players interviewed within this group were employed by the media. All three felt their media commitments allowed them to maintain an involvement in football.

"I think that commentating football is like playing football, at least you still have some involvement".

"I really enjoy being able to commentate at the football, it makes me still feel part of the game".

"I see a lot of players who stop playing football losing contact with their old teammates, the real advantage of being a commentator is that I am still able to have a large involvement in football".

Eight players discussed their need for a total break from football.

"When I decided to retire I felt that I still wanted to play at some level, I thought that maintaining an involvement in football would make the transition easier. I started playing for one of the district clubs, but a few weeks into the season I decided that I really didn't want to play any form of football".

"I had been playing some form of competition football since I was about eight, I just felt that it was time for a complete break from football".

"When I decided to retire from league football there were a lot of things I wanted to do, being involved in football wasn't one of them".

### Social Support

All players interviewed in this category discussed the importance of the support that they received from family and/or club when they made the decision to retire. All players described how this support assisted them in their decision to retire.

"I don't think I could have made such a decision (retiring) without the support I received from my family and club".

"I played my whole AFL career with the same club, it was always going to be a hard decision to retire, the club had become sort of my extended family. When I went to see the coach and the manager to tell them that I was going to retire, they were very supportive, they didn't really want me to retire, but they said they understood".

"It was always going to be a hard decision, retiring isn't something you think about while you're playing league football, and while people tried to be understanding, the final decision was always

going to be mine. When I did make the decision to retire my family and club were great".

"Once I made the decision to retire, I felt quite all right. It was just going to be a matter of telling people. My family had been supportive throughout my football career, and they were supportive in my decision to retire".

"The decision to retire was there to be made. I was 36 (years old) I didn't think my legs could carry me another season. My wife, family, and club were great, they were extremely supportive. I felt that I had made the right decision and all the people that mattered to me were there for me".

### Career Outside Football

All players in this category were employed at the time of the interview. There were some players who worked while playing football, while other players did not work for most of their football careers, but began working prior to retiring.

"I started playing football in my final year of high school I then went on to university. After completing my course, I concentrated on playing football full-time. Then two years before I retired I decided that I really needed to start concentrating on a career outside football, so I did, so I was able to use my football contacts to get a job".

"Playing football was great because it meant that I was supporting myself through uni (university). When I finished my degree I was still playing, and I worked part-time as a physio (physiotherapist), knowing that when I eventually did retire that I had something to fall back onto".

"I started a business during my final two years in league football. I knew that I didn't want to coach or have any involvement in football when I retired. This way I had something to do when I was no longer playing football".

"I always had a job while I played football, it was after I retired that the media job offers started coming through. I always felt that being involved in football through the media was something that I wanted to try. The offer was too good; I just couldn't refuse it".

"I got my teaching degree in phys-ed (physical education) while I was playing football, but because of my football involvement I never actually got to teach. I always thought that it was something that I could do after I retired from playing. When I did retire I got offered the assistant coaching job. I always felt that I wanted to try coaching, so I accepted the coaching job".

### Preparation for Retirement

Having made the decision to retire, all players in this category spoke of how well prepared they felt for retirement. Players discussed how the

decision was generally a process which involved much thought and discussion with family, friends, teammates, coaches, and club administrators.

"I knew what to expect from retiring, I had seen others retire and had seen what they went through. I spoke to others about how they felt about when was a good time to retire. It was good being close to other people who had gone through it before, it sort of gave you an idea of what to expect. I knew from their experiences what retiring from football would be like".

"By the time I made the decision to retire, I knew that I was well prepared, it was something that I had thought about for a long time".

"It wasn't a decision I made overnight, I took a lot of time to actually come to the decision to retire. I spoke to my family, coach and teammates. By the time I made the decision I had weighted up all the pros and cons of the decision. I knew exactly what I was doing and what it meant and I was ready for it".

Only one of the 18 players had previously retired before making a comeback and then retiring again. He discussed how the first time he retired he felt unprepared mainly because he didn't think that he was really ready to retire, but felt totally prepared when he retired the second time.

"I think that the first time I retired I wasn't really ready for it. So it was really easy to be talked into playing another season. At the end of that season (after the comeback) I was ready. I knew

exactly what was going to happen. I had something else to go to and I was prepared for retirement, as much as anyone can ever be prepared for retirement".

### Age at Retirement

Age as a reason for retirement was a strong recurring issue amongst this group of footballers. All players to some extent attributed increasing age as a factor in making the decision to retire.

"You get to a certain age, and you know that you can't and don't want to play football forever".

"I had turned 35 and thought that I had a good run in football, it was time to hang-up the boots".

"I sort of knew I was getting too old to continue playing football after a night game. We had played a hard game and had had a good win, some of the younger blokes were wanting to go out after the game to a nightclub or something, I was so tired that I could hardly move. I just wanted to go home, at that moment it felt so strange. That's what I would have done a few years ago. I began to realise that maybe I was getting too old for the game".

"In your mind you think that you will play football forever, and when you're 18, its hard to think that one day you will be in your thirties and thinking of retiring. When that day does come and you are in your thirties and thinking of retiring, its hard".

This section of the chapter has considered the factors that affected the retirement processes of 18 AFL footballers who voluntarily retired from playing league football. Players within this category gave three main reasons for retiring, that being age, family commitments, and the desire to pursue a career either within football but not as a player or outside of football. Generally, these players discussed how they were satisfied with their football careers and were relatively pleased with having retired.

### Retirement Due to Injury

The sample for this category consisted of 15 recently retired AFL football players, who had all retired from playing AFL football because of injury. The injury that caused each player to retire was a serious recurring injury or injuries.

Within this group all players had played over 50 senior (i.e., elite level) games and had elite football careers which spanned 3 to 12 years. Players ranged in age from 25 to 32 years of age. As with the players who had voluntarily retired all players were currently employed and a few players maintained some form of involvement in football. Typical comments about their injuries were:

"After my third shoulder reconstruction I knew that it was always going to be difficult to play league football again".

"I just kept breaking down, my legs just couldn't handle the pace anymore. It had become quite obvious to me and everyone around me that my league football career was over".

"If I think about it I can still feel the pain I felt when it happened. I fell awkwardly during a game. I knew that it was the same knee I had previously injured, and I can remember feeling that this was probably the end of my football career".

### Reason for Retirement

This group of players openly discussed how they would not have retired if they had not been injured. The common feeling amongst these players was that they would have preferred to have continued playing football. These players discussed how they did not feel ready to retire.

"I never really expected that I would not play league football again. I somehow expected that I would regain my fitness and play another season or so".

"You think that because you're fit, your invincible. You never expect that you will be retiring because of injuries".

"I don't think I would have stopped playing (AFL football) if it wasn't for the constant back injuries".

"Physically I knew that I could not go on any further, my body had just had it. Mentally though, I felt as though I could go on forever".

## Football Identity

All footballers interviewed within this category discussed their football careers in terms of how relevant football was in their lives. For most players football had played a significant role in their lives from a very early age. These players also discussed how they enjoyed playing football.

"I can remember my father taking me to my first game, I was about five. I knew back then that I really wanted to play league football. So as a child I grew up with only one real ambition. When I was drafted and then when I got to play my first senior game in round 6 of that year, it was as though all my dreams had come true. I was a league player and that really meant something to me".

"I suppose all boys grow up wanting to play league football. It was the most important thing to happen to me".

"I sometimes even find it difficult to go to the games. It is really difficult to no longer be involved in something (football) that was such a part of me and that I enjoyed so much".

While these players spoke of how they enjoyed playing football, many spoke of how they felt a loss now that they were no longer elite footballers.

"Football was something that I really enjoyed. I just never thought that injuries would stop me doing the things that I enjoyed so much".

"I never thought of not playing football. You become so used to being a part of the game, you don't expect that it will end".

"It feels strange that I'm no longer a footballer. It was easy to see myself and everyone around me to see me as a footballer".

These players also discussed loss of financial earnings as impacting on their lives.

"Because I hadn't planned for retiring, I hadn't really thought of putting money aside for when I would no longer be playing".

"It's been quite difficult to adjust to not having the extra income from football".

### Satisfaction with Football Career

Most players related to how it was difficult to think of the positive aspects of their careers, when they were dissatisfied with having to retire.

"It just didn't feel like my football career should be over. I still thought that I could play well for another few seasons, it didn't seem fair for it to be over yet".

"It is so hard to think of how much I enjoyed playing football, all I can think about is how I want to play again".

"I guess that if I was honest I think that I had at least another season left in me".

"Its been really hard retiring. After my second shoulder reconstruction I knew that I could still have some football left in me. I worked real hard during the pre-season. It was during a training session that my shoulder just snapped and I needed another reconstruction... My surgeon told me that it could happen again at any time. I just really wanted to play again and prove that I still had some football left in me".

"Deep down I knew my body just couldn't handle it anymore, I thought what will my body be like when I'm 50 if I continue to play with my injuries. It doesn't make it any easier though, having to retire not because you want to, but because your body can no longer take it".

### Length of Retirement

Players who had been retired for a while, discussed how adjustment to retirement was inevitable.

"As the season rolls on you realise that you will not be playing, you think maybe next season but deep down you know that won't happen".

"My legs couldn't carry me anymore, though I had hoped that somehow they would and that I would play again. I know though that I will never play league football again".

"Its now been a full season since I haven't played, I still think about it (playing), but not that much anymore".

"At first it was really hard, you miss it so much. You miss everything about it, your teammates, the feeling you have running out into the ground... As time passes you begin to miss it less".

As with the players who had voluntarily retired, players in this category who had not been retired yet during a season, had feelings of anticipation of what not playing during a football season would be like.

"It's really hard for me to think of what it will mean to not play football, I just can't imagine what it will be like".

"At this stage I don't even know whether I will go to any of the games, its hard to think of what not playing league football will be like".

"It's been a real strange summer without training and training camps. I guess it will be difficult when the season starts and I won't be playing".

## Continued Involvement in Football

Seven players in this category maintaining an involvement in football made the retirement transition easier.

"I knew that I couldn't play AFL as my bad legs just couldn't handle the pace. I did want to have some involvement in football and being able to play for a district club (minor league) has made it easier".

"I'm really enjoying coaching a country football team. I always felt that I wanted to coach when I could no longer play. Who knows maybe some day I'll be coaching an AFL team".

"I did want some involvement in football, having no involvement in football would have been just too difficult".

"When I was told by the doctor that I really shouldn't play football anymore, the club gave me the opportunity to be involved with the club at an administration level, I think that's made the process (of retiring) easier".

"The pace of country football is much easier than AFL. I just thought that I wanted to play football for a little longer. I wasn't quite ready to have no involvement in football".

Five players discussed how they didn't want any involvement in football.

"After all my injuries, I just didn't want to have any involvement in football. I didn't feel as though I could play football again, it was even difficult to think about going to a game".

"I was so disappointed that my football career was having to end because of injuries. I needed a complete break from football. I didn't want any involvement in the game".

"If I couldn't play AFL because of injuries, then I just didn't want any involvement in football. I just feel that once you've played AFL it's very hard to think of playing in a minor league".

Three players discussed how they wanted a break from football, but wouldn't rule out the possibility of further involvement in football in the future.

"I decided to have this year off football. I'll decide next season whether I want some form of involvement in football".

"I haven't ruled out the possibility of having some involvement in football. I think that I would like to try out coaching".

"I want a year off football, then I'll consider my options in football".

## Social Support

While the players who retired because of injuries did admit that in the early stages of their injuries they felt that the club, and their family were quite sympathetic and supportive, most players felt that family and friends did not really understand what they were going through and the clubs remained only supportive while there was a possibility of them playing again. These players felt alone and isolated.

"When you're faced with another injury, it's really hard. People can be sympathetic, but nobody really knows what you're going through".

"When you're seriously injured the club really doesn't want to know you and your family really doesn't understand".

"After my first injury the club was very supportive, they really helped me though it. It was a different story when I broke down again during a training session when I was making my comeback. It was as though they (the club) knew, that I would probably not be able to play again, and quite probably thought that they shouldn't waste their time with me".

"I felt as though I had let my parents down especially my dad. He had expected me to have had some form of perfect football career, to be the best... When it became obvious that I could no longer play any more because my ankle just kept giving in even after repeated surgery, he (dad) never spoke to me about it, he still

hasn't to this day, spoken to me about my not playing football any more.... I guess I let him down".

### Career Outside Football

All players interviewed in this cohort worked or went to school while they played football. Although two informants did not work in the early stages of their football careers, they were working prior to having to retire.

"I got a phys ed (physical education) teaching degree while I was playing football, but never went on to teach because of the commitment of football. While I played I did a sales job... that was ok and the hours fitted in well with football and training... When I had to stop playing I decided to try and get a teaching job, I was lucky and got a teaching position. I didn't really think that I would like teaching, but now I am really enjoying it, and that feels good".

"I joined the family plumbing business when I was playing football. It was really good. Because they were my family I could take all the time off that I needed to for football and training".

"I went to uni (university) while I played football and then started working part time in the computer industry, when I retired from AFL I started working full time".

"I didn't work while I played football I went to university, and then concentrated on my football full time, when I had to retire I started working in the marketing area".

"I didn't work in the first few years while I played football, I was really keen to concentrate on my football, and I felt that I couldn't do justice to both a football career and a work career. After I had established myself in football and was in a routine, I found that I could devote time to working outside football. That worked out quite well actually, because at least when I had to finish with football I had something to fall back onto".

### Preparation for Retirement

The common feeling amongst these players was that they were not mentally prepared for retirement.

"I would never have thought that my career was going to end so early and I never thought I was going to retire because of an injury... I was totally unprepared for it".

"I always thought that I would know when I was going to play my last game, you sort of mentally picture what it would be like, that it would somehow be special, that this would be the last time you would run out onto the ground... It had never crossed my mind that I would be injured during a game and that would be the end of football".

"You see it happen to your teammates, they get seriously injured and they never play again. You never think it's going to happen to you".

"Nobody ever warns you that each game can be your last... I never thought that I would be injured and never play again".

"I had two injury interrupted seasons, my back was just not getting any better. Mentally I knew that my football career was coming to an end".

### Age at Retirement

A common feeling amongst these players was that they were not old enough to retire. All players interviewed felt that they were at an age where retirement from league football was not going to happen for a while.

"I never expected to retire in my twenties".

"It was so hard to think that your football career is over at 25".

"I had always thought that I would play league football until I was too old to play".

"When you're playing league football, you feel as though you're going to play forever. I had never thought that at 25, I would be injured and not be able to play league football again".

This second section of the chapter has explored the retirement process of 15 AFL footballers who retired from football due to injury. These players discussed the importance of football in their lives, and how they would have not retired had it not been for their injuries.

### Retirement Due to Deselection

The sample for this category comprised of 15 AFL footballers, who had all recently retired from playing football due to being deselected from their respective clubs. Typical explanations given by these players were:

"The club had had a bad season, there had been talk of a few players getting the axe. My season hadn't been particularly good, I didn't want to believe that I was going to be one of the players to get the axe".

"I'd had an interrupted season with a hamstring injury that I just couldn't get over, and a few suspensions. I suppose I had seen the writing on the wall. They (the club) wanted to get rid of me".

"The salary cap meant that the club was going to let quite a few players go. I was one of the unlucky ones".

"It's really hard these days; clubs are only allowed 42 players per list. When the club feels that your contribution is no longer required they just dump you. That's what happened to me".

Six of the 15 players had nominated for the draft, hoping that one of the other clubs would select them during the national football draft. None of these six players were selected in the national draft.

"When the club told me that my services were no longer required. I really wasn't ready to give up playing football, that's why I nominated for the draft".

"I sort of knew that the club was going to dump me. You often know these things. It's the subtle things that go on in the club, people stop talking when they see you coming. I know that all my teammates were aware that I was going to be dumped at the end of the season, but nobody said anything. I had already decided that I would nominate for the draft when the club axed me".

"I had seen the writing on the wall. My contract was about to expire. I knew that they (the club) would not renew my contract. I nominated for the draft in the hope of being picked, but deep down I knew that my age would go against me".

Two players did a pre-season with a club, hoping that the club that they did the pre-season with would select them in the March national football draft, this being the final draft before the commencement of the football season. As with the six players who had nominated for the national draft, these players attempted to increase their chance of being picked in the national draft by doing a pre-season with a club that had shown interest in them as players. Neither was selected at the time of the draft.

"After the club told me that my services were no longer required, I felt that I really wanted to continue playing. I nominated for the draft, but wasn't picked in the November round. I decided to do a pre-season with a club as they appeared interested in me, so I trained with them during the summer months. They didn't end up picking me".

"The club axed me at the end of the season (September). I didn't know what I wanted to do. My manager told me that another club might be interested in me if I did a pre-season with them. I really wanted to continue playing football, I just didn't feel ready to give it away, so I did the pre-season, but I never did get picked".

All players within this category had played over 40 senior (i.e, elite level) games, and had football careers which spanned 2 to 10 years. Players ranged in age from 24 to 33 years of age. As with the players who had voluntarily retired and those who had retired due to injuries, all players were currently employed and a few players maintained some involvement in football.

### Reason for Retirement

As with the players who had retired due to injuries, this group of players, openly stated that they would not have retired from league football had the decision been in their hands.

"I really didn't think I was going to be cut. I hadn't had a good season due to injuries, and I felt that over the summer I would be

able to regain my fitness and the following season return to playing at that high level. They (the club administration) just called me in one day and said that my services were no longer required. I was quite shocked and knew that I probably wouldn't be picked in the draft. It was a disappointing way to end my football career".

"My form had been down, I somehow did think that I would get delisted".

"When the club delisted me I nominated for the draft, I really thought that I would be picked up in the November draft, when that didn't happen I thought that I would be picked in the March draft. I never thought that I would not be picked by one of the teams. I really wanted to continue playing".

"I did want to continue playing football. If the decision was mine I would still be playing".

"I was overseas when I heard that the club was delisting me. I was not in a position to even nominate for the draft".

### Football Identity

As with the footballers who retired voluntarily and those who retired due to injury, these footballers also discussed the relevance of football in their lives.

"I really enjoyed being a league footballer".

"Since I was a child I always wanted to play league football, it was my big ambition. It was a great experience".

"I felt really important being a league footballer. When I was a kid, all of the other kids wanted to be a league footballer. When I got drafted I was so happy I had made it".

As well as feelings of the relevance of being a footballer in their lives, these footballers also discussed feelings of loss now that they were no longer footballers.

"Everyone knew that I was a footballer, and everyone related to me as a footballer. Football was the most important part in my life, and now I no longer have that in my life, and I feel sort of lost".

"It is really hard to suddenly stop being a footballer, you become to know that so well, and its gone".

Even though some of these players felt bitter towards the clubs they played for and the league, nevertheless these footballers did not have feelings of regret for playing football.

"Even though I now feel bitter towards football, the club and the league, I wouldn't go back and give up my opportunity to have played league football".

"I remain upset about how my football career ended. I feel let down by the club. Even though I do feel quite upset and bitter towards the club, if I had it all over again, I know that I still would have wanted to play league football".

"It's easy to think of if onllys. I regret going to that club, had I not changed clubs I am sure that I would not have been delisted. But that is the only thing that I would change, I would not change having had the opportunity to play league football".

"The bad things that happened in football are most in my thoughts at present, but if I was to honestly look at it, football provided me with a lot of good times which I wouldn't change for anything".

Financial issues were also discussed amongst this group of footballers.

"Its been a difficult adjustment not to be earning the kind of money that I was earning from football".

"I didn't think that I was going to start needing to put money aside for when I was no longer playing football. I always thought that that was something that I would do. I just never thought that my career was going to end so soon".

## Satisfaction with Football Career

A common feeling amongst this group of footballers was dissatisfaction with their respective clubs. Most players felt it difficult to think of the positive aspects of their football careers, because of this dissatisfaction

"I am now trying to look at the positive aspects of my football career. It isn't easy though, when you feel so let down, especially by the club".

"At the moment it's hard to look at the good aspects of playing football, as I feel quite bitter, I'm especially bitter towards the club".

"I really feel as though the club let me down, I played my best for them and at the end they just tried to dispose of me".

"I gave the club so much for so long. I know I was loyal towards them, they showed no loyalty towards me, it was so easy for them to get rid of me".

Players within this group also found it difficult to think of their football careers as being over.

"There was just so much more that I wanted to achieve with my football. I just didn't feel as though it was time for my league career to be over".

"It's hard to think of my football career as being over, I just wanted to continue playing".

"I have a lot of lost dreams now that my football career is over".

### Length of Retirement

The players who had been retired for a longer period of time, discussed how they felt it was easier to cope and deal with no longer playing league football with the passing of time. These players felt that although it was initially difficult to deal with having to retire from league football, that as time passed the issues associated with having been forced to retire became less evident.

"After not playing for a season you begin to get used to not playing league football".

"I miss it, but I miss it less now than what I did six months ago".

"The first part of the season was really hard, I missed it so much, not being a part of it. I have now become used to not playing".

For the players who had just retired, there were feelings of disbelief at the thought that their football careers were over.

"It's hard to think of life without football. I have only been retired for less than three months, so I'm still trying to come to terms with the prospect of no longer being a league player".

"It's hard to think that I will never play league football again".

"I just find it hard to accept that I was rejected by the club, I felt that I still had some football left in me".

These players who had just retired also talked about fears of not knowing how they would feel, react or to what to expect once the football season would start.

"I think that it's going to be hard once the football season starts, and I no longer will be playing".

"Winter without league football is quite scary, I don't really want to think about that".

"I don't know what I will do during the football season, it's going to be strange not playing".

"I can't even begin to imagine what I will do this winter".

### Continued Involvement in Football

Several players within this group discussed how at that moment they wanted no involvement in football.

"After being delisted I just really wanted a year off football to decide what I am going to do".

"At the moment I don't want to think about football. Someday I think I would like to perhaps coach at some level".

"I don't want to think about football at the moment it's just too painful".

"It just doesn't feel right to be playing in another league, I still wanted to be able to play AFL".

While for other players an involvement in football was considered imperative.

"I am playing for one of the district teams this season. I still want to play football".

"I've been playing in one of the country leagues. It's a very slow pace compared to league football, but it's ok".

"I'm playing and coaching in one of the district clubs. I just want to continue playing and being involved in football".

"Football was a major part of my life. I just need to be playing, and country football is quite ok. Its not as glamorous as AFL, but at least this way I'm still playing football".

"I've been playing football since I was eight. I couldn't imagine a winter without football".

## Social Support

One important common feeling amongst this group of players was how they felt a lack of support. These players openly discussed how they felt abandoned by their clubs, managers, and how their family and friends while wanting to be supportive couldn't because of a lack of understanding of what they (the players) were going through.

"I was called into the club to meet with the coach and club manager, they told me that my services were no longer required. I was so shocked I couldn't say anything. They asked me if I was ok and I never heard from them again".

"I felt so alone, the club didn't want to know me, my manager lost interest in me, and my family couldn't understand what I was going through".

"My wife, family and friends just couldn't help, they didn't know what I was going through".

"There was no one I could really turn to, even my family couldn't help".

"When the club decides they no longer need you, they just don't want to know you, in fact no one wants to know you".

"After the club told me that my services were no longer required, I lost contact with the club and most of the players".

"The club wanted me to be swapped to an interstate club. They had already made all the arrangements without me even being told. I was so confused I didn't want to move interstate, but I did want to play football. At the end, the deal fell through. I wasn't picked in the draft".

"The other players in the team felt quite bad. I still see some of them".

"My family was great, but I don't think they really know how I feel".

### Career Outside Football

As with the players who had voluntarily retired and those who had retired due to injury all players within this group worked or went to university while they played league football.

"I worked while I played league football, but it was just a job to fill in the hours while I wasn't training or playing football".

"I was completing a uni degree while I was playing football. I guess I was grateful that I had that to go to once football was over".

"I had completed a uni degree while I played football, and although I always knew that I could fall back on that, football was my first love".

"I always enjoyed my job, and at least I had something to fall back on to when football was over".

### Preparation for Retirement

All players in this group discussed how they felt ill prepared for retirement from AFL football.

"I guess I knew that I was going to be delisted. In about round 15 (the season comprises of 22 home and away games before four weeks of finals) the coach stopped talking to me. I had seen that before. Once the coach stops talking to you, you know that most likely your head is on the chopping block. You just don't want to believe it".

"A reporter from the Sun (Morning newspaper) phoned me one afternoon and asked me if it was true that the club had delisted me, and do I have a comment. I was totally shocked, I had no idea. There were all sorts of rumours floating around the club, I just didn't think this was true. I was totally unprepared".

"I was told that my services were longer required during the end of season trip, it really wrecked the rest of the trip".

"I was listening to the radio and the news presenter said that they had just heard a rumour that I was going to be axed, that was a really hard way to learn that you were going to be axed".

"At the end of the season I had gone overseas for a short trip with some friends before training started again. I rang home and my mother told me that the club had left a message for me to contact them as soon as possible as they (the club) no longer required my services. I felt so bad, I was 12,000 miles away, and there was nothing I could do".

### Age at Retirement

All players in this group felt that they were too young to retire from league football. These players spoke of how, had the decision been theirs, they would not have retired. While some players did express the view that the current trend in football is to have younger players, they still felt that they would have continued playing.

"I just didn't feel old enough to retire".

"I always thought that football careers had a natural life, that you played until you reached a certain age and couldn't play anymore".

"It just didn't feel like it was time to stop playing league football, I was still only 26. I didn't think football careers ended so soon".

"I knew that I was young enough to continue playing. Had the choice been mine, I would have wanted to play for a lot longer".

"The club decided that they wanted new blood, I was at an age that the club felt that I wasn't going to be able to contribute much more".

"The club was hoping to pick-up a few young players. They (the club) felt that young players were going to be able to service them better".

This final section of the chapter has addressed the issues affecting the retirement of 15 AFL footballers who retired from playing football due to being deselected. This group of players discussed how difficult they had experienced the retirement process, all players spoke of how they felt the decision had not been theirs to retire, and how they would have preferred to have continued playing league football.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

## Introduction

This study examined the retirement process from elite football amongst 48 Australian Rules Footballers. It also explored how elite footballers see the retirement process in the context of forming and accepting their retirement from elite football. The study's main conclusion is that coping with retiring from elite football is influenced by whether the decision to retire was voluntary. It was found that footballers who retired voluntarily generally appeared to cope better with a range of important facets of retirement, compared to footballers who retired due to involuntary factors such as injury or deselection. This study utilised a grounded theory approach to collecting and analysing data. Grounded theory has previously not been used in studies that examine and explore the retirement process of elite athletes. This method of collecting and analysing data does not rely on testing a theory or model, rather the data that is generated is said to "be the theory". While some of the findings are similar to findings of research that has been conducted previously in the area of retirement, it is important to note that the findings of this study are purely derived from the perspective of the informants. It is claimed that the findings are especially valuable to the extent that they support previous research, because they were generated using an alternative research paradigm.

Through the nine propositions discussed in Chapter 2, and the development of the themes this thesis examined whether:

1. AFL footballers who retire voluntarily experience a smoother

- transition than those who retire due to injury.
2. AFL footballers who retire voluntarily experience a smoother transition than those who retire due to deselection.
  3. Similarities in the transition process exist between AFL footballers who retire due to injury and those who retire due to deselection.
  4. Level of football identity influences the transition process of AFL footballers.
  5. Social support from family and friends mitigates negative experiences of retirement from AFL football.
  6. Social support from the club or AFL mitigates negative experiences of retirement from AFL football.
  7. Continued involvement in football eases the retirement process from playing AFL football.
  8. Satisfaction with AFL football career eases the retirement process from playing AFL football.
  9. Satisfaction with non-football career eases the transition from playing AFL football.

This chapter considers these questions in relation to the nine themes that were presented in Chapter 4 and relates the conclusions to previous research and theoretical perspectives on retirement from elite sport. The chapter then discusses methodological issues and limitations associated with the study, the implications for further research, and implications for practice. The chapter finally considers general conclusions on the experience of retiring from AFL football.

## Conclusions and their Relationship to Theory and Research

The first proposition examined whether AFL footballers who retire voluntarily experience a smoother transition than those who retire due to injury. The 18 footballers interviewed for this study, who had voluntarily retired, gave the three major reasons they retired as being, family commitments, age, and pursuit of alternative careers, either within or outside of football. An interesting issue that arose from the stories of these players was that they all felt that they were still playing football well when they made the decision to retire. Neither did they report that their bodies were failing them physically, whether due to "wear and tear" or age. None of these players felt that their football skills had deteriorated, but as discussed in the literature by other researchers, (e.g., Greendorfer & Blinde 1986; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) these footballers felt a lack of desire to continue playing, wanting to spend more time with their family, or a need to pursue a new direction in life. Some felt that they had just reached an age where it was time to retire, because there was a realisation that they could not continue playing football forever. Thus, they needed to focus on a new direction either outside or within football other than as a player.

Two interesting issues were discussed by these players. The first was that, while they enjoyed the life of an elite footballer, most felt that playing football had actually meant that they had missed out on aspects of life that their peers who were not footballers had the opportunity to experience, like travelling. The other interesting issue was that while all of the 18 players had voluntarily retired, all of the players observed that the final decision to retire was nevertheless difficult.

The 15 footballers interviewed for this study who had retired from playing AFL football due to injury all discussed how they would not have stopped playing football had they not been injured. While these players were able to talk positively of having played football, they also spoke of the bitterness felt about having to retire. These players felt that they had been cheated of being able to continue playing football because of injuries, and while some injuries were serious and repeated, players still felt that if they had the opportunity they would play again. Most injury studies examine the effects of injury on how the athlete copes while being injured. Some writers have made suggestions of the possible effects of retirement through serious career-ending injuries (Elkin, 1981; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Rotella & Heyman, 1984). This is the first large-scale qualitative study that explores how a group of elite athletes cope with an injury that causes retirement.

Voluntary retirement from elite sport is a neglected cause of retirement in the literature (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Coakley, 1983). It has been recognised that this form of retirement is perhaps the most desirable way to end a sporting career (Mihovilovic, 1968; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Reasons why athletes retire voluntarily have included: the athlete may wish to assume a new direction in life (Werthner & Orlick, 1986); the athlete might want to seek new challenges and sources of satisfaction in other areas of life, or have a change in values (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1986; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982); the athlete may want to spend more time with family and friends (Svoboda & Vanek, 1982); or the athlete may have reached a stage where they find that sport participation no longer provides the enjoyment and fulfilment that it once did (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). This was certainly the case with this study. Players who had voluntarily retired from playing AFL football gave reasons such as family

commitments, wanting to take up new challenges, and age, that is players felt that they had reached an age where they no longer wanted to play AFL football. Research has indicated that between 14% and 32% of athletes retire due to serious injuries (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Hare, 1971; Mihovilovic, 1968; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Weinberg & Arond, 1952; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Elkin (1981) discussed how career ending injuries may cause athletes to experience an identity crisis. Rotella and Heyman (1984) found that social withdrawal, fear, anxiety, and loss of self-esteem were common in athletes who retired due to injuries. The players who retired due to injury in this study expressed feelings which would coincide with these previous studies. Players spoke of how they were unprepared to retire. These players discussed how most of their lives had centred around being elite footballers, and now that they were no longer footballers, their futures appeared uncertain.

The experience of the footballers in this study would suggest that the footballers who retired voluntarily did experience a smoother transition than those who retired due to injury. The players who voluntarily retired discussed feelings of satisfaction with the decision to retire, they discussed how they had made the decision to retire based on current events and factors in their lives, such as age and family commitments. These players openly discussed that, while they enjoyed playing football, they had come to a realisation that they could not play football forever, thus the decision to retire was one that needed to be made. These feelings were in complete contrast to those expressed by the footballers who had retired due to injury. These players discussed feeling cheated from continuing their football careers, due to the injuries they had suffered. For these players, retirement would not have been an option if they had not been injured. The players who had retired due to injury discussed feelings of being "forced" to retire.

They felt that the decision to retire had been taken away from them, and discussed how their retirement from AFL football was out of their control. These feelings of "lack of control" expressed by the informants who had retired due to injury, were similar feelings to those discussed by the players who had retired because they were deselected. For the players who had voluntarily retired, opposite feelings were expressed. These players did not feel a lack of control in the decision to retire; rather players who had voluntarily retired, discussed how they felt in total control in making the decision to retire. The informants in the group who had voluntarily retired discussed how the decision to retire was difficult, but they nevertheless felt well supported by family, friends and their respective clubs in making the decision to retire. They also expressed the feeling that they were allowed ample time in making the decision. No player in this category felt that they had in any way been forced or rushed in making the decision to retire.

The second proposition examined whether AFL footballers who retire voluntarily experience a smoother transition than those who retire due to deselection. The 15 footballers who retired due to deselection discussed their transition from a point of view that reflected their distress. Players felt that they should not have been dropped from their club, they felt bitter towards their club, coaches, administrators, and the league in general. Players gave examples of being told that they were being deselected while on overseas trips, and first hearing the news from reporters. These players felt that not only had they not been prepared for being deselected, but also frequently reported that they could not understand why it had happened. In comparison to players who had voluntarily retired and who discussed being content with their decision to retire, players who retired due to deselection remained disappointed at having retired. While, as the length of time from retirement increased, some players felt more comfortable about retiring, for

the majority of players in this cohort, retirement left feelings of dissatisfaction for a long time.

The deselection process occurs at every level of competitive sport (Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). Ogilvie and Howe (1982) spoke of the Darwinian philosophy of "survival of the fittest" which exists in elite sport. This approach typically places great value on individuals who survive, but pays little attention to those that are deselected. Ogilvie and Howe (1982, 1986) discussed how, typically, professional football, basketball, and baseball players have careers of only four to five years at the highest level. It was therefore not surprising to find that a significant number of AFL footballers retired due to deselection. Although, some of these players did admit that, during the season, they felt that they might be deselected. Nevertheless they were surprised and shocked when it did occur.

The third proposition explored the similarities and differences in the transition process between AFL footballers who retired due to injury and those who retired due to deselection. It was most evident that players who retired due to an involuntary cause, in this case either injury or deselection, had similar experiences in many respects. Both cohorts discussed feelings of not having control over the decision, and bitterness about most aspects of their retirement experience. All players in these two groups spoke of how they would not have retired had the decision been theirs to make. The common feelings amongst these players were feelings of resentment towards their clubs and bitterness for having to retire prematurely in their own eyes. They expressed regrets about not being able to fulfil their aspirations.

The level of perceived control over the decision to retire appears to closely relate to adaptation to retirement (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; McPherson, 1980). In his study of Yugoslav soccer players, Mihovilovic (1968) indicated that, for many, the reasons for retirement were beyond their control. This caused a decreased sense of personal control. Such feelings were also reported in other studies (Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Research from areas of clinical, social, and physiological psychology demonstrate that perceptions of control are related to many areas of human functioning, including sense of self-competence (White, 1959), the interpretation of self (Kelly, 1967) and other (Jones & Davis, 1965) information. Perceptions of control may also influence individuals' feelings of helplessness (Friedlander, 1985), levels of motivation (Wood & Bandura, 1989), physiological changes (Tache & Selye, 1985), and self-confidence (Bandura & Adams, 1977). Perceived lack of control has also been associated with various pathologies including depression (Alloy & Abramson, 1982), anxiety (Garfield & Bergin, 1978), substance abuse (Shiffman, 1982), and dissociative disorders (Putnam, 1989).

While both groups of informants who had retired from playing AFL football due to an involuntary cause, that being injury or deselection, expressed similar feelings of bitterness and feelings of being upset, it is important to note that the transition processes for these groups differed from each other. For the players who had retired due to injury, there were feelings expressed that the focus for these players was that their football careers had been snatched from them. These players discussed how they had been "robbed" of meeting their aspirations in their football careers. For some players, this was perceived to be the possibility of winning individual awards, while for others it was the missed opportunity of being able to play

in a grand final. The focus for the players who had retired due to deselection was on how brutal their clubs had been. For example, some players remained upset at how they were told that they were being deselected. This included being told while on holiday overseas, hearing that they had been deselected from news reports and from reporters telephoning to ask them how they felt about being deselected. A number of deselected players also denied the validity of the decision, feeling that they were good enough and that they should not have been cast off by the club.

The fourth proposition examined the level of football identity and its influence on the transition process of AFL footballers. All footballers interviewed for this study discussed the significance of football in their lives. A central issue found throughout all the interviews with these players was the importance of football and how the players related to themselves and their significant others as footballers. Being an AFL footballer is often associated with 'superstar' status (Stoddart, 1986). It is thus not surprising that all players who were interviewed within the three groups considered their football careers as a most significant aspect of their lives. There was no evidence that the nature of retirement whether voluntary or of an involuntary nature was of any significance in how these footballers perceived the importance of their football careers. In fact, all players spoke of how football had been an important part of their lives, often the most important and had been important for a long time, typically since they were children. Players also spoke of how it felt good and "special" to be a footballer. All players spoke of how they enjoyed playing football at the highest level.

Many researchers have discussed the relevance of sport identity to adaptation to retirement from elite competition (Blinde & Greendorfer,

1985; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). It has been argued by some researchers that the diversity of an athlete's social identity will affect the quality of the adaptation to retirement (Gorbett, 1995).

Retirement has been associated with a loss of status and social identity (Pollack, 1956; Tuckman & Lorge, 1953). It has been suggested that a person with a strongly held athletic identity is "more likely to interpret a given event (e.g., an injury) in terms of its implications for that individual's athletic functioning than a person only weakly identified to the athlete role" (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993, p. 238). These authors also describe athletic identity as a social role, one that is heavily socialised by the influences of family, friends, coaches, teachers, and the media (Brewer, et al., 1993, Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Mahar, 1993). While the benefits of strong athletic identity include adherence to and involvement in sport, exercise, and health behaviours, development of athletic skills, sense of self, and confidence, the potential risks relate to difficulties athletes may experience during career transitions and specifically problems associated with deselection or injury and athletic career transition (Baillie & Danish, 1992; McPherson, 1980; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). The reason a strong, exclusive athletic identity is thought to be a risk factor for emotional problems following career end is that "individuals who strongly commit themselves to the athlete role may be less likely to explore other career education and lifestyle options due to their intensive involvement in sport" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 241).

While all players who were interviewed discussed the significance of football in their lives, there were differences expressed by players who retired voluntarily compared to those who retired due to injury and deselection, in how they viewed life now that they were no longer AFL footballers. The footballers whose retirement was of a voluntary nature

discussed their football in terms of the positive aspects. These players discussed how football had been a positive part of their lives, how enjoyable it had been to play football, and how football had provided them with a great many positive opportunities. For these players, there were few negative feelings about being retired, and players only spoke of the positive aspects of being footballers, whereas players who retired due to injury and deselection discussed feelings of loss, loss of what they had and also of what they aspired to or expected over the coming years. Players who retired because they had been deselected expressed the same feelings of loss of what they had and what they believed their future as footballers held, and they also discussed feelings of bitterness towards their respective clubs. In fact, some of these players openly discussed anger and blamed the club for their retirement, as well as for the lack of support they were given by the club during the retirement process.

Players who retired voluntarily also expressed their perception that football had provided them with financial security and financial rewards. In comparison, players who retired due to injury and deselection spoke of financially not being prepared for retirement. This could be explained as in all cases the retirement was unexpected and for most it occurred early in terms of typical career length. This meant that these players did not have the opportunity nor the advanced knowledge to prepare financially for their retirement from football. McFadden and Tucker's (1986) study with the US National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA) concluded that the majority of players thought that it was important to plan for retirement, even if the retirement was not imminent. This could be explained by the fact that the players in the McFadden And Tucker study were accessed through a career planning seminar.

The fifth and sixth propositions examined whether social support from family and friends, and social support from the club the footballer played for or the AFL mitigated negative perceptions of retirement from AFL football. Footballers who voluntarily retired discussed how they felt that the clubs had supported them in making the decision to retire. These players gave accounts of being able to talk to the coach and administrators about retiring, noting that they received support in both making the decision and in its execution, once having made the decision. As one would expect, footballers who retired due to injury and deselection felt a lack of support from their respective clubs. Players who retired due to injury, spoke of how, once it became apparent that their playing days were over, the club no longer wanted to "know them". Some players who had experienced more than one injury contrasted the kind of support the club gave for previous injury, when their return was expected, with the lack of support given for the final injury, when it was clear that they would not play again. The 15 footballers who were deselected all spoke of the lack of support from their respective clubs. It was perhaps for this group that the lack of club support was most evident. In the first place, it was the club that had decided that they were no longer needed. Thus the club was likely to be a direct target for deselected players. Also, from the players viewpoint, clubs appeared to treat the process without due sensitivity. Players spoke of being told or hearing about their deselection over newscasts and while on overseas trips, or by receiving telephone calls to go into the club, followed by brief meetings in which they were told that their services were no longer required. They did not report any follow through by the club, where it actually made an attempt to find out how the player was coping with the decision. Players in this group expressed feelings that reflected particular sensitivity to the loss of interest in their welfare that they perceived the club to have shown since they were deselected.

An interesting finding in this study was that, while all players in the study received some form of social support from family and friends, how this support was internalised varied. Players who voluntarily retired discussed feeling that their family and friends accepted and/or agreed with their decision, often providing good support in making the decision to retire, and being there in the post-retirement period. Players who retired due to injury or deselection felt that family and friends, while often sympathetic, could not understand what they were going through. These players felt alone during the transition process. This was most interesting as players in these two groups did admit to having family around them, but expressed that their family could not provide support, not because they did not care, but because they were not able to appreciate what the player was experiencing.

Research suggests that, due to elite athletes' typically being totally involved in their sport, the majority of their friends and acquaintances and their social activities tend to be found in the sports environment (Botterill, 1990; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). Such research has proposed that the athletes' primary social support is thus centred around their athletic involvement (Coakley, 1983; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Hardy, 1989). Difficulties arise when these athletes are no longer part of the team or organisation. It has been suggested that due to athletes' restricted social identity and the absence of social support, they may experience feelings of isolation and loneliness, which may lead to significant feelings of distress (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; McPherson, 1980; Remer, Tongate, & Watson, 1978). It has also been suggested that athletes need institutional support, as well as support from family and friends, during the retirement phase (Gorbett, 1985; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). Research has indicated that athletes who receive social support from family and friends have an

easier transition than those who state that they had little or no support (Mihovilovic, 1968; Reynolds, 1981; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). The present study supports the previous work in this respect, but suggests that the nature of support that is perceived and accepted depends on the conditions of retirement, with social support being accepted by those voluntary retirees, but not so much by those whose retirement is involuntary.

The seventh proposition explored whether a continuation of involvement in football eases the retirement process from playing AFL football. An interesting issue here was that players who had retired due to an involuntarily cause, that being injury or deselection, more frequently continued to play football at a lower level, than the players who retired voluntarily. This could be explained by noting that the players who voluntarily retired wanted to retire and hence stop playing football, whereas the players who retired due to injury or deselection wanted to continue playing football, and perhaps this need was demonstrated in these players electing to play at a lower level. These players were able to feel that they could participate in a sport that had been a major part of their lives.

The eighth proposition examined whether satisfaction with AFL football career eased the retirement process. The 18 players who retired from playing AFL football voluntarily expressed feelings of satisfaction with their football careers. These players spoke of how they enjoyed playing football, how they felt that they had achieved all that they wanted from their football careers, and generally how football had provided them with a positive experience. This was perhaps not surprising considering that these players had enjoyed successful football careers. For these players retirement from football was seen as an inevitable process. This was not the

case for the players who had retired due to an involuntary cause. The 15 players who retired through injury, while discussing that they had enjoyed playing football, considered that they had been "robbed" of their football careers because of their injury. The players felt dissatisfied with their football careers as they reported that they had hoped to achieve much more. These feelings were similarly discussed by the players who had retired because they were deselected. The difference being that these players felt that they had been wrongly deselected. For these players who had been deselected, the most discussed issue was the dissatisfaction with their respective clubs. It was difficult for these players to express any feelings of satisfaction with their football careers. Little research has explored the issue of satisfaction and coping with retirement.

The final proposition examined whether satisfaction with their career outside football eased the transition from playing AFL football for this group of retirees. A surprising finding was that the footballers in this study were all employed at the time of interview. Most players had either attended school or worked while they played football. All players discussed how they were thankful that they did have a career once they stopped playing football. It was difficult to determine whether a relationship existed between satisfaction with career outside football and an easier transition from playing AFL football. Researchers have suggested that adaptation to retirement from elite sport is dependent on the athlete being able to earn a living outside their sport (Hare, 1971; Lerch, 1981; McPherson, 1980; Weinberg & Arond, 1952; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). While no detailed financial information was elicited from the retirees in this study, from which to determine whether they were earning an adequate living outside football, the present study did not find a clear-cut difference in the employment patterns for voluntary and involuntary retirees, but there was a big

difference in their adjustment to retirement. Despite their being no observable difference in satisfaction with career outside football between voluntary and involuntary retirees, the involuntary retirees were experiencing a more traumatic adjustment. This suggests that, while not being employed is likely to exacerbate the problems associated with this career transition, having a job does not alleviate the impact of forced retirement.

This section has examined how the nine propositions which were introduced in Chapter 2 related to the data which was generated. These nine propositions raised some interesting issues in relation to how elite footballers negotiate their retirement. The next section explores how the nine themes generated through the data relate to these propositions and this thesis.

### Comments on Themes

#### Reason for Retirement

This theme was perhaps the core of the present thesis. It was quite evident that the reason for retirement was the basis for how these footballers coped and negotiated their retirement from AFL football. In this study the 18 players who retired voluntarily gave three reasons for retirement, age, family commitments, and pursuit of an alternative career within football or outside of football. The players who had retired due to involuntary reasons, retired due to injury or deselection. The reason for retirement was linked to most of the other themes. For example, players who retired voluntarily

expressed high levels of satisfaction with their football careers. They also discussed feelings which related to a positive identity with being footballers. They expressed being well prepared for retirement and receiving good support from both their families and respective clubs. On the other hand, players who retired due to injury or deselection, while stating that football had played a significant role in their lives, indicated that their football identity was related to how they felt about no longer being able to play football. These players found it difficult to discuss the satisfaction of playing football, as their feelings when interviewed related to how negative they felt, now that they could no longer play elite football. They reported being unprepared for retirement and receiving little support from their respective clubs. While they did admit to receiving support from their families, most players spoke of how they felt that their families did not understand what they were going through.

The reason for retirement appeared to be the crucial link to the way in which players coped with retirement. The players who voluntarily retired gave internal, personal reasons for why they retired, that being, age, family commitments, and pursuit of alternative career. These players discussed how these factors contributed to their decision to retire. These players did not express feeling pressured to retire from either their club or families. The majority of these players spoke of how it appeared that it was "the right time" to retire. This was contrasted by the reports of players who had retired due to injury or deselection. The players who retired due to injury discussed how the injury was the cause of their retirement. All players in this group spoke of how they would not have retired had it not been for the injury. While, for some of these players, the injuries were recurring and of a serious nature, they nevertheless felt that they could play another season. The players who retired due to deselection also discussed how the decision

to retire had not been their own. While some of these players did discuss how they felt that they had not been playing well during the season, they believed they were good enough and felt that they should be given another chance to prove themselves. All of the players in this group indicated that, had they not been deselected, they would have continued to play league football.

### Football Identity

Reason for retirement was linked to the feelings players expressed about their retirement and was also linked to the perceived football identity of these players. This theme explored how the informants perceived themselves as AFL footballers. All players in the study spoke of the importance of football in their lives. The reason for retirement did not influence the significance of football in these players lives, but it did affect their reaction to retiring. For the players who had voluntarily retired, their football identity was discussed from a positive perspective. These players spoke of how they had enjoyed playing football and being footballers. They also spoke of how football had provided them with financial benefits. In addition, they indicated that they were happy with their move out of football and into other spheres that they had selected. The players who had retired due to injury or deselection also discussed the importance of football in their lives, and how they had enjoyed playing football. These players spoke of being at a loss now that they were no longer footballers. As with the players who had voluntarily retired, these players also discussed issues relating to their financial earnings. These players, however, spoke of the difficulties that they were now experiencing as they were no longer earning an income from football, although they all had other employment.

## Satisfaction with Football Career

How footballers in this study perceived their identity as footballers, which was linked to the reason for retirement, was also connected to how satisfied these footballers were with their football careers and their retirement. This theme explored how satisfied players were with their football careers. It was quite apparent in this study that the reason for retirement was linked to satisfaction with football career. For example, players who voluntarily retired expressed feelings relating to high levels of satisfaction with their football career. These players discussed how they had achieved all that they wanted to from football. For most of these players there were also expressions relating to a high level of satisfaction with their personal and team achievements within football. The players who had retired due to injury or deselection found it difficult to express feelings relating to satisfaction with their football careers. For these players the disappointment of no longer being able to play league football was instrumental in the way they felt. While both groups of players spoke of the disappointments of no longer being able to play football, their disappointments differed in relation to whether they retired due to injury or deselection. For example, the players who retired due to injury spoke of feelings of disappointment in relation to having to retire. These players felt the injuries that they received were responsible for their football career ending. All players reported, that had it not been for the injury, they would still be playing league football. These footballers discussed how as league footballers they had expectations of playing league football until they were "too old" to play. These players had perceived that their football careers would continue until they were ready to retire. They discussed how they had aspirations of winning medals and playing in a grand final. While the players who retired due to deselection also expressed feeling dissatisfied

with having to retire, these players' feelings of dissatisfaction focused more on the treatment they perceived that they had received from their respective clubs. As with the players who had retired due to injury, the players who had been deselected also discussed how they had perceived that they would continue playing league football until they were "too old" to play. Those who had been deselected spoke of the expectations that they felt that they were good enough to continue playing, and how if they were given the opportunity to play they would prove their skills and capabilities as footballers.

### Length of Retirement

While all players interviewed for this study had been retired for 18 months or less, the length of retirement was linked to how players were coping with having retired from playing AFL football. The reason for retirement, whether voluntary or involuntary, did not appear to be linked to how players described the retirement transition that they experienced when they first retired. Players spoke of having to come to terms with no longer being footballers, and how with the passing of time they were able to come to terms with the fact that they had retired. For the players who had retired during the off season, and who were interviewed before the start of the next season, feelings of anticipation of what it might be like to no longer be a footballer were expressed. These players were uncertain about how they were going to feel once the football season started.

While most players, whether they retired voluntarily, due to injury, or because of deselection, discussed similar feelings in relation to how time had eased the retirement process, players who had retired due to deselection

within the previous six months spoke of how they felt disbelief in the fact that they had been deselected. These players were finding it difficult to come to terms with what had happened, and discussed feelings of uncertainty in relation to their future. They also found it especially hard to identify anybody with whom they could discuss their feelings at the early stage of their retirement.

### Continued Involvement in Football

Some players who retired voluntarily, due to injury, or because of deselection described how continued involvement in football had eased the transition from playing AFL. These players were involved at a lower level of football, either as players, in coaching, or in administration. They spoke of how maintaining an involvement in football had meant that they could continue being involved in a game that had been such a large part of their lives. Voluntary retirees who were still involved in football and who were all in coaching or administration positions, spoke of how they felt that a complete break from football would have been too traumatic. These feelings were also expressed by players who had retired due to injury and deselection. On the face of it, linking continued involvement in football with adjustment in the transition process might appear to be questionable. While some players in the three categories spoke of needing some involvement in football, there were other players who spoke of requiring a total break from football. In an analysis of the data, however, it was noted that the reason for a complete break varied. Players who voluntarily retired and had no further involvement in football noted that, after their retirement they needed a complete break to be with family or to focus on another facet of their life. Players who retired either through injury or deselection and had no involvement in football, spoke of requiring a break to try to work out

what they were going to do. These players spoke of needing to sort out their options and decide their future in relation to football, once they had got over the "trauma" of either not being able to play due to injury or of having been deselected. Thus, some players chose to continue their improvement in football in some capacity to help them cope with no longer playing the highest level, while others felt a complete break was the best way to cope. There was no indication from the present study of any personal characteristics or situational variables that were consistently associated with this dichotomy.

### Social Support

This theme explored the level of social support that the informants in this study perceived that they received. There was a link between level of support that the player felt he received and the reason for retirement. For example, all players who voluntarily retired stated that they received good support from their family, friends, and respective clubs. This level of support was not expressed by players who had retired either due to injury or deselection. While admitting to receiving support from family and friends, these players felt that their families and friends could not provide adequate support as they (the family and friends) had not experienced what the player was going through and could not understand the impact that this was having on the player's life. Some players who had retired due to injury, spoke of how, when they were first injured, the club was providing support, but when it became obvious that the injury was of a serious nature, the club neglected to even contact them, or follow through on their progress. The perception of support received by the players who had retired due to deselection from their respective clubs was that it was non-existent. These players related

stories of being told that their services were no longer required by news reporters, hearing the news on a news bulletin, or being told at brief meetings at the club. They felt that the clubs left them totally unprepared. These players felt that their respective clubs did not provide the sensitivity that might have been required. All players in this group spoke of how there was no follow up from the club to make certain that they were coping with the situation.

The implication from these findings on social support is that not only does social support have to be offered, but it also has to be accepted. It was apparent that the players who had voluntarily retired were comfortable with the decision to retire and thus also felt comfortable accepting the support that was offered, either from family, friends, or the club. While it was obvious that the players who had involuntarily retired did not receive support from their clubs, the support from family and friends remains an interesting issue. These players could have been at a stage where they were not easily able to accept support from those close to them. Perhaps they were going through a grieving process (Kubler-Ross, 1969) and were in denial, so the offered support was perceived as a threat, or they might have been in the stage of anger at the prospect of no longer being able to play football, anger which was directed externally at anybody who addressed the retirement issue, including family and friends.

### Career Outside Football

One of the most interesting issues in relation to all players in this study was that they were all working or studying at university at the time of interview. The reason for retirement did not appear to be directly related to

whether these players had a career outside playing football. While some players' work was a football related job, like coaching, all players had an established work role. Over half of the 48 players interviewed in this study had attended university while they played football. Of the 48 players in this sample, 11 players did not work at some point of their football careers, but even these 11 players had started work prior to retiring. There were no major differences between the players who retired voluntarily and those who retired due to an involuntary cause in relation to having a career outside football while playing football, the only significant difference was that only players who had voluntarily retired were employed in football related jobs post retirement; this included coaching and media positions. A possible explanation for this finding is that it was the footballers who had voluntarily retired who had perceptions of successful and fulfilled football careers. This seems plausible because it is typically the outstanding players, or at least those with records of achievement, that are invited to join the media, or to take on coaching or administration jobs.

Of significant interest in the finding that all footballers in this study worked while playing football or just prior to retirement is that this finding is unique to Australian Rules football in Australia and is rare when compared with sport in other countries. Australian Rules football has a tradition as the working class sport. Throughout its hundred year history, the playing of football has been something players do on the weekend (Pascoe, 1995). Even with recent increases in player payments, this attitude has not significantly changed. This is an unusual feature of Australian Rules, as in most football codes especially in the US and Europe, players play football full-time. Thus, while it may be perceived that athletes having a job outside the sport, either already operating or to go to, are likely to cope better with the transition out of the sport, this was not supported in this

thesis, where having a job did not seem to ameliorate the difficulty of the transition for involuntary retirees. Perhaps because Australian Rules Footballers are employed during their football careers, employment does not have the same significance in Australian Rules Football that it would in many other sports and football codes in other countries, where a new job must be found at the end of a full-time sports career.

### Preparation for Retirement

This theme which explored how well prepared these elite footballers felt that they were for retirement, was also linked to the reason for retirement. For example, the players who voluntarily retired expressed feelings of having made a careful decision. These players spoke of how they had considered all options, and discussed the prospect of retirement with family, friends, their club, and teammates, before making the final decision. In some cases, these players reported that they had anticipated how they might feel post retirement, whereas the players who had retired due to injury or deselection discussed feelings of being unprepared for their retirement from AFL football. It was interesting to note that in some cases players had thought that their careers were ending, for example, several players who had retired due to injury had sustained serious re-occurring injuries, and had been told by medical staff that to return to AFL football would be difficult, while some players who had retired due to deselection noted that they felt that their form or season had been poor, however, these players still discussed feeling shocked and unprepared when retirement became a reality.

## Age at Retirement

All players interviewed in this study were aged between 26 and 36. An interesting note was that the majority of players who retired voluntarily gave increasing age as a reason for retirement. These players described how they felt that their increasing age was a key factor in determining that it was time to retire. The complete opposite was found with players who had retired due to injury or deselection, who felt that they were not old enough to retire from elite football. This perception by the players who had involuntarily retired was not an inaccurate perception, as these players were younger than those who had retired voluntarily. There were only three players who had retired due to injury who were over thirty, and two players were over thirty who had retired due to deselection.

This section of the chapter has explored the relationship of the themes to this thesis. It has examined the meanings that footballers give to negotiating their retirement from elite level football. The nine themes were significant to the retirement process of the players interviewed in this study. All players spoke of reason for retirement which was significant to how footballers accepted their retirement, this mainly related to feelings of control, with footballers who voluntarily retired discussing feelings of control over the decision to retire, while players who retired due to injury or deselection discussed feeling a lack of control in the decision to retire. All players discussed their lives as footballers and acceptance of being non-footballers. Players who had voluntarily retired discussed positive feelings in relation to being footballers, while players who had retired due to injury or deselection, while they stated that they enjoyed playing league football, spoke of the difficulties they were experiencing now that they were no longer footballers. Satisfaction with football career was dependent on reason for retirement. Players who voluntarily retired discussed feelings of

satisfaction with their football careers, while players who retired due to involuntary reasons spoke of dissatisfaction with their football careers, especially in relation to not being able to fulfil their football ambitions, for example, winning awards, and playing in grand finals. The issue of social support appeared to relate to being ready to accept social support, with voluntary retirees feeling well supported, and involuntary retirees feeling a lack of support and understanding. While all players were employed at the time of interview, having a job did not ease the retirement process for players who had involuntarily retired. The decision to remain involved in football at some level was not influenced by reason for retirement, but was rather an individual choice, with some players expressing needing to be involved in football to help ease the retirement process, while others, wanted no involvement in football. Players who retired due to injury and deselection spoke of being unprepared for retirement, while players who had retired voluntarily felt well prepared for retirement. Some players who had voluntarily retired gave increasing age as a reason for retirement, while players who had retired due to injury and deselection felt that they were too young to retire.

### Links to Gerontological Theories

The literature review began by examining the gerontological theories of retirement. These theories have received criticism in both the gerontological discipline and in the attempts made to apply them to sport retirement. It is difficult to explain the retirement of athletes with theories that were designed to explain retirement of a much older cohort. The theory that can perhaps provide some useful understanding of sport retirement is continuity theory. While the other theories explain processes that are

difficult to apply to younger athletes, and it was quite apparent that these theories provided no useful explanation of the experiences of the footballers in this study, continuity theory, provided some useful comparisons. Footballers spoke of needing to continue involvement to help ease retirement from AFL. These players spoke of how a continued involvement meant that they could maintain involvement in a sport that had been a significant part of their lives. On the other hand, continuity in the sense of having a non-football job that continued after retirement from football was not found to have a strong influence on the retirement process, especially for involuntary retirees. While there were examples of disengagement in those who felt that a complete break from all aspects of football at all levels was the best way to cope, this sense of the term is purely descriptive, having no obvious explanatory or predictive utility. Similarly, activity would describe the behaviour of those who took up any available football-related involvement that was offered, as a means of coping by keeping on doing what they knew and loved best, but activity theory cannot predict those who selected this option and distinguish them from their counterparts who disengaged.

While social gerontological theories have limited utility in the explanation of patterns described in the retirement of elite footballers, the theory of loss and grief developed by Kubler-Ross (1969) was reflected in a number of consistent patterns. All players acknowledged experiencing a sense of loss, but it was much greater for involuntary retirees, who grieved for lost dreams as well as for the loss of their current playing status. Lack of control seemed to exacerbate these feelings, which were reflected in denial of the loss in some, especially deselected players, who continued to seek an entry into the elite game, and in anger directed at the clubs who had deselected them, as well as at family and friends who offered support.

## Methodological Issues

This thesis applied a method that was new to the study of retirement from sport. There are a number of observations about aspects of the research process that should be noted. First, some limitations are discussed and then some observations are made on the method used.

### Limitations

The scope of this study was limited to one elite sport. Focusing on a qualitative methodology may have appeared to be a limitation. The study however, appealed to methods of naturalistic enquiry which enabled more descriptive and vivid accounts to emerge of the experiences and issues relating to the nine propositions. The delimitations were presented as nine propositions which guided and directed the thesis. This focus upon the nine propositions was indeed a limitation. They did, however, also provide conceptual boundaries for the study. The statements were developed as the complex nature of the issues associated with transitions and retirement of elite AFL footballers unfolded.

### Sample Size

The methodological thrust of grounded theory is that the collection of data continues until saturation is reached. In this study, saturation was reached independently within each category, thus in accordance with the grounded theory method, the size of each sample was adequate. In practice,

the groups of 18 voluntary retired, 15 injured, and 15 deselected players were relatively large for qualitative, interview-based research.

### Population

The players who voluntarily retired were generally older than those who retired due to injury or deselection, this was not surprising and quite consistent with overall retirement patterns of elite footballers. The age difference did impact the way footballers within these categories explained retirement in accordance with their age, for example the players who retired due to injury or deselection felt that they were too young to retire, and in fact compared to the players who voluntarily retired they were younger. This did not make the comparisons between the voluntary and involuntary groups invalid, as, while the players who retired voluntarily chose when to retire, the involuntary group did not have the option of choice. It would still be interesting to compare voluntary retirees with a group of involuntary retirees of similar age and playing experience. It would also be interesting to compare voluntary retirees with a group of non-retirees of the same age and playing experience, while involuntary retirees could be compared with a younger group of those still playing, to examine football identity, satisfaction with career, aspirations, and preparation or planning for retirement in both cases. Clearly, it would not be surprising if, regardless of whether they had retired, older, more experienced players shared greater satisfaction with their careers and fewer aspirations than younger players, as well as more concern with planning for retirement.

## Measure

The use of a grounded theory method allowed for a different approach in collecting data and allowed the opportunity to see what emerged from the data that was non-theory driven. This meant that the data was constructed from the stories and perceptions of the informants, the informants were able to construct the meaning from their perceptions of retiring from AFL football. A grounded theory approach allowed for a rich approach in collecting and analysing data, which in turn gave a deeper appreciation of the issues relating to retirement from elite sport. While this method has previously not been used in exploring retirement from elite sport, it did work effectively, in its aim of developing themes which clearly emerged from the data, giving the data richness to the retirement process of elite Australian Rules footballers. Using a grounded theory method which is a different approach to those previously used in collecting data on retirement of elite athletes, some of the results appear similar to previous findings. These similar results are consistent with previous studies and have been able to elaborate on these findings. Thus, it is proposed that the approach was effective in this research context.

## Interview

The interview guide which allowed for probing of answers from informants was a useful method in eliciting information from informants. They were allowed the opportunity to discuss issues that they believe important in their retirement process. The fact that I was female did not seem to restrict or inhibit the players as rapport was established early in the process and the interviews proceeded well.

## Implications for Research

This study has raised many questions that need to be researched further. This section briefly discusses a range of research questions that seem important to gain a further understanding of the retirement process of elite athletes.

### Issues in Relation to Control

The perception of control was important in this study. Players who perceived that they had control in the decision to retire, that is, the players who voluntarily retired, experienced a smoother transition than the players who perceived that they had no control. The way in which lack of control affects coping with retirement needs further examination.

### Social Support

Players who involuntarily retired, that being through injury or deselection, discussed not receiving adequate social support by their clubs, family, or friends. While they obviously did not receive support from their clubs, these players all admitted to being offered support from their family and friends, but stated that their family and friends could not understand what they were going through. This seems to be a case of the players not being ready to accept support, rather than it not being offered. Further research should investigate:

1. factors which lead to perceived "lack" of social support;

2. factors that distinguish when one is ready to accept social support;
3. the value of counselling from a person not attached to the club, or player who is retiring.

### Length of Retirement

All players had been retired for less than 18 months. Players who had been retired for closer to 18 months discussed being able to better cope with having retired. Further research should trace players through the retirement process from time of retirement interviewing every two to three months from the point of retirement, if possible. This may assist in developing an understanding of the process of coping and adjusting to retirement, along with factors that affect this adjustment, especially the factors that may help in the process of adaptation.

### Retirement Due to Deselection

This study explored players who had been deselected from their clubs. These players had played elite level football, but had their careers cut short. Mihovilovic (1968) studied the retirement of Yugoslav soccer players, who had continued playing soccer despite their increasing age and failing capacities, these players continued playing until their clubs replaced them. These two types of deselection are quite different, a third possible type of deselection is players who do not make the cut from junior to senior competition, or from college to major league. It would appear that these are three potential different forms of deselection. Future research could explore

the transition process of these three different types of deselection to identify similarities and differences between the experiences of retirees in each category.

### Continued Involvement in Football

This study found that for some players whether they retired voluntarily or due to an involuntary cause continued involvement in football was deemed a necessity. These players discussed how being able to be continually involved in football eased the transition to retirement. Other players discussed how they needed a complete break from football, as they could not face playing in a minor league or at any level. Further research should explore what determines this decision to continue involvement or to opt out totally.

### Implications for Practice

While it is acknowledged that education programs should be established to assist footballers throughout their careers in the hope that when retirement occurs the player is prepared for life after football, because of the nature of the game, it is important to remember that preparation is not always possible. It is impossible to predict when a player might receive a career ending injury or be deselected before such preparation can be made. In addition, even when effective career education programs are in place, they will not result in all players taking appropriate action, so there will still be those who retire at an age that is typical in that sport, but without adequate financial, psychological, or social preparation. Thus, there are

always likely to be some athletes who are totally unprepared for their career to end. It is suggested that counselling services need to be provided for crisis situations, as well as for those players who don't benefit fully from education. Education programs are also needed to develop alternative skills and knowledge and to ensure that athletes plan for retirement from much earlier in their careers. A number of more specific issues are raised for either or both of these supporting processes (education programs and counselling), that are now briefly discussed.

### Career Education

The themes which emerged from the data gave insight into how footballers construct their retirement. An education program could explore some of the issues that emerged from the data. These include:

1. Players who had retired due to injury and deselection discussed how they felt totally unprepared for retirement as they had not anticipated having to retire. A career education program should address the issue of possible retirement due to involuntary circumstances. Players should be made aware of what their options are should this happen to them.
2. All players discussed the relevance of football in their lives, noting how central it was to their identity. An education program, while encouraging positive aspects to one's sporting identity, should also address the issue of a broader self-concept outside the sporting domain.

3. All players in this study had some form of employment. an educational program should encourage players to pursue careers outside football. While such preparation is important, this research suggests that it should not be relied on to ameliorate the impact of retirement, especially when it is involuntary.
4. Players who had retired due to injury and deselection discussed feeling that there was a lot more that they wanted to achieve from their football careers. An education program should allow players to set career goals and have a back-up should these goals not be achieved.
5. Players who retired due to injury and deselection spoke of not being financially prepared for retirement. An education program should include a financial management component, which should be introduced early in the player's elite career, so there is some financial base, in the event that early retirement is forced on the players.

### Counselling

A transition experience of an individual footballer might include dealing with some emotional issues depending on the nature of the transition. For example, this study clearly showed that footballers who retire due to injury and deselection experience a more difficult transition to retirement. A footballer needs to manage the transition experience from player to non-player effectively. This may be achieved through individual counselling which deals with some of the following issues:

1. Self-identity
2. Social support
3. Coping skills
4. Managing change
5. Developing a sense of control.

Such a program should be available to involuntary retirees in mid-career or at the end of their career, as well as to any other retirees who request it. The nature of the counselling should take into account findings from this research that different issues are important to different types of retirees. For injured athletes the loss of career, the feeling of being "robbed", seemed to be paramount. For deselected players, while this was an important issue, the focus of their anger and resentment was towards the club that had discarded them, often wrongly in their view. It is likely that the issues for voluntary retirees at career end would be different from those of injured or deselected retirees. The issues facing involuntary retirees at career end, that is, those whose capacities were failing due to advancing age, but who hung on to their career, would be different again.

### General Conclusions

From the analyses of the transcripts of 18 voluntary retirees, 15 players who retired due to injury, and 15 who retired because they were deselected, 18 conclusions were drawn.

1. Footballers who retired voluntarily experienced a smoother transition than footballers who retired due to injury.
2. Footballers who retired voluntarily experienced a smoother

transition than footballers who retired due to deselection.

3. While footballers who retired voluntarily experienced a smoother transition to retirement than those whose retirement was of an involuntarily nature, these players still reported the actual decision to retire as difficult.
4. When the decision to retire - as in the case of injury or deselection - was not of an individual's choice the footballer was ill-prepared for the retirement process.
5. Although footballers who retired voluntarily appeared to cope well with the decision to retire, footballers whose retirement was involuntary, such as those who retired due to injury or deselection, found the process difficult, from social, emotional, and financial perspectives.
6. Family commitments, age, the pursuit of alternative careers, and the need to find a new direction in life were the most common reasons why players voluntarily decided to retire from playing AFL football.
7. While some similarities in the transition process existed between players who retired due to injury and those who retired due to deselection, there were also significant differences. These differences mainly related to how players perceived the reason for retirement.
8. Many footballers saw themselves as footballers, that was the

central aspect of their self-concept. They had wanted to be footballers for as long as they could remember and being an AFL player defined who they were.

9. While all the footballers studied considered football an important aspect of their life, the transition whether of a voluntary or involuntary nature, appeared to affect how footballers perceived their football identity. For example, players who voluntarily retired discussed positive feelings with all aspects of their football, including, expressing positive feelings of making the decision to retire, whereas, players who retired due to an involuntary cause discussed negative feelings, including feelings of loss and dissatisfaction.
10. Players who retired voluntarily appeared to be financially more prepared for retirement than players who retired due to an involuntarily circumstance. One factor might be that players who are in a financially secure position feel comfortable to retire, while those who are not financially well-placed continue to play to improve their financial position.
11. While players who retired due to an involuntary cause received support from family and friends, these players felt that their family and friends were not able to understand how they (the player) felt about no longer being able to play AFL football, whereas, the players who retired voluntarily felt that their family and friends provided appropriate social support.

12. Footballers who retired due to injury or deselection, felt a lack of support from their respective clubs and from the AFL, while footballers who retired voluntarily felt adequately supported by their respective clubs in making the decision to retire.
13. Some footballers expressed the feeling that continued involvement in football after retiring from AFL aided their transition process, but it was not clear why some players felt this need, whereas others preferred a total break from football.
14. The majority of players who retired due to injury and deselection generally tended to be younger than players who voluntarily retired, this influenced feelings of satisfaction, as well as influencing the desire to continue to be involved in football.
15. A relationship existed in respect to satisfaction with football career and satisfaction with decision to retire; generally, footballers who retired voluntarily expressed greater levels of satisfaction with their football careers than footballers who retired due to injury or deselection.
16. Length of retirement had some impact on the way footballers expressed their positive and or negative feelings towards retirement. That is, footballers, especially those who retired due to involuntary causes, and who had just retired at the time of interview expressed strong feelings of being upset and bitter at having to retire. Players who had retired

for longer periods of time, that is, more than six months prior to interview, while they still expressed feelings of being upset at having to retire, appeared to be adjusting to retirement. For some of these players, that adjustment included having made choices on careers, as well as decisions about whether to continue to play football in a minor league.

17. A career outside football that was perceived positively by the player did not aid in the transition process.
18. While players who retired due to an involuntary cause, such as injury or deselection, may, in some instances, be of similar age to those who voluntarily retired, the involuntarily retirees felt that they were too young to retire, and were capable of continuing to play elite level football.

### Concluding Remarks

This thesis has explored the retirement process of 48 Australian Rules Footballers who retired from playing the highest level of this code of football. It is important to remember, as discussed in Chapter 1, that Australian Rules football is the most popular code of football, in this country and players often enjoy a hero-like status. Using in-depth interviews 18 players who had voluntarily retired, 15 players who had retired due to injury and 15 players who had been deselected were interviewed. The use of in-depth interviews allowed these 48 players and myself as the researcher to explore the meanings that footballers give to retiring from elite level competition. The study, through these in-depth

interviews, examined nine propositions which were introduced in Chapter 2. These propositions while not directly being examined provided the bases to form the interview guide. From the data collected nine major themes emerged. These nine themes were explored in detail and provided the study with a focus. The study's main conclusion was that retirement from elite football is influenced by the reason for retirement. It was clearly demonstrated that players who had voluntarily decided to retire experienced less difficulties in the retirement process, while players who had retired due to involuntary reasons, that being injury or deselection, experienced greater problems with the transition process. The use of in-depth interviews enabled a rich understanding to be gained of how footballers negotiate their retirement from elite level competition. A number of valuable distinctions were made and several implications were proposed for future research and for practice. The thesis has supported previous research findings that the retirement transition is rarely easy. There is a need for a great deal more research on a whole range of issues before we fully understand retirement from elite sport.

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## List of Appendixes

- Appendix 1. Demographic Data
- Appendix 2. Letter of Introduction
- Appendix 3. Covering Letter from Australian Football League
- Appendix 4. Consent Form

**DEMOGRAPHICAL DATA:**

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**CODE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**AGE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**SEX:** MALE / FEMALE

**MARITAL STATUTES:** SINGLE  
MARRIED  
DEFACTO  
DIVORCED  
SEPARATED  
OTHER SPECIFY \_\_\_\_\_

**CHILDREN:** \_\_\_\_\_

**HIGHEST LEVEL OF  
SCHOOLING:** \_\_\_\_\_

**CURRENT EMPLOYMENT:** \_\_\_\_\_

**SPORT:** \_\_\_\_\_

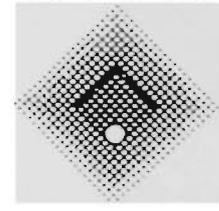
**LEVEL:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PROFESSIONAL / AMATEUR**

Ballarat Road  
Footscray Telephone  
(03) 688 4000  
PO Box 14428 Facsimile  
MMC (03) 689 4069  
Melbourne  
Victoria 3000  
Australia

University Campus  
Department of  
Physical Education  
and Recreation  
Telephone  
(03) 688 4470  
(03) 688 4473  
Facsimile  
(03) 688 4891

**VICTORIA  
UNIVERSITY**



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Dear

I am writing to ask for your support and involvement in a research project. The project will investigate issues associated with retirement from elite level football - the AFL.

This research project will involve interviewing footballers who played for an AFL club and recently retired. The purpose of the study is to gain a greater understanding of factors that may help or hinder players cope with the experience of retirement from elite level football.

Your name and address was supplied to me by the AFL which is supporting this research project. I will be contacting you within a few days to provide you with further information on the project. If in the meantime you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me on (03) 688-4386.

I would also like to stress that all information at in reference to this project will remain confidential at all times.

Yours sincerely



Vanda Fortunato.

20 July 1994

Dear

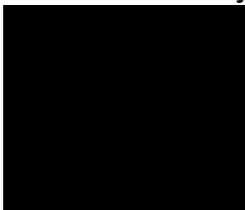
Recently you would have been approached by Ms Vanda Fortunato from Victoria University in an effort to gain your permission to conduct a survey/interview relating to factors that may help or hinder players cope with the experience of retirement from the elite level of football - the AFL.

The interview may address some sensitive issues, but you should have confidence in the fact that the person conducting the research is an experienced interviewer with counselling skills and that all information will be treated with strict confidentiality.

The AFL regards this study as being of extreme importance, as future strategies will be developed that may help elite players make the transition to retirement as easily as possible.

Obviously there is no compulsion to involve yourself, but hopefully you will consider all information carefully before deciding one way or the other.

Yours sincerely



ROD AUSTIN  
STATE DIRECTOR OF COACHING

AUSTRALIAN  
FOOTBALL LEAGUE  
A.C.N. 004 155 211  
INSTITUTED 1896  
INC. IN VIC. 1989

M.C.G.,  
Brunton Avenue,  
Jolimont, Victoria, 3002  
Telephone: (03) 654 1244

Football Operations  
Facsimile: (03) 654 8684

Address all  
correspondence to:  
Box 1449N  
G.P.O., Melbourne, 3001.



Official sponsor  
of the  
AUSTRALIAN  
FOOTBALL  
LEAGUE

## CONSENT FORM

1. Brief Nature of Study:

The nature of this study is to develop an understanding of role transitions in elite sport. There will be two aspects to the research, first, the participant will be asked to partake in an interview which will be audio-taped. The second aspect will involve answering a questionnaire which contains 29 questions.

2. Certification by Subject:

I, \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ certify that I have the legal ability to give valid consent and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in this study which will explore role transitions of elite athletes.

3. I acknowledge that:

- (i) I fully understand the nature of this research;
- (ii) I understand that the interview will be audio - taped;
- (iii) my identity will be protected at all times;
- (iv) I do not have to answer any questions that I do not wish to answer;  
and,
- (v) I may cease the interview at any time should I wish to do so.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

