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*A balancing act: women players in a new semi-Professional team sport league*

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## **A Balancing Act: Women Players in a New Semi-Professional Team Sport League**

Women's professional and semi-professional team sports leagues have recently experienced a period of substantial growth (Baxter, 2019; Mooney et al., 2019; Nielsen Women's Sports Research, 2018). The international growth of women's professional competitions follows a period of well publicised league 'failures' in women's professional team sport in North America (Micelotta et al., 2018). Many of these new competitions are in the early phase of their product lifecycle, and are still building their brand, fan base and have yet to achieve independent commercial viability (Mumcu, 2019).

As a widening array of sport governing bodies recognise the value of extending their competitions to include a women's professional league, women athletes who previously played their sport for little or no payment are now vying for equal/equitable opportunities, remuneration and resourcing (Andersen & Loland 2017; Hendrick, 2016; McLachlan, 2019; Rowan, 2017); improved employment security (Willson et. al., 2017); better media coverage (Musto et al., 2017; Sherwood et al, 2017) and the option to play professionally both domestically and internationally (Agergaard, 2017). In evidence, Australian football (soccer), basketball, netball, cricket, rugby league and Australian rules Football [AFL] have all established leagues for women, and collectively, the athletes therein are amongst the best-paid in the world (Morgan & Taylor, 2017; Sherry & Taylor, 2019).

Despite recent growth, many women's sport leagues provide only marginal salaries and/or partial year semi-professional employment and the ability to earn a living from playing professional sport for women is limited (Sherry & Taylor, 2019). The semi-professional construction of these sport careers provides opportunities and challenges for players, support personnel (e.g. coaches, administrators, etc.) and sport governing bodies. Given the part-time nature of this employment, of particular interest is how players navigate their training and playing obligations alongside other work, family and study commitments. At a time when an

increasing number of traditionally male sports are establishing (semi) professional leagues for women, this research explores the experiences of women entering into paid employment as players in the inaugural first season of a new women's competition. Our research question is: 'what are the barriers faced by, and support provided to, women entering into a new career in semi-professional team sport?'

### **Theory Informing Our Study**

Schlossberg (1981) described transitions as "an event or nonevent [that] results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). This work would prove foundational to the study of sport careers, furthered by Stambulova (1994, 2000) who then identified six transitions in an athletic career, including the amateur to professional transition. While the creation of paid employment for women athletes could be positioned within the latter context; this would be limiting as Stambulova's framework focused exclusively on athletic development and disregarded the possible influence of non-athletic factors (Sanders & Winter, 2016). This limitation was addressed by the Developmental Model of Transitions faced by Athletes (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016). This model conceptualises the development of 'the whole athlete', proposing that each athlete develops throughout the four stages of initiation, development, mastery, and discontinuation and encompasses athletic, vocational, psychosocial, and financial domains (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

To date, transition models have largely been conceptualised by drawing on the experiences and empirical data of males. The sporting career journey of women, from entry through to exit and beyond, is inherently different to that of their male counterparts. As noted by Edelman and Harrison (2008), female athletes have followed a different pathway into professional sports from their male counterparts, and this has meant that their transition context has had a distinctive development trajectory. A further challenge in the study of transition has been that the majority of studies exploring males have focussed upon the late adolescence period where their transition

begins, with comparatively less known about experiences that occur solely in adulthood (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). While this limitation has begun to be addressed by work among adults in the domain of triathletes (Sanders & Winter, 2016), transition into athletic professionalism during adulthood appears to be a particular feature and concern within the women's professional sport movement.

There is a growing body of research that broadly considers women's athletic career transitions and explores physical, psychological and structural challenges facing elite athletes during and after their athletic careers (Beaudoin, 2006; Edelman & Harrison, 2008; Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Roberts & Kenttä, 2018); dual careers (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019); and talent development pathways to elite sport (Henriksen & Stambulova 2017; Mooney et al., 2019). Indeed it has been previously established that male and females appear to exhibit distinct motivation profiles as elite athletes (Beaudoin, 2006; Pelletier, et al. 1995). However, how women athletes' 'transition' from amateur status to paid employment is not fully captured in the aforementioned theorising. Chamorro, Torregrossa, Sanchez-Olive and Calvo (2016) argue that future research needs to explore transition experiences of women athletes. We suggest a different conceptual approach is needed to better understand the creation of new employment pathways for women athletes in traditional male team sports. The latter context requires an approach that specifically considers the gendered nature of professional team sports, and how women experience entering into a previously male-only domain.

Positive positioning and support for women competing at the elite level of sport is growing (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019; Pegoraro et al., 2018). Negative public and (social) media commentary still exist about these newly created women's leagues. These are accompanied by offensive comments made about women's personal characteristics and/or physical appearance (Burch et al., 2018), questions raised about their athletic prowess (Joncheray et al., 2016), attribution of masculine and/or lesbian stereotypes if participating in 'masculine' sport (Cavalier & Newhall, 2018; Hardy, 2015), and negative gender bias placed on women's leagues (Micelotta,

et al., 2018). Given the recency of many women's leagues, literature on how gendered attributions play out as new career pathways into (semi) professional leagues is only just starting to emerge.

Mooney et. al.'s (2019) research into young women's experiences of navigating elite pathways in Australian cricket argued that while new forms of professionalisation in women's team sport afford women opportunities that did not exist previously, there are unintended consequences "particularly for females involved in sports with a legacy of masculine privilege" (p.71). Notably in the context of women moving into a sport arena previously only occupied by men, women found themselves in a pervasive landscape of "gender hegemony and heteronormativity" (p.85). They concluded that investment in fair remuneration, quality coaching, improved facilities, and a determined effort to counteract the masculine culture of the game was needed to break down the gender barriers and provide genuine career options for women in cricket (Mooney et al., 2019). Edelman and Harrison (2008) also outline how policy decisions, within sports that retain a historically masculine orientation, can have consequences upon career opportunities of female athlete. At the time of their analysis the U.S. based Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) enforced an age/education requirement. All American-born players had to be at least 22 years of age, out of high school for least four years and have graduates or about to graduate from of college. Notably, the (men's) National Basketball Association's policy requirement was only for players to be out of high school for one year. The educational requirement for women was not based on empirical evidence that academic experience was correlated with life success, but rather was centred on the league's attempt to promote "a message that not only can females excel in athletics, but also that females can excel academically" (p. 25). This 'higher bar' for women's entry into professional sport employment was justified with a narrative of about the attendant social benefits, notably that women athletes will be viewed as both scholars and athletes, have an easier time transitioning to a post-sport

career and thus would be inspirational role models for girls. The legality of legitimacy of WNBA's age/education rule, and its paternalist overtones have been contested, with arguments for female athletes to receive equitable treatment (Hendrick, 2016). While there is an ever widening array of sports that offer women the opportunity to pursue careers as paid athletes, our understanding of what, and how, environmental factors either positively or negative impact the nature of their employment is still nascent.

The gendered nature of sport is reflected in LaVoi and Dutove's (2012) Ecological-Intersectional model of barriers and support for women coaches. The model has four layers: individual (e.g., sexual orientation), interpersonal (e.g., role models), organisational (e.g., working conditions) and societal or sociocultural (e.g., stereotypes about women's abilities or male-dominant sports culture) (Sallis et al., 2015). A gender-based lens is apparent in all four layers – gender (e.g., women) influences the experience of stereotype threat through interpersonal interactions with others both similar (i.e., other women) and different to them (i.e., men), the requirements organisations impose on different genders and the experience of a male-dominated sports culture.

LaVoi and Dutove's (2012) model provides a framework to better understand the intertwined nature of ecological-intersectional model of barriers and supports for women entering into their first experience of being paid to play sport. The layer-based analysis allows us to look at individual gender characteristics (players), inter-personal relationships (team), organisational expectations (club) and societal experiences of women in a male dominated sport.

In consequence, the aforementioned research question is explored through a case study of the first season of women's semi-professional rugby league premiership in Australia and New Zealand.

### **The Australian National Rugby League Context**

The National Rugby League (NRL) introduced the first paid women's league club

competition (NRLW) in Australia in 2018. Although Sherry and Taylor (2019) suggest the NRL established the women's competition so that they were "not left behind" (p.129) since other sports in Australia developed professional leagues for women (and therefore increased their attractiveness for talent, fans and sponsorship), the NRLW commenced during a period of relative momentum within the women's game. The 2017 Women's Rugby League World Cup, held in Australia, was the first women's tournament to be broadcast on free-to-air television, and saw the men's and women's finals played as a double header. The 2017 season concluded with a 33% growth in participation to a record high of 248,000 women and girls, to be the fastest growing cohort in the game (NRL, 2017).

The women's competition commenced with four teams, aligned to existing men's club franchises. To maximise the geographical reach of the competition despite its limited size (NRL, 2018), the four inaugural teams were located across two countries. Three teams were located in Australia (two teams in Sydney, and one in Brisbane), and one team in Auckland, New Zealand. Notably, six applications were made for team licences, indicating a strong desire among existing franchises to participate. The number of teams was restricted to maximise competition quality in recognition of the developing nature of the athlete talent pool, and from observing the issues faced by Australian Rules in launching their women's competition with an ambitious expansion strategy from a similarly limited pool of athletes (Guthrie, 2019).

The inaugural NRLW season was played over four rounds that coincided with the men's competition finals series (NRL, 2018). Players were contracted to four weeks of pre-season training, resulting in an overall contract length of eight weeks. Player payments during this period ranged depending on the type of contract, with 40 Australian women centrally contracted as marquee players prior to the competition, and New Zealand players separately listed. The remaining balance of players comprised free agents, resulting in each team producing a squad of 22, with a maximum of 15 marquee players for the inaugural season.

## Research Approach

A two-stage mixed methods approach was deployed. The first stage occurred before the inaugural season, in order to inform the development of the league, and is reported elsewhere (reference removed for blind review). This second stage, and the focus of this paper, was implemented post- season, and comprises two parts: (i) a player questionnaire, and (ii) interviews with players, coaches, and team managers/executives.

### Data collection: Questionnaire Survey

#### *Participants*

In total, 46 responses were collected from a population of 88 contracted players, this is an approximate response rate of 52%. However, not all players were contactable after the first season finished, as their contracts did not continue past the final game. As a result, the true response rate is not able to be determined. The average age of athletes in the sample was 26.8 years (range 18-41 years), with 58% of respondents identifying with a Maori (27%), Pasifika (24%) or Aboriginal (7%) lineage. In addition to their NRLW contract, 59% of respondents were engaged in full-time work, followed by casual workers (22%), part-time workers (17%) and students (6%). Overall, 39% of respondents reported having at least one child.

#### *Questionnaire*

The online questionnaire was developed and distributed to all participating players by the four participating clubs via online survey platform Qualtrics, immediately following the completion of the inaugural season. **In designing the survey, we drew on a range of relevant aspects identified in previous research. This included: vocational, psychosocial, and financial (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016); physical, psychological and structural challenges (Beaudoin, 2006; Edelman & Harrison, 2008; Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Roberts & Kenttä, 2018); dual career elements (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019); talent development**

pathways (Henriksen & Stambulova 2017; Mooney et al., 2019) and remuneration, quality of coaching, access to facilities, and gendered culture (Mooney et al., 2019). The questionnaire also collected data on workload, competition structure, team dynamics, personal development and demographic data (see Appendix for questionnaire). Item development followed a structured process of extraction of key concepts from the literature complemented by expert academic and practitioner panel discussion and refinement. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Higher mean scores indicate a higher level of agreement with the statement. The remainder of the items asked open-ended questions relating to the following: Rugby League and employment background; time commitments associated with these activities (in and out of season); player expectations of club and league performance; and the structure and support of the league. The median completion time of the survey among the sample was 33 minutes.

### *Data Analysis*

The analyses were performed using software package SPSS version 23, with analysis occurring at two levels. Firstly, in addressing the overarching research question, the research explored the perceptions, attitudes and reported behaviours of athletes at an aggregated level to understand the collective experiences of women transitioning into a new league/club environment. Secondly, although constrained by sample size, important demographic characteristics (employment type, parenthood, cultural heritage) were explored to uncover potential distinctions in the transition experiences of athlete subgroups. Notably distinctions were apparent in athlete experiences according to employment type and parenthood, which are explored in the findings section. Cultural heritage did not emerge as a resonant theme in the questionnaire data nor the interviews.

The analysis techniques utilised were constrained by the study's sample size ( $n = 46$ ), which reflected the total population size of the cohort in question (88 athletes). Given the categorical nature of the pertinent variables in question, chi-square tests were performed to search

for significant differences among demographic cohorts, using second order Rao-Scott tests of independence (Rao & Scott, 1984). Furthermore, where numeric data was captured and assessed, independent samples t-tests were utilised to compare mean scores between demographic groups and paired-sample t-tests used to compare mean scores of statements among the collective cohort.

### ***Data Collection: Interviews***

#### *Participants.*

The thirteen players interviewed ranged in age from 20 years to 41 years ( $M=30.5$ ). Every player interviewed competed in the inaugural NRLW, and there was representation across all four clubs and contract types. The four NRLW team managers, and three of the four club coaches were interviewed along with two governing body executives. In accordance with ethics approvals, no further interviewee's demographic information is provided here and the results of the non-player interviews are consolidated for confidentiality purposes.

#### *Interviews.*

The NRL granted the research team access to engage in purposive sampling and conduct semi-structured interviews with players, coaches and managers from each team, and the governing body executives. The interview guide was informed by the literature on organisational culture, gender relations, sociocultural aspects of sport and recent studies of women in professionalising sports (Antunovic & Hardin 2015; Hickey et.al., 2016; Mooney et.al., 2019; Sherry & Taylor, 2019; Willson et. al., 2017). The guide was developed after the analysis of the survey findings, allowing the research team to further explore themes that had arisen during the player questionnaire in the first part of the research. The interviews with players therefore focused on exploring experiences and perspectives about the NRLW premiership. Interviews with players explored three levels (individual, club, and league). Example questions included: "What were your goals in signing to play in the Premiership?" (individual), "How would you describe the club's culture and its response to the inclusion of women?" (club), and "What are your thoughts about the contracting arrangements?" (league).

The interviews with NRLW club coaches, managers, and executives addressed two levels (club and the premiership). The club-centred questions sought to understand their perspectives on how NRL clubs can effectively implement strategies for player development, promote women's team culture and include women as semi-professional players in the club. The premiership questions focused on the league competition relating to the efficiency of current arrangements including club allocations, contracts, and their expectations for success. The interviews averaged 30 minutes in length and were conducted with respect to the interviewees' preferred timing, location and method (e.g. telephone, Skype or face to face).

### *Data Analysis.*

Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. NVIVO 12 was used to analyse interview data. The research team took a reflexive thematic analysis approach and independently coded the transcripts, discussed their coding and continued this iterative process until agreement was achieved (MacPhail et al., 2016). The aim of coding and theme development was to provide a "coherent and compelling interpretation of the data, grounded in the data" (Braun et al., 2018, p.6). The aggregate themes captured experiences and perspectives associated with the first season of the new women's league, and the transition to semi-professional employment.

Steps were taken to ensure credibility and enhance the trustworthiness of the study. First, we recruited participants with specific experience on the topic, and included different stakeholder perspectives, which allowed data sources to be triangulated. Three members of the research team, experienced in qualitative procedures, discussed any discrepancies in coding until consensus was achieved.

## **Findings**

The results of the study are presented according to the four levels of the ecological-intersectional model (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). We commence with the most inner layer (individual level) and

progressively move outward, concluding at the sociocultural level. Findings derived from the qualitative and quantitative data are presented concurrently within each level in order to avoid unnecessary written duplication and present a rich account of the phenomenon of interest.

### **Individual Level**

The most resonant theme to emerge at the individual level was the strength of intrinsic (beliefs and values) compared with extrinsic (money and winning) motivations in new career decision making. Many of the players interviewed spoke about wanting to give back to the sport, working with junior players and being ambassadors for the game “our goal was to inspire other girls” (Player 12). These sentiments were expressed in a range of contexts: “we really wanted to build our local area up and our talent up and really push for local talent coming through” (Player 07); and “[it’s]the only NRL club that pretty much represents (my area) I thought it was really important to stay here [...] It's like building pathways for all young women here back home” (Player 13). The comments reflect a common motivation for women to entering into first time paid sport careers, namely, to enhance the visibility of women in the sport, and to directly and indirectly build the capacity of other girls and women to follow in their footsteps.

The strength of intrinsic motivators were also apparent in player’s club selection process. Decision making was based on the club’s culture, atmosphere and values, which took precedence over the potential to be on a winning side. As Player 06 noted, “I would take being involved in a really healthy environment and culture (like we were) over anything. That's a big goal because I love winning.” It was evident from the player’s responses that financial remuneration was among the least valued motivators in transitioning to semi-professionalism. Players were overwhelmingly positive about the experience of being a semi-professional athlete for the first season of the league, irrespective of the amount of pay they received. Player 05 noted “the contracts weren't huge money and it was more about being a part of it and I wouldn't change anything for my experience”. As one of the coaches opined, “most of the girls in our club didn’t care about the cash” (Coach/Manager 01). The survey affirmed satisfaction with salary as only

17% of players somewhat (13%) or extremely (4%) dissatisfied with their financial remuneration. This reflected modest initial remuneration expectations, as 50% of players expected to earn between \$5,000 and \$10,000 for the eight week period and a further 30% expected to earn less than \$5,000.

While payment was referred to as a ‘bonus’, moving from amateurism was not without additional obligations, expectations and time commitments that caused stress for some players. Psychological stress associated with semi-professionalism, namely the part-time nature of a new budding sport career, was manifest across the professional and personal domains. Amongst players in employment, the majority (57%) of survey respondents identified experiencing workplace stress (39% occasionally, 18% frequently) in negotiating leave schedules with employers to train and play in the NRLW.

Player stress was also evident in balancing playing and personal commitments. Only 24% of players agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to “balance Rugby League and non-Rugby League commitments without getting stressed”, while 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. A sense of stress was an experience shared across all participants, with no significant differences in the mean responses to this question between mothers and non-mothers, full-time workers and non-fulltime workers (see Table 1).

Workload stress was explored more broadly with attitudinal statements which evaluated perceptions of competition structure, team dynamics and personal development. Perceptions of workload reported the lowest mean scores among the measured themes, indicating a trend towards disagreement with the statements (see Table 1). In total, five of the six statements related to perceptions of workload, recorded significantly lower mean scores, more so than the questions about team dynamics and personal development factors. In particular, the statement ‘We received adequate time away from Rugby League to mentally and physically prepare before the NRLW commenced’ recorded the lowest mean score of all of the statements ( $M=2.63$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ), significantly below the group mean ( $t[45]= -6.775$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

**Insert Table 1 here****Interpersonal level**

At the interpersonal level, four key relationships emerged that supported or acted as barriers to successful semi-professionalism: family and children; employer; coach; and teammates. A common theme to emerge was the 'struggle' in managing competing tensions which impacted interpersonal relationships, commonly referred to by players as the need to juggle and balance competing commitments: "It's a massive struggle to try and hold some sort of full-time work ... with playing and the travel commitments" (Player 03). The commitment was recognised by the interviewed coaches and managers. As Coach/Manager 07 noted, "Our girls are having to sacrifice a lot of their time away from family, juggle their family, and then some even have to take leave for a whole month or six to eight weeks leave off work so that they can be part of the competition".

***Family***

Considerations relating to balancing home life were a common thread throughout the interviews. For the players, a supportive family was fundamental: "having my family behind me, knowing they have my back" (Player 04). The survey results highlighted the logistical impacts of parenthood with every mother reporting the need to use a combination of relatives (83%) or nannies (28%) to look after their children in order to fulfil their playing commitments. **Despite** mothers accounting for a significant proportion of the playing pool (39%), only 38% of mother's playing indicated that their club provided child related support; and 19% received direct childcare support. The logistical support provided by family members in effect subsidised the limited organisational support provided to this cohort.

***Primary Employers***

Employers were vital actors in supporting players, given 93% players retained full-time (59%), part-time (17%) or casual (22%) employment during the period they were contracted. The short-term but time-intensive nature of the season meant players required work arrangements that either allowed considerable annual leave or shift flexibility. Among salaried workers, 62% took

holiday leave from their workplaces to participate in the competition. The contracted period was eight weeks, whereas four weeks annual leave is standard in Australia. Accordingly, the vast majority of players took unpaid leave, with only 14% exclusively accessing paid leave. The impact of participating in the league was particularly acute upon casual workers as 20% quit their jobs, and 6% of full-time / part-time workers left their employment to sign with a team. Among full-time workers, of the 81% that typically worked 40+ hours per week when not playing in the league, 78% were still working 20+ hours a week during the NRLW season.

The majority of the players therefore largely continued to work in their existing employment during the season in some capacity, thus requiring considerable support from employers to reconcile their varying commitments. Despite the evident strain this placed on existing workplaces, 91% of players reported that their employers were either ‘Supportive’ or ‘Extremely Supportive’ towards their training and playing commitments (see Table 1). This did not differ between employment categories. Of note was that despite considering employers to be supportive, the majority (57%) of respondents reported experiencing workplace stress as a result of participating in the NRLW.

### *Coaches*

Coaches play a vital role in semi-professional transition, particularly with respect to developing positive cultures that understand the associated struggles and juggling acts. Players described the importance of coach support: “the coach realised my situation (single mum) and said he would work around it” (Player 08). The interviews however, revealed diverse responses to semi-professionalism among coaches, which can clearly be associated with a supportive or non-supportive workplace (club).

The Club coaches/managers broadly acknowledged their players’ various responsibilities, as one stated, “it’s tough on the girls because they're wanting to do this rugby league experience but they're also then torn in a million different directions, both financially in their own

workplaces and their employers, and emotionally with their own families” (Coach/Manager 05). The clubs put in place mechanisms to assist balance these demands. Practices took a range of forms, most commonly around training schedules: “the training was restricted to after 5pm [to allow for work]” (Coach/Manager 01). While most players reported prioritisation of a healthy environment and culture (individual level), coaches maintained a focus on winning. This led to some instances of tension between coaches and players when the former needed to enforce performance and behavioural standards. As Coach/Manager 05 observed, “when someone doesn’t do the right thing, then you hold them to account to our original set of standards”. As noted by Player 07:

Someone said that they couldn’t make training because of work. He [the coach] goes ‘well, that’s great, but there’s a requirement for you when you sign that you’re going to be there for the training sessions; if you can’t show your commitment then I’ll have to show you the door’ pretty much. So obviously we’ve had to juggle.

### ***Team Mates***

Players spoke enthusiastically about enjoying being together (“we have our culture behind us, and sisterhood is definitely there. We can laugh and joke”, Player 04), and getting on well (“Everyone got on really well and we all become friends...the team culture within the women's team was fantastic ... it was awesome”, Player 05). Players reflected on how team cohesion assisted with performance: “We had a few team building activities that were done in the pre-season, it helped us build that team culture. We're all on the same page and we all knew what our role was” (Player 07). Being part of an internally supportive team environment, where everyone helped each other out, was equally valued:

We might see one girl struggling and we’re like ‘do you want a hand or ‘do you want to go practice a bit of this?’ ‘Yeah, that’d be great.’ So next minute you’ll have five girls out there before we even start training (Player 03).

The strength of players' interpersonal relationships was fostered through common individual level beliefs, attitudes and motivations for participation in the competition. Similar to the individual level, team comradery was built on a shared value of desiring a healthy environment/culture and a collective understanding of the group's role "to inspire other girls" (Player 12).

### **Organisational Level**

Although individual and interpersonal systems acted largely as supports for player's successful transition to semi-professionalism and a new paid playing career, distinct barriers emerged at the organizational level. Two broad themes impacted player's transition to semi-professionalism: (i) cultural embracement of women; and (ii) practical implications of limited financial remuneration. Players broadly agreed that their clubs provided a 'female inclusive culture', with 74% stating that their respective club met (24%), exceeded (10%) or far exceeded (40%) their personal expectations around inclusivity. This was supported by the interview data, where positive culture was described as being seen as valued members of the club: "the boys even had a chat to us after our first game and [...] invited us into the changing room with them and we sang the song with them" (Player 03). Player 05 noted "It was very professional. I felt like we were treated just as well as the boys". Inclusiveness derived not only from the support of their men's team counterparts, but also from senior executives. As Coach/Manager 05 explained, "our two key decision makers in the business were very supportive". Several players spoke about how important it was that their club provided much needed support. For example, Player 02 noted that "they allowed me to fly home to check in and have family time"

Although clubs were broadly able to achieve gender inclusive cultures, specific organisational barriers were apparent for mothers. Mothers' appraisals of their clubs diverged from players without children on numerous cultural performance indicators. Mothers ( $M=3.11$ ,

$SD=1.28$ ) reported a significantly weaker perception of their club's provision of 'a family friendly environment' than non-mothers ( $M=4.11$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ), ( $t[45]= 2.55$ ,  $p=0.02$ ). Similarly, mothers ( $M=2.83$ ,  $SD=1.38$ ) reported a significantly weaker perception of their club's 'female inclusive culture' than women without children ( $M=4.00$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ) ( $t[45]= 2.85$ ,  $p=0.007$ ). The workplace concerns of player-mothers is typified by the comments of Player 08: "With my team, I was the only one that bought a child but there was five or six other mothers and I felt like they didn't feel comfortable in bringing their children". Mothers were uncertain about whether the presence of children would be acceptable within their place of employment, a concern that intersects the organisational and sociocultural level of the ecological model.

The second major organisational level theme pertains to financial remuneration and its ensuing influence upon successful transition to semi-professionalism for women players. Financial remuneration represents a central organisational policy, given the governing body determined a fixed cap (and minimum) on how much players in the competition could earn, contract, length, and stipulated the mutual obligations between players and clubs. The interviews revealed misalignment between (limited) remuneration and increased workplace expectations that created barriers for players as they developed in their semi-professionalism.

Semi-professionalism resulted in a radical reorganisation of a typical week for players. Sporting commitments (including training, game day, meetings, community/media and medical) were a 30+ hours a week activity for only 4% of players out-of-season, increasing to 33% for in-season. While semi-professionalism necessitated a significant contractual increase in training requirements, the financial value of these contracts was not sufficient for many athletes to replace income foregone from existing employment. This resulted in a perverse negative financial opportunity cost to participate in the competition. As noted by one player: "I ran at a loss because of travel and everything" (Player 02). The identified median total of incremental costs among the participants was \$1,500 (AUD). Other players worked around their

employment requirements:

I travelled down on a Tuesday, five-and-a-half hours. I'd stay Tuesday night, then train Wednesday and come home Wednesday night, then turned around and went back on a Friday... I couldn't afford not to come home to go to work (Player 05).

The coaches/managers similarly indicated that the first season was not financially beneficial for players: “the girls moved here on a casual basis and are getting a very small remuneration” (Coach/Manager 01). Some coaches/managers were also critical of the overall level of investment in the League:

You can't be half pregnant. We can't announce the competition and say, ‘This is amazing. We're doing the right thing and we're taking all the kudos but you don't happily invest in it.’ [...] my frustration is there's a lot of talk and then a lot of people who say, ‘Yes, we're happy to get behind it’, but the funds are lacking. (Coach/Manager 06).

The short-term but time-intensive nature of the season left players with difficult choices around how to allocate their finite time and energy. For some players, league commitments meant giving up study or employment (“some [players] just left or lost their jobs because they want to commit to football”, Player 03). As previously identified, the impact of participating in the league was particularly acute upon casual workers (20% quit their jobs), while a smaller number of full-time / part-time workers (6%) left their employment to sign with a team. Non-full-time workers (part-time, casual) were similarly affected by the transition into the season. Half (48%) of non-full-time workers performed less than 30 hours of weekly work/study when out-of-season, which increased to 84% in-season. Among full-time workers, 78% still worked 20+ hours a week during the NRLW season (and 52% 30+ hours a week), illustrating that for most, participating in the NRLW represented an added commitment to pre-existing work commitments.

Despite facing a myriad of challenges and decisions, the overwhelming commentary

was that the opportunity to play was worth the financial hardship. Regardless of the costs of involvement and associated stresses derived from participation, an overwhelming 96% of players surveyed indicated an intention to play in the NRLW the following season should they be offered a contract. Notably, player expectations around remuneration for season two appeared to be increasing. While only 20% of players expected to be paid more than \$10,000 in season one, this increased to 48% expecting this level of remuneration for season two.

### **Sociocultural Level**

One theme to emerge was the traditional gender roles, accentuated by a traditionally male-dominant organisational setting that contributed to perceived barriers for women players. This was particularly acute for player-mothers, who were unsure of the acceptable norms associated with bringing their children into their workplace environment. This represents an influence that interacts across ecological levels, and particularly a specific challenge for football clubs as historically male-dominant organisations. As semi-professionalism increases the expectations upon female athletes, an evidently underlying tension lays dormant in respect to the place of motherhood within athletic careers. The average age of first-time Australian mothers was 29 in 2017, near to the average age of NRLW players (27). Of children born in 2017, 74% were born to mothers aged between 20 and 34. This age zone aligns to prime athletic years, with 80% of NRLW players falling within this age bracket. The average age of mothers is steadily increasing as women pursue greater financial and career security, with the semi-professionalism of athletes likely to contribute to this broader sociocultural trend.

A second theme to emerge was perceived gender differences in the optimal learning and training conditions of players. Clubs and coaches tailored training programs for women based upon such perceived distinctions, as demonstrated in the quote:

They need to understand that women are totally different [...] they're not males and they shouldn't be trained or treated as males. You have to understand the amount of one-on-

one time you've got to spend with your players, the amount of social cohesion you've got to have within your group [...] it's so much more important in a female space compared to the men's (NRLW manager/executive).

Although it was unclear whether the above view was informed by research, anecdotal experience or opinion, it was supported by the research findings. At the individual level, women players valued a healthy team culture more so than winning, perhaps more so relative to their male counterparts. More broadly, players reinforced a genuine belief in sociocultural distinctions in how men and women learn, requiring distinct training methodologies:

Women like to be explained a little bit on why they're doing it, and then they'll go off and do it, whereas men [say] 'just tell me what I've got to do and I'll do it'. Even just little things, like 'why are we going out to go in?' (Player 03).

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to develop a better understanding of the experiences of women entering into a new career in semi-professional team sport. The ecological-intersectional model lens (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012) provided a framework to analyse the player's lived experiences, with particular reference to barriers and support needs. Semi-professionalisation was placed within a broader environmental level, which distinguishes ecological models from behavioural theories that typically emphasise individual characteristics, skills and proximal influences (Sallis et al., 2015). Allowing us to place a greater focus upon the organisational and sociocultural model levels (Burton & LaVoi, 2016), and extend the model to women athletes breaking into a traditional masculine sport career domain. Correspondingly, findings revealed the intertwined nature of environmental factors impacting the transition of women athletes to semi-professionalism. The new entrant league met with broadly positive stakeholder perceptions, with supports and barriers identified across the individual, interpersonal, organisational and

sociocultural environmental levels. This four-level analytic categorisation advances our understanding of the professionalisation of women's sport.

The transition to a new semi-professional competition required women to balance multiple commitments in order to take advantage of this new career offer. The vast majority of players had children and/or 'non-league' work commitments and relied on supportive employers and/or family members in order to follow their dream of playing in the new league. Accordingly, many sacrifices from a financial, familial, and career perspective were made. Players overwhelmingly described this balancing act as being worth it and is consistent to findings from other women's sport contexts. Mooney and colleagues (2019) for instance similarly detail a tension between an "overwhelming sense of optimism" towards new-found opportunities as well as a "tension and frustration for players as they juggled competing demands for their time" (p. 81).

With remuneration less important, the recognition, and opportunity to play in a semi-professional league took precedence. This finding aligns with Beaudoin's (2006), who also observed elevated importance of intrinsic motivational factors **relative to external factors amongst women within a semi-professional American football league. Significantly, Beaudoin's quantitative study utilised the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS) developed by Pelletier et al. (1995) which measures intrinsic motivation across three dimensions: knowing, accomplishing and experiencing. While 'accomplishment' is conceptualised as a satisfaction derived from personal achievement (e.g. from skill mastery), our findings pointed to an almost altruistic component of the accomplishment dimension, an aspect which was not captured by the SMS.** In challenging societal views of women's place in a sport traditionally bereft of women's professional teams, interviewees spoke passionately about the positive first step taken in the establishment of a premiership competition. Women were excited, proud, and grateful to be a part of this landmark competition and valued the importance of being role models and 'paving the way' for other girls and women (Hardy, 2015). The importance of having and being role models is important to

engage young women (Ronkainen et al., 2019), and in particular, Indigenous women and girls in sport (Stronach, et al., 2015).

The player's prioritisation of intrinsic motivations over financial remuneration, created a potential misalignment of expectations between players and clubs/employers. While many of the players considered payment a 'bonus' and found themselves 'out of pocket' for the privilege of playing; for the league coaches and managers, the introduction of remuneration was not surprisingly associated with higher expectations of commitment and performance of athletes (Willson et al., 2017). In this regard, players' employment contracts were an example of how existing (male) organisational norms could be used to provide legitimacy for the new women's venture, in a similar vein to other women's leagues (Micelotta et al., 2018). Consistent with other developing semi-professional female leagues (Pink et al., 2018), we found that when comparing the extrinsic rewards of semi-professionalism to the relative increase in performance expectations, that the latter increased quicker than the remuneration offered to players to meet these raised expectations. With players illustrating higher remuneration expectations for season two, the league's 'honeymoon' period surrounding pay structure may prove to be short lived.

Lack of alignment between performance expectations and execution were particularly apparent among particular segments of the playing group. The majority of players who kept working 40+ hours were not able to increase their training when the season started, indicating that economic factors restricted their capacity to train, causing significant stress. Women with childcare responsibilities in particular faced distinct workplace challenges associated with their parental duties. The majority of players identified feeling stressed in trying to balance their playing, training and off-field sport commitments. Although their non-sport employers were largely supportive of their sporting commitments, most reported stress associated with balancing their sporting and other broader work and personal commitments. The tensions experienced in maintaining their regular lives and transitioning to become a semi-professional player may in part

be due to common perceptions in elite sport that, to be successful, you have to ‘go for it 100%’ (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009, p. 15) requiring a duality of mindset to be simultaneously participating in normal life and elite sport. The findings also support the notion that intersectionality impacts the career and psychosocial outcomes of women (LaVoi et al., 2019), in this case women with family commitments were acutely affected in their sport career choices.

Ideally athletes in semi-professional leagues should be in a position to focus, as much as possible, on their sport performance requirements during competition time. This may require the sport governing body to negotiate flexible ‘non-league’ work and study commitments for players. If they could take paid leave from regular work, then sport training commitments could be completed during the day, this could in turn, make it easier for players with children to make childcare arrangements. The financial value of most of the player contracts does not make unpaid leave from regular work a viable option. Much can also be done at an organisational level, such as the provision of childcare support and assisting players to gain work that fits with game and training schedules. The ‘semi’ part of semi-professional could be constructed as a short contract duration versus part-time involvement of players, as this may reduce the degree of stress experienced as a result of juggling sport involvement with existing everyday commitments (Pink et al., 2018).

While the sport governing body was conscious of avoiding the pitfalls of other women’s professional teams that have folded through a myriad of managerial and commercial factors (Micelotta, et al., 2018), our study reveals that barriers for women adapting to semi-professionalism were present at the organisational level. The high degree of physicality of Rugby League characterises it as among the most masculine sports (Hardy, 2015), thereby capable of producing particularly entrenched organisational forms and industry practices (Micelotta et al., 2018). Yet, a positive and inclusive organisational culture is pivotal to the career development of women in professional sport (Norman et al., 2018) for athletes, coaches, managers, support

personnel and administrators alike. Overwhelmingly, the players interviewed spoke about the positive team culture, and the high degree of support they received from coaching staff (interpersonal level support). Notably however, perceptions of organisational support were less universal, with a significant distinction in the perceptions of mothers and those without children being among the study's most notable findings.

Players with no children largely affirmed the positive culture created within the NRL clubs that their NRLW team belonged to. An explanation of this may be found in the fact that this group were younger (average age of 24 years) and were not married. By contrast, women with children were older (average age of 32 years), were more likely to be married (38%) and have associated family commitments. As club organisational practices and policies have historically developed to meet the needs of male players (Micelotta et al., 2018), consideration of the requirements of women who are demographically distinctive from the typical male rugby league player is in its infancy. On one hand the positive instances of women players being treated as equals ("I felt like we were treated just as well as the boys") affirmed the inclusion of women into the club's existing structures, but on the other hand may have contributed to an unintended consequence of not being attuned to the unique needs of those women with child support needs. The broader sociocultural challenge faced by women with childcare responsibilities to reconcile their parenting and workplace commitments appeared exacerbated by a masculinised sport organisational environment (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

Our research extends the ecological-intersectional model (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012) through its application to women players engaging in a semi-professional team sport career through an initial foray into paid employment. **The findings extend existing theory related to the vocational, psychosocial, and financial domains of athlete career transition (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016) through re-conceptualising these elements and adding the**

perspectives and experiences of women entering part-time paid sport employment. The research also amplifies the importance of the specific ways in which women experience physical, psychological and structural challenges, adding to and broadening previous research on these elements (Beaudoin, 2006; Edelman & Harrison, 2008; Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Roberts & Kenttä, 2018). Critically, this research has provided empirical support to the arguments of the gendered nature of support required for a career in sport, notably as related to child care and other aspects associated with being a mother with dependent children, equity in access to training and playing facilities, and the importance of cultural considerations (Mooney et al., 2019).

This study has implications for players, clubs, coaches, and executives in all sports with a women's league, regardless of geographical location. Listening to the voices and experiences of the players, coaches, and managers should assist in the future developments in the professionalisation of women's sport and inform policies and practices in relation to relocation, remuneration, the provision of child-care, development of team and club culture and provision of a professional experience for women as a distinct cohort of athletes.

The research revealed that players predominantly drew support from their interpersonal relationships; family, employers, coaches and teammates. The support of family and employers was particularly salient as semi-professionalism requires a balance between shifting commitments. Organisational and sociocultural level barriers for semi-professional women players were clearly evident. Organisationally, contracting resulted in a deficit between the newly established training norms and performance expectations, and the financial resourcing for players to meet these expectations. It was often the support of interpersonal relationships which helped address the consequent challenges (childcare, flexible work hours, access to leave), illustrating the intersectionality of barriers and supports. Contracting and positioning women's teams within existing men's professional clubs helped legitimise the nascent competition. While this fostered positive perceptions of being considered as equals, the masculinised nature of the sport's organisational environment appears to have inadvertently not fully considered the sociocultural

aspect of the unique needs of mothers, who represented a significant demographic (39% of players). It is critical for clubs to develop targeted policies and the co-creation of appropriate support mechanisms that consider not only gender, but also culture, ethnicity and parenthood in the continuance of the development of women's sporting leagues (McDonald et al., 2018).

The research also identified an apparent contradiction between satisfaction and importance of financial remuneration with its perceived impact upon players. Few players were dissatisfied with financial conditions (17%) and nearly all (96%) intended to re-contract the following season, despite identifying remuneration as a significant barrier. This could be explained by the relative expectations of players which were low in the inaugural season, reflecting an appreciation of finally being paid to play. However, the proportion of players expecting to earn more than \$10,000 in season two increased to nearly half the playing group (48%). Such expectations are no doubt influenced by the national and international growth in professional women's sport leagues.

Exploring changes over time as the league develops and matures is recommended to address a limitation of this study, which only captured a single season's data. The rapidly evolving environment necessitates further longitudinal research. In particular, the tracking of shifting player expectations in amateur, semi-professional and professional sport contexts could be of benefit not only to practitioners, coaches and associated personnel but also conceptually extend our understanding of women's sporting career experiences and choices.

Future research that covers a breadth of teams and athletes and explores different sports would add value and knowledge to research and practice, as experiences may differ across sports and have regional and/or culturally specific contexts. Our findings also suggest the need for additional research on how the experiences of women athletes may influence their current and future athletic and psychosocial development and well-being as this would further develop our understanding of managing women's professional team sport.

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