

Life After Football

The construction of masculinity following a career in
elite Australian Rules football

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed Date

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to James, who first inspired me.

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Abstract

Elite Australian Rules footballers are portrayed as exemplars of hegemonic masculinity, and are some of the most recognisable faces in Australian society. Retirement from sport is inevitable, and regardless of the circumstances, a period of readjustment to no longer receiving so much praise and adulation inevitably follows. This research will describe how masculinity is constructed through the Australian Rules football league, an under-researched area, while also adding to the body of literature on retired athletes.

This investigation aimed to explore the meaning of masculinity in the lives of retired Australian Rules footballers, specifically addressing the impact of the experience as an elite AFL footballer on understandings of masculinity, and the impact of retirement from elite sport on the way in which these men now see themselves and their masculinity. This was a qualitative study in which 20 men took part in individual semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed through an inductive, thematic approach, utilising the Braun and Clarke (2006) model.

The nine themes that arose through analysis were orthodox/hegemonic masculinity; society and culture; the 'perfect life'; always a footballer; distrust of the media; staying in shape; the denial of pain; moving on; and life is brilliant.

The following conclusions are offered. Sport continues to be an important avenue through which masculine identity is developed, and an activity in which 'normal' boys are expected to show an interest. Further, involvement in sport was perceived as being in the footballers' 'blood'. Being an Australian Rules footballer is an important part of the men's identity, and remains important as such even in retirement. Involvement in a team sport shapes the way men

perceive themselves. As an opportunity for men to ‘do’ masculinity together, sport leads to a sense of belonging that can positively influence men’s sense of masculine identity.

Although an inclusive style of masculinity has been evident in recent research (Anderson 2002; 2005; 2008b), traditional perceptions of masculinity are still being produced and reproduced. Australian Rules football also continues to be a highly homophobic sport; an example of cultural perceptions enacted through AFL football that need to be challenged.

Whether men retired voluntarily or involuntarily, time was always required for readjustment and reconstruction of identity. The footballers’ constructions of masculinity in life after elite sport were largely comprised through subsequent employment, demonstrating the importance of an alternate career path.

Recommendations for further research include: the homophobic nature of AFL football; a comparative or longitudinal study with early and late career players to explore the changing nature of masculinities; an investigation into whether the sense of belonging gained from participation in team sports can be gained through other male-orientated workplaces; and the attitudes of AFL footballers towards the services offered by the AFL player’s association (AFLPA), to help identify possible further support for retiring AFL footballers.

