

An exploration of career decision-making in the Australian Football League: Does playing experience matter?

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of sporting experience on the perceived effectiveness of career development support and the experience of career decision-making difficulty for current Australian Football League (AFL) players. Thirty-four AFL players ($M_{\text{age}} = 24$, $SD = 3.98$), with varied playing experience in the AFL ($M_{\text{games}} = 87.82$, $SD = 93.41$), completed measures of career decision-making, and career-related support. Results indicated that participants did not report experiencing career decision-making difficulty regardless of playing experience. Findings also indicated that AFL players rate the career-related support provided by the player development manager as effective for their career and educational development. This research contributes to an understanding of the benefit of providing career support for professional athletes.

Keywords

Australian Football League, career transition, decision-making, experience, player development, support

For elite amateur and professional athletes, the termination of one's sporting career can be a physically and psychologically difficult transition. Some of the issues that athletes have reportedly developed following retirement include alcohol, drug, and gambling addictions, relationship difficulties, and depression (Stambulova, 2010). Career termination is particularly difficult for those who failed to plan for retirement, retired unexpectedly, and/or experienced career-ending injuries (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2007). To assist with the career termination experience, numerous transitional support programs have been implemented to provide athletes with appropriate education and resources (Anderson & Morris, 2007). In Australia, for example, the Athlete Career and Education (ACE) program, overseen by the Australian Sports Commission, has provided career and vocational support for elite amateur athletes through the institute of sport network for over 20 years (Chambers, Gordon, & Morris, 2013).

Research on career and education programs for elite athletes has revealed that athletes rate these programs as beneficial (Fraser, Fogarty, & Albion, 2010; Friesen & Orlick, 2010), as they promote engagement in alternate activities (e.g. university study, Miller &

Kerr, 2002; Wylleman & Reints, 2010), and focus on personal development (Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2007). One positive outcome of these programs is that they better prepare athletes for their post-sporting careers. For example, Fogarty and McGregor-Bayne (2008) investigated long-term career decision-making, defined as the various factors influencing the exploration, planning and decisions related to one's post-sporting career, of elite amateur athletes. Of particular importance was the fact that these athletes were at different phases of their sporting careers and had access to the ACE program. Fogarty and McGregor-Bayne (2008) reported that the athletes did not appear to experience career decision-making difficulty, and attributed the lack of career indecision to the provision of career and educational support by the ACE program. This finding is particularly important as a common criticism of elite athletes is that they invest more time and energy into their sporting development, rather than toward planning life after sport (Albion & Fogarty, 2005). However, these results only explain the career-related decisions and behaviour of elite amateur athletes; professional athletes typically do not have access to this program.

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Previous research has revealed that, like elite amateur athletes, professional athletes appear less inclined to develop academic or vocational skills (North & Lavalley, 2004), and perceive less of a need to develop these skills in preparation for life after sport (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). Compared to the ACE program and similar initiatives, the support services for professional athletes in Australia are less established and have only emerged in the last decade (Chambers et al., 2013). For example, the Australian Football League (AFL) created the role of player development manager (PDM) in the mid-2000s; these personnel are employed by AFL clubs to provide career and education support, and promote 'off-field' career interests to these professional athletes (Chambers et al., 2013; Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Traditionally, PDMs have extensive experience in the AFL, as former players, coaches, and/or administrators, with the majority of PDMs also possessing tertiary qualifications (Alessio, 2008). Unlike the nationally consistent ACE program, the roles and responsibilities of PDMs vary considerably between clubs, resulting in a lack of unified support for AFL players (Alessio, 2008). An outcome of this inconsistency is greater variability in the quality of support AFL players receive, which can result in communication issues with culturally diverse players (Nicholson, Hoye, & Gallant, 2011).

A closer examination of the AFL sporting career reveals that playing experience can be categorised according to three distinct phases of playing career: early (0–4 years), mid (4–8 years), and late (8 plus years) career players (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). According to Hickey and Kelly (2008) the desire to establish an AFL identity, at the cost of planning for a career after sport, was ubiquitous across the three phases of AFL playing career. This finding partly explains why 75% of AFL players previously reported that they commenced career planning for life after sport in the last quarter of their athletic careers (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999). A consequence of this singular focus is that many professional AFL players have experienced personal crises related to the termination of their AFL careers (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Noblet & Gifford, 2002), which are often attributed to indecision and/or financial concerns related to establishing a post-sporting career (Hickey & Kelly, 2005).

One theoretical framework of career transitions that may explain the effectiveness of the PDM role is the developmental model (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). The model posits that the development of an athletic career coincides with various levels of individual development, including psychosocial and academic/vocational development. According to Wylleman and Lavalley (2004), an athlete can experience differences in psychosocial support across an athlete's sporting career (i.e. support from family vs. coaches), which may overlap with vocational

progression. Within the context of the present study, the developmental model positions the PDM as a potential nexus between the psychosocial and academic/vocational development that athletes experience.

Aims of the present study

Based on the available evidence, it seems apparent that planning for a post-sporting career is not a priority for AFL players. Yet no investigation has empirically determined whether this population of professional athletes exhibit career decision-making difficulty. Research has also yet to clearly ascertain whether AFL players deem the support provided by the PDM as effective for long-term career planning. Given that PDMs are appointed to support athletes with their career transitions, it is necessary to determine whether the players perceive the PDM's role as beneficial to their personal and professional development. If players deem the PDMs as providing effective career planning, then it is likely that these individuals will not experience career indecision. Therefore, the primary aim of this exploratory study was to explore whether playing experience, as determined by AFL career phase (i.e. early, mid, or late career players), influenced the perceived effectiveness of career and education support provided by the PDM. The secondary aim of the investigation was to determine whether players in different phases of their respective careers experienced career decision-making difficulty.

Method

Participants

Thirty-six male AFL players commenced the study, with 34 male athletes submitting responses to all measures in the survey. Of the final 34 participants, ages ranged from 19 to 34 years, with a mean age of 24 years ($SD = 3.98$). Participants' football careers ranged from 1 to 17 years ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 4.26$), with the number of senior AFL games played ranging from 0 to 334 games ($M = 87.82$, $SD = 93.41$). Participant responses indicated that 29.41% were enrolled in vocational education, 35.29% were enrolled in tertiary education, and 35.29% had participated in a variety of short courses and training workshops. In addition, 38.23% of participants were currently involved in other professional development activities (e.g. coaching and/or media opportunities).

Instrumentation

Player Development Manager Ratings (PDMR) were developed by the researchers for AFL players to rate the effectiveness of PDM support offered to players. A total of 18 statements were created to assess whether participants perceived the PDM's support

as effective in advocating life balance for players, promoting their career development, and providing them with general support. Participants recorded their responses on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). An example item was “The PDM helps me balance between the demands of AFL football and deciding upon my future career opportunities”. Individual statement scores were summed to create a total PDMR score, with higher scores indicating greater perceived effectiveness of the PDM’s support. Rating statements were piloted with AFL representatives and respondents reported the items had good face validity. Analyses also confirmed that the PDMR had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$).

The *Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire* (CDDQ; Gati & Saka, 2001) was used to measure the level of difficulty associated with career decision-making. The CDDQ consists of 34 items with responses recorded on a 9-point Likert scale (from 1 = *Does not describe me* to 9 = *Describes me well*). An example of item was “It is usually difficult for me to make decisions”. The CDDQ has three reported factors: lack of readiness, lack of information, and inconsistent information. Individual item scores were summed to create a factor score, with higher scores indicating greater difficulty in decision-making. Elsewhere, it was reported that the CDDQ has good internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$; Gati & Saka 2001), which was confirmed in the present study ($\alpha = .94$).

Procedure

Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the institution’s human research ethics committee. A snowball sampling method was adopted to recruit participants. An email that contained the information sheet and link to the online survey was distributed to all AFL PDMs, who in turn were asked to forward the research details to all players within each respective club. Participating in the survey was voluntary and took approximately 15 min to complete.

Data analysis

Following the collection of raw scores for the CDDQ and PDMR, mean item scores were computed and descriptive statistics were calculated. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed to determine the differences between different AFL career phases for effectiveness of PDM support, and career decision-making difficulty. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS V.21 (IBM, New York).

Results

Prior to running the analyses, data were screened for violations of assumptions of normality, with none evident in the dataset. Consistent with Hickey and Kelly (2008), participants were categorised into three groups based on years of playing experience: early ($n = 14$; $M_{\text{age}} = 21$, $SD = 2.26$), mid ($n = 10$; $M_{\text{age}} = 24$, $SD = 1.06$), and late career players ($n = 10$; $M_{\text{age}} = 29$, $SD = 2.64$). The mean and standard deviations for the total score of the CDDQ, each subscale of the CDDQ (lack of readiness, lack of information and inconsistent information), and PDMR by career phase are illustrated in Table 1. Significance was set at $p < .05$ for all analyses.

A one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of the AFL career phase (early, mid, and late) on career decision-making, and the perceptions of PDM support. There was no significant differences between career phases and career decision-making difficulty ($F(2, 31) = .83$, $p = .45$, $\eta^2 = .05$), nor was there a difference between career phase and the perceived effectiveness of the support provided by PDM ($F(2, 31) = .34$, $p = .72$, $\eta^2 = .02$). A second one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of career phase (early, mid, late) on the subscales of the CDDQ. Results indicated that there was no significant difference between career phase and lack of readiness ($F(2, 31) = 1.57$, $p = .23$, $\eta^2 = .09$), lack of information ($F(2, 31) = .27$, $p = .76$, $\eta^2 = .02$), or inconsistent information ($F(2, 31) = 1.10$, $p = .35$, $\eta^2 = .06$).

Table 1. Mean scores for CDDQ items, CDDQ subscales, and PDMR for career phases.

Career phase	<i>n</i>	CDDQ items <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Readiness <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Information <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Inconsistency <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	PDMR total <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	PDMR items <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Early	14	4.20 (0.94)	4.60 (1.30)	4.01 (0.41)	4.04 (0.88)	101.86 (9.64)	5.38 (1.45)
Mid	10	3.60 (1.19)	3.98 (1.82)	3.44 (0.45)	3.34 (1.04)	99.30 (7.69)	5.49 (.49)
Late	10	4.14 (1.27)	4.82 (1.65)	3.55 (0.63)	4.06 (1.16)	102.00 (7.39)	5.47 (.38)
Total	34	4.01 (2.05)	4.47 (1.59)	3.67 (0.55)	3.81 (1.06)	98.37 (16.68)	5.47 (.93)

Note: Higher scores indicate more career decision-making difficulty (CDDQ; Career Decision-making Difficulty Questionnaire), lack of readiness to make a career decision, lack of information about career decision-making, and inconsistency of information about career decision-making, and greater perceived effectiveness of the support provided by the player development manager (PDMR; Player Development Manager Ratings).

Discussion

In investigating career decision-making in the AFL, results from the present study indicated that players from all AFL career phases deemed that the PDM provides effective career and vocational support. Put simply, playing experience did not influence the perceived effectiveness of the support provided by the PDM. This finding is somewhat contradictory to previous accounts of the PDM role, as elsewhere it was reported that PDMs lacked the necessary skills to communicate with various AFL players (Nicholson et al., 2011). As the present study did not assess the cultural and ethnic background of its participants, it remains unknown whether Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander players participated in the study. Furthermore, whether these players experience career decision-making difficulty, and perceive the PDM as supportive of post-sporting career and education development is also unknown. Yet for the current participants, it appears that the career and education support offered by PDMs was highly valued regardless of playing experience.

That the AFL players in the current study indicated the PDM role was effective in providing post-sporting career and education support is consistent with previous research on the perceived benefit of career and education programs in elite amateur sport (Fraser et al., 2010; Friesen & Orlick, 2010). One apparent difference between professional and elite amateur sport, however, was the influence of sporting experience. Unlike the players in the current study, younger athletes who had access to career and education services were more likely to experience post-sporting career decision-making difficulty compared to older athletes (Fogarty & McGregor-Bayne, 2008). These younger athletes were also more confused about their career options and lacked the motivation to consider alternative career options. The disparity in these findings is likely the result of contextual differences in the two sporting domains. Specifically, the AFL environment enables young players to earn substantial salaries from early in their sporting careers (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). This outcome is typically a rare occurrence in elite amateur sport.

Results from the current study also revealed that irrespective of playing career phase there was no evidence of career decision-making difficulty among participants. In contrast, this study found that more than 50% of participants were completing vocational or tertiary qualifications. A comparison of mean CDDQ item scores reported in the present study with those reported by previous research supports this viewpoint. For example, Albion and Fogarty (2002, 2005) explored the career decision-making of Australian adults and athletes. Findings from their investigations revealed similar mean scores for CDDQ items to those reported in the present study.

The similarity in mean CDDQ item scores suggests that professional and elite amateur athletes are similarly informed and ready to progress their careers following the termination from their sporting careers. It is therefore possible that the career planning and personal career-related support these players received from the PDM may have provided them with an adequate level of information regarding future career possibilities.

While these results may suggest that AFL players are receiving adequate career development support and are decisive on career-related issues, exploring the AFL context in more detail reveals an alternative explanation. AFL players are encouraged to actively maintain an exclusive training and playing focus, often at the cost of career development (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). For example, AFL managerial staff possess a strong view that players are paid to play first, and develop a post-sporting career second (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Moreover, underperforming players who are actively pursuing career development opportunities may be more heavily scrutinised by these staff, with their extracurricular activities viewed as distracting and at risk of jeopardising their playing career (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). For the players, one incentive to maintain this focus is the lure of earning a large salary (e.g. AUS\$100,000 per annum for an early career player; Hickey & Kelly, 2008). It is possible that these athletes may experience less career decision-making difficulty as they are driven to establish their AFL profile, and financial independence. That mid-career players were reportedly the most unwilling to be involved in vocational or higher education, as they also regarded these activities as distracting, further strengthens this explanation of career decision-making (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Hence, it is plausible that these beliefs and behaviours may result in fewer AFL players engaging in career-related activities, which in turn may perpetuate long-term career development complacency for players. These beliefs and behaviours may also partly explain the lack of career indecision reported in the current study's findings.

There are some theoretical implications of the current findings that need to be considered. In their model of athlete transitions, Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) acknowledged that athletes may experience variations in psychosocial support across their sporting careers. The present study revealed that effective PDM support was experienced by players from all phases of an AFL career (i.e. early, mid, and late). Within the context of the developmental model, this finding supports the notion that as athletes turn professional, they rely less on family and friends for support, in favour of receiving support from those more closely tied with the sporting organisation. The increased reliance on seeking support from the PDM may facilitate long-term career planning for life after sport.

Limitations

While the current study offers new knowledge pertaining to the support provided to AFL players by PDMs, the small sample size poses as a limitation, inhibiting the generalisability of the current findings. It is possible for example that those who participated in the research are largely representative of a subset of players who are engaged in long-term career planning. Given that recent reports suggest there are in excess of 700 players within the AFL system (AFL, nd), it remains unknown whether AFL players experience career decision-making difficulty, and if such a group exists, they may have chosen to not report their true career related decision-making.

Conclusion

The current study investigated career decision-making difficulty, and the benefits of career support provided to AFL players. The findings indicated that players deemed the PDM to be a valuable source of career and vocational support regardless of playing career experience. The same players also reported no issues associated with making long-term career decisions. These preliminary findings suggest that these players may receive adequate career development support, which in part explains the absence of any post-sporting career indecision. It is recommended that future research explore the type of support offered by PDMs in greater detail. Moreover, longitudinal research that monitors the off-field career progression of these players would reveal whether the type of support and/or activities undertaken by these individuals varies across the sporting career. Such research would assist career practitioners with identifying strategies to engage professional athletes in career and educational development activities early in their playing careers.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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