

**Recruitment Philosophies in Talent Identification in
Australian Rugby League Pathways Systems: A qualitative study.**

A dissertation submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Sport, Exercise and Health degree.

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Abstract

This qualitative research paper addresses a significant issue in talent identification within the Australian rugby league pathway systems. Current approaches to athlete selection in rugby league primarily rely on performance metrics and objective criteria. Nevertheless, the following research adopted a unique perspective by exploring the philosophical foundations underpinning the selection process, thereby addressing a critical gap in the existing literature.

Eight recruiters in the Australian rugby league community were interviewed about the philosophies and principles they applied during rugby league recruitment. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The study uncovered three key themes, 13 sub-themes and shared ideologies that informed recruiter's decisions when selecting athletes into the Australian rugby league pathways.

Key findings reveal a shift from traditional physical profiling, which emphasised attributes such as speed, power, strength, and size, to a more holistic and multidimensional approach. While physical capabilities remain foundational prerequisites, recruiters increasingly prioritize psychological and behavioural traits, including attitude, discipline, character, adaptability, and learning capacity, as critical predictors of long-term success. Integrating analytics into recruitment processes has further enhanced traditional methods, with objective data such as game statistics and physical metrics informing decision-making. The study also emphasises the growing importance of geographical recruitment strategies, particularly in identifying talent from diverse and historically underrepresented regions, such as low-income communities and overlooked schools. Moreover, recruitment decisions are significantly influenced by head coaches' philosophies, with preferences for specific physical and tactical attributes aligned to team strategies. These findings demonstrate the progressive evolution of rugby league talent identification, reflecting a balance between physical prerequisites and holistic athlete profiling to address the complexities of modern performance environments.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Signed by student.....

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Recruitment Philosophies in Talent Identification in Australian Rugby League Pathways Systems

Introduction

Sporting organisations are intensifying their focus on talent identification and recruitment, driven by the desire to find the most gifted athletes to strengthen their organisation's success. Till and Baker (2020) noted that a significant investment should go into recruiting top talent at the elite levels of team sports. Additionally, organisations are dedicating significant resources towards identifying and nurturing young, talented athletes within their academy systems to discover or cultivate potential world-class elite talents (Larkin & Reeves, 2018). Therefore, youth sports have become increasingly professionalised, with organisations devoting substantial resources to talent identification initiatives (Johnston et al., 2018). This process is valuable as it enables organisations to "recognise athletes who have the potential to excel in their sport" (Johnston et al, 2018, p.16) and develop them within their system.

Identifying, recruiting, and developing aspiring young athletes have emerged as critical focus areas within the professional rugby league landscape (Cupples et al., 2018). It is a multifaceted process that involves the expertise and collaborative efforts of numerous coaches, scouts, sports scientists, and administrative personnel, who are often financially resourced to establish and maintain extensive youth academy systems (Larkin et al., 2020).

Although abundant research has examined talent identification and recruitment processes, the fundamental understanding of Australian rugby league recruiter's philosophical perspectives and systems when selecting junior athletes for their organisations remains unexplored (Rotheram, 2020). Previous studies have focussed on the integration of objective data, such as game performance and technical, tactical, or physical metrics, which clubs employ as benchmarks when determining which junior rugby league players to recruit. However, there is a paucity in research that considers the subjective viewpoints and ideologies

which are present in shaping current Australian rugby league pathway recruitment decisions. This investigation aims to unpack the philosophical approaches and operational systems currently implemented by recruiters within the Australian rugby league development pathways. By examining how recruitment staff at various clubs make decisions, the research aims to better understand the philosophies guiding recruitment efforts and the frameworks influencing talent identification. The study's findings will offer valuable insights into existing recruitment practices, potentially helping recruitment staff refine their approaches and align their methods with broader club philosophies.

The research addresses the question:

1. What are the current philosophies and practices of recruiters in Australian rugby league pathways?

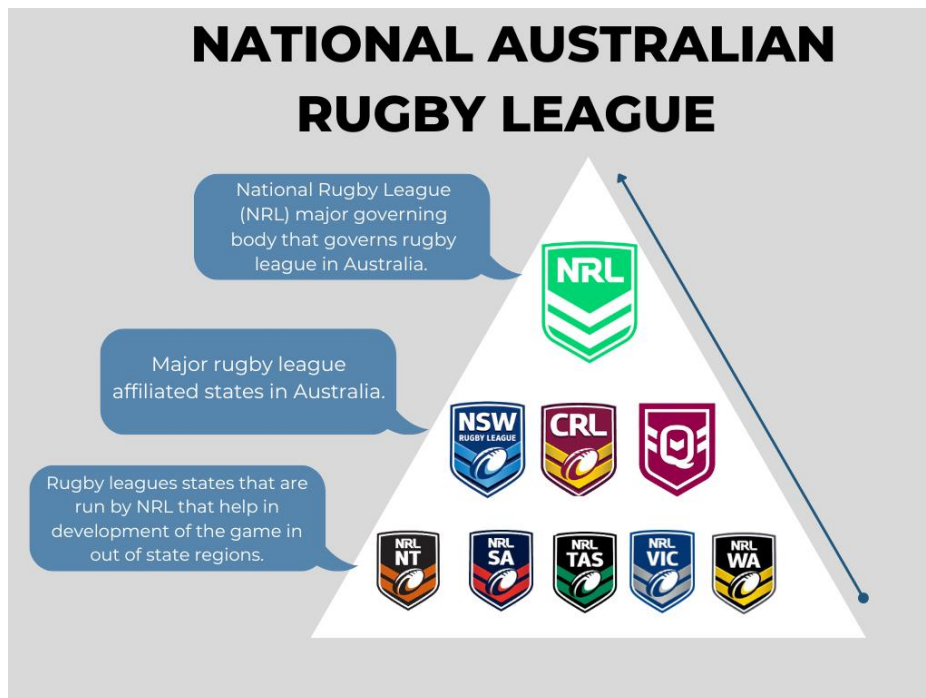
This question will guide an in-depth investigation into how recruiters approach their role and the factors shaping the development of future rugby league talent.

Literature Review

Rugby League is a high-intensity, intermittent team sport played globally, with its popularity particularly pronounced in Australia. The sport boasts a robust pipeline, ranging from grassroots participation to professional competition, with nearly 500,000 competitive players recorded in Australia in 2022 (Johanis-Bell et al., 2023). The development pathway encompasses participation in school and community rugby league programs, selection for junior representative teams, and recruitment by professional clubs (Cupples et al., 2018). State and regional governing bodies regularly organise junior representative teams to identify and select the most promising young athletes to compete in interregional competitions (Gabbett et al., 2010). These well-established pathways enable young athletes to progress from the community level to the professional ranks. Figure 1 shows the state governing bodies represented in Australian pathways systems.

Figure 1

Australian Rugby League Hierarchy



(League, 2021)

The National Rugby League (NRL) organisation has created the talent pipeline system for Australian pathways athletes via competitions hosted by state and regional governing bodies (see Fig. 1). These pathways offer young players opportunities to participate through the levels with the aim to be recruited by the professional clubs. Each professional club maintains a youth academy focused on developing athletes, typically from ages 14 – 18yrs, to become the next wave of professional rugby league players. The literature indicates that the typical career span of professional players in the NRL is relatively brief, between 4 – 6yrs in duration (Cupples et al., 2018). It is suggested that this short career duration is due to the physically demanding nature of the sport, with high injury rates, intense competition for roster positions, and high variability in individual player performance. This was supported by research from Woods et al. (2016) who reported that the median career length for NRL players was 4.5 years, with a considerable proportion retiring due to sustaining injuries or an inability to secure contract renewals. Therefore, it is important to have a flow of young players available for selection to the professional team.

Rugby league academies typically provide young players with coaching, training, and education. They focus on developing a player's physical and technical skills, their mental toughness, and off-field behaviour (Cupples & O'Connor, 2011). The approach closely aligns with the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model, which is increasingly integrated into Australian rugby league pathways (Pichardo et al., 2018). LTAD principles guide the development of young athletes, ensuring that their progression is tailored to their developmental stage, rather than being rushed for short-term gains. The LTAD framework divides athlete development into key stages, such as the 'Active Start' and 'Fundamentals' phases for juniors, moving towards 'Train to Compete' and 'Train to Win' as athletes advance to elite levels (Pichardo et al., 2018). The successful transition of junior players through these pathways is crucial for professional clubs to maintain a pipeline of talented players capable of achieving the high physical and technical demands of the NRL at the elite level (Till et al., 2017). Recent studies have highlighted how specific anthropometric characteristics and

athletic performance measures may be predictors of player selection into elite teams and successful careers (Till et al., 2017). Current research suggests individual data profiles provided to each club NRL recruiter should include a player's physical and technical skills, their mental toughness; and physical performance measures such as speed, agility, strength, power, and body composition are (Gabbett et al., 2010). However, very little research has explored how the NRL recruiters perceive and integrate these data sources within their final assessments to determine their recommendations for player selections.

Despite these efforts to identify and nurture promising young athletes, talent development pathways and youth academies have a low conversion rate to the professional NRL. Thus highlighting the intense competition between the recruiters to select successfully from this small talent pool at the professional level. Research indicates that approximately 1-2% of participants in junior and grassroots pathways ultimately progress to the NRL (Wilkinson & Grecic, 2019). In rugby league recruitment, while developmental pathways like junior teams and state leagues are essential for fostering talent, breaking into the professional tier demands more than just structured systems. Achieving elite status requires exceptional ability, relentless dedication, and, often, favourable circumstances. Factors such as timing, connections, and being in environments where scouts can observe talent play a significant role. Recruiters are looking for skilled and resilient players who can capitalise on the right opportunities to make it into the NRL.

The Role of the Recruiter in NRL

Each NRL club employs recruiters to advise them on which future players they should consider. When selecting young players into NRL developmental systems and youth academies, recruiters are typically guided by a multi-faceted assessment encompassing physical characteristics, technical proficiencies, mental fortitude, and off-field conduct (Gabbett et al., 2010). Sporting organisations often deploy scouting networks and talent identification initiatives to recognise promising talent early and may provide scholarships and other incentives to secure the most talented young prospects (Larkin & O'Connor, 2017).

Recruiters play a crucial role in shaping the composition and identity of a rugby league organisation. The players they select significantly influence the team's community, dynamics, and overall playing style, shaping the club's technical and tactical game plan. Recruiters work closely with the Head Coach, General Manager of football operations, Chief Operating Officer, and other key stakeholders to ensure their talent acquisition efforts align with the club's long-term strategic vision (Edwards & Washington, 2013). Beyond identifying the objective physical, technical and performance skills of the prospective signings, recruiters are required to consider the subjective quality measures of how prospective signings may effectively integrate into the pre-existing team culture and positively contribute to the club's playing philosophy. Thus the successful recruiter effectively provides a holistic assessment of a player's technical abilities, physical attributes, and off-field personality and conduct which is essential for building a cohesive and high-performing squad (Larkin & O'Connor, 2017).

The effectiveness of the recruitment process also has immense financial implications for the organisation. Securing the right mix of talented players increases the team's chances of success, leading to increased competition earnings, enhanced financial sponsorship opportunities, and greater fan engagement. All factors which significantly increase the overall revenue and profitability of the club. Effective recruitment, therefore, is a critical aspect that underpins the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of a club in the highly competitive world of professional NRL.

The purpose of the recruiter in the NRL pathways system is to successfully identify players who have both the physical and technical attributes, and the philosophical alignment to progress into NRL professional athletes after progressing through several age-group junior representative programs (Rotheram, 2020). Each NRL club has a salary cap expenditure of AUD \$12million maximum. The salaries are tiered to the level of experience of each player in the squad. The Academy players that are recruited are generally paid at a lower tier level than the experienced players. Experienced, higher tier player salary level range is from AUD \$500,000 to \$1,200,000 (Bletsoe et al., 2024) while the Academy tier ranges from AUD

\$20,000 to \$60,000 (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Therefore, an effective recruiter who can select successful junior/academy athletes into the NRL pathways system results in a reduced financial cost to NRL clubs when compared to signing experienced senior players. Furthermore, it may create a broader scope, in terms of the number of players that can be employed by each club, within the salary cap.

Selecting successful academy talent currently relies on each recruiter's individual skill and ability to combine the objective player performance metrics with their judgement of the subjective 'player and club philosophical alignment'. Recruiters often have many years of industry knowledge or have been past players who would suggest that they are therefore knowledgeable of the requirements needed to be successful in NRL game. In professional sport it is usual for each player to have a manager to advise them on contract negotiation, career and financial management, endorsements and legal compliance (Burton & Chadwick, 2019). Recruiters often leverage their personal relationships and connections with these 'player managers' to assist in identifying promising prospects (Cupples & O'Connor, 2011).

When questioned about their talent identification methods in the pathways system, recruiters often cite their "gut instinct" as a critical factor (Roberts et al., 2021). Many current recruiters have previous coaching experience, and this perspective significantly influences their decision-making philosophies when selecting talent (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Recruitment decisions in the NRL are complex, involving the recruiters combining their considerations of many factors to make their decisions i.e., player emotional judgment, impact of external pressures, and players' reactive and perceived performances. The 'value' given to each factor may significantly vary between individual recruiters (Roberts et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding more about a recruiter's philosophy would be beneficial to the role.

Sports organisations routinely leverage data analytics to make a prediction of each player's potential NRL performance based upon their current performance. This allows them to be more confident in the likelihood that they are identifying young, talented athletes with the capacity to excel at the NRL level. The increasing influence of technology and data analytics

has evolved the tactics of NRL recruiters, allowing organisations to better identify and secure top-tier talent to achieving their NRL goals (de la Torre et al., 2022).

Most of the research on talent identification in the NRL pathways system has focused on collecting appropriate physical performance metrics and key performance indicators. Objective measures, such as physical metrics of strength, speed, and aerobic capacity are commonly used as key performance indicators, as are statistical game data such as tackles, metres gained, line breaks, and support plays both with the ball and without, as well as tries scored (Gabbett & Seibold, 2013). Recruiters and coaches often rely heavily on these objective measures to determine which athletes they perceive have the potential to perform at the professional NRL level (Gabbett et al., 2012). Yet, successfully assessing future NRL talent in rugby league pathways systems involves both the objective data and the subjective criteria.

Recruiters may use subjective criteria when assessing future performance, such as intangible psychological and personality traits that may contribute to an athlete's long-term potential e.g. coachability, work ethic, competitiveness, ability to perform under pressure, and leadership skills (Baker et al., 2017). It is this combination of defined objective metrics and subjective assessments that provides recruiters with a more holistic evaluation of an athlete's potential to succeed in the elite NRL.

According to Madura (1982), the Human Resource Management (HRM) characteristics of professional sports teams share remarkable similarities with those of many other small and medium-sized business entities. Existing studies on the HRM processes of professional sports organisations have primarily focused on player recruitment systems, with limited attention paid to how these organisations apply established workplace HRM selection processes to their athlete selection procedures (Williams et al., 2023). Additionally, critical aspects of the HRM framework, such as standardised processes for identifying talent at an early stage and incorporating physiological, technical, and psychological evaluations, have primarily been overlooked from a sports management perspective (Larkin & O'Connor, 2017).

Bradbury and Forsyth (2012) highlighted a critical issue in professional sport. The absence of a clear and structured selection system often led to controversies and increased media scrutiny. To address this, they proposed adapting a traditional Human Resource Management selection process to the sporting context. Through focusing on prominent areas such as athlete position analysis, position descriptors, athlete profile development, athlete selection, and athlete debriefing, they described a framework that would emphasise a more transparent and consistent approach to talent identification in sport. This structured methodology reduced subjectiveness in decision-making, promoted fairness and mitigated potential controversies.

Trait Correlations with Sport Performance

Another facet used in recruitment in elite sports is Personality Profiling (Gucciardi, 2017). Various frameworks have employed different methods to assess athletes' personalities and determine how they may influence success in elite competition. The Five-Factor Model (FFM) in Athlete Recruitment (Marczak & Ginszt, 2017) is currently used to assess athlete personalities, aiding recruiters and sports psychologists to select individuals who behave in alignment with the specific demands of their sport. This model assesses personality traits through five dimensions; Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Allen & Laborde, 2014). It provides a structured means of characterising athletes based on their personality traits and predicting how these traits may potentially impact their performance and future success in sport. Researchers and practitioners have highlighted the following aspects of the FFM's role in athlete recruitment.

Studies such as Allen and Laborde (2014), identified correlations between specific personality traits and athletic success. For example, higher conscientiousness and lower neuroticism showed a relationship to better sports performance. The FFM enabled recruiters to identify individuals with these desirable traits and make more informed recruitment decisions.

Tailoring to Sport Requirements

The FFM's flexibility allowed it to be adapted to the requirements of different sporting environments. Recruiters have customised the assessment criteria based on the traits most relevant to success in their particular sport. For instance, a sport emphasising teamwork may seek individuals with higher agreeableness, while an individual sport, e.g., tennis may value players with higher levels of extraversion. While personality traits have provided valuable insights into recognising an athlete's potential for long-term success, their assessment may be more suited to later stages. This is due to early in an athlete's career, traits like conscientiousness, which reflects an athlete's discipline, perseverance, and attention to detail, may be difficult to assess accurately due to a lack of experience and maturity. However, as athletes grow within a pathways system and face increasingly challenging environments, these traits become more pronounced and measurable (Piedmont, 1999). At the earliest identification and recruitment stages, it may be more practical for recruiters to focus primarily on evaluating objective, observable performance metrics and physical capabilities when assessing talent. Because these factors are easier to quantify and are directly relevant to immediate athletic performance. Physical attributes such as speed, agility, strength, and endurance can be measured through standardised tests, providing precise, reliable data on an athlete's capabilities. These metrics directly correlate with the physical demands of rugby league, making them ideal for quickly assessing whether an athlete has the foundational abilities to succeed in the sport.

Recruiters often need to make quick decisions with limited information about prospective athletes, so they may place greater emphasis on subjective in-game observations that can offer insights into an athlete's attitude, competitiveness, and mental resilience (Marczak & Ginszt, 2017). These subjective assessments of an athlete's on-field behaviour and decision-making under pressure complement the more quantifiable performance data, providing recruiters with a more holistic evaluation of the individual's potential to thrive at the elite level. However, the information used from these in-game observations is determined by

the knowledge, experiences, and personal biases held by each recruiter. There is a risk that the level and variability from this subjectivity within the assessment process may potentially lead to inconsistent or discriminatory decision-making on which players get offered a contract. To mitigate the impact of this, it would be beneficial for recruiters to develop structured, transparent, and evidence-based approaches to athlete selection, drawing upon established human resource management principles to ensure a fair and rigorous talent evaluation. Combining the objective performance metrics with the subjective observations of an athlete's mental and behavioural attributes assists the effectiveness of recruiters in identifying individuals who are likely to possess the necessary physical skills and the psychological resilience and adaptability to succeed in elite NRL environment.

In addition, the research model integrates individualised approaches to talent identification and recruitment into the Multidimensional Talent Identification Framework (MTID). This framework, based on the research of Abbott and Collins (2004) and Larkin and O'Connor (2017), combines physical, technical, psychological, and cognitive attributes into a unified assessment process, providing a holistic view of an athlete's potential. The MTID has been successfully used in sports like soccer and basketball, where talent identification involves balancing immediate performance metrics with long-term development potential (Vaeyens et al., 2009). For instance, in soccer, clubs have utilized this framework to evaluate not only speed and technical ability, but also decision-making under pressure and adaptability to various game scenarios. This comprehensive approach has enabled recruiters to identify players who may not excel based solely on physical traits but possess the mental resilience and cognitive skills required for elite performance.

Implementing the MTID framework in rugby league recruitment would broaden the current focus on physical performance by incorporating a wider range of evaluative criteria. This approach allows recruiters to go beyond traditional metrics like speed, strength, and technical skill, and consider psychological factors such as mental toughness, leadership, and coachability. In a sport where only 1-2% of players from pathways programs advance to the

professional level (Wilkinson & Grecic, 2019), the MTID provides a more comprehensive tool for identifying individuals with potential for long-term success.

This literature review addressed the complex nature of recruitment by investigating the recruiter's reliance on objective performance measures and subjective measures in the athlete selection process. It emphasised the critical themes and shared principles that inform the recruitment of NRL pathways athletes. This study explores the strategies, practices, and guiding philosophies employed by recruitment staff within Australian rugby league clubs. By examining the decision-making processes surrounding player recruitment in rugby league pathways, the study seeks to understand the factors influencing these choices.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in this research, which aims to evaluate recruitment processes in rugby league, assess their effectiveness, and explore potential improvements. It begins by discussing the researcher's philosophical standpoint and methodological approach. The chapter then details the participant selection process, focusing on the contribution of Australian Pathways rugby league recruiters. Data collection methods, including the interview process and thematic analysis, are also described. Finally, the chapter addresses the ethical considerations that guided the research. Participant interviews and thematic analysis are central to understanding recruitment practices and uncovering critical themes in the data.

Aim and Research Question

This study investigates the strategies, practices, and overarching philosophies of rugby league recruitment staff in Australian rugby league clubs. Specifically, through answering the following question:

- What are the Current Philosophies and Practices of Recruiters in Australian rugby league Pathways?

Its goal is to understand better the decisions made around recruitment in Australian rugby league pathways. This knowledge can provide recruitment staff clarity in recruitment practices and align club recruitment philosophies.

Research Approach and Research Paradigm

This research used an interpretive paradigm and semi-structured interviews to explore recruitment philosophies in Australian rugby league pathways. It allowed the researcher to explore and interpret the meaning of participant's answers, opinions, and expressions.

Interviews are traditional within a qualitative descriptive approach as they facilitate understanding (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). Furthermore, interviews allow interviewees to expand on answers by discussing their personal experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With semi-structured interviews, the researcher can move the conversation to focus on essential topics related to the research questions. Based on the content of the answer given by the participant, the researcher can stay on topic or move in a different direction to uncover new information (Jooste, 2022). In a semi-structured interview, the recruitment experience can be explored and organised. However, it is still flexible enough to allow for elaboration from participants, emergent ideas and follow-up questions (Bernard et al., 2016).

Research Design

Sampling

The researcher used purposeful sampling, which is standard in descriptive qualitative research and appropriate for exploring the recruitment philosophy in Australian pathways systems (Kim et al., 2017). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select recruitment staff based on inclusion criteria (Bernard et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher also used a convenience sampling technique to select recruitment staff from the researcher's current place of employment for the subsequent interviews.

Before the study, the researcher conducted interviews with eight recruitment staff members, AUTECH ethics were obtained prior to data collection (22/325; January 2023). These participants were selected based on their alignment with the inclusion criteria. Using their extended professional network, the researcher approached eligible recruiters in person. The number of participants was deemed sufficient, as all had at least ten years of experience in recruitment within a professional Australian rugby league pathways environment, ensuring they met the criteria for the study.

Participant Selection/Inclusion Criteria

To be included in this study, recruiters needed to meet the following criteria:

- A. Ten years in Australian rugby league recruitment.
- B. Currently employed in Australian rugby league recruitment in pathways.
- C. Previously coached in Australian rugby league systems.

Eight male participants were recruited for this study. Table 1 provides participant information. The eight male participants have over ten years of experience in professional Australian rugby league recruitment and coaching. The participants were audio-recorded using an Apple iPhone 13 pro and a third-party OtterAi app during the interviews, and all recordings were processed and filtered by a third party before coding to protect their identities.

Table 1

Participant Information

Name	Gender	Age	Years of Experience	Current Role
P1	Male	38	12	Pathways Recruitment
P2	Male	70	30	Senior Recruitment
P3	Male	40	13	Pathways Recruitment/International
P4	Male	49	15	Pathways Recruitment
P5	Male	54	18	Pathways Recruitment/ New South Wales Regional.
P6	Male	39	15	Senior Recruitment
P7	Male	66	32	Senior Recruitment
P8	Male	37	10	Pathways Recruitment

Data Collection Methods/Interview Procedure

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews. The interview sessions were designed to be open-ended, allowing recruiters to express their thoughts and experiences freely. The researcher utilised an interview guide of ten focus and related follow-up questions.

Interview Questions:

In your role as a recruiter:

1. What do you look for when recruiting a rugby league athlete?
2. What are your key performance factors in an elite rugby league athlete?
3. What qualities should an elite pathways rugby league athlete need?
4. What do you think an eye for talent means?
5. What is your current recruitment philosophy?
6. What current or past recruiting system have you used when assessing/recruiting rugby league athletes?
7. How do you process and assess athletes in games and training sessions to determine potential?
8. How has your previous experience in rugby league influenced your decision-making?
9. What method of analysis do you use when recruiting? For example, video analysis, statistical game data, family history, where they live, school, and previous playing history?
10. What key mentors influenced your recruiting philosophies, and what did you learn?
Outside factors that influence your decision-making. (i.e., managers, CEO, head coach)

The interviews were conducted in a meeting room at Belmore Sports Ground in Sydney, NSW, Australia, which was quiet and free of external distractions. They were audio-

recorded via the OtterAi app, which provided an interview transcript for editing at the end of each interview. The duration of each interview varied from 18 to 25 minutes.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was preferred as the qualitative data analysis technique to explore the emerging themes within the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This method was chosen for its flexibility in identifying patterns and underlying meanings in the data.

The thematic analysis process involved the following six steps:

1. Familiarisation: Researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading multiple interview transcripts to understand the content comprehensively.
2. Coding: The initial coding process involved identifying and labelling recurrent ideas, phrases, and concepts within the data. These codes were generated inductively, allowing themes to emerge naturally.
3. Theme Development: Codes were grouped into broader themes that encapsulated the overarching concepts present in the interviews. Themes were refined and clarified through iterative discussions among the research team.
4. Theme Review: The research team reviewed and refined the themes, ensuring they accurately represented the data.
5. Data Verification: A second researcher cross-validated the identified themes to enhance the credibility of the analysis. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.
6. Reporting: Finally, the research team documented the key themes, including relevant excerpts from the interviews, to provide a comprehensive representation of the authors' perspectives and thematic choices.

The flexibility of thematic analysis allowed for a rich, detailed exploration of the qualitative data collected through interviews with Australian Pathways rugby league recruiters. Braun and Clarke (2006) method was particularly suited for this research due to its ability to allow the

researcher to identify patterns of meaning across a diverse set of data, which, in this case, involved a variety of perspectives on recruitment practices. By applying this method, the research uncovered underlying themes that provide insight into the strengths and potential areas for improvement within the recruitment processes. The systematic coding and theme development ensured that the findings were rooted in the data, allowing for a comprehensive evaluation of current practices.

Data Analysis/Transcription

The interview audio recordings were transcribed primarily through the OtterAi app and then manually edited through Microsoft Word. The transcriptions were then sent to the interviewee to check the accuracy before themes were generated. Implementation of thematic analysis then occurred to identify and report patterns within the transcribed data. Additionally, it entailed familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

All participants fully understood what the research entailed and how it could affect them and the community. The researcher acknowledges the existence of a prior relationship with participants due to shared employment within the organisation. The selection of current employees as participants was intentional, focusing on understanding recruitment processes specific to their current roles and organizational context. While this approach provided valuable insights into internal recruitment practices, it may also have introduced potential bias in framing questions and participant responses. The researcher has taken steps to mitigate this bias by carefully considering question design and adherence to ethical research practices, ensuring that all participants felt comfortable providing honest and unbiased answers. The decision not to explore external recruitment practices is a noted limitation, which may affect the generalisability of the findings. These measures align with ethical standards to uphold transparency and rigour throughout the research process. Before the research commenced,

participants signed forms covering what the data will be used for and how it will be collected.

The following documents were completed before the commencement of the research:

Consent, Confidentiality agreement, and Information privacy principles.

Results

This study aimed to explore the recruitment philosophies and practices within Australian rugby league pathways. It sought to provide insight into the decision-making processes that underpin recruitment in the sport, with the goal of offering recruitment staff clarity and in their recruitment philosophies across clubs.

This chapter expands upon the three principal themes identified through the thematic analysis of interview transcripts, which serve as the foundation of the investigation. The three principal themes and sub-themes identified were:

1. Holistic Athlete Profiling
 - a. Correlation between technical skills, passion and performance
 - b. Fundamental skills and pre-requisites
 - c. Assessment of off-ball efforts
 - d. Physical profiling
 - e. Communication
2. Psychological and Athlete Background
 - a. Character assessment and coachability
 - b. Subjective evaluation
 - c. Balancing character profiles
 - d. Adaptation/response to pressure
3. Recruitment Structure
 - a. Data-driven
 - b. Geographical recruitment
 - c. Head-coach philosophy
 - d. Business-like structure
 - e. Internal pathways

Each theme was a critical factor influencing the decision-making of the recruiters in the study. Notably, these factors frequently exhibit interplay, underscoring the intricate and multifaceted nature of recruitment processes within Australian rugby league pathways. The findings address the research questions and provide a detailed overview of the Australian rugby league's current recruitment philosophies. By analysing the interaction between the identified themes, this study contributes valuable knowledge to inform recruitment practices, aiming to enhance alignment and coherence in the recruitment strategies of Australian rugby league clubs. The results presented in this section are discussed in relation to these objectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the recruitment landscape in Australian rugby league.

Table 2 showcases the primary recruitment themes encompassing physical performance, psychological/athlete background, recruitment structure, and rugby league game skills. The table collected insightful quotations from expert recruiters and experiences in Australian rugby league pathways recruitment. It provides a contextual backdrop against which these themes manifest within the dataset

Table 2

Key Themes and Quotes

Key Themes	8 interviews	Sub - Themes	Example of comments
Holistic Athlete Profiling	95%	Correlation between technical skills, passion and performance	"It is watching a player identify those key traits: body shape, athleticism, running mechanics, speed, and competitiveness."
		Physical profiling	"I looked for a high skill level and the obvious things: speed, footwork, strength, and size."
		Assessment of off-ball efforts	"Understanding the game and loving it."
		Fundamental skills and pre-requisites	"One of the good stats is the players winning percentage."
		Communication	"I would not look so much at their skill, speed, and basic skill; I would look more around their off-ball efforts."
Psychological / Athlete Background"	80%	Character assessment and coachability	"Fundamental skills and physicality as prerequisites"
		Subjective evaluation	"Rugby League IQ, a player who understands the game in certain aspects."
		Balancing character profiles	"While we all want a club full of people with great character, everyone is different, and it needs to be subjective whether that person can come in with their character and add value to the club."
			"Character, does he compete, and is he coachable? They will probably be the big three."
			"You have got to have some people in there who can flick a switch and go to the red line, character-wise."

		<p>"They can lack a little bit in the body or the physical makeup if they are competitive."</p> <p>"Importance of relationships, insights from previous clubs, understanding family history, living conditions, school, and previous club experiences".</p> <p>"Family Influence and Personality Assessment"</p> <p>"How they do not respond to adversity or criticism quite well."</p> <p>"Asking questions about setbacks and accountability."</p>
Recruitment Structure	60%	<p>"Collaborative decision-making within the recruitment team."</p>
	Data-driven	<p>"Balancing Development and External Recruitment in System Strategy"</p>
	Geographical recruitment	<p>"Geographical considerations and international recruitment"</p>
	Head-coach philosophy	<p>"You are looking for a certain type of player and certain ways they train, governed by the coach's philosophy."</p>
	Business-like structure	<p>"Club depth chart, understanding current player capabilities, and decisions based on internal options before considering external recruitment".</p>
Internal pathways	<p>"Trusting that you have staff systems processes to build on that athlete for higher grades moving forward."</p>	
		<p>"Alignment of recruitment philosophy is crucial."</p>
		<p>"You usually have recruitment and retention committees, which consist of the head coach, head of recruitment, and maybe even the chairman on that panel."</p>

Theme One: Holistic Athlete Profiling

In this theme, coaches emphasised the pivotal role that both technical skills and physical qualities play in the recruitment process for rugby league. While a strong foundation in technical abilities is crucial, physical attributes such as strength, power, and speed are equally vital for sports success. Coaches highlighted the need to assess a player's ability to perform in the physically demanding aspects of rugby league, where explosive power, speed in both attack and defence and overall physical resilience are essential. Alongside evaluating a player's passion for the game, communication skills, and off-ball efforts, prioritising these physical and technical qualities allows coaches to build cohesive, competitive teams capable of thriving in rugby league's high-intensity, dynamic environment (Rotheram, 2020).

Correlation Between Technical Skills, Passion and Performance

Recruiters accentuate the selection of players who deeply understand and radiate a genuine passion for the game. One recruiter stated having a player with *"Understanding the game and loving it"*. Furthermore, another recruiter commented, *"We seek players who truly grasp the nuances of the game, those who study it and love it because that passion resonates on the field"*. This sentiment aligns with the broader consensus within the rugby league community that passion and knowledge are the bedrock of success in the sport. Additionally, another recruiter pointed out that:

"I like to have a conversation with the athlete's school teacher to get a better understanding of what type of learner they are" "this gives me an understanding on his application that may he bring into his rugby league craft".

Coaches acknowledge that players who genuinely love the game are students of the game and are more likely to dedicate themselves to continuous improvement through learning on and off the field. This finding is strengthened by research conducted by Brown et al. (2018), who discovered that athletes intrinsically motivated by their love for the sport are likelier to demonstrate higher levels of commitment and performance.

Fundamental Skills and Physicality as Prerequisites

Recruiters firmly state that fundamental skills and physicality are critical when assessing potential recruits. One recruiter stated, *"We look for players with a solid foundation of fundamental skills, such as tackling, passing, and positional skill, as well as the physical attributes required to compete at a high level"*. Recruiters recognise that players who possess strong fundamental skills and physical attributes are better equipped to adapt to the demands of the game and contribute effectively to their teams. Furthermore, it aligns with the findings of Geeson-Brown et al. (2020), who conducted a systematic review of performance indicators in rugby league and identified fundamental skills and physicality as essential predictors of player performance. Similarly, research by Till et al. (2017) highlights the importance of physical qualities such as speed, power, and aerobic endurance as critical attributes for youth rugby league players, which indicate long-term success in the sport.

Moreover, one recruiter stated, *"Watching a player identifying key physical traits: body shape, athleticism, running mechanics, speed"*.

Another recruiter mentioned,

"I tend not to get caught up on body size, as I like to look at how the athlete can use technique and his current body size to his advantage... I value technique and football tactics over body size and strength as that can be worked on over time".

This recruiter's positioning reflects findings by Walker et al. (2024), who suggested that while physicality is important, technical and tactical skills are increasingly recognised as necessary in identifying talent in rugby league pathways. Fundamentally, recruiters look at players who represent the core values of the head coach of the club. One recruiter said, *"I look for players with a high output and high-speed grind type of rugby league player that represents the head coach's philosophy...Physical fitness represents the type of gameplay the performance staff and head coach wants to implement, so we look for those physical qualities in a player"*.

Assessment of Off-Ball Efforts

Recruiters highlight the importance of assessing a player's off-ball efforts when evaluating a pathway rugby league player. One recruiter emphasised, *"We pay close attention to players' off-ball efforts, work rate, and willingness to support their teammates, even when they are not directly involved in the play"*. Another recruiter mentioned, *"I would not be so critical of their skill, speed and size; I would look more around their off-ball efforts"*. While technical skills and speed are essential, coaches value players who demonstrate a strong work ethic and commitment to their teammates, even when not directly involved in the play. Another recruiter also mentioned, *"This can be observed during warm-up, in what attitude he brings around his preparation influence he presents to his teammates"*.

Furthermore, off-the-ball efforts reflect rugby league's team-oriented nature and the importance of players willing to contribute to all facets of the game. Salcinovic et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal study on high-performance team dynamics and athletic identity formation. Their findings support the notion that athletes who prioritise team success over individual achievement are likelier to thrive in team sports like rugby league.

Communication

Effective communication emerges as a critical quality recruitment and coaching staff seek in rugby league recruitment. One recruiter said, *"Communication is key, not just during games, but also in training sessions and team meetings...we want vocal and engaged players who can effectively convey their thoughts and ideas to their teammates"*. Coaches value players who can articulate their thoughts and ideas clearly on and off the field. Another participant adds, *"Building connection on the field comes through clear communication"*. Consequently, strong communication builds connections within a team environment and is closely linked to high-performing teams (Morgan et al., 2019).

Physical Profiling

Athlete profiling also emerged as a pivotal aspect of recruitment structures. One participant remarked, *"We employ athlete profiling techniques to assess physical attributes"*. By incorporating physical profiling, rugby league recruiters try to predict future physical performance that the athlete may have to achieve success. (MacNamara et al., 2010). Another participant highlighted the specific role of physical profiling based on positional requirements: *"We look at the athlete's physical profile compared to positional requirements such as speed, power, strength, and body composition"*. This method aligns with findings in rugby league that indicate the importance of specific physical attributes tailored to different playing positions. Positional profiling allows recruiters to pinpoint the physical competencies necessary for success in each role, further supported by research identifying key performance factors in rugby league players based on their playing positions (Gabbett et al., 2012).

Theme Two: Psychological and Athlete Background

Character Assessment and Coachability

Central to rugby league recruitment strategies are assessing character traits and coachability in potential players. When evaluating prospective recruits, recruiters prioritise characteristics such as competitiveness, perseverance, and coachability (MacNamara et al., 2010). As one recruiter articulated, *"Character, does he compete, and is he coachable? They will probably be my main three"*. Another recruiter commented, *"It is important to have relationships and insights from previous clubs and to understand family history, living conditions, school, and previous club experiences"*. Character underscores the significance of talent and behaviour attributes contributing to a player's overall suitability for the team.

This prominence on character assessment resonates with findings from other sports domains. For instance, a study by Abbott and Collins (2004) on talent identification and development in soccer found that successful recruitment processes often prioritise psychological factors such as coachability and resilience alongside technical skills. Similarly,

Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) highlight the importance of assessing an athlete's psychological readiness to cope with setbacks and pressure situations, echoing concerns raised by rugby league coaches.

Subjectivity in Character Evaluation

Character assessment is a subjective process, with coaches acknowledging the individual differences in players and the need for nuanced assessments. One recruiter remarked,

"While we all want a club full of people with great character, everyone is different, and it needs to be a subjective view on whether that person can come in with the character that they have and add value to the club".

This acknowledgment highlights the importance of considering each player's unique qualities and contributions in the recruitment decision-making process. Furthermore, one recruiter stated, *"I like to use different questions when I meet a player to find out how they may deal with certain situations in the rugby league environment...I like to see whether he is extrinsic or intrinsically motivated"*.

This notion of subjective evaluation aligns with research in talent management within business contexts. Pankhurst and Collins (2013) discuss the subjective nature of talent assessment in organisational settings, emphasising the need for evaluators to consider individual differences and contextual factors when making recruitment decisions. Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2020) state the importance of intrinsic motivation and individual autonomy in driving sustained commitment and performance, supporting the idea of subjective evaluation in character assessment.

Balancing Character Profiles

Coaches recognise the need for diversity in character profiles within a team, understanding that a team comprised solely of individuals with exemplary character may lack the necessary edge for success. One coach recruiter said, *"You cannot win with a team full of*

just good people". Another recruiter stated, *"You have got to have some people in there who can flick a switch and go to the red line, character-wise"*. This insight underscores the importance of balancing character traits such as resilience and assertiveness to ensure a well-rounded team capable of thriving in diverse competitive scenarios. Furthermore, a senior recruiter stated, *"While we all want a club full of people with great character, everyone is different, and it needs to be subjective whether that person can come in with the character they have and add value to the club"*.

It shows that character profile diversity mirrors research findings on team dynamics and performance. Reinartz et al. (2004) discuss the importance of nurturing diverse relationships for organisational success, highlighting the need for teams to encompass a range of strengths and qualities. Similarly, in sports psychology, (Morgan et al., 2019) acknowledge the role of team cohesion and diversity in driving performance outcomes, supporting the idea that a balance of character profiles is essential for team success.

Adaptability and Response to Pressure

Concerns about potential recruits' ability to handle pressure situations and setbacks effectively are raised. Coaches need players who demonstrate resilience and an ability to adapt to unknown pressures. This sentiment is captured in remarks such as *"the reaction to pressure and setbacks"*, *"you know, they are coachable"*, and *"You know, they are good kids"*. These highlight the importance of assessing a player's skillset and psychological readiness to cope with the demands of elite-level competition. Another recruiter quoted when watching the game or training, *"How they do not respond to adversity or criticism quite well"*. *"Do they have the ability to bounce back and not compound errors or blame their teammate?"*

The adaptability and resilience align with findings from resilience research in sports psychology. Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) discuss the importance of psychological adaptability and perseverance in navigating challenges and achieving long-term goals, supporting the notion that resilience is critical to athlete success. Similarly, in a study by Abbott and Collins

(2004) on talent identification and development in soccer, researchers highlight the importance of assessing athletes' responses to pressure situations as part of the recruitment process, echoing concerns raised by rugby league coaches. A recruiter also stated, *"Mental resilience is crucial... teams that are successful in the future will have that mental resilience"*. Additionally, a recruiter highlighted this by stating that *"communication is an important factor in elite performance in crucial key game moments"*.

Theme Three: Recruitment Structures in Rugby League

Data-driven

Interviews with seasoned rugby league recruiters reveal a comprehensive recruitment process that blends data-driven decision-making, statistical analysis, and athlete profiling. One participant mentioned that *"Stats and data is only one piece of the puzzle, and solely relying on data without context is a gamble"*. However, another participant emphasised the importance of integrating analytics: *"We utilise data analytics extensively to identify key performance indicators and assess player suitability for our team"*. This sentiment echoes broader trends in professional sports recruitment, where data analytics has become integral. In rugby league, statistical analysis is increasingly employed to enhance talent identification, reflecting advances in other sports, such as baseball, where statistical approaches revolutionised recruitment strategies (Lewis, 2003). Recent research in rugby league recruitment also supports this, showing how key performance indicators such as physical and statistical athlete profiling can predict long-term success and inform decisions about player suitability (Woods et al., 2016).

Geographical Recruitment

The interviews also revealed the growing complexity of recruitment due to the integration of geographical considerations and international scouting. One recruiter noted, *"Geographical considerations and international recruitment play a pivotal role in our talent identification process, allowing us to cast a wider net and unearth potential gems from diverse*

backgrounds". It reflects findings in sports economics, which suggest that international recruitment offers teams a competitive edge by accessing diverse and underrepresented talent markets (Reeves & Roberts, 2020). International recruitment enhances the talent pool and diversifies the team's tactical options, a trend observed in rugby and other global sports (Reeves & Roberts, 2020). However, another recruiter goes on to say,

"I look at the demographic of the area that player grew up...Low social and economic families in my past experiences have had the most talented players due to less availability of technology and distractions and spending more time outside playing".

Another participant further emphasized, *"Athletes from lower economic backgrounds tend to be tougher and more resilient...The hardships they face and their drive to improve their circumstances for themselves and their families often translates into strong motivation and determination on the field"*. Furthermore, it was found in a study of Brazilian soccer players who grew up in favelas¹ with limited access to formal training facilities and insufficient infrastructure that players from these marginalised communities often exhibit exceptional creativity and technical skills (Uehara et al., 2021). Additionally, it shows that a broader view of recruitment is needed to find exceptional talent who may not have a traditional rugby league background or an environment in which structured rugby league is played.

Head Coach Philosophy

Strategic alignment with the coach's philosophy was identified as another important aspect of recruitment. One recruiter stated, *"You are looking for a certain type of player, and the coach's philosophy governs how they play"*. Moreover, it highlights the critical need for recruitment strategies to align with the team's overarching tactical approach and long-term vision. Additionally, another recruiter mentions, *"Not every player will be aligned with the head coaching philosophy, but if you find a talented player that has the raw talent, you have to take*

¹ Term used in Brazil for impoverished or low-income neighbourhoods.

the risk and hope he can adapt and learn over time". The importance of strategic alignment is well-documented in both sports and corporate recruitment, where a shared philosophy ensures that newly recruited talent integrates smoothly into existing team dynamics and contributes to the organisation's objectives (Gomes et al., 2018). However, the common trend with every recruiter interviewed is one quote: *"Used to have a checklist, now more in my head, influenced by the coach's philosophy"*.

Business-Like Structure

The structure of rugby league recruitment committees reflects a semi-structured business model. One recruiter described this model as: *"You have usually got recruitment and retention committees, which consist of the head coach, head of recruitment, and maybe even the chairman on that panel"*. This collaborative framework ensures that multiple perspectives guide recruitment decisions, a practice similar to that observed in corporate human resource management, where cross-functional collaboration leads to better hiring outcomes (Patel et al., 2012).

Internal Pathways

Recruiters consistently mentioned the following: *"Club depth chart, understanding current player capabilities, and decisions based on internal options before considering external recruitment"*. This approach emphasises the value of nurturing homegrown talent, aligning with research in talent development across various domains. For instance, internal talent development models in performing arts and sports have contributed to long-term success by fostering continuous development and loyalty within the organisation (Wilkinson & Grecic, 2019). One recruiter further noted the importance of trust in internal processes: *"Trusting that you have got the staff systems and processes to build that athlete for higher grades moving forward"*. Such internal development strengthens the club's talent pipeline and optimises resource allocation, minimising the need for external recruitment (Till & Baker, 2020). In conclusion, rugby league recruitment structures reflect an integrated approach combining data-driven decision-making, athlete profiling, geographical considerations,

international scouting, strategic alignment with coaching philosophies, and internal talent development pathways.

Discussion

This study investigated the recruitment philosophies and frameworks employed by recruitment staff within Australian rugby league pathways systems to better understand the evolving nature of talent identification in the sport. It aimed to do this by answering the question:

- What are the Current Philosophies and Practices of Recruiters in Australian rugby league Pathways?

A thematic analysis of the collected data identified three dominant themes. These themes help to understand the experiences and philosophies of rugby league recruiters.

- Holistic Athlete Profiling
- Psychological/ athlete background
- Recruitment Structure

According to the findings presented in the results section, this study suggests that the experiences of recruitment staff offer valuable insights into the intricate and multifaceted process of talent identification and development within the Australian rugby league pathway system. Early research on talent identification, as highlighted by Larkin and O'Connor (2017), often characterised recruitment philosophies as highly individualistic, shaped by personal experiences and subjective judgments. This approach frequently resulted in decision-making processes guided by informal procedures and subjective perceptions. However, recent literature shifts towards more structured and standardised recruitment practices. Green (2005) suggests that recruitment practices are becoming increasingly aligned across organisations, with recruiters embracing shared frameworks and philosophies that promote a more consistent approach to talent identification. The findings of this study support this trend, demonstrating a convergence of ideas among participants. Interviews posited the importance of holistic athlete profiling, psychological attributes, and recruitment structure. This aligns with broader talent identification research, indicating a movement towards formalised recruitment systems integrating subjective and objective evaluations. Despite this apparent alignment in

philosophies, a significant gap exists in how these shared principles are communicated and systematically implemented within clubs. This discrepancy highlights a crucial area for further investigation and development within rugby league talent identification practices.

Holistic Athlete Profiling

The recruitment philosophies in Australian rugby league Pathways are increasingly centred around holistic athlete profiling. Recruiters evaluated players through a multidimensional lens, considering both physical and non-physical attributes. This comprehensive approach involved assessing technical, psychological, and intangible qualities to identify athletes with the potential for long-term success.

Holistic athlete profiling stands out as a fundamental framework in rugby league recruitment. Participants mentioned prioritising and evaluating both technical skills and physical attributes, recognising that success in the physically demanding environment of rugby league requires explosive power, speed, and resilience (Rotheram, 2020). This approach was closely aligned with the research question, underscoring the critical components that recruiters considered essential for potential recruits. Current literature reinforced these findings, indicating that technical competencies and physical qualities were significant predictors of performance (Geeson-Brown et al., 2020; Till & Baker, 2020).

A dominant theme emerging from participant interviews was the correlation between technical skills, football IQ, and performance. Recruiters placed significant importance on technical proficiency in skills such as tackling, passing, and overall game understanding. However, they also stressed the importance of a deep-seated passion for the sport, which was seen as a critical driver of dedication and long-term performance. This aligned with existing research, which suggests that intrinsic motivation, particularly passion, enhances an athlete's commitment to improvement (Pelletier et al. (1995). Recruiters believed that athletes who combined technical expertise with a genuine love for rugby league were more likely to persist through challenges and grow in the sport.

In addition to technical and psychological factors, physical profiling remained an essential element in the recruitment processes. Speed, power, strength, and size were considered fundamental for success in rugby league, as indicated by previous research (Gabbett et al., 2009; Till & Baker, 2020). These attributes were viewed by the recruiters as foundational prerequisites for identifying player potential. However, recruiters increasingly focused on how these physical qualities were applied tactically during gameplay, emphasising the importance of player off-ball efforts. These efforts included actions such as push support, kick chase, communication, and positional awareness, elements that reflected an athlete's work ethic, team orientation, and cognitive understanding of the game. Recruiters considered that such traits were becoming equally, if not more, important than raw physical abilities, reflecting a definite shift toward recognising the value of teamwork and situational awareness, a concept that is supported by findings from Ryska (2003).

The findings from this research suggested that recruitment philosophies in Australian rugby league are evolving to include both physical and cognitive assessments, reflecting a broader understanding of 'what it takes to succeed' at the elite level. While physical talent remains a critical factor, attributes such as attitude, discipline, character, and learning ability are increasingly recognised by the recruiters as key determinants of long-term success. This shift toward holistic athlete profiling signals an important evolution in talent identification, where the focus has moved to selecting athletes with the ability to grow, adapt, and contribute to the team both on and off the field.

Psychological/Athlete Background

The findings of this study make a unique contribution to the understanding of recruiter philosophy to athlete recruitment in the Australian rugby league. Evidently, an athlete's psychological and personal attributes play a significant role in the current recruitment philosophies. Recruiters placed a key focus on athlete qualities of resilience, adaptability, competitiveness, and the ability to perform under pressure. Recruiters considered these attributes key indicators of a player's potential for long-term success, especially in the

demanding environment of professional rugby league. Therefore, the psychological background of an athlete is not viewed by the recruiter in isolation, but as a crucial aspect of a holistic recruitment process, which included both player athletic performance and the individual's broader life context. This perspective answered the research question by highlighting that current recruitment philosophies prioritise mental toughness and personal character alongside traditional technical and physical abilities.

The importance of psychological traits in rugby league recruitment aligns with existing literature on talent identification. Abbott and Collins (2004) proposed that psychological readiness and mental toughness were essential components of athlete recruitment, a notion strongly supported by the findings of this study. Additionally, the correlation between mental toughness and elite performance, as demonstrated by MacNamara et al. (2010), is reflected in the recruiter's focus on a player's ability to withstand rugby league's physical and mental demands. Current research also underscored the growing trend toward integrating life management and personal character into talent identification, supporting the more holistic approach seen in modern rugby league pathways. This holistic approach is consistent with contemporary models of athlete development, which advocate for evaluating an athlete's ability to manage life transitions, pressures, and external stressors that could impact their athletic performance.

Furthermore, the subjective nature of character evaluation is highlighted, with recruiters recognising the need to adapt assessments to individual players. This approach supported the views of Pankhurst and Collins (2013) who stressed the importance of individual differences in talent assessment, and Ryan and Deci (2020), who discussed intrinsic motivation's role in sustaining commitment and performance.

In summary, the philosophy of recruiters in Australian rugby league pathways placed considerable importance on psychological and personal attributes when assessing players. Traits like resilience, adaptability, and mental toughness were considered essential for rugby league success. There was a strong recognition that athletic performance is intertwined with

an athlete's broader life context, leading clubs to incorporate personal character, lifestyle management, and external factors such as education or work performance into recruitment criteria. However, the subjective nature of evaluating psychological attributes presented challenges, with recruiters acknowledging the need for more structured and standardised tools to improve consistency and fairness in talent identification. Ultimately, the findings point to a comprehensive recruitment philosophy that integrates psychological, physical, and technical evaluations in identifying talent capable of thriving in professional rugby league.

Recruitment Structure

The research findings demonstrate that recruitment practices are influenced by data-driven decision-making, geographic diversity, the impact of head coaches, and collaborative structures. By connecting these findings to existing research, we can gain deeper insights into how these strategies enhance the effectiveness of talent identification and acquisition in the field of sports.

One of the notable shifts in recruitment strategies is the increasing reliance on data-driven decision-making. Recruiters are now using performance metrics and statistical analysis to assess player potential, reflecting a broader trend seen in other professional sports (Woods et al., 2016). This approach reflected a growing integration of analytics into recruitment practices, where objective data such as game statistics and physical measurements supplemented traditional scouting methods. The result was a more informed decision-making process that reduced bias and enhanced the accuracy of player performance assessments. This trend is vital to the recruitment philosophies adopted in Australian rugby league, as it allows teams to make strategic choices based on empirical evidence.

The findings also highlighted the emergence of geographical recruitment strategies, emphasising the importance of scouting players from diverse regions, including low-income areas and schools that have been historically overlooked. This approach reflected broader strategies in global talent recruitment, recognising geographic diversity to tap into a wider

talent pool. By expanding their recruitment efforts beyond local areas, rugby league organisations can discover underrepresented talent and introduce unique playing styles and tactical innovations. This aligns with contemporary research on talent identification, which suggested that a wider geographical focus can enhance team performance and adaptability.

Another critical finding is the influence of head coaches on recruitment decisions. Recruiters reported that the head coach's preferences and tactical philosophies significantly shaped their player assessments. The alignment between a head coach's vision and recruitment strategies is crucial for ensuring that player selections support the team's tactical goals. This finding correlates with current research indicating that the involvement of coaching staff in recruitment processes can lead to better alignment between team-needs and player capabilities, ultimately fostering a more cohesive team environment and ultimately improved performance (Gomes et al., 2018).

Additionally, the findings revealed a trend toward collaborative recruitment structures that mirrored business practices. Many clubs employ recruitment committees consisting of the head coach, head of recruitment, and, occasionally, the club chairperson. This semi-formal, cross-functional collaboration ensured a comprehensive decision-making process incorporating diverse perspectives. This approach aligns with previous corporate human resource management practices, emphasising collective decision-making to achieve effective outcomes (Edwards & Washington, 2013). Moreover, many clubs prioritised internal talent development, nurturing homegrown players through established pathways before seeking external recruits. This strategy not only minimised costs associated with external recruitment, but also reinforced the organisation's long-term success by fostering a strong talent development culture.

In summary, the current recruitment philosophies in Australian rugby league pathways were characterised by several key trends: the adoption of data-driven decision-making, the expansion of geographical recruitment efforts, the influence of head coach philosophies, and the implementation of collaborative recruitment structures. These findings highlighted a

progressive shift towards more strategic, evidence-based recruitment practices that enhanced talent identification and acquisition. By integrating these approaches, rugby league recruiters and their organisations can improve their competitive edge while cultivating a rich talent pipeline.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the recruitment philosophies and frameworks employed by Australian rugby league pathways recruitment staff. In addressing the research question “What are the current recruitment philosophies?”, the findings reveal significant shifts in recruitment practices. A key insight was the evolution from traditional methods to a holistic approach to recruitment, where athlete profiling incorporates technical and physical abilities and psychological traits like resilience, adaptability, passion, and mental toughness. Thus, suggesting that successful athletes exhibit intrinsic motivation, strong character, and the ability to perform under pressure (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Pelletier et al., 1995; Ryska, 2003). The emphasis on these broader attributes reflects a trend towards evaluating the whole athlete rather than just on-field performance.

In summary, the recruitment landscape in Australian rugby league is progressing toward a more holistic and data-driven approach, incorporating both traditional scouting methods and modern analytics. Holistic athlete profiling, geographic diversity, and coach-led recruitment strategies are at the core of this evolving framework. However, challenges remain in ensuring these shared recruitment philosophies have consistent and systematic application across rugby league pathways systems. Addressing these gaps will be essential to improving transparency and the long-term success of talent identification processes.

Limitations

The limitation of this study is the variation in recruitment philosophies among recruiters despite their work in similar areas of pathways recruitment. While some recruiters prioritise football analysis, others focus on physical traits or the psychological mindset of the athlete, illustrating the complex and multifaceted nature of recruitment. Recruiters also relied on recounting past experiences, which meant they had to reflect on their past recruitment experiences. Acknowledging the inherent limitations of relying solely on recruiter interviews to understand talent identification processes is essential. Recollections can be influenced by

memory biases, potentially impacting the accuracy of their accounts. The retrospective nature of interviews makes it challenging to establish how accurately recruiters recall past events and whether their interpretations of recruitment philosophies have shifted.

This discrepancy in priorities can make it challenging to generalise findings across the recruitment landscape, as individual recruiters bring unique perspectives to the process. However, despite these differences, the research also identified critical similarities in recruitment philosophies, providing valuable insights into the core values that guide decision-making when recruiting Australian Pathways rugby league athletes. These commonalities, though significant, may need to be more balanced with the intricate and subjective nature of recruitment decisions.

Future Recommendations

Future research should explore developing a more structured and standardised recruitment process within rugby league and similar sports. Given the findings that recruiters employ similar philosophies, whether focusing on football analysis, physical traits, or psychological mindset, there is a need to investigate how a more uniform framework could improve recruitment outcomes. Research could examine how structured models integrate these varied perspectives while maintaining the flexibility to assess complex athlete qualities. Such studies would provide insights into optimising recruitment processes, potentially leading to better alignment between club objectives and recruiter decision-making. Furthermore, exploring how these structured approaches impact long-term talent development and organisational success would be valuable for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of recruitment strategies across the sport.

Based on the data collected, the following recommendations are presented for practitioners to consider in their approach to recruitment:

- Build a clear, data-driven recruitment structure that aligns with key performance indicators, psychological profiling methods, physical performance, and technical and tactical measures.
- Establish a collaborative recruitment committee. This committee would ideally comprise key stakeholders from the football department, including recruitment staff, coaches, and general managers.
- Recruiters need to be aligned when it comes to assessing off-the-ball efforts and agree upon which actions are valued to have greater importance in recruitment.
- Strategic talent identification requires identifying key performance indicators and leveraging data analysis techniques to extract meaningful insights to inform recruitment decisions.
- Physical key performance indicators around strength, speed, size, and power are highly correlated in athletes progressing into professional sports. Having standards in a recruiting system can aid accuracy in the identification of athletes in the pathways system in the rugby league.
- Psychological evaluation of the athlete through subjective character profiling can be standardised between recruiters.
- Geographically diverse recruiting. Look outside the landscape of traditional recruiting grounds in rugby league and explore diverse sports, schools, countries and areas where athletes grow up.
- Know the Head Coach's philosophies to ensure that the athletes you recruit fit into the current playing system at the club/team.

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Appendix A-Interview Questions

Questions:

1. What do you look for when recruiting a rugby league athlete?
2. What are your key performance factors in an elite Rugby League athlete?
3. What qualities should an elite pathways rugby league athlete need?
4. What do you think an eye for talent means?
5. What is your current recruitment philosophy?
6. What current or past recruiting system have you used when assessing/recruiting rugby league athletes?
7. How do you process and assess athletes in games and training sessions to determine potential?
8. How has your previous experience in rugby league influenced your decision-making?
9. What method of analysis do you use when recruiting? For example, video analysis, statistical game data, family history, where they live, school, and previous playing history?
10. What key mentors influenced your recruiting philosophies, and what did you learn? Outside factors that influence your decision-making. (i.e., managers, CEO, head coach)

Appendix B-Information sheet



AUT

NEW ZEALAND

Research Participation invitation

Participant requirements

10 years plus in recruitment in Australian rugby league



60min Interview



Contact

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gnn3044@aut.ac.nz

Recruitment philosophies in talent identification in Australian Rugby League pathways systems.

About the study

Talent identification is an important part of the recruitment of rugby league players, but the philosophies of recruiters are unknown in the selection process.

Aim to find different methods and themes of the coaches' philosophies in the Australian Rugby League pathways system talent identification process.

How to Apply

If you are interested please reply back to the email and a information form will be sent to register your interest in the study.

1 month until applications closes.

Appendix C-Consent form

Project title: *Recruitment Philosophies in Talent Identification in Australian Rugby League Pathways Systems.*

The objective is better understand recruiter philosophies and systems in talent identification in rugby league. Aim to find different methods and themes of the coaches' philosophies in the Australian Rugby League pathways system talent identification process.

Project Supervisors: *Dr Kirsten Spencer*

Researcher: *Gurpreet Singh*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated ____ / ____ / ____.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I am aware that my inclusion in the study requires access to a full season of data and that I have participated in the full season.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant signature:

.....

Participants Name:

.....

Participants Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

AUTEC approved January 2023

Appendix D-Ethics form

24 January 2023

Kirsten Spencer
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Kirsten

Re Ethics Application: **22/325 Recruitment philosophies in talent identification in Australian Rugby League pathways systems.**

Thank you responding to the AUTEK's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 24 January 2026.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEK.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEK approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEK prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEK, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEK grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEK Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: Gnn3044@autuni.ac.nz; sierrakeung@gmail.com