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Serving the collective: understanding Pacific athletes' cultural and financial responsibilities

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the financial responsibilities of athletes through the lens of the service lifecycle model and the cultural practice of fa'alavelave. While professional sport provides many athletes with opportunities to uplift their families, communities, and churches, these opportunities often come with significant pressures to fulfill collective obligations. The dual expectations of service and elite sport performance create unique challenges in navigating financial decision-making within professional sport systems. Drawing on culturally grounded insights, this article explores how Pacific athletes balance these responsibilities and offers practical guidance for practitioners, sporting organizations, and financial advisors. This paper also offers broader implications for supporting minority athletes from collectivist cultures operating within individualized, market-driven sport environments.

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Athlete wealth; Pacific athlete; minority athlete; financial literacy; fa'alavelave; Pacific worldview

Introduction

“People still think of rugby as a game it's not a game it's an industry... Professional sport professionalises the whole chain...in that chain money becomes a drive...Professional athletes have fewer working rights than most other workers while the industry itself gets all these benefits and privileges...Pacific workers carry all this work disproportionately... The time is coming where these industries can no longer hide behind this forever” (Salesa 2018).

The opening quote by Vice Chancellor Toeolesulusulu Professor Damon Salesa situates professional sport not merely as competition, but as an industry shaped by commercial imperatives and uneven power relations. While this perspective does not seek to provide a technical account of employment regulation or player welfare frameworks with specific sporting codes, it offers a critical lens through which to understand the broader political and economic environment in which professional athletes operate. From practitioner standpoints, elements of this critique may appear contested or uneven. Salesa's response, however, remains analytically valuable in foregrounding how neoliberal and Eurocentric governance structures have historically marginalized Indigenous worldviews, contributing to the ongoing absence of Indigenous and Pacific athletes' financial beliefs, responsibilities, and relational obligations within sporting governance and policy (Enari and Keung 2024). Salesa's commentary emerges from discussion centered on Pacific rugby league contexts, including Mate Ma'a Tonga; however, the structural critique of professional sport as an industry has resonance across codes.

Pacific contexts, responsibilities, and positionality

The Pacific is a diverse oceanic region encompassing Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, shaped by distinct cultural practices, languages, social systems (Stewart-Withers, Sewabu, and Richardson

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2017; Haua and Enari 2023). Yet across this diversity, many Pacific communities share relational worldviews that emphasise collective responsibility, service and connection to family and community. Within professional sport contexts, it is important to emphasise that Pacific athletes are not a homogenous group. Experiences of cultural obligation and financial responsibility vary across nations, genders, migration histories, sporting codes and career stages (Lakisa, Adair, and Taylor 2014; Hawkes 2023; Enari and Keung 2024). As Pacific scholars and sport practitioners we often see our Pacific professional athletes navigate dual pressures: the cultural obligation to support their extended families and communities, and the professional responsibility to meet the demands of elite sport.

Within many Pacific cultures, athletes are perceived as individuals who “have more” and are therefore expected to “give more” (Borell and Enari 2025), a perception that does not always align with athletes’ financial realities, particularly in the early stages of their careers. The Samoan cultural practice of *fa’alavelave*, a way of life centered on familial and communal service, is central to understanding these obligations, especially in Samoan communities (Jackson, 2025n.d.). However, little is known about how Pacific athletes manage these responsibilities or navigate conversations with their families about financial boundaries. This paper aims to: (1) deepen understanding of the cultural and familial obligations Pacific athletes face, with a focus on *fa’alavelave*, and (2) provide practical guidance for practitioners, sports organizations, and financial advisors to adopt a culturally responsive approach to supporting Pacific athletes.

To address these aims, this paper draws on several Pacific concepts that operate at different analytical levels. To aid clarity, we distinguish between conceptual frameworks, wellbeing models and cultural practices as they are introduced throughout the paper. *Tautua* (Fa’aea and Enari 2021) will be introduced as the lifecycle framework for understanding service and responsibility. *Fa’alavelave* is the chosen cultural practice through which financial responsibility is being explored in this paper, and Pacific wellbeing models such as *Fonofale* (Pulotu-Endemann 2001) have shaped the critical analysis of the impact related to Pacific athletes in professional sport financial responsibilities. Our analysis draws on existing literature alongside sustained community engagement and professional practice. While not presented as empirical data, these experiences shape the questions we ask, the interpretations we offer, and the relational responsibilities we hold in producing knowledge about Pacific athletes.

Tautua lifecycle framework

Central to understanding the dual pressures Pacific athletes face is the concept of service, which underpins both cultural obligations and professional aspirations. The *Tautua* lifecycle model (Fa’aea and Enari 2021) is used to illustrate how service shapes roles and responsibilities across a Samoan’s life. Additionally, the *Tautua* lifecycle model provides a lens through which the progression of service responsibilities, from youth to elderhood, can be understood, paralleling the evolving roles of Pacific athletes throughout their careers.

There are three spheres to the model: *tautua ia tautua* (serve to serve), *tautua ia pule* (serve to lead) and *pule ia tautua* (lead to serve). At the first sphere ‘*tautua ia tautua*’ (serve to serve) a child is expected to obey and respect their elders and do as they are told. Thus, Samoans learn their responsibility early in life to serve, through church, village and family gatherings. This foundational stage of service not only instills values of respect and obedience but also prepares Pacific athletes for the collective responsibilities they will face later in life, both culturally and professionally. In the second sphere, ‘*tautua ia pule*’ (serve to lead), an individual has matured and taken on the responsibility of both protecting those in the first sphere and upholding the legacy of those in the third sphere, who paved the way for them. Pacific athletes often find themselves here, balancing leadership roles in their careers cultural and financial contributions towards *fa’alavelave*. The third sphere ‘*pule ia tautua*’ (lead to serve) consists of elders, including retired athletes, who have paved the way for those in the previous two spheres. This group is tasked with sharing their accumulated wisdom and ensuring that their legacy is preserved and upheld (Figure 1).

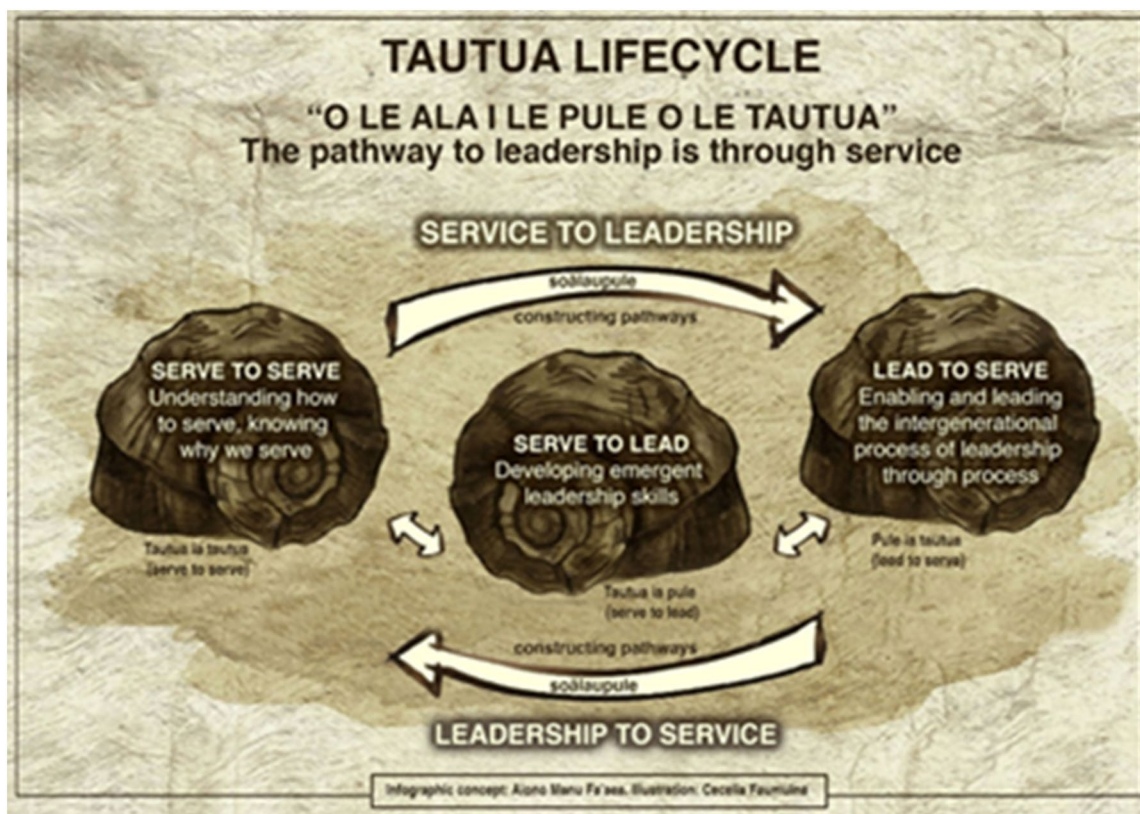


Figure 1. Tautua lifecycle.

Whilst this is a Samoan-specific model, the underpinning value and practice of service is shared across the Pacific. A Pacific athlete's opportunity to use professional sport as a vessel to serve their family, church, people and God shapes their desires, decisions and actions (Keung and Enari 2022). In the sections that follow, we move from this conceptual grounding to examine how these obligations are enacted in practice through specific cultural mechanisms, before turning to the implications for professional sport systems and those who support athletes within them.

Fa'alavelave – a cultural practice anchored in service

Fa'alavelave is a Samoan cultural practice or act of service that involves people providing gifts and monetary support. Events such as weddings, funerals, Chiefly title bestowals and court cases which require extended family clans to gather resources to give are done so under the umbrella of fa'alavelave. In practice, fa'alavelave can resemble multinational businesses (Bertram and Watters 1985, 1986), in how they gather from family members around the world. Therefore, to ground financial responsibility in a lived cultural practice, we examine fa'alavelave as a relational mechanism through which service, familial obligation, and reciprocity are enacted.

The practice of fa'alavelave is a communal way of providing support and being supported. Fa'alavelave is normally performed among those who share similar blood ties or village connection (Va'a 1995). They are not merely economic and material transactions, more importantly they are a form of maintaining and strengthening familial ties and village bonds (Va'a). The reciprocal nature of fa'alavelave is constant and unpredictable, where an individual may receive money for their wedding one week, and provide money for three different funerals the next.

The migration of Pacific people outside of the islands saw a continuation of fa'alavelave (Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009). Those overseas are relied upon to send money back to Samoa to sustain their families there, whilst also participating in fa'alavelave among their families in the diaspora. As a Samoan, irrespective of place of birth or country of residence one's Samoan blood means they are

both supported by fa'alavelave and expected to render support in it. Understanding the intricacies of fa'alavelave is essential for advisors and organizations seeking to support Pacific athletes in navigating the cultural expectations and financial realities tied to their professional journeys. While fa'alavelave is deeply rooted in tradition, its demands can create unique financial pressures for Pacific athletes navigating professional sport environments (Borell & Enari, 2025). Although fa'alavelave is specific to Samoan culture, the practice of giving back to family, community, and church, or sending financial remittances to the motherland, is common across Pacific cultures (Stewart-Wither et al. 2017; Keung 2018; Lakisa et al. 2019). These acts of giving embody the shared values of relationships, love and respect reflecting the collective responsibility to serve and uplift family and community (Keung 2018; Keung and Enari 2022).

Therefore, in this paper, financial responsibility is treated as a relational practice rather than a symbolic, or purely cultural expectation. It involves material decisions about income, resources, timing, and capacity. It also carries real consequences for athletes' financial security, relationships, and well-being. Financial responsibility is therefore one of the key sites through which wellbeing is enacted, negotiated, and at times placed under strain (Pulotu-Endemann 2001; Keung 2018).

Fa'alavelave and professional sports: navigating dual obligations

The cultural responsibility placed on Pacific athletes to generously give to their families, churches, and communities can have significant repercussions, depending on the guidance and support they receive (Napier 2015). Many Pacific athletes pursue lucrative international contracts, or switch sports to maximise their athletic value thereby enabling their ability to engage in fa'alavelave or other remittance practices (Stewart-Withers, Sewabu, and Richardson 2017; Hawkes 2023). While these choices are sometimes misinterpreted as being motivated by financial greed, for Pacific athletes, these opportunities are seen as privileges that enable them to fulfil their collective responsibilities.

A common misconception is that professional athletes are exceptionally wealthy, but the reality often falls short of these expectations, especially when expectations exceed an athlete's financial capacity. Research consistently shows that the desire to give back is a primary motivator for many Pacific athletes entering professional sports (Schaaf, 2006; Stewart-Withers, Sewabu, and Richardson 2017; Keung 2018; Keung and Enari 2022). While this motivation reflects deeply held values of service and reciprocity, it can also place strain on an athletes' wellbeing when the responsibility to give is misaligned with their material realities (Pulotu-Endemann 2001; Marsters 2017). As such, more research is needed on fa'alavelave and how athletes can be supported in managing their familial and cultural obligations. The reciprocal nature of fa'alavelave is grounded in the belief that if performed with sincerity and good intentions, it will be returned in kind over time (Fuatai 2017).

Participation in fa'alavelave is intended to reinforce the Samoan family system, but unmanageable expectations risk undermining this tradition (Jackson, 2017n.d.). Ensuring the sustainability of fa'alavelave requires a collective understanding of its purpose and the athlete's reality. This broader context highlights the foundational role of the family unit in Pacific societies and explains why many Pacific athletes prioritize securing high-value contracts (Borell & Enari, 2025). Viewed through a Pacific lens, an athlete's financial decisions are not merely economic choices, but relational acts tied to the ongoing maintenance of wellbeing for both the individual and the collective. In this sense, fa'alavelave is not treated as a representative Pacific practice, but as a Samoan-specific case through which wider dynamics of relational obligation and remittance can be analytically understood across diverse Pacific contexts.

Divergent understandings of money and responsibility

Pacific and non-Pacific cultures often differ fundamentally in their understanding and use of money. Across many Pacific communities, money functions as a shared and relational resource, a commodity constantly exchanged within kinship networks for life events, reinforcing values such as love, reciprocity and respect (New Zealand Treasury 2018). From a Pacific wellbeing perspective, these financial practices are not incidental but central to maintaining relational balance within

families and communities. This collectivist approach stands in contrast to the Eurocentric, individualistic view of money as something to be saved and accumulated for personal growth (Keung 2019).

For Pacific athletes, this difference in orientation has direct implications for their wellbeing. Contributing financially to family weddings, reunions, birthdays or funeral over personal savings is not simply a discretionary choice, but a relational obligation tied to maintaining familial bonds and cultural identity (Pulotu-Endemann 2001). While such practices can strengthen collective wellbeing, they also place material demands on athletes' financial capacity, particularly when income is unstable or career trajectories are uncertain. Understanding money as both a material resource and a relational responsibility helps explain why financial decision-making is deeply entwined with wellbeing rather than separate from it (Keung 2018). In essence, Pacific people adopt a "for us" mentality, while Eurocentric perspectives emphasize a "for me" approach to wealth distribution.

For practitioners and sporting organizations working with Pacific athletes, acknowledging these divergent understandings of money is essential. Culturally responsive financial literacy approaches must move beyond individual budgeting and accumulation models, and engage with the relational contexts in which financial decisions are made (Keung 2019). Supporting Pacific athletes to maintain long-term financial stability therefore requires approaches that recognise money as a site where cultural responsibility, material capacity, and wellbeing intersect. Having established how financial responsibility is culturally organised, we shift our focus to the relational contexts in which these obligations are negotiated, with particular attention to family relationships.

The role of parents and family conversations

Equally important is the role of parents in setting realistic expectations for their children. Unrealistic financial pressures can be detrimental to both the athlete's performance, their familial relationships, and overall wellbeing (Marsters and Tiatia-Seath 2019). From a Pacific wellbeing perspective, sustaining balance within the family requires expectations that align with an athlete's financial capacity and life stage, rather than assumptions tied to professional status alone.

Former New Zealand All Black Keven Mealamu provides a compelling example of this balance. His parents placed no financial expectations on him, allowing Mealamu to contribute to his family in meaningful and realistic ways (Napier 2015). This approach supported not only financial stability but relational wellbeing, enabling service without undue strain. Similarly, Steven Luatua's decision to prioritize family over rugby commitments illustrates the value of open family discussions in navigating cultural and professional obligations. In 2017, Luatua chose to leave the Blues (New Zealand professional rugby union team based in Auckland) and the New Zealand All Blacks, and head to a professional club in Europe, citing his desire to support his family as a key factor in his decision-making (Napier 2017). These examples highlight the importance of familial input in aligning career decisions with cultural values and practices, long-term wellbeing, and an athlete's legacy aspirations.

Open and honest conversations about money are essential, not only between athletes and their families but also between athletes and their clubs or agents. When clubs recognise an athlete's place within the collective, and their cultural responsibilities and relational obligations they carry to provide, they are better positioned to provide appropriate financial guidance that supports both performance and wellbeing (Stewart-Withers, Sewabu, and Richardson 2017; Keung 2018; Enari and Keung 2024). Parents of these athletes too, must be educated about the realities of their children's income, career volatility, and the risks associated with excessive financial demands. Hence, grounding conversations in key values like respect and love helps to create conditions in which financial boundaries can be negotiated in ways that protect family relationships and sustain Pacific athlete wellbeing over time.

The following section shifts explicitly from cultural analysis to institutional and practitioner-oriented implications, outlining how professional sport systems can more effectively support Pacific athletes in navigating financial responsibility.

Toward culturally responsive support in professional sport

Approaches to athlete support in professional sport often prioritise individual performance and financial outcomes, overlooking the relational responsibilities that shape Pacific athletes' experiences. Such models can obscure the ways cultural obligations influence decision-making, particularly in relation to money, career transitions and overall wellbeing.

Responsibility to family and community underpins Pacific conceptions of wellbeing (Keung 2019; Marsters and Tiatia-Seath 2019), and it can be expressed through *tautua*, the practice of service across the life course (Fa'aea and Enari 2021). For Pacific athletes, financial and career decisions are therefore shaped by their capacity to navigate cultural and familial obligations alongside professional demands. These obligations are not external to professional sport but integral to how balance, security and success are understood.

A culturally responsive approach recognises wellbeing as a dynamic state maintained through balance between service, material capacity and professional demands, grounded in key values such as *tautua* (service), *alofa* (love), *fa'aaloalo* (respect) and reciprocity. As such, the recommendations below are directed at sporting organisations, advisors, and governing bodies, rather than placing responsibility solely on athletes and/or families.

- **Educating stakeholders** on Pacific cultural values, obligations and practices, including how *tautua* shapes responsibilities beyond the field.
- **Supporting athletes** in having open and respectful conversations with their families about financial realities, capacity and boundaries.

Providing **tailored financial literacy programs** that align with Pacific values and recognise money as both a material resource and a relational responsibility. When wellbeing is understood as relationally maintained, rather than individually achieved (Keung 2018; Marsters, 2019), organisations are better equipped to support Pacific athletes in meeting their unique responsibilities without compromising economic sustainability in the future, and overall wellbeing.

Key practical implications for financial advisors and sport administrators

Understanding wellbeing as relationally maintained through service requires a shift in how financial and career support is designed and delivered in professional sport. The following practical implications respond to this by recognising Pacific athletes' obligations to family and community as central to decision-making and overall wellbeing. For sport practitioners and administrators, this means implementing practices that support balance, sustainability, and cultural accountability rather than individualised measures of success. These implications should not be read as a uniform template for all Pacific athletes, but as guiding principles that must be adapted to individual cultural backgrounds, family dynamics, gendered expectations, and career stages.

1. **Embed Cultural Foundations into Practice**
 - Cultural considerations should be integral and meaningful, rather than tokenistic and ad-hoc. This approach unleashes the full potential of Pacific athletes (Enari and Keung 2024).
 - Partner with experienced Pacific community leaders who are knowledgeable about cultural practices like *fa'alavelave*. These leaders can guide organisational practices and ensure cultural alignment.
 - Recognise and compensate cultural expertise, treating it with the same respect afforded to external consultants.
2. **Foster Open and Culturally-Attuned Communication**
 - Be mindful of language when discussing cultural practices with athletes and their families (Borell and Enari 2025). Frame cultural aspirations positively while balancing discussions about financial realities.
 - Collaborate with athletes to navigate financial conversations with their families, ensuring discussions are conducted with cultural sensitivity and honesty.

- Support athletes in aligning their financial goals with personal and cultural values, particularly in ethnically diverse relationships where different expectations may arise.
3. **Support the Athlete's Entire Support System**
 - Deliver financial literacy and wealth management sessions that involve not just athletes but also their families. Topics could include:
 - Financial realities of professional sports.
 - Cultural obligations such as *fa'alavelave*.
 - Transitioning to independent living.
 - Intergenerational wealth management.
 - Engage families early to set realistic expectations and build a collective understanding of the athlete's professional and financial realities.
 4. **Commit to Long-Term Engagement**
 - A single workshop or cultural session is insufficient for meaningful change. Build ongoing relationships with athletes and their families to address evolving challenges and opportunities (Enari and Keung 2024).
 - Develop and embed relational wellbeing indicators into program evaluation, including family-athlete communication quality and athlete confidence in maintaining sustainable boundaries.
 5. **Build Cultural Capacity within Organizations**
 - Train staff on cultural practices and protocols to ensure respectful interactions with Pacific athletes and their families (Borell and Enari 2024; 2025).
 - Avoid assumptions that all Pacific athletes engage with cultural practices in the same way. Build trusting relationships with each athlete.
 - Hold both staff and athletes accountable to organizational values that prioritize cultural respect and inclusivity.
 6. **Build Athlete Capability and Confidence to Navigate Responsibilities**
 - Equip athletes with tools to have transparent discussions with partners and/or parents about their financial capabilities and obligations.
 - Support athletes in managing financial boundaries while honouring cultural practices, ensuring they can contribute meaningfully without undue stress.

Moving beyond awareness

Awareness of Pacific cultural practices and values, along with the creation of advisory and working groups represent critical steps, but they are no longer enough. When Indigenous knowledge is consulted without sustained investment or decision-making authority, its influence remains limited. In these contexts, working groups risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative, leaving Pacific athletes and their families to continue carrying responsibility for negotiating cultural, financial, and professional obligations within a system not designed for them. Culturally responsive practice requires not only recognition of Indigenous knowledge, but the redistribution of responsibility, authority, and investment within sport systems.

Many organisations, advisors, and practitioners still lack the capacity and knowledge to effectively embrace Pacific cultural practices and values within non-Pacific systems (Enari and Keung 2024). This knowledge gap often leaves athletes to navigate their dual obligations alone, with families, parents or partners unaware of the professional and financial constraints shaping an athlete's capacity to give. For many athletes, familial support systems that served as key motivators during their journey to professionalism can become sources of stress when financial expectations go unmanaged (Rodriguez and McDonald 2013). To address these challenges, organisations must work to bridge this gap by:

- Deepening their understanding of Pacific worldviews, responsibilities, and value systems.
- Training staff on culturally appropriate ways to engage with parents and families.
- Providing families with realistic guidelines about an athlete's financial capabilities and responsibilities.

- Preparing families to accept what an athlete can reasonably give, which may not immediately meet their expectations.
- Helping athletes and families navigate difficult conversations about financial boundaries in a way that respects cultural practices.

Empowering athletes and their families with tools and knowledge will enable them to make informed and sustainable financial decisions. By doing so, athletes can engage in fa'alavelave with love and respect, fulfilling its purpose of strengthening familial and community ties. Supported in this way, athletes can balance their cultural obligations with their professional and personal wellbeing, contributing to their communities with care and confidence.

Conclusion

As a Samoan, I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share my divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share a 'tofi' (an inheritance) with my family, my village and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my sense of belonging. (Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi)

In the world of High-Performance sport, we argue that cultural obligations are just as critical as physical/physiological standards when it comes to optimizing performance (Keung 2019). Pacific peoples come from a community of giving, where service to family and community provides both motivation and meaning in the pursuit of professional sport. Understanding these obligations and responsibilities like fa'alavelave, is therefore essential for practitioners seeking to support Pacific athletes effectively.

As athletes transition into the professional sport environment the same family and community support system that once sustained their aspirations oscillates from being a motivating factor to a stressor (Rodriguez and McDonald 2013; Marsters 2017) Thus, success for Pacific athletes is not necessarily measured by wins, medals and trophies, solely. Rather, they are measured by how well they are able to take care of their family, people, and community (Keung 2018; Keung and Enari 2022). When cultural responsibilities are poorly understood or unsupported, this tension can undermine both athlete wellbeing and performance.

Culturally responsive practice enables athletes to engage in service with clarity and balance. When practitioners understand financial decision-making as relational rather than individual, athletes are better positioned to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities without compromising their wellbeing and therefore performance. Supporting Pacific athletes in this way allows cultural practices such as fa'alavelave to remain sources of connection and strength, rather than stress.

Further research is needed to deepen understanding of the financial behaviours of Pacific athletes, and athletes of other collectivist minority groups. Situating financial responsibility within culturally grounded, relational frameworks highlights the need for sport systems to move beyond individualized approaches and assume greater structural accountability for athlete wellbeing.

Disclosure statement

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