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Emerging Athletes' Transition in Professional Sport:
An Existential Multi-Case Perspective

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

ABSTRACT

I am a practitioner with my own sport related business. My work involves assisting predominately adolescent male athletes progress the early stages of their athletic careers. The role I undertake enabled me to identify a lack of accessible resources to help athletes meet their athletic and personal development needs. This concern applies to the period preceding and during their transition into professional sport environments in New Zealand, with many athletes migrating into international organisations.

This thesis investigates the challenges emerging young male athletes in boxing, rugby league and basketball experienced during their transition in professional sport. The *emerging athlete transition* commences with talent identification and extends to exit or promotion into senior professional sporting contracts. The transition occurs within multiple phases and environments, including talent development environments (schools/organisations), collegiate programmes, and within semi-professional and professional organisations. An *existential* lens is applied to examine identity, meaning, freedom and connection, amongst the messiness of sporting events during this transition.

Navigating adolescent maturation alongside the pressures of professional sport, requires coaching beyond athletic abilities to the facilitation of coping capabilities to build self-efficacy, along with athletic and personal development. Given the phenomena of today's modern sporting world, athletes who choose professional sporting careers commonly start in their early adolescence and must exhibit toughness, endurance and intelligence to convert having-a-talent to being-a-talent. This requires commitment and responsibility to the gaining of skill and knowledge, and to the work and actions inherent in this choice. But they cannot do it alone. Using a qualitative multi-case methodology, findings demonstrate the availability and ability to connect authentically with other stakeholders and their environment will enable the young men to perform and develop as athletes as well as individuals. The thesis also demonstrates the importance of collaborative social support relationships in facilitating environments and cultures that enable athletes to *thrive* in and beyond their lives in sport. Finally, I make some practical recommendations for solutions to better facilitate this transition, following an approach informed by the pragmatic paradigm of this research.

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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 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.

25th June, 2024

Signed: P.G. Thomas

Date

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The terms in the list below include only the common organisational and sporting references frequently used in this thesis, along with cultural and linguistic words used that are unique to New Zealand and Pasifika people. Footnotes are also used to explain terms where helpful.

ACD	Athletic Career Discourse (refer Stambulova et al., 2020)
AFL	Australian Rules Football League
AIBA (now IBA)	Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur, now International Boxing Association
ANBL	Australasian National Basketball League - a professional league including the NZ Breakers
Aotearoa	Indigenous name for New Zealand
BNZ	Boxing New Zealand
Early Exit	"premature termination of a sports career prior to reaching their peak performance" (Rothwell et al., 2020, p. 485), as opposed to retirement
Family	Whānau and aiga in Māori and Pasifika respectively
Football	This is the FIFA brand of football, also known in some countries (e.g., US) as soccer (round ball)
HACM	Holistic Athlete Career Model - career transition model for sport.
Haka	Traditionally a Māori war dance, the haka has come to represent a range of ceremonial Māori dances
J2S	Junior to Senior Transition - being any move by an athlete into a senior environment regardless of age.
JUCO	Junior University College (US collegiate institution)
Kiwi	Colloquial term used for a New Zealander (likened to the native bird)
Māori	Indigenous people of Aotearoa.
NBA	National Basketball Association
NBL	New Zealand National Basketball League - a semi-professional league of NZ-based teams.
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association (US based)
NIL	Naming, Image and Likeness - refers to the intellectual property rights to these personal assets.
NRL	National Rugby League (Australasian), a professional body including the NZ Warriors
NSO	National Sporting Organisations
NZ	New Zealand
Pākehā/Palagi	Terms used by Māori/Pasifika to represent New Zealanders or light skinned (white) people.
Pasifika	an umbrella term used in New Zealand (Aotearoa) to describe migrants and their descendants from the Pacific region including Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu and other Pasifika heritages.
PWM	Player Welfare, Wellbeing or Development officers or Managers (embedded in some sporting organisations, in particular NRL)
RLPA	Rugby League Players Association
RSO	Regional Sporting Organisations
SL	Super League (UK)
TDEs	Talent Development Environments, includes academies in both private, public and sporting organisations
TID	Talent Identification
Trans-Tasman	Movement between or inclusion of Australia and NZ
Vā	The physical, emotional and spiritual connection to people, places and things (Keung, 2018).

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Committing to an elite sports career demands an athlete must “set aside and devote oneself, one’s time and one’s body to the task at hand” (Aggerholm, 2015, p. 37).

This work focuses on ‘emerging athletes’ – those who are preparing for, transitioning into or going through the early stages of a professional sporting career and/or collegiate scholarship programme. The reality is, in many cases, athletic careers end during this process, having barely started. This involvement identified concerns and constraints for the adolescent male athletes I was working with, given the environmental and relational challenges they were facing. These challenges lead to existential questions and demands of identity, meaning, choice and responsibility, recognising individuals and the world they inhabit are inseparable. Athletes, during transitional events, are compelled to ask; Who am I? What does sport mean for me? How do I confront the end of my career dream? How do I play the role of the resilient athlete while sitting frustrated on the bench? Athletes and support staff alike are challenged by questions like: Where do I fit into the club or team? How do I engage with others whose priorities differ from my own? How do I compete with others for coveted roles? Although sports personnel (or staff) may not face the same physical demands as an athlete, they embark on a career in professional sport. They also experience transitional events, demanding they navigate their own existential and relational dilemmas.

This thesis intends to go beyond capturing participants’ views via surveys and interviews. It examines existential tensions between athletes and the network of relationships they are embedded in as they evolve. To encompass this evolution, the methods of data collection included fieldwork, documents, follow-up interviews and researcher/practitioner engagements to examine athletes and their relationships in longitudinal naturalistic settings. My methodology for this thesis represents a pragmatic paradigm based on the work by James (1907) with epistemological views of reality defined by Maarouf (2019). This reflects my philosophy that some common threads can be found in the messiness of life (Miles et al., 2014) and my desire to conduct research that offers practical recommendations to the problem being investigated. My ontological position adopted an existential view of being in the world (Buber, 1965; Sartre, 1943/2018) and the research was conducted using qualitative multi-case study (QMCS) methodology directed by Merriam (1998) and Stake (2006). Aggerholm (2015) provided an existential insight into talent identification and development with Nesti (2006) providing an existential psychological perspective.

This investigation into the emerging athlete transition in professional sport, as a phenomena of the athlete career discourse (ACD) has to date been led by Stambulova et al. (2020)¹. This topic is unique in several ways, in its NZ and cultural demographics. NZ's geographical size and remote location often necessitate the relocation of athletes to colleges, clubs or promotions outside the country. The region's Māori and Pasifika² peoples are frequently sought after worldwide for their physicality and perceived warrior-like characteristics (e.g., Lakisa et al., 2014). This thesis is conducted from my privileged insider perspective across the three sports codes I was involved with: boxing, rugby league and basketball. The design aligns with my axiological principles to seek insights and highlight practical opportunities for environmental (structural and cultural) improvements in the relationships and outcomes of those involved (Merriam, 1998). The following sections in this chapter present the research questions and rationale and position the case studies in the context of the modern world of professional sport.

1.1 Rationale for Research

When I was preparing my PhD proposal, we were in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a practitioner in my own sports-related business, my work had evolved into assisting emerging athletes with their transition into professional sporting environments, in a practitioner role I later defined as 'athlete development and career coach'. For adolescent rugby league and basketball athletes, the Covid-19 restrictions meant players were stranded either in or out of New Zealand (NZ), early in their career transition. The connections I made over this time with these (predominately) young men informed my sense of purpose, and the idea that small things make a difference – and also informed my sense of purpose and intentions for this doctorate. I wanted to find ways to improve emerging athletes' relationships and environments and reduce the need for 'ambulances at the bottom of the cliff'³. I questioned whose duty of care it was to support the large numbers of players impacted by early exits during identification and selection funnels. These exits coincide with a critical stage of personal and social development in adolescent lives (Arnett, 2000).

As my involvement increased, I engaged in conversations with those I thought would be responsible for supporting these adolescent athletes, including athlete managers, player

¹ Stambulova et al.'s (2020) research in ACD in sport provides nine postulates for further research. This thesis is guided by these recommendations and evaluated in Table 10.1 for contribution towards these gaps.

² Māori are the indigenous people of NZ, and Pasifika (or PI or Polynesian) is an umbrella term used in NZ for descendants of the Pacific Islands (e.g. Samoa, Tonga, Fiji).

³ Dealing with an event or situation when it reaches crisis rather than preventing or resourcing the athletes coping capabilities.

associations and Sport NZ. I discovered that any funding available was for senior contracted athletes or community sport, but it was unclear who was looking after these emerging athletes who fell between these brackets, but who were being identified and contracted younger and younger (Long, 2018). For the athletes and the families, I was involved with, the lack of funding restricted their access to tangible resources and contributed further to the lack of institutional knowledge required to develop as athletes and navigate the professional sports business required during this transition. These conversations and experiences heightened my concerns about their vulnerability, support and development, and I made the decision to commence my PhD in this area. Using a pragmatic paradigm is appropriate in the analysis of contemporary social issues (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019) and is designed to facilitate practical solutions to identified problems (Powell, 2001). The *social problem* this thesis seeks to address is the inadequate resourcing for the athletic and personal development of emerging athletes in transition in professional sport in NZ (and globally). The intention is to find *recommendations and solutions* that better facilitate the transition of emerging NZ athletes, enabling them to *thrive* in life in and beyond sport, regardless of the events and outcomes they experience.

Regardless of whether athletes are part of a designated talent programme in NZ, emerging athletes will be involved in school, club and representative-level programmes. With the high demands (e.g. physical and mental training and competition loads) placed on emerging athletes, there has been a call from leading advocates in the youth sports space in NZ to address some of the issues of commercialisation and early entry professional athlete transition (Johannsen, 2020). The debate between advocates for and against early specialisation and identification is valid. It is important to acknowledge only a few athletes can 'make it' or become professional; therefore, ensuring the 'healthiness' of talent identification (TID) and talent development environments (TDEs) is imperative. I am not suggesting TDEs are not required but that emerging athlete environments provide both athletic and personal development opportunities (Hauser et al., 2022), and they are, as Rongen et al. (2018) put it, "deliberate development organisations". That is, environments that "concurrently ensure positive impacts and minimise predictable negative outcomes [for emerging athletes] without losing focus on a drive for sporting performance" (p. 1).

1.2 Academic Research Background and Opportunities

Modern sporting pressures have seen researchers expand the field of sports research to include sporting career transitions and events (Drew et al., 2019; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2020; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). Athletes inevitably face a continuum of events or 'a set of demands' (usually appraised as stressors) during an elite sports career

(Schinke et al., 2017, p. 627). These demands require constant review and modifications to assumptions about oneself and the world (Aggerholm, 2015; Nesti, 2006; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017; Ronkainen et al., 2015). With athlete well-being an increasingly important concern for sporting bodies, research has moved beyond psycho-social aspects into researching broader practitioner roles and defining this construct in talent development environments (Hauser et al., 2022). I found the lack of common career transition taxonomy (e.g. TDE, Junior-to-Senior) and process terms (e.g., well-being, thriving, flourishing, coping) s confusing when attempting to combine literature searches with emerging athletes, career transitions, events and relationships. While I identified extensive scholarly literature in the ACD field, the challenge was to focus on the most relevant literature to document and critique to expand knowledge on the emerging athlete career transition and facilitation of positive outcomes.

This aligned with Stambulova et al.'s (2020) international review which called for special efforts to be made by the research community in specific areas to address gaps in ACD, including development, transition, and assistance. Stambulova et al. (2020) highlighted a need for more succinct research across a broader range of career events (such as migration, injury, burnout, dropout), cultural transitions and marginalised athletic populations. Additionally, they stated the need for the publication and rationalisation of models to be in a “form that allows athletes, coaches, parents and other stakeholders to understand and benefit from” (p. 18). Concurring with their pragmatic commentary this research seeks to address the need : 1. for a more simplified, user-friendly model to explain emerging athlete transitions to the community (e.g. athlete, parent, coaches), 2. for a longitudinal approach to facilitating navigating complex career events (which may last month's not days), and 3. to advocate for inter- and intra-disciplinary collaborations across sporting roles and codes. Greater understanding of sports career transitions will assist individuals and organisations to take a broader longer-term view to the planning, development and the support of emerging professional athletes and the stakeholders engaged with them.

Finally, there is an apparent gap in comprehensive research examining emerging athlete experiences in professional sports environments. The predominant literature in this context was found to be positioned in football (or soccer) and rugby league. This observation may be due to these codes being more established professional team sports than other later adopters of professional structures and/or individual athlete sports. Notably, in respect to student-athlete transitions as a phase of athletic career research, there were limited articles in collegiate athletic programmes, and notably none relating to Australasian athletes migrating across to US colleges. Most surprising was the scarcity of literature examining career transitions within professional basketball and boxing, as these are two prominent professional sports. Lastly, emerging

athletes' involvement in professional sports involve making contractual and financial arrangements with sports agents, clubs, promoters and sponsors. Despite this, I found only sideline mention of monetary values and contractual demands in a few of the broader scoped studies I identified. The lack of research in this phenomenon represents a notable gap. Whether this is because it is a relatively new business operation in most sports or whether the environments tend to be more closed, and protective is a question for debate. This thesis attempts to address some of these disparities, particularly in extending the understanding of early (emerging athlete) career transitions and events (migration, recruitment, contracting, and early exit), increasing the number of sports codes studied, and broadening the geographical locations to (NZ) ACD cases.

1.3 Research Scope and Question

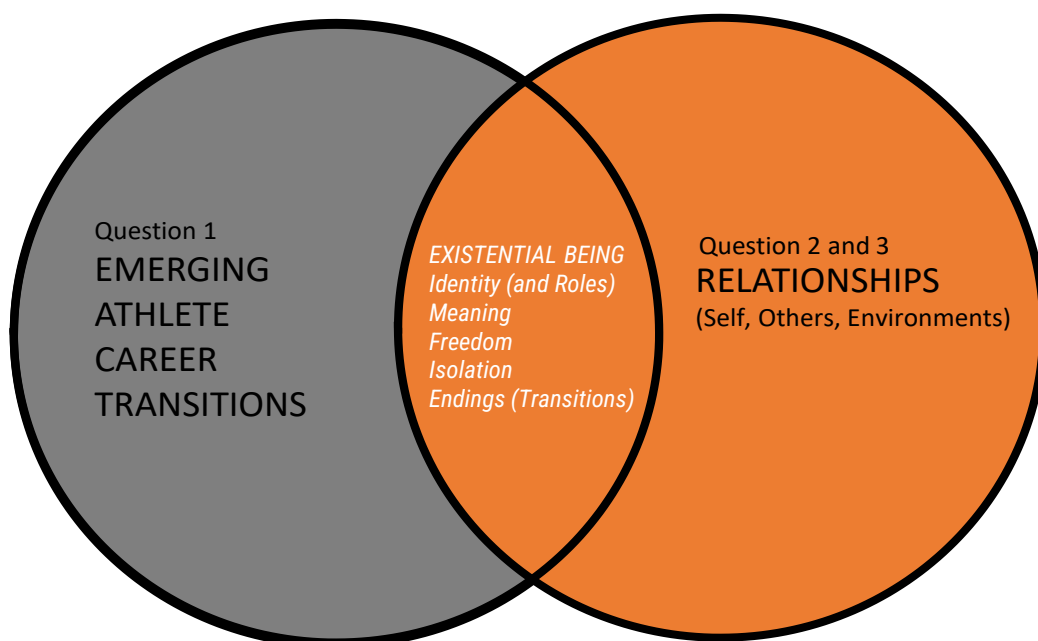


Figure 1.1
Research Scope

The research scope examines athletes preparing for, transitioning into or going through the development stages of a professional sports career. This is referred to as the emerging athlete career transition and involves coping with events and situations in the environments they encounter. This research is designed to consolidate multi-case findings in rugby league, basketball, and boxing, using an existential lens to examine how relationships facilitate or hinder this transition and the events that occur within it by examining the following questions:

1. What events and challenges do emerging athletes experience during transition in professional sport?
2. How do existential relationships facilitate or hinder the transition of emerging athletes in life in and beyond professional sport?

3. What role can practitioners perform in facilitating emerging athlete coping in life in and beyond professional sport?

This research positions the emerging athlete transition in ACD against the 'Big-5' existential concerns (Sartre, 1943/2018), death is translated to endings, since transitioning from one state to another implies the ending (death) of one project or phase and the start of another (Bridges, 1986). Existentialism provides an appropriate lens to allow the hard questions to be asked regarding the who, what and how individuals cope with events and relationships in their career transition: identity (self and social); meaning (time and context); freedom (choice and responsibility); and connection with self, others and the environment (opposed to isolation). Existentialism also permits the examination of outcomes in terms of successful transition, crisis (anguish) and authenticity.

In addition to these questions and in accordance with my pragmatically positioned thesis, the final case and chapter will address practical implications and recommendations relevant to the findings by asking:

4. What organisational and relational recommendations can be made to facilitate emerging athletes' better transition in life in and beyond professional sport?

Notably, the expression 'in and beyond', used in the research questions, recognises athletes as people who also have lives outside their sporting endeavours.

In Chapter 2, I extend the explanation of three constructs (athlete career transitions and coping, existential being, and relationships), providing a framework for the scope of this research. In Chapter 3, I investigate existing published literature specific to the emerging athlete career transition.

1.4 Positioning Professional Sport and Emerging Athletes

"A business is an occupation, profession or trade that generates currency (money). A sport is a recreation of physical exertion, competition, and skill" (Clark, 2016, p. 19) – professional sport is a BUSINESS.

Professional sport, a relatively recent phenomenon, has increased in size and sophistication across the globe (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2013). There is no doubt today that sport is a big money business; the size of the sports sponsorship market worldwide estimated at 64.8bn USD (Statista, n.d., sidebox). Every weekend, sports fans travel to stadiums worldwide to watch their favourite teams: an English Premier League football match, a National Basketball Association (NBA) basketball game, or a rugby league game in the Australian National Rugby League (NRL). Millions more tune in on television and, in recent years, via online broadcasts. As

a result, brands seek to take advantage of the sporting world's biggest stars to endorse and sell their products. Between ticket sales, media and endorsements, the professional sports market has become a highly lucrative industry (Statista, n.d.).

With the increased professionalism of sports overseas, for example, rugby league (1895) and basketball (1920s), and air travel and communication, increasing globalisation afforded more NZ sportspeople opportunities to seek professional contracts overseas (Ryan, 2013). The introduction of paid television services (Sky TV) in 1992 added greater public exposure to professional sports from around the world. Stalwart NZ rugby community fought to protect the pure ethos of sport as an amateur pursuit. The NZ Rugby Union, the overseers of the national sport (some would say religion), fought hard to avoid professionalism—finally succumbing in 1995 after a steady stream of players defected to rugby league in Australia and England. The same year, NZ had their first professional rugby league franchise (NZ Warriors), competing in the Australian competition (now the NRL). In 1996, Super Rugby was born, involving five New Zealand franchise teams playing Australian and South African teams. In 1999, an NZ soccer team joined the Australian League, and since 2004 the Phoenix have played in the A-League. The NZ Breakers joined the Australasian National Basketball League (ANBL) in 2003, and five netball teams from NZ participated in the ANZ Trans-Tasman Championship from 2008 to 2016 (Ryan, 2013).

Regardless of tournament/league or sport, being a sports professional demands not only dedication and commitment to the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of training and competing, but the acumen to deal with the commercial demands of transacting in the sports business. To sum up these realities, one of the participants in Case 2 recalls being at a tournament also attended by his hero Bryan Williams (“BJ”), a highly renowned All Black who was knighted in 2018 for his services to rugby union. This participant, himself an ex-All Black and ex-NRL player described the scene:

BJ was limping around on the side-lines. The kids were all coming up to get my autograph and I said BJ is over there get his autograph and the kids were like, who's he and it hit home to me then. Like my dad always said, “Hey, you know, when you're hot, you're hot, and when you're not no one cares.” So, at the end of the day, I decided I needed to take a professional attitude to contract negotiations and do what was best for me and my family and *that* is just the reality of professional sport. (RL-Agent)

Now an agent/player-manager, he reminds his clients that, success or failure, it is a business transaction:

When your time's up, and they don't need you anymore – you are gone ... it's really important that these guys understand that ... we see so often a [player] feels like they owe it to the club to stay. And I say you don't owe them jack shit. You've given everything that you can, you are a professional sports person. It is no different to any

other job. And I think that's a valuable lesson that you have to try and instil in them. Just to have a professional attitude. When you are there, you give it everything, when it's time to go [their decision or yours] shake their hand and say thank you. (RL-Agent).

These excerpts set the scene for the challenges athletes (and staff) face when choosing a career in professional sport. Individuals must understand their role as a contractual resource in a business, which has a short career span, if you make it at all.

1.5 Role Definitions within a Professional Sporting Context

Identifying and understanding participants' roles in their professional sports environments assists with interpreting patterns within sporting relationships. Roles are patterns of behaviour or actions expected of an individual within a social setting (Carron & Eys, 2012). The central actor in this thesis is the *emerging professional athlete*. All professional athletes interact with various individuals inside and outside of their sporting world. These relationships create a continuum of paradoxes from demands and expectations to services and support. For the purposes of this thesis roles are defined as:

- Athletes may be regarded as 'professional' when they primarily dedicate their time to training and/or competing in return for financial remuneration or subsidy (scholarships). An *emerging athlete* is an athlete who is in the early entry-level stages of their professional career.
- Organisational roles (recruitment, agency, sponsorship, management, administration, national sporting bodies and organisations, and player associations) include activities primarily focused on the practical and contractual aspects of sport delivery and performance.
- Coaching roles (coaches and trainers) include technical and tactical sports performance activities.
- Practitioner roles (welfare and player development, nutrition, Physiotherapy, psychology, counselling, sports science) provide athletes with physical, mental, and emotional development.
- Community roles (teammates, family, friends, fans) are the fabric of people surrounding the athlete. While media and spectators would fall into this classification, these roles are outside the scope of this thesis.

1.6 Positioning Emerging Athlete Career Transitions

Everyone possesses inborn talent, but few possess the degree of inborn talent and acquired toughness, endurance and energy actually to become a talent, that is to become what he is: which means to discharge it in works and actions. (Aggerholm, 2015, p. 32).

Research on sports career transitions has primarily focussed on the holistic athlete career model (HACM) (Wylleman et al., 2004; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). The research examines a subset (development to early mastery) of Wylleman et al.'s career model, investigating the emerging athlete career pathway. For the professional athlete, the career lifespan is typically less than most regular careers (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Depending on the sports code, an emerging athlete will be identified as having a 'talent' (natural ability to do something well⁴), typically between the ages of 16 and 21. For the fortunate athletes who are contracted to professional careers beyond 21 years and who avoid significant injuries or early terminations, their professional careers may extend to 35-40 years of age before *retirement* (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2015).

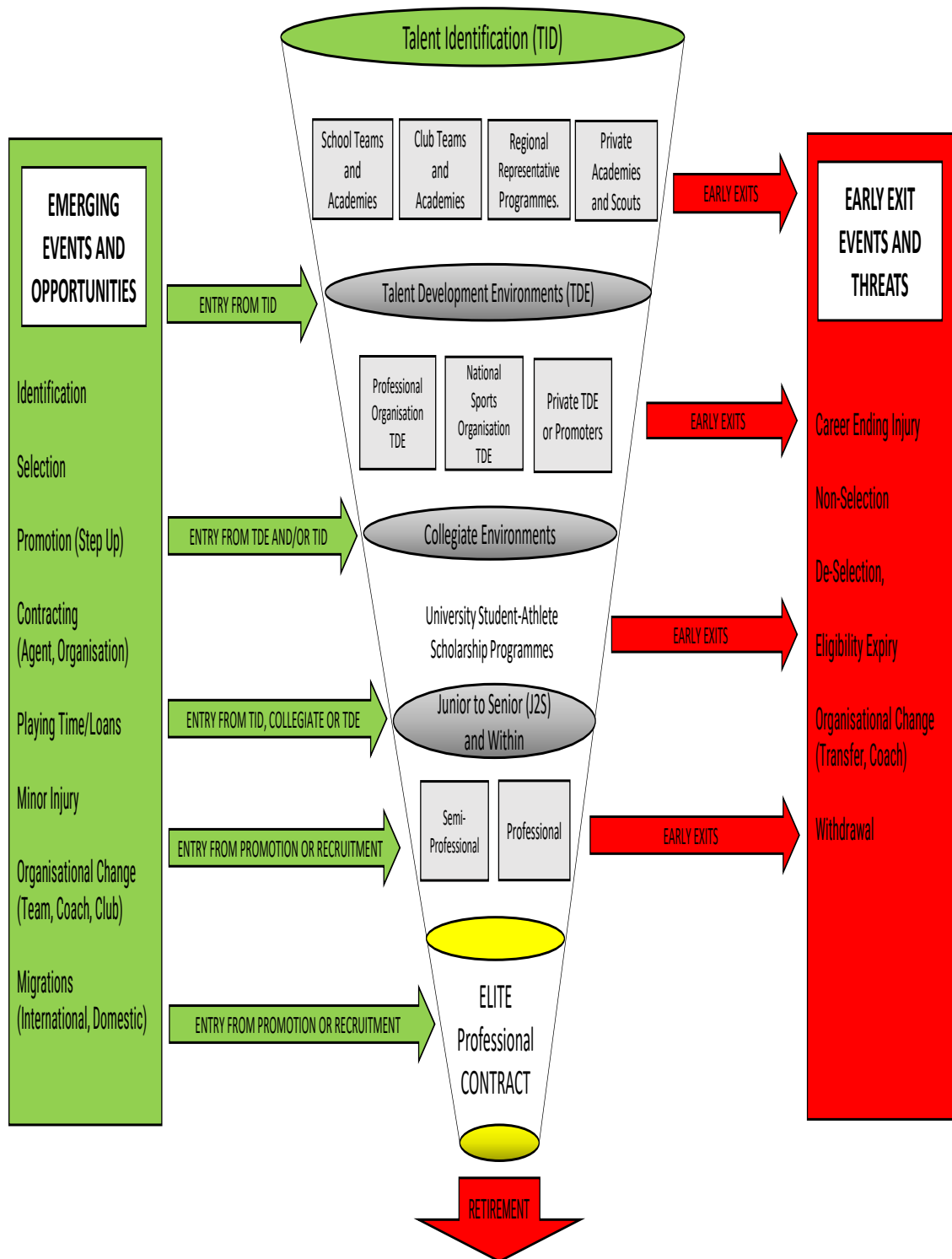
Figure 1.2 represents a generalised schematic for emerging athlete progression from TID to elite professional careers, outlining key events and environments the athlete will phase through. Career progression, i.e., moving 'down the funnel', will depend on the athlete and the sports code they perform within. For example, in football or rugby (union or league), an emerging athlete pathway would typically expect to go via TDE to J2S. For basketball, the athlete pathway may involve time as a student-athlete in a collegiate environment. A budding boxer will move from TID into a semi-professional situation or via an Olympic pathway. At any point down the funnel, the athlete may be *selected* for the next stage of development, or promoted early (green arrows) or exited (red arrows). In addition to progression events, the athlete may experience other critical events such as contracting, organisational changes, minor injury, or moving away from home (migrations). Athletes who fail to progress to the next phase through non-selection (not being selected into TDE after identification), de-selection (selected and then rejected), withdrawal (self-removal), injury (season/career ending) or eligibility expiry (failure to meet collegiate criteria or graduation) are regarded as *early exits*. An early exit is defined as the "premature termination of a sports career prior to reaching their peak performance" (Rothwell et al., 2020, p. 485). Depending on many factors, athletes who experience setbacks, such as selection failures or minor injuries, may still rebuild and return. Positioning entry, during and

⁴ This concept is explored further in the framework in Chapter 2.

exit as events within the emerging transition bind this multi-case research to investigate athlete (existential) interpretations and coping during this phase within the ACD.

Figure 1.2

Simplified Funnel Schematic Positioning Emerging Athlete Transition



1.7 Positioning Case Selection

The sample of cases and participants was purposive, with convenience sampling conducted through the researcher-practitioner's contacts and connections within the sporting industry (Etikan, 2016; Gentles, 2015). Stake emphasizes that cases should be chosen for their potential to provide rich information that addresses the research questions (Stake, 1995). Four cases were selected for this research: three sports cases: boxing (Case 1), rugby league (Case 2), basketball (Case 3), and one role-based practitioner (Case 4). The role-based case was included to reflect on the input and influence that I have in my role as an athlete development and transition coach in each of the three sports cases selected.

1.7.1 Case 1 – Boxing

After completing a case study in open (amateur) boxing during my master's degree, a colleague and I undertook leadership roles in the high-performance team of the national sport organisation (NSO). Our leadership focused on implementing the recommendations identified in Thomas (2017) for the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games campaign period. Through this involvement, I gained extensive experience and exposure to amateur and professional sport and personnel. After leaving the NSO and starting my own business, I was approached by an amateur athlete with a request to support his development while transitioning into professional boxing. On receiving approval from the head coach, I developed an integrated programme and supported this team during their initial emergence. The team also granted me consent for and access to fieldwork and interviews. In addition, during this same period I was fortunate to be connected with a boxer who was transitioning from amateur to professional boxing, including migrating from Africa to the US.

Despite the history of professional boxing, there is limited literature in the ACD on Olympic pathway programmes (Schinke, 2007); more recently, Bonhomme et al. (2020) analysed media data, to examine the careers of two well-known boxers, Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather. Most boxing studies to date focus on the social habitus of professional boxing environments and cultures representing athletes as warriors, revered for masculinity, toughness, hard work and discipline (Wacquant, 1995, 1998). The literature stresses the demands and importance of preparation and sacrifice, as the failure to do so may result in loss of career and life (Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013). The arrangement and progression of a boxer from 'wanna-be' to champion is an orchestrated process of building up a winning fight record, often with little to no financial return during this process. For boxers aligned to the right promoters, opponents are matched to ensure the right results more or less in advance

(Lewandowski, 2020; Wacquant, 1998). The boxer fights within a constituted set of rules and performs to spectators who assess them for their bravery and performance (Hutchens, 2010). An attractive fighter must be a talented athlete and a saleable entertainer who can draw spectators to big-money events (Hutchens, 2010; Lewandowski, 2020; Wacquant, 1998). What some describe as the tainting of 'sweet science' of professional boxing⁵, 'white-collar' or 'corporate' boxing, has now been introduced to provide income to gyms and an outlet to individuals who want to test their mettle in the ring. Here, novices pay to train and box as a consumable experience for a limited time (Wright, 2020). Corporate boxing has become relevant to athlete pathways, as individuals sometimes progress to fill fight positions on professional cards.

There is a clear gap in the literature supplying evidence of pugilists' experiences of their transition into professional boxing. As such, this thesis is intended to extend ACD by demographic (NZ, boxing, professional organisations), transitional phase (within semi-professional and professional boxing) and scope (multiple stakeholder perspectives). Case 1 provides unique and varied perspectives on individual competitor experiences and a promotional lead pathway in professional sport.

1.7.2 Case 2 – Rugby League

I was introduced to a group of rugby league personnel (linked at the time to an Australian NRL club) in their search for expertise and resources to support their athlete development programme. This group was searching for additional support for their athletes, to understand overload, mobility, and nutrition issues, and prepare them for the challenges of entering NRL development programmes after their final year at school. My involvement morphed into establishing a private rugby league academy programme. The programme grew as more athletes (or their parents) arrived looking for training and development support, particularly those stranded during Covid-19. My career progressed into individual athlete mentoring and athlete development planning for emerging youth (16-21 years) rugby league players, predominately Pasifika (Tapasā, n.d.)⁶ from lower socio-economic communities. My network expanded with the further introduction of players, clubs, agents and sports management. A subset of this cohort formulated case study 2, with athletes and other stakeholders kindly offering to complete interviews after departing the researcher's programme.

⁵ 'The sweet science' is a term used to describe boxing, underscoring the belief that boxing is not just about brute force but also about finesse, timing, and the art of outsmarting one's opponent.

⁶ 'Pasifika' is an umbrella term used in New Zealand (Aotearoa) to describe migrants and their descendants from the Pacific region including Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu and other Pasifika heritages.

Literature on the ACD in rugby league has represented two dominant professional leagues, the Super League in the UK and the NRL in Australasia. Studies examining emerging athlete transition catalogued the pressures and requirements to succeed in professional academies (Cupples et al., 2021a; Cupples et al., 2018) and J2S (Jones et al., 2014; Rothwell et al., 2020). The paper by Cupples et al. (2018) provided additional support to Güllich (2014) research into identification and the accumulative and recurring nature of athlete selection processes. The Super League study by Rothwell et al. (2020) provided additional time and context for the literature on exit events, examining athlete contracting and drop-out during and at the end of the TDE period. With welfare roles a mandatory requirement in rugby league internationally, two studies have been completed in this domain (Lewis et al., 2018; Stansen & Chambers, 2019). These studies recognise these welfare roles as essential resources for players across a broad range of performance and personal issues. However, these roles still need to be better integrated within organisations.

Finally, a recent contribution to rugby league literature provided cultural perspectives on Aboriginal and Pasifika collective identity (being bigger than oneself) and the importance of rugby league as a family resource, both financially and in terms of pride. With 45% of the players in the NRL being Pasifika and Māori, and with a further 10% being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, ethnicity should not be ignored (NRL, n.d.-c). The requirement to adapt from “family, small communities and the culture they had grown up in into bigger, foreign, and confronting socio-cultural environments” (p.419) left Aboriginal participants displaced and isolated, as reported in Light et al. (2017). Light et al.’s research aligns with investigations of Pasifika athletes' cultural influence and effect in and on rugby league (Lakisa et al., 2014; Marsters et al., 2020). These investigators referred to athletes identified and valued for their physicality (size and strength) and for their propensity to humility, the sharing of wealth and a reluctance to seek help, with failure bringing a sense of shame. These bodies of literature extended the research demographically to include other cultural specificities in rugby league in Australasia.

Case 2 extends existing research to gain greater understanding of the migration of athletes from NZ to Australia and provides longitudinal insight into the transition of emerging athletes from entry to exit or promotion. The close relationships I developed over the period of this study, allowed for more in-depth real-time investigation into the events and relationships of this cohort, extending research demographically, organisationally and across events.

1.7.3 Case 3 – Basketball

The general manager of an NZ national basketball team, introduced through an academic colleague, provided me with the opportunity to complete fieldwork throughout the

period of one season. I was privileged to be granted full access to training and competition environments in return for support and programme assistance to the community programme, and the staff and players involved. This environment afforded me rich and valuable data through my introduction to various athletes, from ex-NBA players to high-school prospects. Athletes included players planning to go on to and/or going on to US collegiate programmes, imports, and professional players and staff. With issues of Covid-19, the team transitions during the fieldwork study were more transient than usual, with senior players arriving or leaving part-way through the season. My involvement with this organisation also extended my connections to the team's retired players and organisational staff inside and outside the inner coaching and management circle. This environment provided a very different set of dimensions from the fieldwork and later interviews to compare and contrast the other cases within this multi-case research.

An in-depth examination of the literature failed to uncover articles related to non-collegiate transitional pathways in basketball. The dearth of basketball-related literature in the ACD was remarkable, given its popularity as a professional sport worldwide. This finding was corroborated by García-Santamaría et al. (2022). The shortcomings in basketball-related research open opportunities to extend ACD knowledge demographically (country, sport, semi-professional organisation) and contextually (in transitions and events) across multiple stakeholder perspectives.

1.7.4 Case 4 – Practitioner

This case was initially designed to report my experiences as a researcher-practitioner, as a practitioner and in my own transition into the world of professional sport. In this context, data used for this case include cross-case fieldwork notes and reflexive interviews with my supervisors and mentors. However, in accordance with pragmatic methodological principles, it was decided to extend this case to include data from interviews I recorded with a sports psychologist and an independent elite-level coach/trainer. Additionally, I added specific practitioner-related content from Cases 1-3, providing additional nuance to this unique case study. This case provides an extension to the ACD by examining the relationships of service providers from their own existential points of view in working with emerging adolescent athletes. This case is intended to examine the dyadic relationships between the practitioner and others, with the context of Feeney and Collin's (2015) who posit facilitative social support relationships require mutual benefit.

1.8 Thesis Structure

The reporting of this thesis is structured as illustrated in Figure 1.3, with Chapters 1 to 4 providing the background and setting out the principles of the study. Chapters 5 to 8 present the findings in a descriptive format, using the participants' words to tell the stories. Chapter 9 represents the critical analysis and discussion from the cross-case analysis of the four case studies: boxing, rugby league, basketball and practitioner. Chapter 10 formulates conclusions and recommendations for this doctoral thesis.

Figure 1.3

Overview of Thesis Structure

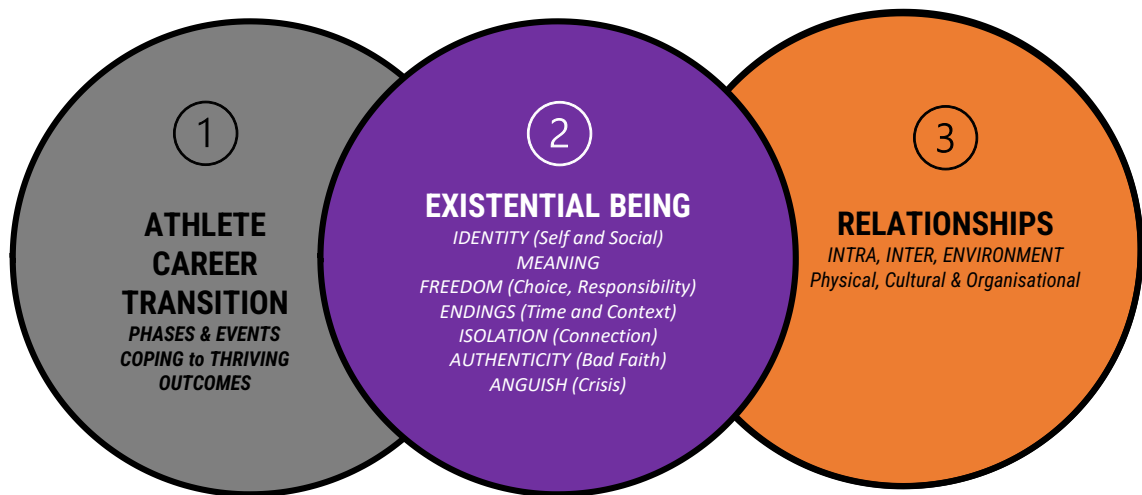
CHAPTER 1 Introduction	CHAPTER 2 Athlete Transitions , Existential Philosophy & Relationships (Research Framework)	CHAPTER 3 Examining Literature on Emerging Athlete Transitions in Professional Sport	CHAPTER 4 Research Design and Implementation
CHAPTER 5 Case 1 Findings Professional Boxing	CHAPTER 6 Case 2 Findings Rugby League	CHAPTER 7 Case 3 Findings Basketball	CHAPTER 8 Case 4 Findings Practitioner
	CHAPTER 9 Cross-Case Discussion and Conclusion	CHAPTER 10 Practical and Academic Implications	

CHAPTER 2 – ATHLETE CAREER TRANSITIONS, EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY AND RELATIONSHIPS

This research adopts an existential ontological perspective to explore transitional events and relational experiences in emerging athlete careers. Research in the ACD to date has identified and focused on three sub-domains namely, transition, environments and facilitation (Stambulova et al., 2020). The scope of this thesis covers the events and facilitation relevant to the athletes' entry (emerging transition) into professional sport. Figure 2.1 depicts three fundamental areas of theory which formulate the framework for this study and are detailed in this chapter: construct 1 – career transitions (events, coping and environment); construct 2 – principles of existential philosophy (freedom, identity, meaning, isolation, endings, anguish, authenticity); and construct 3 – relationships (intra- and inter- roles and relationships and characteristics). This chapter provides the framework used to investigate the four case studies presented in this thesis.

Figure 2.1

Schematic of Chapter Structure for Theoretical Framework



2.1 Construct 1: Professional Athlete Career Transitions

This construct outlines the theoretical framework to examine question 1 - what events and challenges do athletes experience during the career transition covering entry phases for this study? The emerging athlete pathway commences at identification as a talented athlete (TID), moves through multiple iterations of selection (Güllich, 2014) within different organisational environments (TDE/collegiate) and concludes (if successful) with promotion into senior

professional careers. Physical demands restrict professional athlete career lifespans in high-intensity sports and will be shorter (ending in the early to mid-30s) than the full timespans of traditional careers (ending in the late 60s) (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2015; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Leading researchers in athlete career transitions over the past two decades commonly reference the HACM model, which commences with initiation into sport in childhood and recognises continuation through phases of development, specialisation, mastery and discontinuation (Wylleman et al., 2004; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). These athletic phases are positioned alongside the individual's psychological, psycho-social, educational, and vocational development, providing a holistic view of the athlete as a developing human being. The HACM identifies athletes moving from development to mastery as they mature from adolescence to adulthood around the age of 20. HACM provides an appropriate benchmark for the emerging athlete pathway, spanning development and mastery between the ages of 17 and 23 (depending on the sport). The emerging athlete transition is a subset of the development and mastery phases. Understanding this and the psycho-social development of this cohort recognises this is a period that not only represents this career transition but emerging adulthood, where individuals strive for greater self-sufficiency and independence (Arnett, 2000). Guided by HACM principles, recent research has further positioned athletic career transitions as an ongoing coping process (Stambulova, 2011; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Positioning this research in the stress and coping domain, recognises the pressures and demands the athletes face during this transition including selection, injury and relational conflicts, that require them to cope, adapt or fail.

These research developments describe the athlete's career as dynamic and overlapping events. Events (negative and positive) include *normative events*, such as selection trials, entering new teams, contracting, and minor injuries; *non-normative events*, such as season-ending injuries and unexpected selection outcomes; and *quasi-normative events*, including eligibility expiry or elected retirement (Stambulova, 2016). When transitioning through these events, the athlete will employ coping, a psychological process of managing stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The event may involve one (simple) or more simultaneous (complex) stressors. For example, a complex event such as an injury may consist of three stressors, physical strain, de-selection, and coach disengagement. The athlete triggers coping by evaluating the situation for form (positive or negative effect) and intensity (depth, duration, and frequency). In our example, intensity would include the injury's severity, time for recovery and whether it was the first or a recurring problem. The event causes the individual to assess the stressors for personal context, determine resource availability (*appraisal*) and then produce responses and actions (*adaptation*) that lead to facilitative or crisis *outcomes* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Adaptation starts

with an automated response triggered by the autonomic nervous system if the individual feels threatened, which include fight, flight, freeze or fawn (appease) (Evans, 2019).

Adaptions depend on the athlete's appraisal of *time* (age, career stage, prior exposure), *context* (event accumulation, experience, predictability, controllability, repercussions, and personal priority) and available *resources* (tangible, internal and external support) (Akkermans et al., 2018; Hanin, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Thomas, 2017). In our injury example, an athlete's appraisal might involve conscious and/or sub-conscious questions such as: Have I been exposed to injury before? Is it going to affect my selection? How badly do I want to keep playing? What financial and medical resources are available? Who can I trust to support me? Depending on this appraisal, they will interpret the situation as a threat or a challenge.

While not all events are adverse (such as being selected or contracted), all events require the individual to act, for example, in completing tasks, problem-solving, emotional or physical outbursts or help-seeking (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Athletes who demonstrate facilitative coping interpret events (stressors) as challenges. For athletes who struggle to cope, distress or crisis may result (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stambulova (2016) noted that "any crisis is difficult, unpleasant, and requires full mobilisation of resources; on the other hand, it gives a person a chance to grow, develop, and become better by learning new competencies, skills and strategies" (p.158). For an athlete facing a crisis in sport transition (such as a significant injury or de-selection), Stambulova (2011) provided three alternatives for facilitative decision-making: rejecting, accepting or fighting. To *reject* means to avoid or cease the relationship/activity; to *accept* means to remain in the situation but change one's mindset towards it; or to *fight* means to change one's attitude and attempt to change the situation. For an emerging de-selected athlete, this may involve: blaming the coach and quitting (reject), recognising their achievements to date and moving on (accept), or resetting their mindset and fighting to regain their position. Collins et al. (2016b) argued that sports organisations should design programmes that allow for struggle and assist emerging athletes to develop resilience. Other researchers also emphasise the need for developmental support to enhance emerging athletes' knowledge, awareness and facilitative coping capabilities (Cupples et al., 2021b; Schinke et al., 2017).

2.2 Construct 2: Principles of Existential Philosophy

This research uses Sartrean existential philosophy (Sartre, 1943/2018) as a lens to interpret emerging athlete career transitional environments and events. This philosophy starts with the Big-5 existential concerns expressed by Sartre (1943/2018) as:

- *Identity* (self and social) – a sense of who one is.
- *Meaning* – a need to believe [our] life has a purpose, time and context.
- *Freedom* – choice, responsibility and authenticity (versus bad faith).
- *Isolation or loneliness* – a desire to feel connected to others.
- *Death*, translated to transition, moving from one state to another, implies the ending (death) of one project, phase or event and the start of another (Bridges, 1986).

This construct positions events in the athlete's transition as an ending, often accompanied by anguish. Emerging athletes try to make sense of who they are, what meaning they give to, and how they evolve in their athletic pursuits. The existentialist view aligns well with how athletes navigate their career transitions, face adversities, make choices, take actions, and translate meaning and responsibility into their athletic roles and relationships.

Sartre's (1943/2018) principle of "*existence of freedom and consciousness precedes and conditions essence*" (p. 370). Human beings enter the world as a blank canvas, Sartre philosophising that individuals are the architects of their own lives. They are free to choose, createmeaning and make of it as they will. Sartre (1943/2018) viewed this as being "condemned to freedom" (p. 633) because with freedom comes responsibility for everything we do and for the meaning we give to our world. Through this choice and responsibility, individuals establish their true identity and meaning as *being in the world* (Sartre, 1943), but being in the world only has meaning in so far as it opens towards a possible future, with loss of meaning being one of the greatest sources of anguish (Sartre, 1943/2018).

Furthermore, human reality is fluid and dynamic; being in the world does not mean we are isolated from it. This existential perspective accepts individual *facticity* (physical attributes, birthplace, and time) and environmental forces exist. However, accepting facticity and environmental factors exist does not absolve us from our responsibility. Sartre (1943/2018) argues we always retain '*situated freedom*' (p. 663) because we are always free to choose one way of being over another. Here, Sartre (1943/2018) speaks of the true self as "This 'me', with its *a priori* and historical content, is man's *essence*" (p.73). To live an authentic life, an individual must strive to act in alignment with their *essence* and to take ownership for the situations they face. We act in *bad faith* when we fail to be true to ourselves in our interactions with the world and our relationships with others.

Of the Big-5, isolation or loneliness concerns the human desire to have connected relationships and not fight alone. Sartre refers to relationships as "hell as other people", as we see our shortcomings through the eyes of another. We risk losing ourselves in the impersonal social self and/or burying ourselves in a persona or social role to fit in with others. Relationships objectify us through our expectations and the judgements and validations of others, yet we can

never truly know what is in others' minds (Sartre, 1943/2018, 1944/1976). Here, Buber's interpretation of relationships as dialogues extends Sartre's ideas on relational authenticity and objectification. Buber (1965) explained dialogues as two one-sided yet reciprocal exchanges which create dyads of I and I, I and thou, I and it and I and the environment, and vice versa. An I:Thou exchange occurs when a person recognises the humanity of the other without objectification and deliberate effort (Arnett, 1982). Buber argued I:Thou relationships are only truly authentic before conscious effort kicks in. In Sartre's words, "If we seek authenticity for authenticity sake, we are no longer being authentic" (Sartre, 1992, p. 4). When authenticity fails, the relationship objectifies and falls to I:It. The individual reverting to self-service is biased on historical facticity, prior experiences, and personal exposure to the other and the world (Buber, 1965). For example, modern athletic sports science has arguably codified individuals according to their talent and physicality, treating the athlete "as though *it* were a machine ... it is a streamlined and decomplexified image of the human being" (Hoberman, 1988, p. 206). In this thesis, unpacking the true nature and complexities of relationships in emerging athlete transitions requires the careful dissection of each side of dyadic relationships, including consideration of the context, motivations, behaviours, personal meaning, and identities of the individuals involved.

Based on these interpretations, I argue existential philosophy provides an appropriate ontology to explore athlete experiences of career transitions in the context of the world they operate in, their relationships (for instance, with athletes, coaches, officials, and support staff) and the environment (training, competition, home) they operate in. An existential lens provides a framework to get to the truth (Nesti, 2004) on questions of identity (e.g. competitor or friend), meaning (e.g. fame or fortune), choice and responsibility (sacrifice and accountability), and relationships with others. Furthermore, recognising individuals and the world they inhabit are inseparable all with their own wants, needs and perceptions. Athletes are compelled to ask; Who am I? What does sport mean for me?

The following sections expand on identity and meaning as they relate to being in the sporting arena, as an athlete or in a surrounding role.

2.2.1 Identity Theory

Identity refers to a sense of who one is as a person and contributor to society through identification (Erikson, 1968). Identity theory finds its origins in two domains: the psychology of personality (determination or conception of self) and sociology (recognition of self as assigned to a social role) (Jussim & Ashmore, 1997; Ronkainen et al., 2016). Whether identity is self- or socially formulated or whether individuals hold single (unified) or multiple identities are debated

across psychological, sociological and philosophical domains (Ronkainen et al., 2016). The debate suggests identity is not static or fixed but more likely provisional, contingent and relatively dynamic (Jenkins, 2004). Existentialist thought agrees with Jenkins, suggesting that the essence of self and identity is fluid and evolves through individual choices, behaviours, and life experiences.

Identity formation is considered a central task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). From an early age, children develop an understanding of social groups and have a strong need to belong. By early adolescence, social-cognitive capabilities expand, with relational bonds developing as they form small groups or cliques. At this stage, they have difficulty distinguishing their thoughts from others (Erikson, 1968; Reese & Whitehouse, 2021). By later adolescence and emerging adulthood, individuals start to translate self-concepts across multiple social domains through autobiographical reasoning and integrate their personal roles, life experiences and meaning into self-identity (Jenkins, 2004; Reese & Whitehouse, 2021). However, identity is fluid and constantly evolves as an individual experiences life events, such as parenthood and career transitions (Reese & Whitehouse, 2021). Identity formation is distinct from a role. Identification requires accepting and attributing personal meaning to characteristics, ideas and beliefs beyond simply participating in the role. Meaning is attributed when an internal relationship makes constructs coherent or an external relationship makes constructs connected (Leontiev, 2013).

Social identity forms when an individual gives meaning beyond self to their membership in a particular social, ethnic or cultural category or group (Erikson, 1968; Jussim & Ashmore, 1997). Here, identity formation stems from how they see 'I' and how they see 'I' in relation to and with others, for example, son, sister, Christian, basketball player. If self- and social identities merge, 'identity fusion' can develop. *Identity fusion* is hypothesised to occur when individuals become tightly bonded to others, with "an extended sense of personal identity in which self is strengthened and emboldened by a group" (Reese & Whitehouse, 2021, p. 1398). Identity fusion theory is still in its infancy, but these researchers suggest that it is formed by either a shared biology pathway and/or a shared experience pathway. Social identity extends to identity fusion when an individual sees themselves not as a role-player within that group but as the categorisation of the group: I am not just a basketball player; I am an LA Lakers baller. Strongly fused persons are prone to enact pro-group or pro-cause behaviour, like going to war together, making sacrifices for the group, and regard others as 'out-group' (Reese & Whitehouse, 2021).

To date, identity fusion research has predominately centred on extreme cultural and political environments (Reese & Whitehouse, 2021; Swann & Buhrmester, 2015). In this context, those perceived as out-group may be considered enemies of the socially fused group. It is hypothesised that identity fusion may also be a factor in sporting environments: using out-group

behaviours to focus and energise the athlete in the battle of competition when representing their nation, club, or team (Buhrmester et al., 2018; Reese & Whitehouse, 2021). Sartre (2004) philosophised that fused *groups* form when pledged to a *fraternity* under a “slogan” in acts of “revolt”. Social fusion may be temporal or contextual, for example, when competing against an opposition versus competing for selection. Athletes may be temporarily fused in the heat of competition but *enact* pro-team behaviours to ensure their continued involvement or acceptance in the group.

The notion of ‘athletic identity’ was first conceptualised by Brewer et al. (1993). Brewer and Petitpas (2017) offered three parts to the formation of an athletic identity: social identity (strength of identification with role), negative outcome (emotional response of a failure to fill the role) and exclusivity (lack of other social roles). An individual with an athletic identity will think, behave and act as an athlete, and failure in this role would have negative emotional consequences (Brewer et al., 1993; Ronkainen et al., 2016). Disruption or loss of career for those with exclusive athletic identities can lead to a crisis referred to as athlete identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). In existential terms, athletes experience anguish arising from an ending, where being in the world only has meaning in so far as it opens towards a possible future (Sartre, 1943/2018). Examining identity (who am I?) asks questions of self, when is an athlete being true to themselves or complying to the desires and demands of others? Looking at identity with an existential lens, I argue an identity is a label attached to physical facticities (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity) and roles and fluid with experiences in the dynamic environment of professional sports.

2.2.2 Existential Awareness and Being-an-Athlete.

Modern-day existentialists agree with identity theorists, determining that identity constantly evolves through the “changing and complex relationship that human beings have with their being” (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017, p. 14). In existential terms, it is not simply the formation of the identity but the awareness of self and/or in relation to others. Existential awareness is more likely to be present in individuals who have matured, have explored themselves in the context of their world and/or have been confronted with circumstances that tested them (Hanscomb, 2006). However, existential psychologists argue that regardless of awareness, age or experience, existential concerns can still be construed as determinants of thought, feelings and behaviours (Hanscomb, 2006; Nesti, 2006). Regardless of age, people's freedom to choose brings fear of making the wrong decision. This fear arises because the person understands that, in choosing one course of action over another, they have forgone other opportunities or possibilities (Aggerholm, 2015; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017).

Forgoing one opportunity over another is particularly pertinent to athletes where dedication to a sporting ambition involves “setting aside and devoting oneself, one's time, one's body” to their sports project (Aggerholm, 2015, p. 37). Professional sport must represent a meaningful project to enable the individual to endure the pressures, limitations and risks inherent in such a career choice (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). Becoming an athlete commences in TID, and validation as being a talent in the eyes of others. Aggerholm (2015) argued talent is something one has, not something one is – it is having a quality, capability, or knowledge for a particular kind of performance (Aggerholm, 2015). Emerging professional athletes are scouted for this talent, for their future potential, but the conversion from ‘having-a-talent’ to ‘being-a-talent’ requires time and development. As such, “talent becomes a task for the young athlete ... to become who [they] are not yet” (Aggerholm, 2015, p. 31). The young talent must commit themselves to the physical, psychological, and emotional demands of training and competing as part of a fraternity (Aggerholm, 2015) with no guarantee this commitment will result in a professional contract. A fraternity consists, for example, of a squad of players and staff (rugby league or basketball) or an individual athlete and coach/management team (boxing). In pledging to this fraternity, the athlete accepts the group's common objectives (‘slogans’) and institutional artefacts (e.g., sports code, uniform, or brand) and the institutional systems and regulations of the sports environment (Hutchens, 2010). As the athlete identifies with being-an-athlete, they will act and behave as an athlete. They will be disciplined in training, watch their nutrition, be highly competitive, and focus on winning (Aggerholm, 2015).

Few possess the toughness, endurance and energy to convert having-a-talent to being-a-talent, but the authentic athlete thrives on competing to be the best and standing out over others (Aggerholm, 2015). “The drama of winning is indispensable and arguably the very foundation for the magic of sport; it expresses a sacred joy which facilitates a passionate engagement in sport” (Aggerholm, 2015, p. 58). A successfully facilitated career transition will reflect an athlete who can take responsibility for their decisions, who they entrust for support, and whether to commit or withdraw (Aggerholm, 2015; Nesti, 2004). Understanding the existential drivers for individuals, offers opportunities to strengthen relationships and develop and support emerging athletes in their thoughts, feelings, choices and actions. Increasing awareness (or consciousness) brings an individual resources to cope, and freedom to be and to choose (Sartre, 1943/2018).

2.3 Construct 3: Relationships

Transitory relationships are defined as being influential primarily within an athletic context and, although usually short-lived, provide important guidance to the athletes in terms of their career directions or changes. *Existential relationships* influence athletes' sport and non-sport lives, their value systems and motivations for long-lasting athletic careers (Franck & Stambulova, 2018).

Construct 3 involves examining relationship theories to set boundaries to investigate when and where intra- and inter-relationships support or hinder emerging athletes' personal and athletic development. This includes but is not exclusive to practitioner relationships. I define 'intra-relationship' as describing how individuals interpret their thoughts, feelings, and actions in their interactions with the world and others. Adopting Buber (1965), I position 'inter-relationships' dialogically as two one-sided yet reciprocal exchanges or connections, and when authentic relationships (thou: thou) exist when both sides see the humanity in the other (Sartre, 2004). Interpreting inter-relationships requires the inspection of both sides of any relational dyad. To analyse the patterns of relationships, it is important to identify and understand the roles participants perform in professional sports environments, the functions they have and the characteristics that constitute authentic relationships. 'Roles' are defined as patterns of behaviour or actions expected of an individual within a social setting (Carron & Eys, 2012). For the purposes of this thesis we refer to 'functions' as actions or activities we do, and 'characteristics' as how we do them.

2.3.1 Roles and Functions

The central actor in this thesis is the emerging professional athlete, but they do not and cannot function in isolation from others. These athletes engage with organisations, such as NSOs, sports management agencies, professional clubs, and player associations. As defined in Chapter 1, the sporting roles interacting with athletes include organisational, coaching, practitioner, and community roles. These sporting roles perform one or more functions in interacting with the athletes (e.g., technical development, physical development, welfare, nutritional advice). It is important to remember an individual will hold numerous roles, in and beyond sporting environments, for example in our participant sample (all male), a son, a father, a Christian and an athlete or coach. They fill these roles depending on time, place and social context (Carron & Eys, 2012). When tension occurs between a role(s) and the authentic or true self, an individual may be in 'bad faith' (Sartre, 1943/2018). They may be required to think or act as someone they are not to achieve selection or to fit into a fraternity or to satisfy the fans. The athlete can be in a state of existential crisis (bad faith) when they are not being true to themselves but playing a role to achieve a particular outcome.

2.3.2 Social Support Theory

To investigate the roles and relationships, we adopt social support theory to address the research question, how do existential relationships facilitate or hinder the transition of emerging athletes? As specified earlier, career transitions are now seen as a transactional process of coping and sports research has provided empirical evidence to corroborate social support as a resource for facilitative coping (Williams et al., 2013). Social support in the form of tangible or informational (instrumental), esteem or emotional (emotional), resources provides resources conducive to coping (Rees & Freeman, 2012). The availability of social support (perceived or actual) functioning as a coping resource can improve an individual's self-efficacy, self-confidence and perceived control (Freeman & Rees, 2009; Rees & Freeman, 2006, 2009). Increased coping via the reappraisal of stressors as challenges, increased self-efficacy and self-confidence has also been shown to reduce competitive anxiety and enhance performance (Freeman & Rees, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2010; Rees & Freeman, 2009).

More recently, Feeney and Collins (2015) provided a new and broader look at social support by linking the construct more directly as a contributor to well-being and thriving. Their argument offers greater depth to understanding *how* and *when* social support enables athletes to thrive beyond events, particularly as career transitions involve multiple stressors and more extended duration periods. Furthermore, Feeney and Collins (2015) provided a dyadic view of the social support relationship. Feeney and Collins (2015) highlighted occasions where social support offers a resource to cope with adversity (source of support) but also facilitation for opportunities for growth and development (relational catalyst). Improving capabilities to deal with pressure is particularly relevant to professional athletes entering into contracts, transitioning between teams/clubs, and dealing with injuries, de-selections, or retirement. As previously mentioned, not all events are negative, but all events have an element of change. While naturally experiencing stress, athletes equally have the potential to thrive through facilitative coping. These arguments offer a broader perspective consistent with my QMCS focus, where critical events represent opportunities or threats, and interpersonal relationships can come with expectations and support. Providing further classification of *how* and *when* interpersonal support facilitates thriving, Feeney and Collins (2015) referred to over, under or optimal dependence and inter-dependence. Successful support relationships occur when support is given without condition, the recipient feels understood, validated, and cared for, and the supporter respects the recipient's autonomy. Autonomy implies a relationship that fosters intrinsic motivation, self-reliance and decision-making, and self-development (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Here, inter-dependence highlights the mutuality of relationships, emphasising social

support as two-directional in responsibility and reciprocity — a relationship where both parties benefit.

Furthermore, Feeney & Collins’ (2015) research identifies the support receiver not as a passive player but as responsible for shaping their support outcomes by, for example, reaching out, being receptive to efforts, not over-taxing demands, and returning gratitude and support. These concepts provide a helpful context to my research question from both sides of the dyad. Furthermore, it recognises the supporter and recipient as individuals with personal needs and motivations, and both possessing freedom through choice, responsibility, and authenticity. As such, the work of Feeney and Collins’ (2015) is proposed as a more applicable foundation for investigating the impacts of social support relationships on emerging athlete career transitions.

2.3.4 Characteristics of Facilitative Relationships

To determine the characteristics of facilitative relationships across functions and/or roles, I turn to the philosophical domains of psychology, leadership and coaching. Across these domains, there are differences in language, emphasis and the definition of the characteristics said to shape the relationship involved. Nonetheless, across all disciplines, similarities are found in the characteristics (if not the terms) of awareness (of self and other) and authenticity (or genuine intention).

Table 2.1
Characteristics for Facilitative Relationships

Performance Characteristics	Relational Characteristics	Social Support Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confident • Competitive • Disciplined • Resilient • Hardworking • Committed • Focussed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • Humility • Honest • Respectful • Trustworthy • Caring • Values teamwork • Kind • Fair • Acts with integrity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliability • Availability • Generous intention • Protects self-esteem • Acknowledges feelings and needs of the other • Conveys acceptance • Mutual respect • Respects others autonomy • Grateful

Note. Table incorporates summarised performance and relational character strengths (Pim, 2022) and social support characteristics (Feeney & Collins, 2015).

The fields (and some of the valuable leaders within them) informing the initial review included person-centred psychology (Rogers, 1995), existential psychology (Nesti, 2006),

coaching (Jowett et al., 2012) and leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Here, I acknowledge each domain contains well-researched academic constructs defining positive and connected relationships with their taxonomies. However, to enable a cross-analysis of stakeholders and functions, I decided to focus on the characteristics defined by Pim (2022) and the social support characteristics provided by Feeney and Collins (2015) as presented in Table 2.1.

2.3.5 Environmental Relationships

The emerging athlete's career is situated in complex physical, organisational, and cultural environments, some inside and some outside their control (Fletcher et al., 2012), where:

- Physical environment includes ecological features (our bodies, the earth's natural elements), human-made resources (e.g., money, facilities) and time (period, era, age).
- Organisational environment includes commercial, structural (people and hierarchies) and operational systems and processes.
- Cultural environment involves the shared meanings and understanding within a group of people. In organisational culture, this includes artefacts (physical items or public representations, e.g., brands/uniforms), espoused values (shared constructs, ideals, beliefs), and underlying assumptions (behavioural norms and actions) (Frontiera, 2010; Schein, 1990).

Given emerging typical athlete engagement in talent development environments, an investigation into literature in this domain uncovered work initiated by (Martindale et al., 2010) in identification environments and systems. This fostered the development and use of talent development environmental questionnaires (TDEQs). TDEQ studies were initially incentivised by the large investment in creating “a sustainable, genuine world-classing sporting system” in the UK (Li et al., 2015; Martindale et al., 2023). In addition, Henriksen et al. (2010) developed two environmental models (Figure 2.2) that examine the interactions between environmental factors and processes to compare three successful TDEs in Scandinavia for environmental effectiveness. While useful when comparing sporting environments at a fixed point in time, this does not serve this research purpose. The ATDE and ESF models, (Figure 2.2) contribute to the initial conceptual model (refer Research Implementation) used in this thesis. However, TDEs represent only one phase in emerging athlete career transitions.

Figure 2.2

Environmental Models ATDE and ESF (Henriksen et al., 2010)

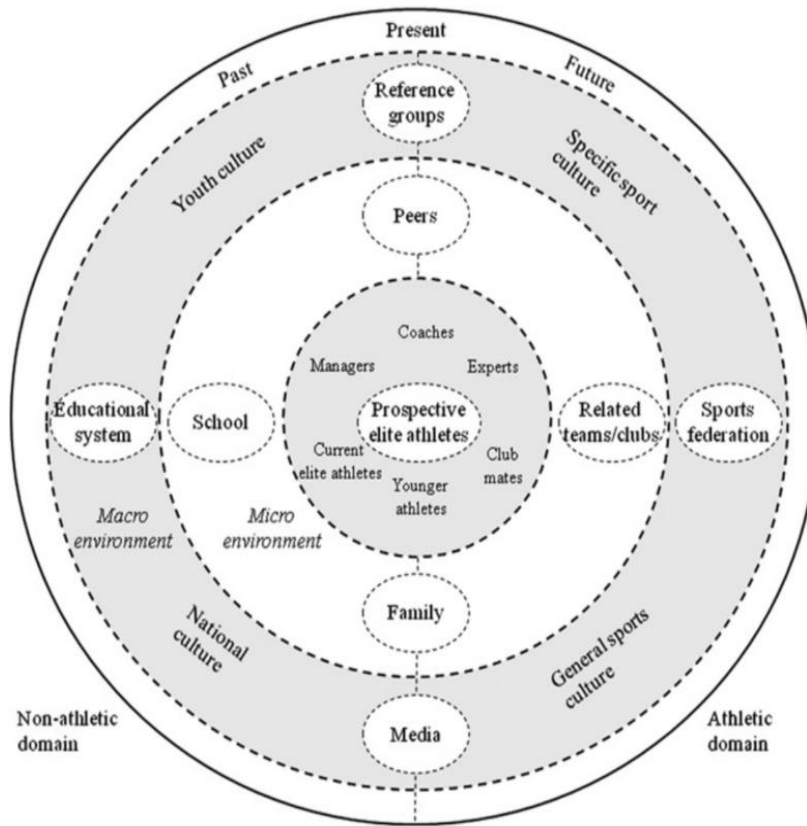


Fig. 1. The athletic talent development environment (ATDE) working model.

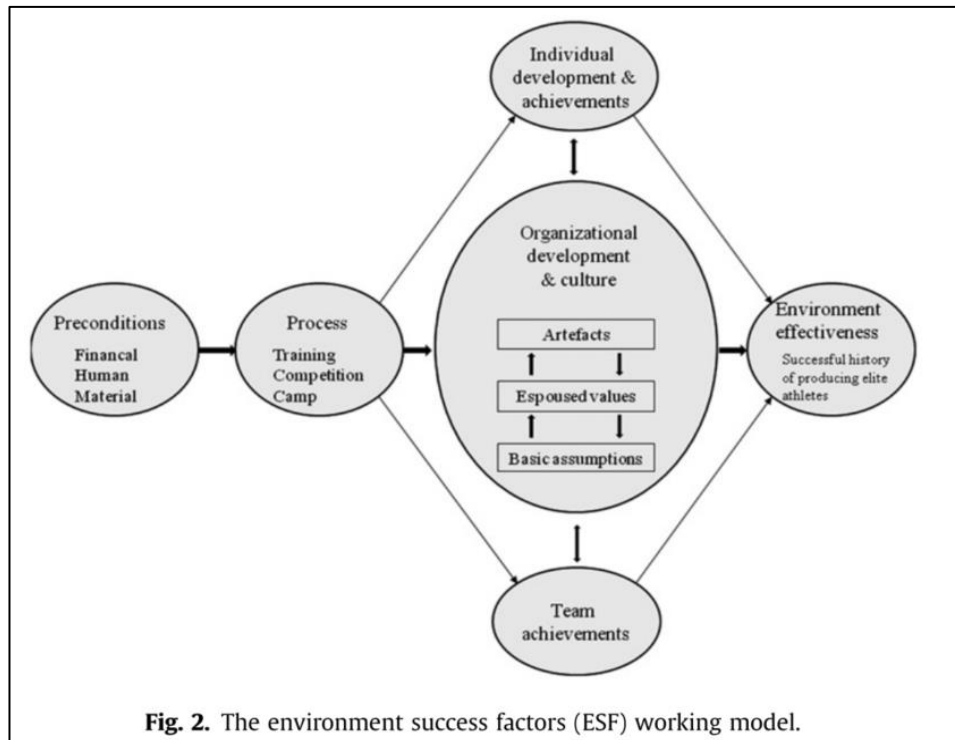
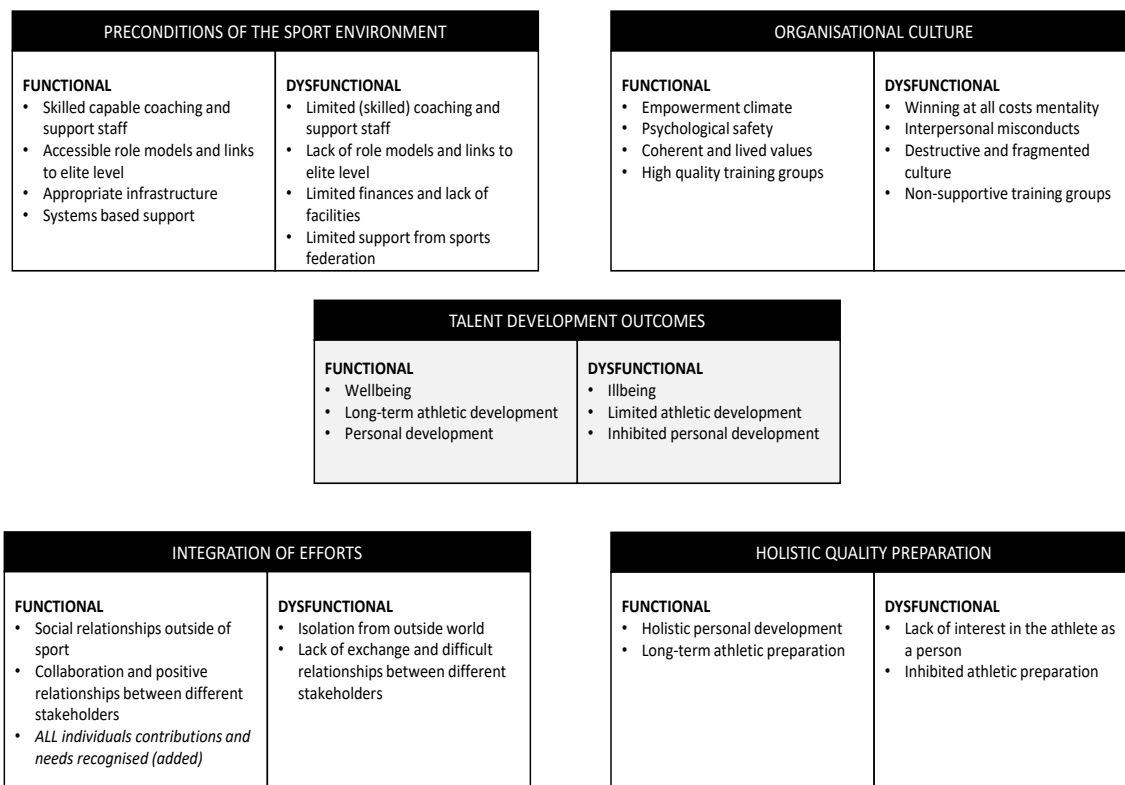


Fig. 2. The environment success factors (ESF) working model.

With the growing globalisation of sport, Ryba et al. (2016) then called for a socio-cultural framework that addressed transitional events involving the physical movement of an individual into new environments (initially designed for transnational migrations). The CTM (Ryba et al., 2016, Figure 1) examines the social and cultural adaptations required to cope with migrating from one (home culture) environment to another to pursue a sporting career. The model commences the process with pre-transition activities, including getting ready/mobilising, goes on to acute cultural adaptation (fitting into the group and culture, normative belonging) and then moves to socio-cultural adaptation (establishing oneself). While this model primarily focuses on transnational migrations, I argue similar crises may occur in domestic settings (e.g., between cities, clubs and teams) mirroring these cultural adaptation requirements. Drew et al. (2019) provided additional insights to the emerging athlete domain by expanding the theoretical discussions to include the J2S phase in Figure 2 (p.16), with a model more representative of a transitional process. In their meta-study review, Drew et al. (2019) concluded articles in their analysis were idiosyncratic and failed to understand the entire J2S transitional period; calling on researchers to extend the knowledge of facilitators and debilitators in transitions. In a later meta-study, Hauser et al. (2022) responded to this call, expanding the conceptual framework for TDE's (Figure 2.3) to recognise broader and more holistic outcomes for emerging athlete environmental requirements.

Figure 2.3

Summarised Conceptual Framework of Functional and Dysfunctional TDE Features



Note. Adapted from Hauser et al. (2022, Figure 2, p.9).

Hauser et al. (2022) concluded studies of TDE's reflected areas of strength athletic development and facilities with personal development and well-being requirements falling short. Hauser et al.'s (2022) model (Figure 2.3) offers a useful continuum between functional and dysfunctional features in environmental evaluations, particularly in ACD studies, focusing on athletic and personal development across longitudinal transitions.

With both groups of researchers adopting a meta-study review method to produce models, I posit transferability between TDE (Hauser) and J2S (Drew) features may be reasonable. These syntheses provide opportunities for transferability to other environmental studies using TDEQ methods. However, the concern is that these conclusions will be isolated to similar sport demographics (sports code, environment and organisation), as such case analysis must clearly articulate these boundaries. Whether these models are transferrable across emerging athlete environments requires further investigation, but given my desire to understand the experiences of individuals on different sides of sporting relational dyads across a phase of events and situations, a qualitative experiential approach is more aligned to this investigation.

2.4 Chapter Summary

The above sections summarise the theoretical positioning of this research across three framework constructs: career transitions, existential being and relationships. This framework is positioned to address the following research questions, with construct 1 addressing question 1 and construct 2 and 3 addressing questions 2:

1. What events and challenges do emerging athletes experience during transition in professional sport?
2. How do existential relationships facilitate or hinder the transition of emerging athletes in life in and beyond professional sport?

In conjunction with the research questions, this framework is used as an analytical lens to combine codes to themes for each case and, in the final collective case analysis, to offer practical recommendations and solutions for emerging athletes transitioning into professional sport. Using an existential lens combined with athlete career transitions addresses:

- The translation from death to **endings** is well suited to athlete career transitions. Events have endings, neutral periods and beginnings. Transitional phases and events are numerous – some, like early exits, result in **anguish**, and others (like debuting for an NRL game) are exciting.
- **Identity** is multi-dimensional– derived from choices, behaviours and life experiences. I posit identity has much more to do with roles than inner essence. Assisting athletes to

understand the multiplicity of identities (e.g., athlete, son, friend, gamer), will support their understanding of self in and beyond sport.

- **Meaning** is why we think how we do, why we feel how we feel and why we do what we do. Challenging young men to dig deep into why – is the foundation of personal development through self-awareness. The expectation is that self-aware athletes are better equipped to make informed choices and become more resilient to the adversities and challenges they will inevitably face in sport and life.
- Sartre expresses the **freedom** to choose comes with a heavy weight of responsibility. As there is only ever 'situated freedom' (we cannot escape the world we live in), external factors and relationships influence our choices and decisions. Regardless of this, the responsibility remains our own. How an athlete appraises and adapts to the situations they face remains their responsibility – e.g., to fight for that selection or to quit.
- **Isolation** is translated to our relationship with others. In *No Exit*, Sartre talks about hell as other people, yet we crave connection. We look at other people's judgements and recognitions as a reflection of self. Athletes are in a constant cycle of selections (Güllich, 2014), and being selected validates the athlete in the eyes of others (Sartre, 1944/1976).
- As individuals, we want to fit in, be accepted, and feel connected. To remain **authentic**, an athlete must walk a tight rope of demands to be competitive at the same time as committed to the fraternity. As such, relationships invariably results in some degree of acting, resulting in "**bad faith**".

The following chapter moves beyond the theoretical into a review of relevant literature reporting on emerging athlete transitions into professional sport. This chapter is positioned to describe the transactional phases, events, and challenges identified in existing literature that are specific to the emerging athlete's career transition.

CHAPTER 3 – EXAMINING LITERATURE ON EMERGING ATHLETES TRANSITION IN PROFESSIONAL SPORT

The theoretical frameworks in sports career transitions, relationships and ‘being-an-athlete’ have been discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 prioritises and investigates the literature on emerging athletes’ transition in professional sport. The transition commences from talent identification (TID) to entry into talent development environments (TDEs), collegiate environments, moving from junior to senior (J2S) and/or into semi-professional or professional sporting environments. Different sports codes offer different pathways and environments.

The review first describes the design approach, overviews the articles identified and then reports key findings, recommendations, strengths and limitations of the prioritised literature. The chapter is structured as follows:

- Literature review design and overview
- Emerging athlete transitions
- Emerging athlete events

3.1 Literature Review Design and Overview

This literature review is based on scholarly articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals between January 2010 and December 2022. Papers published in or translated into English were identified and selected using the cross-sectional Auckland University of Technology (AUT) Library search engine along with additional searches in SPORTDiscus via EBSCO and Scopus. The following search criteria were applied:

- *Athlete transitions*: “emerging athlete”, “athlete #OR# career #and# transitions”, “athlete transitions”, “sport #and# pathway”, “junior-to-senior”, “youth-to-senior”, “sport #and# athlete development”, with
- *Sports roles and relationships*: athlete, player, coach, trainer, “sports psychologist”, “player development manager”, “sports agent”, manager, Physiotherapist, “sports teams”, “well-being manager”.
- *Sports codes*: basketball, boxing, “rugby league”.

Journal articles in the collegiate domain proved challenging, with limited relatable research able to be sourced even though I made considerable efforts to clarify if there was a

linguistic issue. In addition, it was surprising to find limited research in the basketball context relating to transition through either college and/or into professional environments.

- *Extended to “talent environments”, “talent development”, student-athlete”, “college-athlete”, NCAA (i.e., the National Collegiate Athletic Association), “athlete selections”, “athlete drop-outs”, “collegiate athlete”.*

Six systematic review papers were identified as an excellent resource for identifying key studies and/or any research conducted since 2016 that had potentially been missed (Drew et al., 2019; Edison et al., 2021; García-Santamaría et al., 2022; Ronkainen et al., 2016; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2020). In addition, a thorough examination of the cross-references cited in the articles identified was made.

The selected literature identified from the search was compiled into a table, delivering 124 articles for further review. Each paper was analysed for relevance to emerging athlete career transitions and events (transition/event) and diversity of participants, using the inclusion criteria outlined in Table 3.1. Articles were then eliminated based on the exclusion criteria (Table 3.1) to ensure a closer fit to professional sporting environments and the scope of the research (adolescent male athletes, excluding TID criteria). The ‘prioritised’ articles were further analysed for transition, participant, sport, study type, location and event (refer to Table 3.2), resulting in 54 articles.

Table 3.1
Article Scope Eligibility Schedule

INCLUSION CRITERIA AND PRIORITISED ARTICLES	EXCLUSION CRITERIA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male emerging professional athletes (typically 16-25 years). • Performance sports setting (TDE, collegiate, semi-professional and professional environments). • Identification and transition experiences of emerging level athletes. • Coverage of diverse participant involvement with emerging athletes (e.g., parents, coaches, practitioners, organisational staff). • Articles that informed transitional models. • Priority is given to articles with larger case samples (n>5). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreational youth sport. • High school TDE programmes or academies. • National talent development programmes, including Olympic pathways. • Organisational studies focused on structural or cultural content that excluded transition processes. • TID criteria (individual characteristics, physical or mental). • Studies focussed on dual career development with an educational or vocational bias. • Studies focussed on mental or physical health. • Female athlete studies (to eliminate gender differences from study scope).

Note. This approach is consistent with the approach taken by Hauser et al. (2022, table 1, p.5).

3.2 Emerging Athlete Transition

Reviewing the literature on emerging athlete pathways requires comparisons of environmental (demographic, age, ethnicity, country), organisational (facilities, people and culture) and participant (role, age, gender, able-bodied or disability) studies. Participants vary significantly in time (age groups and involvement period) and context (part-time, full-time, residential, under contract). Stambulova et al. (2020) challenged researchers to expand investigations in the ACD, including the diversity of athletic roles, contemporary events and stressors, and holistic career development and facilitation. This research topic (emerging athletes, sports codes, events, multiple stakeholders) responds to this call, where the emerging athlete career is a pathway within the ACD (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). A lack of clarity in terminology and scope presented a challenge in examining literature in this domain, including confusion in the definition of environment and transition phases (Gledhill et al., 2017; Hauser et al., 2022). The difficulties experienced in identifying studies for inclusion in this review confirm Stambulova et al.'s (2020) call for clarification and more user-friendly models, particularly in emerging athlete pathways.

Table 3.2

Article count by sport, data collection method and participants.

SPORT	n=	DATA COLLECTION	n=	PARTICIPANTS	n=
Football	15	Interview	30	Athlete	27
Rugby League	11	Fieldwork	0	Coach	7
Boxing	4	Survey	2	Practitioner	6
AFL	1	TDEQ	3	Coach/Athlete	3
Ice Hockey	2	Document/Media	2	Parents	1
Rugby Union	4	Combination	10	Multiple Roles	6
Basketball	2	Intervention	3	Meta-Studies	4
Collegiate Multiple	5	Meta-Studies	4	TOTAL	54
Multiple/Other	10	TOTAL	54		
TOTAL	54				

Table 3.2 summarises the number of articles by sport, data collection method and participants. Here, the dominance of literature in football (or soccer) (n=16) and, more recently, rugby league (n=11) is likely due to the sport's professional longevity. However, given the high profile of US basketball (Statista, n.d.), what is remarkable is the lack of research on all athlete career transitions in basketball, including collegiate student-athlete research. Table 3.2 shows that research was predominantly (>50%) conducted using data from interviews with current and former sports performers. It is important to note research based on retrospective interviews and survey data is open to recall bias. Bias must be considered when designing research projects and examining findings, as it can impact overall research outcomes.

Literature on emerging athlete transitions is predominantly athlete-centred, whether written from the athlete's perspective (n=27), the coach's or that of other stakeholders (refer Table 3.2). Notable exceptions (excluding meta-studies) include articles written with multiple stakeholder viewpoints (Cupples et al., 2021b; Jones et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2016), coach: athlete perspectives (Barden et al., 2013; Bissett & Tamminen, 2022; Pehrson et al., 2017) and athlete: parent perspectives (Martindale et al., 2023; Storm et al., 2022).

Research limited to one individual's perspective in dyadic relationships may be skewed by positive or negative experiences. For example, an athlete dropped from a programme may fail to take responsibility for his/her contribution to the event, blaming the coach or the process. Athletes' perceptions will likely differ with time (TDE or J2S, age) and context (maturity, on the up, unfavoured or out). To increase the validity of these experiential events, using a stratified range of data with multiple stakeholder perspectives will reduce the risk of distorted views. Additionally, even in fieldwork studies with insider-researcher observations, politics, diplomacy and/or participant protection make accurate reporting of relational challenges complex, particularly in performance environments.

The most comprehensive study in this domain presents a longitudinal investigation across events in football conducted by Swainston et al. (2020). The study used video diaries and interviews to analyse athlete experiences across two transition phases, academy and entry into the first team, including two further J2S pathway options via loan and under-23 squad. This study reported pressure for contract decisions, adaption to men's football, preparation for the first-team, first-team environment opportunity and coping. Swainston et al. (2020) were helpful in extending understanding of the adaptive *needs* of athletes, including psychological, sociological and physical demands. The study period ended before the participants' transition was complete (promotion or exit), but it was reported that participants felt demoralised and ignored by the length of the apprenticeship period. The period of athletic apprenticeship for emerging athletes was questioned, but there are contradictions in the advantages of accelerated promotion into senior organisations and the provision of development opportunities for training-up across researchers (Mills et al., 2014b; Rothwell et al., 2020; Swainston et al., 2020). Swainston et al. (2020) concluded a better understanding of how the dynamic balance of systems supports successful transitions is required. They suggested improvements to social skill development and support for players while recognising an athlete's responsibility for support-seeking and building resilience.

In literature directed to specific events, J2S was the most prevalent phase studied (e.g., Jones et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2020; Røynesdal et al., 2018), with limited research in the collegiate phase (Smith & Hardin, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). TDE research mainly covered

environmental reviews and evaluations (often using TDEQ's) of organisational practices in talent development organisations (see Hauser et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021). Hauser et al.'s review produced a model for best practice in recognising athlete well-being and athletic and personal development as outcomes in highly functioning TDEs. This study concluding current literature identifies more functional findings in athlete performance activities with shortcomings in academic and organisational priorities for personal development.

Given emerging career transitions span months, if not years, using snapshot data will reduce ACD research efficacy. ACD studies cannot isolate athletes from the dynamic and complex environments they operate in when moving from TDE to J2S or collegiate phases. Events and demands are not singular but complex. For example, an individual identified as talented who is moving from a TDE to J2S may encounter new relationships, sporting environment and protocols, and often a new home and country. As such, studies with a longitudinal approach across the whole transition, spanning complex interwoven events and relationships, will be more robust.

3.2.1 Facilitating Transitions

The historical emphasis of research in ACD challenged organisations to improve systems and environments for better athlete outcomes. These studies focused on athletic performance outcomes, with recommendations positioned within athlete-centred philosophies, demanding increased coach responsibility rather than collaborative organisational views (e.g., Bruner et al., 2010; Lebrun et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2020; Rothwell et al., 2020). Calls for coaches to fulfil broader responsibilities are common recommendations (Mitchell et al., 2020; Rothwell et al., 2020). For example, a parent in Morris et al. (2016) wanted the coach to do a better job of looking after her J2S son. Lebrun et al. (2020) concluded coaches in emerging athlete environments have a duty of care to their athletes yet have shortfalls in the knowledge, awareness and organisational support required to protect emerging athletes from mental health demands and issues. Despite the customary placement of the coach as the central, most significant relationship in the athlete's career, the practical realities of supporting adolescents through this experience intact go beyond the coach: athlete dyad. What is more, elite coaching is associated with considerable stakeholder demands for winning performances and returns on investment. This pressure can lead to coaches feeling isolated (Stansen & Chambers, 2019). The literature examined in this review provides coach perspectives on athlete experiences but falls short of presenting the pressures coaches face in meeting growing demands, particularly in professional sports environments (Lebrun et al., 2020).

Hauser et al. (2022) concluded the recruitment and provision of qualified coaching and support staff and positive stakeholder relationships are pivotal to functional environments where facilitative approaches emphasise robust relationships involving trust, transparency, and positive communication (Rothwell et al., 2020). Creating environments for personal growth beyond the emerging transition is critical when career span and chances of success are minimal (Rongen et al., 2021; Williams & MacNamara, 2020). Williams and MacNamara (2020) advocated for TDEs to deliberately design programmes for positive psycho-social development, with recommendations for cross-referencing life skill acquisition in training exercises, transparency, honest conversation, and readiness. In dysfunctional environments, individuals' athletic and personal development may be stunted, where the focus is primarily on winning (Rothwell et al., 2020). Recent research argues an individualistic and collaborative approach is required to establish athletic and personal development in emerging athlete programmes (Güllich, 2014; Hauser et al., 2022; Tod et al., 2019). Enabling this delivery involves the integration of staff and community and the continuity of systems and practices (Cupples et al., 2021b; Hauser et al., 2022).

Researchers also argue programmes providing opportunities to build resiliency through 'trauma' experiences are a resource for coping capabilities for athlete transitions (Collins et al., 2016a, 2016b; Savage et al., 2017). While the term 'trauma' is problematic, researchers recognise exposure to adversity and periodised use of challenge, stating this is more than "merely the provision of mental skills or cosy chats about mindsets" (Collins et al., 2016a, p. 3), with work needing to be one-on-one and individually centred. Cupples et al. (2021b) identified the effects of stressors on emerging athletes, including events' physical, social, relational, organisational, and performance demands. Cupples rugby league study used a coping intervention conducted as a series of workshops and surveys during a 24-week team season. Improvements in task- and emotional-based coping were measured; however, no advancement in social support efficacy or overall psychological well-being was reported (Cupples et al., 2021b). With prior researchers defining social support as a resource for coping (Rees & Freeman, 2012), the authors hypothesised the finding of minimal effects on social support and well-being were due to athlete feelings towards the performance culture in the organisation, including frequent personnel changes. Additionally, the use of workshop interventions in the Cupples research, as opposed to a more individualised approach, may have influenced the social support and wellbeing outcomes, despite a perceived poor culture. The need for presence and rapport is considered a necessary requirement to build trust in support relationships (Tod et al., 2019; Wadsworth et al., 2020). Furthermore, athlete willingness, security and capability to seek support is also a requirement (Lewis et al., 2018; Swainston et al., 2020).

In other facilitatively focused literature, Brown and Arnold (2019) called for more stable recruitment policies that decrease player turnover and incentivise J2S internal promotion, arguing organisational culture improvements will positively affect performance and well-being outcomes. These improvements included creating open and trustworthy communication, role modelling between senior and junior players and opportunities for non-sporting and informal interactions between all organisational members (Brown & Arnold, 2019). Other researchers cited role modelling as a resource for facilitating emerging athlete transitions (Morris et al., 2017; Pehrson et al., 2017; Swainston et al., 2020). Building these connections was seen by athlete participants as a responsibility of both sides of the dyad, with junior players having the confidence to approach senior players for advice and support (Swainston et al., 2020) and senior players taking leadership of the juniors (Brown & Arnold, 2019; Pehrson et al., 2017). Finally, identification of and resourcing for mentoring opportunities (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019), facilitating readiness for J2S step-up (Larsen et al., 2014; Pummell & Lavalley, 2019) and support during crisis events (Stambulova, 2011; Stambulova et al., 2020; Wadsworth et al., 2020) are all facilitative of emerging athlete development. Most importantly, practitioner-based research evidenced the need for the athlete to have someone safe to talk to (e.g. has empathy) and who understands sporting environments (Kola-Palmer et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2018; Wadsworth et al., 2020).

The availability of informational, emotional, esteem, and tangible resources for coping (Rees & Freeman, 2012) and athletic and personal development will reside inside and outside the organisation. In some professional sporting codes (e.g., rugby league, rugby, and the Australian rules Football League or AFL), player welfare, well-being or development managers (PWM) are recruited as designated practitioners to support athlete well-being within organisations (Lewis et al., 2018; Stansen & Chambers, 2019). PWMs implement welfare support in different ways across a wide range of sport and life areas, with trust, availability and visibility critical to relationship success (Stansen & Chambers, 2019). The success of welfare support depends on the coach advocating for it and its cultural (personal and organisational) acceptance (Stansen & Chambers, 2019). With resource constraints, the prioritisation of welfare resources was generally centred on the first team, leaving a PWM in Lewis et al. (2018) wanting to help younger squads but unable to.

Cupples et al. (2021b) questioned why, despite recommendations by earlier researchers (e.g., Larsen et al., 2014; Savage et al., 2017; Schinke et al., 2017), there were still limited studies and implementations in the systematic development of coping skills for young athletes. Future investigators in practitioner-based studies need to examine how engagements enhance recipients' performance, not merely catalogue techniques and approaches (Tod et al., 2019).

The most visible line of research in emerging athlete transitions describes the psychological, sociological and physical demands and resources required to adapt and/or progress across TID, TDEs and within-senior environments. To go beyond the demands and resources and expand the analysis of emerging athlete transition requires dissecting articles and uncoupling the events and relationships. As such, this section provides additional background on the following events will support case investigations in response to research question 1 – what events and challenges do emerging athletes experience during transition in professional sport?

This section examines transitional and performance vents including:

- Entry into emerging athlete pathways.
- Selection and contracting.
- Junior-to-senior events.
- Student-athlete eligibility and adaption.
- Leaving home and/or leaving the country.
- Physical demands and injuries.
- Early exits.

3.3.1 *Entry into Emerging Athlete Pathways*

To be recognised as a talented athlete requires an individual ‘stands out above others’ (Aggerholm, 2015). The central premise of TID is to select the most promising young talents to develop as part of TDE programmes for promotion into elite competitions and professional teams (Güllich, 2014). Having excluded the quantitative identification criteria from the study scope, I found little constructive literature exploring coping, adaption and outcomes of emerging athlete entry into TDEs.

Early trajectories for athletes entering TDE environments have shown little evidence supporting favourable performance outcomes. Yet a growing propensity exists for early TID and junior development systems to expand into younger age brackets (Cupples et al., 2018; Rothwell et al., 2019). This collectivist approach suggests the objectification and expendability of the young people involved in this process, as only a few players will progress to elite professional levels (Güllich, 2014). Examining the extensive literature in early specialisation is beyond the time and scope of this study. In brief outline, the potential benefits of delaying entry suggest reduced physical and psycho-social pressures and protection against early burnout (Cupples et al., 2018; Güllich, 2014; Rothwell et al., 2017). However, as Gledhill et al. (2017) stated, scant literature has examined these qualities against measurable progressions and outcomes from TDEs to successful elite careers. While a more recently published article, which included Güllich as a co-author, used a meta-analysis approach in Olympic sports. Barth (2024) suggesting that junior performance has very little, if any, predictive value for senior performance. This article

contradicts claims for giftedness and talent, raising serious questions about the use of junior performance for talent selection purposes, with the younger the junior the lower the association with senior performance.

However, as Güllich et al. (2017) suggest, there may still be advantages of early TDE entry where improved access to dynamic learning environments, expertise and resources look beyond traditional predictive performance criteria. The variables are extensive, and it is difficult to determine the transferability of a western-based Olympic sport sample to emerging professional sporting pathways. The lack of attention in the professional pathways arena is surprising; as a coach in Mills et al. (2014a) argued, successful clubs are built on a solid foundation of home-grown talent. The ethical success of TDEs is in the assurance of combining incumbents' athletic and personal development (Rongen et al., 2018; Rongen et al., 2021). However, developing transferrable life skills and opening young athletes' eyes to educational and vocational opportunities is not automatic (Rongen et al., 2021). Holistic development requires TDE programmes prioritise individual development over a competitive and winning culture (Hauser et al., 2022; Rongen et al., 2021) and support players on de-selection (McGlinchey et al., 2022; Williams & MacNamara, 2020). Further research would be beneficial to evidence the intent and facilitation of such an approach in different sporting TDEs over the lifespan of various professional athlete cohorts and environments (Barth, 2024).

3.3.2 Selection and Contracting

The meta-analysis completed by Gledhill et al.'s (2017) investigated the psycho-social characteristics that enhance selection chances in football TDEs. These qualities included self-regulation, resilience, commitment, and discipline as most critical to career progression, given their correlation to adaptive football activities (training and competition), coping capabilities/strategies and lifestyle choices and behaviours. Mills et al. (2014a) reported the importance of quality, trustworthy and transparent staff, liaising and respecting parents as stakeholders, encouraging athlete engagement, achievement orientation, discipline, challenge and inspiration, and the provision of quality accommodation and facilities.

Regardless of the entry point, emerging athletes will be subjected to repeated procedures of selection and de-selection across their careers from an early age (Güllich, 2014) with few opportunities for senior contract positions. Looking across the emerging athlete transition, these selection processes start from entry into TDE to J2S. Daily selection occurs for positions in training and competition line-ups within these mainstream selection processes, "sitting out five games in a row" (Bruner et al., 2008, p. 244), sitting out of training because the coach is concentrating on the first side, or being a "body for the first team manager" (Mitchell

et al., 2020, p. 277). If we examine this from a position of truth, there is a disconnect between truth and reality, as participants in Rothwell et al. (2020), highlighted there was a need to eliminate ambiguous expectations, and environments giving “false hope ... sold false dreams” (p.498). Here there is an existential question of responsibility which sits jointly with the athlete to face truth, and the organisation to give it.

Outside brief mentions within other subject-related literature (e.g., Rothwell et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2022), fundamental commercial aspects of being a professional athlete, such as contracting and remuneration, have not been thoroughly reported. In Rothwell et al.’s (2020) paper on drop-out, rugby league players referred to the opportunity cost of forgoing university and better-paid non-sporting jobs as too high a price compared to the contract offers made. In the same article, they reflected on the implications of professional sport, where organisations “like to say it’s a family ... [and] when it doesn’t go their way, it’s a business, and we’ve got to make money” (p. 495). Emerging athletes are often minors, and their guardians will lead the commercial discussions (Storm et al., 2020). In professional sport, athletes typically appoint an intermediary (agent or player-manager) to represent their interests and negotiate with the relevant organisations. In the few articles mentioning this relationship, the participant responses varied in describing them, from ‘necessary evils’ to ‘facilitators and sources of support’. Two examples of positive comments noted the agent “introduced me to the club and helped me with practical stuff concerning the team” and “understood a coach’s mindset and [helped me understand] why I might be sitting on the bench”. On the negative side were players spoke of not listening to their agents as they are only interested when things are going well, or it benefits them directly (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; Storm et al., 2022). From an alternative stakeholder perspective, coaches sometimes saw agents as detrimental to players’ opportunities and mindset, placing unrealistic expectations on their value (Finn & McKenna, 2010). Regardless of perspective, research participants saw collaboration with agents as necessary component to move careers forward, identify opportunities and negotiate financially driven contracts. In summary, the absence of research into the commercial side of dedicated professional sport is significant. Given the fast-paced growth in professional sport, a greater understanding of these events and relationships, and their impact on emerging athletes, is warranted.

3.3.3 Junior-to-Senior Events

Drew et al. (2019) synthesised J2S research in their meta-study, identifying four overarching themes – individual factors, external factors, cultural factors and intervention strategies – and producing a conceptual model (Figure 2.3) helpful in aligning with coping theory. This meta-analysis summarises J2S transitional outcomes as mental health, well-being, and

sports performance. Pehrson et al. (2017) provided additional nuance to the study of J2S, arguing adaption follows four stages: preparation, orientation, adaptation, and stabilisation. While the researchers considered the model validated for Swedish ice hockey players, the findings seem over-simplified in terms of demands, stressors, and relationships for use across a range of sporting contexts.

It would be more apt to describe J2S as a phase within the emerging athlete transition, as it occurs over months if not years. J2S is the 'apprenticeship' period for emerging athletes, where athletes must make more choices about their priorities to cope with the move (Drew et al., 2019). The following quote encapsulates the common sentiment across J2S literature:

They change teammates, [Boxing-Coach], sometimes the position they are playing to suit the teams' style of play. But more than that, the culture changes. They now need to perform to the best of their ability every day. If they don't, they are out the door. The pressure on them is immense. (Morris et al., 2016, p. 381)

J2S reflects conflicting and escalating physical and psycho-social loads, with multiple environmental and relational stressors occurring at the same time (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Jones et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2016; Swainston et al., 2020). Players are coping with stressors, including their ability to absorb high-level technical and tactical skills, and integrate into the organisation and team environment, while remaining determined, disciplined, and working hard despite setbacks. Participants describe the dramatic step up to J2S as 'brutal', with the reality being - *making it* is slim, sitting on the bench, being relegated, feeling isolated or, at worst, being released. An athlete may have all the talent and have done all the hard work but must still wait for an opportunity to step up to an elite contract (Jones et al., 2014; Røyndal et al., 2018).

While players emphasised motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic) and escalating physical demands, coaches highlighted identity awareness, commitment and getting ahead of themselves as sometimes problematic. Here, Jones et al.'s (2014) findings reflect where athlete and staff perspectives differ. Unsurprisingly, staff also highlighted coachability, physicality and technical capabilities. What was unexpected was that the *players* in Jones et al.'s study did not refer to these capabilities, emphasising work ethic as a priority, training load and injuries. Hard work and dedication are well-emphasised expressions in all research articles by all stakeholders in the J2S domain. Yet, sometimes, athletes are simply not good enough (Jones et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2017) or move up too soon (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Jones et al., 2014; Rothwell et al., 2020). This lack of consistency and clarity, firstly on what it takes to thrive at the senior levels adds to concerns for traditional models that measure performance and progression on a narrow and inconsistent set of criteria. Furthermore, using such narrow criteria highlights the potential

for many organisations to dismiss the importance of development, event preparation and timing, particularly in the J2S phase. Recognising this is business, the investment into an emerging athlete has been of some significance at this juncture. As such, one could argue that providing greater support during this event, advantages both the athlete and the organisation (Rothwell et al., 2020)

From an existential coping perspective, preparing athletes with a greater awareness of the demands and expectations of the transition is required – ensuring physical and mental readiness and an understanding of the risks and investment necessary to ‘make it’ (Franck & Stambulova, 2018; Jones et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2016). Social support, role modelling and mentoring were also considered facilitative to coping during the J2S period (Drew et al., 2019). As in TDEs, further research is needed to evidence J2S pathways (successes and failures) in different sporting environments over the lifespan of a cohort of athletes. Furthermore, examining events is idiosyncratic and fails to render the whole experience and the facilitation opportunities; as such research bridging events across the emerging ACD is prioritised (Drew et al., 2019).

3.3.4 Student-Athlete Eligibility and Adaption

A student-athlete collegiate life typically spans four years, from freshman (first-year) to seniors (NCAA, 2023), typically between the ages of 18 and 22 years-old. Over these four years, they will move through stages of maturity and athletic development. The transition phase as a student-athlete includes recruitment and selection into a college (*entry*), surviving freshman year, progressing to graduation (during), and transferring colleges and leaving college (exiting) with a potential move into J2S.

Entry: Participants’ criteria for college selection in Smith and Hardin (2020) included coach and team compatibility, the campus feeling right, proximity to parents and home (also, Barden et al., 2013), and a sense of community. Smith and Hardin (2020) noted none of their study participants mentioned academic pursuits. With collegiate recruitment priorities being to sign the best players, first-year student-athletes were found to be struggling with their “subjugation to lower-status team roles” (Kim et al., 2016, p. 401). Unaccustomed to struggling, they lacked the resources to deal with the failure to make starting line-ups and “losing their confidence in their athletic ability” (p. 401). The challenge for collegiate coaches is ensuring the players remain engaged through this early transition and are retrained to progress to senior playing positions (Kim et al., 2016). Adolescents moving to college may also be migrating away from home. While this is a normal life progression amongst college entrants, student-athlete life differs from their collegiate peers in balancing sport with academic and life demands.

Student-athletes attending college far from home had higher support needs from coaches (Kim et al., 2016); as is the case of the NZ student-athletes in this thesis.

During: Student-athletes spend 33 (Div-I), 31 (Div-II) and 28 (Div-III)⁷ hours in training and competition-related activities per week (NCAA, 2023), with Stokowski et al. (2019) suggesting these hours are under-estimated. Such a high athletic load makes navigating student life difficult from a physical perspective (managing the training load, eating healthily, getting plenty of sleep) and in connecting with peers (Rothschild-Checroune et al., 2012; Stokowski et al., 2019).

The coach in Kim et al. (2016) emphasised the importance of athletes being well prepared and efficiently managing their time, as academic failure (eligibility) results in athlete dismissal. Athletes speak of “not having much time to waste”, “having to push through ... like if you’re tired, or you have a headache”, having the time to do the work but being so tired, “you just want to eat and get into bed and go to sleep” (Rothschild-Checroune et al., 2012). Conversely, one football (American) athlete in the same study described football as bringing structure to his academic commitments. While US colleges do provide athlete advisors to support student-athletes in course selection, work balance and eligibility compliance (Rubin & Huml, 2022; Rubin & Lewis, 2020); the perception of the quality of this support differed between the athletic directors and the athletes (Moore, 2016).

For 98% of student-athletes, the end of college signals the end of their professional sporting careers (NCAA-2018, as cited in Stokowski et al., 2019). Stokowski et al.’s (2019) participants described “feeling lost”, “mourning the loss of a sport family” (p. 411) and missing the athletic camaraderie. During their student days, the participants described being restricted in course selection, being used to having someone tell them “what to do and when to do it” (p. 413) and dealing with injuries. Some athletes in this study enjoyed a sense of freedom after they finished, particularly those who had prepared for life after college. One participant described basketball as teaching him how to “push through the fear of failure and deal with that ambiguity” (p. 415). Interestingly, several participants moved from college into sports staff roles, suggesting a desire to retain their sporting identities.

Remarkably, there is limited robust literature on student-athlete eligibility and adaption beyond the literature described above, and no literature is available in context to Australasian student-athlete demographics. Bringing collegiate athlete research under the ACD umbrella offers another dimension to the study of emerging athlete transitions, and further research in this domain is warranted. With increased value in athletic programmes and scholarships

⁷ Divisions (Div-I to III) are a classification used US collegiates for level of NCAA programme and competition, with Div-I being the highest. This is further explained in Chapter 7.

(Boehm, 2022) and, more recently, student-athlete name, image and likeness (NIL) commercial endorsements (NCAA, n.d.-a), this is a significant element of the professional ACD today. NZ has no such college student-athlete structure, and with seemingly growing numbers of individuals in various sports now pursuing US College scholarship programmes a greater understanding of this pathway is particularly valuable.

3.3.5 Leaving Home and/or Leaving the Country

In addition to collegiate experiences of leaving home, increased globalisation of sport, has made it more common for athletes (and coaches) to move between countries to pursue lucrative professional athletic careers (Ely & Ronkainen, 2021). Entering professional pathways can require emerging athletes leave home to some even migrating internationally. For some young athletes, the opportunity to progress in sport offered a way out of difficult or harmful environments they were living in and/or a chance at a better life for themselves or their families (Ely & Ronkainen, 2021; Jones et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2022).

The migration of boxers globally, and boxing as an opportunity for a better life, is familiar rhetoric, with big promoters centred predominately in the UK and the US. For boxers, often from poor countries, becoming wealthy through boxing is an aspiration of many emerging athletes (Hopkinson, 2022). Yet the realities are, unfortunately, far from the expectations, as they “encounter racialised structural inequalities which locate them as a cheap source of expendable labour” (Hopkinson, 2022, p. 726).

The work of Ryba et al. (2016) has led the direction on sports trans-national migration research, recognising a need for the preparation and adaption (cultural and sociocultural) support for these events. Their study highlighted the “challenges” as including changes in playing environments and style, issues of language and logistics, different ways of being/living, and most notably “In Denmark they took me as a person, In Finland, they took me only as an athlete” (p. 9). Other relatable studies in the migration and leaving home domain, centred mainly on football athletes, and one ice-hockey study (Bruner et al., 2008). While this may be a limitation of the search criteria, no studies were identified in Australasian sport, indicating a need for a wider demographic spread of investigations.

These studies found clubs and agents often require decisions within short timeframes resulting in “chaos” as athletes (and/or their families attempt to manage relocation logistics and prepare for the move (Storm et al., 2022, p. 6). For the Danish footballers in the study by Storm et al. (2022), this involved moving to other European cities away from their families and highlighted the pressure to make the right decision at the right time, while domestic participants

moved cities, travelled long distances to training, or lived away from their family homes (Bruner et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2017).

Environments young athletes move into vary, dependent on club resources, contract terms, athlete age and personal preferences. Relocation includes residential options such as foster families, athletes' own places, or club academy-managed housing, while some move into school-based residential TDEs (Rongen et al., 2021; Storm et al., 2022; Swainston et al., 2020). Some athletes experienced supportive alternate-home environments, others had challenges, and some enjoyed the freedom; "but with billets they don't care as much as your parents do ... Just do your own thing" (Bruner et al., 2008, p. 246).

For some, the challenges were appraised as opportunities to become independent and fulfil their professional career dreams "to make a living out of what [they] truly love" (Storm et al., 2022, p. 8). For others, it was simply too much and led to withdrawal from the programmes (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017). The need to become independent and to grow up quickly was expressed by participants as 'no one's going to cook for you' (Jones et al., 2014; Pehrson et al., 2017). Many research participants spoke of feeling homesick, isolated and alone and the culture shock (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; Storm et al., 2022). As such, athletes were found to need strong self-belief, robust coping strategies and access to facilitative support networks to leave home and succeed in a professional sports career (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; Ely & Ronkainen, 2021; Storm et al., 2022).

Given the extent between risk and reward of young athletes moving away from their home environments and support systems, this event would benefit from further investigation, particularly in relation to NZ athletes moving Trans-Tasman or to US Colleges.

3.3.6 Physical Demands and Injuries

In reality, emerging players' adolescent bodies are still growing; surprisingly, though, the athletes in Jones et al. (2014) "dismissed the importance of physical size and skill in lieu of work ethic" (p. 38). Perhaps there is an inherent assumption that all players getting this far have talent and athleticism; the difference, therefore, is work ethic. The J2S step-up is significant in terms of speed, physicality, strength, and performance demands (Bruner et al., 2008; Mills et al., 2014a; Pehrson et al., 2017). Niggles and injuries are a regular feature as emerging players are not used to the intense demands of senior sport (Franck & Stambulova, 2018). Storm et al. (2022) found three of the eight players in the study were injured in the first three months of relocation, with five in total injured for more than four weeks in the first 12 months. Storm suggested migration stress increased players' vulnerability to injuries, making them more willing

to play with higher risks to justify their contracts or not be left behind. Storm et al.'s (2022) study is limited by a small sample size, and the authors emphasise no causal evidence is provided. However, the qualitative statements contextualise emerging athletes' pressures and isolation in the J2S phase. Even minor injuries can create panic in emerging players, who fear not being seen, losing fitness/conditioning, or losing their opportunities, which could lead to them giving up (Mitchell et al., 2020). Finally, outside these obvious demands, players in rugby league studies commented on their frustrations at being forced to play a certain style or in a specific position which limited their development, with inferences that Pasifika physicality represented brawn rather than skill (Panapa & Phillips, 2014; Rothwell et al., 2020).

Despite the evidence on physical load, there is little emphasis on dealing with injuries in ACD literature. This is likely to be a limitation of the ACD directed search criteria, this expansive scope is outside the capacity of this thesis. However, it is important to mention, injuries demand appraisal and access to tangible, psychological, and social resources to cope, and Morris et al. (2017) found physiotherapists often provide emotional support in dealing with these types of demands. A greater understanding of how emerging athletes appraise and adapt to fatigue and injury is required to enhance practitioner knowledge in facilitating emerging athlete coping when experiencing these events.

3.3.7 Early Exits

Only 1.3% of Premier League club academy players progressed to senior professional football, with 50% leaving by age 16 (McGlinchey et al., 2022). For many emerging athletes, there is a misconception selection into pathways systems means they have 'made it' (Bruner et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2014). Unfortunately, similar statistical analysis is rare across sporting codes. The reality is there are only a small number of professional playing positions and only a tiny percentage of athletes who do 'make it,' with many so-called talented athletes exiting as teenagers (Rongen et al., 2021). Limited outcome-directed research also extends to a lack of literature on exit events in the emerging ACD.

McGlinchey et al. (2022) described early exits as traumatic, as athletes go "from everything to nothing in a split second" (p. 7), with exits involving de-selection for performance and/or injury. Rothwell et al. (2020) extended early exits to include withdrawals due to poor contract offers, poor coach: athlete relationships, and acceptance of the numbers who can play at the top level. Participants in this study spoke of being sold false hopes and unrealistic player expectations. McGlinchey et al. (2022) described athlete experiences of 'foreshadowing release' when being "left out in the cold" or "side-lined" (p. 6) in the interim period between falling from grace and being told of their exit. The range of responses by participant athletes suggested a

variety of responses: self-responsibility, what-ifs and blaming of others. For example, “I regret not working harder”, “In the back of my mind, I knew I wasn’t good enough”, and “what if I just rested [my injury] some days” (p. 6). The participants described emotions on ending as “literally gutted”, “depression”, “anger”, “so down” and grief “like [losing] their family” and “worry,” “going from a decent amount of money” to nothing (McGlinchey et al., 2022, pp. 7-8). Exiting athletes recognise self-responsibility, while others feel betrayed by being cut loose, blaming coaches and organisations. One mitigating factor the McGlinchey study established was the release of multiple players from the TDE at a fixed time, providing a shared experience and support network. More typically, one participant described post-exit support as tokenistic, “off you go and that was it”, highlighting a lack of “club aftercare” (McGlinchey et al., 2022, pp. 8-9).

The duty of care for ensuring personal development resides not only in the exit event but also in preparing emerging athletes for the inevitable end (earlier for some than for others). The need for TDEs to take responsibility for personal development in conjunction with athletic development is undisputed (Hauser et al., 2022; Henriksen et al., 2010; Rongen et al., 2021). Yet research on achieving this culture across organisations is still immature. The replication of studies cataloguing environmental problems is unlikely to advance knowledge on facilitating better life outcomes for emerging athletes, especially those with short-lived careers. Williams and MacNamara (2020) identified the importance of offering emerging athletes an opportunity to reframe their athletic development timespan, recognising successful completions and skills developed (e.g., resiliency, relationship development, time management) as transferrable to other avenues of their lives. Participants differed in “feeling behind” or “not really behind” their non-sporting peers, with the response depending on which academy they exited (Rongen et al., 2021). Also poignant was the athletes’ ability to see early exits as successful completions in the study by Williams and MacNamara (2020) though not in that of McGlinchey et al. (2022). These findings give us hope that environments with the right intention and organisational cultures can offer emerging athletes opportunities to expand their identities, interests, and social networks beyond sport, providing an easier transition on exit. More studies investigating positive examples of these practices would be invaluable to academic and organisational knowledge and implementations.

3.4 Relational Demands and Support

In the literature referenced above, social support, in varying degrees, was seen as a means of coping with athlete events and transitions. Jones et al. (2014) stated the importance of young athletes having a variety of positive and encouraging support networks to turn to. The same study found athletes often receive support from sources that can cause them pressure –

family, friends, teammates, coaches, and managers – with some differentials in power leading to extreme conflict and abuse (Hauser et al., 2022). The three areas covered in this section are coach, parental and peer relationships. Beyond these roles, the importance of educated helpers and other support staff is also recognised (Jones et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2016), particularly in times of crisis (refer to “Facilitating Transitions” above). This section examines the literature discussing relational demand events associated with coaches, parents and peers.

3.4.1 Coach

The most dominant relationship in the sporting context is considered to be the coach: athlete relationship. The athlete sees the head coach as the decision-maker in their career. It is difficult to determine from the reported findings, even in cross-stakeholder analyses (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2016), where athlete versus coach perspectives reflect accuracy or bias and emotion. The research demonstrates athletes and coaches will see selection and performance outcomes differently. Swainston et al. (2020) found some athletes were able to be more open with coaches and staff members, while others felt embarrassed or unable to approach them, worried about showing weakness, the repercussions on selections, or not wanting to be a burden. Coaches recognise a need to maintain a distance because of selection decisions and/or perceived bias (Morris et al., 2016). While common athlete comments included, “Show me you care”, “the coach did not take a liking to me”, “he spent more time with certain players” (i.e., favouritism), and we “did not have clarity on what we need to work on ... too many players at training” (Williams & MacNamara, 2020, p. 6) or he was “always shouting, always screaming his head off” (Rothwell et al., 2020, p. 493). For a dropped player, “I’m pretty bitter toward the coaches ... sometimes you want them to show a little bit of confidence in you” (Bruner et al., 2008, p. 245). Coaches, in response, speak of players who demand opportunities and respect that are not earned (Jones et al., 2014; Pehrson et al., 2017) and who must be able to cope with setbacks (Finn & McKenna, 2010).

3.4.2 Parents

As athletes realise the importance of the coach in selection decisions, “the gaffer [becomes] the one I listen to now” and the influence of parental involvement reduces in significance (Morris et al., 2017, p. 532). Parental involvement is significant in the early phases of emerging athlete careers, particularly in adolescent age brackets. Legal guardianship is necessary to commit to contracts with agents, clubs, and promoters or to leave home and migrate overseas. Parents must represent the athletes’ interests under the legal age and provide tangible resources that enable them to enter financial commitments (TDEs are not

always free of charge). However, as athletes mature from TDE to J2S, players and staff spoke of high parental expectations and parents failing or struggling to step back. Players describe parental influence as overpowering, with parents wanting to analyse the training and games when players wish to switch off after work (Morris et al., 2017) and coaches in one study implying parents' interference can adversely affect athlete selections and careers (Mitchell et al., 2020). Collins et al. (2016b) found athletes whose family support sat outside the athletic inputs (e.g., a coach as a father) were more capable and consequently more successful. The researchers suggested parental push and/or detrimental training and game analysis potentially limits an athlete's ability to self-reflect and cope with setbacks and challenges. However, the significance of family/whānau/aiga in Māori and Pasifika culture is central to the values and meaning athletes bring to their sports involvement (Lakisa et al., 2014; Panapa & Phillips, 2014).

Researchers articulate the conflict athletes face when speaking of the effort, dedication and sacrifices parents have made, logistically, financially, and emotionally (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; Morris et al., 2017; Storm et al., 2022). For example, an athlete in McGlinchey et al. (2022) spoke of the shame of being unable to repay his parents and not wanting to burden them when released from the club. Additionally, researchers note parents are dealing with transitional events and relationships during these times, calling for additional resources and support (e.g., communication, education, workshops) for parents too (Mills et al., 2014a; Mitchell et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2017).

3.4.3 Peers

In athlete: peer relationships, articles refer to out-of-sport friendships dissipating (Morris et al., 2017; Storm et al., 2022). Athletes sacrificed social engagements and were met with pressure from friends to comply with adolescent norms of partying or playing recreational sport with their mates (Morris et al., 2017). Equally, non-sport friends are an opportunity to take time out; losing these removes a potential facilitative effect on athlete foreclosure (Hauser et al., 2022; Larsen et al., 2014). In the team environment, the shift from friends outside of sport to teammates provides a buffer to the pressures of high-performance demands. Bonds between teammates can provide a shared understanding of the environment and circumstances, instigate banter and fun, or provide an outlet to vent to or lift one up (Bruner et al., 2008; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013). Junior (emerging) players also consider senior players idols, and these senior players could provide beneficial role-modelling and a source of support (Brown et al., 2023; Pehrson et al., 2017; Swainston et al., 2020). Shared cultural alliances with peers and senior players were considered helpful for emerging athlete integration into teams, especially when these connections offered a coherent understanding of each-others Indigenous values and

behaviours, specifically in migrating into Australian NRL clubs (Panapa & Phillips, 2014). Teammates become even more valuable support resources when players are away from home, regardless of environment or sports code (Bruner et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2020; Rothschild-Checroune et al., 2012; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013).

However, the team dynamic can shift quickly when a player perceives a fellow team-member as a threat to his position (i.e., as a rival). Sentiments of rivalry were reported in both football and rugby league studies: “you are a young lad trying to take their place in the team” (Swainston et al., 2020, p. 7). Røynesdal et al. (2018) described this environment as an “interchangeable dyad of hostility and friendliness” (p. 32). As an apprentice, one must have “outstanding survival strength” (p. 32), physically, mentally and socially to adapt, respectful but assertive. Participants spoke of difficulties fitting into the team and becoming comfortable with senior players, being tested and put through the paces, exposure to foul language, dealing with adult conversations and activities (marriage, kids, boozing, gambling), and having to grow up fast (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2016; Storm et al., 2022). Boxing gyms operate inside strictly controlled protocols and pecking orders (Wacquant, 1995). Boxers refer to the importance of training partners leading up to fights, describing the camaraderie as a “bond and a band of brothers” yet combative rivalry is also present (Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013, p. 114)

The existential dichotomies between demand, expectations and unconditional support are most evident in athlete: parent relationships. Similarly, there is a conflict between organisational relationships, friendship and rivalry, ego-building and criticism, and selection decisions and the independence of support. The tension in sporting relationships in professional sports is a subtext in studies surrounding emerging athletes. Still, it deserves closer attention, particularly if organisations want to understand *how* engagements enhance recipients’ performance, not merely to catalogue techniques and approaches (Tod et al., 2019).

3.5 Chapter Summary

The literature in this review falls broadly under three categories: investigations of the environment, investigations of athletes’ experiences from their own and other stakeholders’ perspectives, and practitioner experiences. Linking research to real life is difficult because sport is dynamic and multi-faceted. In contrast, research requires that most things are controlled, consistent, and limited to only a few variables (Ashton, 2020). However, investigating emerging athlete transitions requires a longitudinal view to provide an end-to-end view of the phenomenon and/or phases from entry to outcome (Drew et al., 2019). The research scope also

demands a multi-faceted view because the athlete does not operate in isolation from their relationships or environment (Sartre, 1943/2018). Equally, the use of research designs which rely solely on retrospective interview data collection methods (Drew et al., 2019) and/or research using framework models and instruments (e.g., HDEM, ATDE, TDEQ etc.) must ensure they are clearly aligned to a methodology and/or findings are not manipulated to fit the model (Drew et al., 2019).

Regardless, the body of literature identified and analysed in this chapter, reflects depth in some events, in particular, selection events, J2S, and emerging athlete migrations (albeit football dominant) and the coach, role model and athlete relationships. Previous research has shown the complexity and broad range of the relationships athletes have. These relationships extend from organisational, family and community to, not least, the intra-relationships athletes have with themselves. These relationships bring both expectations and support, and often conflicting and dynamic challenges (Bruner et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2016).

This confirms opportunities to expand the demographic (country, sport, organisations) and the emerging events. In particular, the gaps in understanding the definitions and integration of phases, events and stakeholder relationships as an end-to-end transition, and to expand and clarify the framework for emerging athlete environments and facilitation (per Stambulova et al, 2020). In doing so there is a potential to offer practical implementation of findings, contributing new knowledge and creating change. The following chapter presents the research design implemented to extend this body of literature.

CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The aim of this research was to conduct a cross-organisational investigation of athlete transitions in professional sport. Priority was given to emerging athlete transitions into professional or college scholarship contracts. Not all athletes successfully progress from emerging to the subsequent stages of a professional career. It is, therefore, apt that this case study is not only bounded by entry events but also experiences of ‘early exits’ through non-selection, injury, or withdrawal.

In prefacing this chapter, it is essential to emphasise the high value I have put on a pragmatic study in both process and outcomes. The *social problem* this research sought to address is the inadequate resourcing for the athletic and personal development of emerging athlete transitions in professional sport. The intention was to find *solutions* and make *recommendations* to better facilitate emerging athlete transitions for NZ athletes, enabling them to *thrive* in life in and beyond sport, regardless of the events and outcomes they experience. Chapter 4 comprises two sections:

1. Research Design – including the research paradigm, epistemology, ontology, axiology, methodology, methods and analysis within which the study has been guided. The research design is summarised in Table 3.1, with a further explanation following.
2. Research Implementation – including case and participant selection, data collection methods (fieldwork, interviews, and documents/artefacts), case and cross-case analysis and reporting. The implementation approach is summarised in Figure 3.2.

Section 1 draws on recommendations by Carolan et al. (2016) who challenged researchers to “explicitly state their informing philosophical approach, their positioning of ‘self’, and the ethical dimensions of the research” (p. 630). Referencing existential principles as a focus for the research question (as outlined in Chapter 2) demands consistency in methodological approach, analysis and interpretation of findings and, most specifically, the researcher’s ontological philosophy. A pragmatic paradigm, with Maarouf’s (2019) reality cycle underlining the epistemological principles, informed the design of this study and the methodological choice of a QMCS approach.

Table 4.1
Summary of Research Design

RESEARCH PARADIGM	PRAGMATISM
My purpose for doing this research	This pragmatic thesis is premised on analysing a contemporary social issue (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019) in order to facilitate solutions to identified problems (Powell, 2001).
EPISTEMOLOGY	REALITY CYCLE
What constitutes Knowledge: The existence of reality or truth	There is no single truth, but there are patterns of combined truth, given psycho-social, cultural, environmental, and temporal contexts that can explain the “common threads in the messiness of life” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 7).
	Reality evolves with time (the reality cycle) as perceptions change behaviours and behaviours influence context. A ‘single reality’ only exists by combining multiple individual perspectives and behaviours within a defined time and context (Maarouf, 2019).
ONTOLOGY	EXISTENTIAL BEING – Essence over Existence (Sartre, 1943/2018).
Researchers view of being – individual or part of a social system	Individuals are of themselves and have responsibility for the choices they make. However, individuals cannot separate themselves from others and the world (social and physical) they exist in.
AXIOLOGY	EXPERIENTIAL INFLUENCE
View of how researcher values influence or guide research. Can the researcher set self aside?	Research can be an agency to influence change. We are responsible to others to help facilitate ideas and solutions to practical problems. In this research the researcher is an active participant and as such must make active choices, which cannot be completely isolated from their own lived experiences. The researcher, however, has the capability if sufficiently self-aware and moderated, to look at phenomena from both subjective and objective perspectives and catalogue the difference.
METHODOLOGY	QUALITATIVE INSTRUMENTAL MULTI-CASE STUDY (QMCS) (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006; Swanborn, 2010)
Theoretical Approach	QMCS provides a systematic methodology to explore differences within and between cases in anticipation of finding patterns. Increasing the number of cases makes more information available to support recommendations and solutions to identifiable problems.
METHODS	<i>Stratified</i> sources of data collection allow for triangulation of findings (fieldwork, interviews, and document/artefact analysis). Fieldwork conducted by <i>researcher-practitioner</i> allows an insider perspective through active engagement and immersion in the activity.
Data Collection, Analysis and Reporting	The data analysis approach uses an iterative cross-case process using <i>reflexive thematic analysis</i> with semantic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2020) repeated until cases are completed, and all themes are exhausted. Case findings are reported in descriptive formats, illustrative of the key themes identified in each of the cases. These are combined into a cross-case analysis report and drawn together with conceptual model(s).

Section 2 outlines the implementation approaches underpinned by the design, providing a robust method to analyse and report on this dynamic environment. Furthermore, this methodology aligns with my desire (axiology) to conduct a project offering additional academic knowledge to the sports literature domain and provides opportunities to deliver pragmatic operational solutions.

4.1 Research Design

This section describes the research design adopted for this thesis, which is framed under paradigm, epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology, as summarised in Table 4.1. The positioning of methodological choice and methods are complementary to my definition of knowledge, truth and being. The research was conducted within a pragmatic determination of knowledge. The ontological positioning of this research sits in existential theory and is consistent with the theoretical framework underpinning the research question (refer Chapter 2). In simple terms, the research paradigm for this thesis is summarised as follows:

"Some reasonably stable relationships can be found among the idiosyncratic messiness of life" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 7).

4.1.2 Pragmatic Paradigm

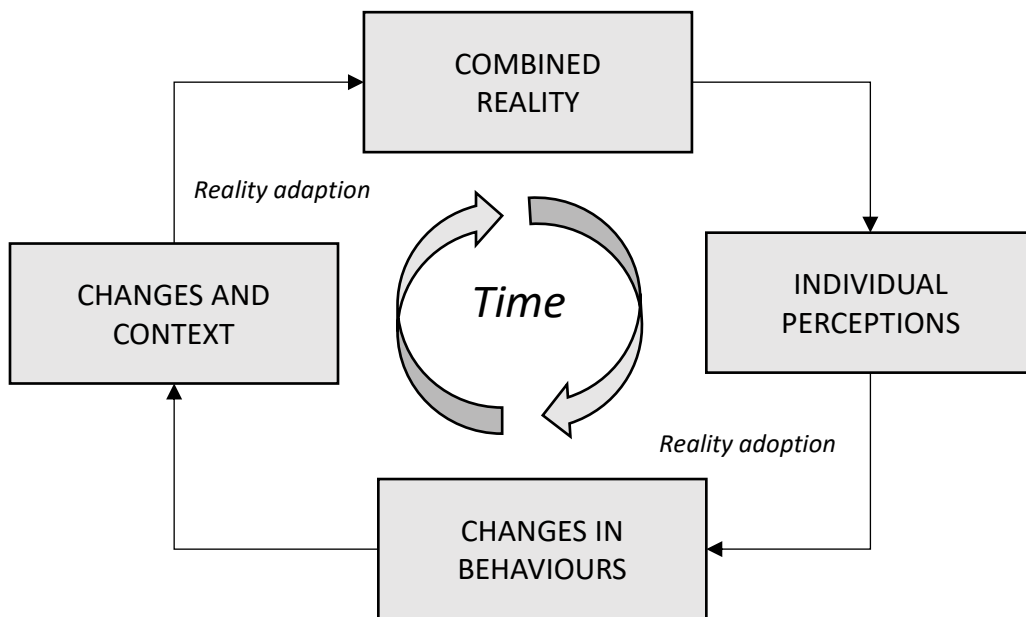
Knowledge defined using a pragmatic paradigm allows a researcher to employ methods purported to best fit the research questions posed. William James, one of the founding philosophers of pragmatism, offered pragmatism as a philosophy for settling disputes that may otherwise never be concluded. Pragmatism is proposed as a method of tracing *a notion* to its respective practical consequences (James, 1907). As a researcher-practitioner, I chose pragmatism as my research paradigm, given its consistency with my objectives to find reasonable patterns of psycho-social behaviour in the complex sporting world, and intending to provide practical solutions that contribute to the lives of emerging athletes. Pragmatism is often criticised as more aligned with an approach than an epistemological definition of truth (Maarouf, 2019). Due to its flexibility, research gatekeepers challenge its application as a 'grab bag', a quick or lazy fix to research design positioning (Creswell, 2014; Maarouf, 2019). The most significant debate on pragmatism's authenticity is with regard to its use as a theoretical argument for mixed methods research. The need to address its application for this research is less concerned about the qualitative versus quantitative debate than the argument for single or multiple realities (ontology) and objective versus subjective truth (axiology). Using a simplistic definition of pragmatism will not address these concerns. The following sections explain my position of a

pragmatic paradigm to ensure cohesiveness to my position as a practitioner-researcher and in the determination of reality and desire to source practical applications in the cases.

4.1.2 Epistemology

Powell (2001) suggested that “to a pragmatist, the mandate of science is not to find truth and reality, the existence of which is perpetually in dispute, but to facilitate human problem solving” (p. 884). The importance of this quote is not only that pragmatically directed research is applied in process and intention but equally that Powell refers to its perpetual nature. This perpetual nature is cross-referenced with the dynamic determination of reality referred to by Maarouf. In attempting to answer the interminable *notion* of single versus multiple realities, Maarouf presents the *reality cycle* (Figure 4.2) as a dynamic phenomenon, combining multiple individual perceptions with the boundaries of time and context (Maarouf, 2019, Figure 1, p. 7). A single reality can be determined, but only inside a defined time period and a specified context (psycho-social, cultural, historical, environmental). For instance, in this research, a single reality may be determinable for a team competing in a specified sport/competition over a given season.

Figure 4.2
Maarouf Reality Cycle



Note. Adapted from Maarouf (2019).

Within these boundaries, an organisational culture may establish and become adopted by the individual incumbents involved. However, after a period or a change in context, the adopted single reality adapts as people’s perceptions (thoughts and feelings) adapt as a consequence of human interaction and behaviours (their own and those of others). In my example, at the end of the season, a new coach brings a different set of perceptions altering and

adapting the organisation's reality. Even without such a significant change, individual behaviours can alter the context. For example, if a team is winning, the team protocols (including artefacts, perceptions, and behaviours) may be more stable. If the context changes, then reality will adapt over time to these and create a new combined reality, and so the cycle continues.

While these definitions of reality initially seem contradictory to my ontology, I argue the reality cycle does align with existential theory. The reality cycle reflects James' notion that "theories become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest" (James, 1907, p. 53). Time and context, which contribute to the dimension of meaning, are integral environmental determinants of the human experience of being in the world (Sartre, 1943/2018). As Sartre suggested, we are thrown into the world, and through our choices, we perpetually create our own essence (or realities). This dynamic interpretation recognises the combining of multiple individual realities. The reality cycle recognises the influence of multiple human relationships and individual perceptions and behaviours in creating a single reality. Marrouf (2019) recognised individual roles and meanings (truths) but argued a single combined reality can exist in well-defined time and context. I argue that pragmatic epistemological research is consistent with existential ontological investigations.

With these principles in mind, a pragmatic research paradigm fits with an epistemology premised on this cycle of reality. This research design allows me to provide recommendations alongside findings to facilitate emerging athletes to cope with events and situations more effectively during their transition into professional sport. In doing so, I can offer more extensive institutional knowledge and/or solutions to identified problems in these dynamic sporting cases. Such a reality exists within case-study boundaries of time, context, and people (as outlined in the "Research Implementation").

4.1.3 Ontology

Existence precedes essence; we are free to choose who we become (Sartre, 1943/2018). Sartrean philosophy positions individuals as 'being in the world'. Sartre offers the Big-5 existential concerns on identity, meaning, freedom (of choice and consequential responsibility), isolation and death. We cannot divorce ourselves from this world (Sartre, 1943/2018). Individuals are unavoidably positioned in their relationships with the environment and others (Buber, 1965). Individuals have a desire for authenticity and connection in their relationships with others. To be authentic is to act in good faith, true to our own identity and meaning, as we seek to avoid isolation and loneliness to protect ourselves from the anguish of our freedom

(Sartre, 1943). My adoption of Sartre's existential ontology is founded on these interpretations of freedom and authenticity.

Sartrean existentialism forms the foundation of my axiology but extends to modern existential thinkers specialising in sports research and practices (Aggerholm, 2015; Nesti, 2004). Investigating self (and relation to others) provides individuals with resources for decision-making and coping, particularly during transition, change or crisis (Nesti, 2004). As a researcher-practitioner, I consider my coaching and mentoring practices take a 'person-centred existential' approach. The foundations of existential psychology articulate the necessity for the individual to find their own solutions by recognising the truth in the circumstances and events they face (Nesti, 2004). Truth is particularly relevant in supporting adolescent athletes whose (sometimes unrealistic) dream is to transition into professional sport. Although Rogers (1995) himself did not refer to any existential unpinning, the tension between humanistic and existential ontologies both immerse themselves in 'one's being' (Arnett, 1982). Rogers' work suggests that individuals are inherently self-aware and have "within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes and self-directed behaviour" (Rogers, 1995, p. 115). Chapter 2 further documents the existential framework adopted for this study.

4.1.4 Axiology

Following my earlier definition of pragmatic reality, as a researcher, I must unpack and present multiple individual perceptions and offer one consolidated reality within definable boundaries of time and context. To authentically interpret people's experiences, I must interpret these perceptions and behaviours subjectively and objectively, with sufficient specificity of time and context. Sartre considered efforts to reduce and document the complex personality of an individual ineffectual and that to gain some understanding of the person, I must go beyond categorisations to reveal their "transitions, the becoming's, the transformations", most of which "have been carefully hidden" from us (Sartre, 1943/2018, p. 726). In reality, we never fully know what is in the heart and mind of the other.

However, subjective viewpoints become more objective when individual responses are expressed rather than merely observed (Maarouf, 2019). In this study, my responses and perceptions as a researcher-practitioner also contribute to interpreting a shared reality. Being axiologically aware of my values and biases, being person-centred (Rogers, 1995) and being transparent in my approach minimise the risks of diverting truth (Braun et al., 2019). Converse to risk, insider participant research arguably enriched the qualitative research and provided more insight without threatening participants and/or manipulating the results (Maarouf, 2019).

Having prior knowledge and experience (time and context) adds additional depth to the research topic and interpretations if I remain mindful and use critical friends to ensure the integrity of findings.

4.1.5 Methodology

A qualitative case study methodology is the best approach to understanding the complex developmental processes and relationships emerging professional athletes experience (Stake, 1995). A longitudinal, in-depth study is preferable with transitional events lasting weeks, if not months, rather than days. When experiencing significant events presenting opportunities or threats to their professional sporting career, athletes typically rely on relationships inside and outside their professional organisational environment. This study is bounded by the emerging athlete and their relationships (people) during a period of transitional events (time) across three sports codes (boxing, basketball, rugby league) and one role-based case (sports practitioner) in their professional sports environment (environment).

Case studies are classified as explanatory (used to explain causal links), exploratory (explore situations with no clear outcomes), descriptive (describe a phenomenon in real-life context), and as intrinsic (to understand a specific case in detail) or instrumental (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Instrumental is the term used by Stake (1995) to describe case studies seeking to accomplish an insight into an issue and are designed to help to refine a theory or facilitate our understanding of the subject area. Instrumental case studies allow for rich descriptions to help develop conceptual ideas and support the ongoing development of theories and models (Merriam, 1998).⁸ Additionally, case studies are classified as singular or collective/multi-case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This research project used an *instrumental multi-case* methodology (QMCS). Investigating multiple cases expands the opportunities to replicate or contrast results for a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon (Stake, 2006). As more cases are added, more information becomes available to enhance a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of professional sport (Lucas et al., 2018; Stake, 2006). The QMCS methodology requires an overarching proposition, question, or binding concept that ‘forms an umbrella’ over all cases under investigation. The aims of this research were to understand relational experiences that support positive emerging athlete development and outcomes during their transition in professional sport. Where Swanborn’s (2010) case methodology sits more towards the positivist end of the continuum, Stake (1995) is positioned towards the constructivist end. This research is less concerned with the determination of causality and more interested in

⁸ Merriam (1998) refers to *instrumental* case studies as *interpretative*. However, I adopt Stake (1995) term *instrumental* to avoid confusion with interpretative methodologies.

research supporting the development of pragmatic solutions. However, drawing on both Swanborn and Stake's systematic approaches provided input into the customised research design implemented (refer to "Research Implementation", below).

The QMCS methodology allows a researcher to explore theories and theorists that are well suited to the complexities of the research question and combine these with the researcher's design preferences (Lucas et al., 2018). The methodology implemented commences with a theoretical framework (outlined in Chapter 2) and combines this with a stratified set of data sources, including fieldwork observations, interviews, and document reviews inside multiple cases. Using a conceptual framework does not mean that the researcher accepts these theories as something to be held up as factual but uses them as a starting point to frame the interpretation of the findings (Merriam, 1998; Swanborn, 2010). The selection of ideas should focus on areas offering the best opportunity to learn the most (Stake, 2006). This research also takes advantage of my 'insiderness' as a researcher-practitioner, which provides on-the-ground, real-time access to people, issues, and data (Lucas et al., 2018). Finally, using descriptive reporting in the individual case findings provides a combination of descriptive and instrumental design. Case findings report the inputs to cross-case analysis, with cross-case reporting concluding the instrumental components of the research methodology.

Case study research is commonly cited as lacking in its ability to achieve generalisability. However, I posit it is highly probable that common patterns or insights can emerge when the case is tightly bound, the proposition well defined, and data sources stratified (Lucas et al., 2018). QMCS provides a valuable methodological foundation for interpreting sports environments. It allows the researcher (within defined boundaries) to focus on social interactions and explore how different participants interpret meaning and actions in the existing system. QMCS recognises the existence of multiple individual realities across and within participants, stakeholders, and cases (Swanborn, 2010). This methodology provides a solid foundation for formulating a 'single reality' using subjective and objective lenses (Maarouf, 2019). Combining multi-case and stratified data sources provides a robust and pragmatic methodology for exploring the commonalities and differences within and between cases and provides greater opportunities to find meaningful patterns (Lucas et al., 2018; Stake, 2006).

In summary, this methodology is consistent with pragmatic epistemology. Using QMCS methodology is consistent with my epistemological (Maarouf, 2019) and axiological claim that some patterns can be found in the messiness of life (Miles et al., 2014). This pragmatic case methodology is considered a systematic in-depth approach to examining real-life, real-time problems (outcomes) within the defined temporal and contextual experiences of the individuals involved. The QMCS methodology allowed me to explore solutions to problems from different

angles and sources through first-hand experience. The intention was to “deduce the specific conditions under which [the most] desirable state of the system can be obtained” (Swanborn, 2010, p. 33). A reductionist approach isolating participant experiences from time and context would not have served the objective of this research.

4.1.6 Methods

Using the QMCS methodology provided a structured approach for an in-depth investigation of complex functioning sporting systems (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The method used multiple sources of stratified data collection, including participant observation, interviews, and document/artefact collection (scholarly, public and social media, and public reports). Insider-based fieldwork (as a researcher-practitioner in my instance) allows for close and personal collaboration between researchers and participants. Insider-observation-based fieldwork offers a trusted insider’s viewpoint (Wagstaff et al., 2012). The inside, real-time perspective, obtained over a longitudinal period, allowed me to examine critical transitional events in professional sport across three sports codes. It was an appropriate method for unpicking the psycho-socio-cultural experiences in the three case environments (Krane & Baird, 2005). It provided in-depth research with minimal disruptions to and in the participants’ natural surroundings (Krane, 2005). The approach included sensitively integrating research-directed fieldwork observations with the day-to-day operations of my business. The capture of participant case experiences during the fieldwork phase supported the framing of conversations with the participants in later interviews. An important element in this research design was the need to record events as they occurred in the day-to-day experiences of the athlete during their interactions with the researcher-practitioner and other relational parties. As such, the researcher gained multiple perspectives from a variety of stakeholders in emerging athletes’ transitional experiences. In this sense, the data collection followed on from work by Sandardos and Chambers (2019) and Ronkainen and Nesti (2017), in addressing both developmental and existential issues for the athlete, myself (as a researcher-practitioner) and the significant others fulfilling roles associated with athlete transitions. Detailed steps and actions are outlined in the “Research Implementation”, but first the theoretical principles of this design are explained.

Case and Participant Selection: The sample of cases and participants was purposive, with convenience sampling conducted through the researcher-practitioner’s contacts and connections within the sporting industry (Etikan, 2016; Gentles, 2015). Stake emphasizes that cases should be chosen for their potential to provide rich information that addresses the research questions (Stake, 1995), while Gentles acknowledging in case research the data collected within and between cases can take varying forms (Gentle, 2015). Braun and Clarke

stipulate determining sample size in qualitative projects is a pragmatic exercise (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The number of Interview participants were extended until the research team determined that sufficient data had been collected to tell a rich, multi-faceted story of the experiences and complexities of emerging athletes and a variety of interacting roles (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Considering the time and resource constraints, the diversity and number of interviews are considered realistic and appropriate to pragmatistic research (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Interviews combined with the extensive fieldwork exposure in all three sports codes and additional document-based research case and participant sample selection were designed to achieve “experiential and perspectival diversity” sufficient to explore the phenomena in depth (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 11).

Analysis: The data collected was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis method recognises the “importance of the researcher's subjectivity as an analytic resource, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data, and interpretation” (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 3). Braun and Clarke (2020) stated that “you cannot enter a theoretical vacuum ... paradigmatic, epistemological, and ontological assumptions inescapably inform analysis” (p. 4). The definitions of the design paradigm set out above meet Braun and Clarke’s criteria. As such, reflexive, inductive, iterative data analysis was considered a robust fit with the pragmatic qualitative MCS methodology. Using semantic coding in reflexive thematic analysis provides for interpretation of the participants’ meaning beyond the exact words, external statements, or representations (Braun et al., 2019). As each level (participant or case), analysis is completed, identified themes are compared to the prototype themes and evaluated for convergent and divergent themes, with decisions being made to modify, add or delete themes (Swanborn, 2010). This process is repeated for all cases. The cross-case analysis then compares and contrasts the themes across the cases until all possibilities have been examined and concluded, and there is a “good understanding of the dynamics underlying the relationship” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 542). In addition to concluding themes, conceptual model(s) are proposed, adapted and formulated throughout this study. The initial conceptual models and theories introduced in Chapter 2, and the final research model(s) are proposed after all analyses have been completed.

Reporting: Case studies appeal to readers because they provide evidence or illustrations people can identify with and provide a variety of presentational modes (descriptions, charts, diagrams, overviews) which give a clear representation of the complexity and relationships between the topics (Merriam, 1998; Swanborn, 2010). Woodman and Hardy (2010) argued “if interview transcriptions are simply reduced into textual summaries and subsequently inserted into a hierarchical tree, the very essence of qualitative research would largely be lost” (p. 210). Stake (1995) suggested the structure of a case report falls somewhere between storytelling and

a traditional research report, which is a fitting description for this thesis report. Merriam (1998) pointed out that it is crucial to consider the audience in the report's writing. The report provides a vicarious insight into the thoughts, emotions and experiences of the athletes and other related parties in each case. The stories are told from the insider perspective of the researcher-practitioner, by combining descriptions with the ad verbatim words of the participants (samples) from the fieldwork notes and the interview transcripts, documental evidence and reflections. These reflections include interpretative questioning of the existential philosophies and framework presented in Chapter 2 (Merriam, 1998). This approach is consistent with thinking while writing, as described by Lofland (1971), cited in Merriam (1998):

One is never truly inside a topic – or on top of it – until one faces the hard task of explaining it to someone else ... [to commit] as text – one can literally see the weaknesses – points overlooked, possibilities unattended, assertions unsupported or unillustrated. (p. 225)

Reflecting while writing is particularly relevant, if not unavoidable, when the researcher is embedded in the experiences as a practitioner in the fieldwork components. The combined descriptions provide a rich and vivid insight into the case phenomena under the primary theme headings identified in the data analysis and the sense-checking of researcher interpretations.

In this thesis, the four case reports are presented as four findings' chapters, each organised into themes (Merriam, 1998). The component stories look inside the real-life emerging athlete settings, challenges to encounters readers may not have an opportunity to access (Merriam, 1998). The selection of samples was carefully considered to ensure confirmability and the overall authenticity of the report, along with balancing the necessity for anonymity in a small sample size. The cross-case analysis and interpretative discussion of common themes, sub-themes and contradictions are reported as a separate discussion chapter followed by conclusions and recommendations consistent with pragmatic case study research.

4.2 Research Implementation

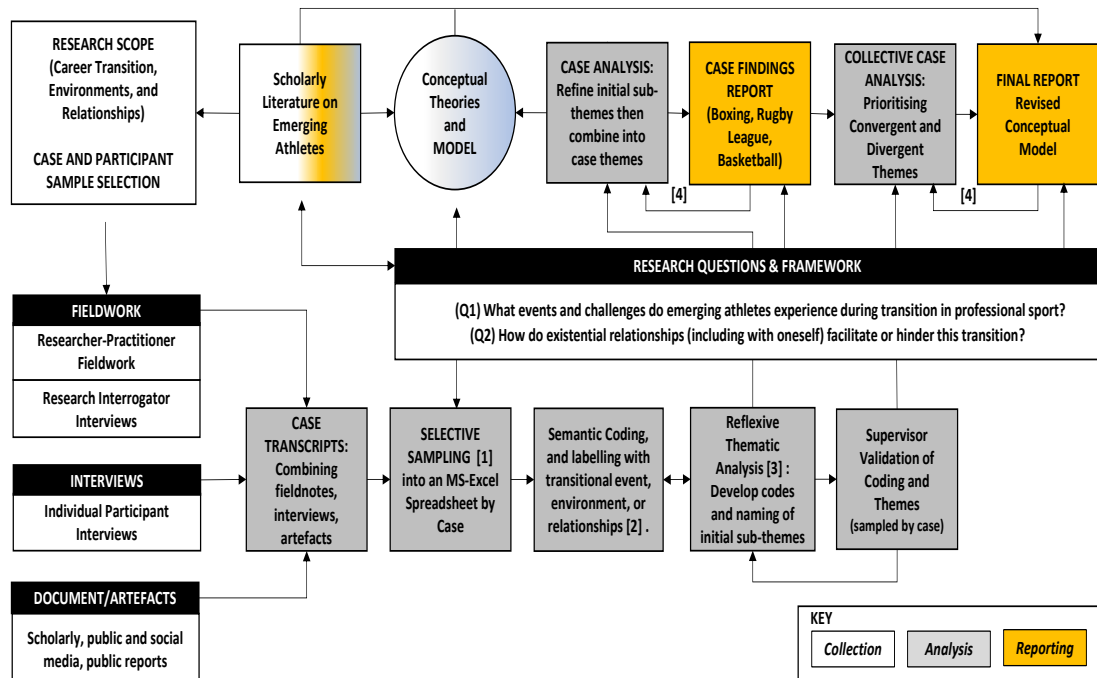
This section details the practical application of the research design, consistent with the methodology and method outlined above. It describes the case and participant selection processes, data collection and analysis, and reporting according to the approaches used. Figure 3.2 summarises the method and the steps carried out to complete this doctoral research study.

This study uses an existentialist framework to explore the events, relational experiences and challenges of emerging athletes transition in professional sport. Following ethical

guidelines, a pragmatic approach was applied to case selection (boxing, rugby league, basketball and practitioner).

Figure 4.2

Schematic of Research Method Implemented



Notes:

1. Selective Sampling involved identifying the instances that are related to the research scope and research questions (70,73)
2. Semantic Code(s) systematic notation for all selective sample in each case, analysing words and meaning, codes use common participant words as codes. Added to each item of coded data, label for scope (career transition, environment, relationship)(78)
3. Reflexive Theoretical Thematic Analysis focuses on patterns and guided by research questions and framework appropriate for participatory and applied research (71)
4. "Thinking while writing leads to new ideas or revisions" (66, p.225), in grouping and naming.

Notes:

1. Selective Sampling involved identifying the instances that are related to the research scope and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Gentles, 2015)
2. Semantic Code(s) systematic notation for all selective sample in each case, analysing words and meaning, codes use common participant words as codes. Added to each item of coded data, label for scope (career transition, environment, relationship) (Braun & Clark, 2013)
3. Reflexive Theoretical Thematic Analysis focuses on patterns and guided by research questions and framework appropriate for participatory and applied research (Braun & Clarke, 2019)
4. "Thinking while writing leads to new ideas or revisions" in grouping and naming.

The sample of cases and participants were purposive with convenience sampling conducted through my contacts and connections within the sporting industry. Purposive sampling is appropriate in case studies involving professional services as it provides variety and creates further opportunities for intensive studies (Stake, 2006). These connections provided an excellent opportunity to conduct in-depth intensive fieldwork and interviews across three sports codes. My role as researcher vis-à-vis practitioner, and my emphasis and balance varied

according to case, time and context, allowing me to combine my experiences working inside sporting codes and alongside athletes and staff.

4.2.1 Case Selection

Table 4.2

Summary of Data Collection Parameters by Case

Case	Data Collection Parameters
1. Boxing	This case examines the researcher-practitioner's involvement with an emerging professional boxing team (Boxer-B) in years 1 and 2, with external observation in year 3, and an individual support relationship (Boxer-A) over the three-year period. Retired Boxer-C was interviewed to broaden case participant experiences.
2. Rugby League	This case examines the NSW pathway, commencing from Harold Matts (junior competition 16-17-years) to Junior-to-Senior transition (typically 20-23-years). Case 2 involved three-years active independent practitioner service (through her academy or individual support relationships) with Players A-F. Players A-F were involved with several different NRL club environments during this time. Player-G, a previous client, was included in the interview phase.
3. Basketball	This case involved independent service with Baller-A and BB-Coach-3 for three years. The case also included six-months wellbeing support with an NZ-NBL team mid-year-1, with the researcher-practitioner continuing support and/or correspondence with participants for the remaining study period.
4. Practitioner	This case examined the researcher-practitioner's own experiences and reflections across the three cases. It combined these with three additional interviews with a sports psychologist, independent trainer, and well-being manager.

Table 4.2 displays the selected cases: three by sports code (boxing, rugby league and basketball) and one by role. Further description of the cases is included in Chapter 1. My connections enabled insider access to the environment and the participants' experiences, including clubs, academies or training facilities (fields, gyms). Boxing and rugby league cases were conducted through my engagements with individual teams and athletes, with fieldwork based on conversations and shared experiences. In Case 3 (basketball), a more formal fieldwork approach was adopted, with approval and support from organisational 'gatekeepers' allowing access to the semi-professional team environment for a season. Selecting three sports codes, one individual and two team-based sports, extends the research scope for more independence and variety in the information. The exact timeframes for the fieldwork period are omitted from

this report to provide additional protection to the anonymity of the participants. However, the data collection was carried out over a three-year timespan.

4.2.2 Participant Selection

Participants were selected as best placed for their knowledge and insight into the phenomenon (purposive), their convenience (accessibility, availability) and their willingness to participate (Etikan, 2016). All participants or individuals entering my sphere of operations as researcher-participants were informed of my PhD undertaking, either verbally and/or with a published advertisement in my place of work. All interview participants were engaged or recruited using the traditional ethical consent processes and fully informed of the research process and the topics that may arise. Participants were invited to participate through direct contact and/or follow-up by email, with the expectations and outcomes of involvement outlined before the interview. Interviews with participants were within established relationships and networks, and the timing of interviews was cognisant of any risks and/or boundaries of a personal or contractual nature. Not all fieldwork participants were invited to participate in interviews, but all interview participants requested for interviews consented. One later withdrew due to life commitments.

Table 4.3
Participant Summary by Sports Case (1-3)

CASE 1 - BOXING				CASE 2 - RUGBY LEAGUE				CASE 3 - BASKETBALL				CASE 4 - PRACTITIONER			
Participants	Role	DATA		Participants	Role	DATA		Participants	Role	DATA		Participants	Role	DATA	
		Fieldwork	Interview			Fieldwork	Interview			Fieldwork	Interview			Fieldwork	Interview
Boxing-Coach	O	1	1	Player-A	EA	1	1	BB-Manager-1	O	1	1	Psych	P		1
Matchmaker	O		1	Player-B	EA	1		BB-Manager-2	O	1	1	Independent-Trainer	P		1
Boxing-Manager	O		1	Player-C	EA	1		BB-Coach1	O	1	1	Research-Practitioner	P	1	1
Boxer A	EA	1	1	Player-D	EA	1	1	BB-Coach2	O	1	1	TOTAL		1	3
Boxer B	EA	1	1	Player-E	EA	1	1	BB-Coach3	O		1				
Boxer C	RA		1	Player-F	EA	1		BB-Trainer	P	1	1				
Researcher-Practitioner	P	1	1	Player-G	RA		1	BB-Analyst	O		1				
TOTAL		4	7	RL-Trainer	P		1	Baller-to-Executive	O		1				
				RL-Manager1	O		1	Baller-A	EA	1	1				
				RL-Manager2	O		1	Baller-B	SP	1	1				
				RL-Agent	O		1	Baller-C	EA	1	1				
				RL-Physiotherapist	P		1	Baller-D	EA	1					
				Wellbeing-Manager	P		1	Baller-E	EA	1					
				Researcher-Practitioner	P	1	1	Baller-F	EA	1					
				TOTAL		7	11	Baller-G	EA	1					
								Researcher-Practitioner	P	1	1				
								TOTAL		13	12				

Notes:
O = Organisational Stakeholder
P = Practitioner
EA = Athlete
RA = Retired Athlete
SP = Senior Professional Athlete
Researcher-Practitioner (RP)

Braun and Clarke (2019) state that determining sample size in qualitative projects is a pragmatic exercise – the selection of participants for interviews was limited by thesis constraints and “the time [and] financial constraints of [this] project” (p. 11). The participant sample was purposively designed within the boundary of the case (sports codes) and athlete (emerging male athletes). Participant selection criteria addressed the intention to ensure broad coverage of the various roles (athlete, coach, practitioner, etc.) and the unique (wide range of experiences) and longitudinal (career events and progressions) criteria (Swanborn, 2010). Table 4.3 above summarises the individual participants and their role and involvement in the study. Sample sizes varied according to the nature of my role in each sport and the size of the fieldwork populations.

4.2.3 Researcher-Practitioner Fieldwork

Researcher Epoch: Being a researcher-practitioner challenges me to be ethically disciplined and keenly aware of when I was a researcher, when I was a practitioner, when I was a team-mate, and when I was a friend. It was also important to consider my own human and existential realities, with my own identity and roles as a mother, wife, sister, researcher, business manager, practitioner, coach, and so on. It would be dishonest to say that the roles could be clearly demarcated. The difficulties in finding a comfortable and authentic nexus between each of these roles was ever-present. What identity did I present – when did I downplay my wealth, my whiteness (Pākehā/Palagi), mask my academic perspectives and language, and/or attempt to neutralise my femininity and age? It was never a series of dichotomies but a continuum or a web of balancing identities and roles. The nature of my relationships demonstrated the existential dilemma of being true to oneself and the roles that one fills. As a researcher, I always endeavoured to remain trustworthy and authentic in my interactions and ensure my behaviours and actions served those around me first. Equally, I had my own wants and needs in roles and relationships.

Fieldwork Approach: Observations of case participants and recording of my own practitioner experiences were conducted over a three-year period (dates excluded to support participant anonymity). This period implies interactions over three-years with the researcher-practitioner both formal and informal, including observation and updates post *active* practitioner/fieldwork engagement. Engagement with participants during critical transition periods provides the opportunity to achieve a level of access and understanding not typically available to researchers. My role as a researcher-practitioner provided the platform to relate to the participants as a trusted insider. This perspective offers a greater chance of observing an individual’s expression of meaning, non-verbal references, deliberate and/or inadvertent actions and behaviours and/or protective responses during their career transitions. The role of

the professional athlete is often revered as that of a super-hero, selection predicated on performance and elitism. So, maintaining a public 'face' in sports can be substantial. Being a trusted insider allowed me to break through these public personas to uncover the existential challenges the participants were experiencing. To achieve this involved listening and talking to people (including conversational and informal interviews), observations of individuals and their relationships (with varying degrees of personal and/or practitioner involvement), combined with action (working, joking, hanging out) and correspondence and personal lines of questioning (of self and others).

During this period, I made notes of observations, messages, interactions, and personal thoughts and feelings, collected social media artefacts, and recorded these in electronic case records for research reference only. Fieldwork notes were valuable reminders of conversations and engagements, providing input to interview prompts and supplementing participant data in case analysis. Documenting observations and supplementing them with explicit conversations gave me objective and subjective analysis.

4.2.4 Researcher Interrogation Interviews

Independent oversight was critical to ensure, as the researcher-practitioner, I did not get so close to the data that I could not acknowledge where my assumptions and personal constructs may divert the conclusions (Merriam, 1998; Swanborn, 2010). Researcher reflection was a critical practice implemented to ensure self-awareness of personal perspectives, behaviours and attitudes on the events and narratives being described (Krane & Baird, 2005; Wagstaff et al., 2012). I completed 'researcher-interrogator' interviews with my supervisors and mentor to support this. Identifying existential principles challenged my role as a researcher to ensure transparency, self-awareness, and authentic open communication (Nesti, 2004; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). The process was designed to be sufficiently challenging to ensure I was critically self-reflecting on my interactions with participants and/or clients, to provide an authentic representation of myself and my participants. All persons discussed by me in these reflective interviews remained anonymous to the supervisors.

4.2.5 Participant Interviews

A logical approach to examining emerging athletes and the personnel they interact with in their transitional experiences would be to interview the individuals at the time of interaction. While this would have been informative, it would have had the potential to interfere with the relationships involved and compromise athlete support requirements. Consequently, interviews were held after *active* fieldwork periods. I found it useful (and, at times, cathartic) for myself and my participants to reflect on the experiences from both sides of our dyad.

Interviews were designed to be flexible, which was necessitated by the ever-changing environment during a pandemic and was intended to be convenient for participants. The interviews took place either on Zoom (due to Covid-19 restrictions) or at a location chosen by the participant, with venues including cafés, gyms, or places of work. The approach was conversational in nature, and the participant was encouraged first and foremost to tell their stories, with the interviewer prompting the conversation using the interview framework as a guide. The interview questionnaire template (refer to Appendix 2) was framed on the following topics and provided to participants in advance:

- roles, identity, and authenticity.
- relationship with others.
- freedom and responsibility.
- coping with transitions and the events.

The interview approach was consistently positioned within engagement principles of existential psychology (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1995). The principles underpinning this research required my ability to break down barriers and create bonds and familiarity within the sports community during fieldwork and interviews. (Krane & Baird, 2005; Wagstaff et al., 2012). Having a previous connection with participants during fieldwork (and/or previously) provided a comfortable rapport during interview conversations. All interviews were recorded with participants' permission via Zoom or a hand-held audio recording device. The interviews typically lasted for approximately 45 to 90 minutes. Audio files were uploaded, stored and automatically transcribed into text form using Otter.ai. I proofread and edited the transcript by listening and comparing the automated Otter.ai transcriptions to the audio file. The interview data was later consolidated with the fieldwork and document data into a single case transcript.

4.2.6 Document Collection

Scholarly Literature: An examination of literature on emerging athlete transitions in professional sport was conducted and documented to compare and contrast the three sports code cases in this study. The literature review design, including the eligibility scope (Table 3.1) was outlined in detail in Chapter 3, preceding the evaluation and reporting of these findings.

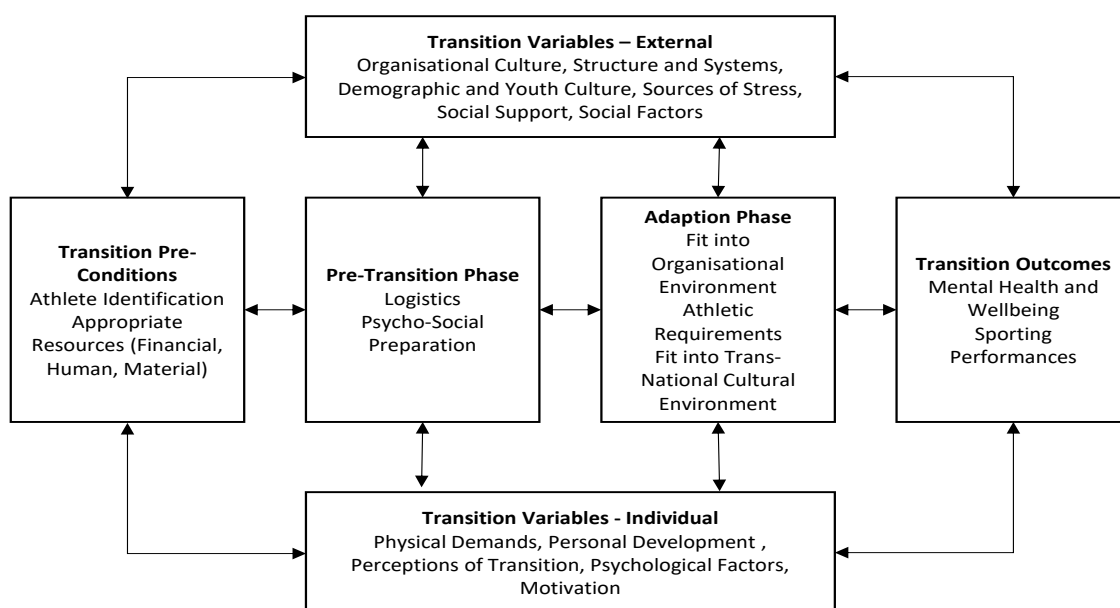
Other Documents and Artefacts: In addition to this, *publicly available media* (non-fiction books, public reports, online news media (*Stuff/NZ Herald*), internet Google searches, YouTube videos, podcasts, Facebook and Instagram posts) were collected where applicable and/or publicly available for any of the participants or cases. Media coverage was expanded to non-fiction literature and podcasts that informed the cultural narratives of highly functioning

teams. These documents and artefacts were incorporated where relevant to inform the public representation of athletes during transitional periods and provide additional depth where possible.

4.2.7 Development of the Framework and Conceptual Model

After extensive background reading and research, I defined this study's scope and framework using relevant theoretical paradigms and models inherent in the academic domains of existential philosophy and athlete career transitions, events and relationships (refer Chapter 2). Given recent alignments of career transition to coping (Stambulova & Samuel, 2020), a model more closely aligned to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress process was considered to be fitter for the purpose of this study. The initial conceptual model (Figure 2.4) was developed by combining the environmental models (Henriksen et al., 2010) with the transactional model in Figure 2 in Drew et al. (2019) and the cultural factors in Figure 1 in Ryba et al. (2016). Using the initial conceptual model (Figure 4.4) as a starting point, I refined the model when scholarly literature was reviewed, e.g., crisis events in Stambulova (2017). As each case was analysed and reported, the model was then modified to clarify events, resources, themes and concepts for inclusion. This approach is consistent with instrumental case studies, with final refinements when writing the final report (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995, 2006). Instrumental case studies are designed to help refine a theory or facilitate our understanding of the subject area.

Figure 2.4
Initial Conceptual Model for Emerging Athlete Transition



Note. Adapted from Drew et al. (2019, Figure 2) and Ryba et al. (2016, Figure 1).

On presenting a revised conceptual model, I argue piecing together all component transactional components within a process flow provides the user with a clear overview of the transition. This model is designed to be a practical educational tool for athletes, parents, and staff involved when navigating phases and events which relies on an emerging athlete's ability to cope with their transition in professional sport (Stambulova et al., 2020). In turn, this model will potentially assist future researchers in formulating implementable solutions for better athlete outcomes if careful consideration is given to their scope and methodologies.

4.2.8 Case Analysis and Reporting

Analysis commences by combining all three data sources into a case transcript. The researcher-practitioner then re-familiarised herself with the stratified case results, adding reflection notes where appropriate. Prominent samples were then extracted into a spreadsheet. This step also allowed me to familiarise myself with the data further and reflect on my personal perspectives and interpretations, consistent with the initial data familiarisation step in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013). Being a researcher-practitioner offered me greater intimacy and knowledge of the participants, data, and research subject, giving greater insight, albeit with potentially some risk of over-familiarity. Managing this risk required rigorous awareness of researcher assumptions (personally and through meetings with my supervisors and mentor, who acted as my critical friends) to ensure active choices in interpreting the data. Integrity was improved by constant questioning, revisiting, and challenging oversimplification or the obvious (Braun et al., 2019). Each participant's interview transcript was reviewed in detail for each case (1-4). Extracts or 'samples' of meaningful conversations and experiences were selected and then input into an Excel spreadsheet. Along with the interview samples, fieldwork notes were added to the spreadsheet, cross-referencing the interview participants when relevant. These samples were then analysed to fit the relevant sphere (see Figure 2.1) or intersections (career transitions, existential being and relationships). Keywords were identified, and the sample was semantically coded into sub-themes. As each participant case was analysed, the sub-themes were then compared to other participant findings. These were progressively developed into prototype themes, with prototype sub-themes attached. The prototypes were evaluated for convergent and divergent themes, with a decision made to modify, add, or delete a theme. On completion of the case, the prototype themes were compared and consolidated and further refined as section headings in the case findings report.

The case findings are reported in four chapters as case-by-case descriptions and illustrative data samples are incorporated to express the experiences in the participants' own words wherever possible. Additional document/artefact data directly related to that case was

added to the report to comprehensively express participants' experiences (including my own as researcher-practitioner). I always remained mindful of my responsibility to stay true to the data, provide enough detail and interest for the reader, and remain aligned with my research question and existential lens, while critically doing my utmost to ensure the discretion of the participants.

4.2.9 Cross-Case Analysis and Final Reporting

The four individual cases reported (including the themes and sub-themes) provided inputs for the final collective case analysis. Each of the case findings report were compared for emerging and diverging themes and combined themes were produced (Stake, 2006). Combining themes for reporting provided too. Cross-case themes and analysis were also compared to the initial research model. The initial research model was modified and adapted through the study and extrapolated in the collective case analysis for presentation as a proposed conceptual model for emerging athlete transitions. The collective case process was repeated until a "good understanding of the dynamics underlying the relationship" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 542) and all four cases were concluded, and the final report was completed (Merriam, 1998).

The final thesis report (Chapter 9) was developed using an instrumental QMCS approach critically examines the emergent themes using the three key constructs (career transitions, existential being and relationships) in comparing and contrasting the four cases. Finally, the final conceptual 'research model' for emerging athlete transitions into professional sport is presented, along with implications and recommendations in Chapter 10.

4.3 Ethics Approval

Ethics approval (reference number 19/395) was obtained from Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee in two parts. First, the approval for fieldwork/document collection was received on February 28, 2020. The second approval to proceed with the interview process was received on October 10, 2021. See Appendix 1 for ethics approval confirmation.

The key aspects to ensuring an ethical process was maintained at all times, was first and foremost, making sure relationships involved mutual genuine care and unconditional positive regard between myself and all participants. Secondly, reflection is critical to both roles, the researcher and the practitioner, as Tod et al. (2019) stated, we must always reflect on where we did well and where we could do better.

This was accompanied by a robust two-part ethics approval process – all participants were well-aware and regularly reminded I was completing my PhD. There was also an

advertisement on the wall of the facility I was working in. Regular fortnightly meetings during the “active service” data collection period with Tony, who has previously practiced as a in a similar role – allowed me an opportunity to debrief on specific instances and check my authenticity. Furthermore, I was independent of any contract or organisation during the data collection period. While I was practicing as an independent athlete development and transition coach, I was not being paid to do so by any of the participants or organisations. Finally, I could argue there was and still is no power relationship between the researcher-practitioner and athlete in an independent practitioner model. If any, the power sits with the client, who may terminate the relationship at any time.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter provides the theoretical and practical foundations for this research. Using a pragmatic, applied QMCS research methodology meets the authentic intentions of the research and fits appropriately with the research questions. In doing so, it offers outputs seeking to inform better understandings and enhance organisational structures and systems to improve the development and care of emerging athletes for life in and beyond sport.

The following four chapters report the findings in the four selected case studies

- Case1 – Professional Boxing
- Case 2 – Rugby League
- Case 3 – Basketball
- Case 4 - Practitioners

CHAPTER 5 – CASE 1 – PROFESSIONAL BOXING

Chapter 5 reports findings for Case 1, emerging athlete transitions in professional boxing. Professional boxing, or prize-fighting, is a regulated positioning of two opponents who fight each other for money over a set number of rounds in a square ‘ring’ until one winner emerges. Boxing first appeared as a formal Olympic event in the 23rd Olympiad (688BC), but fist-fighting first originated early in human history. Boxing was first included at the modern-day Olympic Games in 1904 in St Louis, and has been included in all but the Stockholm games in 1912 since (Wikipedia, n.d.).

This case was interpreted using reflexive thematic analysis of fieldwork notes, social media, interviews, researcher reflections and documents to identify the themes for this case. The description uses my voice, as the researcher-practitioner, interwoven with the participants’ own words to ensure a vivid and authentic representation of the challenges and relationships involved in this phenomenon. My practitioner experiences have been featured to a greater degree in Case 1 than in Cases 2 and 3, as I considered it necessary in reflecting on the inner circle of a professional boxer. This approach is consistent with the methodology outlined in Chapter 3. Table 5.1 summarises the fieldwork and interview participants in the case and their relative transitions and roles. Participants in this case study include three professional boxers (two current, one retired) and three others (organisational representatives) who fulfil the roles of manager, coach, local promoter, and matchmaker.

Table 5.1
Participant Summary – Case 1

Reference / Label	Environment / Code	DATA		TRANSITIONS			ROLES			
		Fieldwork	Interview	Emerging Athlete	Elite Professional	Early Exit or Retired	Elite Athlete	Coach	Practitioner	Organisation
Boxing-Coach	Amateur and Professional NZ	1	1	1	1	R	1	1		1
Matchmaker	Professional International	1	1							1
Boxing-Manager	Professional NZ	1	1					1		1
Boxer-A	Amateur > Professional US	1	1	1	1					
Boxer-B	Amateur > Professional NZ	1	1	1	1		1			
Boxer-C	Amateur > Professional NZ	1	1	1	1	R	1	1		
Researcher-Practitioner	Independent Organisation	1	1	1	1				1	

Note. R = Retired Athlete.

The following sections present the findings of this case study under the four primary themes and corresponding sub-themes summarised in Table 5.2. The findings are underpinned by the three- spheres framework, transitions (T), existential being (E) and intra-, inter- and environmental relationships (R) documented in Chapter 2, with ☑ indicating a *strong* link to that area.

Table 5.2
Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes in Case 1

CASE 1 - BOXING	T	E	R
Being a Professional Boxer			
Setting the Scene - Boxing in NZ			
Open to Pro	☑		
The Fighting Business			
Not Every Prospect gets Promoted	☑		☑
Fight Decisions - Knowledge is Power	☑		☑
Gloves On - Warrior or Entertainer			
The Fighters Mask		☑	
"It's a sin to go to a fight when you are not in shape"		☑	☑
Boxing is not a Game		☑	
Protect Yourself at All Times			
The Inner Circle		☑	☑
On the Battlefield Together			☑
The Slave Contract			☑
Staying in your Lane			☑

5.1 Being a Professional Boxer

We commence these findings by first setting the scene of boxing in NZ and follow this with an outline of the pathway for emerging boxers in NZ under the sub-them *Open to Pro*.

5.1.1 *Setting the Scene – Boxing in NZ*

The sport officially appeared in NZ around 1870 but was outlawed in 1893 until 1904 when professional matches were once again allowed to proceed if granted police authorisation (Leabourn & Mitchell, 2002).

In 1902, the New Zealand Boxing Council was established, later becoming Boxing New Zealand (Boxing-NZ), with the New Zealand Professional Boxing Association (NZPBA) formed in 1984 (Leabourn & Mitchell, 2002). In 2013, Boxing-NZ instigated rules to fully partition amateur and professional competitions; aligning with ordinances passed down by the international sports organisation, the Amateur International Boxing Association (AIBA). The ruling required athletes,

referees and coaches to be classified and registered as one *or* the other. These demarcations disrupted pathways and coach: boxer relationships, the dyad having previously transitioned together from amateur apprenticeship to professional ranks. As Coach-Manager explained:

I shouldn't have stayed after I went pro with [coach] because he wasn't a pro coach. But even though it was against the rules, I stayed pretty much just out of loyalty. (Boxing-Coach)

The boundaries also eliminated opportunities for pro-am events, and Olympic pathway programmes found obtaining funds challenging. During this same period, corporate and celebrity boxing emerged. Corporate-based boxing events became the bread and butter of the sport in New Zealand, as their participants brought with them supporters, selling tickets to events. That corporate boxers are not required to be registered in the sport nor classified as amateur or pro still exasperates the Boxing-NZ executive twenty years on, as this executive report highlights:

We are still in limbo as far as 'corporate' boxing goes. We have been waiting for direction from the Department of Internal Affairs regarding positioning ourselves to fit what should be new legislation surrounding this code of boxing. Boxing NZ has no jurisdiction to prevent members from engaging in this type of activity, but at present, we will not sanction such events until the terms of trade are clear and precise. (Hartley, 2021)

With corporate or celebrity boxers paying to train and compete alongside 'legitimate' fighters, Boxer-B shared his dissatisfaction with the de-purification of his craft:

And you have just competed at the games, paying your own money, paying for my flights, accommodation, tracksuits, and trying to do the whole thing properly. And you're fighting good guys around the world. Yeah, and then there is the [local] pro boxing scene; it was like mostly celebrity boxing ... so like, yeah, it was a midget and a clown show, and we didn't take it seriously (Boxer-B).

In 2016, AIBA rescinded the rules, allowing professional athletes, under specific criteria, eligibility to compete in the Olympics. Boxing-NZ reported in 2021:

Some may be aware that a few of our elite high-performance professional boxers are boxing or wishing to box in the professional division. AIBA has allowed this to occur although they have no clear rulings to assist federations in the conduct of this. National organisations do have some discretion to rule just how this is to be conducted in their own backyards. ... Boxing NZ will allow these people to return back to AOB [Amateur Olympic Boxing], provided they have no more than five pro bouts. AOB boxers who turn professional can return back to AOB boxing only once. They cannot keep yo-yoing between amateur and professional boxing. (Hartley, 2021)

As the quote above attests, the evolving ambiguity between professional and amateur boxing has challenged the sport and its representatives. The following sub-theme discusses these

challenges in context to the pathway that exists at the time of writing for athletes aspiring to become professional boxers.

5.1.2 Open to Pro

The separation of amateur and professional forms aside, amateur (now termed ‘open’) boxing provided the pathway for emerging athletes to move into professional sport. Participants agreed that building a robust Olympic/open boxing career is the best way to successfully transition boxers into the professional arena (e.g., Coach and Matchmaker). The NSOs provide talent pathways in development (TDEs) and competition. However, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recently announced the removal of boxing after the 2024 games. Removing boxing from the Olympics will require a major reset in thinking. With current pathways directed to Olympic and AIBA (now IBA) World campaigns, the transition from open to professional levels is already an exponential step-up.

Figure 5.1
Pathway to Professional Boxing in NZ

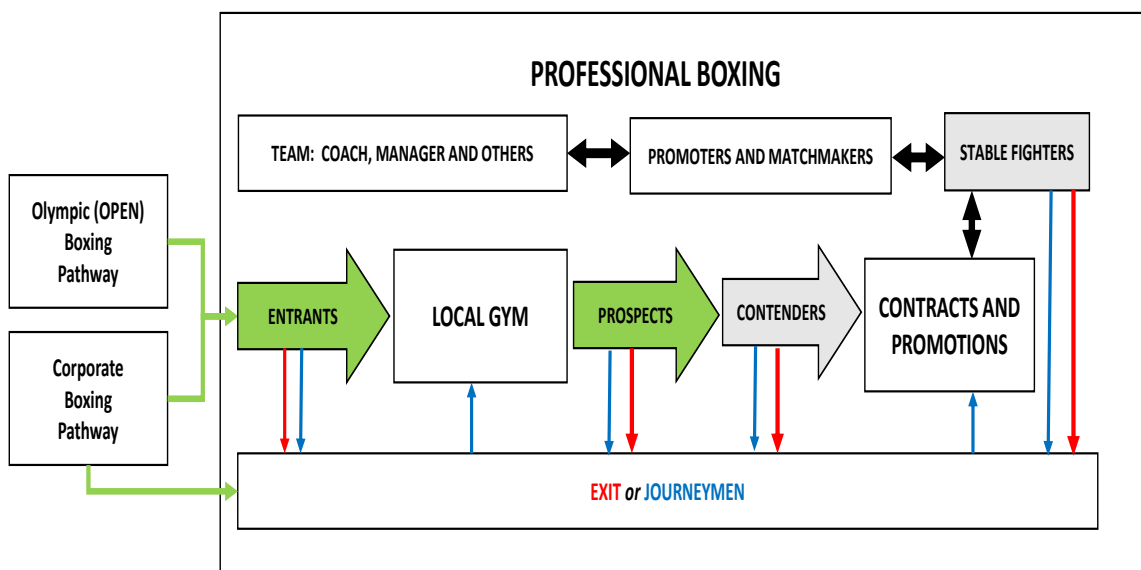


Figure 5.1 provides a schematic of pathway options for the emerging professional boxer. While the traditional pathway was to transition from open boxing into professional, some individuals never compete as open boxers but transition directly or from corporate fight backgrounds onto professional cards. There is no definitive progression. Losing can quickly pivot an emerging professional career; losing multiple times destroys contender opportunities. These losses require the boxer to choose whether to continue as a journeyman or quit (red arrows in Figure 5.1). The journeyman’s role is to put on a good fight and act as an opponent for the prospects. Building a clean fight record (retaining their 0) for successful prospects raises

their ranking to that of a contender. Contenders typically sit in the top 15 in the world rankings and take 'stay-ready fights',⁹ waiting on their opportunity to fight for a championship belt.

Stepping up from being a talented open boxer, where the objective is to score points by touching and evading over three rounds in 12oz gloves, is significantly different to knocking the opponent out in 10oz ones over 12 rounds:

I have seen excellent boxers, with stellar amateur careers who simply couldn't cut the mustard as professional boxers. Yeah, there is a big difference between amateur and professional boxing (Matchmaker).

Lennox Lewis, former English World boxing heavyweight champion, reiterated this:

Fighting in the amateurs is a completely different thing than fighting in the pros. An extensive amateur career will no doubt serve you by the time you reach the pros, but you must empty your cup from the amateurs and then learn to train and fight like a pro. (@MrLennoxLewis Instagram)

Lennox Lewis' quote demonstrates the importance of protecting and building an emerging boxer's professional record in their career transition in a deliberate way (Bonhomme et al., 2020; Schinke & Ramsay, 2009; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013; Wacquant, 1998) by providing a moderated build-up of 'winnable' fights, moving up in rounds as they progress (fieldnotes).

Being a professional boxer means getting paid to fight; the intention of becoming a professional fighter will vary according to talent, need and desire. For the serious prospect, their intentions are to win, build a lucrative career and become world champion (Wacquant, 1995, 1998). For some it may mean being compensated for enjoying the sport; for others, fighting to make a living, where winning is less material. Like our participant, an ex-professional boxer, now Boxing-Coach:

I just wanted to be a pro boxer. I knew my limitations. I wasn't going to be the champion of the world, always worked 40 hours a week, even on a day of fights. So it was never about the money; if it was about the money, I would have been homeless.

The examination of professional boxing ACD in academic literature was limited, however, I uncovered one published article that provides useful context to this case description. Bonhomme et al. (2020) used media data to analyse the careers of two well-known boxers, Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather. Both men were from impoverished backgrounds; while Manny was boxing to escape poverty, Floyd progressed to professional ranks through the Olympic pathway. While Floyd was groomed to fight from a young age, Manny started fighting

⁹ 'Stay-ready fight' refers to a fight used to keep active while a boxer is waiting for a championship fight.

for a living at 16 for \$2 on the streets of Manilla. Despite the differences in pathways, both fighters, with very different styles in and out of the ring, went on to become world champions.

5.2 The Fighting Business

Boxing is big business, but it is far from equitable. The Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act (2000) was enacted in the USA to help shield fighters from the managers and promoters, yet:

Too many fighters walk around seemingly oblivious to the unfairness of the industry. It is easy to point the finger at the boxing industry being ... shitty for lack of a better word. Yet the fighters have to hold themselves accountable for being taken advantage for damn near a century. (Clark, 2016, p. 13)

The second of the four themes examines the business of professional boxing and what this means to the athletes and the other stakeholders involved in it. The following sub-themes describe the business from the perspective of the decision-makers – the matchmaker, the coach and the manager – emphasising the importance of understanding the game they are in:

- Not Every Prospect Gets Promoted.
- Fight Decisions – Knowledge is Power.

5.2.1 Not Every Prospect Gets Promoted

Promoters run the business, producing events to make a profit and contracting boxers to fight each other on a card for payment. These events generally involve a live audience and a media broadcast. Budgets for boxing cards vary enormously depending on the event's rank, prestige, and venue; the matchmaker operates within their boundaries; for example, world title fights come with mass media and are multi-million-dollar affairs. Returning to our early example, Figg (2022) provides emphasis to the scale of potential rewards for successful careers. In the Mayweather versus Pacquiao fight in 2015, promoters returned £678 million, with £223.5 million going to Mayweather and £122.0 million going to Pacquiao. This demonstrates the potential for reward of those few who are successful in this career.

The event or promotion comprises a series of bouts, which make a card. The promoter hires the matchmaker to pair fighters to fill the card, liaising with managers to contract their boxers for the bout. The matchmaker will match the promoted fighters with the right opponents based on record and style. Non-promoted prospects must win to prove they are worthy, and journeymen are recruited and paid to lose. The matchmaker's primary responsibility is to fill the undercard on the promoter's shows. 'Local teams' are unlikely to make any money for the first 10 or so fights during emerging boxers' development (Clark, 2016; Wacquant, 1995, 1998).

There's no money in boxing in NZ. My guys can't live off it and I can't live off it and some are starting to be rated at the top of the world and they still can't live off it ... just about impossible, no one wants to sponsor boxing [in NZ]. (Boxing-Coach)

Not every prospect gets promoted; most start with local gyms and events and build their fight record in these environments. This is true for NZ boxers. Prospects initially fight for nominal purse amounts on local promotions organised by local gyms. In Boxing-Coach and Boxing-Manager's case, this required them to underwrite their own events and 'buy' opponents to build their boxers' reputation:

First few it was me using my credit card and fucking spending money on it. Yeah, literally going into debt. So that's the biggest one, not only are you taking money out of your pocket to do it but you also need to be a mentor for the person. And to actually say that it's worth it. But in reality, yeah, it's a fine line whether it is or not. (Boxing-Manager)

Like any other business, boxing requires upfront investment. The emerging pugilists are vying for promotional deals (promoted), with reputable promoters (investors and event managers) to perform on reputable cards (fight events) for larger purses (payments). The team commits time, effort and money, expecting the boxer to deliver to promise:

I'm not gonna waste my time with someone who doesn't train harder than me ... they are not worth it. If you don't understand that, yeah, that's where the problem is. That's where I'm stating it's a business. The professional boxer's business is a very short period of time, your time your shelf life is limited – and that goes for the boxer and the coach. (Boxing-Manager)

As the prospect's record builds, opportunities to fight on overseas cards may be offered. During this stage, the purse typically equals \$1-2K per round (fieldwork). This rate depends on marketability (talent and entertainment value), weight class and, to some degree, the integrity of the promoter. It is also important to remember that the purse is gross. The coach and manager percentages get deducted from this, along with other costs such as flights, accommodation, additional training and corner-man¹⁰ costs. Taking a fight on an overseas card is high-risk, and the match (opponent pairing) needs to be carefully selected:

If a promoter is bringing you in, and he's promoting the other guy, he's not there to help you out. He doesn't want to see you win, it's as simple as that. (Boxing-Manager)

Promoters often maintain a stable of fighters. These are the promoted prospects, contenders and subsequent champions (Figure 5.1). When a boxer is promoted, they receive a retainer to train and are guaranteed fights on the promoter's promotions. The promoter takes

¹⁰ A corner-man is a member boxer's team who attend to the boxer between rounds. Typically the corner includes a two coaches/trainers and a cut-man, with the cutman required to attend to any cuts made as a result of blows to the boxers face.

responsibility for building their career, reducing the risk to the local team and boxer, as our participants explain:

When we signed with the [promoter] they sorted out the dynamics and guaranteed what shows we are on. [This meant] I was dealing with less and forking up less of my own money. It allowed me to just concentrate on being the manager and dealing with the promoter, except now these guys were supposed to be on our side. (Boxing-Manager)

I'm not just matching him ... I'm mapping out their career by saying this is how you're going to progress them. By putting him in front of these types of fighters ... I usually identify the strengths and weaknesses of the boxer that I'm working with and then I look carefully at opponents where I can hedge my bets around that boxer winning. (Matchmaker)

So you need a promoter when your guys are good because they're gonna pay for the fights. The opponents cost shitloads. All the promoters have a standard sort of contract, ... get to the top five in the world, you're on \$25-40K... but the opponent they bring in might be on \$100K. Remember, the opponent they are bringing in is there to lose. (Boxing-Coach)

The suggestion of a "standard sort of contract" is solely at the promoter's discretion. There are no standardised regulations or athlete union in professional boxing and promoters can and will terminate contracts if the boxer loses fights or is not as marketable and exciting as they envisaged (Clark, 2016).

The promoter's job is to try and get as much attention around a fight as they can – they are putting their money on the line – so while the boxer's balls are on the line in one respect, the promoter's balls are on the line, financially, so it is my job to try and do the best I can for both. (Matchmaker)

It is a business – everyone is trying to make money: "It is a harsh but inescapable fact of pugilistic life that only a tiny contingent of the fight corps is building careers; most pugs are being built upon, employed as stepping stones in the climb of the successful few to the top" (Wacquant, 1998, p. 23).

5.2.2 Fight Decisions – Knowledge is Power

As Eric Molina's quote in Clark (2016) aptly states:

The hard work of running, losing weight, sparring, strength and conditioning, and the actual fights. Those are the *easy* parts of boxing. The *hard* parts of boxing are understanding how the business works and finding people that won't take advantage of you. (p. 82)

Understanding the business is paramount; in other words, do not put the sport of boxing before the business of boxing (Clark, 2016).

The participants described the lack of understanding of institutional regulations and protocols at the start of their professional careers as creating a big learning curve. Matchmaker expanded on how it takes time and exposure to build this expertise: “Boxing is not something that you can buy a bag of experience on the way down to the boxing ring.”

No one was telling us how to do it, we just had to do it all ourselves. So, it was quite a lot of trial and error. Not like anyone’s given us – this is how it’s done ... not really like a helpful person or at least there wasn’t really at the time when I was coming up as a coach. Yeah, no one was really going to offer any real advice. Yeah, so we were just learning as we went. (Boxing-Manager)

I learned that you need to legally bind everything, you need lawyers, you need to do it properly. You can’t just do it on the basis of a handshake like I was used to – it has been a big learning curve for me, and no one tells you how it is done. You have to figure it out yourself. (Boxing-Coach)

Managers/agents work on behalf of the boxer; they play the middleman between the team and the promoter, negotiating promotional and fight contracts. The manager and coach roles are often combined, sometimes independent, or sometimes adjunct to the promotional company. Alongside the coach, the boxer needs a good manager (Wacquant, 1995). But as Matchmaker explained, it is a matter of engaging the right people at the right time: “Some people bring managers on board way too early. The coach will be able to manage you ... [initially] you need to keep it simple.” But this is conditional upon having a good coach, and the contract and relationship with the promoter. The manager’s role is critical for protecting the boxers’ physical, mental and financial well-being:

The manager is the person charged with the responsibility of ensuring that it’s a safe environment to fight in. To oversee and approve any selection of opponents and assist with any relationships, third-party relationships, whether it be sponsor or endorsements activity. (Matchmaker)

As I observed, when the more prominent promoters get involved, the landscape changes, the stakes get higher and the balance of power shifts, and the authenticity of relationships becomes challenged. The power sits with the promoters and the matchmaker (Wacquant, 1998). Boxing-Coach described getting to grips with these 'third-party' relationships as challenging:

The reason I like [promoter X] is you can tell him to get fucked and the next day, you’re okay, but [promoter Y], I’m walking on eggshells, I don’t know what he’s thinking, it is like he is playing a game, won’t return your calls. But you’re a third party. You don’t want to upset the guy. Because it’s not damaging me. I’d be damaging the boxer ... remind myself that I am speaking on behalf ... I’m still trying to work out how to be that guy. (Boxing-Coach)

The transactional approach contradicted his direct, open, no-bullshit style, a sense of being “mates”, and his “handshake meant something” identity. Adapting to the institutional needs challenged his identity and left him feeling disconnected in these organisational relationships. An individual whose identity was centred on being true to himself, with the high control needs as head coach typical of a professional boxing gym (Wacquant, 1995), was outside his knowledge and experience base.

As I outlined earlier, for non-promoted athletes, contracts and fight decisions are less complex, and finances are much tighter. When promoters get involved, the relationship between the matchmaker and the fighter’s representative (Boxing-Manager) is crucial to their career trajectory. As Boxer-B’s career (and those of his stable-mates) progressed, Boxing-Coach needed to retain full control of and personal responsibility for the coaching, mentoring and management (fieldnotes):

I hate being the manager. It’s so hard it takes a lot of time. It’s endless amounts of phone calls and organising and let downs but you can’t [separate] unless you have a stable and you have some sort [of organisation]. It’s a very trusting role – what are you gonna do? Employ a manager? He doesn’t know your guys. (Boxing-Coach)

In Manager’s case, he decided to employ a coach and concentrate on management for the team’s betterment, although “hierarchical” responsibility remained with him:

Why did I bring another coach into the team? Because I wasn’t getting through to [boxer]. My job was to make sure the team continues at a professional level and that the hierarchy [roles] are explained and understood. It’s simple, it’s business. It’s your livelihood. You can still be friends with someone afterwards. Business is business. No emotions in it. Just a job to be done. (Coach to Manager)

And it was pretty easy because [boxer] trusted me with what I needed to do, and I never needed to question his work ethic. There was never any contract between us. Whatever anyone says, we did it with no money and without ripping each other off like other ones did. (Boxing-Manager)

The matchmaker, determining “management was not [his] forte”, found working as the middleman between the promoter and the manager afforded him the opportunity to guide careers if authentically approached.

I didn’t need to earn money from the fighters, which was good. It’s a tough sport, and they deserve every penny they get when they enter the ring. I didn’t need to, and I didn’t want to ‘take’ money from the professional boxer. But I don’t do it for free. I charge the promoters, but it doesn’t come out of the boxer’s pocket. (Matchmaker)

While the Matchmaker’s comments are accurate, indirectly the ‘bout’ contract values diminish from the promoter to the fighter, to include his fee. The importance of having a trustworthy intermediary ensures independent decision-making. Decisions include the

contracts and payments, the opponents and the preparation (camp) periods. As the following quote explains, boxers left to their own devices, and offered opponents and purses directly, tend to say yes – they are fighters, so they want to fight. Yet, as noted earlier, making strategic decisions is fundamental to building a lucrative career path:

The Boxing-Coach is the one that helps make the decisions for the fighter. The fighter needs to respect the coach, because the boxer will say, oh, I want to have this fight in Ozzy and it's \$2,000. And the coach will be like, this is nothing. If you wait in two year's time that fight will be worth \$16-18k. (Retired boxer)

The manager “inserts an emotional and socio-economic buffer” between the promoter and the boxer (Wacquant, 1998, p. 14). There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. When one party's interests focus on short-term and/or financial gains, an authentic relationship collapses, objectifies and moves to I: It (Buber, 1965). The Matchmaker described a story of a boxer and coach he worked with. The boxer was coming off the back of a championship loss, and the Matchmaker's recommendation was to take recovery time to get himself mentally right by taking an alternative fight – an alternative to the one offered for \$1 million. The coach insisted on taking the bigger fight (and perhaps the larger percentage cut). The boxer sustained an additional loss, which proved detrimental to the boxer's recovery and career, and ultimately split the boxer: coach relationship.

5.3 Gloves On – Warrior or Entertainer?

The gloves-on theme takes an existential view of the identity and meaning the boxer attributes to his craft. Analysis of the data identified three sub-themes: The boxer's persona in *The Fighter's Mask*; the approach and importance of preparation in *It's a Sin To Go To a Fight When You Are Not In Shape*; and, finally, the dichotomy in performing in fight sports in *Boxing Is Not a Game*.

The sport of boxing fascinates most, it is repugnant to many as its heroes bleed, risk their health, even their lives in the pursuit of recognition, fame and fortune, and surprisingly, fun. Boxers – the athletes are usually very ordinary yet extraordinary men (and women) who understand the cost of their chosen sport better than most. They understand instinctively, not in a pretentious or academic way. (Dr John McKay, as cited in Leabourn and Mitchell (2002))

Researchers find consistencies of meaning in what attracts an individual to become a boxer. This meaning falls into three themes: *a desire to prove oneself* (status, prowess and success), *the desire to better oneself and one's family* (security and money), and *the desire to be of significance* (to mean something in the world) (Hopkinson, 2022; Hutchens, 2010; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013; Wacquant, 1995).

5.3.1 *The Fighter's Mask*

The single most pronounced identity of a professional boxer in this research spoke of *being* “a warrior”, “a soldier”, “iron-willed”, “courageous”, “dangerous”, “brutal” and “savage”. Wacquant (1995) found similar imagery, “there is no place to hide in the ring (p. 515). Professional boxing, in particular, puts a high premium on physical toughness and the ability to deliver and withstand brute force. The gym exudes military expressions and metaphors: valiant fighters are “gladiators” who go to “war”, and “throw bombs” at each other (Wacquant, 1995). In my experience as a research-practitioner inside the field of play (personal, training and competition environments), the person behind the boxer can be dramatically different to the individual seen in training, sparring, face-offs, walk-ins, at pre-fight, and on fight day. In my relationships with the boxers, it often felt like I was dealing with multiple individuals (or personalities) inside one body. These identities can become an emotional roller-coaster for people close to them as they go from vulnerable to egotistical and sometimes aggressive and cruel behaviours (fieldnotes).

Suffice to stay, a very hungry, dehydrated and generally angry and scared young man, was not a fun person to be isolated in a room with for a week preceding the fight. I generally completed the experience, in tears and a shaky mess, but proud that I had somehow survived the process and got him to the fight on weight and on time. (fieldnotes)

It's a very difficult sport that actually has emotions where you tell people to hide them and at the same time show them. You tell them to be one person inside the ring and another outside the ring, so it's a bit contradicting. (Boxing-Manager)

The ability for the boxer to switch these emotions on and off at a whim becomes a challenge. The sport is littered with boxers who have been celebrated as boxers and criticised as people. Mike Tyson is a prime example:

Mike Tyson is the last boxer who was truly embraced by the media. You didn't know what he was going to do next, bite you, cut you or fight you. (George Foreman quoted on @the_loneliest_sport, Instagram)

When I get in the ring, it's like that's my excuse to be an absolute dick because I get to beat him up. (Boxer-B)

Boxer-B's comment suggested part of him was born with this 'fight mentality' but he also had a social conscience that battled with this same behaviour. Coming from a strict Christian background perhaps added to this existential dilemma – was it okay to want to beat someone up for a living? Furthermore, which is my true identity, and when am I playing a role?

This is the fight game. Just don't even look at them. I want my opponent to be scared of me. Yeah, scared of me before we even get to the ropes. Yeah, we're at the weigh-in. I'm staring them in the eyes. Yeah, you know, I'll just say I am going to knock you the fuck out. (Boxer-C)

Retired Boxer also described this same mentality when facing his sparring partners: "I would hurt them in sparring you know because I don't care, this is the fight game, yeah, we're not playing marbles." But equally there was a need to mask the fear and the automated response was to maintain the tough identity. He continued this expression of a tough persona as he told me the following story, a significant number of years after the event:

I got to spar Mike Tyson. You know, this was a massive opportunity. [I asked him if it was scary – in my mind it would be petrifying even just to be in the same room as him.] NO! ... Oh, yeah. No, no. Oh, yeah. I can't really say it wasn't scary. Oh, it was it was ferocious. Yeah. It was ferocious to be in the ring with him. It'd be the most intense round I've ever done in my life. Yeah, he's just so explosive. (Boxer-C)

The same professional boxer – farm boy to successful amateur then professional boxer, now coach and businessman – described how "I was a quiet boy, I wouldn't even talk. ... I grew up listening to my grandfather's boxing stories, I loved horses, I loved dogs, so from a young boy that's all [farming] I wanted to do." He described how there was no boxing club in the country area he was from, and his parents not having the money to drive him to the nearby town. When he found himself in the UK, on his 'overseas experience'¹¹, he joined a boxing gym, and his career took off. Later, after medalling at the Commonwealth Games, he followed a team-mate to Las Vegas, joining a high-profile boxing team. When the team disbanded, he found himself back at home pruning trees. In his words, "I didn't know how to continue with boxing – I was in limbo." Once again, he followed his team-mate (now manager) into a professional rugby league environment whose executive was expanding into professional boxing management. Here he thrived on the professional training knowledge and regime of a team-based sport. As a professional boxer, and still to this day, he recognises the importance of being seen as someone who demands respect as a hard worker. "I know how to work hard more than anyone" was a central theme to his identity and life-meaning, spoken of in our interview.

Boxer-C and Boxer-A were eager to emphasise that they did not start boxing until a relatively older age (19 years). The retired boxer recalled overhearing a coach's conversation: "He's too old to start, he won't make it, ... and I thought, I'll show you." *Making it* and proving themselves to others somehow drove meaning for these individuals. From different backgrounds, countries, and cultures, both medalled at the Commonwealth Games, despite their late career starts. Getting to the crux of why these professional boxers form life-meaning

¹¹ Overseas experience, or OE, is a rite of passage for many NZ adolescents, they leave NZ to travel and experience the world.

in successful pugilist careers seems unfathomable to many, but this does not seem to be a question they ask themselves. It seems intuitive, a natural course. All three professional boxers interviewed identified themselves as professional boxers, first and foremost. Regardless of career stage, being a professional boxer remains a trademark in their identities. While money was and/or is a contributing factor, the status of being a professional boxer was the most prevalent referenced source of meaning. For them, commitment and the desire to win was paramount: "It's winning for me like winning is gonna get you there. You're gonna do well if you're winning" (Boxer-B); "I just want to be the best, still do" (Boxer-C); "To be a world champion" (Boxer-A, Boxer-B, Boxer-C). As Lennox Lewis explained: "You need to learn to fight with a purpose from the very beginning because once you have enough of it, even money won't be enough to keep you driven" (@MrLennoxLewis, Instagram).

5.3.2 "It's a Sin To Go To a Fight When You Are Not In Shape"

When it comes to fight time, no-one can get in there and fight for you – you have to be able to adapt (Matchmaker). Failure to select the right opponent and prepare technically, physically and mentally for a bout, can be career-ending; with contracts won and livelihoods lost on the results (Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013).

If you want to succeed, you've got to burn you've really got to give it your all. This is the pain game. It's not netball, it's not badminton. *It is the pain game*. And if you want to be successful in the game, your defensive skills, your attack, everything has to be on par. If you're not, the *pain game* is going to hurt you a whole lot more. So, a disciplined approach in the gym is necessary from both the fighter and the trainer and really any person that's part of that team. (Matchmaker)

You must train "like a demon" (Boxer-C); a common saying is: "Fail to prepare, prepare to fail" (Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013, p. 109). To go into the ring unprepared affects not only a boxer's physical abilities, particularly in a weight-restricted sport, but also their confidence.

He made \$6-7 million over a five-year period. Yeah, and lost the hunger and the burning desire. He stopped training like a champion. (Matchmaker)

I'm an extras man. Well, the coach wants me to do this, and then I'm going, that's not enough. Then I'll do this at home, you know, so if I'm doing all this extra training ... and I don't tell them what I'm up to. (Boxer-C)

Boxer-A sent me a clip of some 'pad work'¹² he did at home with another trainer. I asked, "Does your coach know about this?" The answer was "No" (fieldnotes). In exploring the questions around the inner circle (discussed further under *The Inner Circle*, below), one argument may be that the boxers here fail to trust the knowledge and experience of those

¹² Training exercise which involves the boxer punching *pads* held by the trainer.

coaching them. Another may be more personal; it may be the need to feel that they have some sense of control over themselves and their training plans.

No matter how big your muscles are, or how fit you are, you know, it's all about how confident you are when you walk into their ring (Boxer-C).

Boxer-B and Boxer-C both talked about the method of fight preparation (camp¹³) being critical to building this confidence. Boxer-C described his method of “ticking off the sparring¹⁴ rounds and totalling them up in the end” as the primer for knowing he could go the distance of a 12-round bout. Both professional boxers described how having a documented plan for the camp provided them with a sense of having done all they could. This process built confidence and contributed to a stronger belief that they could win and acted as a protection against loss.

I went into my fight, I had the confidence because I was like, even if I lose, now, I'm going to hold my head high because I know I've done literally everything possible. So then there was no reason to be unconfident. Yeah, it was, like, if I lose this, then it wasn't meant to be because I had done everything. And then you win because you know, you're not like hesitating or anything. (Boxer-B)

Boxer-A's preparation told a different story. His environment appeared to lack structure in and around his career pathway and camps (fieldnotes). The decision to take a risky stay-ready fight at short notice meant Boxer-A was not in his usual fight shape. He messaged me, “Two weeks to get in shape – it's a sin to go to a fight when u not in shape” (Boxer-A). I replied, “I'd expect nothing less – just take it easy with the cut, nothing new.” At the same time the social media banter between Boxer-A (“He's not at my level – he is not even at my shoe”) and his opponent (“He thinks he is the real thing, but I will make a fool of this boy in the ring”) was making me nervous. Boxer-A consequently lost the fight.

Boxer-A concluded, in retrospect, he would say no to the fight now. I also recorded a message he forwarded to me after his first loss, “Keep your head up champ! Got to come back stronger! Remember, you didn't have any sparring! That was it” (fieldnotes). When I asked how or why he went into the fight without proper preparation later in our interview, he replied:

They're taking me for a 10-round fight, I have no training camp and they kept saying you are going to knock him out. I was looking around like [hands in the air in the 'I don't know' gesture]. Coach is, like, he's nobody, he hasn't faced anybody. (Boxer-A)

Boxer-C referred to one of his high-profile fights, where his preparation had been hampered by “an injured right hand through the whole camp”. In this fight he lost convincingly:

¹³ The dedicated and intensive training period for an up-an-coming fight.

¹⁴ Fight rounds in the ring between two boxing opponents for training purposes.

I didn't respect him enough ... you have to have those nerves. And then with the [opponent] fight, it was like so much trash-talking. And it was like I disrespected him, which I shouldn't have done. Yeah, he's a big puncher, you know, and I should have respected what he'd done... And I conducted myself in a way that I'd never do again. And yeah, I don't know why. (Boxer-C)

When we delved into the why, he knew he was under-prepared. Lack of preparation was not the mode of operation he prided himself on. He could have delayed the fight but, in his head, he remembers thinking, "I'll still beat him", and he did not want to disappoint the promoters and the fans. In both Boxer-A and Boxer-C's stories, ego had a part to play. Without digging deeper, it is difficult to pinpoint why they used trash-talk to compensate. Possibly it is true that insecurities are louder than confidence, or did they genuinely disrespect their opponents at the time, blinding them to their opponents' power and ultimately getting beaten and going down? In hindsight, Boxer-C tells us he would have delayed the bout till he was fight-fit, Boxer-A says he would have said no to the fight offer.

It is important to state, in my experience commenting to a boxer at the wrong time (particularly pre-fight) can be detrimental to the fight mentality the boxer needs to survive, if not succeed. This ego drives the confidence and self-belief to enter the ring at all. In these instances, both boxers take responsibility for the outcome "I only have myself to blame" (Boxer-C) and "I don't blame people. If you don't blame people, you better listen to yourself" (Boxer-A). Fighters cannot be coerced to train and fight against their will. Wacquant (1995) asserted while these athletes may recognise, they are exposed to exploitation by the business, they also claim (at least partial) responsibility for their fate between the ropes. They recognise the outcomes of their individual powers, choices and strivings as an "*existential challenge of one's own making*" (Wacquant, 1995, p. 510).

5.3.3 "Boxing Is Not a Game"

While participants loosely use the word 'game', they are acutely aware that boxing is *not* a game. More than success, a heavy punch or a catastrophic knock-out can be a matter of life or death or, more likely, serious injury. Unsurprisingly, the boxer expresses fear of losing in physical terms (injury or even death) and broader existential terms (loss of meaning and identity). Simpson and Wrisberg (2013) found the fear or shame of losing was greater than fear of harm.

Boxing is not a game – this is common rhetoric. Yet the public demands to be entertained, and the promoters' profits are predicated on delivering this; this is when the business overshadows the sport. The tough and determined identities are juxtaposed with the need to entertain, "All you got to do is hurt people, knock people out and entertain. Yeah, if you

entertain the money will come” (Boxer-B); or with the realities of fighting to put food on the table, “I AM a fighter and I fight for a living” (Boxer-A - Instagram); and the risks of the sport mean it “is a killing man sport, I don’t play this shit” (Boxer-A - Instagram). On social media, at press conferences, weigh-ins, and the walk-in, it has become a ‘tradition’ to trash-talk the opponent. There is an expectation of building up the hype for the promoters or fighting stylistically for “entertainment, money, the fans, as well as the tv” (Boxer-A - Instagram). Here we see the boxer acting out the role of entertainer and/or attempting to build a fan-base. At these times he may be acting in bad faith: “It was like so much trash-talking ...” (Boxer-C).

In today’s boxing world, to be a promotable professional boxer, a boxer needs not just talent and hard work but to be marketable, not just as an athlete but as a performer (Lennox, 2012; Woodward, 2004, 2007). Boxing has become lucrative entertainment. Boxers, alongside and/or ahead of the promoters, must build a public profile, generate media interest, promote fights, and drive ticket sales and endorsements (Lennox, 2012). The spectators play a crucial part in hyped-up and heavily marketed narratives. For the price of a ticket (or a pay-for-view) and privileged by distance and safe from harm, *fans* objectify the athlete and his opponent with “you wimp/bastard/animal” or “kill-him” (Hutchens, 2010, p. 29). Or as the participants in this research indicate, as key-board warriors, fans offer themselves as experts to span an unbridgeable gap between themselves and the fighter.

It's all entertainment, but it's dangerous entertainment. It's the pain game BUT boxing is not a game. (Matchmaker)

5.4 Protect Yourself at All Times

In the final theme we examine the relationships involved in the boxer’s world, in particular the importance of those responsible for the protection of the boxer. The identified sub-themes include:

- *The Inner Circle*
- *On the Battlefield Together*
- *“The Slave Contract”*
- *Staying in Your Lane*

When a bout starts, the referee brings the opponents to the centre of the ring and reminds them to “protect themselves at all times”. In reality, the need to protect themselves goes beyond the ring; as told earlier, it requires the right people around them to make the right decisions about opponents and fights, or when to ‘throw in the towel’, to protect them from themselves if necessary.

5.4.1 *The Inner Circle*

The most important thing in this business is trust, maybe the most important thing in life as well. When you begin to second guess the motives of your *inner circle*, that is the very day you begin to think wrong; this is the beginning of your demise. Now part of your focus is set to not being screwed, not totally on the fight.” (Mike Jones, 26-2 [19KO], as cited in Clark (2016, p. 80)

As Mike Jones implies, the boxer cannot do this alone; his focus must be totally on the fight. For some boxers, the requirement to have a network of people to support them is extensive. For others the circle is tight. Truth-tellers are valued, but as I allude to earlier, timing is critical:

I didn't have a lot of people around me. I didn't like a lot. I didn't need a lot of people around. I didn't need boys to puff my shoulders up, man. I know where I am going. I don't need no one to stroke my ego or anything like that. You know, it was good to have [manager] and my brother there just to pull me back sometimes when I did get ahead of myself, but I think I was fairly grounded. (Boxer-C)

Too many boxers surround themselves with a back-slapping brigade. ... all of a sudden, they take a loss and the boxer wants to blame everyone else but himself. [The team] are saying, you're right, I agree with you mate. We shouldn't have done this, shouldn't have done that. It's bullshit. Sit back and work with the facts. It all depends on your ability to take it from a loss to a lesson. (Matchmaker)

In emerging pro-boxing teams, the inner circle demands shared passion, dedication and significant trust in the relationship. A boxer needs to know the people in their corner are able to make decisions, even under pressure, “because there is some big fucking decisions” (Boxing-Coach). In the early stages of a boxer's career, the team consists of a small number of individuals who cover various roles, wearing “multiple hats”. Trust is particularly critical as it is not until third-party promoters invest that contracts are first involved (Boxing-Manager, Boxing-Coach). “Multiple hats”, “keeping your circle small” and references to inner circle members as “mates” and “friends” are terms frequently used by the participants:

Boxer-B and I are old idiot mates; we've always been, you know what I mean. ... But there would be no way that I would be mates with [name] if he wasn't my boxer – but over time we can make it work, I don't know, it's hard to explain but if you're gonna get to the top level you can't train somebody you don't like. You have to like them. (Boxing-Coach)

At the same time there is friendship, there are two relationships, a personal one but then it comes down to certain times it just has to be business ... in two instances it got a little bit blurred, and in both instances that caused me problems. (Boxing-Manager)

We are still solid strong friends now. You know, he played a massive father-figure role ... he is a very wise, smart man. He's a guy that I go to even today, you know, I ring him up if I have a decision that I struggle to make. Yeah, he's always the best sounding board.

You know, he doesn't say do this or do that. He goes, he'll say, have think about this. (Boxer-C)

These quotes represent the existential tension between fulfilling a role and having an authentic relationship:

I think it's about putting your right hat on at the right time. And it's about underlining your friendship, so you're an equal, then putting your hat on as coach or as the corner man, whatever. (Boxing-Coach)

Juggling hats, wearing masks and being warrior, in an "entertainment business" all challenge an individual's ability to differentiate self from the role, and remain authentic. The definition of friendship seems vague: "You have to like them", "It got a little bit blurred ... caused me problems." The blurriness increases when both sides of the dyad need to pay the bills and put food on their family's table. It suggests parties understand and agree on the terms, timing, and conditions of the relationship.

5.4.2 On the Battlefield Together

At the epicentre of the inner circle is the head coach/trainer (coach). The boxer and the coach are intrinsically linked. Both sides of the dyads spoke of the need for "shared passion" and "mutual investment" in the boxer's career, "presence", "commitment", "honesty", and "trust". "You've got to be all in" (Boxing-Coach). The strength of the boxer: coach dyad appears more potent than in other sports, particularly when compared to team-based sports. These partnerships sometimes mirror a marriage, a relationship for life, with the ups and downs and the "bickering" the analogy alludes to (fieldnotes). Given professional boxers' identities are labelled as "warriors"(p. 505) or "gladiators" (p. 515) (Wacquant, 1995), maybe it is akin to the coach and the boxer going to war together. The coach is inside the field of play, cornering the athlete during fights and providing physical, technical, mental, and emotional support at the end of every three-minute round. When the bell sounds, the boxer "must surrender to the trial of splendid solitary combat" (Wacquant, 1995, p. 515). From outside the battle, the boxer relies on their corner to protect them if they cannot, to throw in the towel (stop the fight). Lewandowski (2020) referred to the burden and dilemma of cornering the boxer in the ring. While the referee and the medical doctor are contractually obligated, the corner has the moral duty of care (Lewandowski, 2020). This responsibility walks a fine line between honouring a boxer's desire to 'go out on their shield' versus 'throwing in the towel'. The corner must simultaneously mask fight and fighter status while ensuring the boxer's physical and emotional wellbeing. A cornering decision will depend on the boxer's intentions for entering the ring. It can be a lot to weigh up in a very short moment (Boxing-Coach).

I know my boxer, not the referee not anyone else, so you jump in, you grab your boxer first. I don't care what anyone thinks, you don't worry about rules and regulations, your job is purely to make sure he gets to see his kids after this fight. And you do what you think is best, not what anyone else, better off getting it wrong and it's early than fucking sitting by his bedside with tubes everywhere. (Boxing-Coach)

The existential reality that one can get hurt or die creates as much meaning for those in his corner as it does for the boxer. Maybe it is this going to war together that forms the intense bond, bordering at times on (co-)dependency: "They get so massively dependent" (Boxing-Coach). It may also be true that the coach is as invested in the boxer's success as the boxer himself, having invested heavily in the professional boxer's career in terms of time and money, as discussed earlier. Such investments cultivate loyalty, regardless of a contractual tie:

You have to have a coach that's really invested in you. Why does he care? Like does it affect him as much as it affects you when you lose? Yeah, if not, then get a better coach. It's better to have someone who's gonna feel your pain as much as you do. And like, you know, isn't just blaming you for your loss. They're going to be like, oh man, where's my training going wrong? Like, what have we done? Like we've failed, when you fail, you fail together. I'm lucky I've definitely got that with [Boxing-Coach] ... it's not on every corner. (Boxer-B)

Reflecting on the interview response alongside fieldwork, I sense that Boxer-B's comments refer to the breakdown of the relationship between Boxer-B and his previous coach ("Everything fell apart with coach and me"). Having lost in his Commonwealth final, his coach was scathing, and Boxer-B was so disillusioned he left the sport: "It was a crap way to end your career." So, after a three-year break, "I decided to give pro boxing a go" and to "cash up on my talents". It seemed like "a good reason to start training, and it is probably good for my mental health to be like, hey, to do something and have a goal again" (Boxer-B). He started looking for a professional coach, but "I never trusted anyone"; he used words like "dodgy". At that time, Boxing-Coach (Boxer-B's current coach) was on a pathway to becoming a more professional coach, looking for ways to redirect some personal demons in his life.

I gave up drinking and I think I needed something to replace my time to start with, right through till I got out of drinking I was a part-time coach. I was being just like every other coach, but then when I didn't drink, I am no good on my own if I am not drinking, I needed to be doing something, so I just jumped full-on into coaching and I found I was good at it. (Boxing-Coach)

"Coach was willing to make it happen because he was trying to build something for himself too" (Boxer-B). Both boxer and coach (in their separate interviews) shared similar perspectives regarding this joint career path, which evolved and developed together:

I told [Boxer-B] you've got a fight in a month, and that was the start of [pro boxing team]. I think with me if I do something I do it 100%. And when [Boxer-B] came we got serious and I started putting my own shows on as well. I kind of found that I was good at it, to be honest. (Boxing-Coach)

Boxer-B's first bout was on a locally promoted event:

It made me think of how much I had paid out in amateurs, and then even if you did well, it was often like thankless. So yeah, just felt freaking good getting paid \$600 for my first fight. (Boxer-B)

I'd done more preparation than for any [amateur] fight in my life ... coach would actually stay there with me, making sure I'm working hard, running and training hard with the team, sprint work and all that stuff. So yeah, that was all new. And that just gave me confidence going into the fight. (Boxer-B)

The dedication required of a trainer/coach goes beyond a nine-to-five job, or a single role definition:

I am not going to wake up every morning and get this guy up making sure he's running ... the trainer's job is to be in the gym all day every day. Look, when you are a trainer, you're a psychiatrist, you are a mother, you are father, you're an uncle, you're everything (Mike Tyson – Instagram@Hotboxn).

Boxing-Coach described the culture and environment he has developed in his stable since my fieldwork:

We have become real successful and strong. It's real loyal and we are all on the same page, even if you bicker and fight. We have got a really strong culture. It's hard to explain but the boxing is real, and the environment is real.

By this, he means he has built an environment that is authentic to his values and surrounded himself with people in his inner circle who share the same passion, energy and trust. The cultural environment has translated into the gym's success and the loyalty of his boxers. They know he is "all in" and that he genuinely cares, and they also know that they need to pick sides at times.

He is not the most technical coach ... he's always learning ... he is on your career path with you ... he is right there beside you in the gym ... ringing people all the time, when he's not in the gym with you ... he'll be on the phone at like three o'clock in the morning ... going through Boxrec, looking for the right opponent ... all that stuff's really important, there's a lot of work you got to do for that. (Boxer-B)

The related stories of Boxer-B and Boxing-Coach authentically reflect the two sides of a Boxing-Coach: boxer dyad. Both found meaning in throwing their time and commitment into transitioning their roles into professional ranks. The coach, an all-or-nothing character, found a replacement for his self-confessed average professional career and personal demons. The boxer found solace in an environment and a sense of purpose from an unfulfilling end to his amateur

career – that missing sense of belonging and value. Since these interviews, Boxer-B has fought and lost a world title shot. The next chapter of this dyadic story involves the anguish of Boxer-A's lost dream and purpose, and Boxing-Coach's responsibilities with his other prospects.

5.4.3 "The Slave Contract"

Boxer-A, having failed to qualify for the Olympics, returned to Africa. His stable mate, having qualified and returned from the Olympics, was considered a promotable prospect. In a deal brokered by a high-profile international manager, [stable mate] was offered a three-year contract in the US with a renowned contract coach and a reputable promotional company. The contract was negotiated to include Boxer-A. Boxer-A had strong self-belief that he would one day be a world champion; all he had to do was to get to America. In our interview, he said:

It was a slave contract, and I never made any money from that contract. You know, the only money you will make is just money to feed you know, I signed it so I'm not going to regret it, and they paid for five years [living expenses] so I played everything to the best of my knowledge. They only ever wanted [stable mate]. I sneaked myself in. And it got me to America right. (Boxer-A)

The story of this boxer is not unique, where immigrant boxers' desire for a better life, fame, and fortune overshadows their knowledge or acceptance of the realities of the business (Hopkinson, 2022). With separated roles across organisations, Boxer-A's inner circle appeared disconnected. In our interview, Boxer-A implied he regarded the roles of the manager and the coach as two unique and separate components, not as a unified circle of support. His comments suggest he holds the manager more accountable for the shortcomings in his career so far: "I don't just want to get a manager for business. This time I want to get a manager who cares. I need someone who cares about my career" (Boxer-A).

Having built a nine-win record by knockout, I questioned why he took on a risky opponent ranked just below him, asking "You are not going that way?" (fieldnotes). After losing the fight as a ranked contender in "what was supposed to be a stay-ready fight" (refer to the section "*It's a Sin To Go To a Fight When You Are Not In Shape*", above), he sent this text: "I learned my lesson – the business is real – is all gambling ... I only got \$x only – they are making money off me" (fieldnotes). A second loss followed when he fought on a 'swing bout'. Knockouts are unpredictable, so promoters schedule expendable bouts which are dropped from the promotion if not required to fill the broadcast time allocation. Promoters would normally contract the boxer accordingly, but Boxer-A's team was advised en route to the venue (or so he was told). He had promoted his fight on social media to his family, friends and fans, who watched the broadcast expecting to see him perform and win. To be cast aside was a severe blow to his public identity, and this was before the loss. "I waited 10 hours with my glove on,

eat nothing” and by the time he fought, the promoters, the fans and the cameras had left. The hometown boy won the fight by split decision – “All he had to do to win was survive” (Boxer-A). This second loss of his career was pivotal to the cancellation of his contract.

The old man [trainer in his gym] told me the most terrible thing in boxing happened to you there is nothing else, nothing worse than this and you’re still healthy and your mind is still right. Most people quit from here they just get frustrated, and most will speak terrible of boxing. Even if I say boxing is dirty, of course, it is a dirty game but *my will is intact*. (Boxer- A)

Boxer-A’s inner circle differs to the other case participants, literature and my previous research (Thomas, 2017), where the head-coach is the central enforcer and protector in Boxer-A’s career.

The atmosphere and mode of functioning in professional boxing gyms vary considerably with the personality, pedagogic style, and authority of their head coach, and secondarily as a function of their ethnic recruitment and status in the local or national boxing economy (Wacquant, 1995, p. 492).

Whilst I wasn’t close enough to see the inner workings of his gym, there were numerous occasions when, from the outside looking in, I noted concerns about the decisions of his coach in building his career: insufficient sparring, waiving the payment for a late opponent withdrawal, not ensuring pre-fight fuelling was available (especially as Boxer-A was non-meat eating), allowing an opponent not to make weight without penalties, and the swing-bout debacle (fieldnotes).

Even before these two losses, I recorded my apprehensions that he’d been ‘parked’. He was fighting too infrequently to build his career. The response to my attempts to call this to his attention was: “You are just a fan, a lover of boxing, this team are experts, they have years of experience” (fieldnotes). By the time of our interview, his perspective had changed: “These people I trust so much who was leading me. And I was just following, I thought they knew what they were doing. But they never wanted me.” Further into our interview, he disclosed some aspects of the situation I was not aware of at the time:

So, they gave me a three-year visa, which expired and they left me without a visa ... so they kind of kept me handicapped ... keep telling me stories... knowing you are not free, you can’t go back [to his country], you can’t travel, you can’t do this, you can’t do that ... I troubled these guys so much I was tired of telling the promoter, the manager and lawyer, everybody, so well, I cannot complain. I can’t be worried, just have to train hard, eat right, do my best. So, I just coined a lifestyle for myself, which worked. Because I believe anything I want will come to me at the right time. So, I just patiently do nothing. Not getting frustrated, not getting pissed off. Controlling every emotion because I am responsible. (Boxer-A)

His words demonstrate existential freedom, but his environment “handicapped” him. The above statements explicitly describe an athlete with *situated freedom* to choose his boxing career, a country and a different way of life, and his attitude in how he copes with the situation. It also told me of masking his anguish after his visa expired. It emphasised that as close as one is to others, one never truly knows what the other is experiencing, thinking or feeling. His spirituality, founded on creating positive universal energy and existential responsibility, had significant meaning in his life and served as a vital coping mechanism: “*My will is intact*”. When I asked him, “Why didn’t you just return home?”, he was adamant “No”; or when I asked what he’d now do differently, he replied, “Say no sometimes. I never said no to these people at any time.” He continued to reflect meaning into his experience and still maintained hope for a future career: “I proved myself, and you know, they bought me all this fight and to me, it is a good thing ... no regret.”

This resonates with Hopkinson (2022). Boxing athletes travel globally, migrating to seek fame and fortune as professional fighters in Western societies or as contracted opponents to lose to local boxers. Hopkinson found that as foreign boxers became “active in the global industry, they encounter[ed] racialised structural inequalities which locate them as a cheap source of expendable labour” (Hopkinson, 2022, p. 2). Despite these dynamics, boxers and coaches continue to maintain the belief (or religious conviction) that their hard work will pay off, that they will “transcend the industry’s prejudices” and realise their dreams (Hopkinson, 2022).

5.4.4 Staying in Your Lane

Once there are multiple people involved that’s when it can get complex and once emotions get involved with certain things, that’s when it becomes complex. (Manager)

When Boxer-B approached me for support in the early stages of his professional career, the first thing I did was ring the coach. “I am old school,” was his response. After meeting to discuss it further, we informally instituted a collaborative team. We structured workloads of boxing training, strength and conditioning and nutrition planning onto a spreadsheet. The model provided a view of periodicity and visibility between the boxing coach and the trainer, and to this we added performance profiling (fieldnotes). Boxer-B loved this, and the coach embraced it and demonstrated he genuinely wanted to get the best out of himself and the boxers.

I got heaps out of that fight with [opponent], because of what we did with you [i.e., me]. We like learned so much about communication. Like, we had meetings and we communicated what was what and then everyone was on the same page, no one is diverting. We wrote it down, coloured-coded it even. And it just simplified everything.

We built a stairway to the goal. Like, we mapped out all the steps. So, every time you hit a step, you knew, you're closer to the goal. (Boxer-B)

My role was to provide the glue between the team members, integrate the necessary resources and people, translate, calm and mentor the boxer and the coach, and offer a modern-day high-performance sports perspective. This approach opened the floor for open and honest discussions about workload, technique, strategy, mindset and relational issues. Trust developed between all team members. The step-up in the boxer's capability and conditioning was exponential, and the team was confident that his up-and-coming high-profile opponent would meet a different fighter. Winning a 50:50 fight convincingly, his opponent commented to the media on his transformation (fieldnotes).

The cracks started during the next bout, and the coach and the strength and conditioning trainer clashed. The trainer was not attending sparring or pre-fight preparations or was not as available outside of his gym space/hours as Boxing-Coach expected. As such, Boxing-Coach questioned the trainer's commitment, passion and loyalty. Boxing-Coach started to feel threatened as the stakes rose, and the additional pressures of signing the boxer with a promoter came on. He was simultaneously asking me for advice, using me as a sounding board, and accusing me of "*not staying in my lane*". Boxing-Coach felt he was losing control, and the successful approach became "just not me and the way I do things" (fieldnotes). For my own part, "I'd been on-call and invested my time, expertise, and a lot of heart into building capabilities within the team." I was distressed at the end; I questioned my role, values, and future career (fieldwork). I was in existential anguish. In our interview, much later, Boxing-Coach said:

I think you need to keep it in-house, it's just easier for the professional boxers, everything under one roof. I think what I learned is that you need the person [the roles/expertise]. So, it's not about who it was but it does have to be in your environment – they have to be watching it [what we are doing]. They have to be exposed. It was like we had two different camps – like [boxer] and him [trainer] had their own separate camp going towards something. (Boxing-Coach)

As Boxing-Coach often says, it is "us against the world; you are either with us or against us." In this instance, the stable and brand was tightly formed and the "us" was forefront for the boxer, suggesting a level of identity fusion. The boxer also expressed that when "you're winning, it's not just for yourself, but for the pride of [gym]" (Boxer-B).

Matchmaker described a similar scenario in his attempt to have a post-fight debrief. "He just didn't hear what I had to say. And he thought that I was *not staying in my lane*" (Matchmaker). It was not coincidental that our counterparts used the exact phrase.

Matchmaker describes his experience of working closely with a team on fight plans for a boxer who had reached world champion ranks:

I've helped you every step of the way with every fight and now you're telling me oh, no, no, no we are world champion. I know what I am doing and, all of a sudden, they put blinkers on. Yeah, it bothers me. Now they are saying, I'm the trainer, I made that world champion. When in fact it takes a team of people, not one individual; the boxers have the skills, the trainer has the disciplined approach to training, and you need someone, whether it be a manager or someone like myself, in the background with an independent viewpoint, saying who you fight, when you fight, making sure you stay active, and that you're fighting the right guys at the right time. (Matchmaker)

Based on these two examples, the degree to which stakeholders embrace others into the inner circle appears impacted by time (career stage and age) and context (event, success). The inner circle becomes more fiercely protected when the boxer's career starts to take off. In my reflective supervisory interview, I said:

I can see the broader picture. My authentic self says I coached capabilities and knowledge inside the team during the emerging transition period. The ending was an organic part of this process. My 'bad faith me' felt used and genuinely grieved not being part of the inner circle. (Researcher-Practitioner)

5.5 Summary and Case Conclusion

Table 5.2 summarised the themes and sub-themes presented in this chapter. The chapter explored player and stakeholder perspectives using a stratification of data sources that examine identity, meaning, and relationships that help or hinder boxers who are building their careers as prospects. This longitudinally directed case fills identified gaps in prior research on career transitions in professional boxing (no other sources have been identified) and expands the limited reporting of transitional events for migrations, promotional contracts and early exits.

This case examines the business of professional sport, examining the existential identities and meaning described by athletes and stakeholders in performing in a business that is both sport and entertainment. In addition to this, strong challenges are visible in both individual and organisational authenticity, and clear evidence of situated freedom within the confines of the sport's demands, regulations, and coach control. Boxer-A, however, considered he was able to retain his individual freedom (choice and responsibility) often stating "my will is intact". "Boxing is not game", it is a sport where athletes are revered for their "hard work" and "brutality". The requirement for the boxer to mask their true essence and play the role of "gladiator" and "entertainer" is a crucial element for athletes in combat sports vying for promotional contracts. However, switching between these identities and that of a "regular person" is expected by those who surround them, including the fans.

Of particular note in this case study was the lack of knowledge the participants possessed on entry into the professional arena. The implications of boxers having sufficient knowledge (“No one was telling us how to do it, we just had to do it all ourselves”), preparation and the right (trustworthy and transparent) people in their inner circle are most critical in a sport which demands the right fight decisions are made for career progression and, in the corner, for the physical protection of the boxer.

The case also highlighted, in both my experiences and those of Matchmaker, how an inner circle quickly closes when the stakes rise.

In the final round:

You got to be mad dedicated to this sport in both ways – you have to be dedicated to the investment and you have to be dedicated to the madness. Is it worth it? When it comes down to it, we are the only ones who choose and the only ones to blame. (Boxing-Manager)

CHAPTER 6 – CASE 2 – RUGBY LEAGUE

Chapter 6 reports case findings for the emerging athlete transition in professional rugby league. This report uses my voice, as the researcher-practitioner, interwoven with the participants' own words, to ensure a vivid and authentic representation of the themes identified from reflexive thematic analysis. Consistent with the method outlined in Chapter 4, this case combines fieldwork notes, social media, interviews, documents and artefacts, and researcher-practitioner experiences and reflections.

Fieldwork and researcher experience includes two years of active engagement with adolescent rugby league players associated with her practitioner business. Table 6.1 summarises the key participants in the case, their transitions, roles, and their inclusion in fieldwork and/or interviews. Numerous organisational staff have worked in more than one NRL club over their careers (current club label included), have experienced more than one role, and speak of present and past experiences.

Table 6.1
Participant Summary – Case 2

Reference / Label	Environment / Pathway	DATA		TRANSITIONS			ROLES			
		Fieldwork	Interview	Emerging Athlete	Elite Professional	Early Exit or Retired	Athlete	Coach	Practitioner	Organisation
Player-A	SG-Ball to NRL Rookie	1	1	1	1		1			
Player-B	SG-Ball to Flegg	1		1			1			
Player-C	NRL Club Development to SG-Ball	1		1			1			
Player-D	U20 to NRL Train and Trial to Cup		1	1	1		1			
Player-E	SG-Ball	1	1	1		D	1			
Player-F	SG-Ball to Flegg/Cup	1		1		W	1			
Player-G	U20 to Cup to Club Coach		1	1	1	W	1	1		
RL-Trainer	NRL Club 1 - NRL Pathways		1					1		
RL-Manager1	NRL Club 2 - NRL Pathways		1					1		1
RL-Manager2	NRL Player to International and NRL Club 1		1	1	1	R	1	1		
RL-Agent	NRL/International Player to Organisation		1	1	1	R	1			1
RL-Physio	NRL Club 1 - Senior Physiotherapist		1						1	
Wellbeing-Manager	NRL Club 3 and International		1						1	
Researcher-Practitioner	Independent Organisation		1						1	

Note. U=Under, W=Withdrawn, D=Deselected, R=Retired.

The following sections present the findings of this case study under the four primary themes and corresponding sub-themes summarised in Table 6.2. The findings are underpinned by the three-spheres framework, transitions (T), existential being (E) and intra-, inter- and environmental relationships (R) documented in Chapter 2, with ☑ indicating a *strong* link to that area.

Table 6.2
Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes in Case 2

CASE 2 - RUGBY LEAGUE		T	E	R
Making It				
	Setting the Scene - Professional Rugby League	☑		
	The Funnel	☑		
	Prospecting	☑		☑
	From Identification to Selection	☑	☑	
	Early Exits	☑	☑	
Big Step Up - Big Step Across				
	Too Fast - Too Soon	☑		☑
	Dealing with Injuries	☑		☑
	Teenagers with Talent		☑	☑
Apprenticeship Years				
	"It's a Rollercoaster Ride" - Successful transition into the NRL	☑		☑
	Patience and Persistence	☑		☑
	Broken and Distressed	☑		☑
	No Regrets		☑	☑
Significance of family				☑

6.1 Making It

This initial theme provides an overview of the environment emerging rugby league players from NZ experience. As a researcher-practitioner, my insider position gave me access to junior contracting values and timing. Junior contracts varied depending on the contractor's view of the 'talent'. The more talented a player was perceived to be, the more substantial the enticements and the longer the contract timeframes were, thus removing the player from the market. This theme breaks down this process from my experience, fieldwork and the interviews conducted with the participants.

Making It predominantly examines the transitional phases and events the emerging rugby league participants experience. The theme is broken down into the following sub-themes:

- *Setting the Scene*
- *The Funnel*
- *Prospecting*
- *From Identification to Selection*
- *Early Exits*

6.1.1 *Setting the Scene – Professional Rugby League*

Rugby league split from rugby union in 1895 when the players who came predominantly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, began demanding payment to play, The wealthier classes who wanted to retain an amateur ethos continued playing rugby union. (Fagan, 2006). Over time, rugby league progressively changed from its union counterpart, evolving into a high-paced, cardio, and heavy-contact sport designed to entertain spectators and contribute to the players' incomes. Super League (SL) in Europe and the National Rugby League (NRL) in Australia are the prominent professional sports organisations in the rugby league world (Fagan, 2006).

This case study focuses on NRL pathways for emerging NZ-originating athletes assigned to New South Wales clubs. The NRL comprises 17 clubs, including the NZ Warriors, which joined the league in 1995. The 2023 'salary cap' (NRL, n.d.-b), which controls each club's investment cost in players, was announced as A\$12.1 million with a minimum wage of A\$120,000 for full-time players (top 30) and a cap of \$650,000 for development players (NRL, 2022, p. 24).

NRL clubs can sign players to a 'full-time top-30' [senior *topside*] development contract at 18 (or 17 years on November 1). NRL regulations stipulate that only players aged 19 the year of debut can play as full-time senior players in the NRL (NRL, n.d.-a). But there are exceptions to the rule:

The NRL this week granted an exemption to Roosters teen prodigy Joseph Sua'ali'i, who still goes to school before or after training ... we're going to throw a 17-year-old kid in the toughest most physical sport in the world, it's crazy. (St John, 2021)

The Rugby League Players Association (RLPA) controls the regulations accrediting player managers or agents, limiting players from signing contracts until the calendar year in which the player turns 15 years of age (NRL, 2018). Despite the strict regulations regarding senior contracting and salary caps, I cannot identify any formalised NRL regulations that stipulate ages, terms or payments for signing youth players into NRL pathways programmes (NRL, n.d.-b). Yet, players under 18 enter into pathways agreements which incorporate financial support packages (such as playing fees, medical costs, education support, living allowances and relocation costs) in return for their commitment to that club for a period of time (fieldwork notes, RL-Manager1, RL-Agent). As the following quote identifies, there are concerns about current practices:

The NRL and RLPA is reviewing the Agent Accreditation Scheme ... there are more than 100 accredited managers, but most don't have a single first-grader on their books ... discussions with stakeholders will continue, most of those in attendance felt the rule, which allows players to be managed from the age of 15, should be changed. Those in attendance felt a more appropriate age would be 17, stopping agents from speculatively signing as many players as possible in the hope of unearthing a superstar.

By raising the limit, it was hoped young teens would enjoy their football with less pressure and expectation. (Proszenko, 2021)

Table 6.3
NRL Pathways Competition Structure

Age	Structure	New South Wales	Queensland
U17	8-10 weeks pre-season	Harold Matthews (Harold Matts)	CITY: Cyril Connell Challenge COUNTRY: Mal Meninga Cup
U19	10-12 weeks pre-season	SG-Ball	Harvey Norman U19
U21	12-14 week in-season	Jersey Flegg (Flegg)	Hastings Deering Colts
17+	In-Season Open Age	NSW Knock-On Effect Cup / Ron Massey	Intrust Q-Cup / BRL League

Note. U=under.

Competition structures for NRL pathways include Queensland (QLD) and New South Wales (NSW) competitions summarised in Table 6.2. This NZ-based case study investigates participants who compete in the NSW competition. The NZ Warriors compete in the NSW competition but did not enter teams in seasons 2020, 2021 and 2022. The Warriors have returned to SG-Ball and Cup in 2023 and have committed to investing in all pathway levels from 2024 (Stuff_Writer, 2022). Entering as an emerging athlete has no guarantees, as the follow sub-theme examines – while many aspire to lofty heights and big pay days, very few will successfully become contracted NRL players.

6.1.2 The Funnel

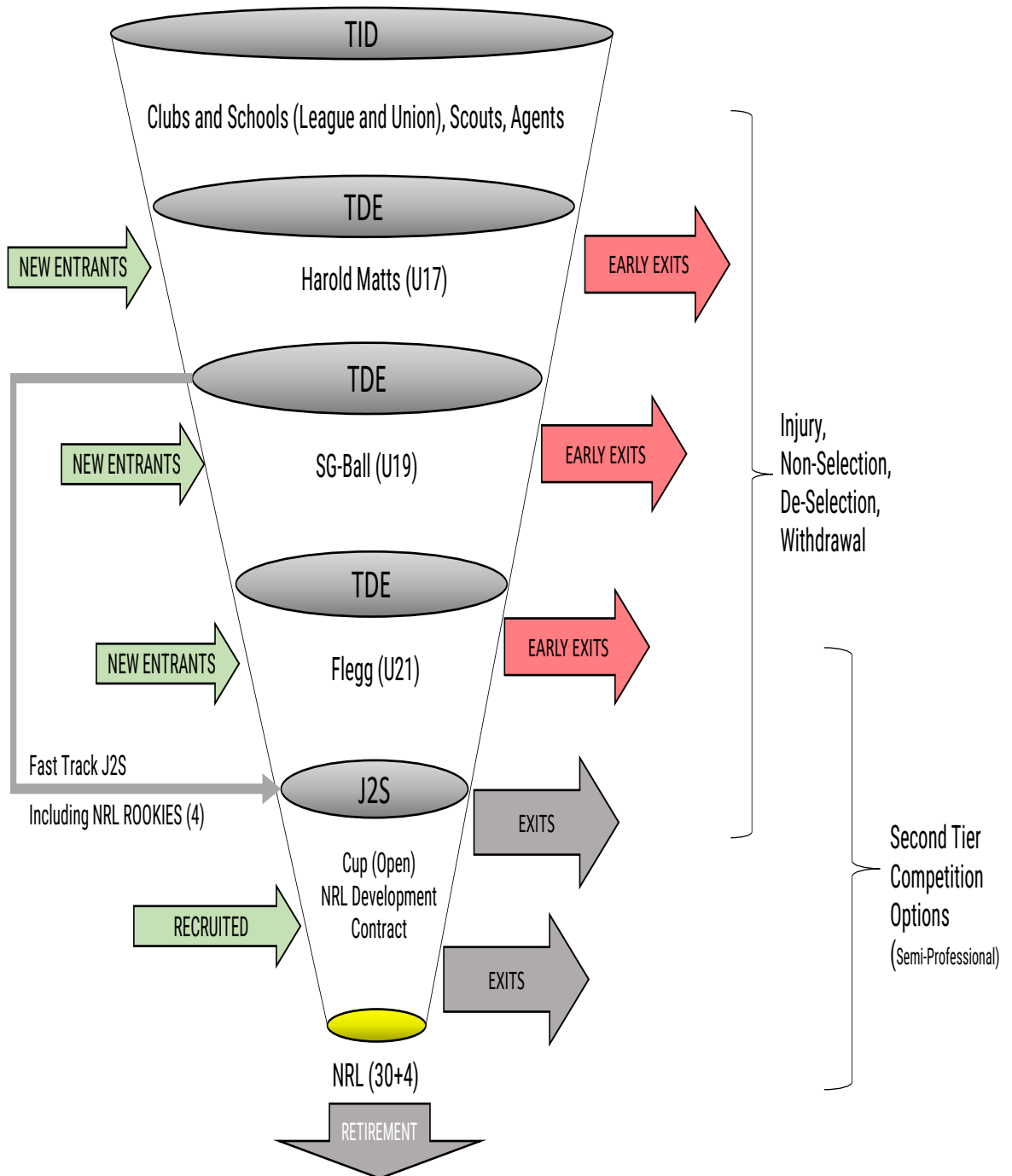
Figure 6.1 represents the NRL pathways system as a ‘funnel’, using NSW competition names. The diagram depicts the extent to which the number of athletes entering at the top (TID) dissipates. I estimated with 17 clubs there are approximately 2040 players in the funnel from TDE to Flegg in a year.

TID commences with agents, school and/or club scouts and recruiters identifying players in their teens. In rugby league, it is rare for players not to be identified before 18 (Cupples et al., 2018). Players enter as club prospects at the top of the funnel. Although NSW TDE official competitions begin at Harold Matts (16-17 years), TID is occurring at younger ages as agents or clubs expand their search ranges, afraid they will miss out on the best prospects – these additional TID numbers are not included in my 2040-player estimate. The following quotes confirm:

This is the first year we’ve introduced 13-14-year-olds. Yeah, it’s great. They come in once a fortnight for six sessions. And basically, like I said, it is just a touch point. (RL-Manager2)

It's only in the last five years that we've gone down to these younger ages. We didn't use to talk to kids until the age of 18, but over the last few years the pressure has come on by entrants into the market, clubs believing they can get a jump on the opposition by identifying younger talent and working with that talent at a high-performance level earlier, give them a better return. I'm yet to be convinced by that; I have a belief too that you'll also have a shorter-term athlete because they'll burn out quicker. (Agent, as cited in Long (2018)).

Figure 6.1
The NRL Funnel – NSW Pathway (Researchers diagram).



The funnel is described by Cupples et al. (2018) as trajectories of reduced selection opportunities. When TID players enter a club pathway (TDE), representatives (coaches, pathway managers) evaluate them for selection. If successful, the player may sign an ‘exclusivity agreement’ and be eligible to play Harold Matts from 16 years of age. If Harold Matts players are successfully reselected, they flow down to SG-Ball and Flegg, or are fast-tracked into senior development contracts (Cup or NRL *rookie*¹⁵). The identification and recruitment process continues at each level, with the potential to bring in new entrants and de-select current athletes. The ultimate achievement is *making it* to the NRL starting side (the XIII on the field, four interchanges, and one reserve player).

Cupples et al. (2021b) argued stakeholders have a duty of care to adolescent athletes to inform and prepare them with realistic expectations for this transition. This extends to recruitment processes that represent appropriate identification and selection. RL-Manager2 described inheriting 55 under 16-year-olds when he took up his club position. “Clearly, they couldn’t all be potential NRL players,” he said. However, as this statement and the following quote suggests, current practices do not appear to be providing young athletes with sensible messages:

A plethora of young talent have found homes in NRL clubs from the previous [domestic] contest, showing a genuine pathway rangatahi can take towards the professional game. New Zealand Rugby League (NZRL) General Manager of Football and High-Performance, Motu Tony, as cited in NZRL (2022).

6.1.3 Prospecting

Some participants referred to the prospecting of potential talent as *whitebaiting*. Whitebaiting (netting lots of tiny whitebait fish) involves agents speculatively signing as many players as possible in the hope of unearthing a superstar (Proszenko, 2021). The only obligation of a player-manager (agent) after signing a player is to formally meet the player twice per year (NRL, 2018), suggesting the cost of stock-piling players is small for that one potential gem. Agents’ fees are generally between 6-7% of the player’s football income, typically levied once annual playing income exceeds \$10,000; however, some agencies charge a sign-on fee for emerging players (fieldwork, RL-Manager1, RL-Agent). With no realistic chance of *making it*, many players are signed with minimum support and false expectations. Furthermore, there is little advantage to agents in whitebaiting as they are unlikely to receive any financial return on their investment until the players reach senior contracts (RL-Agent). Player-D was baffled by the agency prospecting:

¹⁵ A rookie is a player on a junior development contract training with the NRL topside.

Agents, so many of them are dodgy, man. I know some agents who have like 80 boys underneath and 60 of them are bloody 15 and stuff, it's ridiculous ... you don't even need an agent until you make Flegg. (Player-D)

Player-D's intellect and family connections enabled a more independent approach. However, many families were intimidated by the process and feared their sons would not make it if they did not sign. Others saw their sons contracting with an agent as a sign of *making it*, proudly displaying it on social media (fieldwork). The concern is that agents sign too many young players with no realistic long-term prospects. Wellbeing-Manager sums up her experience:

An agent walks straight up to one of the boys in our U17s team because he's 'the next best thing' ... I was sitting next to two other equally talented boys. I see them roll their eyes and put their heads down. The agent turns to me, says "Hi," then walks out without acknowledging them. I ask the boys, "Do you have an agent?" "Yeah." "Who's your agent?" "That guy," they say. (Wellbeing-Manager)

Whitebaiting expresses Buber's definition of I: It as the objectification of young men for the benefit of those who contract them, treated as a number, not a name. It is fair to say not all agents operate these whitebaiting models. For some, recruitment and the provision of services are kept tight and controlled, and boundaries are made clear – a desire to ensure their clients' contractual and financial well-being is paramount to their practice model:

We are not interested [in whitebaiting] because it's just too much work. Forget about the ethical side of things, you know that from a commercial point of view, you can't do a job for them. I know from having done this for so long that the guys that you can't do anything for are usually the ones that also end up yelling the loudest. (RL-Agent)

When I first commenced my research, I idealistically challenged the boundaries of [RL-Agent]'s firm. Two years later, I understand the arguments for separating personal development and welfare components from career progression and financial well-being responsibilities (reflective interview). The demarcation of a business relationship assists successful players in achieving and retaining wealth at the end of their playing careers:

We often say there is no point going around the world collecting rugby jerseys, trophies, and things if you do not have a house with walls to put them on. (RL-Agent)

Misalignment of player and/or parental expectations against the reality of "the sports business" includes harbouring inflated views of the player's skills and potential, or having demands of the agents' responsibilities over their own. As RL-Manager1 explained:

Sometimes players' expectations of the managers are wrong. They think the manager needs to do everything for them. But the duty of care, other than catching up twice a year, is to make sure that the doors are opened to clubs for their players, then keeping the club honest ... most important is that the player can trust them to do what is in their best interest and not their own. (RL-Manager1)

As such, the findings suggest that agent: athlete relationships can and are beneficial if expectations are transparent and realistic, with responsibility from both sides of the dyad – or, in Pasifika families, a collective responsibility. “Player agents definitely have a great place [in] the game ... you just need to educate yourself” (Champions-of-the-Pacific, 2021).

6.1.4 From Identification to Selection

Selecting the players and building pathways programmes is the responsibility of the NRL recruitment teams. The recruitment team will identify the criteria and positions of players they want or need at each level of the programme. Once selected, the pathway staff take over the players' development. As RL-Manager1 explains:

My job is to identify the players, we have the prototype we know what we need, ... a certain player, a certain position in our programme ... I bring this kid in and then I trust [the club] system to confirm his character and coachability, and to take care of him. The coaches, the strength and conditioning coach ... the wellbeing manager ... everyone has a role to play. (RL-Manager1)

The attributes identifying talented adolescent rugby league players are not an exact science, but sports skill, physicality and character are identification features. Technical skill and athleticism are only one factor. The recruiters interviewed highlighted an individual's ability to withstand pressure and represent “strong character and coachability” and holding “strong family values” as significant predictors of successful ongoing selection (RL-Manager1, Pathway-Manager). The need for not only athleticism but character was reiterated by the Bruce Sharrock (Player Manager) in Long (2018):

If they're simply the biggest lad and dominating at that level, that isn't a blueprint for future success, because others will develop later ... the biggest one for me is that you need a player who's got a work ethic. I look to see if a footballer loves what he does, he loves to do extras, loves watching footage, they're always playing with a football. Trying to find a kid who's got a passion for the game, rather than just wanting to be a part of the game, because he thinks it's cool. (paras. 15, 21-23)

Implications of early selection pressures – physical (maturation, injury, nutrition) and emotional distress – are evidenced in this research and supported by Sabato et al. (2016). Cupples et al. (2018) found that the physiological and psychological costs of over-commitment and early intensity, including early athletic identity conflict, can come at a cost. During this phase, the players and their families face an overload of competing priorities and pressures. To pay and play in school, local clubs, ethnic, representative and TDE programmes in NZ is compounding. This overload is as much driven by the players themselves: “Try telling them to forfeit selection for a competition to rest or rebuild” (fieldnotes). Their sporting schedules and commitments, alongside school and family obligations, are confronting, aligning with Cupples et

al.'s (2021a) Australian-based findings. However, players, parents, and other stakeholders speak of these commitments as necessary to translate their dream into reality from a young age. The requirements for workload, life balance and recovery need to be taught: "Someone needs to teach them to behave and train to be an athlete. It is a big step up, so you need to be prepared for that training level, standards, and expectations" (Trainer).

Numerous staff (and the players) highlighted selection misconceptions as a concern. While non-selection is a time of anguish for players, being selected can also be a two-edged sword. Players are considered 'elite' from 16 (Talent Manager). By the time they are 16 or 17 years of age, the league pathway is already demanding. Being selected is only the opening of an opportunity, which comes with a demand to perform. If the player misinterprets successful selection as meaning they have made it, outcomes can be detrimental to their development:

Some parents and some young athletes have very distorted views of what success looks like when they're signing these contracts ... they think, or the expectation is, that they're now professional players, that they've made it ... that they're the best. When in fact all they've done is signed an exclusive commitment to that specific club at that stage and haven't achieved anything other than signing away other opportunities. (RL-Physio)

A lot of talented players fall off because they forget, or they think that they are too good and don't work as hard as other players. (Player-E)

I've seen so many kids who sign that piece of paper, and all of a sudden, it's tools down, I'm sorted, and then other kids just go past them. (RL-Manager2)

Finding themselves on the wrong side of selection, the same "cocky" adolescent boy then faces a self whose ego reflects something they can no longer become, resulting in a potential existential crisis. Participants repeatedly referred to "sacrifice", "relentless hard work", "work ethic", "discipline", and a "love-to-train" mindset (Keung, 2018). "If they don't love to train, you can pick that up pretty early; if they don't love training, they're not going to make it because you've got so much training to do" (RL-Trainer). As players emerge into professional environments, these are essential requirements, as Player-D explained:

For a professional rugby league player, 90% of what we really do with our time is train. We play 80 minutes a week. Yeah, and if you take away, like, all the pre-season, all the other stuff, almost everything we do is training. (Player-D)

However, for some of the more talented athletes, their "work ethic" and "discipline" often fall shy of the demands of their dream. The participants and I reflected on how the more talented athletes frequently fail, whereas struggling athletes can thrive. Collins and MacNamara (2012) corroborated that without 'trauma' (better framed as 'adversity'), an athlete cannot develop the tools and resiliency to handle the demands of converting talent to elite performance. However, this requires access to the right development, resources and support.

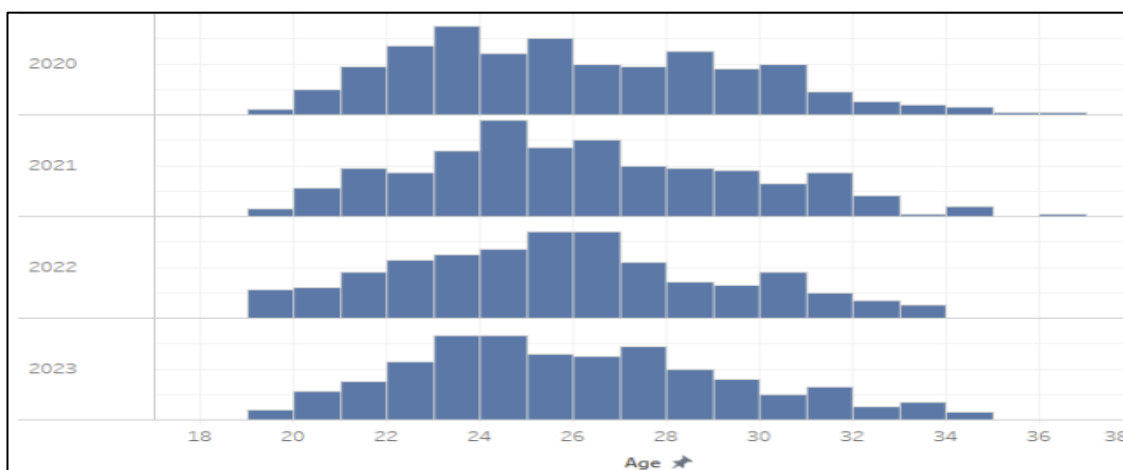
Even after selection for TDEs, players still needed social support (informational, emotional and esteem) and/or tangible help with nutrition, rest and recovery, personal life, and advocacy (fieldnotes).

6.1.5 Early Exits

This sub-theme highlights the dramatic effects and realities of the funnel, where an estimated 98% of young men will exit from the pathway before they turn 21. Despite my search, I have been unable to pinpoint any quantitative research that evidences these numbers. Participants suggested the figure for successful player transitions to NRL is between 1% and 3% (RL-Manager2, RL-Manager1). With an estimated 2040 emerging players across 17 clubs inside the NRL funnel at a time, 20-60 (1-3%) may *make it* to an NRL contract. The remainder spill as *early exits* represented by the red arrows in Figure 6.1. An NRL squad consists of 34 players (including four rookies), a total of 578 players in the NRL topside squads, and only 18 per team suit up each week.

Figure 6.2

Age Histogram of Numbers of Starting Players in Round 1 Teams in NRL for Seasons 2020-2023



Note. Extracted from Rugby.League.Eye.Test (2023) with permission of author, vertical axis shows players numbers in brackets of 10.

The data in Figure 6.2 does not tell us what happens to the 22-year-old players, who complete the pathways programme at Flegg, but who are not in the histogram; some will move to Cup, but for many their NRL careers will be over. However, as Figure 6.1 depicts, early exits occur along the funnel. Early exits start with non-selection at TID, where I received several calls from distraught parents, thinking the non-selection of their offspring at 13 was the end of the road. For example, one 13-year-old who had failed selection in a ‘pre-pathway’ programme had just had a major growth spurt and was uncoordinated at the time of trial (fieldwork). Across the

participant base,¹⁶ I witnessed players who dropped out due to non-selection, de-selection (controllable and not) or withdrawal from TDEs between 17 and 21 years.

Many factors determine a player's success or failure, some in their control, others not. While good attitudes and hard work do not guarantee success, they are a minimum expectation. For players who fail to commit to the levels of work ethic and demonstrate the character required, plenty more players are around and behind them who will take their place (RL-Manager1). When de-selected, the undisciplined player has failed to develop from 'having a talent' to 'being a talent' because of the choices and responsibilities they made (Aggerholm, 2015).

You get guys when they are 18 and have failed on some of those steps through their first development contract. And they sit there with their hand out going, "This is bullshit." And it's like, well actually you had key markers that you had to fill. Yeah, on this pathway, you haven't succeeded and, unfortunately, at this club, an NRL career won't be a possibility for you anymore. (RL-Physio)

Early exits left younger players disheartened, some even moving with their families to Australia. I observed poor communication and process around identification and selection events. In two notable instances, players did not appear on the email list, and in another, the club terminated the programme; in both cases, the clubs mismanaged expectations, failed to notify players or their parents and provided little developmental feedback. The stories presented in the following two themes and in Case 4 show the ability of athletes to cope with selection events reflected in their fight to gain or regain places or withdraw. Early exit suggests finality; however, my fieldwork recorded examples of athletes who had experienced setbacks in pathways events or 'flew under the radar', built determination and self-efficacy outside a pressurised environment, and found later success (Collins & MacNamara, 2012).

For the older TDE exits, post-school-leaver-age, I observed players tended to drift for a period and then moving into jobs, not necessarily with deliberate intention. Most played in alternative domestic teams and competitions (e.g., Fox¹⁷). These findings highlight concerns over the duty of care in the early exit process. Despite an NRL policy of "no work – no study – no play" (NRL, n.d.-a), in an attempt to facilitate better exit outcomes, Players A, B, C, E, F and G had not registered for studies in their first years in the system. Furthermore, work placements seemed transactional, with little personal development evidenced (fieldnotes, reflective interview). Ongoing communication and connection were a significant investment by practitioners like me, and I found contact quickly diminishing as regular face-to-face contact dropped off. However, these findings highlight a need to review these processes, seek

¹⁶ Due to vulnerability concerns, no interviews could be conducted with this cohort at the time.

¹⁷ Fox is the top senior-level competition in NZ.

sustainable solutions, and offer the appropriate resources for this large population of young people.

6.2 A Big Step Up – Big Step Across (TDE)

A Big Step up – Big Step Across introduces the pathway players take into TDE programmes. This phase is often accompanied by the migration of NZ players into Australian systems, with 16 of the 17 teams across the Tasman. This theme firstly introduces the events involved in stepping up and/or across to Australia into TDEs for the initially NZ-based participants. These stories are representative of the following sub-themes:

- *Too Fast - Too Soon* – Player E leaving home at 17 to join an Australian NRL pathways programme vying for a contracted place in the SG-Ball side.
- *Dealing with Injury* – Player-C, who broke his ankle during a trial game but fought to regain his position in the SG-Ball side.
- The third sub-theme provides an existential discussion on *Teenagers with Talent*.

Throughout this case study, 29 players under 19 years old, connected with my programme/research, migrated to Australia, either into school programmes or recruited into clubs (some NRL, some community clubs). Tupou Sopoaga summarised this situation in *Champions-of-the-Pacific* (2021), when this young man was given two weeks to make a decision that would affect the “rest of his life”:

“An NRL agent literally turned up at my house, just knocked on my door, then had a conversation with my parents. My parents were pretty *fresh* at the time too, so they thought that’s a good deal, and then after my last exam I headed over to the Bulldogs,” Tupou Sopoaga said. “I definitely felt like I was pressured ... I wouldn’t change any of the decisions I made because I’ve been able to do some pretty cool things, play in the NRL, got to World Cups, but definitely at the time, I was pretty young to make those decisions, and I didn’t really have anyone else that was already there.”

Athletically, the NZ players leave as superstars and walk into the Australian environment to find themselves sitting on the bench. The players move from a comfortable and fun playing environment, playing alongside the teammates they have grown up with, to an intense and competitive one.

Coming from New Zealand footy [rugby league] to Australian footy, it is a real big step up. They do things to a level that NZ is not exposed to. Yeah, certain things like, back at home, it’s more about size, it’s more about strength and all that, but over here, it’s more technical, more about speed of the game (Player-A).

The player is met with teammates who are rivals for their position, contracts, careers, and a need to build new relationships and navigate the Australian culture. At the same time, the player is trying to cope with a multitude of athletic and personal pressures:

Australian juniors they're way more competitive, and they don't care if they yell at their teammate ... get into a bit of a tiff with their teammates to make them better. ... a lot of that stuff never happens in NZ. I don't know whether it's because everyone wants to be nice to each other. Everyone wants to be liked or, I don't know, like a lot are Polynesian boys, ... they have a lot of religious values installed in them, they kind of don't want to be yelling at their mates and stuff like that ... a lot of New Zealand boys do get a little bit of shock coming over to Australia, see the way that Australians talk to each other, you know, get up each other and actually hold each other accountable. (Player-D)

Player-D introduced issues of Pasifika (and Māori) players' transition. As other ethnic-based researchers found (Panapa & Phillips, 2014), the players in this study also gravitated to other Pasifika players. They struggled with shyness, speaking up for themselves, being too "humble", and going from homes where Mums typically did everything for them, so they needed to grow up quickly. All were homesick, but I witnessed some who struggled and others who were determined to succeed:

[Player-B] never says he's homesick. Every time I ask him, he said everything is good Mum. I tell him 'n my husband keep focus 'n working hard ... that's all we do encouraging him 'n keep him in prayer 'n you guys did the same thing. I know he want to make this goal that's why I never hear from him saying he's homesick. (Player-B's Mum – fieldnotes)

RL-Manager1 advocated transition is easier for emerging athletes whose team coach has a more developmental and friendly approach. In his words: "You can be the best technical coach but have a 'dry personality'. If you don't connect with your players, especially with 15, 16, 17-year-olds, you *and* the players will struggle." A developmental approach is advantageous in younger pathways programmes like Harold Matts and SG-Ball squads (RL-Manager1). Yet players described how this is not always the case:

Coaches in Australia they're very, very hard on you, very strict as well, they yell a lot. You just got to put 100% into training. The coaches they're very biased. I'm not gonna lie. And some, they are ruthless if you have a bad game, they will drop you just like that ... the competition here is all about winning. (Player-E)

It is clear from my observations and athlete interviews that players struggle when moving into pathway environments, with less focus on development and more on outcomes and a win-at-all-costs mentality. Moving into a less supportive, results-orientated environment requires players to display a tough persona to mask their vulnerabilities and survive. The emotional context implied in player interviews (and fieldwork) had a level of uncertainty, of 'faking it till you make it'. Their attitudes implied feelings akin to an imposter syndrome, which

I interpreted as searching for their true sense of athletic identity and self-belief to thrive. In their words:

When you come to SG-Ball, everyone is at a similar level. SG-Ball is like a comp where you verse the best players in your age group. So, no one is lesser than you. No one is weaker than you, everyone is good. (Player-A)

If you don't have what it takes, then you're obviously not going to make it; you know, you gotta have something to be in a team ... it's not by fluke. Then from there, it's business. (Player-G)

Paradoxically, players never express feelings of competing for positions in terms of overt antagonism with their teammates at the TDE levels. However, missing starting line-ups or sitting on the bench (as interchange players) was reflected in calls for help by players or their parents or disillusionment (fieldnotes). The need to mask vulnerabilities and reflect a positive persona as a 'team player', despite these feelings, challenges the authenticity of social identity or fusion. This presented an opportunity for personal and social development when players are coached to acknowledge hardship and encouraged to speak with coaches regarding opportunities for improvement.

The following sub-themes represent two athletes engaged in the TDE phases and aspiring to be future NRL stars. The first story tells of a Player-E (*Too Fast, Too Soon*) and Player-C (*Dealing with Injury*), who broke his ankle during a trial game but fought to regain his position in the SG-Ball side.

6.2.1 *Too Fast, Too Soon – Player-E*

Player-E, of Tongan ethnicity, dropped out of school in the middle of year 13. When he arrived in Australia as a 17-year-old, he was lost and confused, and seemed to lack emotional maturity compared with his peers. Identified by a Tongan coach for his impressive athleticism and speed, he was brought late into my programme for development. Despite not having played First XV rugby union or rugby league, he was offered the opportunity to join and prove himself in an Australian SG-Ball squad on a train-and-trial (basic medical insurance cover only) contract. As with the previous player quotes (from Player-A and Player-G), Player-E was initially daunted by the step-up, working hard to convince himself that he was capable:

You're gonna think the other players are better than you. You're gonna feel that way. You're gonna feel like, oh, I don't even belong here and I'm giving up so much to be here, stuff like that ... but you are there for a reason, so you just have to have the confidence. (Player-E)

Reflecting on the decision to leave home and enter the TDE with him in his interview highlighted a host of misjudgements, mine included. Offered a place within an NRL SG-Ball team with such little experience made him the envy of his peers, and this rare opportunity “blinded us, and we rushed the process” (fieldnotes), not stopping to question whether he was ready for such a step. He said, “There's a lot of people that say you're good at it. But is it *really* something you want to do? ... yeah, it was everybody else's decision [not mine].” Staying with extended family, he was homesick, disillusioned (despite warnings in advance) at not getting much game time, pining for his girlfriend, and withdrawn (fieldnotes). He described the learning curve and living with extended family:

I had a lot of things done for me before going to Australia and I wasn't ready to be more independent. I had to get to training my own way, I didn't have my mother to drop me off ... everything was new to me especially learning the game. ... I'm realising this now because I'm getting older. No one's telling you what to do, so it has helped me improve my life now, to be more independent. (Player-E)

Going into a new family and not knowing them as much, it's really awkward. You don't have, ah, the chemistry is not there. It's not like you have met them before you arrive even though they are family. You don't know if you should trust them or not. They were good people but they were not like me. If I had gone out to see [NZ peers], it would have been a bit better. Not just staying at home on the phone all the time. The only times I came out of my room was to eat or shower or train or go to the game – yep, pretty isolated alright. (Player-E)

At the end of the season, he returned home for a two-week visit, with coaching staff expecting him to return to commence playing for a club side and develop his immature league skills. On arriving home in NZ, he repeatedly delayed returning to Australia. He described himself at the time as “confused, lost, emotional”. Eventually, returning to Australia sometime after he was due, having lost his contract, he was given a second chance to re-join the club on the same ‘train-and-trial’ contract. In his words, “I reckon if I had stayed [in Australia] and not come back to New Zealand, I would have had a [paid] contract. It set me back a lot.” In the following year (three), he was offered an opportunity to trial for a Flegg side at another NRL club; he transferred but failed to make the selection.

There was an apparent existential tension in Player-E; he often spoke to me about still “wanting to be a kid” but then getting frustrated being told what to do, wanting to be grown-up and to live with this girlfriend, but wanting someone to take care of him. He told me of his dreams of making his grandfather proud by playing in the NRL while expressing doubts about his drive, “I'm not sure I am as hungry as the other boys” (fieldnotes). His conversations reflect similar statements from the athletes in Jones et al. (2014), which reference “big step up”, “too much too soon”, “grow up pretty quickly”, and “no one is going to cook you dinner if you don't

cook it”. He demonstrated more independence and awareness in his third year, still only 20. Still, conflicting responsibilities (living with his girlfriend and paying the bills) challenged his focus and dedication to achieving an NRL career.

Player-E is now playing for the feeder club, striving to impress and re-secure an NRL Flegg contract opportunity. Player-E and I speak of the opportunity to be a “late bloomer”; but reaching his aspirations will require changes in priorities. He now sees the decision and repercussions to pursue a rugby league career as *his* choice. It is his responsibility to find the hunger and choose his commitment. Player E’s growth and understanding of his freedom to make decisions, and take responsibility for the outcomes, demonstrate some development of existential maturity and awareness over time (Aggerholm, 2015; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). However, his decisions are still not commensurate with the institutional demands of a professional rugby league career. This story signifies hunger to fulfil the demands of a professional as determined by the meaning the individual attaches to the pursuit. To be awarded several opportunities to address this suggests having-a-talent is still being prioritised over being-an-athlete both by the player and the organisation, yet commitment and reliability are also institutional requirements for selection.

6.2.2 Dealing with Injury – Player-C

This story tells of a player transitioning into SG-Ball as a development player. Playing in a trial game, he broke his ankle, requiring surgery. Player C, a Tongan schoolboy development player, had made exponential leaps, had worked hard on his nutrition, weight and fitness and was considered an exciting prospect at 16. On my visit to him in the hospital, in tears, he spoke to me of his concern about going backwards and “getting fat again”. RL-Physio explained:

[Player-C] is a five-star development athlete who suffered a fractured fibula in the development game. So, because ... he’s got potential, knowing he’s got greater outcomes, the club will facilitate the rehab, provide gym equipment. ... This is based on what the recruitment manager, the development manager, speaking with the player’s agent decide, not what the Physio says. (RL-Physio)

The degree of medical support received and the continuation of the player’s contract following the occurrence of an injury was determined by the calibre or potential of the athlete concerned. For some players, injuries are left for the player to resolve; injuries result in the termination of future contract opportunities or the paying-out of the remainder of an existing development contract (as per other athletes in my experience). RL-Physio explained that injury can brutally shock the athlete and the family. He described common reactions of disbelief: “nah, it won’t take that long”, “we won’t get surgery”, and “he’ll be alright”. In this player’s case, despite club support, he and his family needed additional institutional and emotional help to

deal with this injury physically and emotionally, not least advocating for and translating required resources (fieldnotes).

Despite these setbacks, with his discipline in recovery, 18 months later he returned to school and club league and was named NZRL youth player of the year. After finishing school, he stepped up to SG-Ball domestically. The long recovery time has resulted in a drop in his ranking and time to regain confidence in his leg and playing abilities. Missing selections or starting from the interchange and moving to a new position, he was frustrated and impatient (fieldnotes). The move to prop reflected his physical growth and the coach's perceptions of his confidence in his ankle (fieldnotes). Playing at prop, he was initially frustrated with the style of play required for the position (as per participant in Panapa & Phillips, 2014) but adapted, deciding to "bring his old flair with him". He has another year in SG-Ball on his contract, after which the player is considering his options, including a move to Australia. Player-C "loves to play" and enjoys "being with the boys" but is shy and reluctant to speak up with coaches and those he does not know. He has a strong and varied support network and committed parents who seek and are grateful for support and advice (fieldwork). The struggle and delay have offered time and resources to build resiliency and to mature athletically and personally and his current prospects are positive.

6.2.3 Teenagers with Talent

Adolescents, especially those identified as talented at a young age, are exposed early to environments that influence their identity and meaning. However, it would be inaccurate to assume that these young men do not comprehend the choices they are making, as RL-Manager2 outlined:

With social media and networks today, seeing the boys go ahead of them, they are all pretty well versed, all pretty knowledgeable. They often don't know how to go about the process, but they do know what's required. (RL-Manager2)

Being a kid and just loving to play is juxtaposed with the high expectations and judgement of others. This is what it means to be a teenager with a talent in the modern age. Clubs offer talented players financial incentives, dress them in sought-after badged apparel, include them in 'elite' groups and make them feel special. The desire of the adolescent male to be part of this fraternity is understandable. It is hardly surprising or unnatural that, for some young males, inflated egos and expectations may ensue when "so many different people from different aspects of their lives blow smoke up their butt" (Wellbeing-Manager). Equally, for some, this can come with unwanted attention, as Player-A explains:

I remember everyone at school talking like “Bro you are the man” and then it would come to the game right like I felt like if I play a bad game or something as simple as missing a tackle or dropping the ball ... Like, I just had that pressure that if I had a bad game everyone would just look at me, like “Oh no, what, it’s all talk, he’s not that good, like he’s useless, like he’s just too hyped.” (Player-A)

In my fieldwork experience, all youth athletes, regardless of their aspirations, required time out just to be teenagers:

Sometimes Pip I just wanted to be a kid, do things that you want to do, instead of training all the time. Just to be allowed to be a kid. If you are controlled too much ... you are bound to lose it ... everyone needs to understand that, everyone needs time, a bit of free time, a bit of ‘them’ time, it feels like you have to grow up too fast. (Player-E)

As those responsible for their development, we must remind ourselves to allow time and space for these athletes to be kids. Their physical size and maturation often cause us to forget their age (fieldnotes). RL-Physio concurs:

You need to remember that some of these kids are 15, 16, 17. And we need to provide support structures around them to excel or to achieve so you can’t expect the 17-year-old to do it all on their own, you actually need to provide that structure with them. You create times and things that suit them, and access to the right resources that they need. (RL-Physio)

In summary, my practitioner experience mirrors Bruce Sharrock’s comments that emerging athletes need time and support to develop both athletically and personally:

My advice to their parents is to allow for as long as possible for these kids to be kids. To be the best student they can be, enjoy their footy in whatever code they’re playing and towards the back end of their second to last year of school, make some plans to see if the career, in rugby or league, is a genuine option Long (2018, paras. 7-8).

This combined theme is consistent with Jones et al. (2014), highlighting the demands of having to “grow up quickly”, “being independent”, and having a “demanding workload” – a workload driven by sporting organisations. When combined with moving away from home, dealing with adult responsibilities, alongside the pressures of a sports environment, the demands are significant (Storm et al., 2022).

6.3 Apprenticeship Years (J2S)

The following quote summarises the previous theme, *A Big Step Up – Big Step Across*, and introduces the *Apprenticeship Years*. The apprenticeship years are the years where players move towards senior environments. For most players, this period involves moves up and down between Flegg, Cup and, potentially, the topside, in a ruthless cycle of selection and non-selection events, and typically including periods of injury. It involves a significant leap in physical

and mental intensity, particularly, when combined with the mandatory “no work – no study – no play” rule (NRL, n.d.-c), as RL-Manager1 described:

Stepping up into SG-Ball is a big step; it is another big step to Flegg and an even bigger step to NRL – it is a big enough step for those who grew up with football in Australia and even harder for the boys coming from NZ. (RL-Manager1)

In the stories below, all three players (A, D and G) spoke of the pressures of stepping up during these apprenticeship years and their impatience to make it. There is no luxury of a soft launch for apprenticeship players; as they quickly realise, the tight competition for positions results in lucrative contracts or short careers. While all the players expressed their drive to be an NRL star and the “love of the game”, they simultaneously spoke of the constant pressures to perform and the physical, psychological and relational challenges of *making it*: “being with the boys”, the “thrill of combat sport”, gaining notoriety, the “dream” of earning big money, and “taking care of my family”. Conversely, conversations sometimes exposed a sense of trepidation, stress and feeling overwhelmed (fieldwork or interviews).

The need for athletes to adjust values, perceptions and habits to new expectations and demands (work ethic, tough persona) to fit in and the desire to perform and impress the coach was recognisable and consistent with Storm et al.’s (2022) findings. Both Player-A and Player-D cited their move into NRL as a “really big jump, intensity-wise and hours-wise” (Player-A), “Fox to NRL is massive” (Player-D). They described the need to earn the respect of older players, coaches, and staff. Experienced players tested their mettle, as “they don’t go soft on you just ‘cos you’re young or new” (Player-D). The hierarchical challenges were hedged with being made to feel welcome:

[Senior players] made me feel part of the team ... you know who the leaders are ... but, like, when they speak, you listen. (Player-D)

I felt the pressure ... you want to impress ... You know, just being a newcomer, you know, just trying to do your best to make sure you doing every little thing right, and it’s just that sense of them watching you all the time. (Player-A)

For Player-A, an accelerated rookie athlete, entering the senior environment at 19 was extra-challenging. Both Player-A and Player-D expressed feeling intimidated by the head coach, both in terms of engaging with him and wanting to prove themselves. In rugby league, the head coach directs the performance and culture in senior environments. He is “the dominant figure, and what he demands, is what he kind of gets, you know, putting athletes at a trial needing to impress” (RL-Physio). Once again, this reflects the constant cycles of selection expressed in Güllich’s (2014) research.

This theme examines three players' stories, combining fieldnotes and interview data to investigate the apprenticeship phase of the emerging athlete transition:

- *"It's a Rollercoaster Ride"* – the ups and down of Player-A's successful transition into the NRL topside as a 21-year-old.
- *Patience and Persistence* – Player-D takes a different pathway, taking time out to finish his degree – then successfully returning to play at NRL-Cup level.
- *Broken and Distressed* – after sustaining multiple serious knee injuries, Player-G is forced to withdraw in his early 20s.
- The theme concludes with an existential analysis of effort and *endings* in *No Regrets*.

6.3.1 "It's a Rollercoaster Ride": Successful Transition into NRL – Player-A

Player-A is a young man of Samoan/Tongan descent who transitioned into the NRL development system in Australia. Although he was TID'ed when young, he and his family were nurtured and supported by his recruiter, who guided him to finish school in NZ and take his time. The recruiter recognised the importance of preparation, and he was part of a well-structured NZ-based programme; I became involved with his preparation before his departure. On arrival in Australia, he joined an NRL club and entered the pathway system with a one-year residence in club-owned housing. Once "he had gained his feet", he moved into a flatting situation with three other NZ teammates at the same club. Player-A surprised and impressed the coaches with his preparation and conditioning on arrival. He unexpectedly made the starting SG-Ball XIII for the season and was awarded NRL club youth 'player of the year'. He spoke of the initial challenges of his move to Australia:

The main [challenge for me] would probably be being *independent*. Like being at home, you get help from Mum, Dad, your brothers, your sister, and stuff. But when you come here, and you want to chase something, for me personally, I had to be independent. I had to get my stuff sorted myself, washing, cooking, eating everything ... getting my own car ... to work for it. Just makes you become your own person. I *really* enjoyed learning that. (Player-A)

Being aligned with his peers doing the same thing (such as entering a clubhouse) and immersed in a team environment assisted him in acclimatising and adjusting (Panapa & Phillips, 2014). It offered him the time and opportunity to build relationships and gain independence. He was subsequently signed to a three-year development (rookie) contract, where he made a brief NRL debut in year two. He reflected on his J2S experiences:

At the start of things, I feel like, with the head coach, I felt like really awkward, like, there were so many things he expected. And like, you always wanted to make sure you got it right, especially at the start. I remember him telling me heaps of things to do, and I'd go a bit blank at times with him. And I just remember, like, I don't want to let him down. (Player-A)

Player-A, albeit capable and successful in his league career, may be an example of success too soon. Jones et al. (2014) found an increased pressure in rugby league for players to specialise and peak early. Player-A described his athletic identity as paramount in his interview. Pressure is unavoidable for young men who leap-frog the TDE period into 'rookie' pathways (Rothwell et al., 2020). This pressure had a knock-on effect in deferring his intended studies and isolating him from other non-league-related activities. He justified his prioritisation as a necessary sacrifice to achieve success. He explained:

I'll just say, being like, being that I'm starting to make a name for myself, make a career out of what I'm doing. I'd say right now sport is real dominant for me, but there are other values like family and being a good son, a good friend and then like religious stuff. (Player-A)

When I challenged Player-A about the delays in progressing his studies after two years (he was a top student at school), he replied, "I'm still not 100% about what I want to do. Like for me, this is a really big year for me, a breakout season for me." Jones et al. (2014) found increased pressure to focus on rugby league and consider *non-league* interests and other activities later. However, RL-Manager1 argued players must make "sacrifices on not going out ... or the amount of paid work they do. It is tough but proven others have done it" in order to study. A minimum rookie player payment of A\$60,000 per annum (at the time), supplemented by the education allowances, should promote study opportunities, yet "a lot [of players] don't utilise the money they have in their contracts for education or university" (RL-Manager1). With pending fatherhood at 20, I contemplated whether the need for an outlet for the pressure of an accelerated pathway contributed to his commitment to this relationship (fieldnotes/reflection). While he (and another player in the initial fieldwork phase) referred to their partners' pregnancies as "unexpected", they both suggested it provided an additional source of inspiration to "keep pushing harder". However, the pressures of supporting a girlfriend also paralleled problems in his NRL progressions (fieldnotes). In his third year, Player-A was 'demoted' to the Cup side with periods on the bench but remained in the NRL squad of 34. He described this as a tough year. In his own words, Player-A recognises the importance and consequences of his decision-making, reflecting an interpretation of existential responsibilities for his choices:

If you really want to achieve what you want to achieve, you got to have *sacrifices* and, like, at times it is tough, but most of the time I try to, like, let my actions do the talking. (Player-A)

Player-A expresses and demonstrates strong values of humility, avoids social media and avoids being the centre of attention (fieldnotes). In our interview, I asked him how he deals with being recognised as an NRL future star, and his face lit up:

Like when you play and like you just see fans and they're like, just cheering for you. And after the games, you have little kids like saying "Hi" to you, and stuff like this is really cool. (Player-A)

In year four, Player-A, now 21, has had a number of starts in the NRL playing squad, starting or on the interchange bench, but has periods bouncing in and out of the reserves. He has also begun some part-time studies. He messaged me, "I'm getting a bit impatient not playing, but I know I gotta keep my head down and grinding." His age, time and stage echo the profile of the apprenticeship years in Figure 6.2. It underscores the unpredictability, the highs and lows and the pressure emerging athletes experience week-on-week, and having to deal with criticism (Lewis et al., 2018) and repeated selection (Güllich, 2014). Using words like "grind" and "sacrifice" and deferring studies suggests Player-A sees it as all-in or fail. Understanding parental sacrifice and pressures but making his own choices reflects existential meaning and authenticity in his drive to be an NRL player.

6.3.2 *Patience and Persistence – Player-D*

Player-D (NZ European, 23 years old) transitioned into an NRL train-and-trial environment, following a different path. Player-D chose to complete his law degree before transitioning from pathways into senior opportunities:

Left [NZ NRL club] at U20s (2015-2018) and I was halfway through my law degree ... Then decided I rather just go finish my degree and focus on that and play Fox with my mates and have a bit of fun. And I feel like that was actually best for me because it built my confidence back up. (Player-D)

After completing his degree, Player-D migrated to Australia to chase an NRL career while concurrently finishing off the last of the papers in his conjoint degree. In our interview, Player-D spoke of initially being very homesick, to which I expressed surprise, given his independent and confident persona. He talked of boarding in a friendly and supportive home, establishing himself in the team environment and finding "mates" to socialise with. He found having studies provided him with a positive distraction and questioned how the other boys could just train, play league and come home and spend their spare time playing video games:

I feel like boys who just focus on league and don't actually have a life outside of it, sort of eats away at them and sort of just kills your love of the game ... I'd go crazy. (Player-D)

This athlete's abilities and confidence in communicating, and being older, were crucial factors in his ability to transition into a senior professional environment. Player-D referred to having his girlfriend and father (also a rugby league coach) back him up with informational and emotional support to bounce off the situations he was facing. He described the intense pressure he felt dealing with a domineering NRL coach:

I didn't go up to [NRL head coach] because he's quite an intimidating figure ... he scares the shit out of me, ... he is honestly a really good coach though ... he's just got a good blow-up in him ... not like angry blow-ups more like passionate ... he'll be screaming at you, but it's ... what do you call it, like, constructive. (Player-D)

He described being frustrated with trialling outside his usual position in a place "already stacked with other players". He knew that, despite finding the coach intimidating, he needed to speak up if he was to have any chance of securing a contract:

The person going to look out for you most is yourself, you might have people on your side ... like agents, stuff like that. And I could ask my agent to tell them to stop playing me at half-back, but I feel like it's a little bit cheap and it seemed sneaky rather than doing it myself and being upfront. And I feel like they would have a little bit more respect. (Player-D)

When interviewed, he was training with the NRL team once a week but was a starting player in a feeder club. "I'm not actually contracted with them [NRL club] because if I train with them twice a week, they would have to pay me under the RLPA agreement" [referring to the development salary cap]. He was initially optimistic about his NRL career working out for him by playing the season in the feeder club, but at the same time realistic:

If I don't play as well as what I think I play at this level ... I give this thing a crack, then at least I'll know that I just physically wasn't able to keep up – but, seriously, I don't think that will happen. (Player-D)

He saw this transitional period as an opportunity or "reality check", speaking of his desire to know once and for all if he was good enough. Existentially (Aggerholm, 2015), he was choosing freedom over the fear of rejection or failure:

I went into this with my eyes wide open. Knowing that I was pretty low on their priority list coming in as a train-and-trial boy. When I've finished everything and I can't play league anymore, I want to know I gave it as good of a crack as I could. Did I do as much with what I had as I could? That's probably like a complicated way of saying "no regrets". (Player-D)

Unfortunately, his opportunity to pursue an Australian league career fell short. After sustaining a lengthy injury, Player-D realised playing at the level he desired in Australia would not happen for him. He decided to return to NZ, pursue his [executive] career, return to playing in the Fox, and play for enjoyment. Since his return to NZ, the opportunity to play Cup in the NZ team opened up; he trialled and made the squad, has fortified his position in the team and is now enjoying high-level Trans-Tasman football alongside his career. He may not make NRL topside, but his persistence has paid off, and he has given it his best crack and has remained authentic in his pursuit.

6.3.3 Broken and Distressed – Player-G

I first met Player-G as a 22-year-old Tongan man when he was referred to me by a colleague. Player-G sought support to transition from his broken professional league to a professional boxing career. During this period, he flipped back and forwards between both sports, with problematic knee injuries, eventually accepting retirement in his mid-20s and starting his own business. Player-G reflected in our interview on his experiences as an emerging young rugby league athlete:

When I finished in the U20s team I was *pretty lost* ... [The club] had a part to play in me not coming up as well as I could of as a developing player because I was probably one of the biggest guys they always put me at prop but *I had a bit of game* you know. (Player-G)

After being released from NRL TDE at the end of his under-20 period, he described himself as “pretty lost” and “off the rails”. Playing in a locally televised game, he was recognised and recruited to go to Australia shortly after I met him. Negotiating his own contract, and still only 23 years old, he moved his family (wife, five-year-old daughter and baby on the way) to Australia. On arrival, and not unexpectedly, he was re-injured in pre-season:

I needed to have an operation, but I didn't, I kept playing, just tape me up and I will play ... I was playing for the Ron Massey Cup ... the head scout came to watch me play. Obviously, I was playing injured (50%) so they lost interest and questioned why they had spent the money to get me here in the first place. (Player-G)

He described a conversation with his father then: “You’ve done so much to your body, you are only young [24], you don’t want to be a cripple and not be able to do anything with your kids.” Player-G spoke of his desire to be successful for his father and his own family. Despite exiting rugby league several years before this interview, he became emotional while discussing it. “When I think about it, I just feel terrible.” “Is it the loss or the sense of what could have been?” I asked. “Correct”, he answered. He went on to reconsider the situation and find meaning in outcomes:

I was blessed to be at the [NRL club] and learn from [coach]. I was playing in Australia, I was playing injured, yes, but I was playing at a high level, I still got to play alongside NRL players, and I was playing full games – yeah, so I look back now ... I would definitely do things differently ... firstly, learning the on-field game more from the start, secondly, training smart because I would always over train any session or train and play injured which caught up with me. And third, my off-field life, I could have fixed a lot of stuff. (Player-G)

Player-G's narrative matches that cited in other ethnic research (Lakisa et al., 2014; Marsters & Tiatia-Seath, 2019) where physical size and strength in Pasifika players develop early combined with perceptions of a warrior mentality. As Marster's research uncovered, Pasifika cultural expectations can carry with them the burden of being the 'beast' on and off the field; any signs of weakness are frowned upon. For those I spoke to about Player-G and in his own words, he is also "stubborn" and did not always listen to advice. As RL-Agent expressed the harsh truth:

And they have fucked it up for themselves. And they spend the rest of their lives being that guy who could have done this or that (RL-Agent)

His story might also suggest shortcomings in the NRL TDE system where player decisions are biased towards brawn rather than talent, hampering both athletic and personal developmental opportunities (Panapa & Phillips, 2014; Rothwell et al., 2020). Player-G's story underscores the tenuous position career athletes are in, as they are always only one injury away from everything ending (Marsters et al., 2020).

6.3.4 No Regrets

The participants stories present three very different players and people, and from different cultures. Player-A and Player-G were both Pasifika, but the first is NZ-born Samoan Tongan, the second was born in Tonga, and Player-D is NZ European. Notably, both Player-D and Player-G exited their under-20 careers at the same club (different periods) feeling "lost". Player-D took time to enjoy his football and finish his degree; Player-G "went off the rails" for a period. Injuries hampered Player-D and Player-G, with Player-G not fulfilling his potential and exiting from the game early. Player-D demonstrated resilience, and his persistence paid off playing in an NRL Cup side.

All players gave meaning to their experiences by giving it their all. The two Pasifika players represent the importance of bringing pride to the family. Player-G's acceptance of his playing career ending still leaves him emotional and with the anguish/regret of having "failed", but he found meaning in having had the opportunities he did. He now coaches a Fox side. Player D recognises the freedom of having given it his best "crack" and finishing with "no regrets". Surprisingly, when directly questioned, these athletes denied feeling objectified, reflecting an

understanding of loving the sport and “representing the club”, comprehending that they are part of a business:

I don't see me as a commodity, definitely you know what you are getting into, you know that it's a business. So, you know, they're going to do what's best for the club instead of what's best for you always. And that's how it should be. (Player-D)

Nobody truly knows what is in another's mind (Sartre, 1943/2018), so it is irresponsible to think that we can see the meaning behind an athlete's desire to be an NRL professional, regardless of age. Indeed, Māori and Pasifika athletes speak strongly about finding meaning in serving the family in this case and in other literature (Marsters et al., 2020; Panapa & Phillips, 2014). Family can be the easy answer, but there are generally deeper reasons too. The road of the professional athlete's *being* is too demanding to sustain without authentic meaning. “I want to make my family proud, make myself proud, and I love the game” (Player-E). Or as Player-A expressed it, ever since he was young “I've always had a mindset of knowing that I could do anything on my own. Not in the way of – I don't need anyone but just my own mindset”, and despite setbacks, he “was always determined to do what I do to the best level” (Player-A). As he said himself, he knew what he wanted and had faith he would achieve it. Player-A experienced a roller-coaster of selection pressures and has now successfully reached an NRL top-side on a lucrative contract.

In the above two themes, I presented the stories of five players, all navigating different phases and events in the emerging athlete transition and the environmental pressures of increased training demands, migrating between countries, leaving home, and managing selections, injuries, (home)sickness and contracts. These events required athletes to cope with sustaining family obligations, building new relationships and learning to deal with freedom and independence. Their responses differ with time (age, experience and prior exposure) and context (background, expectations, and “hunger”). In the final theme, I discuss the significance of family as a demand and resource during emerging athlete events.

6.4 Significance of Family

In the last theme I examine for this case, I encapsulate a common component of emerging rugby league players' experiences reported in this thesis. The significance of family is relevant, firstly, because the pre-apprenticeship period commences before players are 18 years old, and the apprenticeship period extends from the age of 18 to 22. Emerging athletes in this sport are under-21. When I ask these young men what they are chasing, there is only one answer, to play NRL. When I ask *why*, the answer is invariably “family”. As RL-Physio and I discussed, the meaning attached to family varies. Is it a financial thing? Is it to make them

proud? Are they trying to live up to someone else in their family? The majority of players I work with are of Pasifika and/or Māori descent. 'Pasifika people' is a colloquialism used to group individuals from a host of different Pacific Islands, but there are distinctions between the Polynesian cultures. Commonly, boys are of mixed Island and European ethnicities and some referred themselves to me as "fruit salad", with many of the younger athletes at least one generation removed from the Islands (Panapa & Phillips, 2014). They recognise and respect their cultural and family heritage but equally identify as urban Kiwi¹⁸ "bros" (Marsters et al., 2020; Panapa & Phillips, 2014). Pasifika collective values culturally represent service to the *collective* or *village*, and my findings support the above and other valuable ethnic-based research in understanding the intra- and inter-relationships of young Māori and Pasifika rugby league athletes (Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2014). The following quotes from Player-A summarise the tension between family honour and responsibility and the pressure the young players often expressed:

Knowing that I'm a product of them. And knowing that I represent them as well. They've taught me a lot, like; I feel a huge responsibility being their son, knowing all the *sacrifices* they have made. (Player-A)

I'll just say I *did* feel that pressure growing up. Like not only as an athlete but just as a son in general and being like a role model for my siblings, being one of the oldest. ... I wouldn't change, want to change feeling that expectation. I felt they [his parents] helped me to stay focused on what I wanted to do ... but yeah sometimes it felt like an inspiration and others it felt like a burden. (Player-A)

Participants' parents commonly referenced "*sacrificing*" to provide their sons with the opportunity to train/play. Findings show players found meaning in their desire to repay "*family sacrifices*" to foster family pride and support financial security for their families (Keung, 2018). Parents proudly display selections and contract signings on social media and repeatedly tell their sons they are "going to make it, putting them on a pedestal" (RL-Physio, Wellbeing-Manager). Some families invest scarce resources in the hope of a return, sometimes at other siblings' expense.

I'm the oldest boy in a Tongan family. The oldest boy is always at the side of his dad, and responsible for providing for the family. We grew up in a village in Tonga, and we were really poor. And I had to grow up real quick. (Player-G)

However, it is well documented (Lakisa et al., 2014; Marsters et al., 2020) and evidenced in my fieldwork that the family's future or position can be predicated on professional sporting contracts.

¹⁸ A *Kiwi* is a colloquial term used to refer to New Zealanders – it is culturally neutral, including Pākehā, Māori and Pasifika alike.

For some families, their son being great at rugby or league can be seen as a way out of poverty. It's understandable, but the child becomes a potential cash cow and they feel that pressure. That exists, and if you think it doesn't then you're fooling yourself. (Long, 2018)

Family influences become concerning when it is difficult to demarcate whether the aspiration to play is an obligation or has personal authenticity. For the players where obligation is the answer, suffering (existential anguish) is familiar. Peeling it back further, examples become apparent of emerging players earmarked by the family, or a family member driving this athlete to be and do this (RL-Physio, Researcher-Practitioner). A typical response from the player's dad after the game, "He played alright – more to work on," is the best you'll get (fieldnotes). Conversely, failure can bring shame (Wellbeing-Manager) and a sense of anguish at letting the family down (Marsters et al., 2020)

Player-G spoke about a need for independence, a need to have the right people around you. "Family are sometimes not the right people to be involved". Keung (2018) also found young men who sought support from someone outside the family but who understood the cultural values, someone they could trust and with whom they had a connection. The 'family driver' can overtly influence, as RL-Physio experienced, decisions to play through an injury or contracts on financial rather than developmental bases.

Wellbeing-Manager and I found parents who were struggling. Parents dealing with teenage boys compounded with the pressures of athletic contracts, demands and expectations of professional sport. As quoted earlier, sometimes the family are "*pretty fresh*", meaning their English is poor or their experience of 'non-Island' ways limited (Champions-of-the-Pacific, 2021). They can be easily influenced and/or not sufficiently informed to make the right decisions. Parents are transitioning, too. These findings stress the importance of providing information and care for players, their families, and partners (Wellbeing-Manager, Trainer, Researcher-Practitioner). Being a sounding board or a shoulder to lean on, not only for the players but their mothers and families, form part of a culture of mutual support (Keung, 2018; Stansen & Chambers, 2019).

6.5 Summary and Case Conclusion

Table 6.2 summarises the themes and sub-themes presented in this chapter. This chapter uses an existential lens to examine player and stakeholder perspectives in rugby league TID, pathways environments (TDEs) and J2S transitions. This case study benefits from unique inside practitioner relationships that allow close and longitudinal examination, over three years, of athlete narratives during their formative emerging transition, extending previous research in

rugby league and offering unique insights into emerging athlete contracting and the migration of adolescent athletes from NZ to Australia.

We see the phrase “grow up real quick”, the forfeiture of childhood, and an emphasis on “sacrifice”. “*Sacrifice*” is frequently mentioned by participants, suggesting a lack of freedom for players to “be kids”. Equally, the players recognise the “sacrifice” of others, especially their parents. Sacrifice is contradictory to existential being; it suggests a removal of individual freedom and choice. As a practitioner with an existential bias, I encourage my clients to reframe the word sacrifice to *choice*. It draws attention to an individual’s freedom to make their own decisions and carve their own pathways and lives. Participants in this study “love to play” and compete; their aspirations are authentic regardless of the pressures and realistic chances of *making it*.

As seen in these findings, the emerging athlete transition in rugby league is eventful and pressured. Even positive events come with physical and mental intensity; pressure to perform and relational pressure, not-least from players themselves. While the decision commences with being identified as a talent but, as the participants highlight, it is a career that demands dedication and hard work and delivers setbacks and often disappointment. Emerging athletes have *situated freedom*: they must fulfil certain organisational requirements, but they still have the individual freedom to choose to “grind” or “quit”. Some of these athletes, simply will not be talented, athletic or resilient enough, and will exit early. These truths are the existential reality of being-a-professional-player (Aggerholm, 2015).

The young men in this case study demonstrated they have the capability to understand their choices, but they require authentic existential support to make decisions with the right knowledge and ability to face truthful realities. However, most are still *adolescents*, and as such this case demands we question whose duty of care or responsibility it is to guide and develop emerging athletes in and beyond life in professional sport.

Sadly, findings showed little institutional evidence of athletic and personal development beyond some limited curriculum-based activities. To face the existential reality of ‘being a rugby league player’ is something they do for a period of time, and the ending may be much sooner than their dream. Regardless, the end still opens up a life with meaning for the future. Not by demanding attention to option B’s or pampering or “normalising issues” but by giving them the *freedom* and the “opportunity to struggle and to figure out how to solve/do it themselves” (RL-Manager1), and providing a safe environment to practice and develop “independence” and meaning through time, exposure, and experience (Collins & MacNamara, 2012). I conclude that athletes choosing to make a career in sport should be supported in their athletic and personal development, as in any other apprenticeship decision.

CHAPTER 7 – CASE 3 – BASKETBALL

Chapter 7 reports the findings from Case 3’s investigation of emerging athletes’ transitions in professional basketball. This case description uses my voice, as the ‘researcher-practitioner’, interwoven with the participants’ own words where appropriate, to ensure a vivid and authentic representation of the challenges and relationships involved in this phenomenon. The findings include the primary themes identified in my analysis of fieldwork notes, social media, interviews and researcher reflections, and documents and artefacts relevant to the case. Fieldwork was completed with a national basketball league (NZNBL) team (players and organisational representatives) across a season, with contact with individual players extending across the following 18 months on the transition to college. Data collection included 11 formal interviews with four players (‘ballers’) and seven staff (‘organisation role reference’). Table 7.1 summarises the key participants in the case, their transitions, roles, and their inclusion in fieldwork and/or interviews.

Table 7.1
Participant Summary – Case 3

Reference / Label	Environment / Code	DATA		TRANSITIONS			ROLES				
		Fieldwork	Interview	Emerging Athlete	Elite Professional	Early Exit or Retired	Elite Athlete	Coach	Practitioner	Parent	Organisation
BB-Manager-1	School Coach and Management	1	1					1			1
BB-Manager-2	Ex-Pro Rugby Athlete/Coach > Manager & Parent	1	1		1	R	1			1	
BB-Coach1	School and Semi Professional NZNBL Coach	1	1					1			
BB-Coach2	School and Semi Professional NZNBL Coach	1	1					1			
BB-Coach3	Regional Coach and Player Development		1								
BB-Trainer	Semi Professional NZNBL Strength and Conditioning	1	1						1		
BB-Analyst	Analyst	1	1					1			1
Baller-to-Exec	Ex Professional Player > Sport Executive and Parent	1	1		1	R	1			1	
Baller-A	US College Grad > Pro Player (NZNBL/International)	1	1	1			1				
Baller-B	US College Grad > Pro Player (International, ANBL, NZNBL)	1	1		1		1				
Baller-C	NZNBL Player > US College	1	1	1							
Baller-D	NZNBL Player > US College	1		1			1				
Baller-E	NZNBL Player > US College	1		1			1				
Baller-F	Deselected NBL > US College	1		1		D	1				
Baller-G	US College Grad > Professional Player (ANBL and NZNBL)	1			1		1				
Baller-H	Ex Professional Player (ANBL) > NZNBL	1			1	W	1				
Baller-I	Import ex NBA > International Professional Player	1			1		1				
Baller-J	Deselected NZNBL	1				D	1				
Researcher-Practitioner	Independent Organisation	1	1								

Note. ANBL=Australian NBL, D=Deselected from NZNBL, R=Retired, S&C=Sports and Conditioning W=Withdrew. Some participants held multiple roles, for example, Baller-to-Exec, BB-Manager1 and BB-Manager2. Players who have/had held NZ representative honours, including with the “Tall Blacks” (the national side), are also noted in Table 7.1. Baller-to-Exec and BB-Manager2 also provided additional insights as both have had professional athlete careers in their respective sports (basketball, rugby) and are now parents of emerging basketball players.

The chapter firstly sets the scene for the semi-professional, professional and collegiate basketball landscape relevant to NZ athletes. The following sections present the findings of this case study under three primary themes and corresponding sub-themes summarised in Table 7.2. The findings are underpinned by the three-spheres framework, transitions (T), existential being (E) and intra-, inter- and environmental relationships (R), documented in Chapter 2, with ✓ indicating a *strong* link to that area.

Table 7.2
Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes in Case 2

CASE 3 - BASKETBALL	T	E	R
Becoming a Professional Basketball Player			
Setting the Scene	✓		
Being Tall, Being a Baller		✓	
From College to Pro and In-Between	✓	✓	✓
Vulnerable Way to Make a Living		✓	✓
US College Pathway			
Deciding on a Collegiate Pathway	✓		✓
Surviving the Freshman Year	✓		✓
Juggling Positions in a Semi-Professional Environment			
Budget Constraints and Part-Timers	✓		✓
Developing the Emerging Players	✓	✓	✓
Being the Coach			✓
You have to Build the Right Culture		✓	✓

7.1 Being A Professional Baller

This theme describes participants' experiences of *being-a-professional-basketball-player*. *Being a professional baller* explores the existential question of being a talent, the sacrifices and the challenges athletes encounter in becoming a successful professional player, with a focus on three sub-themes:

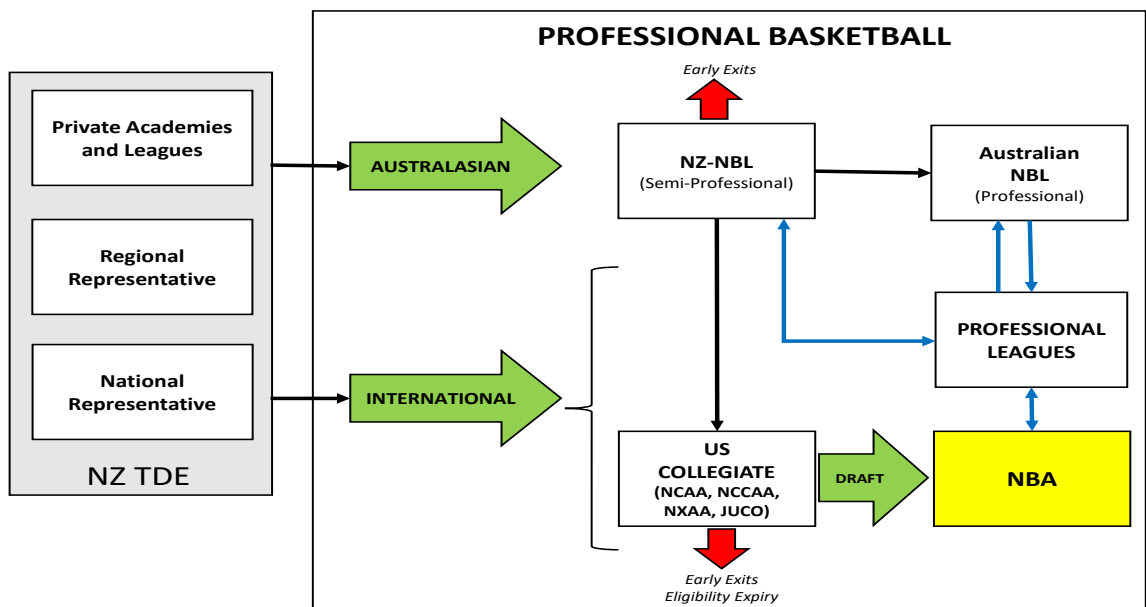
- *Setting the Scene* – describes the alternative pathway options of NZ-originating basketball players.
- *Being Tall, Being a Baller* – examines the physical and cultural identities highlighted by participants in this case.
- The third sub-theme tells Baller-A's story as a player in a semi-professional team (fieldwork) who then moved on to an international contract at the end of the season. When interviewed, Baller-A told me of his college experiences and the challenges of moving between environments as an emerging athlete. This sub-theme provides great insight into the pathway *From College to Pro and In-Between*.
- *A Vulnerable Way to Make a Living* – draws together some of the business aspects of *being a baller* within a transient and demanding career.

7.1.1 Setting The Scene

Professional NZ basketball players typically follow development pathways that progress through regional or NSO TDEs to collegiate scholarship programmes and/or into semi-professional and professional environments (Developer). This section explains the US collegiate and professional environment. In this case, participants were involved in Australasian semi-professional and professional organisations. In some instances, players in this case study refer to or play in international leagues outside of the US or Australia (e.g., Baller-A, Baller-G).

Pathway Overview: Figure 7.1 provides an overview of the possible pathways that emerging players may transition from being TID'ed in NZ environments to collegiate programmes, semi-professional and professional leagues, as outlined above. The blue arrows represent migrant players (*imports*) from or to NZ (e.g., to or from the US or Australia).

Figure 7.1
Pathways to Professional Basketball



National Basketball Association (NBA): The NBA, formed in 1949, has become one of the world's most well-recognised professional sporting leagues (NBA, n.d.). With a seasonal salary 'soft cap' estimated at US\$122.7 million per team, some teams spend as much as \$191 million in pre-tax salaries (Quinn, n.d.). As Quinn explained, the cap is soft as it appears to be a guideline, with exceptions above allowed on approval. The NBA collective agreement baselines the projected revenues for the following season, with a 50-50 split applied between players and staff (Quinn, n.d.). This background highlights the enormity of the dollars involved in US professional basketball. For emerging athletes, 60 players are drafted from college into the NBA each year, with 450 players currently on the NBA roster. To be eligible for the NBA draft, a player must be 19 years old in the calendar year of the draft and one year out from high school

graduation. Eligibility criteria require either four years of US college completion or a full 12-month professional contract outside the US (NCAA, 2023)

US Collegiate (College): US collegiate athletic associations (AA) systems include the following organisational bodies: National Collegiate AA (NCAA), National Christian College AA (NCCAA) and National Junior College AA (also known as JUCO) (NBA, n.d.). The NCAA offers US\$3.5 billion in athletic scholarships across 1,100 member colleges and three divisions (Div-I to Div-III), with 1.2% of NCAA athletes progressing onto professional basketball contracts (NCAA, n.d.-b). With the professional game becoming more commercialised, it became increasingly difficult to retain players in the ‘amateur’ college systems (Boehm, 2022). As a result, recent legislative changes now mean collegiate athletes are eligible for name, image and likeness (NIL) endorsements (NCAA, n.d.-a). An increased attraction to top players to complete their college education is an expected outcome of this change. Boehm (2022) suggested completing college benefits players by allowing them more time to develop experience before entering the NBA draft (recruitment process). Colleges also benefit by retaining players to win college competitions (Boehm, 2022). Boehm stated, “The erosion of the NCAA’s cartelised control over student-athletic revenue has created a more dynamic set of choices for players”, with the best college players likely to earn circa US\$2 million per year in NIL (Boehm, 2022). US colleges invest heavily in their basketball programmes alongside the US\$3.7 billion supplied in scholarships. For example, three colleges spent over US\$8 million per year each on their head coaches) (Hannable, 2022). Defining US collegiate basketball as an amateur environment is difficult, considering the billions of dollars involved.

Australasian Professional Basketball: Australasian professional basketball consists of two levels of organisational bodies: the NZ National Basketball League (NZNBL) and the Australian National Basketball League (NBL). The NZNBL commenced in 1982, with local players joined by American imports shortly after (NZNBL, n.d.). The Australian NBL was founded in 1979 and in 2003 was expanded to include an NZ franchise, the NZ Breakers; the competition currently consists of 10 teams and 120 players (NBL, n.d.). The Australian NBL set the 2023-24 salary cap at A\$1.82 million with a minimum investment of A\$1.638 million and a minimum per-player payment of A\$69,750 for the season (Uluc, 2023).

7.1.2 Being Tall, Being a Baller

Where rugby league athletes in Case 2 are scouted for their ‘warrior-like’ physiques, basketball players are valued for their height. Being exceptionally tall does one obvious thing – it makes you stand out. When Baller-I, a 7' 0" African American, was in public in NZ, people stared “*a lot*”. When Baller-C (a 6' 8" 20-year-old of Māori ethnicity) and I went shopping

together for a pair of track pants one day – people stared. People stopped him to ask him if he played basketball, *and* we did not find any pants long enough. At one point, he snipped “Yes, I’m tall” to a gawping passer-by. He told me how fed-up he gets with all the comments (fieldnotes). I asked him did basketball choose you – or did you choose basketball? He told me he started playing young before he grew tall when one of his mate’s mothers was coaching the school team and invited him to join. But his height has certainly kept him in the game and contributed to his college opportunities. Further to our informal conversations about his height, I asked him in our interview about the meaning he attributes to being a basketball player. When he spoke of his identity as a basketball player, he linked it to his height:

It’d be really hard I think ‘cause I mean, even just like a little thing, like, whenever someone sees me because I’m standing, six foot eight, they ask do you play basketball. So, if I was to say, No, or like, I used to play, it would affect me, because you know, I take pride in playing basketball. It is not an easy sport to play or to get to where I am now. If I couldn’t play basketball, I wouldn’t know what to do. (Baller-C)

And when I asked 6' 11" Baller-B about how he felt about being a well-recognised NZ player, he replied:

It happens and it is a cool feeling, but I probably get more comments about my height than I do actual people knowing who I am. (Baller-B)

Aggerholm, an existential specialist in talent development, said, "Being-a-talent is a blessing and a curse – talent becomes a task for a young athlete. Excellent performance becomes a burdening responsibility of their own making" (Aggerholm, 2015, p. 31). I would add the physical make-up and appearance of ‘being’ that talent. These athletes, being tall, know their physical qualities qualify them as potentially talented basketball players. Yet having the physical attributes does not necessarily mean the athlete has the skills or the desire *to be* a talented basketball player.

In the documentary Netflix production, *Last Chance U – Basketball* (Series 2, Episode 2), the coach, the basketballer and the player’s Mum underscored this phenomenon. Bryan, a 7' 0" teenager, left high school with countless Div-I offers (Whitelely, 2020). Bryan stressed how everyone referred to him in terms of his “potential”. His potential being “someone at that age [18], *at that height*, with that ability.” His emphasis and expression reveal a sense of objectification of his physique. After struggling in his freshman year with injuries and sitting on the bench, he decided to transfer. Moving to LSU, a JUCO, he was happy and got more playing time but failed to meet his academic *eligibility* requirements. “I had to go home, and I felt like a failure.” From there, he was recruited by the ELAC Huskies, where this television documentary was set. The coach at ELAC had this to say in his televised interview about Bryan:

He goes to University of Washington. Why does he go there? Because he is big? Not because he is playing big but because he is big. Then he has a tough time there. Then he goes to LSU, why does he go there? Because he is physically big. But is his game big? Is he taught how to be big? No! Do you know what a dark place you go to when you leave LSU resources, and you are sleeping on the couch? [It is our job] ... to teach him how to *be* big. (Coach Mosely, in Whitelely, 2020)

Bryan's mother spoke of constant doctor visits during his adolescence due to growth pain and related injury issues. Bryan says, "Life has been tough, but giving up would be a lot harder than getting up for training, so I am going to stick with it." Coach Mosely's points resonated with me. Bryan's story echoed Baller-C's comment, "I wouldn't know what to do" if I wasn't a basketball player. Both stories imply that playing basketball gives some 'meaning' to *being tall*. Being a basketball talent, unnaturally tall, *and* a teenager requires coaching and support. I compared these athletes to my observations and interpretations of Baller-J's experience during the selection period in the NZNBL fieldwork.

Baller-J, a 6' 9" 18-year-old Māori hopeful, attended pre-season in the NZNBL fieldwork team. For him, being tall was not enough. He had relocated from a regional town in NZ to attend training and trial during the selection process. He was intensely quiet and was struggling to fit into the environment. The coach regularly yelled at him to be more vocal on the court and aggressive in his play, only making matters worse (fieldnotes). When I raised my concern, the coach stressed that if he wanted to be an elite basketball player, he would have to learn, but there was no appetite in that environment to invest in developing him. What added to this situation was the poor handling of the selection process and the mixed messages this player received when they decided he would not make the selection. My fieldnotes described my feelings: "I accept that professional sport is brutal, but surely we can minimise the brutality, especially with young emerging players, by performance coaching them with a broader outlook." I also questioned whether this was short-sighted. Was there so much talent in New Zealand, especially boys of his height who were still growing? After offering Baller-J my help, his response suggested that either the coaches were correct, his commitment was not there, and/or his self-belief was significantly disrupted.

Culture was also potentially a factor. Baller-A, a Māori player himself, alluded in his interview to the differences in identity and culture. During the fieldwork, Baller-A spoke with another player about speaking up, adding weight to the need to adapt:

The Kiwi culture, particularly if you are Māori or PI, is to be more humble, but in the US, they see this as a weakness. So sometimes you have to be in the coach's face and be like – hey, I am working harder than him, I am better than him – give me the shot and that's what I did at halftime on Sunday – I told coach – I can do this, put me in – but then you got to make sure that you back it up. (fieldnotes, Baller-A)

Later, we expanded on his experiences transitioning from NZ to US college and back to the NZNBL environment. For an emerging basketball player with aspirations to obtain a college scholarship or to play in professional environments, their ability to acclimate and accommodate the team culture is a requirement to survive, if not thrive.

7.1.3 From College to Pro and In Between

In this third sub-theme, I tell the story of Baller-A, whose pathway transitioned from NZ representative to a US NCAA Div-I college to an NZNBL semi-professional contract, where I met him during fieldwork. After the NZNBL season, Baller-A moved to a team competing in a European professional league. Baller-A's story provides an excellent longitudinal insight into an emerging player across multiple environments, including the J2S transition, and sets the scene for further investigation into the US college pathway and the semi-professional environments in the following two themes.

From his account, Baller-A's experience in college was a vibrant and enjoyable period for him. Despite his first year as a redshirt,¹⁹ he made some strong and enduring friendships. While he describes his basketball experience as "toxic and terrible", his narrative suggests this period of his life was foundational in his development towards adulthood.

One of my best friends was from [college city] and was on my basketball team. But he was literally from, like, across the road from where I lived. He just lived at home. And so, like, he introduced me and opened me up to the [college city] side of life. Other than that, I was really just stuck on campus and stuck within the college social group just, you know, and I would go to events and dinners. Getting to know him really well [broadened my social world], kicking it out with his family and his friends. (Baller-A)

Returning from college back 'home' after four years away, he spoke with me about feeling displaced and lost on his return (fieldnotes). He described not having kept in touch with friends in NZ and besides family, this became a problem when he arrived home as he felt he had no sense of community to return to. During this time, he was playing for the NZNBL team:

I felt a lot of pressure coming back from college to perform, just to do well, not for my family but more that I am one of the first guys to come back from college in my year. I'm the only one that finished. So, in my eyes, I think a lot of it was probably in my own head if I'm being honest. I felt like coaches were looking at me. A lot of coaches were curious. They hadn't seen me play in four years; you know? I'm playing for the Junior Tall Blacks. And I'm on the radar for the Tall Blacks. I just thought people were curious to see what I became. (Baller-A)

Baller-to-Exec explained in our interview, "You don't just send the kid to the States, and four years later, he comes back, and suddenly, he's a good basketball player." Coincidentally

¹⁹ 'Redshirted' means excluded from university sporting events for a year to develop their skills and extend their period of playing eligibility by a further year.

Baller-to-Exec pointed to Baller-A as an example, observing, “Take [Baller-A], for example, he came back from the US with something to prove; this tightened up his game, and he ended up frustrated on the bench.”

I didn't really have people. I didn't really stay in touch with too many people when I left, outside of my family. And the people I did stay in touch with weren't in New Zealand, you know? Yeah. And so that was probably a big one. Like, I just didn't really know how to behave. (Baller-A)

When a young American import arrived on the NZNBL side, the two gravitated to each other. Baller-A described feeling familiar, suggesting he had acclimatised and identified himself more now as an American than as a Kiwi (fieldnotes) supporting identity as a contextual and dynamic phenomenon. In our interview, he spoke openly about this,

Identity does concern me though. I think I struggled with my identity. Just like leaving New Zealand kind of messed me up a little bit. I feel like I haven't had like a set home and that kind of threw me off. I don't know where to anchor my world. It's like, I kind of just anchor it with my suitcase, you know? So, it's like, my whole identity is just where I'm at. (Baller-A)

However, in the fieldwork and conversations I had with Baller-A, I interpreted this as less of an issue of identity and more of an issue of feeling disconnected and isolated from those around him and wherein found himself. Having completed the season in NZ, with mixed results and variable playing time ('minutes'), Baller-A received an offer (via his agent) to play in Europe. At the time of our interview, he was in his first season; he described this environment:

I've been here four months now, and I'm in midseason slump really. Just wasn't well. It's cold. It's wintertime. It's snowing. I'm just in a bad mood. We've had a lot of imports come in and out [of the team] and most of the imports live [in the house]. So, I've had teammates come in and out the whole year. It's been like there are four rooms here and there have probably been nine people living here throughout the season. Mostly all of us have come off our first year playing pro after college. Living in the house it keeps me sane. If I was living by myself. It would just be yeah [not good]. (Baller-A)

Baller-A used the word *comfortable* a lot in his interview and listed this as one of his 'trademark' words: “And being able to just be *comfortable* around campus and *comfortable* around people”, and “I'm going to try and get really *comfortable* with people and be myself a little more.” From an existential standpoint, this athlete displays evidence of the challenges of establishing their identity as a human being and emerging athlete and adapting his identity to his environment.

Having graduated from his US college with a marketing degree, he had options but chose to pursue a professional basketball career. He knows he loves playing basketball, but he wonders:

What do I do with all my time, like I have a lot of time? I've never had this time to just you know, yeah, whatever like, especially finishing college, I don't have classes anymore and I don't umm, so, I train in the morning, I have the whole day and we train again at night. I've tried all sorts of things. And I've tried to just kind of explore hobbies and just keep my mind active as much as I can. I do sleep a lot. And I do watch a movie during the day. Sometimes I'll come home and lay on the couch. (Baller-A)

I asked him whether fame contributed to this decision and in his meaning for choosing to be a professional basketballer, he replied:

Fame, nah, as long as my friends think I'm cool ... I will take pictures with some kids after the game but I'm *not* into it when I am trying to eat food and people interrupt you. And people you don't know message you and it's like a stranger, it's exhausting ... I just don't wanna look at my phone. (Baller-A)

Baller-A recognises his freedom to choose his path and takes responsibility for these choices. Yet at the same time he recognises in himself the need to have a sense of belonging, to be recognised by his peers, and a desire to feel *comfortable*. He finds fulfilment in connecting with others with whom he can be himself. As a young man in his early 20s, he is figuring this out. He implies fears of not fulfilling his potential. With a college degree and accumulated experiences, he has shown that existential awareness and development are a work in progress in the emerging athlete age bracket.

7.1.4 A Vulnerable Way to Make a Living

Athlete participants spoke of being vulnerable. Factors for consideration in highlighting this heightened sense of vulnerability were the smaller team size, with only five starting players, ten on the roster, short seasons and multiple competitions (Frontiera, 2010).

The transfer of the players between environments (and countries) means a transient and migratory life for those involved. It may be different for a contracted player in the NBA. For emerging NZNBL players, and even for Australian NBL players, contracts can be split across two seasonal competitions, teams, and countries to achieve career and income continuity (BB-Analyst). Baller-to-Exec and Baller-B both expressed being a professional basketball player as "100% a commodity", living in "a brutal world", and "getting treated almost like meat like you are a buy and sell". The following offers two athletes' perspectives on their different basketball careers, one as a retired player (Retired-Player) and one currently at the height of his game (Baller-B):

If you don't perform, you're not getting a contract. People always used to say to me being a professional basketball player, that must be the best job in the world. And I said, imagine having your boss sitting over your shoulder every day at work, watching every move. Being a professional, when you're at training and you make the wrong cut or you don't stick the loose ball, someone is screaming at you telling you you've done it wrong.

And that's hard. And then at the end of the year, you're paid accordingly to what that coach thinks you're worth. So, if that coach doesn't think you're any good then your pay packet can drop by 50% sometimes more. Guys' careers can die under a coach because they just don't value them for what they do. (Baller-to-Exec)

The need for fluidity in the ability to move between teams and countries early in a career is a requirement. Baller-B described this as isolating and lonely, especially leaving his partner behind while he played overseas in the early days. During his first professional contract in Europe, navigating a foreign language and money issues were "one of my most miserable times":

I struggled being away in a place that didn't speak much English in a small town. My partner wasn't able to travel with me because she was working and doing a master's. So, it was kind of a shock that my support system I implemented in college kind of crumbled away (Baller-B)

Baller-B emphasised this sense of individuality in a professional organisation versus feeling part of a collective in the national environment:

I have a lot of good relationships on the national team, where guys aren't playing for themselves. They're playing for the badge. There you lose all the arrogance, and you know, you become friends with guys because of that situation. (Baller-B)

Baller-B also spoke of valuing people that could switch off the basketball. "Off the court, you are a regular person, and your whole life doesn't always revolve around basketball" (Baller-B). Baller-A found that having the right connections from outside the basketball world enabled him to enjoy his college experience, despite feelings of vulnerability. Participants spoke of needing someone to share their vulnerabilities with whom they could trust, someone who genuinely cared and who could give them perspective:

Somebody who's monitoring people and having behind closed doors conversations, because a lot of times people just want to vent and get it off the chest. So, if you've got good leaders within the team, they'll sense that ... they'll sit down with them and have breakfast with them and just let them get off the chest what they are feeling. You know, because a lot of times, players usually don't want to take it any further, they don't want the coach to know about it. They just want someone to know how they are feeling. (Retired-Player)

Feeling safe and being comfortable enough to have those conversations also. Like, I'll never go to my coaches just because I feel like that will affect other multiple things, you know, that have nothing to do [unfinished sentence]. (Baller-A)

This theme highlights the potential for physical factors (both environmental and body-composition) to put emerging athletes at risk of feeling isolated and vulnerable. The transient nature of basketball and the migration implications of moving internationally, either to US

Colleges or overseas leagues, demands a high level of coping capabilities in adolescent athletes to thrive.

7.2 US Collegiate Pathway

In the second theme, I firstly expand on the collegiate pathway using NCAA eligibility as an example and follow this with athlete and stakeholder experiences under the sub-themes, reflecting two distinct events in this phase: *Deciding on a Collegiate Pathway* and *Surviving the Freshman Year*, thereby adding to the earlier sub-theme *From College to Pro and In-Between*.

NCAA operates across three divisions (Div-I to Div-III), with Div-I schools offering the highest number and value of athletics scholarships (NCAA, n.d.-b). Div-III schools are said to focus on excelling in a competitive athletics environment with more emphasis on academic opportunities (NCAA, n.d.-b). Individuals must meet agreed 'eligibility' criteria to earn and retain a student-athlete position in an NCAA college. Eligibility criteria are set by division level and involve achieving grade levels in approved academic courses (NCAA, 2023). While Div-I colleges have the highest academic criteria, they also place greater emphasis on student-athletes training, practising and competing (Smith & Hardin, 2020). Smith and Hardin (2020) reported that Div-I student-athletes focussed more on athletic pursuits, while Div-III student-athletes had more realistic expectations surrounding their athletic careers and tended to branch out and develop parallel personal identities and passions.

7.2.1 Deciding on a Collegiate Pathway

Once an athlete meets college eligibility status and has been identified by prospective college coaches, the college registers their offer on a public database. These registrations are visible to other coaches (Developer). BB-Coach3 explained: "Typically, the more prominent colleges let smaller colleges do all the homework and then investigate the players with multiple interests." In NZ, the process of being identified by US coaches is often through organised tours. BB-Analyst explained his concerns about parents investing in sending their children on tours to the US, hoping to get a college scholarship, and potentially falling prey to these operators.

Unless you're in the top 2% of players in the country or in other words you're playing for a New Zealand age group team unless you're at that level, or very close to going to be no one's going to be interested because there are 1000s of kids wanting to get into college. (BB-Analyst)

BB-Manager2 reiterated, "If you are good enough, someone comes asking." The following extracts show two players' perspectives with two different recruitment paths:

I played well at a national tournament ... [before that] I didn't have any offers ... some [US college] coaches just happen to be there watching. So they flew me and my parents out. And that was me. That was really cool. They treat us really well, put us in a hotel, take us out to eat. So, they just sell you the place. (Baller-A)

The only reason I am in America right now is because [regional squad] basketball was sending teams over to the US to play in front of college coaches. (Baller-C)

If a baller receives multiple offers, it then becomes a decision by the student-athletes and their families to choose which college to attend. Agents did not appear to feature in the recruitment process in this case-study. When I asked BB-Manager2, he replied, "We didn't use an agent with [son]. Because all I heard was they promise you the world and deliver nothing." Two organisational participants (Retired-Player and BB-Manager2) explained their experiences, both had offspring dealing with college recruitment and had the added benefit of their own experience as athletes and in coaching and management.

BB-Manager2 stressed the importance of doing your homework before you commit. BB-Manager2 explained that talking to experienced players, parents, or experts who had gone through this exercise helped him understand the process and environment on the way to making the right decisions. Homework included investigating comparable player pathways, statistics and minutes to understand the collegiate coach's approach to a player's athletic development (BB-Manager2). However, it must be noted that BB-Manager2 is an experienced and knowledgeable parent; many others require support and/or moderation in their off-springs' transition (Dorsch et al., 2016).

BB-Coach3 added that making the right decision for a particular individual may not mean joining a Div-I college (like Baller-A) unless they are prepared to commit to a four-year programme and the likelihood of spending junior years on the bench. A JUCO may be more appropriate if they want more playing experience and want to commit (albeit initially) to a two-year programme, per Baller-C.

Baller-A is a good example, didn't play a hell of a lot, got injured. Probably spent a lot of time sitting on the beach watching others play. Had he gone to a smaller school would he have had the same experience? Or would he have played more, you know, and those are things you don't know, like hindsight. But, you know, [school name's] a good school. Would he be a better player if he played more? Would he be not as good if he'd gone to a smaller school? Who knows? (Retired-Player)

As highlighted by the participants interviewed, the coach was considered the most significant factor in the decision-making process; the average life of a college coach is three-and-a-half years on a team (BB-Manager1, BB-Manager2, BB-Analyst, Retired-Player). Yet, "The coaches are going to tell you what you want to hear," as Baller-to-Exec explained he told his daughter during her recruitment process. "She said, I think I like this coach he's kind of talking

like, he likes me more. And I said, he's just a better salesman, that's all it is, you know." Smith and Hardin's (2020) participants also spoke of the importance of the coach: "It came down to the coach ... [he seemed] honest and would lead me in the right direction and get the best out of me" (p. 148).

Aside from the coach connection, making the right decision requires weighing up many factors: location, sense of community, compatibility with the team, athletic facilities, academic programme (developer, BB-Analyst, Baller-C) and even then, circumstances can alter the course of the athlete's experience.

Given the time between recruitment and when an athlete leaves a Div-I College, which can be around five years, the statistical chance that the coach will change over their tenure is high. Coach instabilities were the subject of Pate et al.'s (2011) case study with student footballers facing three different head coaches during three years at the University of Tennessee. Staff changes meant the athletes had to cope with varying coaching philosophies and disruptions to the team's socialisation and culture. Pate et al. (2011) used the analogy of coaching changes being "like changing family members" (p.363). Furthermore, whether a new coach likes a particular individual or whether he has other players he wants to recruit or intends to make his own mark is a lottery (BB-Analyst).

While participants in Smith and Hardin (2020) did not reference academic considerations as a decision factor in college choice, the participants (probably due to the commitment to travel far from home and strong mentoring) did consider which academic courses were the most relevant to them. Although, the Student-athletes in this study commented that the papers they were required to complete in their first year seemed largely disconnected to their degree aspirations compared to NZ university course structures (e.g. Baller-D). The decision to leave home and pursue an athletic career in conjunction with a college degree challenges the individual existentially from two perspectives. Firstly, am I a student or an athlete? Can I be both? Which do I give more meaning to? Secondly, in deciding to move and committing to the collegiate pathway, what other opportunities or experiences am I forgoing?

7.2.2 *Surviving the Freshman Year*

Smith and Hardin (2020) described that the experiences of athletes moving to college as student-athletes extend beyond academics to the demands of athlete life. For NZ student-athletes, this also involved moving a long way from home. Retired-Player recalled his decision not to accept a college scholarship offer, transitioning his career through the semi-professional pathway.

My son had a scholarship and decided not to go; spending four years in America wasn't something he wanted to do. I was completely okay with it because the same thing happened when I was 18. My parents were "you should go". And I was like, "no, I think I'll just stay in play for Auckland." Like at the time I could sense that they wanted really badly for me to go because it was a lifetime opportunity. But it is not everyone's cup of tea.

With a long and successful playing career, he has played alongside and subsequently mentored many players who followed the college path:

So, you suddenly go from a coach that's been really nice to you because you've been the star player, and you get over there, you're just a number, and the college coach is screaming at you, you're doing everything wrong because the style of play is different to what we do. (Retired-Player)

At the time of the interview, BB-Manager2's son was months into his transition into a highly ranked Div-I college: "[Son's] day is intense, he is waking up at six and going to bed at ten, six days a week." In highly ranked Div-I colleges, players face intense national and social media coverage: "There are NBA-level prospects, 15,000 people in the crowd, and so much intensity around the environment." For BB-Manager2's son, the transition was difficult despite having done the research and having a knowledgeable and experienced parent, amongst others, in his support team. BB-Manager2 told of a call from his son, who was frustrated and upset; he is a long way from home and not playing. He was playing on the pre-season roster, getting good minutes, and then he dropped off the roster. "I'll go to someone who really wants me," he says. Dad is torn, "He's a freshman now; he needs to learn to handle things; I can't interfere," as he explains.

I told him: You'll be okay talking to the coaches. If you want me to, I can be on the Zoom meeting. But I think you can handle it yourself and we talked about what he could ask him, you know, where do you think I'm at, what do you think I need to be working on and, yeah, he kind of got some answers from the coach and some encouragement. (BB-Manager2)

The expectation of minutes and the realisation that the pathway is long is a common theme. There are three years of college players ahead of a freshman on the roster, so they need to work hard to prove themselves because they "haven't made it yet" (BB-Manager2). As Baller-A stated, "It's business now." For some kids, it's not in their nature, and they struggle with the transition:

Like, there's not many kids that could handle what [BB-Manager2's son] is handling right now. But he's got the support of his family; he has learned what hard work looks like, you know, and he's got some support mechanisms around him. (BB-Manager1)

Baller-A described his college experience as taking place in an "untrustworthy" and "toxic" college environment. While we heard earlier (*From College to Pro and In Between*) his

experience outside of basketball was rewarding, he described the basketball experience as “terrible”. Coming in with eight people, he was the only one to graduate.

We had a new team year after year. There wasn’t much *accountability* on either side, with the coaches or the players. I think a couple of coaches were just toxic. It was just like a very toxic environment. They would talk behind people’s backs. They would talk about certain players or about how bad the other coach was. Like you couldn’t really trust the coaches. They would say one thing and you would never see it happening. (Baller-A)

For Baller-A, his ability to deal with this environment centred around the relationships he built. When I asked how he coped with the toxicity, he replied, “I just blocked it out. And I was just like, I’m just here to have fun. And I just had fun with it. I love playing basketball. Yeah, so when it came to game day. I’m living my dream at that point” (Baller-A). BB-Manager2 recognised the benefits of the reliable on-the-ground connection his son has available to him. “They can say they’re gonna look after you and they’re gonna do this, but it is still lonely. We were fortunate that a local family reached out to [son] through their connection with [a previous high-profile NZ player].” Baller-B described the differences in environment and the adaption he had to make to the coaching approach. “If you grew up in New Zealand, you’re not really accustomed to getting cussed at and yelled at” (Baller-B).

It was not just the basketball, either. Two other college athletes, Baller-C at a JUCO and Baller-D at NCAA Div-I college, found their academic experiences more like school than a university in NZ. Baller-D, studying engineering, messaged me: “It’s weird I am doing some classes that have nothing to do with my degree, but I guess that’s just how they do things over here.” Both Baller-C and Baller-D described their arrival as a culture shock, Baller-D joking that he “didn’t realise how uptight Americans are.” My experience of Baller-D (fieldwork) was of a laid-back and cheerful ‘Kiwi kid’ off the court and an aggressive player on the boards. Having completed his freshman year, by all accounts, he is doing well academically and athletically, and enjoying his time in his college city. The student-athletes connected with this case study were academically sound, which differed from other researchers who found challenges in maintaining eligibility common in the freshman year (Papanikolaou et al., 2003). This was also reflected in BB-Analyst’s statistics. This may be due to a skew in the sampling where participants are heavily invested and well prepared compared to others outside this cohort, particularly, given the distance and changes in culture from NZ. Nonetheless, this offers some encouragement to the introduction of NZ-based programmes designed to ready student-athletes for this move. In Baller-D’s case his thriving may also be a factor of his higher game time.

JUCO colleges offer a two-year (typically intermediate) programme. Funding is less; the head coach gets paid, but the assistants do not (Baller-C). In two-year programmes, players

compete with one year of 'seniors' for playing positions. However, as a JUCO prospect wanting to be promoted to an NCAA school, players have added pressure to do well and be seen by scouts. JUCO environments also have the reputation of attracting more troubled players, relegated to the school because of grades, behaviour, or struggles with Div-I pressures/playing time (refer to Bryan's story in *Being Tall, Being a Baller*, above). When Baller-C first arrived at his selected JUCO, he was terrified of the "gangster culture", "thugs with guns", and menacing attitudes, and the standard of basketball was less than he expected:

A lot of guys are really athletic; they can jump high. But I would say that a lot of the guys here don't have really great basketball IQs. That's probably why they're at a JUCO. I know that I'm at JUCO for the same reason as they are, so for me, it is just about making the most of my opportunity. (Baller-C)

When Baller-C refers to the 'same reason', he refers to being presented with fewer scholarship opportunities. Baller-C intended to raise his exposure and advance to a Div-I or II college from this platform. Baller-C had significant support in his college selection through his relationship with BB-Manager1 and Developer, both experienced and knowledgeable mentors. After initial anxiety and a cry out for help, he settled, after which he became frustrated with his teammates' commitment and training intensity (fieldnotes). On arrival in the US, Baller-C expected the players in his new environment to be more talented and hold at least the same level of commitment as him:

At the start of the season, we had a few guys that [coach] wanted to kind of put back on the rails that grew up in some hard areas. And so he was trying to get the best out of them, but they took advantage of his leniency that kind of disrupted practices because they wouldn't be listening. But then by the fall semester, I think he might have had a reality check and he kicked out a lot of the guys that weren't putting the effort in. And now our team is like a completely different team. (Baller-C)

The athletic environment and the quality of training fell short of his experiences in a semi-professional NZNBL team (fieldwork) in the preceding year. Having made significant sacrifices to be there, the players and coach did not meet the performance roles agreed upon when recruited. Once the coach honoured his responsibilities, the team culture became more authentic and aligned with his expectations.

Over the past two years of co-mentoring this athlete, there were moments when BB-Coach3 and I were deeply concerned about his ability to step up and out of his comfort zone. After a 'gap' year due to Covid-19 restrictions, a decision to sever a four-year relationship with his girlfriend, and a year out of an academic environment, getting used to learning again was cause for concern. Despite our concerns he said, "Algebra was my biggest worry. I put a lot of work into that. I only missed one class, the whole semester, and I ended up passing with a B plus." He has recently graduated from two years at JUCO and has proven he can adapt and

thrive. “Holding himself *accountable*” and playing some good basketball, he has now committed to a Div-II college for the remainder of this tenure.

Junior College isn't for everyone. Man, it's really tough but I wouldn't change anything. I feel like picking the right fit for you is more important than the level of the school or the name of the school. I think this was a good starting point for me because it was kind of like a reality check of where I am and, yeah, it helps me know where I want to be more. I want [the full] college experience. (Baller-C).

Baller-C's statements – “reality check” and “helps me know what I want” suggest that in choosing an unpredictable path (US college) versus another (staying in NZ), there was a positive acceptance of choice and responsibility and determination of meaning to his college period. He expressed a sense of freedom from knowing he survived the ending of his relationship and the isolation and disillusionment of a basketball environment that initially failed to meet his expectations, going on to enjoy the experience.

The realities of campus life can be harsh, and many drop out, not fulfilling their scholarship commitment. BB-Analyst, who has been tracking NZ college players over the past five years, references reasons for drop-out are: coaching issues, team environment, homesickness, loneliness, inability to cope with academic levels, and favour for academia over basketball. Baller-to-Exec and BB-Coach3 described the realities of migration for a 'Kiwi kid':

They can't go anywhere, they don't have a car, they can't go down to the pub for a beer, because they're only 18 and it's 21 over there. Everyone in college went home for Christmas, bar three kids left on campus on their own, and none of the campus was open. So they didn't have a cafeteria, didn't have any transport. And, you know, every day they are on social media, looking at screens of their mates at the beach, having parties. You know he is thinking, gee, I just want to be home in New Zealand with my family. (Baller-to-Exec)

They've got 12 guys on scholarship, they play eight, two of them are okay to come back the next year because they think they've got a chance to play. When you're playing a lot, you might be happy. There are always at least two who are like, this fucking sucks. Coach stopped talking to me, stopped interacting with me. No one ever says a word to me at training anymore. Everyone just forgot about me. The only person who cared about me was my tutor and my girlfriend. (Developer)

The participants in Smith and Hardin (2020) corroborate the view that freshman year is overwhelming, stressful, fun, and very busy. Student-athletes moving from NZ to the US must adapt to a new country and culture without the close proximity of family, friends, and other norms (Smith & Hardin, 2020). In this theme, the significance of sacrificing one path for another, feelings of isolation, and not fitting in, combined with anguish for an uncertain future. Isolated from family, the need to form a connection inside the new community (and to form an

alternative family) and adapt to a different culture was fundamental to facilitative coping in this transition.

7.3 Juggling Positions in a Semi-Professional Environment

Conducting case fieldwork in a semi-professional NZNBL team environment presented the opportunity to examine the experiences of emerging athletes and semi-professionals juggling part-time careers. In addition, several leadership team members were also in their first season of undertaking managing and coaching roles in a professional organisation. While BB-Manager1 took care of the business and event day management with his team of mostly volunteers, BB-Manager2 looked after the players' travel, training and playing logistics. The head coach was in charge of basketball operations, supported by two assistant coaches. In addition, there was a strength and conditioning coach, a Physiotherapist, and me. With a limited budget, volunteers undertook the logistics, administration, and team support functions. My role involved supporting player wellbeing in conjunction with the opportunity to complete my research. What was meant by wellbeing was ambiguous; what eventuated was a combination of tangible support, cheerleading and mentoring.

This fieldwork experience allowed me to experience first-hand the stresses and responsibilities of athletes and other stakeholders in training and playing in the NZNBL. Participants included NZ-based players and international imports at both emerging and elite levels. The theme, aptly named *Juggling Positions in a Semi-Professional Environment*, focuses on the J2S phase and events relating to emerging athletes. The theme is broken down into identified sub-themes:

- *NZNBL Team Environment – Budget Constraints and Part-timers*
- *Developing the Emerging Players*
- *Being the Coach*
- *“You Have to Build the Right Culture”*

7.3.1 NZNBL Team Environment – Budget Constraints and Part-Timers

It was the first year for me transitioning into the [NZ]NBL, dealing with professionals, semi-professionals, and imports, all that kind of stuff. So obviously, that's quite a lot of different challenges. [Players] all present different things, but at the end of the day, it's kind of all the same; you just got to try and build a sustainable culture. Be a great leader and, you know, ultimately help people develop on and off the board. (BB-Coach1)

Budget issues also impacted the playing roster, with many athletes juggling work, school, and basketball careers alongside personal activities. With only a handful of the more

experienced players getting paid to play, and with funding tight, disgruntlement started to show as the season progressed. Budget issues also impacted available funds for logistics and welfare resources. Travelling and flying to out-of-town games on a limited budget left players with insufficient time for rest and recovery, sub-standard accommodation and big bodies cramped into tight minivans. I personally supplied snacks for them to grab in a training session as the budget did not stretch to this provision. It was a small concession for their commitment and equally essential to support their recovery and performance. The following example highlighted my concerns about the budget and logistics shortfalls:

You're asking them to give up their time to do media work for the team. They're not getting paid. They'll be there for at least five hours on a Friday night, and they are not going to feed them – so I supplied some food. (fieldnotes)

With the transient nature of the player roster including professional, semi-professional, emerging and school players, players and staff described integration as challenging. A significant factor was the proportion of players combining full-time jobs with families and playing basketball, and an influx of professional players in and out of the team over the season. There was a need to keep an open roster due to issues with import migrations due to Covid-19 restrictions and managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) periods. The team roster had temporary players covering for crucial players and late roster confirmations.

So many moving parts, with Covid and MIQ issues for imports, you had to keep options open, conversations were had that didn't pan out ... and particularly for a first-year coach [and himself], you don't want to reduce your options, you want to keep things wide. (BB-Manager1)

As BB-Coach1 underlined, "We would like to have brought in strong imports that could have been there from the start to the end of the season." Budget restraints dictated the selection of cheaper playing 'resources', including high-school players who, due to their need to retain 'amateur' status, were not and could not be paid. Therefore, the team roster comprised a range of players, from an ex-NBA player (Baller-I) to a very talented 16-year-old high-school student-t (Baller-E). It is a *juggling act* to balance the inclusion of the imports even in an undisrupted season; this particular situation resulted in "a hard mix to have to blend together" (BB-Manager1). 'Imports' (international professional players) also vary from emerging athletes breaking into professional ranks to experienced veterans (Baller-I). Juggling differences in age, experience, exposure, and culture meant individual expectations and meaning varied:

The import situation is *challenging*. They may have come from a top in college where they fly around in a private jet. Or maybe they've played a bit of G League ²⁰... suddenly you come to the other side of the world as well, playing in front of a handful of people,

²⁰ The G-League is the official minor league organisation of the NBA.

training in a school gym. Living in some ordinary apartments. It is a totally different world. And I always feel a hell of a shift of mindset for these young pros. Maybe not getting their money every week. So, it's no wonder sometimes things break down, and they aren't always giving 100%. They are only there playing for the next contract. The number of actual Americans who stay for more than one season is quite a low percentage. (BB-Analyst)

Where you would look to the better players in the team for captaincy and leadership and the mentorship of the emerging players, the transience in the roster impacted continuity. Furthermore, with the more experienced players in these environments typically imports, they can view their roles and responsibilities more as transactional than leadership. The variation of intent and meaning questions the authenticity of the relationships inside this environment.

Whenever people are paid to play, and it doesn't matter what level, if it is considered professional then there are different dynamics at play. Players tend to be fairly self-centred and most of them are looking after themselves. And that's fair enough, you know, this is their profession – they want their money in the bank at the end of every week. (BB-Analyst)

I asked one of the temporary imports bought in for part of the start of the season how he felt about transitioning into the team for a short period. He described fulfilling his role as “a choice, a decision of who and what you are going to bring to this situation. You can treat it as a job and go in and just get the job done and get out, or you can treat it as a responsibility to add value to individuals in the team” (fieldnotes). He presented a prominent voice in the team for the period he was there – providing a lot of coaching and direction to the emerging players.

The impacts of semi-professional players, juggling work/school and playing commitments also presented players with a lack of time and effort and, in some cases, discipline for the 'off-the-boards' aspects of training and conditioning requirements typically expected of a professional athlete (BB-TRAINER, Researcher-Practitioner). The BB-TRAINER, team Physio and I were frustrated by the lack of team structure and systems, which potentially came from a lack of experience and/or priority of the emerging head coach:

You're under a hierarchy, right? At the top of the hierarchy is [the head coach] So, you've got to devise your systems around what he wants. I didn't want to overstep the boundary where ... the last thing I wanted to do was piss the players off. If you piss the players off, you don't have a job right. (BB-TRAINER)

While the facility and support were available, the lack of prioritisation of 'other' athletic development was disappointing from my and BB-Trainer's perspective. There were no designated gym sessions as a team – which, from my perspective (fieldnotes), missed two beats – firstly, with athletes juggling priorities, the organisation did not support prioritising nutrition, rest and recovery. In this situation, the downward wellbeing spiral begins, and the injuries and sickness increase. Secondly, this is a time for the team to bond off the court; it becomes a more

comfortable environment for players to share concerns and pressures and a time for staff to assess potential performance and wellbeing risks. In other words, the lack of cohesion fails to develop sufficient social identity or allow for the removal of the inauthentic mask and for players and staff to show their true selves. Baller-to-Exec confirmed that when the players are in informal settings, they talk to each other as human beings about what their kids' names are or what their hobbies are outside of their sporting roles.

7.3.2 *Developing the Emerging Players*

“If the goal is to win the game of basketball, the players are used like chess pieces, each with a specific function; some have more functions than others” (Developer). The only way emerging players will develop in a professional environment where winning is the priority is if the outcome is decided or the result will not be affected by people's mistakes (Developer).

Baller-F was an 18-year-old NZ-born high-school graduate brought over from Australia, where he lived. I recall BB-Manager2 questioning his recruitment from the start. It was quickly apparent that he would not get any game time nor be in the travelling team.

[The coach] wouldn't have told him to come if he wasn't going to play him. But now he's not playing him. And it's, yeah, I can understand the frustration. From my understanding, [names] didn't promise anything, but at the same time, without promising, maybe he was promising by telling him to come, you know? (Baller-to-Exec)

I think Baller-F was a really clear example of just poor communication. And over-investing too early. So, he thought he was coming into a very different situation. (BB-Manager1)

Frustrated and devastated, despite encouragement to make the most of the learning environment, he headed back to Australia, was released from his contract, and went on to a US college opportunity. Four under-20 emerging players remained on the roster for the season: three high-school students and Baller-C, who was in his first year out of school. Baller-D and Baller-E rose to the challenge, playing steady roles in the team, Baller-D winning rookie of the year. The third played some time, and Baller-C played very few minutes. Unsurprisingly, emerging players were struggling and confused regarding 'playing minutes' or getting cut. “Expectations [for court time] were too high from the start,” BB-Manager1 confirmed. The 'off-court coaching' of these players became a part of my wellbeing role. I asked Baller-C how he felt about the way the season played out in our interview:

In the first game, I think I played like a good 12 minutes maybe some good minutes. But obviously, we were missing a big part of our team. [Baller-G and Baller-I] were missing then. So, we got our very two main guys back into the season and they filled my position. (Baller-C)

Seeing [Baller-D and Baller-E] get a lot of burn, get a lot of game time, and succeed in their areas even though they're younger than me. You get in what you get out and so they provided some good decisions, good shots on the court whenever they're playing in their point guard/shooting guard positions for coach, and that didn't really kick me. (Baller-C)

Baller-C's responses spoke of understanding his role, justifying his outcome on position criteria of being a 'big'. However, this denies the diminished sense of self when faced with the realities of sitting on the bench. When a player gets just a few minutes at the end of the game, he explained "it kind of just ruins your confidence, it is a bit of façade, and there is nothing really you can do as the game is really over." After a game where Baller-C had been promoted as the poster boy and visited the local schools as the local lad for a game at a particular stadium, he entered the court for the final two minutes of the game:

So that was pretty hype. I got all my friends to come. Obviously, my parents came to every game but they came and sat courtside. So I got put in at the last minute, and I was pretty pissed at the end of the game. And of course, it's a professional environment so I can't say much really. But I did have a word with coach 'cause it was probably the biggest kick in the nuts, I felt pretty shit. (Baller-C)

While the coach apologised, Baller-C questioned its authenticity. Why do it and then apologise after, he suggested. What escalated the situation further was that Dad got involved. Surprising to me was the need to coach parents through the transition, which required me to navigate several parental incidents and concerns for the team. As Baller-C explained:

I was unaware that my dad had gone up to him before we went into the locker room. And I'm not too sure what my dad said. But he's a pretty upfront man. I think I was more upset with my dad saying something because it's like, you know, it's a professional environment it is not high school, it's not club. And it's not like his right to say. I mean, he's a father who is proud of his son and wants the best for him. But it's not his right to kinda, yeah, say something directly to the coach of a professional team. (Baller-C)

Like the boys and their families in case study 2, these players are still teenagers, and the parents are still protective. For example, the mother of Baller-E raised her concerns about the workload of her son's training and his mood, as he was playing across his school, representative, and NZNBL assignments. The expectations of Baller-E's coach (BB-Coach1 for School and NZNBL) and Dad (also his representative level coach) were intense; Mum had expected BB-Coach1 to efficiently manage his load. By the end of the season, Baller-E was playing with a stress fracture (at 17 years of age). He was "over having to spend so much time with coach" and ready to move to college football (fieldnotes). This transfer of responsibility from adult to child can be a difficult transition for parents, evident in emerging athletes moving between and from school into professional environments. The instinctive role of a parent is to protect one's children. But parental involvement of this nature has no place in a professional environment (Retired-Player,

BB-Manager1). From the staff position, BB-Manager1, BB-Coach1 and BB-Coach2 emphasised the need to prepare emerging players, learn what a professional environment is, and prepare them for the real world, and to drive them to look inward for the determination to grow and succeed.

Often you won't even get a minute at the end of a blowout ... you kind of got to let them fail sometimes ... for them to grow. And they have to take accountability for their own improvement. You can't be blaming the coach. You can't be blaming the teammate, blaming the roster. (BB-Manager1)

If you're not engaged and you're not providing anything on the bench, then you're just gonna stay on the bench ... show that you're committed to the group and stay confident and alert with what's going on ... you're ready when the opportunity comes. (BB-Coach1)

It is hard when you're training the same as everybody else. And sometimes you feel like, you're going harder than the ones who are getting more court in front of you, but you just kind of do your time. And do your learning at training. I had a pretty glass-half-full attitude when I was younger. So, I was always like, yeah, I'll get my opportunity. And I'll show the coach. (Baller-to-Exec)

When Baller-C approached the head coach about why he did not give him a chance to show him what he could do in a game, the coach replied, "That is what training is for" (BB-Coach1). For much of the later part of the season, we saw a despondent Baller-C in the training environment, which had a compounding knock-on effect on his representation on the court (fieldnotes). Despite my attempts to propel him forward, he never pushed himself forward. He would stand on the side of the court and watch the non-rostered players scrimmage²¹ ahead of him. By the end of the season, he did not care, and no one cared to try and talk or help him through (fieldnotes). Baller-C expressed his feeling as "Coach just stopped interacting with me" (Developer), as he confessed in the interview:

Coach did seem like a guy to definitely favour. Yeah, I reckon he did have his *favourites*. And that wasn't just because, like, he played him more, that was just the way he interacted with them. (Baller-C)

Yet, from the coach's perspective:

Every relationship is equally as important. If you value one more than the other, then, you know, people can get left behind or feel like they're undervalued, which is dangerous. (BB-Coach1)

Baller-C's narrative draws out the contradictions in this semi-professional environment. The intention expressed by the leadership team at the start of the season was to create a

²¹ Training game

development environment. The reality was more difficult to deliver in a restrictive professional environment.

This is professional basketball, their goal is to win. Their goal is to produce a winning team. And they need to because, financially, like we're trying to establish sustainability, like right now, like the long-term development of a couple of kids that they ended up with is not a priority in their first full season together. They need to figure out how to build a winning team. (Developer)

They needed to build a winning team – this was their first priority. It is rare in a professional environment to be “dealing with six, seven high-school guys” (BB-Manager1), including rostered and un-rostered players. As explained above, this was both a factor of budget constraints and a cross-over of roles, with the emerging manager and coaching staff simultaneously working with high-school teams. Towards the end of the season, they separated the squad into two groups, blue and white. The white group (off-bench) team were assigned to BB-Coach2, which provided some structure to the development environment. However, as the staff participants agreed, if there are development players in a semi-professional or professional environment, there needs to be a competition²² for them to play in (BB-Manager1, BB-Manager2, BB-Analyst, Developer). Neither the NZNBL nor the Australian NBL has an age-group-based tournament. No matter how much training they do, they cannot develop as players without playing. Not only does playing improve their game, but it also improves their mood. Young men want to play for the love of the game and the competition; merely training to train in isolation for long periods becomes demoralising. ‘Having-a-talent’ and ‘being-a-talent’ demand development to transition into a professional player (Aggerholm, 2015) and to grow as an individual into adulthood. The duty of care for emerging players’ athletic (and personal) development falls ambiguously outside the professional environment. Yet young players supported a roster with budget and player constraints.

7.3.3 *Being the Coach*

The coach is constantly walking a tightrope as the head of the business whose aim is to win games and earn sponsor dollars. A coach must be able to have conversations with people and explain situations, and have them buy into what the coach has presented to them:

The workload from playing to coaching is actually probably one and a half, if not two times as much commitment. Players can just go to training and train and go home. Coaches got to be there before training and you got to deal with all the rubbish after, like why am I on the bench, and the complaints. (BB-Manager2)

²² An additional tier two NBL competition was introduced after the submission of this thesis.

Having filled roles as player, coach and now manager, Baller-to-Exec explained different aspects of the coach: athlete dyad. He alluded to the players' inner sanctum, the us-versus-them and a sense of loneliness and isolation as a staff member being inside the team but not really. He addressed players seeing the coach as the bad guy for potentially just doing their job or being accused of showing favouritism for genuinely just liking or relating to some people better than others.

As my fieldwork observations recorded, maintaining a roster and keeping everyone on side is a balancing act. With complicated rosters and environmental events (like Covid-19), the coach needed to hedge his options, keeping players onside in case a player fell through. For an emerging coach, building his reputation was career-defining, knowing if the team failed, he failed, and his job could be on the line. Coaches must constantly negotiate between controllable and unpredictable situations, such as injuries or performance downturns. The players were vulnerable, with college placements and future playing contracts in their hands. As such, players can have a singular focus on their own playing careers and prospects. As Retired-Player recalled, players see their careers at the coach's discretion.

They had changed the coach, and I'd gone right down to the end of the bench where, you know, I'd gone from starting-five status ... to not playing significant minutes. And by the end of that season, [the Australian NBL team] didn't want to re-sign me. And so I had to go and play elsewhere. So, you know, I had to move my whole family because one coach decided that I wasn't a good player, you know, that's real. Then you go somewhere to coach loves you. And now your stock rises again ... I mean, a lot of times your careers will be dictated by coaches, they like you or don't like you. (Baller-to-Exec)

A coach will also feel the weight of this responsibility. The coach in Knights and Ruddock-Hudson (2016) confirmed this anguish by saying: "When you end people's careers, it is something you never quite get used to ... but it has to be done" (p. 167). A coaching role in a professional environment requires the coach to have a business mindset. Disgruntlement, as in the fieldwork case (some factors outside the coach's control, some due to playing time), can and did quickly accumulate.

A coach has to be fully aware of his team and the dynamics that are going on because people talk, you know, players talk. When you get two disgruntled players together, then a third comes and joins the conversation, then all of a sudden, now [a] third of your team is potentially working against you. (Baller-to-Exec)

The reality is you can only put five in the starting line-up. The coach is responsible for building a strong and flexible roster within budget, and winning games. Even great players find themselves on the bench, so the coach needs to be able to have the hard conversations when it matters. For example:

Coaches that didn't communicate to me were really hard for me as a player to function because I needed instruction of what they wanted ... what he specifically wants from me ... so I can go and deliver what you want. (Baller-to-Exec)

I think players like black and white. Yeah, sometimes they don't like hearing black, but they still want to know. So, if one of the players comes and asks you, how come?, don't beat around the bush. The player just wants to know, what can I do to get better? Yeah, and they'll be shitty ... someone may not have told him before. But yeah, it's kind of, I think what happens is some players haven't been told the truth in the past. So, they probably think they are better than they are. (BB-Manager2)

In a professional environment, it is easy to overestimate the importance of technical and tactical matters. Players come and go quickly (particularly in the NZNBL environment), and it is easy to underestimate the transient nuances of the environment. It can be awkward to tell imports what to do, especially the experienced ones. Budget restrictions demanded compromises on the skill and experience of players brought in, opening up opportunities for the high-school and emerging players. The challenging environment made building player connections and team culture harder than in a more stable environment (Developer, BB-Manager1). Retrospectively, BB-Coach1 observed:

There were times where I probably could have been a little bit more honest. I tried to sugar coat it at times ... and you just got to be blunt and tell them what they need to understand. (BB-Coach1)

Being a coach involves experiences not so dissimilar to the athletes' existential dilemmas; not surprisingly coaches and staff have wellbeing issues too (Kilo & Hassmén, 2016). Where it might be the head coach's choice, and therefore their responsibility to lead, others would argue it is *not* their sole responsibility. Perhaps, it is more a responsibility to lead by example, to be open to others' expertise and experiences and to contribute to the cultural environment they operate in. To be authentic to self (in identity and meaning) in a professional sporting environment is a constant dilemma for a coach where business can override individual relationships and wellbeing. However, it remains that coaches are also responsible for how they choose to approach relationships inside the organisational boundaries and can try to be "a bit more honest", and see the humanity in the athlete.

7.3.4 "You Have to Build the Right Culture"

In the interview, BB-Coach1 expressed the importance of his leadership role and the need to present a clear message to players and a consistent staff front:

The relationship I have with my assistant coaches is really important. At the end of the day, we're the ones that are delivering the message and executing what we need to get done. So, I try and be on the same page with them. So, whatever we're trying to deliver

it is the same across the board ... With the off-court staff, it's just being in tune with everything that's going on, constantly communicating with them, you know, being that point of reference, being proactive. (BB-Coach1)

Understanding each player's role within that group and making it obvious how important that is for the team, letting them know how important their development, their input, their voice, all of that stuff goes towards our success. (BB-Coach1)

His actions and the disconnect in his coaching team showed inconsistencies (fieldnotes and interviews with other parties). "We never really kind of a sat down as a collective – you got to create your own culture within your management team" (BB-Manager2). Demonstrated by the following quote:

Like the communication was quite poor between myself and the coaches ... sometimes I was guessing, or I was just getting what I was getting from the players. We needed regular meeting catchups to help with overall team communication. (BB-Trainer)

BB-Coach2 emphasised his values as a coach as leading by example, explaining, "You're demonstrating behaviour at the end of the day. If you are treating your staff with respect, then the players will treat others like that. It sets the culture." During the NZNBL fieldwork study, I noted times when BB-Coach2 appeared to hold back from expressing his view or taking charge, particularly in the approach to the development players. In several instances I approached him directly to add more support for the outliers. His response was to refer me to the head coach; I expected he would address it as part of the coaching team (fieldnotes). Later in our interview, he explained how he felt he needed to perform inside a strictly defined role. I had felt similarly, unable to advise or involve myself in the coaching circle, or uncomfortable with doing so. I was very careful of, when and how to raise athlete concerns with the head coach. At times, BB-Coach2 said, he felt like an outlier within the coaching team. He also described the culture of an Australian NBL team when working as an intern:

There were other people at similar levels of experience and expertise as me, and I'm being shouted at, told to do this do that, fill water bottles. And to go to the next level, you do whatever you need to do, because you're just trying to get an opportunity. (BB-Coach2)

In the NZNBL, BB-Coach2 felt compromised on where his alliance sat – with the coaching staff or the players. In the Australian NBL environment, he performed the role to get the opportunity. From an existential point of view, this represented a conflict of good faith. It was evident that BB-Coach2 led with a genuine connection inside his school coaching environment. He credited the players' cultural behaviours of "being a good young man first" with how his school team represented themselves on and off the court. He believed the external observations of his team's sportsmanship gave rise to the professional opportunities that have opened up for him. BB-Coach3 confirmed this:

[BB-Coach2], when he is the coach of a team, probably does the best job of integrating all facets technical, tactical, strategic with family, community, connection, togetherness. (Developer)

Emerging player development requires coaching beyond the sport specifics because players carry the character they develop during these early stages into the professional ranks (BB-Coach2). He gave an example from his Australian NBL experience:

Yo, coach, give me a ball, and [player names] would say, get your own fucking ball. [Same player names] would be the first to grab the bags getting out of the van. (BB-Coach2)

Baller-to-Exec shared the importance he holds for being *accountable* as a role model. Here he suggested that cultural leadership sits inside the “inner sanctum” of the player group. Participants in this study often used the word *accountable*. Accountability suggests congruence with the participants’ existential awareness of the freedom to choose, including responsibility for their behaviours, actions and outcomes, as demonstrated here:

I always had good relationships with my teammates. You lead a lot of the culture on the court and in the locker room, being one of the senior players. So I felt a responsibility to do the right thing and have people hold me *accountable* ... Because when you’re in the team, you’re one of the boys, you know, you are in that inner sanctum. (Baller-to-Exec)

Retired-Player went on to express his sense of responsibility to carry these values into his organisational leadership roles: “When you are in the office, you are no longer one of the boys; to use a basketball term, you are a ‘fish head’.”

Finally, guiding athletes to find healthy, sustainable forms of peak performance goes beyond the technical and tactical aspects, and looks to things like nutrition, sleep, recovery, and a balanced lifestyle (Researcher-Practitioner, BB-Coach3, BB-TRAINER). “If you have that as a base, then you can naturally layer on culture”, and create a healthy high-performance environment where athletes flourish (Developer).

I think there’s a lack of genuine care sometimes in some of the programmes I’m involved in. You know, like, it’s so hard because it’s such, like I said, high stakes. It’s about winning and competing ... They want to be part of [a great culture], but it might slow you down because integrating it takes a little more time. But I think a great culture is ultimately about care and empathy. (BB-Coach2)

I asked, whose responsibility is it to lead a culture for the athletic and personal development of emerging athletes:

You need the head coach to build the right culture, obviously. And the assistants kind of help communicate that I’d say. Extra staff are probably the least important, but also like, the better those people are, the better the culture is. (Baller-B)

Your culture is led by your coaches and your captain. So possibly your captain is as much to blame sometimes if there's not a culture being developed. (BB-Manager2)

Individuals are situated in the world (Sartre, 2018/1943). In this instance, the world refers to a sporting environment. To thrive, individuals must 'enact' their role or leave (Aggerholm, 2015). To succeed means becoming part of a culture where personal and/or athletic identity aligns with the group's 'social identity': if the team wins, I win. I am the team. However, as BB-Coach2 explained, a social identity is only constructive if there is an agreement on the purpose, values and behaviours within and "integrating these takes more time". Furthermore, if we are one part of a whole, then do we lose our oneness? Does doing what is best for the team deny self? From a leadership perspective, the challenge is to create a culture where individuals (staff and players) are valued, and the organisation becomes a sum of the parts.

7.4 Summary and Case Conclusion

Table 7.2 summarises the themes and sub-themes presented in this chapter. The chapter explores player and stakeholder perspectives, using a stratification of data sources to examine identity, meaning, and relationships that help or hinder emerging athlete transitions. In addition, this longitudinally directed case fills identified gaps in prior research examining emerging athletes in basketball, recruitment and early exits, collegiate athlete transitions, and J2S transitions into semi-professional basketball, and it expands on previous research relating to athlete migrations. These events represent a cross-section of transitional and coping processes underpinned by existential questions of freedom, authenticity, social identity and events.

A US collegiate pathway offers opportunities for athletes to develop their sporting prowess at the same time as achieving a university degree. Dual career advocates argue for the advantages of education combined with athletic apprenticeships (Van Rens et al., 2019). Unfortunately, in NZ we do not have university-based athletic opportunities and competitions of this calibre. This requires aspiring athletes to travel outside of NZ to gain these experiences. However, it is also important to recognise not all talented athletes are equally talented academically.

Furthermore, the experience also requires a level of personal development to ensure transitioning from tertiary student-athlete programmes enhances life transition (Miller & Buttell, 2018), and like in rugby league, this involves supporting the parents too (Dorsch et al., 2016). Positively, I found these participant athletes were better prepared for the transition into

college and are, to date, achieving better outcomes, offering hope for programmes leveraging greater levels of readiness.

This case also highlighted several areas of note. 'Being tall' is an identity marker that comes with assumptions. Not all tall people want to be basketball players, but if they do they need to be taught how to deal with their extraordinary bodies. Basketball is more transient than the other two cases, and it also involves a considerable amount of pressure to 'get minutes'. This situated freedom demands players manage their game face and team persona, potentially creating individuals who are constantly challenged to hide their true feelings and being. In semi-professional environments, as in this case study, this is not conducive to robust athletic and personal development, particularly when there are no pathway competitions for the players to play in. Mandating a tier-two level semi-professional competition (potentially under-21s) could address these shortcomings.

CHAPTER 8 – CASE 4 – PRACTITIONERS

Chapter 8 presents case study 4 in response to the third research question – when and how can practitioners authentically perform their role in facilitating emerging athlete coping in life in and beyond professional sport? Case 4 differs in boundary from the previous three cases by investigating practitioner relationships instead of a sport. The cases revisit data from the earlier cases relevant to practitioner and social support activities and relationships. In addition to Cases 1-3 data²³, Case 4 draws upon two additional interviews conducted with an independent athletic trainer (Independent-Trainer) and a sports psychologist (Psych) and my fieldwork notes and reflections.

This case is written in a narrative-of-the-self style, as this chapter integrates and tells of my own experiences and stories as a practitioner across the cases and throughout the themes. My voice is interwoven with the participants' words to ensure a vivid and authentic representation of the challenges and relationships involved in this phenomenon. As the researcher, I used reflexive thematic analysis of fieldwork notes, social media, interviews, reflections and documents to identify the themes for this case. This approach is consistent with the qualitative multi-case design outlined in Chapter 4. The first section briefly outlines the analytical scope of practitioner-led social support, expanding on the framework in Chapter 2.

8.1 My Perspectives on Social Support, Thriving and Practitioner Roles

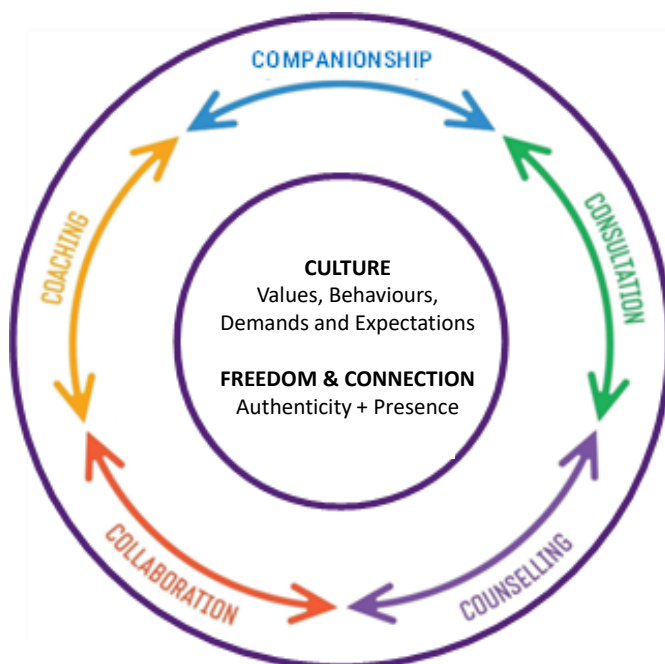
Social support relationships facilitate emerging athlete coping by using actual or perceived resources in the form of instrumental (technical, tangible, physical, informational) and emotional (including esteem) aid (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Rees & Freeman, 2012). An underlying principle adopted in this thesis is that social support relationships should not purely assist individuals to “cope with stress or adversity but also assist their efforts to develop, grow, build resilience and achieve success – to cultivate [their] talent and find purpose and meaning in life” (Feeney & Collins, 2015, p. 114). The desired outcome is to thrive, where thriving comprises five components: hedonic wellbeing (happiness, life satisfaction), eudemonic wellbeing (purpose and meaning in life), psychological wellbeing, social wellbeing, and physical wellbeing (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Addressing the wellbeing construct is beyond the scope of

²³ Quick Reference: BB=Basketball, Ballers=Basketball Athletes, RL=Rugby League , Players=Rugby League Athletes

this thesis, but in this context, wellbeing is defined as a positive human experience. Each of these five wellbeing components, singly or multiply, mark a continuum of fitness from crisis to thriving at a given time, where ‘crisis’ is below and ‘thriving’ is above baseline levels of human functioning (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Stambulova, 2017).

Burns et al. (2019) argued the fundamental duty of care in roles that support athletes is to help them “become their best, most resilient self, both on and off the field” (p. 1390). To do so requires a “team of people who embrace a pro-active and collaborative approach to performance management and maintain a culture of integration and open communication” (Burns et al., 2019, p. 1390). Burns et al.’s original model of interpersonal relationships in elite sports included communication, consultation, counselling, collaboration, and coaching (Figure 1, p. 1387). Figure 8.1 adapts this model, replacing communication with companionship, illustrating the functions involved across social support roles and relationships. Companionship recognises the significance of community relationships (cheerleaders, peers, team-mates, role-models, family) as a provision of social support. Communication is removed from the outer circle of the diagram, positioning this within behaviours, suggesting communication is applicable to all functions and part of the organisational and individual culture (Alder, 2015; Henriksen et al., 2010). Freedom represents environments enabling individuals or organisations to operate in “good faith” (transparently and true to self). Connection recognises that “both the provider and the recipient bear responsibility for cultivating effective support” relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2015, p. 130) through authenticity and presence.

Figure 8.1
Interpersonal Functions in Social Support Relationships



Note. Adapted from Burns et al. (2019, Figure 1, p. 1387).

These principles underpin the practitioners' experiences recounted in this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, working as practitioners with emerging athletes involves responsibilities extending beyond athletic (physical and technical) development to personal development (Hauser et al., 2022). Secondly, within emerging athlete transitions, individuals experience multiple events, both positive (e.g., selection, J2S promotion) and negative (e.g., injuries, de-selection), which require them to thrive to achieve successful professional sporting careers.

The following sections present the findings of this case study under three primary themes and corresponding sub-themes summarised in Table 8.2. The findings are underpinned by three-spheres, transitions (T), existential being (E) and intra-, inter- and environmental relationships (R) documented in Chapter 2, with ✓ indicating a *strong* link to that area.

Table 8.2
Summary of Themes in Case 4

CASE 4 - PRACTITIONER		T	E	R
What About Me?			✓	✓
	Defining my Role and Identity			✓
	Small Things Matter		✓	✓
	Letting Go		✓	✓
	Meaning, Reward and Recognition			
Being a Practitioner				✓
	Practitioner Roles			✓
	The Wellbeing Role in the NRL			
Right Person, Right Place, Right Time				✓
	Presence Matters			✓
	It's a Team Sport			✓
	Inside or Outside the Organisation			

8.2 “What About Me?”

The findings commence with a description, in a narrative-of-the-self style, of my lived experiences. This theme emphasises the practitioner: athlete support relationship as dyadic, which requires shared meaning and respect from both parties to be authentic and connected. As a practitioner, I desire to be *a strength of support* and a *relational catalyst* (Feeney & Collins, 2015) for athlete and personal development. This theme explores my support relationships in the three cases under the following sub-themes:

- *Defining My Role and Identity.*
- *“Small Things Matter”.*
- *Letting Go.*
- *Meaning, Reward and Recognition.*

In expressing my vulnerabilities and engagements, I hope to demonstrate it is not whether or not support is available but how it is offered and received that determines the positive outcomes for the supplier and the recipient.

8.2.1 Defining My Role and Identity

Commencing my PhD coincided with starting my own athlete development business. During this period, I struggled with determining my role title and responsibilities and creating a financially viable model. Others frequently labelled me with varying tags, not all of which I was comfortable with, implying a need to classify my identity or questioned my meaning. I have been “accused” of being “too soft”, “interfering”, “too kind”, “too direct”, “a good person”, or “enabling” by other staff in sporting environments I have worked in. I have also struggled with being called “Mum” or “Aunty”; despite being fully aware it is an honour in the cultures I work with, I felt the statements implied an undervaluation of my expertise and blurred my ‘family’ and ‘practitioner’ identities. Functionally, I mentor (counsel), coach, consult, cheerlead and provide support and development to emerging athletes and their families. In addition, I collaborate with other personnel on the programmes they are engaged in. My critical colleagues consistently challenged me to reflect on my relationships and roles in my career development and research findings. In particular, the reflective interviews challenged me on the influences of my gender and socio-cultural perspectives in these relationships. It highlighted questions: How am I seen? How do I see myself? Who am I? How is what I am and what I do legitimised? Do I make a difference?

In working with adolescent athletes, I am conscious about what and how I contribute to those I serve (Tod et al., 2019). There is this constant tension between creating connection, forming affection, and not getting too attached. Having the tough conversations – “You are dreaming” or “It’s not good enough” – but not pushing too hard. Being there when needed, but never feeling recognised or part of the ‘inner circle’. “I know you are part of a village raising an athlete, but am *I really* making a difference? Or am I just kidding myself?” (fieldnotes). Given my existential ontology, the expectation would be that I would align my approach with existential psychology principles (Nesti, 2006), which promote the notion that the practitioner retains an independent, bracketed relation to the other. It would be disingenuous of me to claim this was true in my case. Indeed, I challenge my clients to look deeply into the reality of situations and take their own responsibility for the making and the consequences of their decisions. As one parent put it: “Truly lucky you [me] are a part of his [her son’s] village coz you don’t sugar coat anything.” I aspire to empower young athletes to be self-sufficient with ‘open eyes’ and to face the truth with courage and opportunity (Nesti, 2006) while also giving *caring*

support and positivity (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). These feelings mirror Feeney and Collins' (2015) viewpoints, that support is often invisible (non-intrusive or subtle) and sometimes involves telling people what they do not want to hear. It is also worthwhile noting Rogers (1995) found alignment with Martin Buber and "a homegrown brand of existential philosophy" (p. 39).

As such, I would now call myself a 'person-centred existential' practitioner, combining the ideas of Nesti (2006) and Rogers (1995). My principles are generous intention (willingly available and reliable), keeping it real and authentic (say it like it is, leading-by-example), and unconditional positive regard (unconditional and genuine care). Both Nesti and Rogers agree individuals have the capacity to understand themselves and make their own choices; all they need is the right support and a safe space to explore.

8.2.2 "Small Things Matter"

The following paragraphs describe my thoughts, feelings and experiences in the three *different* case roles and environments. These experiences occurred in gyms, training environments, breakfast clubs, games and boxing events, or as a chat over lunch or a 'cuppa' in a café. This 'organic' approach provided a less intimidating manner and space for vulnerable conversations or upbeat encouragement; and the following quote echoes my sentiment and the reason for the sub-theme title.

Too often, we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. (Leo Bucaglia)

Case 1 – Boxing: My practitioner role (counsellor, companion, consultant) and relationship in boxing were often challenging, particularly when I became the safe person to release the pressure valve on. Emotional and often aggressive outbursts commonly occurred pre- or post-fight when the boxer and the coach were vulnerable, and this often came at my own emotional cost. Pre- or post-fight was not the time to challenge an athlete. Confidence is grounded in ego, a mentality ensuring they can enter the ring and fight not only to survive but beat their opponent. Indeed, these are the times the boxers (and coaches) needed to lean on me as a source of unconditional emotional and tangible support. Practical matters need to be taken care of – comforting them during a weight-cut, ensuring that food is available after a weigh-in, doing the crossword together before the fight, picking up the opponent from the airport and saying no when they cannot speak up for themselves. However, the boxers and team quickly lost sight of the value these 'small matters' contributed to their success after the heat of the battle; my role was not valued later inside the inner circle, as was seen in Case 1.

My experience and exposure to the boxing world are far from uninitiated, yet it was in boxing I suffered some of my most significant existential crises. For example, in Case 1, I felt used, hurt and angry in my experiences with Boxing-Coach and Boxer-B, and with Boxer-A, when my warnings that “boxing is a business” fell on deaf ears or resulted in a confrontational dialogue: “You are just a fan, a lover of boxing, this team are experts, they have years of experience” (fieldnotes). Feeling unheard and disregarded challenged me to move beyond my ego and recognise the individuals’ rights to make their way in the world (Nesti, 2006; Rogers, 1995) In my experience with Boxing-Coach and Boxer-B, having been part of something to the point of success and then cast aside, I was challenged to reflect on the purpose of my involvement and my hurt, and question my intentions for wanting to stay part of the inside circle. In the end, I had to take responsibility for my self-worth and recognise my contribution as a coach (mentor), counsellor and consultant was valuable and completed. Had this filled my need to feel part of something? For a time, yes, but then I had to accept the relationship’s ending, grieve the loss, and move on. In our relational engagements, we cannot demand others meet our expectations or treat us equally. We are only one side of a series of dyadic relationships; some operate in good faith, others do not.

Case 2 – Rugby League: As a practitioner (coach, counsellor, companion, consultant) with emerging rugby league athletes and their families, throughout this PhD, my relationships typically commenced when the athlete was in his mid-teens and developed over the subsequent years. In my experience, young men (later teens/early 20s) aspiring to be professional athletes can simultaneously behave in entitled, thoughtless and vulnerable ways. They are still ‘kids’ with grown-up decisions and pressures. They want affection and reassurance but, at the same time, they want their independence too. As they mature, there is an inevitable need for greater autonomy and space to mature, make their own decisions, and take responsibility for the consequences (good or bad).

My rugby league involvement commenced with regular weekly physical training sessions followed by breakfast, and these were combined with athletic and personal development and support; for many of this cohort, this period preceded their migration to Australia. After face-to-face contact diminished, communication channels remained open and typically continued in different forms. Regular ‘contact’ through social media messaging (their preferred communication channel) seems to matter. Sometimes I found this form of communication tortured and unrewarding, as the initiation and effort appear out of balance and unappreciated. It can be tough to know when to “check in on them or not”, or when I am, as the boys would term it, “being a rash” (irritating), or “nagging too much or not enough”. The most disquieting time is when I know an athlete has experienced adversity (e.g., injury, de-

selection); I have no hesitation in reaching out, but what do I do when met with a wall of silence? What is unnegotiable is adolescent athletes need to know “I have their backs”; that I am not their parent or their schoolteacher, so no conversation is off limits, and I will not judge them but will support them in dealing with any consequences.

At all times, you must learn to read between the lines, the quiet periods and the text messages, and to buy them lunch every so often. Responses are often simply knowing they have seen the message, a random emoji, or “I’m OK pip”. A text with a heart emoji is the modern-day teenager’s demonstration of affection, and sometimes they surprise you with “appreciate you”, “Hey pip, everything’s all good; we start pre-season next week, so I’m getting a little nervous” (Player-B), or “Hey pip!! Just letting you know I’ll be making my debut this week don’t tell anyone lol just letting the main ones know!” (Player-A). Such messages reflect they care and a longing for me to “be proud of them”. Conversely, they retreat if they think you will be annoyed, disappointed, or feel they have let you down, and this is a particular issue with the Pasifika athletes I associate with (Marsters et al., 2021).

In summary, as a practitioner working with adolescent athletes, you need to learn text language 😊, be patient, persistent and present; most of all, while they may be young, they quickly see through any inauthenticity.

Case 3 – Basketball: Entering the NZNBL semi-professional team environment as a researcher-practitioner as part of my fieldwork research, it was agreed I would provide ‘wellbeing’ (their term) support to the team, prioritising the emerging J2S players. What wellbeing meant was ambiguous. The leadership team expected the senior players would not need much help. Attending practices two nights per week, I often felt little purpose sitting on the side-lines, but “I refused to let my awkwardness show and found ways to engage with each athlete” (fieldnotes). Consequently, the role evolved into counselling, companionship, cheerleading, and the provision of tangible requirements, including stepping in for the team manager when required.

Providing pre-training snacks became a token of care and, as in Case 2, sharing food or a meal provided a ‘facilitator’ for an informal approach and a way for me to feel useful. Once again, the engagement seemed to comprise many small things: with Baller-I, it was having a bit of a laugh, reminding him to have fun on the court and remember why he played. For Baller-H, it was an anchor to remind him to play for himself, to chill and take responsibility for planning and looking after himself, or to chat about the imminent arrival of his first child. For others, it was a safe place to express their frustration with being on the bench, a place to vent. For a younger import, it was a push to share his frustration over his injuries and then to negotiate additional clinical support for him. When a long-standing player was dropped, it was reminding

coaches to respect his leadership and contribution and to remind them he brought value as a role model to the team. For a Pasifika athlete, it was an Aunty Pip hug.

Presence is foundational, and for those recognised as ‘being present’, it represents a form of authentication in the squad environment – individuals who are not just there for “office duties”, as a “spectator” or “hanger-on”, but are approachable, doers and genuinely care about not just the athlete but the person. Contrary to their expectations, senior athletes *did* require my support, especially those balancing work with training/playing in a semi-professional environment. Senior player Baller-G saw it in the small things: “A kiss and cuddle, a mandarin or a piece of chocolate or a bit of a chat and kind word” (fieldnotes). This gratitude was great, but what did I need a PhD for, and who would pay me for the small things? In our interview, I asked BB-Manager1 about this and his perception of the well-being role I had filled:

[Whether ballers directly engaged with you or not], knowing you were there was a comfort thing. Knowing you were there legitimised you as a part of the team. So, if you weren’t invested in kind of being there, I think there wouldn’t have been as much trust. I think there were a lot of people that really valued you and felt supported just because of your presence. (BB-Manager1)

What was evident in all three cases was that *small things matter*. These small acts of care and communication matter to both sides of the relationship; unless you stay in touch, they will not open up when needed. It is difficult not to feel hurt, unvalued and uncared for at times. For younger emerging athletes, this requires reminding yourself these *are* teenage boys with big dreams and a lot of pressure. However, it is also essential that support recipients learn (through guidance) to reach out, regulate demands, reciprocate support and express gratitude (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Small things build connections and culture, and culture does not change because of one big thing but because of many small things (Alder, 2015).

8.2.3 Letting Go

If I have done my job right, athletes will be independent and resilient and no longer need me. As the athlete matures and/or transitions into new environments or exits, successful or otherwise, the nature of the relationship changes or ends. The hardest part of the job can be accepting success. Here I am aware of contradicting myself; I do not want them to refer to me as their Mum, but in this context, I am behaving like one. During the emerging athlete transition, some athletes excel; success brings with it feelings of pride and excitement. However, at other times there are feelings of disappointment and/or sadness when athletes make decisions that contribute to their failure, or they give it everything but fall short. In either instance, the job is not simply to promote autonomy but to ensure they know when and how to seek support when needed.

Given the meaning I attribute to my role is a *desire for connection*, letting go was accompanied by a period of questioning the authenticity of the relationship, of asking whether I had made a difference, and natural feelings of sadness or loss. This sadness is akin to a period of grief, reflecting the relationship meant something to me. To remain emotionally *unattached* would require a transactional approach, one which would be inauthentic or would fail to satisfy the meaning I give to my connection with others. For me personally, the testament to a connected relationship is the value it holds after 'the end'. Durable and connected relationships, built on foundations beyond the sporting context, make a difference. Later, the small differences and contributions may surface, but uncomfortably the period between influence and demonstrable outcomes can span a long time. Recent visits from returning off-season Australian- and US-based athletes reminded me that connection can be enduring and meaningful for both sides of the dyad. Psych agrees:

He had a real tough family background ... when he came back, he was quite a different young man, ... I saw him at a function, and he came over to me and gave me a hug and told me how nice it was to see me there. And I say, "Hey, awesome to see you too." I think, then you know, it's almost like you made *a little difference*. (Psych)

When letting go, authentic practitioners must reflect on how and where our involvement was valuable, where our approach could have been better, whether we did enough or too much and whether the relationship led to facilitative athletic and personal development (Tod et al., 2019). Evaluation of the relationship is important so we can do better next time but, correspondingly, we should also reflect on whether the experience was valuable to our own lives.

8.2.4 Meaning, Reward and Recognition

Recruitment staff in the rugby league study reflected on being part of a system that was "changing lives", "building lifestyles", and "providing networks and jobs". Even in the lower divisional contracts, players can benefit from a career in rugby league. RL-Manager1 expressed the view it is worthwhile "as long as they are successful, you know, as long as they get an education or end up better people". RL-Manager2 spoke of the pleasure he felt when meeting players who may not have 'made it' but spoke of having "got something out of [rugby league] in life".

As a practitioner, there is an expectation that in serving others, we set aside our own needs and desires, and our rewards "will come in heaven" or through the satisfaction of knowing we have some small part to play in a player's success. This expectation is true; I feel some fulfilment when players speak of knowing I "believed in them" or "had their back when they

needed it". Like Psych, RL-Trainer and RL-Manager1, I also find myself saying, "I think I made a little difference". Yet, the expression "little difference" also suggests a guardedness about recognising even in ourselves the need to feel a contribution to another's success, the need to feel valued. It recognises that our time and effort have some purpose and meaning. When I read Feeney and Collins (2015), I had a eureka moment because it gave practitioners permission to say it was OK to want recognition and mutual benefit. Sartre would also say that by denying my own needs, I was already acting in bad faith, playing a service role instead of building a genuine, authentic human connection.

However, making a small difference did not always fulfil my *desire to prove myself* and to be recognised by others as someone with the knowledge and capability to improve the developmental outcomes of the athletes I work with. Equally, organic interactions sometimes fell short of a deep feeling of connection or *feeling part of something*, especially when I sat outside the inner circle. I struggled to find the meaning and recognition I sought when I felt like an outsider, as in my Case 1 boxing story. I realise I value being part of the inner circle, connected to a team. It appears I am not alone; Psych summed it up as follows: "When you're involved in the journey from inside the performance environment, it is a real privilege; I get quite excited about just being around and being available for them."

Attraction to Athletes' Success: The *desire to be part of something* when choosing to 'be-a-practitioner' with emerging athletes can get confused with the desire to be of significance, to be associated with a successful and high-performance athlete. Seeing an athlete you work with running onto the field in a prestigious team, you naturally feel a sense of excitement and pride for them and yourself. You are tempted to and sometimes do post events on social media as if you have ownership or at least part-ownership of their success. When I asked Boxer-B about this, he replied, "Just the way it is – it doesn't bother me." For me, it has never sat comfortably, and when I do post, it is only the celebrations, and I am careful about how I position the media. In truth, if being an independent practitioner is a committed career role, I cannot afford to be entirely altruistic; I must earn a living. Aside from the fulfilment of proving oneself as contributing to success, a successful athlete has a high profile, which can offer more opportunities. Furthermore, there are advantages in using athlete success as an advertisement for future opportunities.

The dilemma is similar when I engage with a client with expectations of future success. For example, when Player-G approached me to help with his transition from rugby league to boxing, I was excited about the opportunity to lead the campaign with an exciting prospect. This athlete had the talent, the physical attributes and the potential to be a champion boxer. We agreed on specific training and playing commitments with his boxing coach while in camp. In

return, I would arrange a bout for him. I cancelled the fight when he broke a pivotal agreement we had made. My fieldnotes recorded my thoughts and feelings at the time: “He is a man now, and he needs to take responsibility for his decisions. I am not wasting my time, money or risking my reputation.” Equally important was my integrity; I refuse to support boxers who want to “play the sport; boxing is not a game.” In my notes, I continued: “I feel proud and secure in my decision, but deflated, disappointed and frustrated to have to give up this opportunity.” I had desperately wanted to prove I could ‘produce’ a successful athlete and be part of something big.

In these instances, as coaches and practitioners, we can find ourselves acting in bad faith. Either we mask our true feelings and remain publicly anonymous, or we promote the relationship, however slim our contribution, claiming their successes as our own. Regardless, we must be transparent in acknowledging our truthful intentions to be authentic. Equally, we are entitled to want relationships to be mutually invested and respectful and for the recipients to be reciprocally supportive and receptive to our efforts (Feeney & Collins, 2015).

Gratitude Two Ways: As Feeney and Collins (2015) explained, a social support relationship requires the supplier to feel their efforts are not being abused, and this can be as simple as an expression of gratitude or a feeling of validation. BB-Manager1 expressed his need to feel appreciated, referring to his high-school coaching role and his advising of players and parents on US collegiate pathways and systems:

I’m choosing to give up my time to be there for the athlete, and I get something out of these connections. I think that’s the rewarding part. But when I feel like the family or the player isn’t grateful, or when they expect it [take it for granted], when they’re thankful, and they’re grateful, fine. But as soon as it feels like they expect me to do that for them because that’s what you did for that person. Can’t do it. And so, therefore, what I guess I’m saying is that I want to be thanked. (BB-Manager1)

I was significantly out of pocket financially over the last few years, practising and researching in the emerging athlete domain. Do I have any regrets? Categorically, no, I have loved what I have done, but the question remains – Can I afford to continue? I found and continue to see the relationships built with the athletes and their families as rewarding and enjoyable, and I am grateful for these experiences. “If you truly love who you are working with, mentoring shifts into a true friendship” (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019, p. 150).

Shared affection (love), bond, and “to feel an authentic connection with others knowing we both benefit” are central to the purpose I give to my ‘role’ and legitimise my investment (particularly when I am the one buying lunch). My ability as an older Palagi woman to blend in with Pasifika rugby league families often surprised me. Connection (Vā) and family are foundational for Pasifika athletes, and I truly feel part of this community. It is important to emphasise here that, to remain authentic, I do not attempt to assimilate into their culture or

language – I will and can only be myself. They seem happy with this, as many have said that “I think you are brown on the inside”. The same could not always be said for some of my organisational relationships, as is attested in my boxing and rugby league experiences to date.

The following themes extend my experiences to include other practitioners’ perspectives and examine these relationships in relation to organisational boundaries and collaborative environments. In doing so, there is an expectation that “people will be most likely to thrive when they are embedded in a network of responsive relationships” (Feeney & Collins, 2015, p. 121) – different individuals bringing different identities, meanings, knowledge, skillsets and approaches. Even as practitioners, we must look to our own existential freedom. Having chosen to engage in these roles and relationships, we must first look within ourselves to find our sense of fulfilment and recognition.

8.3 Being-A-Practitioner

This theme describes practitioners’ roles, responsibilities and characteristics in providing service through social support to emerging athletes under the sub-themes ‘*Practitioner Roles*’ and ‘*Wellbeing Roles in the NRL*’.

8.3.1 Practitioner Roles

Psych has a post-graduate degree in psychology and practices as an organisational psychologist and a sports psychologist contracting with sports organisations and individual clients. She attributes the importance of both career capacities to developing her approach of engaging with emerging athletes to cope with stress and performance in pressured environments.

Mental skills are really broad. Usually, I say to the athletes I work with, anything that impacts upon your ability to give it your best may fall into the mental skills bracket – the number of times I’m talking about sleep or relationships, study. *Anything that intrudes on the person’s ability to focus, make good decisions, be confident and cope under pressure* (Psych, italics added for emphasis).

Psych’s mental (also referred to as psycho-social) skills definition above reflects my practitioner engagement. Expanding these skills to the five wellbeing components, I would add nutrition, injuries, and managing excitement and disappointment around selections to her examples. That is, the work involves bringing together the resources required to adapt to the transitional pressures experienced as an emerging athlete in and beyond life in sport, including both athletic and personal development.

Coach is an independent athletic trainer supporting athlete development, mainly focused on load, physical dynamics, strength and conditioning. Coach said of the foundation of his relationships and responsibilities with his clients, “I’m not here to be your friend. I am your coach first ... it’s very blunt, very simple” for me. He demands those in the squad take responsibility for themselves but fully commit to the process and others around them. Inside a team environment, open, critical and honest expression must be enabled between players and staff, and between staff, to achieve peak athletic development and performance. Here, he stressed:

When players are allowed to be who they want to be in and outside of training and games, they’re going to thrive. (Independent-Trainer)

But he also recognised a need for truth and responsibility:

If we can’t be honest with you, how are you going to get better? ... But then you got to go and look in the mirror and figure it out yourself because I’m only here to help you. (Independent-Trainer)

Independent-Trainer thrives on developing programmes designed to achieve individual athletic development. Yet, emerging athlete team environments generally do not allow for the specificity of training to meet individual needs. Training athletes outside of the sporting organisation they represent, Independent-Trainer described a conversation he experienced with an athlete’s team coach:

How about you give me your loading information for the week? So, I know not to overdo it with them. Or how about I do certain things I know you’re not doing? So, we’re not doubling up? Yeah. Let’s work together. Because our job ultimately is the players? It’s not about you and me. So, put your ego aside. (Independent-Trainer)

BB-TRAINER offered a similar perspective, reflecting on the need to match the physical and mental components of athlete development:

You can watch a clip of players playing on film and different things like that, when that’s all [technical or quantitative data] you focus on, and you don’t actually sit down with your athlete every now and then. That’s a real strong view for me because I’ve been a personal trainer and that’s something I’ve really had to learn to do. Even wellness data, they just punch in the number five out of 10 for mood, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it was five out of 10 you don’t know if you haven’t actually talked to them (BB-Trainer).

Mental and personal development responsibilities in organisational environments, such as TDEs, often fall to coaches, other staff, or Physiotherapists. Independent-Trainer talked about the broader aspects of his role as a strength and conditioning trainer (S&C) in an NRL pathways environment:

I’m doing the S&C side, and wellbeing is quite important; I am not as well equipped there. I don’t really want to stuff that up. If I don’t know, I go, “I’ll find the right person to help

you.” Any the issues to do with, like, outside the field, what is happening in the background, their home life, family things and that sort of stuff ... I don’t know what they’re doing when they leave the field [that all affects their performance]. (Independent-Trainer)

Welfare on the Physiotherapy table is a common adage. When on the Physiotherapy table, “Guys are relaxed, they talk ... I listen, and they talk ... whether this helps them [shrugs shoulders], the guys say it does” (Morris et al., 2016, p. 384). Although this suggests welfare is (and often it can be) unrelated to treatment, this connection also supports injury rehabilitation and return to ‘field’ confidence and timing. RL-Physio explained, “You are better off knowing the athlete than the injury ... different personalities and how they see their own injuries or their own competencies.”

Rightfully, Wellbeing-Manager raised concerns when inexperienced sources of support are dealing with some issues, particularly at-risk athletes. Psych agrees, stressing the importance of being very conscious of one’s scope of competence:

There’s a large propensity for athletes who are quite vulnerable in their own way. So there probably needs to be a bit more rigour in terms of ethics, confidentiality, informed consent, as well as the worst-case scenario around mental health in this space. (Psych)

Recognising the difference between mentoring and social support versus psychological treatment and counselling capabilities is crucial. Knowing when and how to refer or escalate is essential (Wadsworth et al., 2020), as in Player-F’s case. This risk places a duty of care on organisations to ensure cross-functional training and referral systems are in place to support athletes and practitioners, including explicit statements of where and when private information can and should be shared.

8.3.2 Well-Being Roles in the NRL

Wellbeing-Manager (Case 2) has held this mandated position in several NRL clubs across the Tasman. She explained that the certification, training, and experience in mental practitioner skills of those tasked with well-being support are variable. The role Wellbeing-Manager fills in an NRL club requires a meeting (one to two hours) with the athlete at the start of the season to complete a wellbeing plan and then checking in with them a couple of times. It centres on mandatory education and work-related matters and workshops. “So, it was kind of a lot of ticking boxes,” she stated. In addition to educational and vocational requirements, the NRL regulates (NRL, n.d.-c) the content and delivery of workshops dedicated to player behaviours and code of conduct (Wellbeing-Manager). RL-Manager2 argued there is a place for workshops as they introduce the issues and conversations; it is up to the coaches to follow up on these openings. However, Wellbeing-Manager and RL-Manager1 expressed their frustration that the

well-being role is too focused on dual career and curriculum rather than personal, individualised development.

The NRL mandate for development players who have left school is for athletes to be in education or part-time employment (dual career) to play SG-Ball and/or Flegg. Fulfilling this requirement (refer to Player-A's story) can be too demanding for young male athletes. It can also be equally frustrating for the well-being managers:

Education and employment can take a lot of time away from the wellbeing role, it takes them away from the personal stuff ... She'll do his homework to find work, network to find local employers. And then two things happen, a lot of the jobs won't work out because the kids will just be lazy, or they'll quit after one day because it's too hard. And then the employer rings up grumpy. (RL-Manager1)

Participants agreed there is a clear need for better support for emerging young athletes' transition into professional sports environments with organisational priority given to senior players or the implementation of the "no study – no work – no play" rule (NRL, n.d.-c). Emerging player personal development, including preparing them and supporting them for and/or through migrations, injuries, and selection events, appears to be lacking:

Ideally, if we could establish the right conversations, teaching them different skills, even about being comfortable being vulnerable. Like at 16, 17, 18, we can embed it in their DNA [for life in and beyond sport]. (Wellbeing-Manager)

Furthermore, the restrictions placed on the practitioners suggest they find the role unrewarding and transactional through no fault of their own. For instance, Wellbeing-Manager finds more authentic meaning to fulfilling her role as a mix of a "counsellor-type support person", providing "mana-enhancing support". It is not a role that happens from nine to five or in a designated meeting agenda. Wellbeing-Manager went on to express the pressure and her fears of not fulfilling individual needs adequately, especially for those that may be 'at risk'.

I want to be out there at the training sessions; I want to get in, I want to go meet players, I want to, you know, build profiles on them, I want to go chat with them, I want to be seen, wanting them to know who I am, you know, so they are comfortable and come to me when they have issues going on. (Wellbeing-Manager)

When the practitioner feels unable to fulfil an authentic service, they are left enacting their role in bad faith, regardless of the best intentions, as seen in Wellbeing-Manager's case. These findings augment academic studies published on designated development or welfare roles. Player development managers (PDMs), player welfare managers (PWMs), and engagement managers highlight the PDM as a "jack of all trades", with some PDMs feeling the role held a "tokenistic" position in their organisations (Stansen & Chambers, 2019). Others outlined the significant additional hours that they put into the role outside of their contract and

the difficulties when faced with a lack of recognition of the need for the role by the coach. “At the end of the day, the coach, he’s the one that almost makes or breaks you ... the coach is the top person ... if he says yes, it happens if he says, no, it doesn’t – PDM8” (Stansen & Chambers, 2019, p. 161).

Like Lewis et al. (2018), I learnt many (but not all) of the PWMs in this research were ex-players, and all have been around rugby league in some capacity for many years. Participants raised concerns over whether this was the right fit; understanding the game and athlete pressure has some benefits. However, conversely, this raised concerns about the risk this holds on restricting independence, mainly when PWM staff and coaches are both former players. I, amongst others, felt there were advantages to wellbeing managers having diverse life experiences and perspectives in this role. Additionally, there is the potential for unresolved subconscious conditioning, where ex-athletes holding these positions may still be grappling with their own crises around career endings and failings. Incumbents desperately desiring to remain in the sport and striving to prove themselves beyond the requirements of their role may not be the best fit for today’s youth. In Wellbeing-Manager’s experience and words:

A lot of coaches and staff in the wellbeing space are former players; it’s like, I am an ex-player, and, in my day, we just *fucking sucked* it up. Egos comes into play. (Wellbeing-Manager)

8.4 Right Person, Right Place, Right Time

This theme examines the social support needs of emerging athletes, recognising age and context, with sub-themes including:

- *Presence Matters,*
- *It’s a Team Sport and Inside out*
- *Outside the Organisational Environment.*

You gotta have the right people, *not just the right people* – people with the *right* knowledge ... people that understand ... you have a lot of Islanders in [the organisation], so you have to have someone that understands that you got to have the right balance of [performance and cultural requirements of family and faith]. (Player-G)

My analysis confirms practitioner support must be person-, age-, culture- and event-specific. Emerging athletes are not adults; thus, we must remember adolescents’ bodies, minds, and beliefs are still evolving. At the same time, they are looking for increasing self-sufficiency and independence (Arnett, 2000). Athlete support must be robust, multi-faceted, and often more tangible for emerging athletes transitioning into professional environments (Marsters et al., 2020; Sabato et al., 2016).

You need to remember that some of these kids are 15, 16, 17 and they need you to provide support structures around them to excel or to achieve so you can't expect the 17-year-old to do it all on their own. (RL-Physio)

As RL-Physio stated, where an adult athlete *may* be capable of going to specialist appointments alone or adhering to rehab independently, adolescent athletes need a more hands-on support and supervision. I would extend RL-Physio's age bracket to 18-22, with the implications of adolescent development coinciding with other life transitions, such as leaving school, compounding the pressures of *being-an-athlete*. Tangible support applies to other areas, such as handholding around appointments, advocating with family and stakeholders, helping them sit their driver's licence or even how to eat in a restaurant. Most critically, though, is supporting the development of their communication skills. Furthermore, "Not all kids have the resources [including finances] and equipment ... Some are taken to trainings, they're doing it together as a family" (RL-Trainer – Case 2). In contrast, others have little family support, or the family is struggling too.

Parents are dealing with a teenage boy becoming increasingly independent and stretching the boundaries. Parents are transitioning too. The challenge for parents is to adapt their involvement to the progression of their son's careers (Collins & MacNamara, 2022). Often, their sons are moving into environments and opportunities they have no knowledge or experience in dealing with. This was regularly found with the Pasifika families in the rugby league case; when presented with (multiple) offers and contracts, families were ill-informed, unprepared, or incapable of comprehending and negotiating (Champions-of-the-Pacific, 2021). They shy away from the hard conversations, saying no, or demanding better development and support when committing their sons to agents and organisations. Having an independent source of support is beneficial for emerging athlete families, to whom they can ask questions without judgement or knowing there is someone with a holistic and independent view of their son's needs. At the early stages of an athlete's career, I have found independent mentoring and consulting are more critical to the athlete and their parents than an agent or contract.

These findings propose that who the support is sourced from is very individual, and one size does not fit all. Athletes and parents expressed value in having someone "who isn't a coach, who isn't a manager, who isn't a parent, who isn't in athlete welfare education ... someone outside of sport who they can talk to" (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019, p. 149). However, contrary to Sandardos and Chambers' (2019) suggestion that someone outside the sport is beneficial, some participants in the case studies reported in this thesis felt understanding the pressures and requirements of high-performance sport was an advantage. In more vulnerable environments, I found participants expressed greater concern for separating performance discussions and decisions from private and welfare conversations (Rothwell et al., 2020;

Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). In Cases 2 and 3, athletes expressed the importance of independence and trust in their willingness to share concerns or open up to coaches or staff, particularly when their performance is judged and may compromise their careers. Wellbeing-Manager described a situation where players and staff from a previous club she worked at felt unsafe and approached her for support and advice:

I had a lot of people contact me towards the end of the season last year, staff and players, about how unhappy they were, with how things were going and some of the poor, you know, leadership. And I was like, well, who can you talk to within your crew? And they were like, I don't know who to trust. I think I can tell him, but he's quite close with coach. (Wellbeing-Manager)

"A lot of the times, players don't want to take it any further; they don't want the coach to know about it. They just want someone to know how they are feeling" (Baller-to-Exec); someone to vent to or to talk to (Kola-Palmer et al., 2019).

Social support and personal development sources differed across functions (coaching, counselling, companionship or consulting). Each source must be knowledgeable and appropriately qualified to supply technical, informational and tangible support for specialist coaching and consulting. However, for emotional and esteem support, the source is often immaterial when the supplier represents qualities of "caring", "trustworthiness", "being available when called on", "understanding", "having faith in me", "being reliable", "encouraging", "being easy to talk to", "being a shoulder to lean on", words expressed by participants across the cases. Player-A demonstrated this, telling of an administrative staff member at his NRL club who he values:

There is a lady here; she's like, the heart of the club. She just makes sure all the boys are like feeling at ease, she just makes sure that boys are comfortable, the way she speaks to us like, her actions too like, she'll give us hugs and stuff. She just helps out a lot she's like the mother of the club, the heart of the club. She checks up on everyone. I mean, everyone, players, to staff, to Physios. Like she's just, she's all about making sure everyone's okay, everyone's fine. And then just making the environment more happy, more enjoyable for everyone. (Player-A)

These quotes speak to availability, trust and familiarity and align to 'organic' interactions around tangible activities (e.g., during training, on the Physio table) and in familiar settings (e.g., during training in the gym, in the corridor waiting for an appointment, in a café over lunch, on the Physio table (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). Athletes regularly open up on issues and concerns to potentially unqualified personnel. In these instances, these are the right people in the right place at the right time. Athletes are most likely to approach someone they trust and have a rapport with (Wadsworth et al., 2020), someone physically available and reliable with whom they connect. As explained:

I love that I can linger with intent around the gym, around the rooms, and it's when people feel able to ask, hey, can I have a chat? And that's where I think I make the most difference. The workshops are great, they give that broad brush information, but it's the one-on-ones where I feel I have the most influence because you get that rapport, and you get that connection, you are a part of it. (Psych)

8.4.1 Presence Matters

Presence matters – presence is not 'just someone who is there' but people with 'generous intention' who are caring, available, reliable and *aware* of what is happening. All the case studies concur presence is crucial in the emerging athlete cohort, where a need is more likely recognised and offered by the practitioner rather than solicited by the young man who is reluctant to seek help. Adolescent males, particularly Pasifika, will not naturally seek support and will avoid people rather than face an awkward conversation (Marsters et al., 2021).

It is not easy to build a connection to get them to tell the truth when they are scared, sad, ashamed, or have feelings that accompany having messed up, being injured, or being released. It takes trust, time and generous intention and "You have to be around them long enough for them to trust you and to read them, know when to go hard and when to go soft" (Reflective interview). As the "*What About Me?*" theme emphasised, the practitioner must be intuitive and generous enough to spend time prompting, checking and staying in contact, regardless of the response and long after the relationship ends. Presence must remain, even if only in a virtual sense, long after athletes move into other environments and the practitioner is not there to see events unfold. Without 'presence', the intuitive moments and the more awkward conversations are less likely to happen (Tod et al., 2019).

8.4.2 It's a Team Sport

This sub-theme commences with two stories, providing examples of where holistic support was critical for two athletes, followed by the benefits of a collaborative culture.

Wellbeing is the duty of care of the whole pathways team – so you need a team of people, where everyone cares ... so you can't just hire people for the sake of the job, you got to find right people. (RL-Manager1)

Story 1: Before relocating clubs and cities, the athlete, off-contract but with viable options, returned to NZ for a period which coincided with Covid-19 events. He was physically well prepared on departure overseas, initially excelling at trials. However, after a period, it became evident he was struggling in his residential environment and not coping well. He felt isolated from his previous team-mates and family, and uncomfortable in his new environments (team and residential); consequently, he became anxious (fieldnotes). Having been involved

with his preparation, I began recognising some warning signs. However, given both distance and having no formalised position, I could only urge the athlete to communicate and explain my concerns to a colleague local to him and guide him in supporting the athlete's situation. Like Wadsworth et al. (2020), we found the support provided by the organisational parties lacking, with responses which appeared too "textbook" and impersonal. The right escalation paths were followed, but early recognition and the speed of response were too prolonged.

Story 2: This story draws upon interviews with the RL-Manager1. Withdrawal is not an uncommon transition outcome for emerging athletes when pressure mounts and events inside and outside the sporting environment occur. The ability to identify triggers and ensure that the right decisions are made for the right reasons by the young athlete eludes them. Having a structure and staff in tune with the developmental and cultural needs of the *individual* is crucial.

He's just trying to cope, he's moved, everything was going well, but, you know, he's upset he's been moved out of position, had a bit of a standoff with the coach at training, this triggered him to start thinking, you know feeling a bit down, and wanting to go home. (RL-Manager1)

RL-Manager1's story also stressed the importance of clearly articulating to the player the club's expectations and plan for his transition, for example, his need to be adaptable regarding his playing position, and understanding his welfare needs as an Indigenous athlete outside of his comfort zone. This scenario required input and support from the PWM, the coach, and the RL-Manager1. In this example, the player was uncomfortable and unable to adapt to being away from home in a competitive environment (Williams et al., 2022), and in this instance a very talented player withdrew. Regardless of age or contracts, withdrawal is primarily the choice and responsibility of the player concerned. RL-Manager1 also described the agent's (selfish) pressures and expectations placed on the club and the individual involved to keep the player in the system. Here we see evidence of when 'having-a-talent' represented more meaning to those wanting to convert and leverage that talent than to the individual (Aggerholm, 2015). The responsibility of the organisation is to provide a safe environment for them to navigate the right decision.

Collaborative Culture: Creating an integrated environment valuing practitioner input requires an openness to share, value, trust, and respect the knowledge, skills and qualities different individuals bring. The above discussion shows that it is less about vertical roles and more about horizontal support, which includes a range of functions: coaching, companionship, counselling, consultation, and collaboration.

In the ideal environment, you [me] would have as important a role in that team as anyone, and you would all sit around at a table, checking in on the team's status. And you would be asked, "What do you see happening, going on – share that with us," right? (BB-Coach3)

Success in professional sporting organisations, like NRL clubs, is measured by winning teams and commercial dollars. The design of pathways programmes is, first and foremost, to produce a succession of elite players that will achieve this, using a funnelled approach to whittle down players to the few required for the top sides. With jobs on the line, athletic performance and winning are considered paramount. With the size of the talent pool, athletes can become expendable, or staff morally disengaged from their needs beyond their athletic performances. Coaches in pathways programmes, as Wellbeing-Manager expressed, generally want to impress (winning culture) and only consider athlete development and mental skills a requirement to sharpen on-field performance. For example:

Sometimes in sports environments ... if the coach is pro mental skills, then they will integrate it in as something that's important and they may get a provider involved ... a lot of coaches do the mental skills. And that's fine, too, *if* they have the skill set, but I think it can be a bit of a conflict of interest too, which can be frustrating. (Psych)

As Psych touched on, conflict arises when those selecting teams and measuring on-field performance limit themselves to a narrow set of criteria and/or are the same people hold responsibilities for performance and welfare support. Practitioners intimated that personnel with excellent athletic coaching skills may still *not* possess the right capabilities and/or have the time or intention to provide a broader view of athletic and personal development.

Often, staff are time-poor, poorly remunerated, struggling themselves and/or ill-equipped (in terms of knowledge and experience) to deal with athlete (and staff) development encompassing all five components for thriving. Even with the best intentions, processes and decisions can become conflicted (Morris et al., 2016). As such, athletes will inevitably mask vulnerabilities if they feel it risks their position. Overcoming this impasse demands transparency and trust between all parties to create genuinely open and authentic relationships.

8.4.3 *Inside or Outside the Organisational Environment*

Integrating oneself successfully as a practitioner within a professional sporting environment requires strong connections, rapport, reputation, and a performance mindset. Only this will enable practitioners to make a difference and contribute to personal development. As individuals, we have 'situated freedom' to operate in 'good faith' within the boundaries of the organisational systems and culture, as one must 'perform' within cultural norms and expectations to practice inside the organisation. That is, one must fit in, as RL-Trainer explained:

I'm naturally an introvert, quite a quiet person. I can almost come across quite snobby, like people think I am. But I'm not, it is just my personality and stuff. It's just probably the S&C role [requires you to be] totally opposite to that. So I've had to sort of condition myself to sort of be this person ... this conflict within myself to be that character. ... It just took me a while. But now I have found my style or approach. I remember the first year I was really struggling. Yeah. But I'm just I knew I had to, it took me a while, but I found my groove later on and now I can completely be myself then go into that role and come back to being me. (RL-Trainer)

This is a clear example of when an individual plays a role outside of their natural being. To remain in good faith, to be authentic (I: Thou) in a relationship (Buber, 1965), both sides of the dialogical relationship, including person to person and person to environment/organisation, must remain transparent and recognise the needs and humanity of the other to achieve thou: thou authenticity (Buber, 1965; Feeney & Collins, 2015).

Working inside an organisational structure has its benefits; being outside provides apparent independence. As I expressed earlier, being connected or part of something brings me meaning, something the Psych also values. As demonstrated by the following quote:

I think belonging is really important. It's a personal thing. You know, I like being part of something. Being a sole trader having my own business you are not always part of something, you know, I go in and do my work and I come out ... In [name of organisation] I feel very much part of it. It feels like family, and even they would use that term. (Psych)

Insider psycho-social support, particularly that of a psychological and well-being (hedonic and eudemonic) nature, assists in removing the stigma often connected with failure or mental illness. It can prevent or enhance rather than recover, legitimising practitioners' services and support as beneficial to performance. Equally, this is more fulfilling to the practitioner's sense of purpose too, a sentiment also reported in Lewis et al. (2018).

I don't like it when I'm the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff; when someone has an injury, or when someone's suicidal, then they ring me. It is much better when they bring me in as part of the management structure. (Psych)

Operating inside the management structure or within the inner circle, as narrated in Cases 1 and 3, also opens opportunities to build more collaborative relationships, but this demands all parties' willingness to share rewards and responsibilities:

I think you need to keep it inhouse ... everything under one roof ... It's not about who it was but it does have to be in your environment – they have to be watching. (Boxing-Coach)

Here, I and other participants disagree; it needs to be the right person too. The control needs of a coach, as participants across all three cases attest, are high. Perhaps fairly so, as their jobs and livelihood are on the line if the athlete or team fail; but "you need the head coach to build the culture" (Baller-B).

As a practitioner, the biggest challenge to authenticity and good faith is the inevitable need to fit within an organisational structure and work within contracts; it is the contradiction between fitting in, remuneration, independence, confidentiality and/or organisations that operate in good faith. Culturally, trust in a person will only occur when there is trust in the organisational processes and the systems (Keung, 2018).

The ability to remain in good faith is challenged when the organisation pays for the services. This arrangement requires the practitioner to distinguish between their organisational responsibilities and their duty of care to the individual. Contractually, the service provider is bound to report to the organisation on athlete-related performance matters. For example, sporting organisations regularly commission Psych to provide support services working with athletes individually and in groups. Psych stated their role requires sharing sport-related information with the coaches, the academy manager, and other staff as part of the role. The client expects that, and the athlete knows this. If the athlete confides something personal, Psych applies discretion to distinguish between what must remain private or what should be shared under certain more personal situations. I had a similar situation with an athlete preparing for their transition to an Australian NRL club. The NRL club was paying for my services, and I was required to provide progress reports and write a report on transfer. This type of situation requires the practitioner to distinguish between personal matters and performance ones. The same dilemma applies when parents, rather than organisations, pay for the services. A practitioner should always inform parents of safety issues; other conversations are a little greyer, even when the individual is underage.

However, without organisational commitment and/or funding, most athletes (or their families) cannot or will not self-fund. Monetary transactions are even more challenging, as emerging athletes are typically on low incomes and are depending on their families to finance them, and they are often unable or unwilling to prioritise payment for this type of support. The existential dilemma is real: being a practitioner working with emerging athletes is fulfilling but often does not pay the bills. "An overseas athlete contacted me because he was struggling and wanted someone to talk things through; sending an invoice for my time just doesn't sit right" (fieldnotes). The best one can do is to ensure the transactional arrangements are transparent and honest. Then, perhaps, the relationships can still be authentic and reciprocal (Thou: Thou), recognising each other's needs and desires alongside the roles and responsibilities each fills with the organisation (I: Environment) (Buber, 1965; Feeney & Collins, 2015).

These perspectives suggest providing social support resources can enhance performance or, at a minimum, avoid or manage critical event fallout more effectively from the inside. The cross-pollination of knowledge, perceptions, and approaches between staff roles

and capabilities gives a greater potential of anticipating and achieving better athlete events and outcomes. Participants stated: “Players are going to play better when they’re happy, and their lives are positive” (Baller-B) and “You can’t divorce performance from this other stuff” (Psych). As Rongen et al. (2018) argued, positive personal development is imperative and can be achieved in emerging athlete environments without losing the drive for sporting performance. Unfortunately, these findings suggest this support is not yet the norm in NZ programmes:

There’s a lack of genuine care sometimes in the programmes I’m involved in. You know, it’s so hard because it’s such, like I said, high stakes. It’s about winning and competing ... [creating a great culture] it might slow you down because integrating it takes more time. (BB-Coach2)

Recruiting the ‘right people’ who fit within an agreed organisational culture can benefit athletic development and performance and individuals’ personal development. “We know how much the off-field stuff in that mental space enhances on-field performance” (Wellbeing-Manager). When the right people are in the right place, at the right time, and with the right organisational culture, the environment can be healthy and high-performance and benefit all.

8.5 Summary and Case Conclusion

Table 8.2 summarises the themes discussed in this chapter. The first theme tells the case stories of social support relationships from the researcher-practitioner’s experiences in “*What About Me?*” The second theme discussed the roles and responsibilities undertaken by practitioners in the four cases with the addition of Psych and Coach, including the wellbeing role mandated in the NRL. The final theme examines the importance of having the right people in the right place at the right time to support emerging athletes and their families from within or outside organisational boundaries.

As practitioners, we all agree our role is to help athletes succeed in and beyond life in sport, and to provide the link between athlete and personal development and support. Nesti (2006) challenges practitioners to guide athletes in understanding their true selves, facing situations with truth, and enabling them to make informed decisions. Taking responsibility does not guarantee the choice will always be the right course of action, and their sporting aspiration may still die. However, for the emerging athlete, we must continually remind ourselves these are young men transitioning not simply in sport but from adolescence to adulthood (Aggerholm, 2015). Therefore, there is a duty of care to those designated in these roles to guide them in making sense of their emergence in and beyond professional sport. Equally, it is incumbent on the organisation to ensure the development of capable, experienced, resilient personnel and providers who are recognised, rewarded and supported.

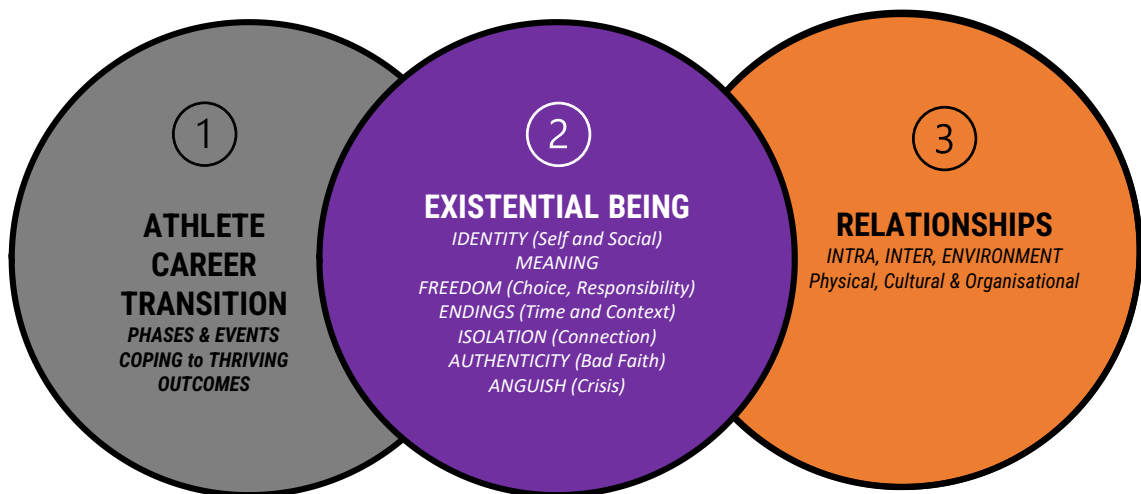
These findings indicated the broader development and support needs of emerging players or personnel were not appropriately positioned or prioritised within organisations. This shortcoming appeared linked to funding and inadequate staff deployment in emerging athlete programmes. Sports heavily invest in well-being initiatives to prepare athletes for life after sport, but the head of the players association, Roger Mortimer, rightly asked, “Who is filling that gap at the youth level?” (Johannsen, 2020, para. 27). Athletes under 18 are legally unable to make contracting decisions; as such, this responsibility falls to their guardians. However, as we saw in Case 2 and Case 3, families are transitioning too. Individuals’ freedom to choose and take responsibility for the outcomes is severely diminished without the right knowledge and environmental experience. Recruitment and availability of the *right* mix of personnel is required to support the athletes *and* their families during their emergence in professional sport.

CHAPTER 9 – CROSS-CASE DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The process for the research design and implementation reported in this chapter is as per Figure 4.2 in Chapter 4. Chapter 9 presents the cross-case analysis across the four cases selected, comparing and contrasting the findings using the athlete transition framework (construct 1, Chapter 2.1) and relationship theory (Construct 3, Chapter 2.3) with the literature examined in Chapter 3. Figure 9.1 presents the translation of cross-case findings into combined themes responding to the three-research questions:

1. What events and challenges do emerging athletes experience during transition in professional sport?
2. How do existential relationships facilitate or hinder the transition of emerging athletes in life in and beyond professional sport?
3. What role can practitioners perform in facilitating emerging athlete coping in life in and beyond professional sport?

Recap: Figure 2.1



Section 9.1 responds to athlete transitions (construct 1), section 9.2 reports on question 2 (construct 3 relationships), and section 9.3 unpacks question 3 regarding facilitation (coping and social support). This is followed by a discussion on the third construct (Figure 2.1, Chapter 2, recap above), the existential perspectives underpinning this thesis. The final section in this chapter presents the research conclusions, with the practical implications and recommendations following in Chapter 10.

Figure 9.1
Mapping of Research Themes to Final Combined Case Themes

CASE 1 - BOXING	Q1	Q2
The Fighting Business		
Open to Pro	✓	
Not Every Prospect gets Promoted	✓	✓
Fight Decisions - Knowledge is Power	✓	✓
Gloves On - Warrior or Entertainer		
The Fighters Mask		✓
"It's a sin to go to a fight when you are not in shape"		✓
Boxing is not a Game		✓
Protect Yourself at All Times		
The Inner Circle		✓
On the Battlefield Together		✓
The Slave Contract		✓
Staying in your Lane		✓
CASE 2 - RUGBY LEAGUE	Q1	Q2
Making It		
The Funnel	✓	
Prospecting	✓	✓
From Identification to Selection	✓	✓
Early Exits	✓	✓
Big Step Up - Big Step Across		
Too Fast - Too Soon	✓	✓
Dealing with Injuries	✓	✓
Teenagers with Talent		✓
Apprenticeship Years		
"It's a Rollercoaster Ride" - Successful transition into NRL	✓	
Patience and Persistence	✓	✓
Broken and Distressed	✓	✓
No Regrets		✓
Significance of family		✓
CASE 3 - BASKETBALL	Q1	Q2
Becoming a Professional Basketball Player		
Being Tall, Being a Baller		✓
From College to Pro and In-Between	✓	✓
Vulnerable Way to Make a Living		✓
US College Pathway		
Deciding on a Collegiate Pathway	✓	✓
Surviving the Freshman Year	✓	✓
Juggling Positions in a Semi-Professional Environment		
Budget Constraints and Part-Timers	✓	✓
Developing the Emerging Players	✓	✓
Being the Coach		✓
You have to Build the Right Culture		✓
CASE 4 - PRACTITIONER	Q3	
What About Me?		
Defining my Role and Identity		✓
Small Things Matter		✓
Letting Go		✓
Meaning, Reward and Recognition		✓
Being a Practitioner		
Practitioner Roles		✓
The Wellbeing Role in the NRL		✓
Right Person, Right Place, Right Time		
Presence Matters		✓
It's a Team Sport		✓
Inside or Outside the Organisation		✓
CROSS-CASE THEMES		
QUESTION 1: Emerging Athletes Career Transitions		
Making it Or Not		
Moving Away		
Professional Sport is a Business		
QUESTION 2: Relationships		
Being an Athlete (Intra)		
Physical Attributes		
Performance Characteristics		
Relationship with Others (Inter)		
Relational Characteristics		
Organisational Relationships		
Team Fraternity		
Practitioner Relationships		
QUESTION 3: Facilitation - Thriving not Surviving		
Coping with Adversity - Early Exits & Setbacks		
Resources for Coping		
Help-Seeking and Social Support		
Facilitating Athletic and Personal Development		
EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVES		
Identity		
Meaning		
Choice and Responsibility		
Authenticity and Connection		

For additional clarity, Table 9.1 summarises the cases and provides a recap of the participant roles and terms used in each case.

Table 9.1
Recap of Participant Roles

Case	Sport	Athletes	Other Personnel	
1	Boxing	Boxer A-C	Organisational	Boxing-Coach, Boxing-Manager, Matchmaker
			Practitioners	RP, Pscyh, Wellbeing-Manager, Independent-Trainer
2	Rugby League	Player A-G	Organisational	RL-Manager(1-2), RL-Agent
			Practitioners	RP, RL-Physio, Wellbeing-Manager, RL-Trainer
3	Basketball	Baller A-J	Organisational	Baller-to-Exec, BB-Coach(1-3), BB-Manager(1-2), BB-Analyst
			Practitioners	RP, BB-Trainer
4	Practitioner	NA	Organisational	NA
			Practitioners	RP, Pscyh, Wellbeing-Manager, Independent-Trainer

Note. NA=Not Applicable, RP=Researcher-Practitioner, RL=Rugby League, BB=Basketball.

9.1 Addressing Question 1: Emerging Athlete Career Transitions

This theme responds to question 1 – what events and challenges do emerging athletes experience when transitioning in professional sport? The theme commences by examining the experiences of emerging athletes across transitional ‘phases’. This is followed by a closer examination of three sub-themes, ‘making it or not’, ‘moving away’ and ‘*professional sport is a business*’. An athlete's ability to cope and adapt to these phases and events will contribute to *making it or not*.

The emerging athlete transition spans from early adolescence into early adulthood. In basketball and rugby league, by early adulthood (21-23 years old), athletes are either in or completing the J2S step, with a successful transition, *or not*, into senior professional careers before the age of 25. At the commencement of their transition, all emerging athletes in Cases 2 and 3 were under the legal age to make their own decisions and still had deeply-rooted parental involvement, extending from practical and logistical requirements to emotional support (Dorsch et al., 2016; Harwood et al., 2019). Athlete parenting is incredibly diverse, particularly when combined with different cultures and professional sports are involved. The young men in this thesis are moving from adolescence to young adulthood, requiring ongoing parental support but needing increased personal autonomy (Arnett, 2000) as they continue to specialise in their sporting careers (Wylleman & Reints, 2010).

Career spans differed in the boxing case, with the emerging period continuing into their late 20s before reaching prospect status. Boxer-C and Boxer-A arriving in the sport at 19 implied, if not overtly, there were concerns over their late entry into the sport, “He’s too old to make it ... I’ll show you” (Boxer-C), with Boxer-A boasting if he started late, he would finish late. Still, “the professional boxer’s business is a very short period of time, your shelf life is limited – and that goes for the boxer and the coach” (Boxing-Manager). Limited time in sport also applies to the two other sports in this study. The end of employment looms over the athlete from the onset as a finite career period significantly shorter than more traditional occupations (Aggerholm, 2015; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). As the rugby league case demonstrated, even though the apprenticeship period is long and hard (especially when identified early), the athletes are impatient to step up and ‘make it’ (Cupples et al., 2018). With this impatience and/or youthful perception of time, these findings illustrate young athletes “often do not know the process, but they do know what’s required” (RL-Manager2). That is, they have sufficient awareness of the athletic responsibilities (commitment and hard work) required to translate opportunities into careers (Hanscomb, 2006; Nesti, 2006); but lack sufficient knowledge of the “business”. As events and participants in Cases 1-3 demonstrate, athletes have freely chosen professional careers, often at an early age. Sadly, for some, their sporting careers end before they even start, an existential truth the young people in the case studies were unaware of, avoided or required greater maturity to accept.

Sports systems across environments have limited resources and opportunities available, which means competition for places from identification to senior contracts is tough (Collins & MacNamara, 2022). Being identified as having talent (Aggerholm, 2015) signifies being validated through the eyes and the opinions of others as being better than one’s peers (Sartre, 1943/2018, 1944/1976). Even in the environment of boxing, an individual sport, I found Boxer-A and Boxer-B both vying for priority in busy gyms, with limited resources and competing demands for the coach’s attention. The harsh reality is that only a tiny percentage of athletes identified as talented are selected. Once selected, they are not guaranteed to continue progressing or sign elite-level professional contracts. Finding limited data available quantifying athlete outcomes from identification, from my insider knowledge of the sports I estimate 95-98% of athletes dropout or are early exits (based on estimates by RL-Manager1 and RL-Manager2).

9.1.1 “Making it Or Not”

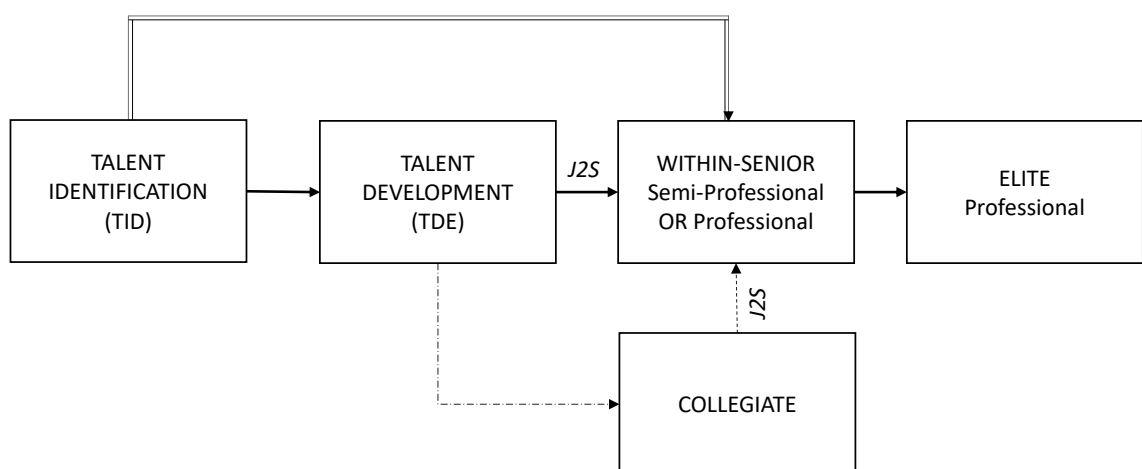
Figure 9.1 represents a simplified view of the transitional phases identified in this emerging pathway. Supplying this ‘emerging’ taxonomy and process, Wylleman and Reints’ (2010) ACD assists in understanding the constituent phases and environments relevant to the

professional sport cases investigated. Rugby league (Case 2) follows a more traditional team-sports pathway, similar to football and ice hockey (solid line). For boxing, the pathway may be via an Olympic TDE (solid line) or directly into a professional gym environment (double line). Finally, the basketball pathway in NZ showed alternative options, which included TID to TDE to within-senior sport or via the collegiate route (dashed line). These findings posit J2S as an event rather than a pathway phase. J2S is a notional step for some athletes and sports, but (as in this NRL case) it can be a lengthy apprenticeship event for others (e.g. Player-A in *It's a Rollercoaster Ride*). Thus, depending on the sport, a transition has various pathway options comprising different phases encompassing multiple events. Phases and events are made up of a series of endings and new beginnings (Bridges, 1986).

As athletes progress from TID through selection into a TDE and beyond, the funnel becomes narrower, and the demands accelerate, with increasing “sacrifice”, commitment, and physical and mental intensity needed to progress (Mills et al., 2014a, 2014b). Participants in all three cases faced complex and compounding events, conflicts, adversities and crises, for example: in Case 1, Boxer-A losing his contract through poor fight decisions and being hampered by visa issues; in Case 2, Player-C dealing with a major injury, Player-F changing clubs mid-TDE; and in Case 3, Baller-C, -D, and -E moving to US colleges. Most commonly, athletes battled with vicious cycles of repeated selection events (Güllich, 2014), with outcomes of non-selection (Baller-J), de-selection (Player-F), moving in and out of starting positions (Player-B and Player-E) or sitting on the bench (Baller-A, -C and -F).

Figure 9.1

Overview of the Emerging Athlete Professional Transition and Pathway Options



Moving into TDE and collegiate environments, players were striving to be seen and fairly treated and selected. The players spoke of a “ruthless” culture where it was “all about winning”, comparing themselves to others and trying to convince themselves they were good enough

because “no one is weaker than you; everyone is good” (Player-A). They moved from environments where they played with friends they had grown up with since they were kids to teammates who were also rivals (Storm et al., 2022). Adolescent athletes talked about still wanting “just to be a kid sometimes” but being asked to “grow up quickly”, behave maturely and make adult decisions to have any chance of *making it* (Jones et al., 2014; Storm et al., 2022). Entering as adolescents, these emerging athletes mature physically and psycho-socially (Wylleman & Reints, 2010) during this period, ultimately becoming more independent, accountable, and ready to stretch their boundaries beyond parental inputs (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021). This growing independence was seen in Cases 2 and 3 as an uncomfortable transition for parents, too, notwithstanding a necessary one for the athlete, especially when it involved moving away from home and going overseas.

Intensity, pressure to perform and fitting in was compounded in the promotion from junior (TDE) to senior environments during the *apprenticeship* period. In rugby league, moving through the junior pathway is a series of steps, as RL-Manager1 explained, “SG-Ball is a big step, it’s another big step up to Flegg and an even bigger step to NRL.” Players added, “It’s a really big jump, intensity wise and hours wise,” “the other players don’t go soft on you,” and athletes can become more isolated realising “the person going to look out for you most is yourself.” In boxing, there is a “big difference between amateur and pro” (Matchmaker) in format, intensity and risk. Athletes across all sports expressed feeling the pressure to impress those around them. For example, Baller-A felt the weight of expectation leaving college and returning to a semi-professional environment at home in NZ. He said “people were curious to see what I had become ... I didn’t really know how to behave.” Player-A, accelerated to NRL at 19, said “I felt pressure ... you want to impress ... just being a newcomer,” and Player-D spoke of senior players making him feel part of the team, but “when they speak, you listen”. Senior environments represented more dynamic and unstable propositions for the athletes as contracts depended on individual performance and impressing coaches and organisational representatives. Baller-B described being a professional athlete as “a vulnerable way to make a living”. The “boss is sitting over your shoulder every day at work, watching your every move” (Baller-to-Exec). Significantly, Player-A’s early J2S contract resulted in an unpredictable cycle of selection and de-selection, demanding patience and persistence through his lengthy apprenticeship period. With pressure from stakeholders to win, or promoters to entertain, contracts and selections to meet these mandates are the selector’s and coach’s priorities. Failure to impress meant failure to progress, regardless of which sport the participants represented (McGlinchey et al., 2022): “If you don’t perform, you’re not getting a contract” (Baller-to-Exec). These findings endorse issues cited in previous literature, including recurring selection processes (Güllich, 2014), and training and competition speed and intensity, with high-performance expectations and critique on a weekly

basis (Bruner et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2015, 2016; Pehrson et al., 2017). From selection to career end, coaches, selectors, and promoters closely monitor their every move. The scenario reminds us of Sartre's famous quote, "hell is other people" (Sartre, 1944/1976), as athletes were exposed to constant criticism and forced to see themselves through the eyes of others.

9.1.2 Moving Away

With no identifiable literature on emerging athlete relocation between Australasian countries or into the US collegiate student-athlete systems, this research extends European football studies on adolescent athlete migrations (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; Storm et al., 2022). In this study, I was exposed to athletes aged 17-19 who left NZ, joining NRL pathways programmes in Australia (across the ditch²⁴) or student-athletes migrating to US high school and collegiate basketball programmes (a long way from home).

Across the Ditch: Depending on the family, organisation, and contract, findings in Case 2 saw rugby league players staying in a club residence flatting situation or hosted by a family (Bruner et al., 2008). Regardless of blood connections, positioning players with a family was not always constructive: "Going into a new family and not knowing them, it's really awkward ... the chemistry is not there" (Player-E), highlighted the importance of real connections. On the field or court, the standards and expectations of performance were high. The coaching and culture were more abrupt and competitive than they were used to, noticeably for Māori and Pasifika youth: "The Kiwi culture, particularly if you are Māori or PI, is to be more humble, but in the US, they see this as a weakness" (Baller-A), and "Australian juniors, they're way more competitive ... like, a lot of the Polynesian boys ... don't want to be yelling at their mates and stuff" (Player-D). As such, this represented cultural challenges for NZ players moving overseas, along with the many demands to adapt to the athletic intensity, new organisational structures, playing styles and different living environments.

A Long Way from Home: For US collegiate basketball participants, student-athlete life also required balancing sport with study requirements, deadlines, and maintaining eligibility to play (Kim & Park, 2020; Rothschild-Checroune et al., 2012). Participants spoke of adapting to American culture, intense coaching styles, and coaching changes (Pate et al., 2011). The decision on which college to attend was a stressful process, with the decision criteria including the division in which the college sat, scholarship offer, compatibility with the coach, and expected playing time/style (Smith & Hardin, 2020). "Junior college isn't for everyone ... picking the right

²⁴ Across the ditch – refers to the move across the Tasman from NZ to Australia

fit for you is more important than the level or name of the school ... it's a good starting point for me" (Baller-C). Attending a lower-division college increased the chances of playing time, which often accompanied pressure to upgrade to a higher-division school after the two-year tenure, as with Baller-C. Like other emerging athlete environments, not "getting minutes" on the court frustrated ballers; for example, a freshman in a leading Div-I college said, "I'll go to someone who really wants me". His father explained, "He needs to learn how to handle things; I can't interfere." High-profile spectator games, NBA presence and commerciality in highly ranked Div-I schools added additional stressors to raw NZ migrant student-athletes. At the other end of the spectrum, Baller-C overcame his initial trepidation of the "gangster culture" in his JUCO team and recruited up to an NCAA Div-II college after his two-year completion. The athletes did not really know what they were walking into until they entered college, as Baller-C's experience attests. Even with prior visits and coach conversations, circumstances change over a four-year college tenure, particularly among coaches (Pate et al., 2011; Smith & Hardin, 2020) and the importance of being organised and well prepared reflected (Kim & Park, 2020). In these findings, with strong mentoring support, the student-athletes (Baller-C, Baller-D, Baller-E, and BB-Manager2's son) were well-prepared and counselled on the decision, logistics and expectations. These factors contribute to transition pre-conditions in the form of prior exposure, preparation and knowledge (readiness).

BB-Analyst reported a significant dropout rate of NZ ballers after the first year, e.g., Baller-A was the only one of eight who finished in his peer group. First year student-athletes often struggling the subjugation of their playing status. Yet, it is in collegiate coaches' interests to support student-athletes as they need the retention of freshman players beyond the first year to ensure team succession (Kim et al., 2016). The most significant reasons for such a high withdrawal rate of kiwi student-athletes included the pressures of meeting eligibility simultaneously with high-intensity training, combined with homesickness "looking at screens of their mates at the beach, having parties" (Baller-to-Exec), "toxic" team environments and frustration with sitting on the bench.

The findings in Cases 2 and 3 demonstrated knowledge, experience, and preparation are strategic in facilitating athlete readiness for migrations. The degree of athlete readiness for relocation was variable on an individual's circumstances, such as whether parents were accompanying them, residential and club/college destinations and distances, family dependency versus independence maturities, domestic capabilities, prior visits, prior connection with others in the team (including the coach), and physical, logistical and psycho-social preparations. For Player-E, it was too soon, feeling forced to be independent before he was ready (Storm et al., 2022). Even for those prepared, the "culture shock", "homesickness", and the step up in

independence and sporting demands were challenging. Student-athlete and rugby league participants alike confessed they struggled with being “homesick”, “lonely”, and “isolated” being away from home, friends and family. Subsequently, some players needed more structure and adult support, and others failed to adapt and returned home (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017). The ability to cope with these emotions, to accept, act (fight or flight) or seek support resulted in varying mental and emotion fitness levels, dependent on the meaning the individual contributed to staying.

Pre-transition visits, research and transition plans, and talking to experienced players, other parents or experts (BB-Manager1) assist athletes and their families in understanding the conditions they are entering and the expectations and pressures they will experience. Club-managed homes or college residential accommodation indicate a helpful buffer for athletes in their initial step away from home. The initial accommodation allowed time to gain independence, with social support (peers, house parents and personnel) in close proximity. Perhaps closer presence enables early identification and action of potential issues. The importance of connections to local people was mentioned by several participants, as providing them with a sense of belonging, feeling part of the community, and a knowledgeable network of people to draw on: “one of my best mates was local” (Baller-A) and “fortunate a local family reached out” (BB-Manager2. For some, migration indicated a better life (Williams et al., 2022), as in Boxer-B’s case, despite being poorly prioritised and hampered by visa issues (Hopkinson, 2022). Finally, several players found becoming independent rewarding and despite initial struggles in having to cook, clean and make their own way, they could adapt and thrive (Bruner et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2014).

9.1.3 “Professional Sport is a Business”

When young men are recruited or selected for coveted sporting positions and endowed with dollars and apparel, it is not surprising egos get bolstered. However, the brutal realities of the business become quickly apparent as expectations and intensities grow, and events and relationships stretch their physical, mental and emotional capabilities. Participants quickly appreciated their performance role: “It’s simple, it’s business. It is your livelihood” (Manager), “You’ve got to have something to be in a team ... from there its business” (Player-G), “the business is real – is all gambling” (Boxer-A). Individual interpretations of being in the business, however, differed. Two of the more knowledgeable and mature rugby league participants (Player-D and -G) despite understanding their business resource role denied feeling like a commodity, reflecting a love for the sport and “representing the club”. However, in the basketball case, the senior interviewees described it as a vulnerable way to make a living, “100%

a commodity” and getting “paid according to what the coach thinks you are worth”. The variation between the two sports is inconclusive; differences likely reflect participant time and context, bound by individual exposures and experiences, and the greater transience across seasonal contracts in the basketball case in semi-professional and professional environments. Individuals must fit into the organisational culture to succeed, enacting stipulated institutional demands (Aggerholm, 2015). In complying, the individual is said to be in a state of *situated freedom* (Sartre, 1943/2018), where acting their role puts them at risk of losing their true self to be accepted within a group (fraternity) or achieve a particular result. When this occurs, Sartre (1943/2018) says the person is acting inauthentically or in bad faith.

The same principles that apply to the athlete also apply to the organisational culture (Henriksen et al., 2010). Organisations comprise not only the physical environment and facilities but a group of individuals acting within those institutional boundaries, where organisational culture comprises artefacts (e.g., branded apparel, traditions), espoused values (what the organisational members say they do), assumptions (reasons for actions) and behaviours (what they actually do). As such, individuals (athletes and personnel) and the organisation operate at various levels and in moments of good or bad faith—these organisational environmental factors influence (positively or negatively) at all stages of the transition process.

The topic of the first sub-theme, ‘*Contracting*’, is summarised by BB-Analyst’s point: “*If it is considered professional, then there are different dynamics at play*”. These dynamics were evident not only with the athletes but in the agents’ ‘whitebaiting’ practices, in coaches’ expectations of “mutual investment”, and in the other personnel involved. In the second sub-theme, I examine the imposing levels of role-playing and organisational bad faith in boxing (“It’s a Dirty Game” in ‘*Getting Promoted*’—the first theme represents the pathway in Rugby League and the second the pathway in Boxing

Contracting: A differentiating factor in this research is in the examination of prospecting and contracting events in professional sports, particularly during the early ACD phases. Recruitment, contracts and the legal and financial implications were limited to side-comments in the broader themed articles (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Pehrson et al., 2017; Rothwell et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2022). For example, Rothwell et al. (2020) referenced insufficient contract offers as a reason for dropout. In this thesis, rugby league athletes and their parents were very aware of talent prospecting by agents and clubs at tournaments. Unlike the mother who was distressed about having a monetary value set on her son (Storm et al., 2022), rugby league parents in Case 2 expressed concerns about their sons ‘not being good enough’ or having missed their chance, with some even moving their adolescent sons (sometimes with the family,

sometimes alone) to Australia to vie for other opportunities. Despite their boys being only 14 or 15, when presented with contracts their parents were scared if they did not sign, they would miss out or be penalised. Equally, I found parents proudly advertising club and agent contracts as a sign they had “made it”. However, in truth, signing ‘agreements’ young merely “took them off the market” and placed them in a stockpile to protect the benefactors’ interests in hoping to ensure their rights to one extra-special talent over their counterparts. In return for accepting this opportunity cost, the family typically received a nominal financial amount for most, with minimal support and false expectations for many. Furthermore, I found evidence of athletes and/or their families negotiating and signing contracts they were ill-informed about, unprepared for, or incapable of comprehending (Champions-of-the-Pacific, 2021).

For players considered by scouts to be more talented, contracts included full collegiate scholarships in Div-I schools and financial remuneration in TDEs or more lucrative financial packages including, playing fees, education, medical and living-away-from-home allowances, with contract values increasing as players phase move from junior to senior semi-professional and professional environments. The NRL, Australian NBL and NZNBL in Cases 2 and 3 have stipulated regulations and salary caps for senior playing contracts, with agency agreements controlled by the RLPA in rugby league. Surprisingly, junior contracts were not well governed during the data collection period in any of the three sports. The NRL were the only organisation with an established athlete association (RLPA) at the time of writing, but the association was predominantly focussed on senior contracts.

What was common over the three sports cases was how a lack of knowledge and understanding of the business puts emerging players at risk in two ways: firstly, in their understanding of the truth of how talented they are and the realities of their chances of success; secondly in their understanding of how, when and what to contract for. I reported on athletes (and parents) who failed to understand the dyadic nature of relationships and the expectations of and commitments to fulfilling their contract commitments. Previous researchers also finding a deferral of personal responsibility and/or an unreasonable burden placed on the coach and agents to provide services, often with unrealistic expectations of support (Mills et al., 2014a; Morris et al., 2016). As Case 2 participants stated, when contracts are not forthcoming, often the athlete has “failed to do their part” (RL-Physio) and “sometimes the players’ expectations of the manager are wrong. They think they need to do everything for them” (RL-Manager1). Furthermore, the actions of such roles are often unappreciated, “not even a Christmas card” (RL-Agent).

Conversely, as outlined earlier, the percentage of athletes who get signed as talent versus those who ‘make it’ is miniscule. The problem that arises with a ‘whitebaiting’ approach

is it gives young athletes and their families false hope: “players who haven't been told the truth in the past ... think they are better than they are” (BB-Manager2), “blowing smoke up their butt” (Wellbeing-manager). This mirrors players in the study by Rothwell et al. (2020), who spoke of being “sold false dreams” (p. 498). The degree of truth-telling between organisational stakeholders and an athlete will depend on transactional events and contexts and commercial prerequisites. Additionally, I found truth-telling an issue when performance and personal needs do not align. Staff can be conflicted when athletic and personal development sits alongside performance and selection decisions (Morris et al., 2016), and players feel vulnerable about opening up about issues (e.g. hiding injuries).

Organisational truth and transparency were often hedged or manipulated in conversations between agents, recruiters, coaches and athletes. In the rugby league case, Pasifika parents are particularly vulnerable. Participants explained when money is involved in sport, the dynamic shifts and self-interest increases. For example, the coach in the basketball case was hedging to keep players on and recruiting emerging players to make up the roster and save money.

My findings found value in having a reputable agent or manager on board before entering the J2S apprenticeship (entry in Senior environments). Someone who can advise on legal and sporting technicalities, is capable of and trustworthy in sourcing the right opportunities, and can negotiate and protect the athlete's professional and financial well-being. Having an agent is less critical than having an advocate to guide and support the athlete and their families during the identification and selection phases of this transition. The right support network can assist in developing self-efficacy for performance events and relational demands and coping resources for transitional pathway events. Regardless of role or contractual commitments, there is always a duty of care on all parties to be informed in their decisions and to do their due diligence. Trust and transparency are critical, and family “are sometimes not the right people to be involved” (Player-G).

When adolescent emerging athletes are transitioning in the early phases of their careers, the contracting responsibility fall to their guardians. As the athlete matures, the relationship should be between them and the agent, not via a third party. My findings in case 2 showed athletes over 18-years old who did not understand the contents of their contracts and the commitments and opportunities they implied either of the organisational party or themselves. For example, emerging league contracts often have annual education allowances that lapse if athletes do not take them up at the contract year's end. It is, therefore, beneficial that emerging athletes are exposed early to contractual principles, are involved in and

understand the decisions being made for and on their behalf, and that they establish a personal connection with their agent.

Getting Promoted: Case 1 findings summarise the magnitude of boxing as a business. The stakeholders described the difficulties involved in getting to grips with the business: “no one was telling us how to do it,” and you cannot “buy a bag of experience on the way down to the boxing ring.” Boxer-A, who said, “people I trust so much who was leading me ... I thought they knew what they were doing,” realised he did not understand the business he was in (Clark, 2016). To get a professional boxer’s career off the ground requires a slow build-up of fights and self-funding by “using my credit card and fucking spending money on it.” Without an influential promoter, the boxer will not reach championship bouts, and “if a promoter brings you in ... he’s not there to help you out” unless the boxer is in his ‘stable’ and then they will “hedge bets around that boxer winning.” The examination of professional boxing in its specificity to ACD and in its inclusion of a range of cross-stakeholder participants is unique to this study. Wacquant’s (1998) academic work on the ‘flesh peddler’ provides some confirmation on this relationship and process (Matchmaker). While Clark’s (2016) book offers valid comparisons to and confirmations of this case regarding boxers’ need to protect themselves at all times. Participants agreed on the importance of a boxer having the right people around them (the inner circle). The coach: athlete relationship in boxing was seen as more entrenched, “being all in” and juggling between “two relationships”, friendship and business. Crucially, this relationship is critical as the coach and manager must protect the boxers from themselves, to make the right fight decisions, and be in the corner to ensure the boxer’s safety in the ring (Lewandowski, 2020). This intense bond is described as being “on the battlefield together”, sometimes bordering on “co-dependency”.

The boxer needs people who will make the right fight decisions, protect their financial interests and guard their physical and emotional health and safety before, during and after the fight. In this case, blurred lines appeared as stakes rose, and decisions about who was in the inner circle became muddied with power and finances. “When multiple people get involved ... and once emotions get involved ... that's when it becomes complex” ([Boxing]-Manager). Authentic relationships got exposed as the coach’s protection became more controlling, with previously trusted advisors told to “stay in their lane”. While Boxer-B’s career confirms Wacquant’s (1995) findings, in that he was operating inside a gym strongly directed by the nature and style of the head coach, Boxer-A’s story told of an inner circle seemingly disconnected in terms of protection and responsibilities. The costs of having the wrong person or signing the wrong contract was evidenced in Boxer-A’s scenario, where his contract “kept him handicapped” and all he was left to do was to “[control] every emotion because I am

responsible.” In boxing, purse values are at the promoter’s discretion, with negotiations between the matchmaker and the Boxing-Coach for positions on fight cards. “I only got US\$X ... only paid to feed.” In an unguarded moment, Boxer-A stated, “it was a slave contract”, augmenting Hopkinson’s (2022) findings regarding migrant athletes. It is important to note here that he took full responsibility for signing the contract: “It’s a dirty business – but my will is intact.”

In this theme, I summarise how knowledge is power. It is a necessary pre-condition to support coping with a professional career transition and the commercial events (e.g. contracting) within it. In other words, it is imperative athletes (and their families, if underage) take responsibility to arm themselves with the right information and the right social support people who will offer them independent advice and the necessary resources to deal with professional sports demands and expectations. While it is reasonable to expect institutional representatives (e.g., agents, manager, coaches) will resource them with the right knowledge and support, this is not necessarily true. Therefore, emerging athletes must be cognisant of where and how this knowledge and advocacy can be found and not to rush into entering contracts without sufficient due diligence. This theme also addresses the conflict between *situated freedom* and *individual freedom*, “No-one can get in there and fight for you” (Matchmaker). Individuals operate within the constraints of “the business” (organisational cultures). The degree to which they retain “good faith” will be determined by the choices they make and the responsibility they take.

9.2 Addressing Question 2 – Relationships

This second section addresses question 2, exploring the relationships (with self and others) required to transform talent into professional contract opportunities. The section is broken down into two themes. Firstly, the characteristics of *‘Being-an-Athlete (Intra)’* include, physical and performance characteristics. Secondly, *‘Relationship with Others (Inter)’* covers relational characteristics, followed by an analysis of organisational, team, and practitioner roles and interactions. An existential examination of relationships (intra and inter) is further explored in section 9.4.

9.2.1 *Being-an-Athlete (Intra)*

The next sections in this chapter break down *Being-an-Athlete* into *Physical Attributes* and *Performance Characteristics*.

Physical Attributes: Historically, athlete identification and development literature focussed on the physical requirements of being a top athlete (Till et al., 2016). To write about emerging athletes without, albeit brief, reference to these necessary factors would render this discussion incomplete. Findings across the three sports referred to athletes in terms of physical presence, being a “gladiator” or “warrior”, having “strength and speed”, “being explosive”. . Physical size and body mass are constantly referred to, with weight a particular requirement in a weight-restricted sport like boxing. An athletic frame is an essential requirement, or tool of trade, in a professional sports environment, so individual success will depend on them having the required tool for their trade, to be well conditioned (physically fit), to “be lean”, “be big”, “be tall”. These factors were underpinned by an ability to withstand the physical demands of training and competing (to be resilient, tough) and the inevitable niggles and injuries, which was also compatible with findings reported by other researchers (Mitchell et al., 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Yet having the physical attributes does not always translate to knowing how to turn them into performance, as I saw in Baller-I’s case. He needed coaching on “how to be tall” and more aggressive; possessing the physical attributes did not mean he had the toughness, endurance and energy required to become a performance athlete (Aggerholm, 2015). Furthermore, the physical attributes identifying an athlete as “having-a-talent” outside of sport could be a curse – “when someone sees me ... they ask if I play basketball, so if it was ‘No’ ... it would affect me” (Baller-C) – and, in practical matters, buying clothes to fit was an issue.

While other research has explored these demands through critical lenses such as masculinity, this has fallen outside the scope of this study. Adopting an existential viewpoint demands those choosing a professional athlete career accept their physical body are the tools of their trade and, as such, their commitment to developing the required physical attributes to meet the particular sporting performance they are contracted in (Aggerholm, 2015). Yet “you cannot shirk or outrun your ageing body” (Aggerholm, 2015, p.30). Taking such an existential position infers that regardless of physical facticity, an athlete “is nothing other than what he makes of himself” (p.21) through his attitude and commitment (i.e. performance characteristics) to the project.

Performance Characteristics: Athlete Performance characteristics, refer to the individual’s endurance and capacity to develop, train and compete at high-performance levels. In boxing, “being a gladiator” implies being “iron-willed”, “savage”, “dangerous”, and prepared to fight to the end (Wacquant, 1995). Although analogies of entering the battlefield are more overt in boxing, other athletes adopt similar descriptions when they enter the field of play. In rugby league, power and strength in contact, playing through injuries, and pre-game rituals

represent ‘going to war’ alongside their brothers, and include cultural influences from Māori and Pasifika tribal traditions (Alder, 2015). Alder (2015) found organisations instil traditional culture symbols and practices, such as the *Haka*²⁵, as a vehicle to “facilitate people finding meaning and some shared purpose in playing” for the team (p. 98).

To ‘make it’ in professional sports, the athlete must be the best, or at least one of the best. Talent and physical attributes are insufficient without the performance characteristics required to achieve excellence. Athletes and stakeholders alike confirmed Pim’s (2022) performance characteristics as noted in column 1, Table 9.2. These characteristics also synergise with ACD team-sport literature (Jones et al., 2014; Røynesdal et al., 2018). Performance characteristics seen consistently in both this thesis and Pim’s list included, confidence, competitiveness, resilience, strong work ethic, and commitment. Participants recognised *commitment* in several forms, including discipline, dedication, determination and focus, with data from participants in this thesis adding patience, persistence, hunger or determination and coachability to Pim’s criteria.

Table 9.2
Revised Characteristics from Table 2.1

Performance Characteristics	Relational Characteristics	Social Support Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ★ <u>Confident</u> • ★ Competitive <i>Hungry</i> • ★ Disciplined • ★ <u>Resilient</u> • ✓ <i>Patient but Persistent</i> • ★ Hardworking • <u>Committed</u> • ✓ Focussed • ★ <i>Dedicated</i> • ✓ <i>Determined</i> • ★ <i>Coachable</i> • ★ <i>Values teamwork</i> • ✓ <i>Entertaining</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • ✓ Humility • ★ Honest <i>Truthful</i> • ✓ Respectful • ★ Trustworthy • ✓ Caring • ← Values teamwork • ✓ Kind • ★ Fair <i>Consistent</i> • ★ Acts with integrity • ★ <i>Transparent</i> • ✓ <i>Mutually invested</i> • ✓ <i>Shared passion</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ★ Reliable • ★ Available • <u>Generous intention</u> • ✓ Protects self-esteem • ✓ Acknowledges feelings and needs of the other • ✓ Conveys acceptance • ✓ <i>Genuine</i> • ★ Mutual respect • ★ <u>Respects others autonomy (independence/perspectives)</u> • ✓ Grateful • ★ <i>Rapport</i> • ★ <i>Believes in them</i>

Note: Diagrammatic elements from the table: Blue arrows point from 'Confident', 'Resilient', 'Disciplined', 'Committed', and 'Trustworthy' to 'Committed'. Blue arrows point from 'Honest Truthful', 'Values teamwork', 'Kind', 'Fair Consistent', 'Acts with integrity', and 'Transparent' to 'Authentic'. Blue arrows point from 'Generous intention', 'Protects self-esteem', 'Acknowledges feelings and needs of the other', and 'Conveys acceptance' to 'Cares'. Blue arrows point from 'Reliable', 'Available', 'Generous intention', 'Protects self-esteem', 'Acknowledges feelings and needs of the other', and 'Conveys acceptance' to 'Presence'. Blue brackets group 'Patient but Persistent', 'Dedicated', 'Determined', and 'Coachable' under 'Committed'. Blue brackets group 'Mutual respect', 'Respects others autonomy (independence/perspectives)', 'Grateful', and 'Rapport' under 'Cares'. Blue brackets group 'Generous intention', 'Protects self-esteem', 'Acknowledges feelings and needs of the other', and 'Conveys acceptance' under 'Presence'.

Note. Columns 1 and 2 are adapted from Pim (2022) and column 3 from Feeney and Collins (2015). Revisions are based on my study findings with additional characteristics in italics, with ✓ = identified in some cases, and ★ = strongly identified in all cases. Characteristics linked to self-efficacy are circled, arrows and brackets represent linked characteristics, and underlined characteristics are group headings.

²⁵ Māori war dance

The two characteristics most commonly referred to across the three cases were “work ethic” and “confidence”, with confidence interpreted as having a positive thought (cognition) pattern arising from knowing one has the skills and capabilities required to complete a task well (Vealey, 2001). Case findings emphasised confidence as critical to performance: “You are there for a reason, so you just have to have the confidence” (Player-E). Successful performances and selections increase confidence, which is established through repetition and experience in training and competition events (Vealey, 2018). The distinction between confidence as a mindset “I must be confident” and how confidence is achieved was commonly lost on young athletes (RP). However, it was evidenced when described in transactions, such as in Case 1 pre-fight training camps through planned programming – “Every time you hit a step, you knew, you’re closer to your goal” (Boxer-B) – and knowing they had done the work, per Boxer-C by “ticking off the sparring rounds” (Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013). As Boxer-C summarised it: “It is not how big your muscles are, or how fit you are; it’s all about how confident you are when you walk in the ring.”. Confidence is different to self-belief, which I found was instilled in meaning and recruited through others’ emotional support (refer to *‘relationship with others’*).

To be a professional athlete, an individual must be hungry and have a competitive character; to earn a place, they must be better than their peers. Competitiveness (including assertiveness or aggressiveness) was an emotion that athletes were asked (by coaches or the public) to display in some circumstances and put aside in others. While there is an element of putting on a mask and playing a role in all three codes, these dichotomies are most evident in boxing. The significance of role-playing in pre-fight marketing and competition is critical to the successful elevation of an emerging boxer. This role-playing, further complicated by the need to be “savage” and entertaining on demand, means “you tell them to hide [their emotions] and at the same time show them” (Boxing-Manager). To sell tickets, the athlete must not only compete fiercely but ‘put on a show’ and fight courageously in the spectators’ eyes. As Matchmaker stated, “It’s all entertainment, but it’s dangerous entertainment”, see also (Hutchens, 2010; Wacquant, 2011). Without this, the boxer will not secure a promoter. Additionally, the nature of the boxer is to fight: “That’s my excuse to be an absolute dick because I get to beat him up” (Boxer-B). As Hutchens (2010) affirmed, what is revered in the ring under institutionalised regulations is abhorred outside it. Indeed, boxers see themselves as entertainers, but this is juxta positioned with a strength and power, wins are accomplished by them alone, and are they are not required “to share the accolades with teammates who may not equally deserve them” (Wacquant, 1995, p. 515).

9.2.2 *Relationship with Others (Inter)*

Participants referred to being in it together “side-by-side”, “being comfortable”, “really loyal ... real strong culture”, “being mates”, “if you fail, you fail together”, “someone I trust”, “truthful”, “caring” and “transparent”. This sub-theme represents the importance of relationships in sporting environments, including *organisational relationships*, *team fraternity* and *practitioner relationships*.

Relational Characteristics: When comparing my findings to Pim’s relational traits (Column 2, Table 9.2), empathy did not feature in my participants’ vocabulary, nor was it demonstrated in adolescent athletes’ behaviour. Participants observed how teenage boys are typically unaware of the needs of others, until it is pointed out to them. While humility was mentioned, with the Pasifika athletes and their parents, referring to the need to “stay humble”, other participants saw this as a potential weakness, particularly when humility was combined with not speaking up or competing to be the best. Here again, I find being humble was emotion athletes were asked to hide sometimes and display at others.

Respectfulness, trustworthiness, honesty, consistency, and being a person who acts with integrity (does what they say and says what they do) were characteristics recognised as valuable by athletes and stakeholders in each other. Being caring and kind was more commonly mentioned by athletes when referring to coaches and other personnel; being fair, truthful and transparent were more closely related to and strongly regarded by athletes, particularly when referring to staff and to selections and performance. Conversely, coaches require athletes to consistently uphold the above performance criteria (strong work ethic, commitment and coachability). This level of commitment will be relative to the degree of meaning the individual invests in the activity. In the previous section, we referred to an athlete’s commitment to performance. Here, we see a commitment to sporting relationships. Commitment applies to both sides of the dyad; as the boxing coaches highlighted, it requires “mutual investment” and “shared passion”. In analysing all four cases, authenticity was represented as integrity, truth, and transparency. In existential terms, authenticity also implies being free to be true to ourselves. Yet, if we mask feelings and behaviours, are we truly acting authentically or in bad faith or playing a role?

Organisational Relationships: It would be reasonable to expect organisational personnel to act with integrity and be truthful and transparent in their approach. “The player just wants to know, what can I do better” (BB-Manager2), “yet there were times I tried to sugarcoat [instead of being] blunt and telling them” (BB-Coach1). Participants spoke of agents who were “dodgy” (Player-D, Wellbeing-Manager) and coaches as: “a guy to definitely favour”

(Baller-C), “very hard on you, [. . .] they yell a lot” (Player-E), “he’s quite an intimidating figure” (Player-D), “They will drop you just like that ... here is all about winning” (Player-E).

However, findings showed that transparency and truth-telling were often conflicted, hedged and manipulated to accommodate instituted organisational values, behaviours and actions. Contrary to emerging athletic and personal development priorities, organisational representatives are under pressure from stakeholders to prioritise contracts and mandates to win, attract sponsors and entertain. I found staff conflicted when development sits alongside performance and selection decisions; similarly, players felt vulnerable opening-up about issues (e.g., hiding injuries). Participants explained when money is involved in sports, the dynamic shifts and self-interest increases. For example, we saw BB-Coach1 recruiting emerging ballers to save money and stockpiling players waiting for senior athletes to arrive.

The coach-athlete relationship in boxing was witnessed as more entrenched, “being all in” and juggling between “two relationships”, friendship and business. This relationship is critical as the coach and/or manager must protect the boxers from themselves, make the right fight decisions, and be in the ring to ensure their physical safety (Lewandowski, 2020) This intense bond was described as being “on the battlefield together”, “almost like a marriage”, yet at times RP observed it sometimes bordered on “co-dependency” or “subservience”. Boxer-A stated, “I never say no to these people at any time”. Boxer-B’s career confirmed Wacquant’s findings(Wacquant, 1995), operating inside a gym strongly directed by the nature and style of the head coach: “I think you need to keep everything in-house” (Boxing-Coach). Conversely, Boxer-A’s story told of an inner circle seemingly disconnected in terms of protection and responsibilities, while Boxer-C referred to needing a small circle: “I didn’t have a lot of people around me – I didn’t like a lot” just a tight trustworthy team who could be independent and strategic in fight decisions and “to pull me back when I got ahead of myself”. As stakes rose, decisions about who was in the inner circle became muddled with power and finances; with previously trusted advisors told to “stay in their lane” (RP, Matchmaker). Relational authenticity was exposed when the coaches became more controlling: “When multiple people get involved ... and once emotions get involved ... that's when it becomes complex” (Boxing-Manager).

Team Fraternity: While coaches valued a strong team ethic, athletes were sometimes conflicted between teamwork, “brotherhood”, and competitiveness. As such, team-work was moved from the relational to the performance column, recognising the need for the athlete to play a team role in sport, even individual ones (*italics in Table 9.2*). Athletes needed to operate or behave as one fraternity (Aggerholm, 2015), demonstrate commitment, enact selflessness for the team’s betterment, or to secure wins. However, when observed closely, teamwork or cohesion (including among staff) was more tenuous when positions were at stake, or sides were

losing. The 18th man in rugby league is eager to take the field but only plays if a team-mate gets concussed, his best mate plays in the same position, or “sitting on the bench shows you are committed to the group” (BB-Coach-1) versus “feeling like you have been going harder than the ones getting more court time in front of you.” (Baller-to-Executive). The individual must mask their true nature, frustrations and feelings to fill their designated public role (athlete, coach, etc). Here, fraternity contradicts the competitive nature of the individual, who wants to prove themselves better than others for coveted positions, starting sides, winning points and lucrative contracts. In boxing, fraternity differs; when they step into the ring alone, the boxer accomplishes wins alone. They don’t have “to share the accolades with team-mates who may not equally deserve them” (Wacquand, 1995 p. 515). Still, they rely heavily on their corner to “jump in” (Boxing-Coach) and protect them (Lewandowski, 2020).

Practitioner Relationships: Critical factors in facilitative practitioner services included the importance of lingering with intent - being present (available, familiar and reliable), having rapport, trust, and affection for each other, with athletes adding the importance of having “someone who believes in me” (Player-E), “having their back” in good times and bad and investing time and effort towards their successes. Confidence is crucial in the heat of competition and is often grounded in ego. In boxing, ego is a requirement to fight to survive and win (Hutchens, 2010). As I experienced, emotional and often aggressive outbursts occurred pre-fight when the boxers and coaches were most vulnerable. The practitioner’s role demands they set aside their feelings to protect others’ egos. Generally, athletes want someone to vent or talk to (Kola-Palmer et al., 2019): “A lot of the times, players don’t want to take it any further; they don’t want the coach to know about it. They just want someone to know how they are feeling” (Baller-to-Executive). For Player-A, it was the administration lady who would give him a hug and encouragement, whom he described as the “heart of the club”. Both Psych and I concluding, “Small things do make a difference”, sometimes this is as simple as a text message.

The importance of presence in developing and maintaining connections was a common thread in all four case studies. Psych explained relationships develop organically when one can “linger with intent around the gym, around the rooms, and when people feel able to ask, hey, can I have a chat?” That is when she felt she made the most difference. Baller-A emphasised the importance of comfort: “Just being comfortable around campus and comfortable around people” and “comfortable with people and being myself a little more.” Athletes open up to people they know or when distracted by tangible activities (e.g., on the Physio table) or in familiar surroundings (with the trainer in the gym) or relaxed (over lunch in a café) (Morris et al., 2016). Establishing shared meaning and connection requires presence (Nesti, 2006).

Watching athletes compete demonstrated my investment, genuine interest, and pride in their pursuit and personal progress, contributing to a greater connection over time.

Last but certainly not least, practitioners must always be aware of what and how their knowledge and approaches contribute to the recipient (Tod et al., 2019). An existential practitioner approach encourages athletes to choose their own path, accept personal responsibility for their decisions, and face adversity constructively and honestly with a future focus (Nesti, 2006).

9.3 Addressing Question 3: Facilitation - Thriving Not Surviving

The final theme demonstrates how facilitative relationships (intra- and inter-) are not simply premised on coping with athlete career transitions (as not all events are negative, but all are challenging), but on resourcing athletes to thrive in life in and beyond professional sport (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Perhaps question 3 should have asked what resources facilitate more effective emerging athlete coping in and beyond the emerging transition. This theme is split into three sub-themes, *'Coping with Adversity'*, *'Resources for Coping'*, *'Help-Seeking and Social Support'* and *'Facilitating Athletic and Personal Development'*. This section examines the overlap between coping and relationships (intra and inter).

9.3.1 Coping with Adversity: Early Exits and Setbacks

Despite the high probability of failure, there is only limited research dedicated to studying athlete experiences of early exits (McGlinchey et al., 2022; Williams & MacNamara, 2020) and eligibility expiry at the end of collegiate athlete careers (Stokowski et al., 2019). Responses to adversities, setbacks, and/or acceptance of the end were diverse yet painful for all. Some of the case participants fought hard, with "a not-giving-up" attitude; many drifted, while others hid setbacks, avoided the truth, and evaded contact with others, including me. This was often from shame or concern that they had disappointed me or their parents, and in some instances, they were suffering emotional crises. When endings occur, particularly premature or unpredictable ones, anguish is inevitable as the individual grieves the loss of who they believed they were destined to be (Nesti, 2006). My cross-case analysis found consistent responses to career endings, resulting in individual decision-making responses to reject, accept and fight transitional crisis events (Stambulova, 2011). These responses depended on appraised pre-conditions of freedom and meaning, prior exposure and circumstances (normative, anticipated, controllable) and the degree of self-efficacy the athlete possessed.

In two athlete examples, Player-D and Player-G were released at the end of the TDE pathway (at the time, under-20s), both feeling disillusioned and lost. Player-D decided to finish his university studies and enjoy playing domestically. After a period “off the rails”, Player-G pursued an opportunity in Australia. However, given substantial knee injuries and the mismanagement of his recovery, he finally accepted failure. He was still emotional at what could have been but is now pursuing a part-time role as a domestic coach alongside building his own business. During this study, Player-D, having finished his degree, was determined to give it “a crack” to ensure he had no regrets, persevered and fought his way back into a professional NRL Cup side. Similarly, athletes who adapted from being star players at home to sitting on the bench demonstrated a commitment to masking their disappointment and frustration and to keep fighting for their place (Bruner et al., 2010; Swainston et al., 2020).

In Case 1, Boxer-A, having suffered two losses and having his contract terminated, has not accepted his career is over, believing anything he wants will come to him at the right time – and what he wants more than anything is to be a world champion. Where team-sport career endings result from injuries, withdrawal or selection decisions, in an individual sport like boxing, the boxer is not subject to selection decisions and can continue to fight for a living (typically as what is termed a ‘journeyman’) until his physical body decides otherwise. Across my rugby league fieldwork, numerous participants moved into enjoying playing in their domestic competitions and took employment, commonly in trade jobs. In this population, very few had career plans or academic intentions beyond rugby league and needed reminding “not to cheat themselves” (fieldnotes). Given their age, it was more likely that participants’ priorities were on earning some money and enjoying being a young man. The importance here is for continued mentoring to open their eyes to alternative education and career opportunities when they are ready and need it.

Previous researchers have defined the anguish of career endings as ‘athlete identity foreclosure’ (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). However, this study posits crisis outcomes such as career-ending are better described in existential terms (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) that include meaning and endings akin to the death of their dream (Aggerholm, 2015). To these young athletes, the world only has meaning as far as it opens to a potential future, in which their hopes are still committed to “being-a-professional-athlete”, a dream many had held since they were small children (Sartre, 1943/2018). As such, it becomes less about hedging with an alternative career option during the apprenticeship period of their sports career and more about ensuring an opportunity for a broad base of relationships and experiences. Athletes who terminate their sports careers in their late teens or early twenties still have plenty of time and opportunity to pivot. Dual career (combing sport and education) was found to be difficult to manage around

training commitments and were seen to increase the pressure on some athletes in the short term. Therefore, this thesis corroborates other studies calling for more robust personal development during the apprenticeship and genuine post-care after exit (McGlinchey et al., 2022; Williams & MacNamara, 2020).

9.3.2 Resources for Coping

My cross-case findings show successful transitions rely on an athlete's ability to overcome doubts, maintain confidence and work ethic, cope with setbacks, rise to challenges and possess a hunger or commitment to achieve (Collins et al., 2016b; Cupples et al., 2021b; Vealey, 2018). Over recent decades, researchers coveted mental toughness or 'grit' as a quality for elite athletes' competitive performance (Gucciardi, 2017), with agreement among all that mental toughness reflected an "athlete's ability to cope with stress" (Jones et al., 2002, p. 206).

In my analysis of performance and relational traits in Table 9.2, I identified *confidence*, *commitment* and *resiliency* as critical resources for coping with the pressures of navigating emerging athlete events, further recognising the correlation of *meaning* to *commitment*. Combining the three sub-traits (circled in Table 9.2) recognises self-efficacy as a pre-condition for thriving in high-performance environments. Self-efficacy defined as *confidence* in one's abilities and the certainty one can and will make the sacrifices (*commitment*) necessary to do whatever it takes to overcome adversity (*resilience*) and succeed (Bandura, 1997). When I review social support literature, I find self-confidence (Rees & Freeman, 2006), self-efficacy (Dorsch et al., 2016; Nicholls et al., 2010) and resiliency (Collins et al., 2016a) as reported traits contributing to facilitative coping and competitive performance (Rees & Freeman, 2009).

Confidence contributes to transition coping the same way as it contributes to performance. Having done the work and prepared adequately for phases and events, athletes were more confident in their skills, character and ability to adapt and to take the step up or in moving into new environments: "You are there for a reason ... so you just have to have confidence" (Player-E). Conversely, an athlete's confidence gets knocked when they lack comprehension of the environment or situation they are entering: "He thought he was coming into a very different situation" (Player-F), "it was a slave contract" (Boxer-A), "He's upset he was moved out of position", "I wasn't ready to be more independent" (Player-E). Interpreting and resourcing 'weekly selection events' took its toll on the athletes' confidence, underscored by Baller-C describing coming off the bench in the closing minutes: "It kind of just ruins your confidence, it is a bit of a façade" (Baller-C). Nonetheless, coaches measure players' ability and attitude during these events: "Stay committed to the group, stay confident and alert with what's going on ... then you're ready when the opportunity comes" (basketball).

I saw individuals at their most vulnerable when they moved between environments, particularly notable in the J2S phase when apprentice athletes found themselves on a rollercoaster ride of success and setbacks. To thrive, they must feel the fear but enjoy the challenge. Developmentally, findings in adolescent athletes showed self-efficacy increased as independence, exposure to different events, experience in environments, and accountability grew: “No one’s telling me what to do, so it’s helped me improve my life now” (Player-E), “Junior college isn’t for everyone, it’s really tough ... a reality check of where I am” (Baller-C), “I just want to be the best, still do”(Boxer-C). In rugby league, athletes’ self-efficacy and ability to cope (appraise and adapt) increased by understanding the environments and situations they were moving into (a step up in level or a move overseas): “I went into this with my eyes wide open ... as a train-and-trial boy” (Player-D).

When an athlete underpins self-efficacy with a solid meaning for career pursuit, their ability to cope in high-pressure environments is more likely to contribute to successful or at least more positive outcomes (e.g., Player-A, Player-D, Baller-C). Self-efficacy warrants further quantifiable research; the construct arguably resourcing coping capabilities (Nicholls et al., 2010) *and* performance (Lochbaum et al., 2023). Lochbaum et al. found evidence that pre-event self-efficacy has a meaningful impact on sports performance, with higher correlations found in elite sports. This initial examination encourages continued investigation into transition preparation, including developing coping capabilities in emerging athletes, as per the recommendations of Cupples et al. (2021b) and Collins et al. (2016a).

9.3.3 Help-Seeking and Social Support

As was evidenced across these cases, and as other studies found, there is often a reluctance to seek help potentially as a symptom of culture and/or masculine protection and position security (Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Lewis et al., 2018; Stansen & Chambers, 2019). People under pressure will recruit support from trusted resources (Wadsworth et al., 2020). For specific technical, tangible and informational requirements, knowledgeable resources are sought. However, expertise and role are less of a concern for emotional and esteem support. Providing social support is exceptionally demanding when the practitioner becomes an outlet for emotional outbursts, an issue I experienced as a researcher-practitioner when working with boxers and coaches. When under pressure or in the heat of competition, an athlete's ego must be protected for confidence to be maintained. Emotional support and protection are particularly true during pre- and post-fight periods in combat sports. In this respect, these findings support Feeney and Collins (2015) tenet that self-esteem protection is a factor of social support. In other situations, athletes want someone to vent to or talk to (Kola-

Palmer et al., 2019): “A lot of the times, players don't want to take it any further; they don't want the coach to know about it. They just want someone to know how they are feeling” (Ballerto-Exec). As I saw with Player-A (Case 2), it was the administration lady who would give him a hug, someone with a big heart who would check up on everyone. With other athletes, the separation of vulnerable conversations from stakeholders independent of those involved with performance decisions was critical. As such, as these findings confirm, one size does not fit all.

In engaging with emerging athletes, practitioners must remember they are not dealing with adults. RL-Physio summarised several participants' views about dealing with emerging athletes: “We need to remember that some of these kids are 15, 16, 17 ... can't expect a 17-year-old to do it all on their own.” Coaching and counselling adolescents require a much more informational and tangible approach to identifying needs and providing robust, authentic support to athletes through events and crises. Practitioners in Case 4 stressed adolescent males would not seek help or approach someone unless they have spent time with and trust that person (Tod et al., 2019). A lack of willingness to speak up is particularly true of - but not restricted to young Pasifika males (Marsters et al., 2021; Wadsworth et al., 2020). Adult participants agreed one must be around them long enough to be trusted and intuitive enough to know when to prompt, step in, reassure, “just be available, ” and when to let go (respect autonomy and recognise adolescents need to become independent).

Help-seeking literature provides valuable tenets to guide this theme, pointing to a reluctance or lack of capabilities to ‘seek support’. The individual must: firstly, be aware they have a problem (recognise the stressor); secondly, establish the need for support (appraise the situation and requirement); thirdly, be able to identify sources of support (appraise resource availability); and, finally, take facilitative coping action, be willing to ask and open up (seek support (Brown et al., 2023)). Although positioned in the mental health domain, help-seeking is a useful starting point. Expanding help-seeking to support-seeking (institutional and emotional) recognises assistance is sought not only for crises but also in navigating and preparing for positive events and outcomes (e.g., selections, the step up or the move overseas). As such, help-seeking expands social support to include athletic and personal requirements and connects it to organisational stress and social support in sports literature (Arnold et al., 2018).

In analysing the relational and social support characteristics presented in Table 9.2, I summarised inter-relational characteristics (columns 2 and 3) as centred on one fundamental need: to feel a *connection* with others (avoidance of existential loneliness and isolation). Within ‘connection’, I identified two fundamental qualities in facilitative Thou: Thou (Buber, 1965) relationships, *presence* and *authenticity*; where *presence* includes availability, reliability,

generous intention and respect for another's autonomy, and *authenticity* includes transparency, trustworthiness, genuineness and acting with integrity.

These findings also emphasise that parents, staff, and personnel also need social support, which is not the sole domain of the athlete. Practitioners, too, have their own needs for connection, recognition and meaning in fulfilling an athlete support role. As practitioners, we can also be conflicted when financial remuneration (or lack thereof) or organisational boundaries are involved. Offering support with generous intention (genuine, caring, unconditional), respecting each-other's autonomy and perspectives, and being reliably available when called upon mirrors the findings in Feeney and Collins (2015). An authentic support relationship recognises the supplier and the recipient as a dyadic dialogical phenomenon, not a unilateral one, where both sides of the dyad see 'the humanity' in the other (Buber, 1965). I also found a higher potential for achieving 'thou: thou' relationships, regardless of roles, when mutual respect, mutual investment, and gratitude for each other's contribution existed (Feeney & Collins, 2015).

9.3.4 Facilitating Athletic and Personal Development

The concern identified across all cases was the shortfall in personal development and the lack of preparation and support for emerging athletes in anticipatable events and after early exits or setbacks (Hauser et al., 2022; Williams & MacNamara, 2020). While setbacks can assist emerging athletes in developing requisite resources to cope with the inevitable events they will experience as professional athletes (Collins et al., 2016a), this requires a conducive environment to nurture their coping capabilities (Cupples et al., 2021b). Concerningly, in this research, I found very little demonstrable evidence of personal development being delivered alongside athletic development (Hauser et al., 2022). Case 4 concluded, and BB-Coach3 emphasised an ideal environment would be one where different personnel come together with diverse knowledge and skillsets, offering different perspectives on athletic and personal development.

This broader view recognises the need for cross-functional resources to advance companionship, counselling, coaching, consultation and collaboration in and between athletes and staff (Burns et al., 2019). For example, using an integrated team of mixed skillsets and approaches in two of Boxer-As training camps resulted in successful bout outcomes against the odds. Despite this, Coach-Manager terminated the involvement of external personnel, demanding a tight team circle and doing it his way. This situation backs other participants' views of environmental cultures where egos, demarcated roles and "stay in your lane" mentalities existed. Several participants referred to issues where the coaches did not value personal

development, believed they had sufficient skills in this area or felt threatened by others. This included Wellbeing-Manager in Case 4.

Despite the institution of the wellbeing role in NRL clubs, participants expressed frustration with a curriculum-based approach, which led to “box-ticking”. Wellbeing services were limited in time and budget and commonly resourced by past players. Organisations prioritised topside players, and the scant resources remaining to pathways players were applied to meet mandatory “no work – no study – no play” requirements (NRL, n.d.-c). This application frustrated participants who saw huge advantages in supporting emerging players through one-on-one sessions and their presence during training sessions and informal team get-togethers to “establish the right conversations, teach them different skills, [get them] comfortable being vulnerable ... so we can embed it in their DNA” (Wellbeing-Manager). Practitioners argued that providing a more personal and integrated approach can offer better personal development and support-seeking opportunities than group settings and workshops (see also Cupples et al., 2021b). As such, providing resources to develop these skills inside emerging environments, along with available and appropriate practitioner support, is critical to the personal development of these athletes (Hauser et al., 2022; Rongen et al., 2021).

This thesis proposes emerging athlete environments fostering collaborative cultures designed to develop the athlete, and the person will produce thriving athletes *and* success in the sporting arena – arming them with the requisite knowledge, experience and skills to cope in high-pressure situations (Williams & MacNamara, 2020). On exit, the athlete can transfer these qualities and capabilities to life outside of sport. This culture requires supportive individuals (including staff) who genuinely care about each other and engage in a reciprocal relationship of transparency, trust, honesty, respect and genuine care (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Organisations that authentically recognise the need to integrate coaching, companionship, collaboration, counselling and consultation functions (Burns et al., 2019) can achieve athlete and personal development alongside a winning culture. This thesis is conclusive on the importance of “deliberate development organisations”; environments that “concurrently ensure positive impacts and minimise predictable negative outcomes [for emerging athletes] without losing focus on a drive for sporting performance” (Rongen et al., 2018, p. 1).

9.4 Existential Perspectives

This section examines the above themes and responses to the three research questions in context to the existential lens outlined in Chapter 2 and underpinning this thesis. This is

discussed under the following sub-headings: 'identity', 'choice and responsibility', 'meaning' and 'authenticity and connection'.

9.4.1 Identity

Being-a-talent morphs into *being-an-athlete*. These are both identities with a host of characteristics, as described above. These characteristics respond to the question, "Who am I?" but only in the context of an individual's athletic endeavours. Participants in this study were all adolescent or early adult males and this sample is noted as a limitation of my research. Perhaps given these research limitations, I did not evidence any specific marginalization according to gender, but more typically, athletes were limited by their physical size and characteristics. This is not to say that gender narratives did not exist, but that this was outside my research findings.

As such, it is important to acknowledge that there is substantive socio-cultural literature that has focused on athlete identities (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017), including gender and other physical and socially constructed identity factors (Carrington, 2022) and that physical and socio-cultural attributes were highlighted in the findings. The semantics of boxers used to describe the 'fighter's mask' (Woodward, 2004) and the physical appearance and performativity elements of certain bodies, 'being a gladiator', 'savage', 'dangerous', 'going to war', 'being strong' in Cases 1 and 2 and 'being tall' as a basketball player in Case 3. Furthermore, cultural and religious identities (e.g., Boxer-B coming from a Christian background), socioeconomic factors shaping rugby league player identities in case 2 and the influence of Pasifika cultural values and norms. For example, Pasifika athletes' humble disposition compared with perceptions of how this could be positioned as a weakness in the US. Adapting to the events and perceptions around the physical, performative and cultural expectations clearly influenced the athletes' ability to acclimate and accommodate team culture as a requirement to survive, if not thrive (Aggerholm, 2015).

As Leontiev (2013) argued, identity labels are often a linguistic challenge – even words hold different meanings to each of us, and this is particularly so when I look at words such as commitment and integrity. Sartre considered efforts to reduce the complex personality of an adolescent down to a few basic desires as naïve, so to gain some understanding of the person, I must go beyond categorisations to reveal their "transitions, the becoming, the transformations", most of which are carefully masked from us (Sartre, 1943/2018, p. 726). As such, I argue that identity can be isolating when used more as a label or fixed concept. For example, Baller-A spoke explicitly about identity in his interview: "Identity does concern me though ... I feel like I haven't had a set home, and that kind of threw me off ... like my whole identity is just where I am", but in my fieldwork observations and conversations, he often referred to wanting to be comfortable

with others – as such I would interpret this was more of an issue of feeling isolated and disconnected.

Given the scope and intent of this research, I used a broader existential lens. I noted that the “fighter’s mask” and “the need to be a certain way sometimes and not others” reflected in individual bad faith (Hutchens). Given that existential freedom implies athletes are always free to choose whether they enter the ring or the field of play, I argue that it is less about gender and other identity factors and more about whether they are being true to themselves. Physical characteristics are their tools of trade – physical criteria and attitudes cannot be divorced from the project of being a professional athlete. Whilst a different research lens is applied in sporting contexts, there is agreement (be that masculinity, entertainer or ego) that there is an ever-present need to live up to the heavily market narratives for athletic performance and comply to external (e.g. team, opponent, fans) demands for performance and validation. I also reported that this same ego (masculine or otherwise) contributed to confidence and self-belief, with brotherhood offering a sense of belonging or not doing it alone.

Furthermore, I cannot say whether any reluctance towards help-seeking is an issue that applies solely to male athletes, any more than categorising it as a Pacifica athlete issue. As a practitioner, I found that young male athletes need to be taught to recognise the resources they need to cope, internal (characteristics) and external (social support).

Over the length of this study, individuals' identities emerged as multi-faceted, dynamic and socially derived (Jenkins, 2004). For instance, it could be argued a social or fused identity was demonstrated amongst team sides when selected when players “put on the jersey” (Jenkins, 2004; Reese & Whitehouse, 2021). Team fusion was heightened amongst *selected* sides, especially during the heat of competition (Reese & Whitehouse, 2021). However, when closely observed, the authenticity of this fusion was often fractured due to selection and team performance outcomes. Self-identity flexed over time and in different contexts (Sartre, 1943/2018); as such, it appears to relate more to time and roles than to any deeper existential importance. For example, players were leaving school, going to university, getting their first jobs, and some became fathers. Like other researchers, I observed a shift away from parents as the primary source of social support towards expert providers of technical and informational support and independence (Morris et al., 2017).

To argue emerging athletes fully and only identified as athletes was not supported in these findings. The participants were involved in other relationships holding significant meaning and contributed to multiple, sometimes conflicting, identification demands. Many had embedded cultural and family connections, alliances with their schools and clubs, and strong religious or spiritual beliefs. As such, I concur with the final remarks in Ronkainen et al. (2016)

that self and identity are permanently “inconsistent, incomplete, and open to interpretation and change” (p. 58).

To conclude, everyone has multiple identities construed with time and context and attached to others’ expectations and judgements (Jenkins, 2004). These findings support the premise that identity has more to do with labels and roles than inner essence. For example, I am simultaneously a student, a coach, a mother, and a friend, and each has its own identity characteristics. Yet, as Sartre aptly states, no one truly knows what is in the hearts and minds of others. As such, those facilitating emerging athlete development must support adolescents in exploring and fostering a broad range of relationships and activities in and outside their sporting environments. However, this will only minimise the pain of career endings, which hold entrenched meaning for their essence; it will not protect them from such pain (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017).

9.4.2 Choice and Responsibility

For an individual, having been identified, becoming an athlete becomes a task to convert their talent to performance should they so choose (Aggerholm, 2015; Hutchens, 2010). Individual freedom is implicit in an athlete’s decision to embark on a professional sporting career path. Once the decision is made, the emerging talent is responsible for developing their talent, physical attributes, and character to become successful professional athletes. In Sartre’s famous words: “Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (p. 633). It is up to you to give life meaning (Sartre, 1943/2018). As Matchmaker states, “No one can get in there and fight for you”. When chasing a professional sporting career, as I examined in the *Making It – Or Not* theme, there is a multitude of events requiring constant effort and commitment through the emerging athlete pathway. Choice and responsibility become a constant process of intense effort, performance and coping from identification to the end of athletes’ careers. Failure to fulfil the institutional demands of their chosen sport results in non-selection and/or termination of contracts (Morris et al., 2016). For example, in Player-E not feeling as “hungry as the other boys” and being dropped after prioritising work over training, or Player-A “letting his actions do the talking” and being contracted to the NRL. Many participants in this study repeatedly talked of either sacrifice or accountability: “If you really want to achieve ... you got to have sacrifices ... at times, it is tough” (rugby league), and “You felt a responsibility to do the right thing and have people hold you accountable” (basketball). Here, sacrifice and accountability are congruent with choice and responsibility; drawing out this connection offers freedom rather than restriction. Sacrifice

implies hardship and denial; choice suggests personal control and a willingness to accept responsibility for these choices (Aggerholm, 2015; Sartre, 1943/2018).

The investment needed to be a professional goes beyond the thrill of competition to the long hours of grind and repetition. Perhaps this is why “sacrifice” and “work ethic” were two of the most commonly talked-about criteria for success across all three cases. As Player-D highlighted, “90% of what I really do with our time is train”; or Boxer-B, still waiting for a bout opportunity, “just have to train hard, eat right.” Sacrifice, in this instance, refers to committing to forgo other activities and past-times, and do what is required to manage their physiques, get physically fit, adequately fuelled and rested and become technically and tactically expert in their sport. For emerging athletes, this includes “sacrificing” social pursuits other teenagers engage in (Morris et al., 2017; Rothschild-Checroune et al., 2012; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013). For some, this “sacrifice” required leaving their family homes (and their country) to pursue their dream (Storm, 2020). They must willingly choose to set aside and devote their time and bodies to converting their talent into a professional career (Aggerholm, 2015). Only they can deal with events, train and compete in their chosen sport. Where references to “accountability” implied being held responsible for your actions by others.

The athlete is always free to choose the attitude and exertion they apply to the task. They must choose because “No one can get in there and fight for you” (Matchmaker). They decide whether to train and compete on the field or court or to get in the ring and fight, to advance or withdraw, regardless of age. Sometimes, I observed withdrawal as self-sabotaging actions or behaviours in younger athletes; when the pressure becomes too much, and they do not want to disappoint their parents. Being dropped meant they could blame someone else rather than admitting they just wanted “to be a kid sometimes”. In these cases, most participants expressed a strong desire to pursue professional sports careers at the onset. Still, they were unprepared for and challenged by what was required to achieve this and the increasing demands they faced as they progressed. As recruiters and coaches explained, some players prematurely think they have *made it*, and after “[signing] that piece of paper, all of a sudden it’s tools down, I’m sorted.” Complacency and entitlement appeared to be a greater risk for rugby league players on higher-value contracts compared to players striving to gain positions (Collins et al., 2016b; Jones et al., 2014). In basketball, players described needing to take *accountability*, “You can’t be blaming the coach ... the teammate... the roster” (Coach-1), and for the boxing athletes, “it was a sin to go into a fight unprepared” (Boxer-A). These are all examples of where desire and responsibility can become mismatched.

Increasing adolescent athletes’ existential awareness of their *freedom* to choose where and how they apply themselves will enable them to move beyond coping to thriving and take

responsibility for their successes or failures in life and sport. To achieve this awareness, personnel working with the athletes should use real-time situations as opportunities to point out personal development (Williams & MacNamara, 2020), for example, by being mindful of the language used (e.g., not sacrifice but choice, not discipline but chosen responsibilities), and being direct and honest about potential and possible outcomes (both good and bad). This requires a connection between personnel and athletes beyond an athletic approach (refer to the final theme, *Thriving Not Surviving*). To 'make it' in professional sports, the athlete must be one of the best. To be the best, the athlete must be comfortable standing out above others (Aggerholm, 2015) and must fully commit to developing the requisite physical and psycho-social capabilities to get there. Yet even after making this choice and forgoing all other opportunities, the athlete may still fail (Aggerholm, 2015). In summary, when athletes choose a sporting career, they are responsible for committing their best endeavours and accepting outcomes; in doing so, they must give their own meaning to their lives in and beyond sport.

9.4.3 Meaning

Continuing from my discussion on *being-an-athlete*, commitment was a foundational characteristic of self-efficacy, being the quality to fight through difficult times and apply themselves to the project at hand. In this sub-theme, I examine the reason *why* an athlete will commit themselves to the harsh requirements of becoming that which they are not yet (Aggerholm, 2015). Their 'why', that is, the *meaning* athletes attribute to wanting a professional sports career. Simply put, "*Meaning* is shared mental representations of possible relationships among things, events and relationships ... Meaning connects things" (Leontiev, 2013, p. 466). Meaning is a particularly personal thing, privately guarded, rarely singular, often embedded, and difficult to separate as unique constructs (Leontiev, 2013). Unpicking the meaning athletes assigned to pursuing a career in sport required delving below the obvious, culturally accepted and automated responses. Adolescent athletes typically retort, "I want to be in the NRL," or say they are doing it "for my family" (fieldnotes). But what is meant by 'doing it for their family' is vast: is it a financial thing, is it to make them proud, are they trying to follow in a family member's footsteps, or is it completely different 'why'? The desire to help the family, make them proud, and contribute to the collective is especially true for Pasifika families in the rugby league study. However, with family honour comes expectations and pressure to uphold family security and pride (Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2014; Panapa & Phillips, 2014). Like Marsters et al. (2020), I found that as Pasifika athletes who were one to two generations removed from the Islands, they saw themselves as 'Kiwi kids', with identity and meaning spliced between traditional family and modern urban youth cultures.

Combining observation, interviews, and the long and close relationships I had with the athletes as a researcher-practitioner, I conclude that the meaning falls comfortably within the three themes reported in Case 1. These were: *a desire to better oneself and their family* (security, money), *the desire to prove oneself* (status, prowess and success), and *the desire to be of significance* (to mean something in the world) (Hopkinson, 2022; Hutchens, 2010; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013; Wacquant, 1995). In addition to these meanings, I separated the *desire to feel connected (to others)*, which was more directly apparent in team sports and perhaps elicited from the presence of Pasifika collective values (Lakisa et al., 2014). In Pasifika culture, this is known as Vā, the physical, emotional and spiritual connection to people, places and things (Keung, 2018).

To Better Oneself: *The desire to better oneself and one's family* was more apparent in the athletes from less secure financial backgrounds: "To buy my parents a house". Even contracts that only include small amounts of "money to feed" for emerging athletes could subsidise their households. The potential for significant dollars, such as those paid to NRL players, factored in a desire to better themselves and their families. NZ senior basketball participants described the meaning of financial security in terms of its "vulnerability" of income stream, noting "your pay packet can drop by 50%". During my Case 3 (basketball) fieldwork, when player payments were late, team resentment was evident, so making a living was a minimum requirement. At the same time, one might expect scholarships to represent a priority in terms of free education for collegiate athletes. However, participants in Case 3 inferred more meaning to the opportunity to experience going to a US college and playing. Boxing stakeholders emphasised the difficulties in financing emerging boxer campaigns. The notion of security was also implied by Boxer-B migrating from Africa, stating, "It got me to America", but Boxer-B's desire to be a world champion and prove himself successful exhibited as greater meaning as security and money.

To Prove Oneself: In all cases, the *desire to prove themselves* was apparent. Most predominately, athletes found meaning in their love of the game, the thrill of combat, and their "hunger" to represent, compete and win (Aggerholm, 2015); having permission to be aggressive proved themselves to be "warriors" (Hutchens, 2010). The feeling of boxers yearning to be a world champion was closely related to expressions of being known as someone who "knew how to work hard more than anyone". In Cases 2 and 3, participants spoke of wanting to impress and look good in front of their peers', a norm for their adolescent development stage (Arnett, 2000). Interestingly, the wider prestige of fame seemed a more comfortable proposition with the boxers, perhaps linked to the need to be an entertainer. Individual accolades or fame were expressed as less of a priority for some, albeit a nice by-product: "Little kids saying hi to you ...

is really cool" (Player-A), "I will take pictures with some kids after the game, but I am not into it [when it impacts personal space]" (Baller-A). Both these players were humble Pasifika athletes, which may have a bearing on their responses. It is interesting how both appear more comfortable with children admiring them, intimating they were less comfortable with adult fans. There was always a sense that fandom was something the athletes felt embarrassed to reveal rather than it held no meaning.

To Do Something of Significance: *The desire to do something of significance* showed in the reverence players, ballers, and boxers held for 'being-an-athlete'. Being a professional athlete was seen as a badge of honour enduring beyond emerging into retirement, with specific organisational representation considered of even greater significance than other representative honours. The pride was evident when players "put on the jersey", representing successful team selection of worth. The significance of 'being-an-athlete', amongst other personal identifiers, externalises the meaning they give to the sacrifices and efforts of the task or having achieved something significant. For instance, even in Player-G's failure to achieve and his distress at his lost potential, he reflected, "I was playing injured, but I was playing at a high level ... alongside NRL players, and I was playing full games." Whether this represents athletic identity foreclosure is less conclusive.

Feeling Connected (Vā): However, being something significant was closely correlated to *feeling connected to others*. Players spoke of a sense of meaning derived from being with their mates, of *being part of something* in "going to war together" (boxing), a "brotherhood" (rugby league) and "the strength of the pack" (basketball). Not all relationships were equal, but individuals saw meaning in the development of genuine relationships and bonds, in their connection with each other and in "mutual investment", being in it together "side-by-side", "being comfortable around people", "going into a new family and not knowing them", "it's really loyal ... real strong culture", "being mates", "if you fail, you fail together", all accenting this sporting endeavour has no meaning if done alone. The desire for connection and meaning was particularly true of the social support relationships outlined in Case 4. A failure to feel connected at points during their professional sport was potentially a source of crisis for some athletes. Even inside team environments, as the cases showed, being an athlete can sometimes be a lonely and isolating proposition: "By the end of the season, he did not care, and no one cared to try and talk or help him through" (Baller-C, fieldnotes). Or, this might occur when they move between environments, losing established friendships and moving into more competitive environments.

We never fully know what is in the heart and mind of the other. However, some degree of understanding between individuals can be reached by translating *meaning* through externally expressed intra- and inter-relational patterns (thoughts and feelings, emotions and behaviours)

across time and exposure (Maarouf, 2019; Sartre, 1943/2018). In my experience, and supported by these findings, without meaning, an individual will not commit themselves fully and completely to pursuing a professional sporting career. Without meaning, an athlete will not be able to resourcefully cope with and adapt to the inevitable threats and challenges in the events they face during their pathway.

9.4.5 Authenticity and Connection

To succeed, individuals on both sides of relational dyads must fit into the organisational systems and culture and enact stipulated institutional demands (Aggerholm, 2015), diminishing them to a state of *situated freedom* (Sartre, 1944/1976). Individuals may think or behave differently to become accepted by others or to achieve a particular result, acting inauthentically or in bad faith. These findings showed failure to feel *connected* can be a source of crisis for some athletes (and other stakeholders). Even inside team environments, it can still be a lonely and isolating proposition: “By the end of the season, [Baller-C] did not care, and no one cared to try and talk or help him through” (BB-Coach3). Athletes’ needs (perceived or actual) for social support were consistently demonstrated across all three cases. Novelly, the importance of modern-day electronic messaging (texting, social media channels) was now an essential mechanism for prompting and checking-in, reminding adolescent athletes you are there (RP). *Presence* availability and reliability, physical or electronic, are fundamental requirements of facilitative relationships in these cohorts, as well as mutual investment and respect for each other’s contribution (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Boxing-Manager explains the need for mutual investment: “I am not going to waste my time ... your shelf life is limited, and that goes for the boxer and the coach”. RP (like Matchmaker) “felt used and genuinely grieved not being part of the inner circle”. Later, accepting “the ending was an organic part of the process” (RP, Case 1). “Small things matter” for the supplier too: “getting a reply to my text even if it was just an emoji” (RP), “being thanked” when I go beyond (BB-Manager1), “he just didn’t hear what I had to say” (Matchmaker).

9.5 Thesis Conclusion

The research title suffixes *in* life in and beyond professional sport, not *into*, because the emerging athlete transition is a lengthy process of recurring and dynamic events across several phases. *Life in and Beyond* recognises that emerging athlete lives in a world of family, school, and work outside their life in sport. Beyond their sporting aspirations, most adolescent boys are unsure who they are yet to become. The existential reality is choosing a sports career has a finite life span that is significantly shorter than a more traditional occupation, and many sports

careers end before they even start. This is an existential truth the young people in the studies were unaware of, avoided or required growing maturity to face. While they speak of 'plan Bs', continue to prioritise training and competing in their sport; time is an unfathomable concept for teens.

Sport is now a business, and the participants in this study have or are choosing to pursue an athletic career. The issue is the freedom to choose a professional sporting career comes with the responsibility to meet institutional demands and existential challenges. All three cases show only a minute percentage of athletes *make it* from 'having-a-talent' to 'being-a-talent' to 'being-a professional-athlete'. Despite this, many young men commit to intense physically, mentally and emotionally demanding programmes, forgoing other opportunities and sacrificing normal youthful past-times to be one of those elite few. Athletes in this study still choose this unpredictable path, leaving their homes and countries to take up sporting apprenticeships to become who they are not yet (Aggerholm, 2015).

As adults looking in from the outside, each with our own existential essence, we may question whether these athletes are sufficiently aware of these choices. Still, regardless of their age, I encountered young men who found meaning and an understanding of the requirements of following this path. The cross-case analysis found consistency between individuals who overtly or tacitly inferred meaning to their striving that represented: *a desire to prove oneself* (status, prowess and success), *the desire to better oneself and their family* (security, money), *the desire to do something of significance* (to mean something in the world), and the desire *to be connected* (or part of something). Whether subconsciously embedded in their psyche and/or culture, many dream of being a professional athlete from an early age, doing it for their families. Athletic identity refers to being technically talented and having the physical characteristics setting them aside from others, being big, strong, tall, muscular and gladiator-like. Meaning is translated onto these attributes, licencing rugby league players and boxers to exert their masculinity and combative spirits. However, athleticism alone will not ensure success but must be developed alongside performance and relational characteristics to operate in any professional sporting environment and system.

We live an authentic life when we are true to the meaning we give and the choices we make. However, as Sartre (1942/2018) stated, with this freedom comes responsibility, and with unfulfilled dreams, an uncertain future can lead to periods of anguish. Where previous literature in the ACD focussed on athletic identity foreclosure, this research found meaning and self-efficacy were more a factor in how individuals respond to events, endings and crises. When an activity holds strong meaning, this translates to an intense commitment to a task. Anxiety and grief are inevitable when something which held significant meaning, and whose time and effort

was committed to, is disrupted. Individuals were identified as talented and identified themselves as 'being-an-athlete'. But equally, they identified themselves by their youth culture, ethnicity, family connections and school and friendship alliances. Identity or culture is neither a single nor a fixed state. Over the length of this study, individuals' identities emerged as multi-faceted, dynamic and socially derived processes (Jenkins, 2004).

Sports environments, people and systems sometimes fail the athlete, as we saw in Boxer-A's case. Sometimes athletes fail themselves, lack discipline, become entitled or uncoachable, or are not brave enough to face the truth of the situation or the meaning it truly holds. While many situations are outside the individual's control, most can be anticipated. Of critical importance in the emerging ACD is the need to remind ourselves these athletes are *not adults*. Dichotomies between adolescent athletes wanting "just to be a kid sometimes" and the requirement to "grow up quickly", while typically still embedded in parental relationships, oppose needing to behave maturely, work intensely and make adult decisions. As these findings confirm, male athletes mature significantly during this period, becoming more independent and accountable. During this longitudinal study, it was a privilege, as a researcher-practitioner, to witness these boys growing from teenagers into men. Admittedly, it is not easy to let go or to watch them struggle. However, genuine and durable connections can facilitate an open path to seeking support when needed yet allow them the freedom to test their boundaries and make their own decisions.

Stakeholders have a duty of care to nurture an individual's existential awareness of self (meaning, choice and responsibility) in safe athletic and personal development environments, arming them with knowledge and appropriately preparing them for life in and beyond sport. Building experience through exposure, struggles and successes enables confidence and coping capabilities (self-efficacy) to develop. Prompting emerging athletes to examine their choices and responsibilities with courage and truth empowers existential awareness and allows them to make informed decisions and positively adapt to outcomes. Confidence remains volatile through the emerging transition, so the availability of different sources of social support (e.g., organisational, independent practitioner, family) and forms (institutional and emotional) is required to navigate events (e.g., personal, injuries, selection processes, coach conflicts, moving overseas), and facilitate development. As such, I confirm social support is a resource going beyond coping to facilitating both athletic and personal development and thriving. In sporting environments, this requires an integrated set of skills and capabilities (coaching, counselling, consultation, and companionship). Connection through authentic relationships is foundational; it protects the athlete from feeling isolated or lonely and provides a safety barrier to experiment and grow. Environmental cultures valuing authentic relationships and communication (truth

and transparency), presence and collaboration will achieve better outcomes for the athlete and the organisation.

In the following and final chapter, I conclude by presenting the final conceptual model and summarise the practical and academic implications to expand this research beyond a document and into implementable solutions.

CHAPTER 10 – PRACTICAL AND ACADEMIC IMPLICATIONS

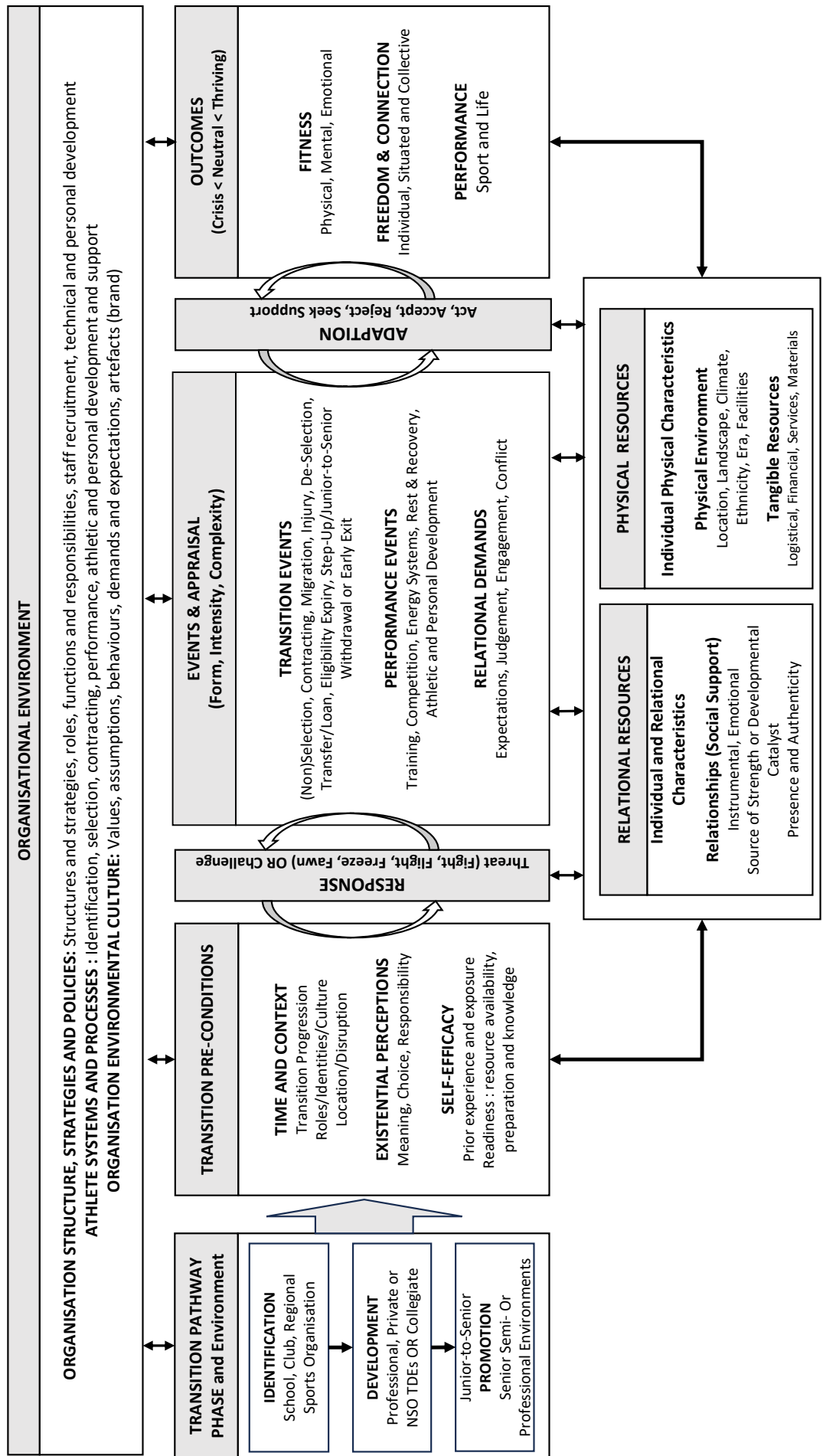
Chapter 9 presented the cross-case analysis, discussion and conclusion across the three sporting case studies, and the practitioner-based case. In this final chapter, I conclude by presenting the final conceptual model and consider its implications, and I summarise academic implications and limitations. This is followed by the practical implications and recommendations for future research. The intention of this chapter is to expand this research beyond a document and into implementable solutions.

10.1 Conceptual Model Implications

In line with the methods defined in Chapter 4, this thesis concludes with the conceptual model presented in Figure 10.1. This model was progressively developed throughout the research process commencing from the initial conceptual model (see Figure 2.4) combining conceptual models and theories (Drew et al., 2019; Hauser et al., 2022; Henriksen et al., 2010; Ryba et al., 2016) outlined in the framework (Chapter 2) with other emerging athlete literature (detailed in Chapter 3). The final conceptual model (Figure 10.1) combines and extends Figure 2.4 with constructs from the coping domain (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Thomas, 2017) and transitional event decision-making (Stambulova, 2011). Throughout the case analysis and reporting process, I refined the model, with a final examination of the model during and after the cross-case analysis. This approach was consistent with my pragmatic paradigm and the expectation that some reasonable patterns be determined in the messiness of sporting environments (Miles et al., 2014). This approach is consistent with Maarouf's (2019) position that a single cross-case reality can exist within a defined time and context.

The production of the model in Figure 10.1 responds to Stambulova et al.'s (2020) call to simplify the models and clarify taxonomy in ACD, ensuring a more user-friendly presentation is available for a wide range of stakeholders and pragmatic implementation. The absence of a comprehensive end-to-end pathway and consistent terminology in the emerging ACD was evident when undertaking the literature search and the effects of professionalism in sport relevant to these phenomena. Interchangeable concepts between the environment and the athlete transition process and the extent of collegiate scholarships and NIL cause additional confusion. In the previous chapter, I explained the proposed deconstruction of athlete transitions into pathways, phases and events. Recapping, the emerging athlete transition has various pathway options, depending on the sport, with a pathway comprising different phases, and phases potentially involving multiple events.

Figure 10.1
Proposed Conceptual Model: Transition of Emerging Athletes in Professional Sport



Events are categorised as *transition* (related to changes in situation), *performance* (relevant to the functioning of athletic and personal operations, training and development) and, *relational demands* (e.g., *parental pressures, coaches demands and conflicts, fan expectations and team dynamics*). Events rarely occur singularly but can do so and are more commonly embedded (e.g., de-selection and coach conflict, injury due to overtraining and or J2S intensity); multiple simultaneous events are tagged as *complexity*. Events are appraised across a continuum of *form*, between positive (e.g., selection) to negative (e.g., de-selection) and for the degree of impact on the recipient (*intensity*). All events comprise a process; some start with beginning and move to ending (e.g., injury), while others start with endings and move to new beginnings (e.g., exit, migrations) (Bridges, 1986).

How individuals respond and adapt to events first relies on whether they interpret these events as a threat or a challenge (Hanin, 1995; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Threats trigger biological survival responses, including fight, flight, freeze or fawn reactions, and challenge responses inviting arousal, excitement and drive (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; LeDoux, 2012). These responses reflect individuals' pre-conditions: *time and context* (career progression, identity/role/culture, degree of disruption), *existential perceptions* (meaning, choice and acceptance of responsibility), and self-efficacy (pre-conditioning and readiness).

Self-efficacy combines commitment (derived through meaning) with confidence and resiliency (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy evolves from prior experiences and exposure (Lazarus, 2000; LeDoux, 2012), and readiness – the athlete knowing they have the resources available if they need them and they have prepared sufficiently and armed themselves with the skills and knowledge to get the job done (Hanin, 1995; LeDoux, 2012). The visible importance of self-efficacy as a pre-condition in this model reflected the participants' emphasis on confidence, self-belief and toughness/competitiveness in performance, but equally in its presence as a resource for individuals coping with this career transition.

An individual's self-efficacy and existential perceptions will mitigate event responses, adaptations, and outcomes. The perceptions determining how much meaning the individual attributes to a positive or negative *outcome*, the choices they perceive or have (degree of controllability and anticipation, other options available), and the responsibility they take versus the blame they attribute to others will all contribute to form and intensity. Here, we posit the criticality of meaning both in its determination of self-efficacy and its primary essence of existential being (i.e., why am I committed to this project).

Individuals recruit an array of relationships to cope with events, including intra- and inter-personal and inter-environmental (Buber, 1965). Here, it must be noted that coping is triggered regardless of positive or negative form. Furthermore, relational resources can be

facilitative or demanding. An individual's *choice* of adaption will be determined by their appraised response (threat or challenge) and the actual or perceived resources they deem available (relational and physical). This appraisal results in a decision to act, accept, reject or seek support. Replacing the five components of thriving: physical, hedonic (or emotional), eudemonic,²⁶ psychological and social (Feeney & Collins, 2015) or wellbeing²⁷ with *fitness*, *freedom* removes less understood terms with physical, mental, emotional, freedom and connection. I believe this is less complicated terminology for the community, and fitness more clearly articulates the volatility of form, intensity and complexity from crisis (e.g., mentally or physically sick) to thriving rather than a static outcome. In addition, fitness recognises the “inter-relation of psychological characteristics with social influences and the ways that these shape behaviours” (Gledhill et al., 2017, p. 93) over time. A state that an individual has the freedom to alter (Sartre, 1943/2018).

Freedom refers to the individual and collective freedom (choice and responsibility) to act in good faith, true to oneself or themselves (Buber, 1965; Sartre, 1943/2018). *Connection* (which in its negative form implies isolation) goes beyond social behaviours to the existential relationship one has with oneself, with others as a universal collective, and with the environment. The third set of outcomes refers to tangible (successful or failed) *performance* events and projects the athlete undertakes in sport and life. It is conceivable an athlete may fail in an event but may be thriving in any mix of other performance, fitness or connection components.

Finally, the interaction between the athlete and the transitional phase and events recognises the inter-relationship between the *organisational environments* (including stakeholders). These organisations regulate the structure, processes, systems and cultures the athlete engages with. As such, athletes are said to exist in *situated freedom*, as they are bound by the physical facticity and institutional regulations of these relationships (Sartre, 1943/2018). As Alder (2015) concluded, “merely altering the surface architecture of artefacts ... fails to trigger intended meanings and meaningful connection” (p. 186). The influence of the organisation and its representatives share responsibility for a culture acting authentically or in *good faith*.

I recognise this model incorporates a lot of detail. However, navigating a transition with its multiple phases, potential events, and relationships is complex. As such, I propose this model can assist other researchers and organisational bodies in explaining athlete career transitions with a broader and more complete end-to-end view. In particular, presenting this athlete's career transition as a process of coping (with environmental inputs, appraisal, adaptations and

²⁶ Although eudemonic may be more closely correlated to freedom and connection.

²⁷ I consider wellbeing an over-used and misunderstood concept.

utilisation of resources) results in a continuum of outcomes from crisis to thriving. Greater awareness of individuals' existential meaning, choices and ownership (responsibility and accountability) can facilitate more positive and authentic human outcomes. Performance and fitness outcomes will range from crisis to thriving, predicated on an individual's preconditions, time and context and the key relationships one has with oneself and others. Using an existential perspective is a relatively new proposition at this juncture but one I argue offers a greater emphasis on the need for connection to reduce feelings of isolation and builds on Lazarus and Folkman (1984) principles by introducing responsibility to appraising stressors as challenges versus threats.

10.2 Academic Advancement and Framework Conclusion

This thesis has examined the transition of emerging athletes in professional sport as a subset of the broader ACD. Stambulova et al. (2020) called on researchers to extend the ACD in demography, time, context and design scope, using diverse but concise methodologies. Table 10.1 critiques this thesis against the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) postulates for new developments and future challenges for ACD research (Stambulova et al., 2020, pp. 18-20).

In summary, this study has extended the subject area in location (NZ/Australia), sports code (rugby league), organisation (TDE, collegiate, within-senior), event (entry, selection cycles, J2S, migration, injury) and culture (Māori and Pasifika). The research introduced new scope, including clarification of the emerging athlete pathway, sports code (professional boxing, basketball), organisation (within-senior semi-professional), and events (prospecting, contracting, eligibility expiry, early exits). The thesis provides methodological clarity and depth through multi-case, stratified data collection methods (including transferrable literature from football, rugby union and hockey), multiple stakeholder participants and a longitudinal design.

In addition to extending the scope of ACD research, this thesis examined the social support relationships relevant to the emerging athlete transition. In particular, Case 4 was guided by Feeney and Collins' (2015) framework for social support and embraced two functions: support as a source of strength in adversity and relational catalyst support as a resource for growth and development, enhancing an individual's capacity to thrive. These researchers challenged future projects to look at social support relationships as dyadic and reciprocal interactions, as well as the effectiveness and mechanisms of the relationships in facilitating (vis-à-vis hindering) athlete thriving (see also Tod et al., 2019). I argue this thesis has responded to this challenge, finding strong support for Feeney and Collins' propositions and roadmap for the future, recognising that one size does not fit all.

Table 10.1*Thesis Contribution against ISSP Postulates*

ISSP Postulate		Study Contribution
1	Use of ACD as an over-arching umbrella for sport psychology research on athlete careers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research fits comfortably within ACD and sport psychology domains.
2, 9d	Expand the diversity of research for athletes with and for other sports stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on dyadic relationships as two-directional dialogues between athletes, coaches, parents and other stakeholders.
3	Dual career provision research, to expand on factors for successful transition coping, to incorporate optimal balance between sport, studies/work and private life.	<p>Framework and focus for study include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coping with transitions and events, extended to thriving. Athletic and personal development and performance in life in and beyond sport.
4	Examine ACD in context of environments and opportunities for optimising functions and cultures that facilitate athlete transitions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cases include TID, TDE, collegiate and within-senior environments. Using Hauser (2022) incorporates athletic and personal development.
5, 9e	Further examination of mobility and migration of athletes trans-nationally, and its effects on cultural change, function and wellbeing, and the facilitation thereof.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demographic addition of athlete migrations between NZ and Australia and US. Inclusion of boxer migrating from Africa to US. Recognition of the need for preparation and ongoing needs of athletes away from home.
6, 9f	Recognition that transitions last from several months to years requires more in-depth examination of the process and research into movement between transitions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarity and definitions proposed over transitions, phases and events, with particular reference to the emerging athlete transition.
7, 9c	Increase the diversity and definition of research on career transitions, pathways and events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expands events in prospecting and contracting in professional sport. Expands events on obtaining promotional contracts in boxing. Identifies emerging athlete events as dynamic in form, intensity and complexity.
8, 9a	Examine innovations in career assistance, translation of mental health to both a resource and outcome and advocacy of inter- and intra-disciplinary collaboration in support teams.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case 4 investigates practitioner relationships and facilitation in emerging ACD events and environments, and Supplemental evidence found to advocate for collaboration of support teams across all cases.
9f	Extend research beyond successful athletes to crisis transitions (e.g., injuries, burnout and dropout).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusion of non-selection, de-selection, injury and drop-out events. Inclusion of matchmaking bias, and risk of harm in boxing.
9b	Marginalised populations (para-athletes, cultural minorities).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion on Māori and Pasifika inclusion in professional sport in NZ.
10	Encourage cross-domain research collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This research sits predominately in ACD but emphasises the need for both performance and developmental outcomes in professional sport. Introduces existential framework for ACD research.

Note. Columns 1 and 2 are a condensed version of the ISSP Postulates in Stambulova et al. (2020).

Finally, I found the adoption of existential philosophy as an ontological foundation and analysis framework to be conducive to a broader viewpoint for investigating the emerging athlete career while noting that *events* and *connection* are proposed as more helpful terminology than the more nihilistic originals – death (endings) and isolation. I also propose freedom be specified as *situated freedom*, given the individual or organisational decisions to act in good faith or to be true to self within environmental constraints, as separate from individual freedom, which is more precisely referred to as *choice and responsibility*. Here events, are seen as plural and can be constructed in phases, pathways and transitions, with all events comprising a beginning, a middle and an end. As such, I propose a revision to the Big-5 existential concerns for sport related research – identity, meaning, freedom, choice and responsibility, events and connection (Figure 10.2).

10.3 Academic Limitations

My axiological position as a researcher-practitioner across the three sports in this multi-case thesis positioned me as an active participant inside the environments of most of the participants in this thesis. I was extremely conscious of my responsibility to act according to institutional and moral ethics in both my research and practice. Being inside and close was arguably both an advantage and a limitation to this research. As a researcher-practitioner, my selection of participants was purposive. Given the scope of my practice, my network and fieldwork participation predominantly involved adolescent male athletes. As such, participant selection for this thesis was confined to this age (adolescents) and gender (male). Future researchers might consider extending this study to female emerging athletes in professional sport.

My lengthy and continued connection with the players and parents independent of organisational environments and contracts allowed for ongoing contact and provided greater longitudinal insight into post-event coping, although this was not always possible in instances of early exit events. The difficulty in examining non-selection and early exit outcomes, particularly in adolescent athletes, is the participants are particularly vulnerable at this time and/or on exit. As such, no interviews were undertaken with these athletes, and the data analysed only referred to fieldwork observations, interactions (conversations, actions and behaviours) and my personal reflection on and interpretation of events. Paradoxically, there is also potential the forms and strength of my practice (I would hope, however small a difference this might be) positively affected participant outcomes. As such, participant outcomes may have differed if my presence was solely that of a researcher. However, I cannot control the reception, activation or

categorisations bestowed by my involvement. What was critical was I sidelined my ego, and my personal bias, and entered the relationships in an open, transparent and authentic fashion.

Furthermore, the positioning of performance and relational characteristics (Pim, 2022) did not include academic cross-referencing. No extensive work was completed to research (in the literature or otherwise) or include definitions of the characteristics presented in Table 2.1. As Leontiev (2013) argued, it is often a linguistic challenge – even single words hold different meanings for each of us, and this is particularly so when we look at words such as commitment, and connection. While this view is potentially an academic limitation for more positivist projects, I would argue it had advantages for this thesis. The words simply represented a classification of ideas across the participant sample and were then compared to a word Pim (2022) had identified. The words were analysed using an existential lens to develop understanding beyond the nomenclature to reach the meaning and identity the individuals attributed to them.

As an existential philosopher, I recognise that no one can truly know what meaning an individual holds, reveals, or masks. As such, the truth in these interpretations may be considered less objective, when external expressions of thoughts and feelings are not provided. In these matters, while I cannot be categorical in my statement, I was always aware of the risks of interpretation and influence. To ensure I remained independent of the data, I used my supervisors and my “critical friend” to retain sufficient objectivity and make subjective assessments, as appropriate, cataloguing the difference.

10.4 Practical Recommendations

In offering these suggestions, the research scope for this investigation is professional sport. As such, I recognise *performance* cannot (and should not) be removed from or ignored in the emerging ACD. The demands placed on athletes contracted to professional sporting organisations have skyrocketed (Mitchell et al., 2020). Early advocates focussed their attention on the effects of athletic identity foreclosure at retirement from full-time athletic careers (typically by players in their mid-thirties). To alleviate this concern, the dual career was recommended. While on the surface a sensible approach, whether this continues to be appropriate to modern day professional sporting apprenticeships needs reviewing. Today’s athletic sports science has codified the athletic career and increased the intensity of performance and selection for individuals required to execute their roles as streamlined machines (Hoberman, 1988). Where this reality becomes even more challenging is when the athlete entering this environment is an adolescent. Here, recent researchers have highlighted

recommendations for sporting organisations to increase their duty of care to the provision of athletic and personal development for entry level athletes (Hauser et al., 2022). The conclusions of this thesis unequivocally endorse the necessity for more urgent attention to this need. In the emerging ACD I found two pivotal periods of increased vulnerability. Firstly, in the 18 months after the athlete leaves high school (17-19 years of age), and secondly when they leave the TDE period, in J2S, reaching eligibility or early exit outcomes (up to 22 years of age). Yet, it is here I found poor resourcing (financial and people) available: “Two big players’ associations rugby and cricket invest up to \$2m a year into personal development programmes to support athlete wellbeing initiatives and prepare players for life after sport. Who is filling that gap at youth level?” (Johannsen, 2020, paras. 25-26). Furthermore, I have concerns about increased investment by Sport NZ into poorly defined wellbeing initiatives have the potential to be misdirected and exclude emerging athletes and professional sporting bodies (HPSNZ, 2021).

My research found adolescent male athletes leaving school, in TDEs, entering academic programmes or forced to work in jobs focussed on pay cheques (often labouring work) alongside high-intensity sporting commitments. Like most adolescent young men, grappling with leaving the familiarity of their school lives (and often the brotherhood it provides) and just being teenagers, long-term vision was unsurprisingly *not* a feature of this period of their lives. In the basketball case study, NZ emerging athletes generally followed the US collegiate pathway, enforcing the decision to enter the next phase as student: athletes. The non- or less-academically talented or inclined basketballers, either failed to qualify or suffered through academic eligibility or the consequences of the high dropout rates. In rugby league, the NRL instigated the “no work – no study – no play” rule for pathways athletes. However, to fulfil this requirement, individuals end up in jobs to satisfy the rule not to enhance their development. The rugby league findings identified teenage boys with rugby league contracts who simply were not ready to make life decisions beyond playing league. They loved training and competing (Aggerholm, 2015); with a heavy workload and fatigue that comes with intense training and selection pressures, any commitments outside of league, unless mandated, were not prioritised. In a rare instance, Player-D, academically smart and dedicated, set his league career aside for a period to complete his degree.

Do we ask a lawyer, or plumber to pick a dual path when they are studying or in their apprenticeship “just in case it doesn’t work out”? Should the sporting apprenticeship be any different? Firstly, these questions highlight the point that sport as a career choice and option needs to be validated. Secondly, yes, we need to recognise a sporting career differs from more traditional ones because we know the percentage of successful athletes is small, the career span is short, and apprenticeship contract values are low. However, there needs to be an approach

recognising the combined pressures, the existential nature and desires of emerging athletes, along with the realities of a sporting apprenticeship. This research showed the preparation for this transitional phase is lacking or too late in the process. Furthermore, adolescent male athletes require time to adjust to the step-up in athletic intensities alongside normal adolescent changes.

I offer the following recommendations, with the emphasis directed towards the NZ emerging male athlete population. Recommendations are accompanied with cross-references to other supporting literature calling for similar changes:

1. Introduce athletic career planning into school environments – prioritising schools who offer athlete academies and scholarships. Programmes would include curriculum content, but this needs to be combined with individual development plans and independent advocacy for athletes and their families. These programmes could provide transparent and truthful conversations about what is involved and reasonable expectations of the outcomes of a sporting apprenticeship and how this will affect the individual and the family.
2. Implement a professional TDE apprenticeship programme for school-leaving athletes entering into professional pathways environments. This should be offered as an alternative bespoke programme which incorporates opportunities to try different jobs, learn new skills and hobbies, and encourage out-of-sport activities, without the pressure to commit to a course or employment and in a form commensurate with training times and commitments. There is merit in learning the disciplines of working or study life so this is not to suggest athletes should be protected from the struggle (Collins et al., 2016a). This should be an alternative non-mandated option for those not clearly committed to a specific course or career training, emphasising one size will not fit all.
3. Introduce individual development plans and measurable outcomes including athletic development criteria **and** personal development areas. These would include appropriate gauges of fitness (physical, psychological, social, life balance), freedom and connection (individual, social support and organisational relationships) and performance (sport and life). Organisational cultures espousing holistic development must also endorse these areas in their recruitment, selection and retention of personnel and players. If selection, including team selection, supports winning talent ahead of development, the culture will not change (Alder, 2015; Brown & Arnold, 2019). Martindale et al. (2023) highlighted four pertinent areas parents sought improvement on in TDEs – individual plans, better advice and communication with parents, psychology/mental wellbeing support, and better facilities – I concur with these recommendations.

4. Preparation and readiness for transitional events in advance of migration, particularly for Step-Up in levels, JTS, and Moving Away events (refer Figure 10.1), which are shown to minimise adverse outcomes and/or allow the athlete to thrive in the challenge. Transition preparation can be achieved through evaluation for readiness, risk assessments, increasing available information and knowledge, use of role models, pre-event visits and social support resources (Pummell & Lavalley, 2019). Preparation should involve all relevant parties, including the athlete and their family. Social support resources should remain available, with regular follow-ups for an appropriate period after an event.
5. Implement stronger regulations on contracting and payment values²⁸ for athletes to provide adequate financial support by recognising sporting apprenticeships as valid careers. Emerging athlete remuneration should be commensurate with their age and experience, not their future potential. This research shows inflated remuneration can have the opposite effect on development and retention. Potential savings can be redirected into development programmes that offer increased benefits to athletes and organisations. In boxing, consideration for the implementation of standardised contract rates and the institution of a combat athlete's association would be beneficial to the protection of emerging athletes.
6. Athletic player associations should incorporate emerging athlete resources and advisory services, *not* prioritised to contracted senior players. Additional research supports the reduction of 'whitebaiting' through stronger investment in more subtle and considered TID would be beneficial. Once again, more strategic recruitment enabling increased investment in player development on selection should benefit organisational budgets and reduce unrealistic individual career expectations (Cupples et al., 2018; Güllich, 2014).
7. Reduce fast-tracking of athletes' pathways into senior programmes pre-21-years (guideline age for discussion). This has several benefits: firstly, it reduces the impact in terms of the early exits of senior players needing to make room for youngsters; and secondly, it gives youth athletes time to combine personal development with athletic pursuits, simultaneously reducing the load on young minds and bodies. Additionally, it sets clear expectations of a minimum apprenticeship timeframe, reducing the unrealistic expectations seen in some of the study participants and allowing additional time to adapt to the intensity of high-pressured sport (Mitchell et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2016; Rothwell et al., 2020).
8. Parents matter, too! This thesis highlighted the challenges parents face in adapting to their offspring's transitions into professional sport combined with the natural transitions into adulthood. Previous researchers have also recognised the importance of improving the

²⁸ Recent salary cap proposals in the NRL are leading the way; salary cap regulations now include *all* junior payments over A\$20,000 in the A\$650,000 development allowance (RL-Manager1).

education of and advocacy for this cohort (Dorsch et al., 2016; Harwood et al., 2019). However, these findings are novel in also highlighting the need to supply additional attention to the lack of knowledge and experience in dealing with the commercial aspects of emerging athletes professional career preparations and management.

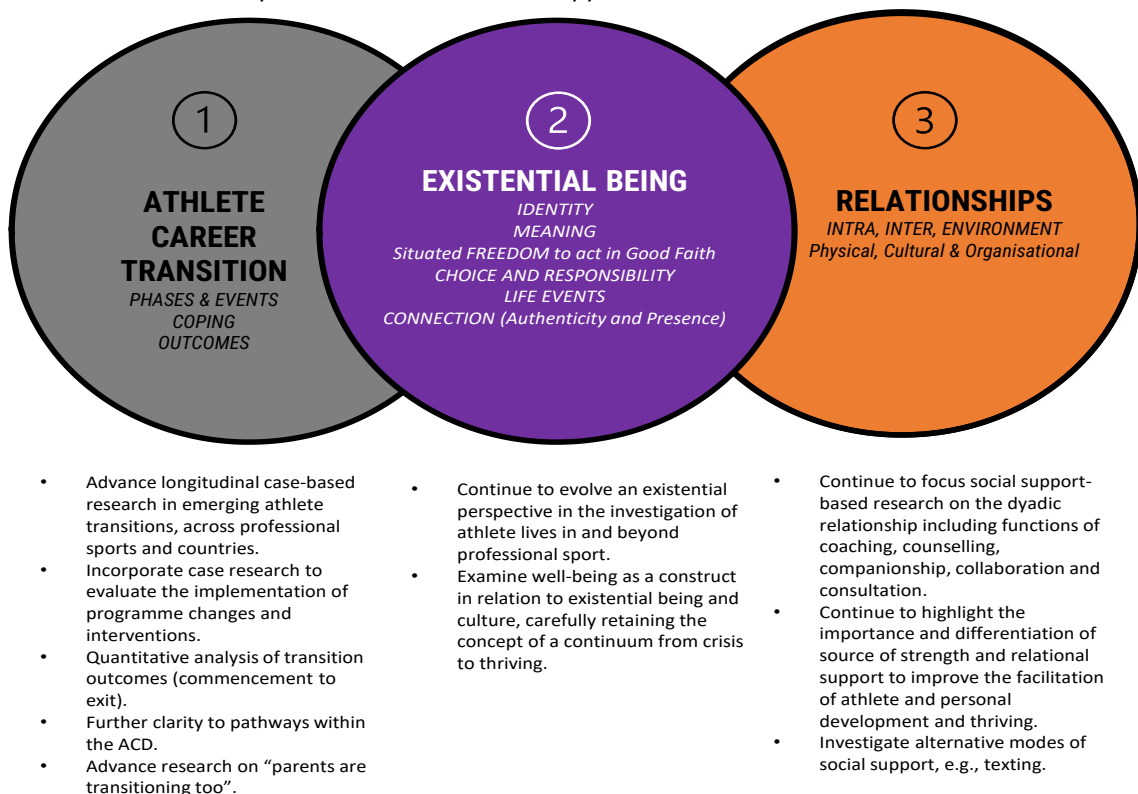
9. Staff matter, too! Recruitment and onboarding of staff into emerging athlete environments should include learning, athletic and personal development plans mirroring the expectations the organisation has of its players. Recruiting staff with the appropriate knowledge, intentions and alignment with the desired organisational culture will embed changes (Alder, 2015; Brown & Arnold, 2019). Understanding individual competencies and strengths and beneficial recipient: supporter connections (which are different for different individuals) can offer time- and context-relevant communication, coaching, counselling, consultation and companionship beneficial to both parties and to athletic performance. Organisational pathway structures may benefit from horizontal rather than the more traditional vertical roles and responsibilities, assigning individual development planning and monitoring to a relationship (with collaboration) rather than a role.
10. While performance cannot be divorced from athletic careers, I suggest providing adequate team personnel qualified in athletic and personal development who are *outside* of selection decisions and are qualified, capable and valued *within* the working environment. Emphasis on this investment should be on process transparency and enabling healthy coping in adolescent athletes by combining appropriate support-seeking (athletes) referral (personnel) processes and resources (Refer also Cupples et al., 2021b). Additionally, establishing bonds between teammates, including the introduction of role models as a resource for emerging athletes, was found to be facilitative to a development and organisational performance culture (Brown & Arnold, 2019; Rothwell et al., 2019).
11. Organisations' duty of care should include support for emerging athletes exiting programmes during/after designated apprenticeship periods – not simply token responses but authentic follow-up (McGlinchey et al., 2022, p. 9) with measurable outcomes. Adolescents involved in robust athletic and personal development programmes should have developed and demonstrated more resiliency as well as adaptive coping (Williams & MacNamara, 2020). Individuals exiting out of TDEs in their late teens/early twenties still have ample time and opportunities for education and alternative careers. The critical point here is for continued mentoring and post-exit care to be available and to open their eyes to alternative options, the same as any employee who is made redundant might receive.

10.5 Opportunities for Future Research

Figure 10.2 positions the opportunities for future research alongside the three framework spheres. Fundamentally, this research affirms the ISSP’s call (Stambulova et al., 2020) for continued research across more geographical and sports environments, with a particular focus on modern developments and events in professional sporting organisations, including collegiate and youth culture. This thesis has gone wide and long, and some of the phenomena investigated (e.g., emerging athlete migrations to Australia and US colleges) have only scratched the surface. Returning to some of these areas in more depth would be advantageous, while retaining a longitudinal, relational context within a pragmatic paradigm (James, 1907). Martindale et al. (2023) argued that “feedback gleaned through this [TDEQ] process is providing information for coaches to reflect on. It is not saying what must be prioritised” (p. 9). However, I would argue follow-up research on implementations and interventions is vital to ensure greater understanding and reflection on what is working and why (Tod et al., 2019). This also highlights the challenges for research embedded in an organisation, where a need to be politically sensitive can influence the researcher’s authenticity. However, I agree that combining qualitative research with quantitative methods like TDEQ and collecting metrics to identify athlete pathways outcomes (positive and negative) will assist with strengthening this research domain.

Figure 10.2

Revised Research Scope with Future Research Opportunities



10.6 Final Remark

You can't expect athletes to trust you if they don't trust the process and system you operate inside (Keung, 2018). An organisation is not a physical entity but a combination of the people within it. Presence (availability, reliability, consistency, generous intention) and authenticity (transparency, trust, genuine, and integrity) were strongly emphasised components of supportive relationships in Case 4, and they offer freedom to be oneself and the social connection to support each other. Creating environments that recognise individuals' unique qualities can provide a collaboration that benefits all. Organisational culture does not change because of one big thing, especially something enforced, or inconsistently or inauthentically delivered. It changes because of lots of small things; as I concluded in Chapter 8, small things make a difference, and small things matter (Alder, 2015). A culture reflecting transparency but not shying away from the realities of selection and performance processes requires emerging athletes and their families to understand the harsh realities of pursuing a professional sporting career. Emerging athletes choose to pursue a career in sport, guiding them in understanding the existential freedom and meaning that goes with this will assist in their development of self-efficacy to cope with life in and beyond sport. In today's modern world, I believe accepting sport as a career choice means we can implement better solutions to assist emerging athletes through this apprenticeship. However, staff need to be able to manage these relationships and conversations, recognising and assigning the responsibility for the harder and softer skills of an athlete's development whilst promoting meaningful relationships and activities in and beyond the sporting environment.

As such, authentic relationships inside culturally responsible structures and processes can protect or at least minimise crisis in setbacks or failure. I conclude that organisational cultures promoting a holistic, relational approach to emerging athlete development can expect to enhance athlete self-efficacy and fitness (physical, psycho-social, and emotional) with corresponding positive outcomes in performance in sports and life.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Ethics Approval



AUT

TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

4 October 2021

Tony Oldham
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Tony

Re Ethics Application: 19/395 The ins and outs of professional sport: An athlete practitioner perspective

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH).

Your ethics application has been approved in stages for three years until 4 October 2024.

This approval is for all aspects of the research presented except for those that involved athletes as participants. These parts of the research are not approved and full information about them needs to be provided to and approved by AUTECH in a separate application, before athletes are recruited and data is collected from them. This needs to include information about how athletes who have transitioned out of sport involuntarily, for example through deselection or injury, will be protected and adequate risk assessment and management protocols.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. In the Information Sheet remove Dr Carina Mearns name as the AUTECH Executive Secretary;
2. AUTECH reminds the researchers that it is inappropriate in these circumstances for them to provide counselling support as they need to maintain an appropriate distance in their role as researchers.

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTECH before commencing your study.

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 AUTECH in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organizations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTECH grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organization 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.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTECH Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: pipgthomas@gmail.com; Patricia Lucas

Appendix 2 – Research Questions

Start with the participant's story: Tell me about your career and experience in/with <>

Roles, Identity and Authenticity

1. What is your role? What other key roles are priorities in your life?
2. When and how did you become a <>? Why did you choose to be <>?
3. What do you like best, find most rewarding about this role? Least?
4. How important is being a <> in your life? What do you most enjoy about being a <>? What are the rewards? What are the costs?
5. What events in your career did/have you found the most challenging/rewarding?
6. When do you find being a <role> conflicts with other roles in your life? What do you do?

Relationships with Others

1. Which relationships would you say are key to fulfilling your role successfully?
2. How do these relationships affect you either positively or negatively?
3. Which relationships do you consider have/are the most influential in your <> career? Why?
4. What frustrates you about working with <> at times?

Values / Meaning

1. What three words or phrases would you use to describe yourself and/or your values? Or how others might describe you? What values do you look for in others? Are they the same?
2. How do you think these characteristics influence your relationships?
3. What influences how you feel in an environment?
4. When did/do you feel conflicted, consciously, or unconsciously? How did you handle these situations/relationships?

Freedom and Responsibility

1. As a <role> what decisions/choices/sacrifices did/do you make to fulfil your role? Were these difficult? What were the implications?
2. What involvement do you with others in your sports environment that you consider is?
 - a. within your role description
 - b. outside your role description
3. When stress or conflict occurs, how do you approach this?
4. Who do you turn to for support? Why?
5. Wellbeing is a big topic in sport these days – what are your thoughts on how this is being managed in your sport at the moment?
6. Looking back would you change anything about yourself and/or do anything differently?

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