



**The cultural transition of Indigenous Australian athletes' into professional sport**

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# The cultural transition of Indigenous Australian athletes' into professional sport

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**Abstract:** This article reports on a study that inquired into the journeys of sixteen Indigenous Australian athletes from their first touch of the footy to the Australian Football League (AFL) and National Rugby League (NRL) that identified two distinct stages of their journeys. These were: (1) the development of expertise and of a distinctly Aboriginal style of play from their first touch of a footy to around the age of thirteen and, (2) a process of cultural transitioning toward and into the AFL and NRL. This article takes an interdisciplinary approach to focus on the second stage of transitioning into the world of professional sport and sport as business. Identifying this as a process of cultural transitioning from local Aboriginal culture to the culture of professional sport provided insight into this transitioning process while illuminating the profound importance of culture in this process. It also helped identify the ways in which tensions between local approaches to ‘footy’ as play and cultural expression and professional sport as work, within the global culture of sport-as-business, were manifested in the challenges that the participants had to overcome. This article thus contributes to knowledge about Indigenous development of sporting expertise, of the specific challenges they face in transitioning into the global culture of commodified sport and how they succeed from a cultural perspective.

**Key words:** Indigenous sport; Australian sport; cultural transitioning; culture; global, local, commodification; economic rationalism.

## Introduction

On February 10, 2017 the Indigenous All Stars team overpowered the World All Stars team 34-8 to confirm the dominance of Indigenous Australians in rugby league. Only making up 3 percent of the Australian population (ABS, 2011), Indigenous Australians account for up to 14 percent of players in the NRL (National Rugby League) and the AFL (Australian Football League) (Harvey & Halloran, 2010) while constituting 35 percent of players in the Australian national rugby league team (Evans, Wilson, Dalton & Georgakis, 2015). While some recent attention has sought to explain this success beyond it being a reflection of innate racial qualities (Adair, 2012; Adair & Stronach, 2010; Evans, Wilson, Dalton & Georgakis, 2015; Light & Evans, 2017), the ways in which Indigenous players are able to succeed in transitioning into the world of professional sport has received scant attention (see for an exception, Campbell & Sonn, 2009).

To redresses this oversight this article reports on a three-year study that inquired into the journeys of sixteen Indigenous Australians (eight AFL and eight NRL players) from their first touch of the 'footy' to entering the AFL or NRL as a process of learning. The findings of the study identified two distinct stages of development with the first stage involving the development of a distinctly Aboriginal approach to play and learning up to around the age of twelve or thirteen shaped by Aboriginal culture that we have recently reported on in this journal (Light & Evans, 2017). Here we report on the second stage, which involved a process of transitioning from mostly small communities shaped by Aboriginal culture to the culture of professional sport shaped by a global culture of the sport industry and economic rationalism. The small communities we refer to are relatively isolated communities in the Northern Territory for three of the AFL

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2  
3 participants and a rural community in West Australia for one. Each of the NRL  
4  
5 participants came from small rural communities in Queensland and the Northern  
6  
7 Territory with five coming from rural New South Wales.  
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10  
11 In this article we adopt an interdisciplinary approach by drawing on a body of work in  
12  
13 psychology on cultural transitioning (see, Ryba, Stanbulova & Ronkainen, 2016) that we  
14  
15 locate within larger social, economic and cultural fields through Bourdieu's work on  
16  
17 cultural reproduction to better understand the nature of these transitions. In doing so we  
18  
19 identify the importance of (1) having a good mentor and (2) life lessons learned from  
20  
21 family and community for this transition. Through this approach we are able to identify  
22  
23 how local communities and culture, and larger social, cultural and economic fields shape  
24  
25 individual experience and learning. This allows us to add to knowledge about the  
26  
27 challenges faced by Indigenous athletes in adapting to the culture of professional sport  
28  
29 while redressing a gap in the literature on athlete cultural transitioning by accounting for  
30  
31 the significant differences between Aboriginal culture and a global culture of  
32  
33 commodified sport.  
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### 43 **Athlete transitioning**

44  
45 We draw on the work of Schlossberg (1981) on transitioning to provide a way of  
46  
47 conceptualizing the challenges faced by the participants in adapting to the immense  
48  
49 cultural differences between the small communities where most of them learned to play  
50  
51 and the culture of commodified, professional sport. This approach offers a useful way of  
52  
53 contextualizing how, from around the age of twelve or thirteen the participants in this  
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55 study adapted to an increasingly professional culture of sport and to living in non-  
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3 Indigenous settings. In this article we define a transition as any event experienced by the  
4 individual that significantly changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles  
5  
6 (Schlossberg, 1981).  
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10 Despite the growing literature on athlete transitioning the adjustments required by  
11 athletes to culturally transition within the global, transnational sport industry (or market)  
12 and the implications these have for their sport performance and lives outside and around  
13 their sport (see, Ryba et al., 2016) have been largely overlooked. Identification of the  
14 pivotal importance of culture in the study we draw on in this article thus makes a valuable  
15 contribution toward advancing knowledge about athlete career transitions from a cultural  
16 perspective as a core component of the inter-disciplinary approach we draw on to  
17 understand the nature and implications of the participants' transitions into professional  
18 sport. We then locate this process within larger social, cultural and economic fields, with  
19 a focus on how tensions between local, Indigenous sporting culture, and global cultures  
20 of sport shaped by economic rationalism, by drawing on the sociology of Pierre  
21 Bourdieu.  
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### 41 **Cultural transition**

42 There is a body of work on the challenges facing transnational athletes as a process of  
43 cultural adaptation that we drew on to understand the process of adapting an Aboriginal  
44 approach to professional and commodified sport as one of cultural transition (see,  
45 Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Ryba, Stanbulova, & Ronkainen, 2016; Schinke, McGannon,  
46 Battochio, & Wells, 2013). This work draws upon a number of transition models that  
47 outline the different types of transitions that individuals face. A transition generally  
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3 results from one or a combination of events which leads to a change in assumptions about  
4  
5 oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and  
6  
7 relationships (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011). As a result, transitions are  
8  
9 related to the developmental context in which they occur and include those transitions  
10  
11 inherent in their involvement in sporting contexts, as well as those related to their  
12  
13 development at psychological, psychosocial, academic, and/or vocational levels  
14  
15 (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Learning how to transition into a different culture of footy  
16  
17 emerged as being critical to the participants' development into expert players competing  
18  
19 at the highest levels in Australian football and rugby league from the age of around  
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21 twelve. However, little is known about the adjustments required by athletes to culturally  
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23 transition within the global, transnational sport industry or market and on their  
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25 implications for sport performance and their lives outside, around and beyond sport  
26  
27 (Ryba et al., 2016).  
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### 33 34 35 36 **Habitus, field and practice**

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38 Here we briefly identify and outline the key analytic concepts of Bourdieu that we used  
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40 to shift substantive theory, as a theory of action for the specific context we were studying,  
41  
42 to conceptual theory that was used to make conceptual distinctions and organize ideas in  
43  
44 the latter stage of the grounded theory process.  
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48  
49 *Habitus* is the key concept through which, Bourdieu avoids oppositional relationships  
50  
51 in an approach that Wacquant (1998, p. 217) describes as being 'resolutely anti-dualistic'.  
52  
53 It is the embodied social history of the individual comprising a set of dispositions and  
54  
55 inclinations that structure action, thinking and behaviour. It is constructed through the  
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3 individual's participation in the social and cultural *practices* of a cultural *field*, *subfield* or  
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5 communities within them over time ranging from the communities the participants grew  
6  
7 up in to the larger cultural fields of sport and business. Structured by past social  
8  
9 experiences the *habitus* structures individual responses to particular circumstances  
10  
11 (Bourdieu, 1986). Although individual life trajectories are different, those who pass  
12  
13 through similar *fields* tend to develop a similar *habitus* that reflects the successful  
14  
15 negotiation of particular environments in life but it is not coherent and may display  
16  
17 varying degrees of integration and tension depending upon the social settings that have  
18  
19 shaped it (Wacquant, 2006).  
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24  
25 *Practice* mediates between *field* and *habitus* with them being mutually-constituting  
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27 and the activities that people take part in produced by the interaction of agency and social  
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29 structure such as the individual actions of the participants and the ways in which this was  
30  
31 influenced by the tensions between the field of sport for sports sake and that of sport as  
32  
33 business. In this article we consider *habitus* in relation to Bourdieu's other key concepts  
34  
35 and particularly those of *field* and *practice*. Bourdieu uses his key concepts to capture the  
36  
37 complexity of social existence and capture the relationship between the individual and  
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39 his/her social world is one of mutual possession in which, "the body is in the social world  
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41 but the social world is in the body" (Bourdieu, 1982, cited Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:  
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## 52 **Methodology**

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54 The study drawn on in this article combined narrative inquiry and constructivist,  
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56 grounded theory methodology as an interpretive approach to provide a subjective  
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3 perspective and a holistic understanding of experience and learning in particular socio-  
4 cultural settings (Lal, Suto & Ungar, 2012). It used a life history type interview as used to  
5 capture people's own perceptions of their lives (see Goodson & Sykes, 2001). This and  
6 the emphasis placed on locating theory within narrative allowed us to keep the stories  
7 intact while identifying emerging ideas and themes to develop theories from that were  
8 grounded in the data.  
9

10  
11 The combined, methodological approach used complemented the importance of telling  
12 stories in Aboriginal culture (Bamblett, 2013) that we aligned with the Indigenous  
13 methodology of *dadirri*. *Dadirri* requires a degree of empathy, sensitivity and openness  
14 on the part of the researcher. Grounded theory suited this purpose due to its rigorous,  
15 open ended and inductive approach. The methods used in this approach require the  
16 researcher remaining non-judgemental with understanding generated through non-  
17 intrusive observation, deep, active listening that involves "hearing with more than the  
18 ears", building knowledge through sensitivity and awareness, and developing  
19 understanding through contemplation and reflection (Atkinson, 2000: 16).  
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#### 40 41 *Participants*

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43 Sixteen Indigenous players participated in the study with eight having played in the AFL  
44 and eight in the NRL. Within the AFL cohort four players were initially approached  
45 through the Indigenous manager for the Australian Football League Players Association  
46 with a snowball sampling approach used to recruit the other four. The NRL cohort  
47 sample was also selected using a purposive and snowballing approach to recruit  
48 participants. The criteria were that they had to be Indigenous and were playing in or had  
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3 played in the AFL or NRL within the past fifteen years. Of the eight AFL participants  
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5 one was still playing but not at AFL level. One had retired less than five years before the  
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7 first interview with five having retired around ten years prior and one around fifteen years  
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9 before. Three were from the Northern Territory, two from Adelaide, one each from the  
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11 suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne and one from rural West Australia. One NRL player  
12  
13 was playing at the time of the interviews with the other seven having retired ten years or  
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15 fewer prior to the interviews. One grew up in Sydney, one was from North Queensland,  
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17 one from the Northern Territory and five from rural NSW. Of the sixteen participants ten  
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19 were from small rural or remote communities.  
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### 27 *Data generation and analysis*

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29 Data were generated using an initial life history type interview of approximately one hour  
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31 in which the participants were asked to tell their story from their first exposure to their  
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33 sport to making the AFL or NRL. The duration of the interviews varied from 50 minutes  
34  
35 to 70 minutes. Initial coding of this narrative data and then focused coding (Charmaz,  
36  
37 2006) was developed through shifting to grounded theory and the use of two more rounds  
38  
39 of shorter and more focused, semi structured interviews. This enabled us to develop  
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41 emergent, and then substantive, theories grounded in the data that were connected with  
42  
43 the formal theory of Bourdieu and of athlete transitioning in the latter stages of the  
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45 process where we integrated substantive theories to move to conceptual theory, which is a  
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47 major challenge in grounded theory.  
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3 The University of Sydney granted ethical approval for this study with pseudonyms used  
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5 for all names and places or institutions where possible to maintain anonymity.  
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## 10 **Findings**

11  
12 Here we trace the participants' experiences of learning to play footy, shaped by  
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14 Aboriginal culture, and then outline and discuss their transition toward and into the AFL  
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16 and NRL. We then focus on the two socio-cultural factors that most assisted their  
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18 transition into the AFL and NRL. These were: having effective mentors and drawing on  
19  
20 learning from family and community for the strength required to overcome the challenges  
21  
22 involved in cultural adaptation on and off the field. This transition involved dealing with  
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24 what Ryba et al. (2016, p. 8) describe as the "mismatch between their own mode of  
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26 being" and their new social and cultural contexts.  
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### 37 *Early experiences: Aboriginal cultures and contexts*

38 All of the sixteen participants' exposure to 'footy' began from early childhood where  
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40 it was a prominent cultural practice (Light & Evans. 2017). Most grew up in small,  
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42 Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, West Australia and rural New South  
43  
44 Wales and Queensland where day-to-day social life and learning was shaped by  
45  
46 Aboriginal culture. A few grew up in suburban settings in Melbourne, Sydney and  
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48 Adelaide characterized by cultural diversity but in which the influence of Aboriginal  
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50 culture was still significant for these participants. As they developed their expertise and  
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52 moved toward and into professional sport they had to adapt their training and playing  
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54 approaches without losing what made it attractive to AFL and NRL clubs and were  
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3 increasingly faced with the challenge of adapting their Aboriginal approach to a very  
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5 different culture of sport while also adapting to new ways of living. They had to adapt the  
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7 culture-specific abilities, understandings and embodied knowledge they had developed to  
8  
9 far more structured, monitored and constraining approaches than those they had learned  
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11 through as children. This involved adapting to regimes of individual accountability,  
12  
13 measurement, statistics, the structures of large clubs and detailed team tactics in the  
14  
15 pursuit of success. They had to adapt to an environment shaped by a global culture of  
16  
17 sport as business and approaches to training and playing that Duncan (2016) argues  
18  
19 characterize contemporary, commodified sport and which Huizinga (1938/49) suggests,  
20  
21 mirrors the economic rationalism of the capitalist world. This also suggests how this  
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23 transitioning was shaped by the contradictory *doxa* of the fields of sport for sport sake  
24  
25 and sport as business (Bourdieu, 1978, 1986). *Doxa* are the unquestionable beliefs and  
26  
27 sets of assumptions taken for granted in a field or subfield that can also reinforce social  
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29 limits within the field/subfield captured in the individual's sense of place and belonging,  
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31 and acceptance of the 'natural order of things' (Bourdieu, 1986).  
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39 Adapting to the culture of AFL and NRL clubs required adapting an Aboriginal  
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41 approach that was open, free flowing, creative, intuitive and was expressive of Aboriginal  
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43 culture (Butcher & Judd, 2007; Hallinan & Judd 2007; Stronach, Maxwell & Taylor,  
44  
45 2012) to a structured, professional approach to play shaped by global developments in  
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47 sport.  
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50 From the mid nineteenth century Australian football developed as a game with more  
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52 spontaneity than most other football codes and encouraged players to play with flair and  
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54 freedom (see, Murray, 1994). This is how Indigenous Australians still play in central and  
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3 northern Australia (Butcher and Judd, 2016) but contrasts with contemporary AFL in  
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5 which, “teams have set plays, game plans, specific structures and instructions players are  
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7 to follow, all of which reduce the creativity and inventiveness of players” (Duncan, 2016,  
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9 p. 62).  
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### 12 13 14 15 *Cultural transitioning into the AFL and NRL* 16

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18 The participants grew up with footy as a meaningful practice in their communities and  
19  
20 culture (authors’ publication) but their movement toward and into the AFL and NRL  
21  
22 involved increasing exposure and adjustment to the practice of footy with different  
23  
24 meanings and within different socio-cultural contexts. They had to adapt to different  
25  
26 ways of playing and training with all but one also moving away from family, small  
27  
28 communities and the culture they had grown up in into bigger, foreign and confronting  
29  
30 socio-cultural environments.  
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36 Two participants felt so lonely that they cried every night for the first year or two of  
37  
38 being in an AFL club with others (AFL and NRL) feeling the displacement, isolation and  
39  
40 alienation that research on athlete transnational transition commonly identifies (see, Ryba  
41  
42 et a., 2012; Ryba et al., 2016; Shinke at al., 2013). Some of the NRL players were also  
43  
44 intimidated by playing against “grown men” at seventeen or eighteen years of age in a  
45  
46 heavy contact sport. Two suffered serious injuries in their first couple of years in the  
47  
48 NRL and one was demoted to a lower team or competition due to a number of injuries.  
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50 Ryan had injured his shoulder earlier but recovered and was playing well enough in  
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52 reserve grade to feel he was next in line to be promoted back to first grade but damaged  
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54 his other shoulder twice:  
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7 I was like the next player that's going to move into first grade, that's how they saw  
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9 it but the following year, it didn't eventuate that way because I dislocated my other  
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11 shoulder twice... I was 18, I played five first grade games, but I just wasn't ready  
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13 mentally, physically, it felt like there was a long way to go.  
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20 While injury is a common concern for any professional athlete it is accentuated for  
21  
22 those transitioning into different cultures of the sport and of life outside sport along with  
23  
24 the worrying threat of being demoted that three of the NRL participants said they faced  
25  
26 (see, Ryba et al., 2016). In this study this was more pronounced due to the stark  
27  
28 differences between the collective and supportive nature of the communities they grew up  
29  
30 in and the highly individualized world of professional sport as business. For example,  
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32 Danny (NRL) noted the problems he had adapting to an emphasis on individual  
33  
34 responsibility when compared to the collective nature of Indigenous culture that he  
35  
36 described:  
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42 It's part of our culture to do things as a group, to enjoy each other's company and  
43  
44 all that sort of stuff and I think that's what comes into why Indigenous people play  
45  
46 football the way they do and why they enjoy training the way they do.  
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50  
51 Succeeding in the AFL or NRL required the participants being able to deal with  
52  
53 significant personal, psychological and emotional challenges involved in transitioning  
54  
55 into the culture of professional sport and the foreign culture surrounding it. Although  
56  
57 these are also experiences that would be similar for non-Indigenous players from the rural  
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3 areas moving to the bigger cities in Australia they had the added challenge of adapting to  
4  
5 such significant cultural differences.  
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9 The more individualized approach to training, characterized by constant measuring  
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11 and monitoring of performance and fitness, individual accountability and the need for  
12  
13 individual discipline was confronting for most participants. For example, Bernie (NRL)  
14  
15 found being ‘up’ and ‘on’ every day in a highly competitive environment without a sense  
16  
17 of community a challenge for him and one that is typically faced by Indigenous players  
18  
19 (Schinke, Michel, Gauthier, Danielson, Peltier, et al., 2006). Carl (AFL) struggled to deal  
20  
21 with structure as soon as he began to play in higher-level teams and quit a representative  
22  
23 schoolboy team to return to his local club at the age of fifteen. Two years later he was  
24  
25 drafted into an AFL club in Melbourne where he initially struggled with the emphasis  
26  
27 placed on fitness, strength training and demands for meeting measurable standards but  
28  
29 enjoyed anything where he had ball in hand and was relevant to playing the game: “The  
30  
31 speed I was okay at, the weights? I wasn’t lifting the heaviest weights, but as soon as the  
32  
33 footballs came out, there was a sense of – how would you say it? I was comfortable.”  
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35 This was also where he felt he outperformed the other players.  
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43 As the participants moved from playing footy for enjoyment and cultural expression to  
44  
45 playing footy as work they experienced something of a disjunction between the game  
46  
47 they had grown up with and its professional version (see, Schinke, et al., 2006) that could  
48  
49 be seen as a misfit between their playing *habitus* and the *doxa* of sport as business. In  
50  
51 their local communities they not only learned the techniques and skills of the game but  
52  
53 also important cultural lessons that Bruner (1996) suggests cannot be separated from  
54  
55 other learning. To different degrees, the communities that the participants grew up in  
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3 were shaped by a broader notion of an Aboriginal approach to playing footy. This was  
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5 not only evident in small communities in the Northern Territory, West Australia and rural  
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7 NSW and Queensland but also in diverse communities in the suburbs of Adelaide,  
8  
9 Melbourne and Sydney. Carl (Melbourne) and Toby (Sydney) did not grow up in  
10  
11 Indigenous communities but had strong identities as Indigenous Australians and played  
12  
13 with other Indigenous Australians as they developed. Toby's mentor in Adelaide had also  
14  
15 helped him find his country, which helped him deal with the challenges of fitting in by  
16  
17 affirming his sense of Aboriginal identity.  
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### 26 *The influence of mentors*

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29 Opinions on the use and effectiveness of mentoring in education are widespread and  
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31 diverse with some controversy about its efficacy, meaning and the differences between  
32  
33 mentoring and coaching (Bodkin-Andrews, Harwood, McMahon & Priestly, 2013). In  
34  
35 relation to the use of mentoring to improve Indigenous educational outcomes Bodkin-  
36  
37 Andrews et al. (2013) also suggest that understanding of the term must extend beyond a  
38  
39 simplistic view of it as merely being a process of role-modelling. In the sport coaching  
40  
41 literature mentoring is seen as a role played by coaches in developing their athletes  
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43 beyond the improvement of technique with the term generally taken to refer to guiding  
44  
45 and supporting them (see, Chambers, 2015). Lyle (2005) suggests that the term, mentor,  
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47 might better describe the more holistic and person-centred role that characterizes much  
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49 contemporary coaching.  
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4 Mentor implies a close and familiar relationship with a focus on more than merely  
5  
6 developing skill and technical competence to suggest a holistic development of the  
7  
8 athlete that inherently involves relationships of trust and respect between coach and  
9  
10 athlete (Bloom, 2013). It is a relationship in which they develop, “trusting relationships  
11  
12 with athletes to nourish and catalyze their personal and athletic development” (Bloom,  
13  
14 Durand-Bush, Schinke & Salmela, 1998: 211-278). Having a mentor during their cultural  
15  
16 transition made a significant contribution toward most of the participants’ ability to adapt  
17  
18 to more structured approaches to training and playing and to making sense of a different  
19  
20 culture of footy.  
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24  
25 From the age of twelve Alvin moved from the Northern Territory to rural Victoria for  
26  
27 six months of the year over a two-year period. In Victoria he lived with an uncle who was  
28  
29 also coach of the team he played in and helped him adjust to training and approaches to  
30  
31 play that were more structured than what he had been used to. At sixteen he stayed with  
32  
33 the family of another uncle in Adelaide who mentored him in adapting to the professional  
34  
35 approach and after being drafted into an AFL club a few years later his (non-Indigenous)  
36  
37 coach acted as a mentor for him and was central to his success as player and his  
38  
39 development as a person:  
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45 I still remember him saying, one day you’ll be a great leader for your people, and I  
46  
47 sort of had a giggle at the time, just thinking ‘yeah’, and you’ll potentially be the  
48  
49 captain of this club one day...I was thinking no way will I get be getting up  
50  
51 speaking in front of people or media or whatever but I just sort of grew into it.  
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3 When he moved to Sydney Danny (NRL) lived with an Aboriginal rugby league legend,  
4  
5 Andy Brown (pseudonym), for a few months and stayed in contact with him after that.  
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7  
8 Andy helped Danny adjust to the culture of the NRL and encouraged him to persevere  
9  
10 after being dropped from the first grade squad in his NRL club. Up until being drafted  
11  
12 into the AFL Toby did not have an effective mentor until his move into an AFL club in  
13  
14 Adelaide where his Indigenous mentor, Allen (pseudonym), was pivotal to his success:  
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21 He became like a brother or father or father figure you get put in that kind of space  
22  
23 that was what his family did as well. It was only when I got there that I actually  
24  
25 really, really flourished...I almost solely put it down as being with Allen.  
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32  
33 Carl (AFL) had immense talent that was evident from a young age but he struggled  
34  
35 with the processes of transitioning from the Aboriginal culture of footy into and toward  
36  
37 the culture of professional footy from the age of thirteen onwards. He quit a schoolboys'  
38  
39 representative team because he felt the structure took the joy out of footy. His club coach  
40  
41 made an effort to help him but it was not until making it to the AFL that he felt he had an  
42  
43 effective mentor who could help him transition into the culture of professional footy:  
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51 (He) just painted the canvas of what you need to do to win AFL games. So I started  
52  
53 realizing what I needed to do and then what my teammates needed to do and just  
54  
55 painted a clear picture on how football is played.  
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3 Mick's (AFL) most effective mentor in West Australia was his coach from the age of  
4  
5 fourteen to eighteen who taught him what he said were important lessons about stepping  
6  
7 up to more competitive environments. His mentor also cared about Mick as a person and  
8  
9 treated him with respect and consideration, which some suggest are the characteristics of  
10  
11 a good mentor coach (see, Bloom et al., 1998; Lyle, 2005).  
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19  
20 Bernie (NRL) had very strong support from his family and community and saw his  
21  
22 best friend's father and his high school coach as mentors who had guided him, and  
23  
24 encouraged him over his high school years. However, this was no so much a case of  
25  
26 having to suddenly adjust to more structured approaches to training and playing as most  
27  
28 other participants did because this was the approach taken over his years at a specialist  
29  
30 sports school that facilitated his transition. Barry (AFL) lacked any significant mentors  
31  
32 over his career. He had a very talented older brother who guided him when he was young  
33  
34 but who was not around after being drafted into the AFL at seventeen. His mother and  
35  
36 other people helped him on his AFL journey but there was no, one person who acted as  
37  
38 an effective mentor for his development as a footy player, which seemed to contribute to  
39  
40 his late entry into the AFL.  
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46  
47 Ryan's (NRL) move into year 11 and 12 at a non government school which was well  
48  
49 known for its excellence in rugby league exposed him to more structured ways of training  
50  
51 and playing as preparation for making it to the NRL at seventeen. The coach of the first  
52  
53 grade team encouraged him to work hard on his strength and fitness and took some  
54  
55 interest in him, which saw him selected in first grade at the age of eighteen. In the  
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3 absence of a good mentor, when Ryan suffered serious injury he had to rely on his own  
4  
5 motivation to come back from injury and work his way back into first grade.  
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12 *Learning from family and community*  
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15 All of the participants identified the importance of the life lessons they learned in their  
16  
17 communities and/or families for adapting to new environments for living and ways of  
18  
19 playing footy. Schlossberg (1981) sees a transition as being any event that changes  
20  
21 relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles through the individual's experiences of it  
22  
23 and suggests the importance of the situation, self, social support and strategies for  
24  
25 successfully negotiating them. This offers some insight into how the sixteen Aboriginal  
26  
27 athletes in this study succeeded in adapting to the world of professional sport.  
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32  
33 Schlossberg's identification of the importance of social support for coping with  
34  
35 transition in terms of the influence of (1) intimate relationships, (2) family units, (3)  
36  
37 networks of friends and (4) institutions and communities is reflected in our findings.  
38  
39 During their early experiences of moving from the small communities in which they laid  
40  
41 the foundations of expertise (Light & Evans, 2017) toward and into the AFL and NRL  
42  
43 most of the participants enjoyed the support of social networks, their communities and  
44  
45 intimate relationships such as with their mothers. While most participants had guidance  
46  
47 from fathers when very young by the time they had set their sights on making the AFL or  
48  
49 NRL in their teens five AFL players and three NRL players were in single parent  
50  
51 (mother) families. Moving toward the AFL and NRL involved leaving these familiar  
52  
53 surroundings for increasingly challenging cultural contexts that the values they had  
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3 learned, strong identity as Aboriginals and links with their communities and families  
4 assisted them in meeting. Most expressed gratitude for their mother's guidance and  
5 strength of character and wanted to make their family and community proud: "Like the  
6 people up in Darwin - make a name for myself but also the big drive thing was to make  
7 her (his mother) proud and pretty much say thank you in a way because you can never  
8 thank your parents enough" (Alvin - AFL).  
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18 For four participants this transition included adapting to a new and very different  
19 school environment that typically presents a challenge for any young person (see, Engec,  
20 2006) but which was accentuated due to the other challenges involved in a major cultural  
21 transitioning (see, Shinke, et al., 2013). Danny (NRL) missed the community feel of his  
22 school back home and felt isolated at his Sydney school:  
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32 I went to school down here and went to Madison College and I just couldn't get  
33 over the, you know, the fact that people stuck to themselves a lot and there were not  
34 many people to interact with and so I used to spend a lot of time in the library by  
35 myself.  
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44 Intimate relationships such as those with uncles or aunties, a brother or a boyfriend of a  
45 sister or the family of a friend were of great help in adjusting to new environments for  
46 some but a few others had no mentors or contacts to help them. In these cases they said  
47 they relied on what they had learned from their families and communities to give them  
48 the strength to endure and succeed.  
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3 Mothers were central to providing most of the participants with the ability to succeed  
4 in adapting to non-Indigenous ways of training and playing and particularly for those  
5 with single mothers. For example, Alvin felt his mother had given him a life education  
6 that allowed him to achieve his dream: "...you get trials and setbacks and if you're  
7 serious about what you want to achieve, and like I said, I was strong on what I wanted  
8 and the thing behind it all was my mum."  
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18 Malcolm (AFL) also recognized the importance of his mother for his transitioning into  
19 professional sport: "I was learning lessons that I didn't know I was learning, and about  
20 responsibility... So these little things I learned along the way and I think she's been an  
21 inspirational person in my life." Danny was also confronted with significant emotional  
22 and physical challenges upon joining his first NRL team that required strong "character"  
23 and confidence in his ability to succeed that he said that his father and mother had helped  
24 him develop. Carl's father had supported his footy from an early age with a focus on his  
25 attitude and behaviour on the field:  
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The only time dad gave me advice was when I either lost my temper and how  
should I go about it...dad would have had a big influence, a massive influence  
just on me in terms of keeping your cool and keeping your temper.

51  
52 Mark's (AFL) biggest challenge was moving from a remote community in the Northern  
53 Territory to spend six years in an elite independent school in Sydney where the support  
54 he received from his Aunty was pivotal to his success at school and in footy. Barry's  
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3 (AFL) brother had also exerted a positive influence on him growing up but has far less  
4 influence from the time he had been drafted into an AFL team at the age of 17. Danny  
5  
6 (NRL) had very strong connections with his family and his community in the NSW  
7  
8 country that sustained him in Sydney. For him, the values of his 'mob' and his  
9  
10 connection with them gave him confidence and the ability to deal with the challenges he  
11  
12 had to face:  
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22 Having strong connection to your community is something I'm really passionate  
23 about and really proud of. All my mob back home are very important to me about  
24 whether they're family or they're not family. When I go back it's about trying to  
25 inspire them to be better and to do better in their lives.  
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34 For Ryan (NRL), his people, his family, community and his (Aboriginal) country made  
35 him the sort of person who could succeed in rugby league. His experiences of growing up  
36 in this meaningful and supportive environment promoted confidence in his ability to  
37 succeed and helped him deal with adversity at the Cougars (pseudonym) in the early  
38 stages of his NRL career.  
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47 Bernie had remained in the same suburb in Sydney up until the end of his first five  
48 years in the NRL and stayed in contact with his family and community. He felt it kept  
49 him grounded and gave him the confidence to deal with adversity. His ability to give  
50 back to his community and how he felt it inspired young people in the community also  
51 motivated him:  
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3 ... you can see that it inspires others around them so that it can create positive  
4  
5 change in a community or in some individual's lives, and that's probably the  
6  
7 biggest part of our rugby league, was my impact on other people, and to try and  
8  
9 help and change their lives.  
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## 17 Discussion

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20 The participants who made the smoother transitions into the AFL and NRL identified the  
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22 grounding they developed from their communities and families (and their mothers in  
23  
24 particular), their sense of Aboriginal identity and effective mentoring as being of pivotal  
25  
26 importance. While this aligns with Schlossberg's (1981) emphasis on the importance of  
27  
28 social support for coping with transitioning it suggests a far more significant influence of  
29  
30 culture. Even for the AFL players who had not grown up in Indigenous communities,  
31  
32 their families their strong sense of Aboriginality and the influence of Aboriginal culture  
33  
34 gave them strength when they needed it. For many of the NRL participants this was  
35  
36 assisted by frequently returning to their communities with the opportunity to play at the  
37  
38 annual NSW Aboriginal (rugby league) Knockout (see, Norman, 2012) being very  
39  
40 important to them.  
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47 Entering the AFL or NRL involved a shift from a form of play toward it becoming  
48  
49 work and the need for discipline, effort and individual responsibility. This contrasted with  
50  
51 the ways in which the participants learned to play footy up until the age of around twelve  
52  
53 through impromptu games that seemed to offer what Hendricks (2006) calls 'laboratories  
54  
55 of possibility' in which the characteristics of Aboriginal play that are widely respected in  
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3 Australian sport, such as creativity, intuition, anticipation and having a ‘sixth sense’ of  
4 the game (Hallinan & Judd, 2009), flourished. Playing footy out of the familiar cultural  
5 contexts that gave it meaning when growing up was a challenge for the participants as  
6 they navigated their way from one world view to another (Shinke, et al., 2013). Locating  
7 these individual experiences within larger cultural dynamics of fields and sub fields as a  
8 process of negotiating the tensions between the local sporting culture they had grown up  
9 in and the culture of sport as business with its conflicting *doxa* emphasizes the  
10 importance of context and of culture in particular. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*  
11 contextualizes the individual experience identified through the use of the athlete  
12 transitioning framework to highlight the significance of the challenges the participants  
13 faced.  
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30 The *habitus* of the participants were constructed over long periods of time through  
31 participation in the practices of their communities and within the context of Aboriginal  
32 culture to provide a comfortable fit with community and the *subfield* of Aboriginal sport,  
33 as sport for sports sake (Bourdieu, 1978). The challenges of adapting to the global culture  
34 of professional sport reflected tensions between a *habitus* constructed in local cultures of  
35 Aboriginal sport as sport for sport sake and the *doxa* of subfield of sport as business. In  
36 doing so it locates the psychological processes involved in transitioning deeply within the  
37 context of culture and tensions between cultural fields. The powerful and implicit way in  
38 which the *habitus* structures thinking, behaviour, action, taste and dispositions, and its  
39 durable nature, suggests the magnitude of the challenge the participants all faced.  
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*The influence of larger social and cultural contexts*

The interdisciplinary thinking evident in this study allows us to see how the participants' personal, psychological experience of transitioning into the NRL and AFL were influenced by larger social, economic developments and dynamics. The participants transitioned from a local culture of Aboriginal sport to a professional culture of the same sport and in the same country but one that was strongly influenced by the global culture of sport as a commodity acutely shaped by economic rationalism. Although Australian football and rugby league are not global sports they are intimately shaped by global developments in the commodification of sport and its links with the media within the context of the intensifying globalization of media and sport (Tomlinson & Young, 2006). The term, the commodification of sport, refers to processes through which sport at elite levels has become a valuable commodity that is traded in, and subsumed into, the logic of the global marketplace as a consumer product (Stewart, 1987) with the interdependencies between sport as a commodity, the media and marketing organizations at a global level exerting a powerful influence over professional sport that extends to Australian football and rugby league (Duncan, 2016; Maguire, 1991; Raney & Brynat, 2009). As Duncan (2016: 58) suggests, the shift towards economic rationalism in the AFL is a "reflection of the economic landscape in Australia and, indeed, in most of the Western world."

The growing links between contemporary, professional sport, culture, and media promote the development of sport as a global commodity with values that can contradict those of sport-for-sports-sake (Bourdieu, 1978). Focused on AFL Duncan (2016, p. 41) draws on Huizinga to examine the 'play element' in culture and society to suggest that in pre-industrial revolution communities play produced culture but has since become, "more

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3 organized, structured, and influenced by economics” as part of the “culture industry”.  
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5 Viewed from this perspective, the cultural transitions the participants undertook to make  
6  
7 it into the AFL and NRL were not only shaped by moving from Indigenous culture to  
8  
9 mainstream culture but also by tensions between local (Aboriginal) sport culture and a  
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11 global culture of commodified, media-sport (see, Maguire, 1991).  
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## 20 **Conclusion**

21  
22 This article provides detailed insights into individual Indigenous Australians’ experiences  
23  
24 of transitioning from local cultures of footy to professional sport and the global cultures  
25  
26 shaping it to highlight the central role that culture played in these processes. It identifies  
27  
28 the vast differences and tensions between the local Aboriginal culture that shaped and  
29  
30 enhanced most of the participants’ development of expertise and a distinctive Aboriginal  
31  
32 approach to playing footy and a global culture of commodified, professional sport as a  
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34 product of economic rationalism.  
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40 The concept of transitioning (Schlossberg, 1981) and its application in athlete cultural  
41  
42 transitioning (see, Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek & Ng, 2012) provides an effective means of  
43  
44 understanding and explaining the challenges involved in making this significant transition  
45  
46 at an individual level for each of the sixteen participants. Locating this within larger  
47  
48 social, cultural and economic considerations through the use of Bourdieu’s key concepts  
49  
50 provides for a broader understanding of the cultural dimensions of this process to  
51  
52 demonstrate the potential for interdisciplinary approaches to research in this area. This  
53  
54 interdisciplinary approach contributes to knowledge about the Indigenous development of  
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3 expertise in Australian football and rugby league and to knowledge of athlete  
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6 transitioning with a focus on culture located within the tensions between local cultures of  
7  
8 sport and a global culture of commodified sport as business that is shaped by economic  
9  
10 rationalism.  
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