

**SPORT CAREER TRANSITION:  
STORIES OF ELITE INDIGENOUS  
AUSTRALIAN SPORTSMEN**

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Technology Sydney in fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In late 2006 I experienced a life-changing event. Although it was a distressing and painful experience for me and those people around me, it became a powerful and motivating force. As a consequence, I realised that we are all vulnerable, and life is short and sweet. I also learnt that I am a strong and resilient woman. It was at this time that I decided to do something significant, constructive, and worthy with my life, and to try and transform the experience into something positive. This thesis is the result. However, it would not have been possible without the guidance and help of several people, who in one way or another contributed and extended their valuable assistance in the preparation and completion of this study. It is my pleasure now to thank those individuals.

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## AUTHOR NOTES

**Capitalisation:** This thesis will follow the guidelines of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2005) regarding capitalisation, as follows:

- The ‘A’ in ‘Aboriginal’ is capitalised similar to other designations like ‘Australian’, ‘Arabic’ or ‘Nordic’. The word ‘aboriginal’ with a lowercase ‘a’ refers to an indigenous person from any part of the world. As such, it does not necessarily refer to the Aboriginal people of Australia. ‘Aboriginal people’ is a collective name for the original people of Australia and their descendants and does not emphasise the diversity of languages, cultural practices and spiritual; beliefs. This diversity is acknowledged by adding an ‘s’ to ‘people’ (‘Aboriginal peoples’). ‘Aboriginal peoples’ can also be used to refer to more than one Aboriginal person.
- The ‘I’ in ‘Indigenous’ is capitalised when referring specifically to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The lower case ‘i’ for ‘indigenous’ is only used when referring to people originating in more than one region or country such as the Pacific region, Canada or New Zealand.

**Abbreviations:** A deliberate decision was made when developing this Thesis not to abbreviate the descriptive phrase ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’. Verbalising the acronyms “ATSI” or “TI” or: “TSI” is considered culturally insensitive, as is the abbreviation of terms such as Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (NIPAAAC, 2002, p. 24). All other phrases that could be abbreviated are set out in full the first time they are referred to in each chapter prior to being used as an abbreviation thereafter.

## **PRECAUTIONARY NOTE**

The significance of cultural practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised throughout this thesis. The use of names has been kept to a minimum to respect customary laws and prevent offence to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers of this Thesis. However, at the time of reading, there may be persons named or referred to who are now deceased. The researcher does not wish to cause offence to readers, and for this reason it may not be appropriate to continue to read this Thesis.

This Thesis has been referenced according to APA 5<sup>th</sup> Guidelines. Formatting was undertaken with the use of *EndNote 9* software.

## PREAMBLE

*“It’s a rude awakening. People need to know that it’s not good. People think you’re flying but you’re not” (David, retired AFL footballer, 2009).*

*“My heritage gives me so much power it’s unbelievable. I’ve got the confidence to go out and speak in front of anyone and present Aboriginal culture. At the end of the day that’s going to stay with me for the rest of my life” (retired Indigenous footballer, David Wirrpanda, cited in the official website of The David Wirrpanda Foundation, 2011).*

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## ACRONYMS

ACE	Athlete Career and Education
ACG	Australian Commonwealth Government
ACGA	Australian Commonwealth Games Association
AFL	Australian Football League
AFLPA	Australian Football League Players' Association
AI	Athletic Identity
AIBA	International Amateur Boxing Association
AIMS	Athlete Identity Measurement Scale
AIS	Australian Institute of Sport
AOC	Australian Olympic Committee
ARDI	Athletes' Retirement Decision Inventory
ARL	Australian Rugby League
ASC	Australian Sports Commission
BAI	Boxing Australia Inc.
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CMACT	Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition
CTBI	Chronic Traumatic Brain Injury
EAFU	Elite Athlete Friendly University
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
MCG	Melbourne Cricket Ground (also colloquially referred to as the 'G')

MHAT	Model of Human Adaptation to Transition
NASCA	National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy
NFL	National Football League
NRL	National Rugby League
NSO	National Sporting Organisation
NTID	National Talent Identification and Development
NYC	National Youth Competition
PDM	Player Development Manager
RAP	Reconciliation Action Plan
RLPA	Rugby League Players' Association
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SCT	Sport Career Transition
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TEA	Tertiary Education Allowance
TPP	Total Player Payment
UK	United Kingdom
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VFA	Victorian Football Association
VFL	Victorian Football League
WBA	World Boxing Association



## ABSTRACT

International research into sport career transition (SCT) has consistently found that life after sport is fraught with uncertainty for elite athletes. Planning for post-sport careers is therefore most important, something that progressive sporting bodies have begun to realise in recent years. Within the sport industry, SCT programs have emerged to provide frameworks through which athletes plan for retirement, and pathways by which to transition out of sport into a new career and lifestyle.

The thesis focuses on a key problem within the SCT paradigm: that it has been presumed that an end to elite sport requires a process of adjustment that is common to all players. That rather narrow perspective fails to acknowledge the situational complexity and socio-cultural diversity of elite athletes, a population group with varied personal circumstances, and thus arguably different individual SCT needs. In developing that argument, this thesis focuses on an athlete group that does not fit ‘mainstream’ participation in elite sport, nor the ‘conventional’ SCT policy milieu. The context is Australian sport, and the focus is with a small but significant number of Indigenous athletes who, notwithstanding substantial socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural obstacles, have contributed significantly to elite-level Australian sport. While many Indigenous Australians have assumed high profile careers in sport, little is known about their transition to a life after sport, or their experiences of retirement.

To address this research gap, the thesis explores the SCT experiences of 30 current and former male Indigenous athletes from three sports: Australian Rules football (i.e., AFL), rugby league (i.e., NRL), as well as professional and amateur boxing. The inquiry uses an interpretive phenomenological methodology, and draws inspiration from a Bourdieuan conceptual framework. In depth, face-to-face interviews featuring open ended questions facilitate story-telling and narrative data collection: there is a strong emphasis on giving voice to the participants. Subsequently, Bourdieu’s sociological theories of habitus, capital, and field, provide an interpretive lens around which to frame and analyse the interview responses.

The thesis concludes that although elite sport provides Indigenous Australian athletes with many opportunities for a secure life beyond sport, these athletes remain vulnerable and at risk due to:

- 1) the primacy of Indigenous athletic identity;
- 2) assumptions about their ‘natural’ acumen as athletes;
- 3) the perpetuation of racialised beliefs and behaviours;
- 4) the sense of Indigenous responsibility for, and commitment to, extended families and traditional community networks, and
- 5) a perceived Indigenous invisibility that tends to reduce the range career choices thought available to Indigenous athletes after sport.

Indigenous AFL footballers, rugby league players and boxers have needs that will continue to evolve over time. Sport managers need to recognise this changing environment, their responsibilities to the professional development of athletes, and the needs and perspectives of Indigenous sportsmen playing elite-level sport. The thesis provides an understanding of this situation, by giving voice to stakeholders, who demonstrate that Indigenous athletes experience SCT in complex and unique ways.