

On the Transition into Elite Rugby League: Perceptions of Players and Coaching Staff

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Authors' Note

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Abstract

1
2 Transitions need to be effectively managed to allow for successful progression through
3 developmental stages in many life domains. In this study, we aimed to generate new insights into
4 within-career athletic progressions by exploring players' and coaching staff's perspectives on the
5 transition from sub-elite to elite level rugby league within an Australian context. A personal
6 construct psychology approach including experience cycle methodology was used to interview 17
7 purposefully recruited male rugby league players ($M_{age} = 21.71$, $SD = 2.79$) who had been or were
8 part of an elite rugby league squad, and 9 staff ($M_{age} = 47.14$, $SD = 11.13$) who had experience
9 working with transitioning rugby league athletes. Overall, 21 themes (11 combined, 5 unique for
10 each group) were extracted from the participants' discourse using a thematic analysis, all of which
11 were separately conceptualised into 3 global themes: *personal attributes*, *environmental factors*,
12 and *critical incidents*. Our findings provided support for the robustness of a holistic, lifespan
13 developmental perspective of career transitions in sport contexts. The theoretical integration of this
14 lifespan perspective with the Job Demands-Resources model is discussed as a fruitful avenue for
15 future research and theory.

16

17 **Keywords:** experience cycle methodology; job demands-resources model; personal construct
18 psychology; within-career transitions

19 **On the Transition into Elite Rugby League: Perceptions of Players and Coaching Staff**

20 Contemporary sport transition scholars have defined career transitions as periods of
21 normative (i.e., predictable, anticipated, voluntary) and non-normative (i.e., unpredictable,
22 unanticipated, involuntary) events throughout the developmental life course of athletes that are
23 characterised by “a set of specific demands related to practice, competitions, communication, and
24 lifestyle that athletes have to cope with in order to continue successfully in sport or to adjust to the
25 post-career” (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007, p. 713). With the recent shift towards a holistic,
26 lifespan developmental perspective of career transitions in sport contexts (e.g., Stambulova,
27 Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004), there is an increased recognition of
28 the centrality of key transitional periods other than career termination for performance excellence
29 and psychosocial well-being in the life course of an athletic career (for reviews, see Gordon &
30 Lavalley, 2011; Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013). The limited research on within-career transitions in
31 sport is surprising since it was almost 20 years ago that Stambulova (1994) identified six normative
32 transitional periods of an elite athletic career: (1) the beginning of sport specialisation, (2) the
33 transition to more intensive training in the chosen sport, (3) the transition from junior to senior/high
34 achievement sport, (4) from amateur to professional sports, (5) from peak to the final stage, and (6)
35 the transition to the post-career. Aligned with recommendations of leading sport transitions scholars
36 to broaden their focus beyond career termination (e.g., Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007;
37 Stambulova et al., 2009), we aimed to contribute to this body of knowledge on career transitions in
38 sport by exploring athletes’ and coaching staff’s perceptions of the transition from sub-elite to elite
39 sport.

40 In what can be considered an extension of Stambulova’s (1994, 2009) empirical and
41 substantive work on her athletic career transition model, Wylleman and Lavalley (2004) emphasised
42 the importance of the “whole person” including both athletic and non-athletic (e.g., academic,
43 vocational) challenges and transitions within a broader set of events across the developmental life
44 course. Their conceptual model encompasses normative transitions faced by athletes at athletic,

45 individual or psychological, psychosocial, and academic or vocational levels. The athletic level of
46 development draws from Bloom's (1985) three stage model (i.e., initiation, development, mastery)
47 and also includes a discontinuation stage to capture career termination. The second level is designed
48 to capture the major stages in an individual's psychological development (i.e., childhood,
49 adolescence, (young) adulthood). The third level is focused on changes in psycho-social
50 development relative to one's athletic development, and denotes important social agents (e.g.,
51 parents, coach, peers, romantic partners) as perceived by athletes. The fourth and final level is
52 concerned with stages and transitions of an academic (e.g., primary to high school) and vocational
53 nature. Thus, Wylleman and Lavallee have captured the concurrent, interactive, and reciprocal
54 nature of normative transitions within a lifespan (i.e., whole-career) and holistic (i.e., development
55 in different domains) perspective.

56 It is both conceptually and practically important that we gain insights into why some athletes
57 thrive through transitions into higher levels of competition, whereas others struggle to cope with the
58 demands they confront. Within an Australian sport context, approximately 50% of athletes make the
59 transition from the sub-elite to elite level experience difficulty in the form of challenges such as
60 financial problems, self-doubt, and illness, and only 33% of athletes successfully transition into the
61 senior level (Oldenziel, Gagné, & Gulbin, 2003). Other scholars have estimated the success rate at
62 which athletes successfully transition into elite sport at around 17% (Vanden Auweele, De
63 Martelaer, Rzewnicki, De Knop, & Wylleman, 2004). Elite athlete development is also a major
64 financial expenditure for many governments. For example, in the four years prior to 2012, the
65 Australian and British Governments invested over \$AU380 (approx. US\$390) million and £265
66 (approx. US\$415) million, respectively, to help their athletes succeed at the London Olympics
67 (Australian Government, 2012; UK Sport, 2012). Substantively, the transition into elite sport is a
68 phase in which individuals typically confront a variety of challenges and demands across different
69 domains of their life. Indeed, sources of stress for elite athletes can encompass environmental (e.g.,
70 selection, finances, training environment), personal (e.g., nutrition, injury), leadership (e.g.,

71 coaching styles, relationship with coach), and team issues (e.g., team atmosphere, support network;
72 Fletcher & Hanton, 2003). Therefore, the transition into elite sport is an ideal period to better
73 understand the concurrent and interactive nature of such factors of a holistic perspective on
74 transitions (cf. Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

75 Several commonalities as well as unique findings can be gleaned from initial research on
76 within-career transitions (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008; Finn & McKenna, 2010;
77 Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008). Consistent with theoretical expectations (e.g., Schlossberg,
78 1981; Stambulova et al., 2009), within-career transitions have been found to encompass dynamic
79 and complex periods that are characterised by many normative and non-normative events or non-
80 events that can be problematic for the attainment of personal goals and the maintenance of
81 psychosocial well-being. Additionally, across each of the studies conducted to date, it appears that
82 the transition to higher levels of competition is associated with a variety of stressors or demands
83 that are consistent with the four levels (i.e., athletic, psychological, psycho-social,
84 academic/vocational) of Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model of transitions.
85 Unique findings across the available research can also be found in the dynamics of these four
86 developmental layers. For example, coaches' reports of English athletes' experiences are
87 emphasised by strains that are outside of the sport context (Finn & McKenna, 2010), whereas sport-
88 related strains characterised the reports of Canadian athletes (Bruner et al., 2008). Despite these
89 encouraging results, further research is required to ascertain the robustness of these findings and
90 generate new insights into an integrated account of within-career transitions. Research that is guided
91 by theory is especially important given the largely descriptive and atheoretical nature of previous
92 research (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

93 Central to both conceptual (Stambulova, 1994, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and
94 empirical evidence (Bruner et al., 2008; Finn & McKenna, 2010; Pummell et al., 2008; see also,
95 Gordon & Lavallee, 2011; Park et al., 2013) on sport transitions is the notion of coping; that is, the
96 process of drawing on (internal and external) resources to manage those demands and challenges

97 that athletes confront in a given developmental period and which have implications for continuation
98 in their sport or adjusting to life after sport. Thus, the successful negotiation of any career transition
99 is dynamic and involves a complex interplay between the available coping *resources* and the
100 normative and non-normative *challenges or demands* they confront and which occur across
101 different domains of one's life. In keeping with this conceptualisation of coping, we propose the
102 Job-Demands-Resources model (JD-R; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; for a
103 review, see Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) as one theoretical model that can help organise existing
104 evidence as well as offer a framework for the interpretation of new findings. Despite the primary
105 tenets of the JD-R model having been empirically supported in a variety of workplace contexts and
106 occupations (e.g., Bakker & Demerouti, in press), the model has not yet been applied to sport
107 contexts.

108 Within the context of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) there are two defining
109 characteristics of the work environment. The first set of conditions relates to *job demands* and
110 includes those physical, social, or organisational aspects of the context that require sustained
111 psychological and/or physical effort and which are associated with certain physiological and/or
112 psychological costs. Job demands are central to the "impairment pathway" in which there is direct
113 positive relationship with negative outcomes (e.g., job strain, burnout) or an inverse relationship
114 with positive outcomes (e.g., engagement, well-being). With regard to previous within-career
115 transition research, for example, elite adolescent ice hockey players reported a decrease in self-
116 confidence from overly critical feedback from their coaches (Bruner et al., 2008), whereas event
117 riders associated limited communication from sport organisation as a deficiency in organisational
118 support (Pummell et al., 2008). On the other hand, *job resources* are those physical, psychological,
119 social, and organisational factors that help individuals meet performance requirements, buffer
120 against strain, and/or promote growth and development. Job resources are central to the
121 "enhancement pathway" in which there is direct positive relationship with positive outcomes (e.g.,
122 engagement, well-being) and an inverse relationship with negative outcomes (e.g., job strain,

123 burnout). With regard to previous within-career transition research, for example, elite adolescent ice
124 hockey players reported a link between emotional support from teammates and performance
125 (Bruner et al., 2008), whereas event riders associated a positive “team spirit” from informational
126 support provided by teammates and peers (Pummell et al., 2008). In addition to these main effects, a
127 key tenet of this model is that the combination of high demands and low resources leads to negative
128 outcomes, whereas the combination of high demands and high resources leads to positive outcomes
129 (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

130 In summary, the central aim of this study was to contribute to the body of knowledge on
131 career transitions in sport by exploring players’ and coaching staff’s perspectives on the transition
132 from sub-elite to elite level rugby league within an Australian context. Rugby league is an
133 international sport played in over 30 countries with Australia currently the top ranked country
134 (Rugby League International Federation, 2012). Rugby league has been played competitively in
135 Australia for 104 years (NRL, 2012). The National Rugby League (NRL) was developed in 1998
136 and administers Australia’s national competition (the highest level of national competition
137 excluding State of Origin) which consists of 16 teams (including a New Zealand team; NRL,
138 2012). There is two career pathways into the NRL. Each NRL team has an under 20s side that
139 participates in the National Youth Competition (NYC) which comprises the second-tier (or sub-
140 elite) level of the Club pathway. Alternatively, athletes can follow the State League pathway
141 comprised of independent, second-tier, open-age state competitions such as the Queensland Cup (Q-
142 Cup) and New South Wales Cup, from which NRL clubs recruit players associated with their feeder
143 teams (NRL, 2012).

144 Three key extensions of previous research were considered in our study. First, with the
145 available studies on within-career transitions having occurred in Russian (Stambulova, 1994),
146 British (Pummell et al., 2008), English (Finn & McKenna, 2010) or Canadian contexts (Bruner et
147 al., 2008), our research context offered an assessment of the extent to which these previous findings
148 extend to a culture (i.e., Australian) and sport (i.e., rugby league) not previously examined. Second,

149 we examined the perspectives of players who were at different stages of the transition process; that
150 is, players who were positioned at a sub-elite level with the prospect of transitioning into an elite
151 team, currently in the process of transitioning into the elite level, had transitioned successfully (i.e.,
152 are still playing fulltime at the elite level after several years), had transitioned into the elite level and
153 struggled to maintain their spot, and had an opportunity to transition but did not make it into the
154 elite level. Third, although athletes' viewpoints are important due to their proximity to lived
155 experiences, the perspectives of coaches and other personnel (e.g., development managers) remain
156 an untapped resource because they drive the selection process and pass on information to relevant
157 selectors (Morris, 2000). The perspectives of coaching staff are rarely featured in the transition
158 literature and can therefore offer new insights into the transition into elite sport, as well as enhance
159 the scientific rigour via multiple perspectives. In so doing, consistencies among rating sources (e.g.,
160 common themes reported by players) and unique perspectives between ratings sources (e.g., themes
161 reported by players and not coaches) can be revealed.

162 Method

163 Participants

164 Seventeen male rugby league players aged between 19 and 29 years ($M = 21.71$, $SD = 2.79$)
165 were purposefully recruited from the NRL and the Q-Cup. Six NRL clubs and one Q-Cup club were
166 represented. All participants had between one and five years ($M_{subelite} = 2.82$, $SD = 1.33$) playing
167 experience at the sub-elite level (defined as the competition one step below NRL level, e.g., NYC,
168 New South Wales Cup, Q Cup). Players with a minimum of one year experience training with an
169 NRL squad or who were contracted to an NRL squad for the first time in 2011 (counted as 1 year)
170 were recruited to participate and had a range of experience ($M_{elitesquad (years)} = 2.76$, $SD = 1.35$, Range
171 = 1 – 5; $M_{NRLGames} = 15.06$, $SD = 19.37$, Range = 0 – 65). The players were at different stages of
172 their rugby league careers with some anticipating the elite transition (i.e., were contracted to an elite
173 NRL team but had not yet played a game of NRL, defined as *second-tier players*, $n = 3$), some
174 currently in the process of transitioning (*transitioning players* who had played some NRL games

175 but were not playing NRL fulltime and had played less than 26 games or an entire regular season of
176 NRL in total, $n = 7$), those who transitioned successfully (i.e., are still playing fulltime at the elite
177 level after several years and had played more than 26 games of NRL, $n = 4$), those who transitioned
178 into the elite level for several years but struggled to maintain their spot on a fulltime basis (*partially*
179 *transitioned*, $n = 1$), those who transitioned successfully but were now playing at a second-tier level
180 to finish their career (*completed transition*, $n = 1$), and those who had an opportunity to transition
181 (i.e., received a contract with the elite squad) but did not make it into the elite level (*failed*
182 *transition*, $n = 1$). A number of different cultural groups were represented by the participants
183 including French, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Polynesian, and Caucasian.

184 Nine male coaches and support staff aged between 27 and 60 years ($M = 47.14$, $SD = 11.13$)
185 were also recruited from the NRL and Q Cup for this study. Support staff roles included strength
186 and conditioning ($n = 2$), development coach ($n = 2$), football operations/coaching and development
187 manager ($n = 2$), head coach ($n = 1$), and player welfare ($n = 1$). Five NRL clubs, one Q Cup club,
188 and the NRL organisation were represented. Coach or support staff members had extensive years
189 experience in their respective roles ($M_{elite} = 10.00$, $SD = 8.90$, $M_{subelite} = 5.44$, $SD = 4.38$) and all but
190 one were working at either an elite or sub-elite level of rugby league at the time of the interview.

191 **Interview Schedule**

192 Semi-structured interview schedules were developed separately for players and coaches. The
193 general structure of both interview guides was based on Morgan and Krueger's (1998) five main
194 question areas: opening questions, introductory questions, transition questions to link to the next
195 area, key questions, and ending questions. We developed key substantive questions using
196 experience cycle methodology (ECM; Oades & Viney, 2000), which is grounded in a personal
197 construct psychology (PCP; Kelly, 1955/1991) theoretical framework. PCP (Kelly, 1955/1991) first
198 emerged within the sport psychology literature 20 years ago with Butler and colleagues' application
199 of the performance profile technique (Butler & Hardy, 1992; Butler, Smith, & Irwin, 1993; for a
200 review, see Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009b) and has been reignited through investigations of mental

201 toughness (e.g., Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2008; Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002) and
202 choking in sport (e.g., Gucciardi, Longbottom, Jackson, & Dimmock, 2010). Central to PCP is the
203 notion that individuals act as “personal scientists” who are actively engaged in forming and testing
204 theories about their world through their ongoing experiences. Furthermore, cognition, affect, and
205 behaviour are not considered independent entities within a PCP framework but rather comprise
206 features of a holistic system that stem from a common underlying process of anticipation and
207 construction that is cyclical in nature (Kelly, 1955/1991). It is this view of human beings as holistic
208 entities that conceptually aligns PCP with the emphasis on the whole system and the
209 interdependence of its parts espoused by contemporary transition scholars (e.g., Stambulova et al.,
210 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

211 ECM provides a useful framework for capturing the cyclical process by which people are
212 said to operate within the context of PCP (Kelly, 1955/1991). Briefly, people develop certain
213 hypotheses or *anticipations* of the events or situations in their life. They then involve or *invest*
214 themselves in this anticipation of their world, which is actively experienced through their *encounter*
215 with the event or situation (akin to data collection for a scientist). Having experienced the event,
216 people compare their encounter with their initial anticipation to ascertain whether their expectations
217 were *dis/confirmed*. Finally, their decision regarding the assessment of the experience with their
218 anticipation leads to *constructive revision* in which existing constructs may be strengthened or
219 revised, or new constructs are developed for subsequent cycles of experience. Interview questions
220 were slightly modified to suit the transition phase of players (e.g., past tense for players who have
221 already transitioned into the NRL). Specifically, ECM was employed to ascertain participants’
222 perspectives on the anticipation phase (e.g., “What (were) are you expecting when you (were about
223 to) start training with the NRL squad?”); the investment phase (e.g., “What did (will) it mean to you
224 to play NRL?”); the encounter phase (e.g., “What was (is) your experience moving into the NRL
225 squad?”); the dis/confirmation phase (e.g., “How did things go compared to what you initially
226 thought would happen?”); and the constructive revision phase (e.g., “If you were to go through the

227 whole transition experience again, what would you do differently?”). Consistent with a PCP
228 approach (i.e., dichotomy corollary), coaching staff were asked to compare and contrast the
229 experiences of players who have successfully transitioned with those who were unsuccessful for
230 each of these phases of the experience cycle. Clarification and elaboration probes (e.g., “Can you
231 tell me what you mean by...?” and “Could you tell me a bit more about that?”) were used
232 throughout the interviews to add meaning to the data (Patton, 2002). Interested readers can contact
233 the corresponding author for a copy of the full interview guides.

234 **Procedure**

235 Ethics approval was obtained from the authors’ institution prior to the commencement of the
236 project. Participants were recruited via personal contacts with NRL and Q-Cup teams who
237 identified and contacted staff and players who met the selection criteria. All participants approached
238 consented to participate and only two potential participants (one staff and one player) were unable
239 to arrange times to attend an interview due to work commitments. The lead author conducted all
240 interviews to ensure consistency both in the conduct of the interview and the process of building
241 rapport. Each interview was conducted either face-to-face or via phone and took approximately 45
242 to 90 minutes and occurred during the competitive season (over a period of five months).
243 Transcription and data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection. Where possible, a
244 copy of the interview schedule was sent to participants prior to the interview.

245 **Data Analysis**

246 Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using recommendations for inductive
247 thematic analysis (Patton, 2002). First, the interview transcripts and audio files were revisited
248 several times before analysis to gain a clear appreciation of the participants’ discourse. Second, the
249 raw data were coded into an initial classification system by breaking each interview into small
250 segments of meaningful information units. Third, the individual meaning units were organised into
251 categories, then reviewed to create broader themes that identified patterns in the data and set clear
252 boundaries distinguishing different themes. The player and staff data were analysed as separate

253 groups. Common themes within each group were compiled into a final list for each group with
254 unique themes viewed as anomalies (Gilham, 2005). The final two lists of themes were then
255 compared to ascertain similarities and differences.

256 **Research Credibility**

257 Triangulation and member checking were employed to enhance research credibility. All
258 participants were given the opportunity to view a copy of the interview transcript and invited to
259 verify its accuracy and amend or clarify their responses as desired; no participants requested
260 changes or updates to their transcript. Triangulation of sources was achieved by interviewing a
261 number of athletes at different stages of development and by including staff data to increase the
262 number of sources of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, the first two named
263 authors independently analysed the data, and then collaborated to compare similarities and
264 differences to arrive at a common classification scheme. The corresponding author acted as a
265 “devil’s advocate” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and completed an audit trial upon completion of the
266 analysis process (e.g., checking raw data and classification scheme; Patton, 2002).

267 **Results and Discussion**

268 The results are presented in three sections. First, we provide a summary of the similarities
269 and differences between our findings and those of previous within-career sport transition research.
270 Second, we discuss the similarities and discrepancies between players and coaching staff. Finally,
271 we conclude with a comparison of players’ views across different transition phases. Descriptors of
272 players provided in the Participants section (e.g., “second-tier player”) are employed throughout the
273 results section to contextualise the discussion. We draw from tenets of the JD-R model (Demerouti
274 et al., 2001) to describe and interpret the findings of our study.

275 **General Findings**

276 A visual representation of the global themes and themes discussed by the participants is
277 displayed in Figure 1. Further detail for each theme, including descriptive summaries and verbatim
278 quotes, is provided in Table 1. Overall, the findings supported the notion that the transition process

279 is a fluid balance of personal and environmental demands and resources across four developmental
280 domains (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Specific themes reported by the participants were largely
281 consistent with previous research on within-career transitions in sport (Bruner et al., 2008; Finn &
282 McKenna, 2010; Pummell et al., 2008). For example, ice hockey athletes reported similar athletic,
283 psychosocial and psychological themes to both rugby league players and coaching staff including
284 earning playing time (similar to opportunity), readiness for elite competition (cf., role expectations
285 and initial experiences), personal development (cf., personal growth), and role of teammates and
286 billets (included in the support theme; Bruner et al., 2008). Comments regarding coachability and
287 demonstrating competence (physicality and ability) were not highlighted in the player themes, yet
288 they were mentioned by coaching staff. In the UK, coaches identified a similar perception of athlete
289 transitions as coaching staff in the current study, identifying transitions as potentially stressful, high
290 in physical demands (physicality and ability theme) and requiring personal maturity (personal
291 growth) and capacity to handle change (cf., coping strategies; Finn & McKenna, 2010). Similar
292 sources of strain (or demands) discussed within themes of the current study (physical intensity, self-
293 management, coach relationship, earning respect from senior athletes and coaches, managing free
294 time, parents, girlfriends) were also identified in Finn and McKenna's study. Work ethic, support,
295 intrinsic motivation, positive and negative experiences (cf., initial and subsequent) were themes in
296 common with those reported by event riders (Pummell et al., 2008). The findings were also
297 consistent with performance indicators reported by NYC coaches who emphasised that important
298 cognitive (psychological) resources such as attitude, character, personality, discipline, and learning
299 ability are needed at the elite level (Cupples & O'Connor, 2011). Collectively, therefore, the current
300 findings provide evidence to support the robustness of the holistic perspective of sport transitions
301 (Stambulova, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and the findings of within-career transition
302 research.

303 Despite these similarities with previous sport transition research and theory, several
304 differences also emerged. First, the level of agreement among participants and importance assigned

305 to attributes differed between studies. For example, work ethic was the most common theme
306 reported by participants in this study, whereas the most common theme reported by ice hockey
307 athletes was readiness for transition (Bruner et al., 2008). Second, psychological, psychosocial,
308 athletic, and academic domains have been emphasised in previous research (Finn & McKenna,
309 2010; Pummell et al., 2008), whereas participants in this study did not report themes associated
310 with the academic or vocational domain (consistent with research in ice hockey; Bruner et al.,
311 2008). The limited discussion on the academic or vocational domain in the current study indicates
312 the importance of considerations associated with the sport-type and culture for understanding
313 transition demands and resources (i.e., college versus academy or club environments). This
314 difference may be due to the young age at which rugby league players specialise and peak (Schulz
315 & Curnow, 1988), leading to increased pressure to focus on rugby league and consider career at a
316 later time. It may also be reflective of the setting in which the interviews took place (all at rugby
317 league clubs or offices) and the face validity of the study and expectations participants had of the
318 researchers. Third, themes including confidence, interpersonal attractiveness, identity, off-field
319 behaviours, injury, stage development, getting ahead of one's self, as well as the global theme of
320 critical incidents did not appear in previous research on within-career transitions, perhaps due to our
321 sampling of a wider range of participants across the transition period than previous studies.

322 **Player and Coaching Staff Comparisons**

323 As depicted in Figure 1, a number of similarities and differences in the demands and
324 resources identified across Wylleman and Lavellee's (2004) levels of development were evident
325 between the two groups of participants. Both players and coaching staff identified themes from the
326 athletic, psychosocial and psychological levels, with no mention of the academic/vocational level,
327 and agreed on the importance of work ethic as both a demand and a resource. Common resources
328 included stage development and opportunity within the athletic level; confidence, coping strategies,
329 personal growth, and interpersonal attractiveness within the psychological level; and support within
330 the psychosocial level. Club culture, off-field behaviours and role expectations were agreed upon

331 demands within the psychosocial level. However, several themes were unique to either the players
332 or coaching staff. Players, for example, highlighted the importance of intrinsic motivation (resource,
333 psychological level), whereas coaches identified physical ability and stature (demand and resource),
334 coachability (resource, athletic level), and identity (resource, psychological level) as personal
335 attributes that can facilitate or impede a successful transition into the elite competition. Players but
336 not coaching staff mentioned extrinsic motivation (resource) under the global theme of
337 environment. Interestingly, one of the development coaches reported that young players tended to
338 get paid “too much too soon” while not enough money was being spent on senior players to
339 maintain a balanced and contented player group. A variety of responses was evident under the
340 global theme of critical incidents. Staff uniquely identified getting ahead of one’s self (leading to
341 increased demands, psychological level), whereas only the players identified injuries (demand,
342 athletic level) as well as initial (generally characterised by high number of demands or impairment
343 pathway) and subsequent experiences (characterised by an increase in resources or failure, athletic
344 level).

345 The differences in responses between groups appeared to reflect a difference in
346 consideration of experience cycle phases. For example, coaching staff tended to focus on external
347 experiences especially during the encounter phase, describing the players’ engagement during the
348 transition (behavioural focus), whereas players focused on internal experiences (i.e., thoughts and
349 feelings), particularly in the anticipation phase, describing physical and psychological readiness for
350 the transition, and the dis/confirmation phase (Oades & Viney, 2000). Players also reported internal
351 attributions regardless of the outcome or demands they experienced throughout the transition
352 process. This attribution style was most clearly demonstrated in players’ responses when asked how
353 they would change their experiences given the opportunity to go through the transition again. All
354 players took responsibility for the path that they had taken and stated that they would not change
355 anything (despite some of the pathways taken being identified as problematic) since doing so
356 appeared to be seen as assigning blame to others or external events for the outcome, which in turn

357 appeared to be viewed as an unfavourable characteristic. This trend in the players' discourse is
358 interesting considering that external attributions are an important part of optimistic thinking, an
359 established adaptive coping strategy (Seligman, 1991). The decision-making process and role
360 responsibility of each group of participants also may have played a role, that is, coaching staff
361 spend much of their time assisting players to develop physical skill and attributes. This finding is
362 consistent with previous reports of athletes' experiences which demonstrate a shift from others
363 introducing and reinforcing psychological characteristics to athletes taking ownership of their own
364 psychological development during the specialisation years, indicating a shift in roles for both
365 athletes and coaching staff (MacNamara et al., 2010). For example, the strength and conditioning
366 coaches were the main participants who identified the importance of physicality and ability as a key
367 theme, consistent with their occupational focus.

368 Additional nuances between groups were identified. Every participant in the study identified
369 work ethic as a primary contributor to transition success, with a number of participants citing it to
370 be the most important theme. Interestingly, the players dismissed the importance of physical size
371 and skill in lieu of work ethic and other personal attributes and environmental themes; one of the
372 partially transitioned players stated that "it's the person who trains the hardest, puts in the time, puts
373 in the effort...they can always come in on top...even though they've got less ability." In contrast,
374 coaching staff emphasised physicality and ability, "from my experience, the number one thing is
375 pure talent and then the other thing would be their actual physical attributes as in size, speed, skill."
376 This discrepancy might be explained by differences in implicit theories of athletic abilities (cf.
377 Dweck & Leggett, 1988), such that the players appear to endorse an incremental theory (i.e.,
378 personal attributes such as intelligence or personality are malleable and open to development
379 through effort) whereas the coaching staff supported an entity theory (i.e., personal attributes are
380 stable, trait-like whose opportunities for change are not within one's control). However, it became
381 apparent throughout the players' discourse that their main focus and responsibility was responding
382 to challenges in an appropriate way (i.e., psychological aspects).

383 Having an understanding of the expectations of the club or environment (i.e., knowing what
384 to expect) was reported to aid the transition process by allowing the players to mobilise resources to
385 appropriately prepare for possible demands. One of the biggest difficulties players reportedly faced
386 was that most of them did not know what to expect when initially transitioning into the NRL squad,
387 and even transitioning from club to club, because different club cultures dictated different
388 expectations in terms of behaviour. This ambiguity interfered with players' physical and
389 psychological readiness to transition because planning allows for preparation and increased feelings
390 of control and improved self-efficacy (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004). One second
391 tier player stated, "the standard they expected was a surprise...[the club] expected pretty much for
392 me to be perfect...I didn't believe I was up to it." The consequences of this uncertainty led to
393 misinformed behaviours (e.g., becoming extremely unfit during the off-season making it difficult to
394 catch up with the rest of the squad) and complacency, or anxiety due to the unknown, reducing
395 physical and psychological readiness to transition. The general level of agreement on most themes
396 between players in contrast to the low level of agreement on themes identified by the coaching staff
397 provided a clear demonstration of the inconsistent message being sent to the players, interfering
398 with their preparation or anticipation phase. Role clarity, which helps reduce uncertainty regarding
399 the organisation's expectation on employees, has been revealed as an important antecedent of an
400 individual's commitment to their organisation (Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007) and both task and
401 contextual performance (Whitaker, Dahlin, & Levy, 2007). Discrepancies between coaching staff
402 views tended to be a reflection of their coaching philosophies, club culture and their current roles.
403 For example, the partially transitioned player reported his differing experiences at two NRL clubs,
404 If you make a mistake at [NRL Club 1] at training like if you drop the ball, (the coach)
405 was like, "oh yeah, don't worry just restart and we'll do it again", but if you drop a
406 ball at training at [NRL Club 2], you'll get your head bitten off...[Coach 2]'s
407 standards are a lot higher...it doesn't mean that they're going to (perform) better, it's
408 just the way they train.

409 This example reflects the need for organisational fit as a consequence of an athlete's readiness
410 to transition, with increased readiness (due to clear role expectations and an understanding of
411 the club culture, i.e., information as a resource) leading to increased ability to fit or to make
412 an informed decision regarding a club that does fit, perhaps leading to the enhancement
413 pathway main effect (cf. JD-R model; Demerouti et al., 2001).

414 The coaching staff also discussed the importance of having a balanced identity (cf.,
415 foreclosed identity; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996), a theme not mentioned by the players.
416 Some players' responses were indicative of a foreclosed identity (i.e., committed to the athlete role
417 without exploring identity elements); for example, one transitioning player reported that many of
418 his friends were going out and exploring different social options and alternatives (i.e., going
419 through psychosocial moratorium; Erikson, 1968) while he decided not to join them because he did
420 not want to take his focus off his career. Another second-tier player mentioned that he missed some
421 of his final High School Certificate exams to join NYC pre-season, reducing his career options
422 outside of football. Contrary to the single-minded focus (indicative of foreclosed identity) among
423 the player reports, the coaching staff underscored the importance of self-exploration and developing
424 a strong sense of self throughout the transition process. A player welfare manager reported the
425 importance of

426 "broadening a person's identity, which is about the self-esteem thing. It becomes clear
427 that if you engage in something else, if you're a good family person, if you're a church
428 person, or whatever it be...you've got to have a bit of an outlet that takes you away
429 from that single focused desire because it actually helps that desire.

430 Many of the players mentioned the importance of balance; however, this theme was mentioned in
431 relation to trying to balance the workload of mandatory study or work during NYC or mental
432 recovery.

433 **Transition Stage Comparisons**

434 Aligned with the theoretical framework (Kelly, 1995/1991) that guided our methodological
435 approach (Oades & Viney, 2000), the key themes reported by the players can be considered in
436 relation to a cycle of experience, beginning with the anticipation phase (i.e., knowing what to
437 expect, confidence, or lack of). During this phase, the second-tier players appeared to interpret this
438 phase in the context of demands and reported experiencing nerves, “down times” and awe at the
439 greatness of the opportunity to join the NRL squad; for example, one player stated, “I couldn’t
440 believe I was in the top squad and I didn’t prepare for it.” The transitioning players also focused on
441 the demands during this phase and tended to discuss the pressures, fear and intimidation of playing
442 with superstars. The partially-transitioned player reported being unsure of what to expect whereas
443 the player who failed to transition overstated his resources and indicated that he thought he knew
444 what to expect, “I thought I’d do it easy. I thought just training. I’m good at it. No concerns at all.”
445 Those players who successfully transitioned tended to report being concerned with meeting
446 expectations (i.e., planning how to use resources to manage demands and to perform and fit
447 culture). The anticipation phase is followed by an investment in the transition experience based on
448 intrinsic (i.e., love of the game) and extrinsic (i.e., incentives) motivations. Consistent with self-
449 determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), those players who emphasised an intrinsic motivation
450 for playing at the elite level were more likely to have successfully transitioned when compared with
451 those who reported extrinsic motives.

452 Differences in players’ perceptions were evident during the encounter phase of the cycle of
453 experience, specifically relating to entering the NRL squad (i.e., first NRL game). The second-tier
454 players tended to report an initial feeling of being overwhelmed by demands including being away
455 from family and under preparing (i.e., loss of resources), leading to difficult initial experiences and
456 in some cases reduced performance (impairment pathway). For example, a second-tier player stated
457 that he did not adequately prepare for the pre-season demands: “That first year I just went under the
458 weather...as soon as I had a bad pre-season I was out of the picture,” potentially delaying his
459 opportunity to play NRL which occurred after data collection; he progressed into the transitioning

460 category after mobilising resources, making some changes and switching to the enhancement
461 pathway, “I knew after having that year under my belt what I had to do to turn it around...” The
462 transitioning players tended to also identify a number of demands at first, however, appeared to be
463 able to adapt by utilising resources. A transitioning player summed up the adaptation process as
464 follows:

465 It all comes down to you’ve made mistakes and those mistakes are going to help you
466 go along or you’re going to improve and you’re going to not make those mistakes a
467 second time round, it’s going to make you a better player and mentally strong the next
468 time you come round.

469 Five out of the seven transitioning players went on to successfully transition into the NRL. These
470 players were able to identify what was needed to adapt to the demands placed on them during the
471 encounter phase and perceived these demands as challenges rather than threats (Lazarus &
472 Folkman, 1984). One of the transitioning players who dropped out of rugby league shortly after the
473 study to pursue another sport identified a continuous lack of support from coaches and coaching
474 staff and appeared to view this situation as a threat, “the coaching staff were taking its toll on me
475 (and) I couldn’t really give much more”. The partially transitioned player and the player who failed
476 to transition tended to have a negative view of the encounter phase, whereas the successfully
477 transitioned players reported feeling confident to meet the demands they faced. One successfully
478 transitioned player reported that his initial experience was positive, however, his second year
479 (subsequent experience) was more challenging, “the second year is the hardest because everyone
480 expects you to know what to do and that can be a bit more pressure”. The player who had
481 completed the transition tended to be negative about his encounter experience, perceiving a number
482 of threats, particularly in terms of support, leading to a less than ideal experience and achievement
483 level (cf. JD-R impairment pathway). The apparent discrepancy between what was anticipated and
484 what occurred during the transition experience among the discourse of the players who did not

485 successfully transition or partially transition suggested a greater likelihood of an unsuccessful
486 transition and difficulties adapting to their initial experiences.

487 Themes relevant to the encounter phase included off-field behaviour, work ethic, support,
488 confidence, coping, personal growth, and interpersonal attractiveness. In particular, those players
489 who made successful transitions tended to have their expectations confirmed when entering the
490 transition process or were able to adapt quickly using effective coping mechanisms, reporting a high
491 level of support either from peers or family/romantic partners. One successfully transitioned player
492 stated, “A lot of help came from the boys (players)...(they) just made everything much easier for
493 me and I felt welcomed...they always gave me a kick up the bum if I was out of line which was
494 good.” However, there was an exception to this general trend in the players’ discourse whereby the
495 participant who had completed the transition reported that the first time he attempted to transition
496 his expectations and predictions were not confirmed, particularly relating to his cultural needs,
497 leading to disengagement for a time. He underwent a process of construct revision and renewed
498 investment, leading to a successful transition, during which he reported an increased ability to
499 manage the challenges he faced.

500 The coach told me straight up, “you are doing well but you won’t get in front of these
501 (NRL players) until they retire.” Psychologically that f*#ked me up pretty well. I gave
502 up...Having a year off gave me a bit of desire...the thing I actually needed was to get
503 a bit of hunger, a bit of fire in the belly. I had to learn to eat properly and to maintain
504 myself and those are the two things that got me back.

505 After the process of adaptation occurred, all participants reported that balance, defined in terms of
506 managing training with work (especially during NYC), managing free-time by having something
507 outside of football and having a balanced mindset, was fundamental to maintaining a successful
508 transition.

509 Out of the players who had been through the transition, a number of revisions and
510 confirmations were made as a way of making sense of the transition. One successfully transitioned

511 player stated that the transition was about making the right choices on and off the field, whereas
512 other successfully transitioned players discussed the importance of consistency in performance,
513 doing what others are not willing to do (work ethic) and being clear-minded, having a goal to work
514 towards. One of them stated, “Just being consistent in your performances. Just getting there but not
515 losing focus of where you are and taking it for granted...just like a clear mind- just knowing what
516 you want.” The partially transitioned player felt that the shock of his initial experiences had kept
517 him from reaching his peak and advised future transitioning players to spend time gathering
518 information to avoid a similar experience. “I would probably say that they need to talk to their
519 coach and try and get as much advice as possible about what they’re not doing or what they should
520 be doing or talk to older people.” The player who had completed the transition emphasised support
521 and reiterated that he felt he had been let down in that area. The player who failed to transition
522 reported regretting his refusal to conform to club expectations and not working harder.

523 The most evident differences between players’ perceptions occurred within the context of
524 discussions regarding the environment, particularly relating to the subculture of rugby league.
525 According to subculture research, sports such as rugby league are characterised by hegemonic
526 masculinity in which males dominate and characteristics such as aggressiveness, strength, drive,
527 competitiveness, heterosexuality, homonegativism and self-reliance are valued, along with an
528 emphasis on the physical body, leading to behaviours such as hazing (Waldron, Lynn, & Krane,
529 2011). Such a culture is often contradictory as it encourages risky and dangerous off-field
530 behaviours such as binge drinking and drug use. The two players who reportedly had the most
531 difficult transitions perceived that the club they were playing for at the time did not care or support
532 them. The player who did not transition successfully reported acting in a way consistent with
533 hegemonic masculinity, specifically frequent binge drinking behaviour, leading to acceptance from
534 his fellow players but alienation from his coaches. He described his relationship with the club and
535 his NRL coach as follows:

536 I didn't know if they knew me to be honest. It wasn't good with the head coach. A
537 couple of the assistant coaches it was good like I could have a bit of a joke with them
538 but it was never good with the head coach. That was my bad... We hated each
539 other...[Q: How did that happen?]. Me getting on the (alcohol) and playing up and
540 being in his office. Being in his office was like being back in school getting yelled at.
541 This player recognised that he could have taken responsibility for his actions which may have
542 resulted in a different outcome; however, he recognised the importance of support from the club and
543 the coach and the contradiction between the expectations of the subculture to perform on and off the
544 field. These findings are consistent with tenets of basic psychological needs theory, particularly as it
545 pertains to one's perceptions of relatedness support in the social environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

546 Several participants stated that a mismatch between one's own culture/upbringing and the
547 team's culture led to adjustment difficulties. The player who failed to transition described his
548 difficulty transitioning from the country into a city team: "All you do in the bush is play footy and
549 drink [alcohol]...you get into a fight and it's not a big deal...but in the city it's a massive deal...you
550 go to court and get sanctioned by the club." Amidst these discussions on club culture it was
551 revealed that hazing was important to earn group membership, consistent with previous findings
552 regarding the outworking of hegemonic masculinity in male-dominated sports (Waldron et al.,
553 2011). A player who successfully transitioned laughed when he recollected his experience of
554 hazing:

555 I think [NRL Player] gave me a bit of a touch up and wrestle one day... That happened to
556 him too when he was younger so it just gets passed down...it can be hard...a lot of the older
557 guys often can push you a little bit in certain way... to not let the younger guys get ahead of
558 themselves [i.e., arrogant] when they're there and just to concentrate and just train hard and
559 do the best they can on and off the field as well.

560 Another player who had partially transitioned reported that he saw hazing as being similar to
561 bullying at school with other players pointing out weaknesses, "just like being picked on, being the

562 new person...if there's something different about you...some people just target it." Players'
563 appraisals of hazing differed based on their stage of progression through the transition process with
564 those earlier in the process more likely to appraise hazing as a threat, whereas those who had
565 successfully transitioned tended to perceive it as a challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

566 **Substantive and Practical Implications, and Conclusions**

567 The available sport transition research has been criticised for being largely descriptive and
568 atheoretical (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Thus, this study is timely as we have drawn from
569 complementary theoretical frameworks to inform our interview guide and sampling strategy (i.e.,
570 PCP; Kelly, 1955/1991) and interpretation of the findings (i.e., JD-R; Demerouti et al., 2001).
571 Additional strengths of this study included the integration of both athlete and coach perspectives,
572 alongside a broad range of athlete perspectives that covered major periods of the transition into an
573 elite sport team. Collectively, these strengths permitted a well-rounded assessment of the
574 substantive robustness of previous findings and conceptual models on sport transitions, and helped
575 generate new insights into this area of research. For example, the use of ECM alongside our
576 sampling of athletes at different stages of the transition process helped identify differences in
577 perspectives on the anticipations of the changeover into elite rugby league, for example, between
578 players who had successfully transitioned against those who were unsuccessful.

579 We also revealed the usefulness of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) as a
580 complement to existing conceptual models of sport transitions (Stambulova, 2009; Wylleman &
581 Lavallee, 2004) and framework to help organise new empirical evidence. As with the JD-R model
582 (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), we speculate that demands and resources within each level of the
583 holistic, lifespan developmental perspective of career transitions will have direct or main effects
584 with negative (e.g., ill-being, underperformance) or positive outcomes (e.g., well-being, high
585 performance), as well as interactive effects between demands and resources within (e.g., high
586 athletic demand coupled with high athletic resources) and between these four levels (e.g., high
587 psychological demands coupled with low psychosocial resources). Indeed, Wylleman and Lavallee

588 (2004) have alluded to the interactive nature of transitions in different life domains. Perceptions of
589 demands and resources are inextricably linked within the coping process (Lazarus & Folkman,
590 1984) and, therefore, when integrated with the holistic, lifespan developmental perspective of career
591 transitions in sport contexts (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) provide an element of parsimony
592 together with a level of explanation that considers the complex number of themes that emerged in
593 this study and previous transitions research.

594 Despite these strengths to our research, the study was not without limitation and these issues
595 should be considered in future research. For example, our focus on male athletes and coaches limits
596 the extent to which these findings can be generalised to female perspectives. Additionally, our
597 adoption of “one-off” or cross-sectional interviews that relied primarily on retrospective recall does
598 not permit an examination of individuals’ changing experiences and life course patterns;
599 longitudinal qualitative approaches in which individuals are interviewed at multiple points during
600 their transition would prove fruitful in this regard (McLeod, 2009).

601 In summary, we sought to understand a group of people striving to succeed in their context
602 by exploring players’ and coaches’ perspectives on the transition from sub-elite to elite level rugby
603 league within an Australian context. Specifically, both groups of participants reported that a number
604 of personal attributes and environmental factors – mobilised through critical incidents and exhibited
605 through consistency and a balanced lifestyle and focus – were fundamental to a successful
606 transition. The importance of having adequate resources to match the demands of the transition was
607 a key feature of the participants’ discourse. These themes were integrated using established theories
608 (i.e., developmental model of transitions, coping, JD-R theory) to suggest that demands and
609 resources from each global theme influence within-career transitions by occurring across four broad
610 levels of development (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). From a practical standpoint, these findings
611 underscore the importance of resource building interventions for athletes, coaches, and sport
612 organisations. For example, educating athletes to take a proactive approach to goal regulation
613 (Bindl, Parker, Totterdell, & Hagger-Johnson, 2012) could help develop their readiness for

614 important transitions across their athletic career. More broadly, educating coaches and organisations
615 on how to create an environment that fosters self-determination, and developing more in-depth and
616 individualised transition programs to clarify expectations and individual needs, could also assist
617 with improving outcomes for transitioning athletes.

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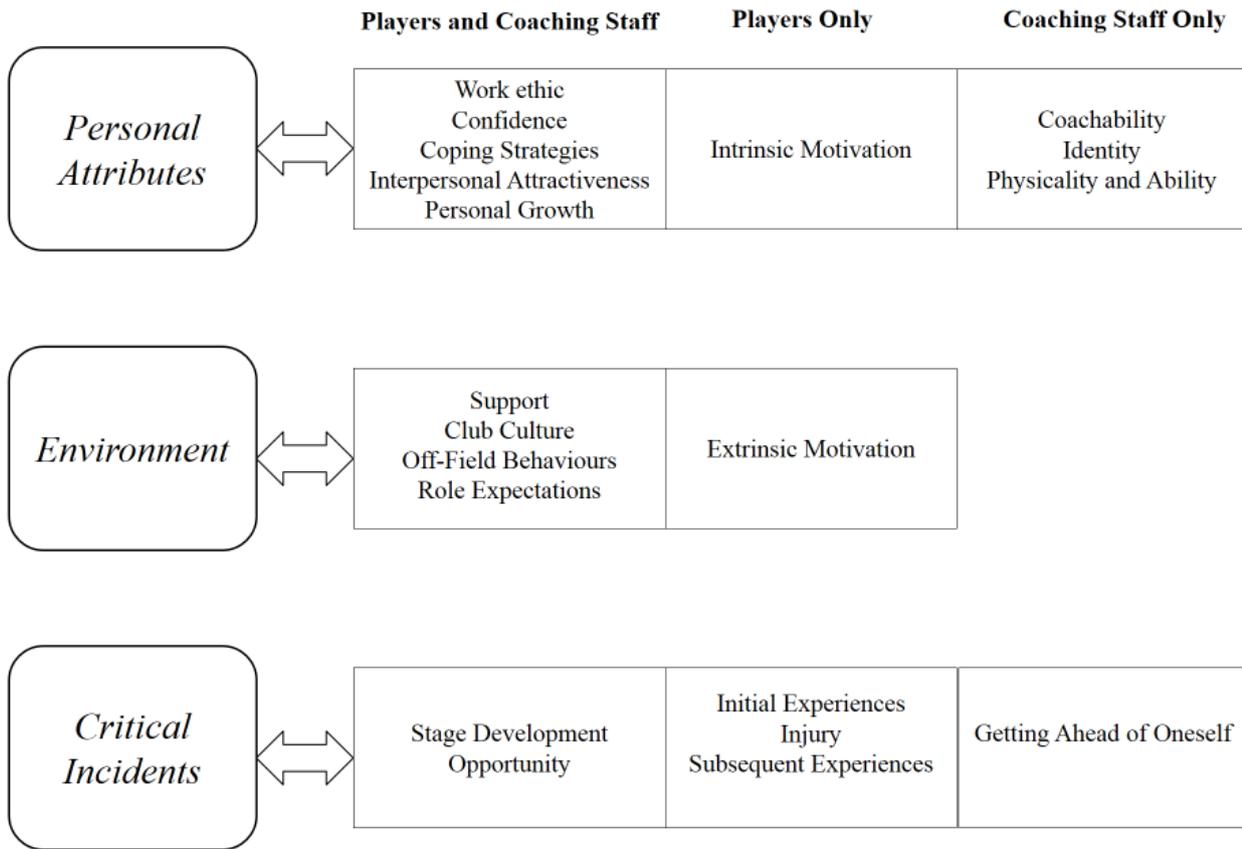


Figure 1. Schematic overview of the global themes and their associated themes as reported by players and coaching staff, players only, or coaching staff only.

Table 1. *Perceptions of players including a representative quote.*

Theme and Description	Representative Quote
Work Ethic: A player's capacity and willingness to remain determined, disciplined and effortful in fully preparing one's self for training, competition and the lifestyle of being an elite footballer	I think probably the effort, just...trying your heart out every game, doing everything you can be doing... doing more than what you have to do.
Confidence: Belief or degree of certainty that one has the ability to achieve his goals	If you can have that belief that you can do it or, even if you didn't do it the first time...you go and practice that and you're going to get it eventually.
Coping Strategies: The ability to use positive strategies or mechanisms to overcome and adapt to on and off-field stressors such as media and performance pressures, fame, family	A lot of other guys had contracts before me. I didn't make all the representative teams...and for a while there [NRL Club] didn't want me either but then I just worked hard and ended up getting in the Australian schoolboys team and it went from there (into an NRL career).
Interpersonal Attractiveness: A player's ability to integrate into the team environment particularly relating to being of good character, being personable, having a good attitude and being respectful	Honesty to yourself, to your team mates...that comes with everything like don't cut corners...just be on time, be early and all that stuff that makes a person. Just being a real positive guy. Don't be negative; just always be really happy and caring about others...always willing to help...never saying no. Just really reliable too...
Personal Growth: Growth both on and off-field across developmental domains in terms of developing maturity, independence, striving for ongoing improvement, taking responsibility or ownership for behaviours, personal development, and self-awareness	It made me grow up pretty quickly...you've got no choice. No one's going to cook your dinner if you don't cook it.
Intrinsic Motivation: An intrinsic enjoyment of rugby league football	It was the footy development that came with being part of a group that you wanted to be part of and where you wanted to do well...that enjoyment made me want to learn and become a better footballer.
Support: Help and resources provided by others	Having key people on your side that actually care about you, that are giving you constructive criticism...making you feel good about yourself, training buddies...people that can help motivate you.
Club Culture: The general club environment imposed by the club's philosophy, (including club expectations), and the players' expectations (e.g., hazing, intimidation, player acceptance)	That's what's good about [NRL Club] ...it's like the culture there is like your family because everyone's come from somewhere else and you pretty much just take everyone in and become one family.
Off-Field Behaviour: Problematic behaviour that occurs outside of the rugby league club and playing environment, particularly those involving drugs, alcohol and gaming	You see so many freaky players get (dropped) for doing something stupid...like one night out doing something dumb can end your whole career...once you're in the scene you've got to realise you're in the scene...you're targeted by media. You've just got to keep a level head when you're out.
Role Expectations: Having an understanding of the expectations of the club and environment	I think...trying to get as much information about the way NRL trains...ask past players what they went through so you can know what to expect...Like for me...I was talking to no one really...I just went in and hit everything front on without knowing what I was expecting. It makes it a lot easier if you do know what to expect. You can prepare yourself better for it.
Extrinsic Motivation:: Having extrinsic rewards for motivation (e.g., money)	A couple of little incentives along the way obviously helped. Like scholarships and things like that and trying to make those (representative) teams when I was young.
Stage Development: Completing a stepwise progression through the different levels of competition	You've got to do your apprenticeship; go through the 20s and if you're good enough from there then the club will pick you up and then you'll play first grade footy.
Opportunity: Everything falling into place to provide a chance to play NRL. Also, creating an opportunity for a better life.	Just growing up in New Zealand and the bad environments that we were living in... Education-wise nothing was very good back then and...the boys I was hanging around with (got me into trouble). That's the main reason I moved here; to try and get away from all that kind of stuff. I was just really focussed when I got here to get out of it and do something with my life.
Initial Experiences: Players' initial experiences of moving into the NRL squad, usually characterised by underperforming, poor decision-making and high levels of stress	Training full time rugby league 5-6 days a week was taking its toll on me. (I was) just one of them little kids coming in and wanting to get out...For the first 2 years I was just sort of going there, just walking around and I was saying, "yeah, get out of here, I've got better things to do"...That was really tough making the switch from Q Cup and I was training 3 days a week and just cruisey training but now training 5 or 6 days a week you got to be mentally prepared to train and get the most out of it.

Subsequent Experiences: Players' second and third year experiences in the NRL squad

The second years and following you see the good players who can have everything down pat of what they've got to do during the week or they get -away from football, they do certain things that can be a big part of why players play so well on the weekend.

Injuries: The occurrence of injuries that take one out of the playing roster for one or more matches

I was playing with (osteitis pubis) for about 2 years on and off. So I got the operation at the end of last year...it just sort of dragged out and this is only my second game back (at Q-Cup level) now. That's been the most frustrating thing...knowing that I should be at that level (NRL) – I was at that level.

Table 2. *Perceptions of coaching staff including a representative quote.*

Theme and Description	Representative Quote
Work Ethic: A player's capacity and willingness to remain determined, disciplined and effortful in fully preparing one's self for training, competition and the lifestyle of being an elite footballer	If (players) come into the professional environment with a background of...having had developed a work ethic through their earlier lives...they seem to fit into that team environment a lot easier.
Confidence: Belief or degree of certainty that one has the ability to achieve his goals	If you're strong in yourself you'll stand up for your own beliefs...you won't be as easily misled to do the wrong thing or to skip a session or be a bit lazy...to make the right decisions based on your own ethics, ideals, ambitions and character .
Coping Strategies: The ability to use positive strategies or mechanisms to overcome and adapt to on and off-field stressors such as media and performance pressures, fame, family	There are talented players that just can't keep up with the full-time training program...they are overwhelmed by the demands and challenges so we need to help them develop better ways to cope and make the most of these experiences.
Interpersonal Attractiveness: A player's ability to integrate into the team environment particularly relating to being of good character, being personable, having a good attitude and being respectful	Players who are truthful and trustworthy and respectful to you as opposed to some arrogant and brash young athletes.
Personal Growth: Growth both on and off-field across developmental domains in terms of developing maturity, independence, striving for ongoing improvement, taking responsibility or ownership for behaviours, personal development, and self-awareness	Successful players have to be prepared to take ownership and accept responsibility...to critique their own game with the coaches to get that feedback and be able to work out what they need to do and then to go about it.
Physicality and Ability: Rate of physical development and time to maturity as well as skill and ability	It's having the necessary skill obviously to be that professional with skills that are required to fulfil that role and obviously depending on what position it's really important to not be one-dimensional...you've got to be able to have multi-skills in terms of what's needed. That skill component you can't underestimate that as well as all the others.
Coachability: Being willing and able to learn new skills	Your ability to absorb information, taking feedback, act on it and be prepared to keep working on it.
Identity: Knowing who one is, what one's values are and what defines one as a person outside of sport	You're not just an athlete, you're someone else as well...and you're not going to be the best at everything...knowing your strengths and weaknesses...having a vision of what you want to be.
Support: Help and resources provided by others	It's important to have a variety of positive and encouraging support networks that assist in all areas of life.
Club Culture: The general club environment imposed by the club's philosophy, (including club expectations), and the players' expectations (e.g., hazing, intimidation, player acceptance)	If you have a culture of alcohol abuse you just can't change that overnight. It's got to start from the youngest levels...The organising body have got to have a strong philosophy on what they really want to achieve.
Off-Field Behaviour: Problematic behaviour that occurs outside of the rugby league club and playing environment, particularly those involving drugs, alcohol and gaming	As far as events that are going to disrupt the player...we've had a number of different incidents with young players who are just tempted by different things...the drink and the gambling and late nights etc are the major issues that you encounter when you bring players into this sort of environment.
Role Expectations: Having an understanding of the expectations of the club and environment	We as a club...(are) trying to be about 5 or 6 years ahead so our next generation will come up and it'll (the requirements) be second nature to them.
Opportunity: Everything falling into place to provide a chance to play NRL. Also, creating an opportunity for a better life.	Even though you're at the peak of your ability limits, the peak of your fitness...you've still got to wait for that opportunity to present itself.
Getting ahead of One's Self: Prematurely assuming that all the work is finished and one's achieved all one needs to	I think too many guys come in and think they've made it once they get picked...They've been the king pin on their side...they get to our environment where everyone's on a level footing and they don't know how to make that next step.