



The Professional Athlete Career Lifespan: Through an Indigenous Lens

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Abstract

The rise of non-European sport athletes has meant a need for their cultural ways to be acknowledged in the sporting arena. Although the players' cultures are visible in sports, through war chants, tattoos, and cultural singing, much of their interactions as athletes are underpinned by foreign western centric philosophies. Many of them are forced to work in an environment which privileges individual capitalism, over their cultural values of service. The failure of sporting organisations to understand the cultural beliefs and practices of players has not only resulted in cultural exclusion but also an incorrect analysis of the player lifespan of these athletes. As Indigenous researchers, we use a culturally appropriate service model to underpin the lifecycle of these professional athletes. Through the analysis of three Indigenous professional athletes from various sporting codes, we provide insight into their professional life span along with their priorities, responsibilities, and duties. By exploring their narratives through a cultural lens, the professional life span of a rookie, veteran and legend athlete are explored and analysed. It is envisioned that this article will provide a strengths-based view of Indigenous athletes and the unique worldviews they bring.

Keywords Indigenous · Service · Tautua · Athlete career lifespan · Pacific athlete · Athlete wellbeing · *Athlete career transition*

1 Introduction

“I play for more than myself, I play for the name on the back of my jersey, I play for my Samoan culture, but most importantly, I play for my family's legacy”

([Tagovailoa, 2020](#)).

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It is commonly known that young Pacific males view the professional sporting pathway as a viable opportunity to improve social mobility (Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2019). The high financial rewards that can be accumulated as professional athletes can elevate a family name, status, and reputation. It can also elevate the expectations placed on the individual athlete to fulfill their family obligations as soon as they signs a professional contract. Rugby union, rugby league and American football are three codes where Pacific athletes are highly visible, and have been able to use their sporting prowess to become icons (Uperesa & Mountjoy, 2014). Pacific athletes draw strength and guidance from the values and beliefs that have been instilled in them. However, in a cutthroat business such as professional sport, those values and beliefs can be undercut by poor performance or injury. Sadly, these effects can be further exacerbated by the individual capitalist nature of the industry, which can be contrary to the Pacific athletes' collective values. To offer pragmatic considerations for sport practitioners and administrators, the tautua lifespan model (Fa'aea & Enari, 2021) will guide our analysis of how Pacific athletes utilise their cultural values, beliefs, and practices to navigate the professional sport space. To achieve this, we have chosen to contextualise athletic career development using three Samoan professional athletes, one from each of the aforementioned codes. Pragmatic considerations will be offered as we use a Samoan lens to unpack the professional athlete's lifespan (i.e. rookie, veteran, legend).

2 Professional Athlete Career Lifespan

A myriad of models and frameworks have emerged as the complexity and competitive nature of the athlete development pathway has increased. The literature has evolved from a siloed, linear approach towards athlete development, to a more holistic, non-linear, multidimensional approach (Debois et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2020). The dominance of Western underpinned models and frameworks has led to an inadequate knowledge base for practitioners and administrators to refer to when trying to optimise the development and performance of Pacific athletes. With the "Polynesian Pipeline" of talented rugby union, league and American football players increasing, the demand for organisations, coaches, and administrators to move beyond 'ticking the cultural diversity box' is important (Enari, 2021; McAllister et al., 2022).

The average career length in high-impact collision sports such as American football, rugby league and rugby union is significantly short relative to the years that one may spend on the development pathway. In the NFL the average career length is 2.5 years (Wilson, 2020); NRL 3–4 years (NRL, 2012); Super Rugby 5 years (NZRPA, n.d.), although for both the NRL and Super Rugby, it is common to see athletes go overseas (i.e. England, France, Japan) once they have finished playing in their respective competitions. Given the small window athletes have to maximise their earnings, it is imperative Pacific athletes, and their families have the tools, knowledge, and processes to be successful both on and off the field. For example, there is a need to improve financial literacy of Pacific athletes and their families given the sudden increase in wages (Stewart-Withers et al., 2017). The athletes

mental and emotional wellbeing must also be considered when they transition after their playing career (Marsters, 2017). To achieve this, organisations must have a deeper understanding of the sociocultural context Pacific athletes come from to inform culturally responsive pedagogy, practices, and processes.

3 Tautua lifecycle model

The Tautua lifecycle model (Fa’aea & Enari, 2021, 2021) in Fig. 1 shows the service lifecycle of a Samoan: tautua ia tautua (serve to serve) tautua ia pule (serve to lead) and pule ia tautua (lead to serve). In the first sphere tautua ia tautua (serve to serve), a child is expected to obey and respect their elders, and do as they are told. At a young age, Samoans learn their responsibility to serve, through church, village, and family gatherings. Those in the second sphere, tautua ia pule (serve to lead), have grown from sphere one and now have a responsibility to both protect those who are currently in sphere one and uphold the legacy of those in sphere three, who have pioneered the way for them. Samoan athletes in sphere two are afforded leadership opportunities and a chance to share their insight. The third sphere, pule ia tautua (lead to serve), consists of elders who have paved the way for those in the other two spheres. This cohort are tasked with imparting their accumulative wisdom and ensuring their legacy is upheld for the greater collective.

In this analysis, we use the tautua model to look exclusively at the athlete’s lifespan at the professional or elite level. Because there are three spheres of service

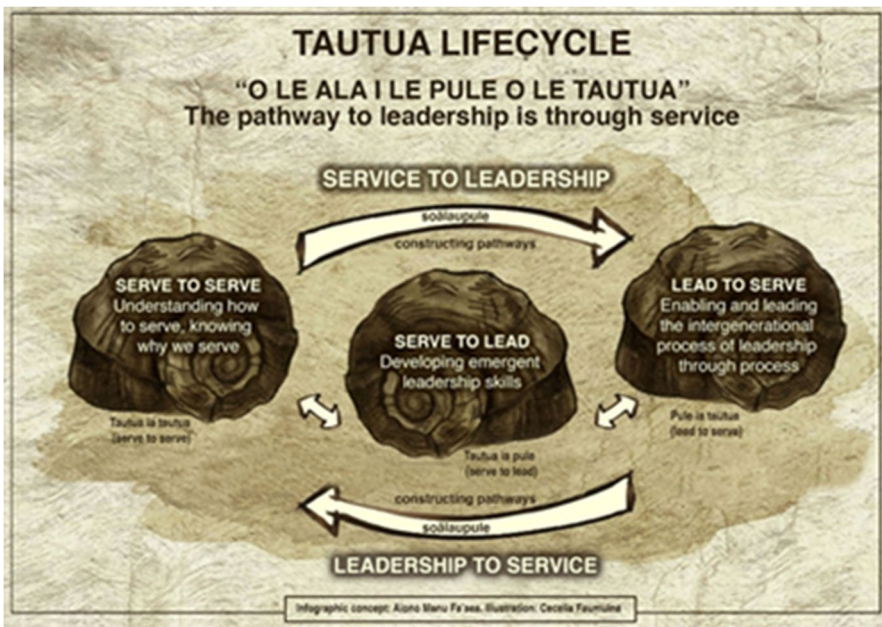


Fig. 1 Tautua lifecycle

within the tautua model, we have determined that ‘Rookie, Veteran and Legend’ are three appropriate development markers within the athlete career lifespan to stimulate critical knowledge and understanding for the sport practitioner and administrator. Each development marker will be defined at the appropriate point of this article.

4 Rookie—Tautua ia tautua (Serve to serve)

For this analysis, a *rookie* is defined as a first year contracted professional athlete. In this sphere of service, it is the athlete’s duty to do all they can to bring honour and respect to their ‘aiga (family), the family name, village, and community. They are learning how to bring honour and respect both on and off the field through the examples and guidance of those who have gone before them. Tuanigamanuolepola “Tua” Tagovailoa, a well-known professional American Football player, is the athlete we have chosen to contextualise this phase.

Tuanigamanuolepola “Tua” Tagovailoa—*Drafted fifth overall by the Miami Dolphins in 2020.*

Tagovailoa was born and raised in Ewa Beach, Hawaii. His parents were both born in American Samoa and he is the eldest of four children. ‘Family and faith are fundamental pillars for Pacific athletes (Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2019) and that is no different in Tagovailoa’s case. With his rookie contract worth \$30.2 million over 4 years plus a \$19.6 million signing bonus, his attitude towards money and his spending behaviours, in particular his first one million dollars, reflect his values. Tagovailoa explained:

“...it wasn’t more so me when I thought of the purchase, I thought of everyone that would be involved in the purchases as well..... I got everything knowing that you know if I have family members coming over to the house, you know they all have a place to sleep, you know they’ll have a place to stay, they’ll be comfortable and then they’ll have a car to drive, uh things of that nature” (GQ Sports, 2020)

Tagovailoa’s spending pattern is similar to that of other Pacific players in the NFL, such as fellow Samoan Juju Smith Schuster (Schuster-Smith, 2020). Having the means to repay the sacrifices of parents, grandparents, and generations past has enabled Tagovailoa to show his respect, love, and loyalty to his family. These critical Samoan values are transferable to the professional team sport environment. Understanding of the players’ value systems underscores the intrinsic motivation of Pacific athletes chasing the professional sporting dream (Keung, 2018; Stewart-Withers et al., 2017) and therefore offers insights as to why Samoan athletes may be disproportionately represented in the NFL; pushing beyond the stereotypical hyper-masculine warrior narrative that is regularly referred to when unpacking Samoan athlete success (Hawkes, 2018; Schaaf, 2006; Uperesa, 2022). Success at the elite level increases a Pacific athlete’s capacity to serve their family and community. It is this notion of service, and the core values that underpin such service, that gives a broader understanding as to why family are consistently reported in the literature as critical contributors of success and overall wellbeing for Pacific athletes (Enari and

Fa'aea, 2020; Enari & Faleolo, 2020). Faith has also been identified as another critical contributor of success and overall wellbeing for Pacific athletes (Keung, 2018; Marsters & Tiatia-Seath, 2019).

Like Tagovailoa, fellow young Samoan rookie Caleb Clarke began his rugby union ascent in 2020. Clarke also credits his parents and God for his achievements. Clarke's father, Saveatama Eroni Clarke, a New Zealand All Black legend, has effectively passed the baton to his son to carry on the work, and further their family's legacy. Faith is a central talking point that Clarke senior reiterates when mentoring his son:

I've talked a lot with Caleb about his faith. It's a huge part of our lives and gives him an important perspective. I've told him he's been blessed with a gift by God and the way you play is an expression of your worship to Him. So play with all your heart, and give it your best. (Saveatama Eroni Clarke)

As such, spiritual preparation is essential in the development of a rookie's resilience, patience, work ethic and ultimately performance, on and off the field. Hence it is imperative that faith practices are identified and interwoven into regimes early, to support the young Samoan athletes' transition into, and longevity within, the professional sport space.

Veterans and experienced players can also act as a crucial learning and development mechanism for rookies. The respect for a veteran's legacy and wisdom can inform and guide the up-and-coming athlete in their determination to hone their craft. Tagovailoa considers fellow Samoan Marcus Mariota to be a mentor for him. Despite the age difference, Tagovailoa and Mariota share a bond through their Polynesian lineage, Hawaiian upbringing, both are alumni of the same high school and both play quarterback. Tagovailoa credits Mariota with increasing young Polynesians' self-belief that they can aim high and achieve (Schnell, 2015). Similarly, Du'Plessis Kirifi, a young professional rugby union rookie shared that one of his idols, fellow Samoan and veteran teammate, Ardie Savea, has provided tutelage in navigating the professional space as a rookie and has empowered Kirifi to use his platform for the greater good (Porter, 2020).

In summary, the young rookie Samoan athlete is constantly looking for opportunities to learn, observe, and receive guidance and wisdom from those who have gone before them. This gives context as to why young Pacific players may not ask questions or speak out of turn. They are there to do the work: to learn the plays, systems, and processes, and observe the veterans and leaders. Doing so positions them to successfully carry out their roles and responsibilities both on and off the field, in a manner that brings honour, respect and pride to their name, family, culture and people.

5 Veteran—Tautua ia Pule (Serve to Lead)

For this analysis we have defined a *veteran* as an athlete who has been able to maintain their place in their professional sport longer than the respective sporting code's average career length. In this phase, it is the athlete's duty to start learning to lead,

be a role-model for the younger players, practice using their voice whilst showing respect to, and seeking guidance from, their elders. Roger Tuivasa-Sheck, a well-respected professional rugby league player, is the athlete we have chosen to help contextualise this phase.

6 Roger Tuivasa-Sheck

Made his professional rugby league debut for the Sydney Roosters in round 21 of the 2012 NRL season and was part of the 2013 squad who won the NRL premiership. Tuivasa-Sheck moved to the New Zealand Warriors in 2016 before switching codes to play professional rugby union for the Auckland Blues in New Zealand in 2022.

Tuivasa-Sheck was born in Apia, Samoa, and raised in Auckland, New Zealand. He is the third of four children, and the eldest boy. His speed, agility and elusive sidestep on the field have led to the accumulation of multiple personal accolades over his 11-year professional rugby league career, including the 2018 Dally M award (best player in the NRL). The recognition of performance brings heightened respect for one's name and who they represent. His service as a professional rugby league player has enabled him opportunities to serve his family, community, and people. As such, it is the veteran's responsibility to lead in a manner that upholds the legacy of his family name, as well as those Samoan athletes who have blazed the trail (i.e. La'auli Sir Michael Jones, Tuifa'asisina Sir Bryan Williams, Ruben Wiki, Ali Lauti'iti) for the next generations of Samoan athletes.

Striking the balance of respect and responsibility for mentoring the younger generation and being mentored by the elder generation is where leadership development begins to evolve and affect performance of the individual and team. Tuivasa-Sheck was made Captain for the NZ Warriors in 2017 at the young age of 23. This is a role that he has had to grow into, relying heavily on elder players and coaching staff for their support (Byrnes, 2019). Tuivasa-Sheck's navigation of becoming the leader of a professional sport team highlights this sphere of service. Specifically, there is an acknowledgement of the necessity for him as a captain to develop a sense of awareness of others and know when to take the lead or when to allow others to lead (Byrnes, 2019).

Fellow Samoan rugby union veteran, Ardie Savea, was recently handed the captaincy role for his Super Rugby team (Wellington Hurricanes) for the 2021 season. Upon receiving the invitation from his coach, Savea recognised it was time for him to step up and lead regardless of how uncomfortable he might be (Porter, 2021). In conjunction with the title of captain, both Samoan veterans bear the important titles of son, father, and husband. This acute awareness of their cultural and familial obligations has implications on their leadership approach, decision-making and behaviour as they would be closely observed and respected by those they lead. Savea eloquently articulates this sentiment:

I'm standing loud and proud to be Samoan, to be Kiwi. I'm here loud and proud not only representing myself, but my franchise, my brothers, my team and more importantly my family, mum and dad and everyone back in Samoa

and here at home. You see Ardie, but there's a whole whānau behind me. It's an honour.

This perspective of honour reinforces the respect Samoans have for those who have contributed to their journey in life as a person and athlete. This honour and privilege to represent family, in the Samoan context, grows stronger the longer one's professional athlete career lifespan is.

Faith in God is a pillar that is commonly discussed in the literature related to Pacific athletes (Lakisa et al., 2020). To serve God (or a Higher Being) is synonymous with serving one's family. They are not mutually exclusive. However, we highlight this consideration as care should be taken to understand the intergenerational Pacific perspectives of faith. As such, Troy Polamalu and Sonny Bill Williams are two Samoan athletes who leveraged their platform during their veteran years to establish a brand that is synonymous to their faith. Since converting to Islam in 2009, Williams has been vocal and intentional with his declaration and practicing of his faith. For example, he supported victims affected by the 2015 Christchurch, NZ mosque shootings; and in covering sponsor logos that contradict his Islamic beliefs. Polamalu was widely known in the NFL for being a devout Christian and stated: *I try to serve God through football, with passion...as Mother Teresa said, God calls us not to be successful but to be faithful*" (Smith, 2020). This positioning offers a deeper understanding of the role of faith and spirituality as it relates to the Samoan athlete's career lifespan.

Success to these athletes is broader and deeper than their win and loss record. Tuivasa-Sheck is not widely known for his declaration of faith and spiritual practices, however, his service to family is evident and such behaviour is central to serving God:

This is where I chose to be because I'm the provider for my family. I'm here to work and this is the role I play for my family. It's a blessing to be doing the job that I'm doing (Tuivasa-Sheck)

As a Pacific athlete matures and their longevity increases, they recognise the blessings they have received to still be able to play at an elite level and therefore continue to bless their family and community.

As such, the Samoan veteran is at a stage in their career where they must begin to mentor the next generation, especially young Samoan and Pacific athletes. The knowledge and experience they have been privy to should now be shared while at the same time, remembering to draw strength from their mentors and leaders. It may be uncomfortable at first shifting from a teammate who serves to serve, to being the primary decision-maker, primary role-model, lead advocator, and sometimes an initiator of difficult conversations (serve to lead). This may offer context as to why our Pacific athletes may be hesitant in accepting leadership roles or are unsure of how to use their platform. They have spent time learning by observing how their leaders conduct themselves, as a means to upskill and develop. The sacrifices they make as professional athletes are perceived relative to the sacrifices ones' family and God (or Higher Being) have made for them to be where they are. It is this constant reminder that drives the Samoan veteran's approach to the game. Those who have been able

to successfully interweave their cultural values and faith practices into their development throughout their career lifespan are better positioned to fulfil their family and past Samoan athletes' legacies with honour, respect, and integrity.

7 Legend—Pule ia Tautua (Lead to Serve)

Among Pacific Island people; elders and other leaders are treated with the utmost respect. As such, many Pacific athletes who have transitioned out of sport are revered, and their presence and voice is treasured and respected. Therefore, the term 'retirement', is inappropriate when speaking of Samoan and Pacific athletes at the end of their playing careers because their legacy would continue to precede them even beyond death (e.g. Papali'itele Peter Fatialofa and Jerry Collins). We believe the term 'Legend', as opposed to 'retired' is a more appropriate construct to use. La'auli Sir Michael Jones, a well-respected rugby union legend, who is internationally one of the most famous rugby players, has been chosen to contextualise this phase.

8 La'auli Sir Michael Jones

La'auli had a professional rugby playing career spanning from 1985–1999. His off-field accolades include the New Zealand 1990 Commemoration Medal, for his service to Pacific Island community and Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit, for his service to rugby. La'auli was inducted into the International Rugby Hall of Fame in 2003 and received the Knight Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit. He was bestowed two chief titles, La'auli and Savae from Samoa, for the honour and service he has rendered to his family, village and island nation.

A legend is defined as one who has honourably finished their professional playing career. In this phase, the athlete has contributed all they could during their time as a player, and now have a legacy that lives on forever. Despite their playing career coming to an end, they continue to serve the game, their people and community off the field. Specifically, Legends oversee and guide the next generation and ensure everyone is performing their roles and responsibilities. La'auli Sir Michael Jones has overseen the growth and development of many rising rugby players. He has been able to use his position as a legend to help impart his wisdom, such examples include his speech to the Samoan Rugby League team at Mount Smart Stadium, Auckland, New Zealand "*There is such power that is wrapped up in this jersey. It carries with you the history, the legacy, where we have come as Toa Samoa*" ("Pasifika Futures Sir Michael Jones presents Toa Samoa with jerseys", 2021). Beyond the sporting sphere, La'auli Sir Michael Jones outreach efforts also extend into education (i.e. Pacific Advance Secondary School), non-profit (i.e. The Village Community Services Trust) and governance (i.e. NZ Rugby Board) and Church. Other examples of mentorship by Samoan legends to young up and coming athletes throughout the years also include speeches by Faumuina David Tua and Pat Lam. The power of their legacies among Pacific people is so great that their presence alone adds prestige

to any event they attend. There are many instances where other Pacific people would gift legends pigs, money, boxes of corned beef and fine mats as an acknowledgment of the prestige they hold.

In the Legend sphere one becomes a Godfather figure both for the game and among the younger Pacific generation. Their presence is revered as they are called upon by sporting management to provide insight into how the game should move forward, as well as their responsibility to oversee and guide the next generation. La'auli's election into the New Zealand Rugby Board is another avenue upon which he oversees and guides up and coming players.

"I have been fortunate throughout my life to be involved in rugby which has given me a lot. I am very humbled and privileged to have been elected on to the NZR Board, and I am looking forward to giving back to the game in this capacity," (Pasifika Futures Sir Michael Jones presents Toa Samoa with jerseys, 2021)

Other examples of Samoan legends actively overseeing the player pipeline include Manase Jessie Sapolu from the NFL (Uperesa, 2022), who has his own self named foundation, which nurture's other Polynesian rookies, and Sir Bryan Williams who is on the New Zealand Rugby Union board and called upon to mentor young athletes.

Samoa and Pacific legend duties and responsibilities extend beyond the game. Legends are also called upon to be active in other community initiatives such as educational promotion and fundraisers. La'auli is widely known for his work outside of the rugby sphere. He is passionate about overseeing the wellbeing of Pacific people as he is involved in several initiatives. In his interview with Taumeasina he spoke of this work outside of rugby:

"I am privileged to be involved with a number of Non-for-profit agencies and charities that focus on youth development and education. The Village Trust is a non for profit that we set up 20 years ago to deliver mentoring and education programs and a drop in centre for Pasifika youth at risk in Auckland . The Pacific Peoples Advancement Trust was set up 10 years ago, and established the first Pacific island Secondary School in NZ, which we call "Pacific Advance Senior School" or PASS. I am involved in numerous other charities either as a board member or a patron. It is a privilege to serve my community in these various capacities. Ultimately I want to play whatever part I can to see our people thrive and prosper and to be the Head and not the Tail "(Resort, 2021).

Other examples of Samoan legends actively working with the community outside of their respective sporting codes include Sonny Bill Williams' pledge during the measles outbreak in Samoa and Tim Cahill's financial support during the 2009 Tsunami (Reporters, 2021) (Cahill touched by Samoan tragedy | The World Game, 2021).

At this phase legends are recognised with status among mainstream society for their sporting legacy and are solidified in Samoan and Pacific spaces as leaders.

Many in this phase are bestowed Chief titles, such as rugby legends Fa'alogo Tana Umaga, Muliagatele Brian Lima, and Namulauulu Alama Ieremia. Chief titles are bestowed as a recognition of one's service to their family, village, and nation. In a Samoan context chief titles are the supreme mark of leadership.

Sport legends are the highest revered sphere among Pacific Island athletes as their pioneering status is treasured and commended among both rookies and veterans and the wider public. They have both used their positions as athletes to serve and serve to lead. This is the most prestigious sphere for a Samoan athlete, as their accumulated years of service are recognised and honoured; particularly as a minority group, they are seen as the trail blazers who fought the hardest fight and paved a way to allow for other Pacific and Samoan players to have better playing conditions.

9 Discussion

Athlete development and career transition scholarship has predominantly come from North America and Europe. Much of the research on athlete development focused on the individual athlete, as opposed to them as beings who are permanently entrenched in the collective. There is a necessity for more in-depth analysis of the construct of culture and its relevant characteristics that contribute to knowledge surrounding athlete career transitions and development (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova et al., 2020). As such, we have opened a discourse utilising a Samoan lens, relevant to the Samoan professional athlete. Western ways of analysing the Samoan athlete are inaccurate, as they neglect their fundamental cultural values of service and faith. For too long, Eurocentric philosophies and ideologies have been inappropriately imposed on Samoan and Pacific Island athletes (Enari & Matapo, 2020, 2021). Sporting organisations have worked with Pacific athletes through capitalist modes of individual financial gain, with disregard to the athlete's wider family and village. As a result, the athletes' foundational values and beliefs are not considered, as frameworks and strategies are made about the Samoan athletes, without the Samoan athlete and their culture. Therefore, Western notions of the athlete lifespan should be disrupted as they do not acknowledge critical cultural nuances such as: *tautua* (service), *faatua* (faith), *'aiga* (family), *fa'alavelave*, *alofa* (love), *matai* (chiefly title), that shape the player and person, as they fulfil their duty to serve, as a Samoan professional athlete.

10 Utilising a Samoan Lens to Understand the Samoan Athlete

There are several implicit and explicit pressures placed on an athlete as soon as they sign a professional contract. These perceived pressures come by way of performance and contractual responsibilities, as well as familial and/or cultural responsibilities. Through *tautua*, the importance of one's role and responsibility to serve before, during and after their athletic career is highlighted. This deepens understanding about the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of Samoan athletes. The athlete's whole life is devoted to the notion of service to the collective, including the organisation and

team. Failure to acknowledge this results in an inadequate recognition of an integral part of who the players are, and further extends misunderstanding among Pacific players and the sporting industry.

Eurocentric models and theories have been established and are predominantly used to outline the process to achieving excellence for any athlete of any sport (Keung, 2018). However, excellence through a Samoan lens broadens the metric to include “service hours” to the collective. For a Samoan athlete, their worldview, way of being and morals guide the way, and why they play. Their identity and position as a Samoan outweighs their status as an athlete. They were Samoan before they became a recognised professional athlete and will continue to be Samoan long after they finish their professional sporting career. Furthermore, a Samoan athlete’s relationship with collective entities such as extended family and their nation, are an integral part of who they are and inform their decisions regarding how to navigate the sporting space. Their responsibility toward others, as well as legacy-building and maintaining is highly important. Their ability to take care of their family and represent their family, village, community, and culture with honour is a measure of excellence for the Samoan athlete. Hence the implicit and explicit pressure one can assume if they are not properly supported, let alone understood.

Therefore, by viewing an athlete through a Samoan lens and acknowledging their collective ways of being, a better understanding and more honest dialogue with the athlete can evolve. Doing so may unlock how to leverage an athlete’s cultural ways of being (e.g. conversation about ways their village and extended family can actively support their professional athlete journey) and therefore influence performance (Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2020; Marsters & Tiatia-Seath, 2019; Uperesa, 2022).

11 The Athlete Career Lifespan – a Deeper Look through a Samoan Lens

The transition to professional sport poses challenges both on and off the field, as the rookie experience can be filled with personal and performance challenges (Bruner et al., 2008). When one considers an athlete’s approach to the professional sporting space as a rookie, it is a time of celebration and respect for those who have contributed to their success. The sacrifices especially of parents or caregivers can finally be repaid by ensuring that one honours the name that is visible on their jersey with pride. Though the athlete may be the person on the field, in the gym and putting in the hard work, there is acknowledgment that they represent much more than just themselves and their nuclear family. Hence, organisations that offer a culturally safe environment, where the athlete identity and the cultural identity are not mutually exclusive, are in a better position to optimise the preparation and performance of the young Pacific athlete.

Considering an athlete’s approach to the professional sporting space as a veteran, the understanding of responsibility deepens. Responsibility by way of mentoring, protecting, and leading the younger players and young people in general. Responsibility by way of being aware of the consequences of their behaviour as a public figure and role-model. They have a responsibility to ensure their elders are taken

care of and that their wisdom and knowledge is respected. Veterans not only have a responsibility on the field to look out for their teammates, it also extends beyond the lines of the field and across the vast oceans that ones' ancestors traversed. It is this final point that begins the discourse as to the weight of the 'invisible' jersey that Pacific athletes wear. The weight of serving the larger collective through sport as it is an avenue of service. The process of preparing, supporting, and nurturing the Samoan athlete takes a reciprocal and collective response. It is likely that the veteran may not aspire to fill the leadership role but they will recognise the opportunity as a privilege and honour to further serve their family, team, community and people. Thus, the veteran bears the responsibility of reinforcing the 'Polynesian Pipeline'. Hence, the veteran stage is critical in the Polynesian Pipeline, as it simultaneously ensures the rookies are being looked after and the legends' legacies are not in vain.

The legend sphere holds a status of prestige and wisdom. Because they have been pioneers in their own rights. Legends are rewarded and acknowledged for their years of service both as a player and for the community work they have done. They have been instrumental in offering tutelage to both the rookies and veterans. This is achieved either hands on (i.e. personally guiding and working with them) or by their mere legacy as a pioneer (i.e. seeing another Samoan excel offers encouragement and motivation for other Samoans to excel). As an established legend both in the game and among Pacific people, their position of power and status is used to affect change for the collective at a board and policy level.

The transition out of sport can be difficult if athletes have only spent time developing their athletic identity. Those who successfully transition through each milestone of their career are those who have been able to cultivate and present their holistic identity within the professional sport context (Schinke et al., 2012). If Pacific athletes have been able to cultivate and present their whole self during their professional sporting careers, then legends will be better prepared to embrace the transition out of sport. They are grounded in who they are, what their life purpose is and can lead the next chapter of their life, building upon the legacy that has been set during their service.

12 Considerations moving Forward

We would recommend organisations with a strong Pacific presence, or practitioners who work with Pacific athletes to assess their current position and practice regarding the below questions.

Do you know the names of your Pacific players?

Can you pronounce your Pacific players names properly?

Do you know where their families are from?

Are families involved during milestone events (i.e. first or 100th game jersey presentations)?

Are there Pacific-specific networks that athletes can engage in, and offers mentorship, with regards to their holistic development?

Are you implicit or explicit in supporting an athlete's cultural and spiritual practices within the organisation?

Do you explicitly and genuinely inquire about your Pacific athletes beliefs and/or practices, and know what their greatest motivation/aspirations are?

How do organisations embrace and support those with strong faith beliefs in a society and climate that does not?

How do your wellbeing initiatives support family, faith, and service, considering those are fundamental Pacific values that enhance ones' wellbeing?

Do you engage with your Legends and if so, how do they contribute to the club?

Does your organisation prioritise profit over people or people over profit?

Is there adequate support and follow-up for those who transition out of sport (whether voluntary or involuntary)?

Understanding the notions of service, including the who, what, why and how is a critical step that must be taken if we are to better support the development and performance of professional Samoan athletes. Whilst this is a Samoan perspective of the professional athlete lifespan, there are shared experiences and understanding across the Pacific athlete population. A Pan-Pacific exploration of the notions of service is needed to highlight the subtle cultural nuances that may exist and therefore support a more culturally appropriate response.

13 Conclusion

It is evident that the Polynesian pipeline is only getting stronger. We can no longer rely solely on adapting Western-underpinned models and frameworks (Enari & Rangiwai, 2021; Enari & Taula, 2022) to fit non-Western athlete populations. Hence, our intention for this article was not to create an athlete career lifespan model. Rather, we have intentionally chosen to apply a culturally specific lens to aid understanding for those who work with Pacific athletes due to the dearth of Pacific-underpinned frameworks within the literature. The tautua model offers a vantage point from which coaches and administrators can seek ways to support Pacific athletes, in particular Samoans, to maximise their professional sporting career. It is imperative that a Pacific athlete should not have to have an internal battle as to whether they should 'leave their culture' at home. Doing so means you have inadvertently asked your athlete to disregard their family too, the very people who have been fundamental in their athlete child's journey and who could be your strongest ally. You have also asked them to neglect their faith, cultural values, beliefs which with better understanding could help optimise the preparation and performance both on and off the field. It is envisioned that this paper will help bridge understanding between Pacific athletes and the non-Pacific people and organisations they engage with.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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