

Exploring The Perceived Facilitators and Barriers Affecting Female Athletes' Overall Well-Being Within The NRLW



BACKGROUND AND STUDY AIM

Women's semi-professional and professional sporting domain has experienced a period of substantial growth. As employment contracts and playing conditions continually improve for female athletes, there is now the opportunity to attain relatively full-time employment from within their preferred sport. However, for many female athletes attempting to develop a career within this male-dominated space, they are often presented with an additional range of complexities.

With the planned expansion of the National Rugby League Women's (NRLW) in the near future, it is vital that current practices are evaluated to ensure that the women's game can become more sustainable in terms of managing their current and future players overall well-being. Access to effective structures of support will be especially necessary for the four newly integrated teams, as they have not had the opportunity to implement, develop and evaluate a range of well-being structures previously.

There is currently no existing literature that explores and evaluates the currently implemented support structures offered by the individual clubs within the NRLW league. This then raises questions regarding whether NRLW athletes are receiving enough access to these structures and if these support structures are effective in promoting professional development and managing player well-being.

Study Aim

This study aimed to address this gap by exploring the current facilitators and barriers to accessing player well-being within the NRLW from the perspectives of both players and support staff. This included examining the current support structures offered to support overall player well-being and the perceived effectiveness and limitations of these structures in supporting player well-being.



Spencer, C (2022). Getty Images. <https://www.gettyimages.com.au/editorial-images/sport/events/775461031/child-events>

PARTICIPANTS & THE PROCESS

Who participated?

Players and support staff from the Sydney Roosters took part in this study. The Sydney Roosters are one of the foundation clubs from within the National Rugby League Women's (NRLW) competition established in 2018. Since the commencement of this league, they have achieved considerable success in winning the premiership in 2021, as well as been the runners up in 2018 and 2020.

This study was also conducted in partnership with Inspiretek – a health technology company who aim to change the future of sport and incorporate better well-being outcomes globally for athletes. Prospective participants for this research study were recruited through Inspiretek Brisbane's relationship and connections with personnel from within the NRLW.

What did we do?

Participants took part in a one-on-one interviews online with the UQ research team where they were asked to reflect and discuss: the current structures provided by the club; how player wellbeing was supported; barriers and facilitators to wellbeing; and, proposed solutions to address any barriers identified. Four participants took part in the interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with key themes identified and summarised. The project was led by 4th year clinical exercise physiology students at UQ as part of their Honours research program.



Perez, A (2022). Getty Images. <https://www.gettyimages.com.au/photos/albert-perez>

WHAT WE FOUND

Findings

The support staff at the Sydney Roosters implemented a range of structures that attempted to manage and regulate the overall well-being of their players.

Physical Support Structures

From a physical well-being perspective, these structures included monitoring and tracking of supervised and unsupervised training sessions, provision of nutritional support, including the provision of food after training sessions, and housing support for non-local players.

“The support staff would touch base with each of the players multiple times a week, especially prior to or following a team field session”

Mental and Emotional Structures

From an emotional and mental support perspective, structures included the interprofessional collaboration between support staff roles, and a supportive environment being provided by the club with a level of rapport, and respect between the support staff and the players.

“I think it is really important to whenever you can as a support staff, to look for opportunities to establish personal connections with your players...This way, they will feel comfortable coming up to you whenever, and talking to us about the stressful demands related to rugby, or you know, anything personal which is going on in their lives”

“The players knew that they could trust [us] and knew that if they ever needed to reach out, that [we] would be there. They should always feel comfortable to do so, for whatever they needed”



Blyth, M (2022). Getty Images. <https://www.gettyimages.com.au/photos/matt-blyth>

BARRIERS AND IMPLICATIONS

Barriers

The most prominent barrier currently impacting the well-being of players was because of the semi-professional nature of the league. This impacted the players' ability to access support structures, as well as the array of offered structures that were available at a club level.

“Due to the semi-professional nature of this league, players are currently not able to spend a lot of time with support staff. They're either working or at university, or they're busy during the day a lot of them. So, they are not getting the best opportunities to access these provided avenues, as well as not having the time to recover their bodies like any other professional athlete would”

“Workplaces and places of study need to have a greater understanding about maybe like the demands of what [the players] are actually going through, and that [they are] trying to juggle so many hats”

Implications

Findings suggest various factors may sustain and improve players overall well-being in the future. At the current time, the Sydney Roosters should endeavour to continue the provision of the supportive environment to the players. The fostering nature of the support staff, and club management staff will continue to provide an enabling environment to discuss well-being and help to address both internal and external stressors to the players.

Additionally, the Roosters should continue to provide advice to the players on how they can continue to aid their own well-being and continue to provide educational opportunities such as talks and seminars with health professionals.

The club could consider profiling **“A day in the life”** of players to highlight all of the various commitments involved in the current semi-professional nature of the sport.

For the future, continually striving for improved funding, from a variety of structures including the NRL body, media, and sponsorship, will aid in improving the facilities accessible to the players. In turn, improved funding will reduce the financial, and time burden on the players, and will aid in improving mental well-being along with providing physical and social well-being benefits. Directions for future research would ideally involve investigation of strategies to improve the funding to NRLW clubs to turn the sport from semi-professional to professional for the players.

“The more investment there is in the game, the easier it's going to be for the lives of the female athletes and for the women's game”

A huge thank you to all the participants, Damon Spooner (Sydney Roosters), and the Inspiretek team for their support and help in the project

Find out more

If you have more questions about our study, or would like to find out more please contact the following researchers:

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