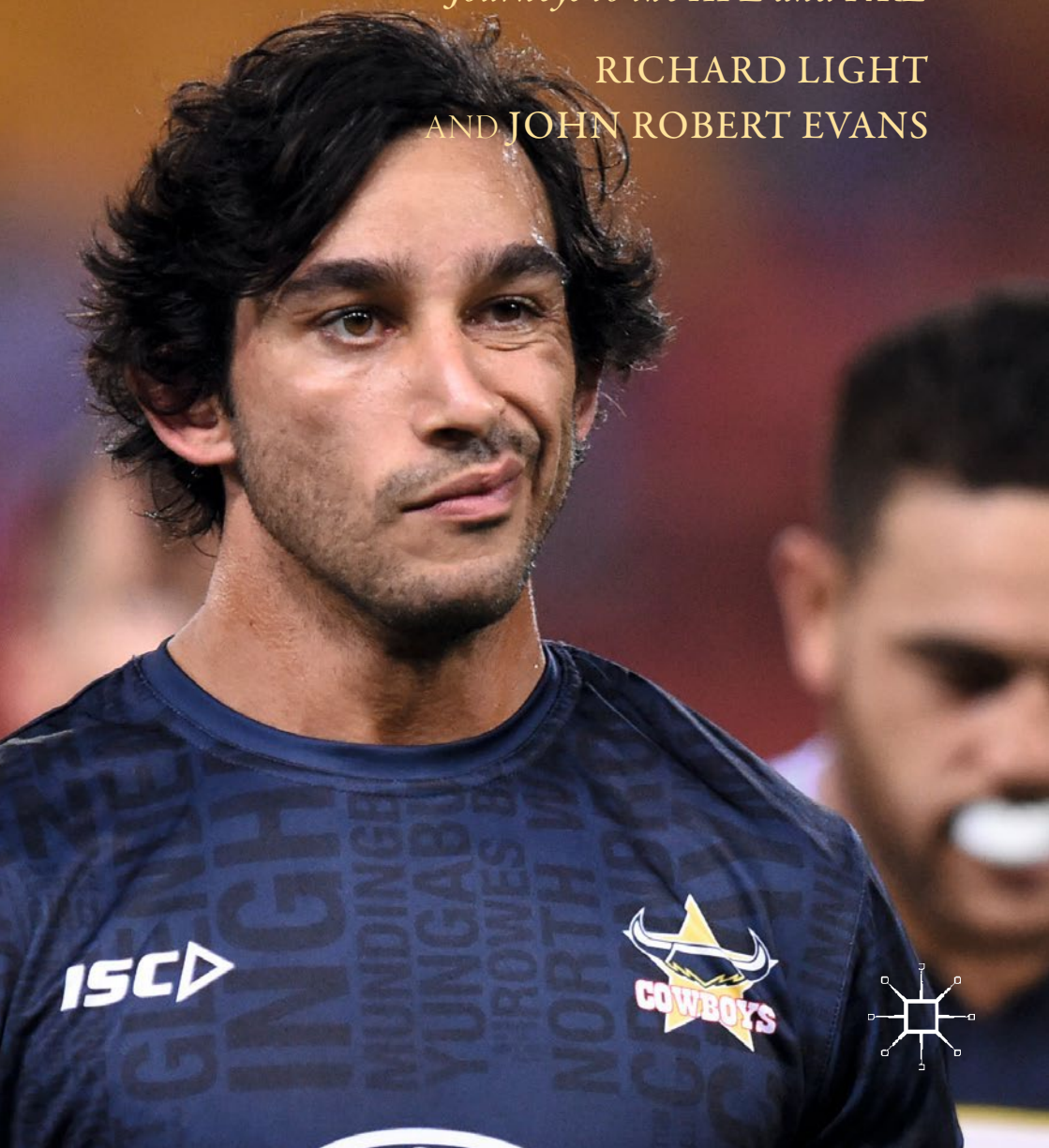


Stories of
Indigenous Success
in Australian Sport

Journeys to the AFL and NRL

RICHARD LIGHT
AND JOHN ROBERT EVANS



Stories of Indigenous Success in Australian Sport

“The research presented in this engaging and important book provides invaluable understanding of the meaning Australian football and rugby league holds for Indigenous Australian athletes and its inseparability from Aboriginal culture. Guided by the important and profound Indigenous methodology of *Dadirri, Indigenous stories of Success in Australian Sport* provides deep insight into what enables Indigenous Australians to thrive in sport by embracing our humanity and capacity to be exceptional and by offering us hope rather than entrenching despair. It also suggests the potential that taking this approach to understanding Indigenous Australians holds across a wide range of issues that include but are not limited to sport.”

—Chris Sarra, *University of Canberra, Australia, National Rugby League (NRL) Commissioner and Founding Chairman of the Stronger, Smarter Institute*

“A fascinating, well-written, entertaining and significant study. *Indigenous Stories of Success in Australian Sport* is a timely and perceptive personal understanding of Indigenous experiences in both the AFL and NRL. Light and Evans provide rare insights into considering the importance that sport plays within Indigenous communities. A very welcome addition to Indigenous sports literature.”

—John Maynard, *University of Newcastle, UK*

“The narratives of the outstanding sportsmen in *Indigenous Stories of Success in Australian Sport* are immensely interesting, beautifully written, neatly structured and provide fascinating insight into the development of elite Indigenous sportsmen and the role Aboriginal culture plays in it. This book is more than a chronicle of Indigenous success in sport. It is an incisive and original exploration, and critique, of a country with a proud history of sporting prowess. It also presents a passionate plea to sports administrators, educational leaders, and policy-makers, to ‘listen to culture’.”

—Angus Hikairo Macfarlane, *University of Canterbury, New Zealand*

“*Indigenous Stories of Success in Australian Sport* is an exceptional book. Readers of the volume cannot fail to be impressed by the depth of the stories presented in Parts II and III, each of them fascinating in their own right, but when considered collectively, provide a compelling perspective on how Indigenous Australians develop sporting expertise and succeed in transitioning in professional sport.”

—David Lavalley, *Limerick University, Republic of Ireland*

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Cover illustration: Jonathan Thurston on Friday received the Australian Human Rights Commission's medal in recognition of his ongoing commitment to improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Photo: Scott Davis

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Foreword

The 2015 NRL Grand Final goes down as one of the greatest and most historic; not only was it an exceptional game won by the North Queensland Cowboys after the final siren, but it was also the first time both teams had Indigenous captains. I was at that game in my capacity as an Inaugural Australian Rugby League Commissioner. The NRL is the first national sport to have an Indigenous Australian on the commission, the highest level of corporate governance in the game. As an Indigenous Australian and as an educator, I am proud to fulfil that role.

At that very game, Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull asked me 'What are three things we must do to make a difference in Indigenous policy?' It is indeed a complex question but in contemplating a profound response I realized the answer to his question was being played out on the field before our very eyes. Eventually, with the answers being played out before me on the NRL field, I responded to the Prime Minister by articulating three key elements for success on the Indigenous policy landscape:

- Embrace our humanity and our capacity to be exceptional;
- Bring us policy approaches that nurture hope rather than entrench despair;
- Do things WITH us, not TO us.

The Indigenous policy landscape has always been complex. The enduring and parlous statistics for Indigenous people reminds us that we still have a long way to go before we remove this dreadful blemish from the fabric of our Australian nation. Conversely, the representation of Indigenous players in our two most prominent Australian football codes, that *Indigenous stories of success in Australian sport* focuses on, shows that within the confines of these games, we are getting something right.

I have always maintained that the football field is a tremendous analogy that offers a glimpse at what a fair, equitable and exceptional society can look like. The playing field is level. Racism might exist there but it is dealt with promptly as there is literally no place to hide. Most importantly, if Indigenous football players, or indeed any player, are prepared to work their guts out, turn up, be a cohesive team member, and commit to the pursuit of excellence and winning, then usually they will succeed. If only the rest of our society could understand how to create such a societal culture that embraces Indigenous Australian culture and enables us to move well beyond surviving, to thriving.

In this engaging book, Light and Evans bring to life their research into those very elements that enable success for Indigenous Australian NRL and AFL players and offer deep and valuable insights into notions of Indigenous cultures within football culture. Drawing on their innovative, three-year study, they note that for many Indigenous players, football is not just a physical activity, but a cultural practice whose meaning is shaped by historical and social contexts.

The findings of the three-year study presented in this book help us understand more deeply how Indigenous Australian athletes can thrive in Australian football and rugby league by embracing our humanity and capacity to be exceptional and by offering us hope rather than entrenching despair. An added bonus for readers of *Indigenous stories of success in Australian sport* is the valuable insight it provides into a profound Indigenous methodology, referred to as Dadirri. Dadirri encourages us to learn through non-intrusive observation, deep, active listening that challenges us to hear with more than our ears and build knowledge through sensitivity and awareness and develop understanding after deep contemplation and reflection. It is from this perspective that Light and Evans have been able to offer such deep and enlightening insights into what

enables Indigenous athletes to thrive in Australian football and rugby league while locating their experiences in the bigger picture of global sport. It suggests the potential that this approach to understanding Indigenous Australians holds across a wide range of issues that include, but are not limited to, sport.

Chris Sarra

Preface

This book presents the findings of a three-year study on the journeys of 16 Indigenous Australian athletes from their first touch of a football to the highest levels of Australian football and rugby league, conceptualized as a process of learning. Given the acute disadvantages Indigenous Australians suffer across a range of key social determinants, their success in Australian football and rugby league is something of an anomaly that invites investigation but from a more sophisticated perspective than reductionist views of the ‘natural athlete’. The study we report on in this book inquired into the development of sporting expertise as a process of culturally and socially situated learning with the central research question being: ‘What pedagogical factors enabled male, Indigenous athletes to become elite level players in Australian football and rugby league?’

The combined narrative inquiry and grounded theory methodology we used aligned with the Indigenous Australian cultural concept of *dadirri*, which encouraged us to listen deeply and attentively and strive to wholly understand. Individually, the life stories told to us by 16 elite-level Indigenous athletes provide fascinating insights into experience, culture and learning. Collectively, they provided deep understanding of the powerful influence that Aboriginal culture exerted on the participants’ development of expertise and their journeys to the top of their sports while locating individual experience and agency within larger economic, cultural and social considerations. We wrote this book in a way that attempts

to capture the unfolding of understanding that came from listening and thinking about the stories told to us, and the use of formal theories to further develop this understanding. It locates detailed individual experience of learning within an Aboriginal culture of sport in local communities and locates the participants' journeys to the AFL and NRL within the tensions between a local Indigenous culture of sport and the global culture of the sport industry as shaped by economic rationalism.

Focused on Indigenous success in two of Australia's biggest sports, this book makes a contribution towards knowledge in Indigenous studies across a range of issues that include, but are not limited, to sport. At the same time, it makes a significant contribution towards knowledge about the development of expertise and particularly up to the ages of 12 or 13 in team sports by confirming much of the literature in this area while emphasizing the importance of culture.

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Richard Light
John Robert Evans

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We would like to acknowledge the assistance and cooperation of people who helped make this book possible. This begins with the eight AFL and eight NRL participants who took time from their busy lives to tell us their stories and to answer questions we had in following up on those interviews. We thank them for being prepared to share their life experiences with us as strangers and appreciate their trust and cooperation. Each of them spoke at length about their lives and journeys to the AFL and NRL in ways that were honest, sincere, positive and inspiring. Without exception, each of them had faced great challenges over their journeys to the highest level of their sport in Australia that highlighted their courage, resilience and commitment to realize their dream and which we feel could inspire other Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) Australians to reach their goals in life. For the first author, who is not Indigenous, these stories provided enlightening insights into Aboriginal culture, spirituality and the importance of community and identity as an Indigenous Australian and the role these played in assisting them succeed.

We would also like to thank the staff at the AFL Players Association for their help in finding the AFL participants in the study and note with thanks the help of our research assistant, Ricardo Pimenta. We are especially grateful for the very generous funding provided to us by the Australian Research Council through a Discovery Indigenous research grant, without which this study would not have been possible.

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List of Abbreviations

AFL	Australian Football League
AGSV	Associated Grammar Schools of Victoria
CLT	Complex Learning Theory
DMSP	Development Model for Sport Participation
GBA	Game-Based Approaches
NSW	New South Wales
NSWRL	New South Wales Rugby League
NRL	National Rugby League
QLD	Queensland
SANFL	South Australia National Football League
TAC	Transport Accident Commission
TGfU	Teaching Games for Understanding
VFL	Victorian Football League

Part I

Introduction

Despite being acutely disadvantaged in comparison to non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Australians punch well above their weight in sport and particularly in Australian football and rugby league. Although only comprising 3 per cent of the Australian population, they account for between 10 per cent and 14 per cent of the elite player population in the [NRL (National Rugby League) and the AFL (Australian Football League)] (Harvey and Halloran 2010; Sheedy 2010a, b). Approximately 22 per cent of players in the annual rugby league State of Origin series (NSW Vs Qld) are Indigenous with one-third of the Queensland team typically Indigenous. As we outline in more detail in the following chapter, sport has long had an important place in Indigenous Australian culture but access to elite-level sport for them is a comparatively recent development. Rugby league was first played in Australia in 1908 but it was not until 1960 that Lionel Morgan ran on the field as the first Aboriginal to play for the Australian national team to be greeted with boos and pelted with objects by spectators. Over half a century later, the participation of Indigenous players in rugby league and Australian football at their most elite levels is significant enough for the annual promotion of 'All Star' games between Indigenous and non-Indigenous players, leading into the respective playing seasons.

Indigenous players are not only very visible in the AFL and NRL due to their numbers but also due to what is seen to be a distinctively Indigenous approach to play that is commonly described as being intuitive, creative and free flowing with Indigenous players displaying superb skills, anticipation, awareness and a remarkable sense of the game that escapes most non-Indigenous players (see Hallinan and Judd 2007). In AFL this reflects what Butcher and Judd (2016) describe as an Aboriginal 'football ethic' that is evident in weekend gatherings in central and northern Australia where the role that culture plays in the development of an Aboriginal is also evident. These important cultural events in central and northern Australia celebrate sport, culture and community with an approach to play that, 'stresses attack in a style that is characterized by high-speed running quick scoring and minimal body contact' and one in which, 'giving expression to the game is given priority over any desire to win' (p. 173).

The rugby league All Stars pre-season game is a highly anticipated event between two reasonably evenly matched teams but with the Indigenous team being dominant over recent years. The Indigenous All Stars had an emphatic win in 2013 with the Festival of Indigenous Rugby League programme replacing the All Stars game in 2014 because this was the year following the Rugby League World Cup. In 2015, the Indigenous All Stars defeated the NRL (non-Indigenous) All Stars 20–6. A World All Stars team narrowly defeated the Indigenous All Stars 12–8 but in February 2017 the Indigenous All Stars overpowered the World All Stars team to earn a convincing 34–8 victory. In the same sport, up to 35 per cent of players in the Australian national rugby league team (the Kangaroos) are Indigenous (Evans et al. 2015) with this figure rising up to 46 per cent of players in the Australian run on side for the 2015 ANZAC day test match. The presence and influence of Indigenous players is very evident in both sports. So is their distinctive way of playing.

In Australian sport, it is widely accepted that Indigenous Australians bring something special to the NRL and AFL and display outstanding skill, knowledge, ability and a sense of the game but little research has been conducted on how this expertise is developed. Most commonly, this aptitude to rugby league and Australian football and subsequent over-representation in the AFL and NRL is simplistically explained as being

racially inherited ‘natural talent’. While there is likely to be some genetic influence, this is a simplistic and inadequate explanation that has been widely criticized (see Adair and Stronach 2011). A tempting alternative explanation might lie in the body of work on the broader development of sporting expertise in sport but its lack of attention to culture limits its ability to explain the success of Indigenous Australians at the highest levels of two major Australian sports and how this distinctive style of play is developed.

Natural Athletes?

As Adair and Stronach (2011) suggest, the concept of the ‘natural’ Aboriginal athlete as a biological, genetic and ‘racial’ explanation for innate sporting acumen is pervasive in popular culture, whether in Australia, the USA or elsewhere. In Australia, this belief in Indigenous athletic ability being genetically inherited is not only uncritically accepted among non-Indigenous Australians but also among Indigenous Australians. Described by Godwell (2000) as ‘folkloric theory’, it encourages belief in the existence of an innate athletic ability in Aboriginals as a simplistic explanation for their success in sport that ignores their efforts in developing their talent as a process of learning and the influence of Aboriginal culture.

Racial inheritance explanations of sporting success are not limited to male Indigenous athletes. Indigenous females also accept this explanation of their success in sport as being naturally occurring as well as accepting that characteristics of performance in sport such as being instinctive, magical, inventive and having a ‘sixth sense’ are also genetically passed on (Stronach et al. 2016; Hallinan and Judd 2007). While there are likely to be genetically inherited capacities that provide some advantage for Indigenous Australians in rugby league and Australian football (and other sports), this view of the natural athlete is too simplistic and dismissive of individual contributions to the development of expertise in sport and the influence of socio-cultural contexts. It fails to recognize the lifetimes of learning and the contributions of other people involved in these players’ development into elite-level sportsmen. It also fails to recognize the role

that Aboriginal culture plays in this process and the meaning and value of sport in Indigenous communities (Butcher and Judd 2016; Light and Evans 2015, 2017).

Developing Expertise

Not only is recognition of the ways in which cultural context shapes and influences the development of sporting expertise lacking in research on Indigenous sport but also in sport more broadly. This is not to say that it is ignored because the last few decades have seen increasing consideration of how social and cultural contexts shape the development of sporting expertise but knowledge in the biophysical sciences in sport continues to dominate thinking about how expertise is developed. Recent explanations of expertise and performance in sport, in general, recognize and account for the interaction of genetics, environment and experience over time. As Côté et al. (2007) suggest understanding how expertise is developed in sport involves determining, ‘the relative contribution of genetic and environmental/experiential factors to high-level human achievement/work that has emanated largely from the nature/nurture distinction first proposed by Sir Francis Galton’ (p. 184). Genetic inheritance may play a significant role in the development of expertise in Indigenous athletes but, as research suggests across a range of cultural settings, the experience that they have from an early age, ‘is enormously influential in determining to what degree individual potential is realised and expertise attained’ (Côté et al. 2007, p. 184). Genetically inherited talent, capabilities or physical attributes alone are unlikely to take anyone to the most elite levels of their sport. Some work on the development of expertise in sport identifies how genetically inherited abilities and capacities are complemented by experience, formal practice and socio-cultural contexts but it is not merely the quantity of practice that is important as is suggested by the notion that 10,000 hours of practice is required to become an expert performer (see Ericsson and Charmness 1994).

The reductionist contention that 10,000 hours of practice is required to become an expert performer refers to deliberate practice that is high in effort, low in inherent enjoyment and designed to purposefully address areas of weakness (Ericsson and Charmness 1994). Recent developments

within the motor learning field have led to a more inclusive notion of what constitutes practice and consideration of the breadth of experience that contributes to the development of expertise, which is evident in recognition of the development that arises from participation in ‘deliberate play’, as play-like, loosely structured activities. The term deliberate play refers to activities that are fun, enjoyable, engaging and which promote intrinsic motivation. Deliberate play includes the informal pickup games often played in the local neighbourhood or after school and usually as small-sided games with peer designed rules and managed by the players. While they are not designed or played with any specific intent for performance improvement, they make a significant contribution to the development of expertise and particularly in regard to improving perceptual capacities and decision-making (Berry et al. 2008).

Some studies on the development of expertise have identified how expert decision-makers in elite-level team sports such as Australian football invest more time in deliberate play than in structured practice (see Berry and Abernathy 2003). Motor learning theory recognizes how deliberate play contributes to the development of performance but it is seen to be less important than deliberate practice as athletes focus more on one sport in the transition from the sampling phase (5–12 years) in the Development Model for Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté and Hay 2002) to the specializing phase (13–16 years). However, we suggest there is a need to look beyond motor learning theory to better understand how experience beyond the training field contributes to the development of expertise as a lifelong process of learning and how culture influences this development. In this book, we do so by drawing on learning theory that sits upon constructivist epistemology and accounts for experience and culture and complements the social theory of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu.

Developing Expertise as a Process of Situated Learning

As Kirk (2010) argues, seeing improvement in sport as a process of learning is invaluable for being able to identify and consider the wide range of environmental and interpersonal factors that shape it. Contemporary developments in theories of learning that have been drawn on to inform innovative approaches to teaching and coaching sport and other physical

activity identify and account for the culturally and socially situated nature of learning (Light 2017). They also identify the implicit processes of learning that occur through participation in practice within particular social and cultural settings ranging from Bourdieu's concept of cultural fields (1984) to the tighter focus of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice. They offer more sophisticated and effective ways of understanding how Indigenous Australian football and rugby league players succeed in making it to the pinnacle of their sport than seeing them as natural athletes or by measuring how many thousands of hours they spend in deliberate practice. The idea of learning as a lifelong process we refer to here is different to that of lifelong learning that forms an aspect of formal education policy in many developed countries (Light and Kentel 2010). Our view of learning as a lifelong process sees it as an inescapable aspect of social life expressed by Begg (2001) as living = learning, and which includes the implicit, embodied processes of learning gender and culture (Light and Kentel 2010).

Seeing the development of expertise by Indigenous Australian AFL and NRL players as a process of learning facilitates accounting for the powerful influence of culture, of the extended family and of the importance of relationships and interaction for Indigenous Australians. It also assists in recognizing the complexity of how they learn to succeed. In this book, we see learning as an ongoing process throughout life that is shaped by experience and context and not restricted to formal settings such as schools and universities. Taking a socio-cultural perspective on the development of expertise in Australian football and rugby league as a process of situated learning, we set out to answer the core research question of: 'What socio-cultural factors most enable the male, Indigenous athletes to develop into elite level players in Australian football and rugby league as a process of learning?'

The Study

Outlined and discussed in more detail in Chap. 3, the study drawn on in this book generated data from the stories told to us by the 16 participants about how they learned to play 'footy' from their first experiences of games and sport as very young children through to being drafted into the

AFL or NRL. We kept the stories whole but after identifying ideas, concepts and/or themes emerging across the participants' stories, we shifted to a grounded theory approach beginning with initial coding developed from the life history interview transcripts and then focused coding (Charmaz 2006). Following focused coding we used short, focused interviews to develop substantive categories through constant comparison within and between categories and memo-ing. We then moved from substantive to theoretical coding through the introduction of formal theory and concepts for theoretical integration.

This combined narrative inquiry and grounded theory methodology is an interpretive approach aimed at providing an inside perspective and a holistic understanding (Lal et al. 2012). Its use of a life history type interview and its emphasis on locating theory within a narrative allowed us to keep the stories intact while identifying emerging themes from which we developed theories grounded in the data. The combined, methodological approach complemented the importance of telling stories in Australian Aboriginal culture (Bamblett 2013) while also aligning with an Indigenous approach to research known as *dadirri* (Atkinson 2000).

According to Atkinson (2000), *dadirri* proceeds inductively and requires a degree of empathy, sensitivity and openness on the part of the researcher who must remain non-judgemental. Information and understanding are generated through non-intrusive observation, deep, active listening that involves 'hearing with more than the ears', building knowledge through sensitivity and awareness, and developing understanding by contemplation and reflection (Atkinson 2000, p. 16). In the later stages of the study, we asked the participants to not only check the accuracy of facts but also comment on the substantive themes that we had arrived at. The ways in which the findings provide understanding of Indigenous learning provide us with the opportunity of meeting a requirement of *dadirri*, which is to act upon the understanding developed from listening, reflecting and interaction. We act on this understanding by initially suggesting in the closing chapter of the book how the understanding and knowledge developed from the study could be used to inform policy and strategies involved in improving Indigenous formal education in the hope that we might be able to contribute to this aim in some practical way.

The delayed use of formal theory and literature in the grounded theory process is reflected in the increased use of the literature and formal theory in Part IV of the book. The study identified two distinct stages in the participants' journeys to the NRL and AFL that we focus on in Chaps. 12 and 13. Chapter 12 focuses on how the participants laid the foundations of expertise and a distinctive Aboriginal style of play. Chapter 13 focuses on the cultural transition from around the age of 12 or 13 to the participants' entry into the NRL and AFL. Chapter 14 locates the detail of individual experience and learning through participation in practice within the broader dynamics of cultural fields by drawing on the concepts of Bourdieu. The methodology employed highlighted the pivotal role that culture plays in this learning and how the challenges of adapting this to non-Indigenous professional sport involved processes of athlete cultural transition from the local culture of Aboriginal sport to the culture of professional, commodified and globalized sport.

The Book

This book is divided into four parts.

Part I

Section 1 begins with Chap. 1: *Indigenous Australians and Sport*, which discusses some of the relevant literature for the study that is divided into the four sections of:

1. Indigenous Australians: Issues and Challenges
2. The Place, Meaning and Importance of Sport in Indigenous Culture
3. Indigenous Knowledge, Culture and Learning
4. Aboriginal Approach to Playing Australian Football and Rugby League

The first section covers broad issues for Indigenous Australians including the extent of their disadvantages when compared to non-indigenous

Australians. The second section critically examines the place and function of sport in Indigenous culture and communities, their historical involvement in it and the ways in which it can operate to exacerbate disadvantages and/or help to fight against it. Section 3 focuses on Indigenous learning and culture with section 4 identifying characteristics of how sport is played by Indigenous Australians with a focus on Australian football and rugby league. Chap. 2: *Sport, Experience, the Body and Learning* continues and extends the discussion on developing sport expertise touched on in the introduction to examine and critique commonly used theories of motor learning for explaining the development of expertise in sport and to emphasize the influence of culture. It suggests more appropriate explanations of learning that are drawn on in this book and which can account for the development of expertise as a lifelong process of learning that is culturally and socially situated. Chap. 3: *The Study* presents the rationale for the study and its aims. It then explains the methodology used which is a combination of narrative inquiry and grounded theory that aligns well with the Indigenous *dadirri* approach as explained in the introduction.

Part II

Part II comprises four short, individual stories of success told by Indigenous former AFL players to us over the duration of the study (Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11). We wrote up the stories of all 16 participants (8 AFL and 8 NRL) and used them in the grounded theory process from which our two core theories or themes were developed but only present four AFL and four NRL stories in this book. Each initial life history type interview (Goodson and Sikes 2001) forms the main source of data that was developed through a grounded theory approach involving a number of subsequent interviews focused on testing emerging ideas and themes from our reading of and listening to the initial interview data. Each one of these stories provides insights into how the development of the participant is tied into their life stories, culture, family and significant other people in their lives. Each one of these stories is fascinating on its own but when considered collectively, they tell a powerful and compelling story about learning to perform at the highest level in both sports that is deeply situated in cultural contexts.