

# National Junior Rugby League Players' Experiences

## 2017

*Players' experiences and the impact on retention rates*



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## Acronyms and abbreviations

Term	Meaning
3Ps	Performance, Participation and Personal Development
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AFL	Australian Football League
AIS	Australian Institute of Sport
AM	amotivation
ASC	Australian Sporting Commission
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
EM	extrinsic motivation
IM	intrinsic motivation
LIFT	League Integrated Fundamentals Training
M	Mean
NRL	National Rugby League
NSO	National Sporting Organisations
NSWCRL	NSW Country Rugby League
NSWRL	NSW Rugby League
PA	Physical activity
QRL	QLD Rugby League
RL	Rugby League
SD	Standard deviation
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SIT	Social / Symbolic Interactionist Theory
SMS	Sport Motivation Scale
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TAFE	Technical and Further Education

## 1 Executive summary

Sport participation during adolescence (10–18 years) offers many immediate and long-term benefits; including the formation of positive physical activity behaviours, development of life-skills and physical literacy, and cognitive and social functioning. Policies and strategies that promote enjoyable and challenging Junior sport experiences will encourage greater participation as well as target personal and social development outcomes. Importantly, youth sport involvement can lead to outcomes classified as the 3Ps: *performance*, *participation* and *personal development*. The 3Ps are central to youth sport systems aimed at providing quality experiences to participants (Côté & Hancock, 2016).

Therefore, with this in mind, the aims of this research were to investigate:

- the extent to which a Junior player's ( $N = 6597$ ) Rugby League (RL) season (2017), was influenced by four main experiences, being: *coaching*, *player*, *club* and *socialisation*, and
- how such experiences re-enforce and align with the 3Ps.

There is growing evidence that Junior sport programmes for adolescents can be designed to focus on all three outcomes (3Ps) and be successful in developing skilled performance, maintaining participation rates and enhancing personal development.

Importantly, the National Rugby League (NRL) has noted that a key challenge is to reverse a two percent national decline in total male participation, with the particular problems in keeping the 13 to 18-year-old age groups. These national statistics are reflective of historically similar international trends, whereby it is indicated that one-third of all participants between 10 and 18 years of age withdraw from sport programmes every year (Gould, 1987; Kelley & Carchia, 2013). One of the key issues, for the NRL, is to reduce this decline and work to assure that Junior players have positive, rather than negative experiences in RL, thereby reducing the dropout rate and sustaining long-term participation. It is envisaged, that by exploring *why* Junior players remain in the game, and by establishing their positive (as well as their negative) experiences, the NRL will be better positioned to create informed future strategies to reverse such a declining national Junior sporting participation trend.

A mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) approach was employed to investigate possible associations between all four experiences. The survey provided Junior players, who returned to play in the 2017 RL season, with the opportunity to record and voice their 'lived experience'. Findings from this study provide a comprehensive 'snapshot' of the current Junior RL landscape, presenting useful findings pertaining to players' experiences (2017). A summary of results and potential recommendations are presented throughout this report, with the aim to draw attention to some of the more important patterns of associations between the four measurable experiences (*coaching*, *player*, *club* and *socialisation*). On the basis of these findings, it is recommended that a number of current processes and practices, undertaken by the NRL, require modification or prioritising, to assist with minimising and/or eliminating the various factors that have been identified by Junior participants as points of affect.

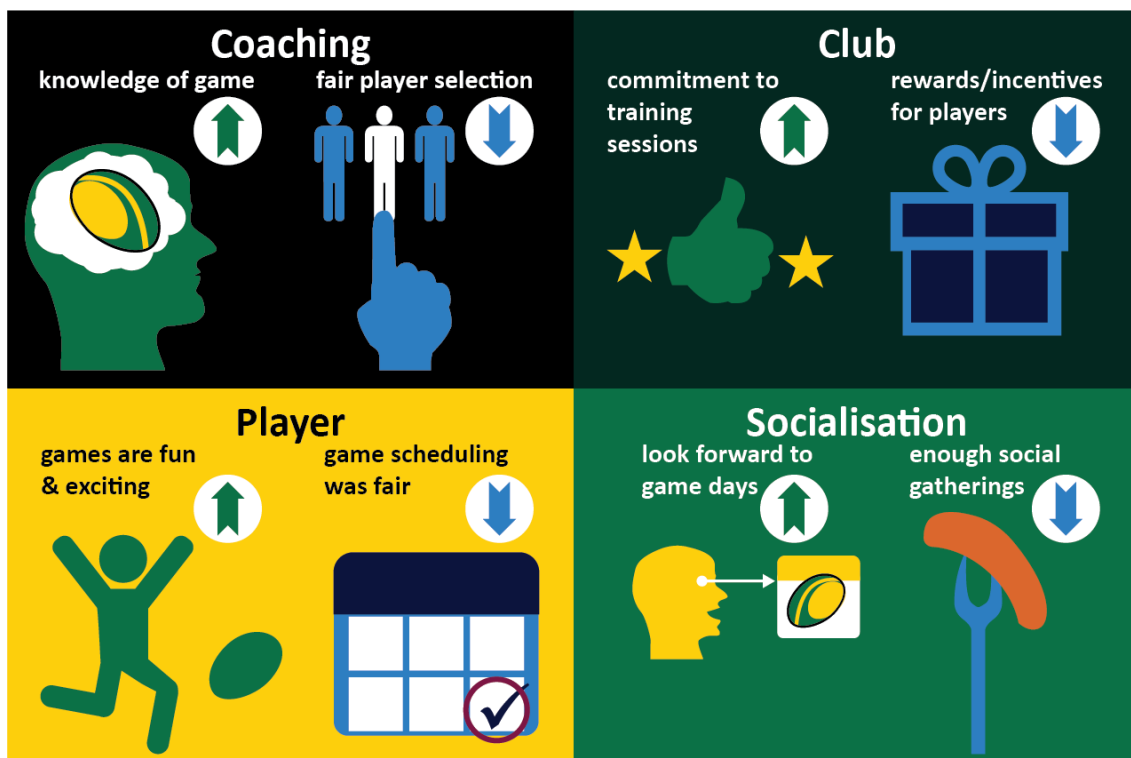
Notably, as indicated in Table 1.1, participants were highly positive about such experiences as 'training and game sessions', however, they were more critical about such



elements of their 2017 RL experience that were associated with 'fairness' and 'player incentives'. Such patterns of associations give support to the previous retention survey, whereby participants who did not return to play in 2017 identified similar trends, albeit, more pronounced. Such data indicate a systemic issue, highlighting that concerns about 'fairness of selection' and 'rewards and incentives' are highly important to Junior RL players, irrespective of remaining or leaving the game of RL. Significantly<sup>1</sup>, players across the Junior group, were mostly similar in their responses concerning these identified highly and lowly rated items (Table 1.1). Given the large number of participants, together with the large number of associations being reported, only those were reported where the probability of achieving the same outcome by chance was less than five in a thousand ( $p < 0.005$ ). Interestingly, reference to 'games are fun and exciting' was deemed to be significantly different to that of players who did not return in 2017, that is, players returning to the game maintained that their experience was fun and enjoyable—this was recorded at a significant level ( $p < 0.005$ ). A 5-point Likert scale for agreement was used (*Strongly disagree* = 1, *Neutral* = 3, *Strongly agree* = 5).

**Table 1.1** Summary of highly vs. lowly top-rated items per focus

Focus	Highly rated	Poorly rated
COACH	Demonstrated excellent knowledge of game	Player selection fair and equitable
CLUB	Commitment to training sessions	Rewards/incentives for players
PLAYER	Games are fun and exciting	Game scheduling/draw was fair
SOCIAL	Looked forward to game days	Enough social gatherings



**Figure 1.1** Top-rated items (Table 1.1)

<sup>1</sup> Significance is based on determining levels of a) variable relationships (e.g.,  $r_s = 0.20^* - 0.40^*$ ), b) p values (e.g.,  $p < 0.005^*$  and  $p < 0.000^{**}$ ), c) Mean ( $M$ ) and d) percentages (%). Only the highest levels of these measures / scales are used to represent significance.

Of importance, was the variance between participants' top ten highest and lowest items of agreement (based on *Mean (M)*). From such quantitative data findings (Table 1.2 and Table 1.3), it is possible to discern patterns of associations between specific items related to the four experiences (*coaching, player, club, and socialisation*). Such patterns of responses would seem plausible, given the context of the Junior players' intrinsic and extrinsic motivational needs. A summary of main quantitative findings, can be identified as follows.

**Table 1.2** Top ten highest responses against participants' four experiences (*M*)

Experience	Item	Mean (M)
PLAYER	Games are fun and exciting	4.76
COACH	Demonstrated excellent knowledge about the game	4.67
PLAYER	Games were safely conducted	4.65
COACH	Ran training sessions that were safely conducted	4.53
SOCIAL	Looked forward to game days	4.52
SOCIAL	Looked forward to training	4.31
SOCIAL	Felt it was a safe environment	4.30
CLUB	Commitment to training sessions	4.30
COACH	Maintained a fun and enjoyable training environment	4.22
CLUB	Competitiveness during the game	4.21

\*based on highest *M* and  $p < 0.005$ \*

**Table 1.3** Top ten lowest responses against participants' four experiences (*M*)

Experience	Item	Mean (M)
SOCIAL	Was feeling overwhelmed and 'burnt out'	2.16
SOCIAL	Enough social gatherings	3.10
PLAYER	Player selection was fair	3.27
PLAYER	Personal rewards / incentives	3.31
CLUB	Rewards / incentives for player	3.39
PLAYER	Playing times were convenient	3.41
CLUB	Provision and maintenance of club facilities	3.48
CLUB	General organisation	3.49
COACH	Ensured that player selection was fair and equitable	3.55
SOCIAL	Felt that they had the support of the club officials	4.05

\*based on lowest *M* and  $p < 0.005$

\*a low response to feeling 'overwhelmed and burnt out' was not considered a negative. Participants do not feel 'overwhelmed.

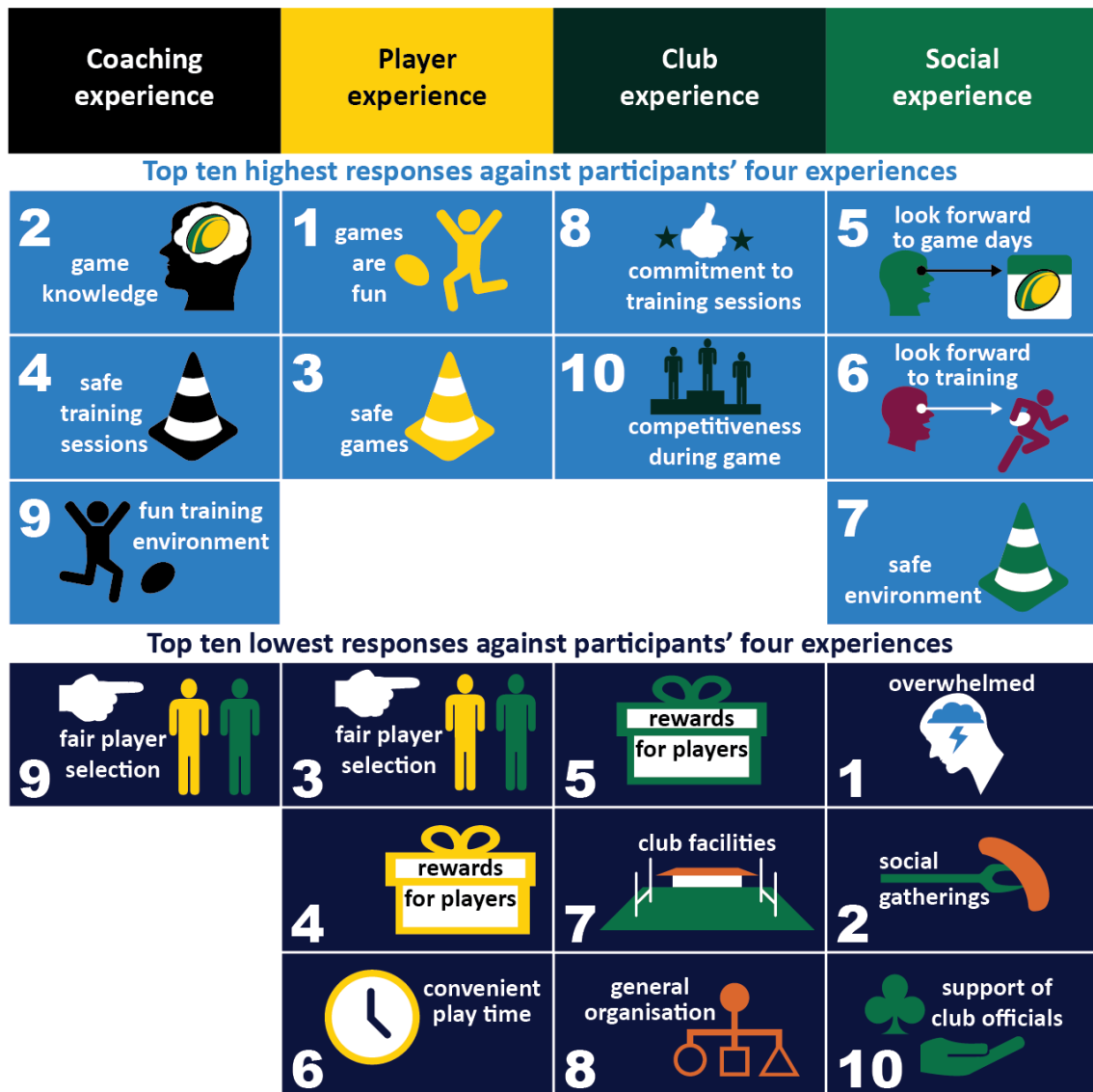


Figure 1.2 Top highest and lowest responses against experiences

To get a sense as to why Junior players continue to return to RL, participants were asked a number of questions (10–12 items) related to:

1. What did the player like most about playing RL?
2. What was the main reason/s for playing RL?

From such items, the highest recorded, positive factors, that impact on a Junior player's experiences and their main reasons for joining RL and continuing participation are related to:

**Like most...**

- Wanting to be an NRL player (37%).
- Like playing the game (31%).

### Main reason...

- Family members influenced their decision to play (33%).
- They wanted to become an NRL player (21%).

Data was further looked at to determine a profile and associations between *LEAVERS (2016)* verse *STAYERS (2017)*. Data identified a significant ( $p < 0.005^*$  and  $p < 0.000^{**}$ ) pattern of associations between a number of player's personal variables. These variables provided a profile of a Junior player who is more likely to leave or remain in the game of RL at the end of the 2016 / 17 seasons. Those Junior players who were more likely to leave RL at the end of 2016 were associated with:

- Being a NSWCRRL player,
- Living with a single parent,
- More likely to be either at university, unemployed, doing casual or part time work.

Those Junior players who were less likely to leave RL at the end of 2017 and remain in the game, were associated with:

- Being a QLDRL player,
- Being at school,
- Playing in State competitions or Premier, A Grade or A division RL,
- Being male,
- Being younger (younger than 15 years old),
- Generally, more positive on all measures related to all four experiences—*coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*.

Reoccurring themes from across the qualitative (player commentaries) data sets were associated strongly with *friendships, playing the game* and *games are fun and exciting*. Interestingly, the thematic patterning from the qualitative data went to re-enforce (mirror) the quantitative data uniformity across groups.

### 1.1 Thematic categories (qualitative data)

The three major, large themes, that cut across the data sets, were recorded as being:

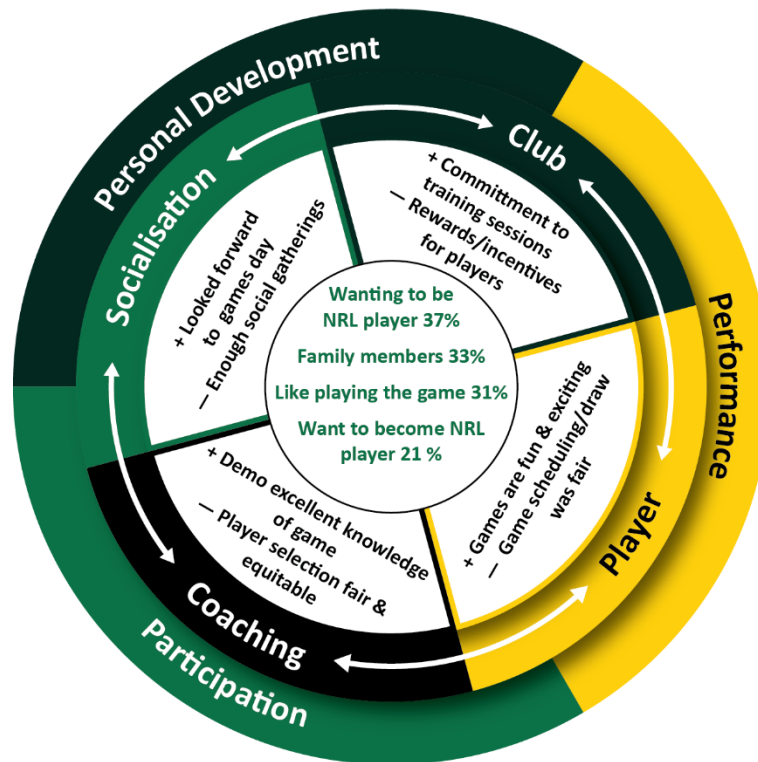
- **Friendships**—making new mates and being with friends.
- **Playing the Game**—being physically active.
- **Games are fun and exciting**—look forward to playing games.

Based on these findings, it would be reasonable to suggest that RL needs to invest in a more concentrated effort around the guiding principles and aspects of the 3Ps—performance, participation and personal development. Such an approach will ensure that

initiatives, to increase and support Junior RL players, are grounded in solid and academic literature, rather than previous attempts and models. An initial starting point would be for RL to focus on strategies and wide-ranging policies that address youth social engagement and cater to individual player's participation motivations, rather than solely aimed at ensuring high levels of competition and game results. Another, more notable, immediate challenge for RL, is how to best design, implement and sustain youth development sporting programmes that cater to the multiple needs of young participants (3Ps) and serves the different outcomes of youth sport. Research does suggest that the contrasting natures of the different outcomes of youth sport are not achievable within a single programme and should be promoted by different programmes (Siedentop, 2002a,b). However, it is maintained that one can make a defensible argument that the outcomes of performance, participation and personal development are not necessarily incompatible—*if* designed and implemented correctly.

It is envisaged, that the findings from this report, will provide a valuable 'foothold' into the world of the RL player and as such, promote the future design and implementation of strategies aimed at addressing Junior RL development. This report presents findings from an individual group (Junior) and individual governing bodies (i.e., NSWRL, NSWCRRL, QRL). Such a thorough approach has provided a burden of evidence, concerning elements of the RL culture, which impact and influence player experiences. It is also important to note, that whilst there are a number of immediate strategies RL can commence with to address retention motivations, there are certain facets of the game and data findings that will be out of the control and reach of the sport (i.e., individual player transitional life phases—relocations, heightened and fluctuating study, work and family commitments). Subsequently, from the findings, this report provides eight recommendations that RL may consider, in an attempt to address the identified areas of concern.

From the following executive summary, data analysis and elaborations, a combined Conceptual Model (Figure 1.3) has been designed which represents the direct and indirect reasons, levels of agreement, positive and negative representations, associations and differences between variables and main thematic codes can be presented. Only the most highly significant ( $p < 0.000$ ) associations, agreement levels, Means and thematic codes have been identified. Providing an encompassing framework to the model, is the reference to the 3Ps: *performance*, *participation* and *personal development*. Of importance, is the need to understand that the model identifies each of the four experiences and specific variables which have either positively or negatively impacted on a player. It further represents that each experience does not necessarily fit within (under) only one of the 3Ps, but rather moves laterally under each. This represents that a Junior player's experiences will directly and indirectly impact on his / her performance, participation and personal development. In other words, whilst maximising the positive and eliminating the negative experiences, players have, RL will be operating out of a 'strength based' approach for future years Junior RL player development.



**Figure 1.3** Conceptual Model representing 3Ps and four experiences

*Note.* Representing a significant ( $p < 0.000$ ) association with high level of agreement and high (+) / low (-) Mean. + indicates positively associates with agreement level (positive or negative) ^ Main themes.

From the participants' responses, it can be summarised, that whilst the majority of the players who did return to play RL 2017 season were happy with the greater part of the game's delivery and subsequently their personal experiences, there were a significant number of players who, whilst still remaining in the game, identified a number of negative experiences. These negative experiences, identified by returning players, went to mirror the same identified experiences from players that failed to return to RL in 2017. It would seem that irrespective of a Junior player's personal experience, with the game of RL, there are a number of systemic, common negative experiences that players encounter and identify with. These negative experiences seem to align with such aspects of

1. fairness,
2. socialisation and connectedness,
3. general organisation and
4. fun and enjoyment.

These motivational factors are characteristic of either discouraging or encouraging youth into levels of sporting involvement.

Although the research literature suggests the broad outlines required for such planning and considerations (Green, 2005), added research is needed, particularly to identify the benefits players perceive in association with RL, how they come to value particular benefits (and not others), how and why those values change, and how expectancies are affected by variations in program design and implementation. Of importance, is that RL programs must be designed to optimize player recruitment, sustain player transitions, promote player commitment, which will ultimately impact on player sustained commitment to RL. The findings and subsequent recommendations outlined in this report,

suggests that each RL club / team should examine their own individual situation, so as to better understand and identify their position/s related to:

1. specific player experiences,
2. individual player motivations and associated trends,
3. barriers to progression and transition, and
4. opportunities to identify and create 'smooth' pathways for players at differing junctions, abilities and interest levels.

Such strategies will assist the club to create an increased awareness of the issues of retaining players (Junior) and motivate clubs to think of possible short and long-term strategies and solutions.

Lastly and importantly, although achieving high rates of participation amongst Junior RL players is a key aim and component of the NRL, there must be a willingness to create future strategies that promote a culture of general fun, fitness, and social connectedness in ways that are literate and critical. Future strategies for maintaining Junior RL participation trends should *value* fair access to participation, so much, that the NRL is willing to work at local, regional, and national levels to make RL more available to potential Junior players.

## 1.2 Summary of results and approach

This study aimed to determine Junior RL players' 2017 experiences and why they returned to play and what they liked about the game of RL. Specifically, this research set out to determine the level of influence two key questions had on players' decisions, these being:

1. What does the player like most about playing RL?
2. What was the main reason/s for playing RL?

A player's attitude and his / her reason/s for remaining in the game, were strongly influenced by and associated with four main experiences, being: *coaching*, *player*, *club* and *socialisation*. Findings from this study found significant<sup>2</sup> ( $p < 0.000$ )<sup>3</sup>, patterns of associations and differences, between experiences, that go to support / prove the research aim. A mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) approach was employed to investigate these associations. The online survey was designed to capture participants' ( $N = 6597$ ) overall responses to:

- their general experiences in 2017,
- what they liked about playing RL,
- what are the main reason/s for playing RL.

It has been identified that a player's positive experiences arise from links (or interactions) between a number of independent variables, with these being the *individual*

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<sup>2</sup> An  $\alpha$  of 0.05 indicates that the risk of concluding that a correlation exists, when actually no correlation exists, is 5%. P value  $\leq \alpha$  —the correlation is statistically significant.

<sup>3</sup> P value (e.g.,  $p < 0.000$ ) A smaller p value means that there is stronger evidence in favour of the hypothesis (alternative).



*characteristics of the player* (e.g., age, division, experience, number of years played and negatives associated with four experiences), the *social identity* they derive from the game (e.g., prestige, status, rewards), and the *social setting* in which they act (e.g., socialisation, club organizational characteristics, sense of community and team spirit). What is more, the breadth and depth to which these experiences (variables) impact on an individual player's experiences and consequently their decision to return to the game, is dependent on player's age, personal expectations (social and / or playing), SES and number of years involved in RL. These variables, in assorted combinations, went to directly impact on Junior players' 2017 experience. These independent variables are represented as being:

1. years of RL experience,
2. age-related,
3. socio-economic status (SES),
4. state affiliation,
5. ethnicity.

In summary, a player's experience in the game of RL, is mediated by his / her motivations and the ways the player is socialized into the game and RL's individual club subcultures. Importantly, prolonged, sustained engagement in RL, is dependent on the commitment<sup>4</sup> a RL player develops to the club's subculture and / or to the RL organization. Specifically, investigating reasons why players return to the game, requires a concerted multifaceted approach and needs to be focused on a number of important player motivational elements, these being:

1. **Individual characteristics**—related to age, gender, life transitional phases,
2. **Performance factors**—enjoyment, coaching and player experiences,
3. **Social identity**—prestige and social status,
4. **Social setting**—socialisation experiences, club setting and characteristics.

This research report considers the relative level of agreement (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), for sets of items related to one particular aspect of a player's experience, that is, 1) positive aspects of the *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation experiences* and 2) why they returned to the game in 2017. Consideration was given to a specific number of subscales / variables, being: gender, number of years of RL experience, state affiliation and the subset of four specific ethnic identities. These subsets / variables were measured as to the level of their independent influence on the two aforementioned aspects of a player's experience in 2017. When a relationship<sup>5</sup> between subsets / variables (e.g., number of years playing RL, age or SES) was statistically significant<sup>6</sup>, this was indicated as well as the strength and direction of that relationship<sup>7</sup>. With these two points in mind,

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<sup>4</sup> Commitment refers to the level of engagement with the game and / or club.

<sup>5</sup> A relationship (rs) between variables indicates if one variable effects the other in any significant manner. As one moves (+ or -) in direction so too does the other variable.

<sup>6</sup> Statistical mean (*M*) is a measure of central tendency and gives a good idea about where the data seems to cluster around. Means are only used as a ranking of items for the identified player and negative experiences.

<sup>7</sup> Relationships between variables can be indicated as being either positive or negative (e.g.,  $rest = .353^{**}$  or  $rs = -.353^{**}$ )



it would seem that the strength of relationship ( $r$ ) between items, on average, has demonstrated a moderate level of correlation (relationship). Additionally, only highly significant<sup>8</sup> positive differing associations have been reported. Means ( $M$ ) were also provided to give ranking of each item based on the central tendency. To give further context to the rankings, data was extracted from participants' levels of agreement (*agree* to *strongly agree*) for each item and aforementioned overall aims.

It has been identified that there are significant patterns of associations and differences exhibiting uniformities, across the four experiences and the level of influence these have had on a player's decision to return in 2017. The main areas of difference appeared in relation to: number of years of RL experience, age, SES, ethnicity and state affiliation. Importantly, there were recorded differences found across and between the individual governing bodies (i.e., NSWRL, NSWRL, QLDRL and Affiliated States) in relation to the overall patterns of differences between items and resulting uniformities.

Whilst a number of 'direct' reasons have been identified, the findings also present several 'indirect' reasons. The reason/s why Juniors continue playing sport is multifaceted and, in many circumstances, interrelated. In relation to RL, there were a number of personal and specific experiences that influenced players' decision/s as to continue their engagement with the game. By presenting a more 'wholistic' picture of the player experience/s, this report is better positioned to provide a more wide-ranging, 'big picture' view of the current situation concerning influences that impact on Junior RL participation rates. However, as is often the case, with research, there are many more new questions that spring forth from the undertaking.

Of importance, RL has noted that a key challenge is to reverse a two percent national<sup>9</sup> decline in total male participation, with the particular problems in keeping the 13 to 18-year-old age groups. With this said, evidence from this research has identified that there was a substantial number of players who indicated that their main reason/s for joining and remaining in the game of RL was due to:

#### **Like most...**

- Wanting to be an NRL player (37%).
- Like playing the game (31%).

#### **Main reason...**

- Family members influenced their decision to play (33%).
- They wanted to become an NRL player (21%).

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<sup>8</sup> Reference can be taken from the below probability statements:

For significance levels, the smaller the decimal fraction, the higher the level of significance.

- .05 = five in hundred probability of achieving this outcome by chance.
- .01 = one in hundred probability of achieving this outcome by chance.
- .001 = one in thousand probability of achieving this outcome by chance.
- .000 = less than one in thousand probability of achieving this outcome by chance.

<sup>9</sup> Total national player registration (2017) = 170,947. There were 50,000 players who did not return in 2017.

Having said this, there was a strong, negative consensus, amongst Junior players, associated with:

1. Felt that enough team / club social gatherings organized outside of game time to increase peer / family bonding.
2. Player selection was fair.
3. Personal rewards / incentives.

The latter, negative comments<sup>10</sup>, are characteristics of the game delivery which can be addressed and rectified. It is also important to note that whilst there are a number of immediate strategies RL can commence with to address identified negative comments, there are certain facets of the game and data findings that will be out of the control and reach of the RL (i.e., individual player transitional life phases: relocations; heightened and fluctuating study, work, and family commitments).

### 1.3 Demographic Breakdown

#### 1.3.1 Demographic profile

After excluding participants who had only completed a small portion of the survey, a total of 6597 participant responses were included in this survey, of which, more than 80% were assisted by a guardian (or parent).

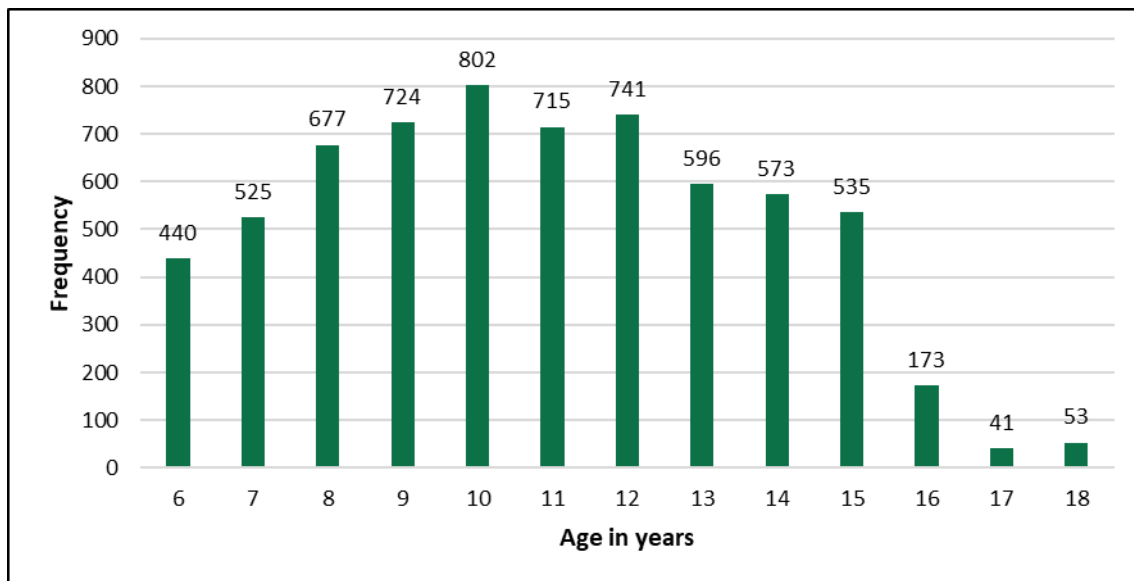


Figure 1.4 Junior League participant ages in years

More than 90% of these participants were male (92.5%). The ages of participants reporting themselves to be less than 6 years of age were manually adjusted to equal 6 years of age, and those above 18 were adjusted to equal 18 years of age. As illustrated in Figure 1.4, after adjustment of extreme responses, these participants ranged in age from 6–18 years of age, with an average of 10.8 years of age. Socio-Economic Status (SES)

<sup>10</sup> Representations made on participants' responses being either *strongly agree* to *agree* for each item.

provides an estimate of the social and economic position of individuals, with 1 equivalent to the lowest point and 10 equivalent to the highest point. Based on postcodes, these participants were distributed relatively evenly across the 1–10 range of SES, with about 64.8% in the 3–8 range, about 17.4% in the two lowest brackets (1–2) and 17.8% in the two highest brackets (9–10). Participants were asked to indicate if they identified with one of four specific ethnic identifies. Of the 6597 participants, about 12% identified as Aboriginal and about 6.3% as either Torres Strait islanders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders or Australian South Sea Islanders. Participants were asked to indicate their home situation based on four options. About 79% reported living with both parents, another 19.6% reported living with a single parent, and about 1.1% reported living with relatives.

Participants were asked to indicate whether they were studying or working and if so at what level. Of the 6597 participants, more than 99% reported being at school, with less than 1% of responses distributed across another six options (at university, at TAFE, unemployed, casual work, part-time work, full-time work).

Participants were asked about the number of years they had played official club RL. Of the 6597 participants, about 2/3 had played either 1–2 years or 3–4 years, and less than 8% had played official RL for more than 8 years. Finally, participants were asked if they would return to playing RL in the future. Of the 6597 that responded (10 did not respond), 87% stated that they would, about 11% were undecided and about 2% said they would not be returning. A demographic breakdown is presented in Table 1.4 and diagrammatically represented in Figure 1.5.

Table 1.4 Demographic breakdown

Characteristic	Junior
<b>Participants</b>	After excluding participants who had only completed a small portion of the survey, a total of 6597 participant responses were included in this survey, of which, more than 80% were assisted by a guardian (or parent).
<b>Gender</b>	More than 90% of these participants were male (92.5%).
<b>Age</b>	After adjustment of extreme responses, these participants ranged in age from 6–18 years of age, with an average of 10.8 years of age.
<b>Socio-Economic Status</b>	Socio-Economic Status (SES) provides an estimate of the social and economic position of individuals, with 1 equivalent to the lowest point and 10 equivalents to the highest point. Based on postcodes, these participants were distributed relatively evenly across the 1–10 range of SES, with about 49.3% in the 1–5 range, about 17.4% in the two lowest brackets (1–2) and 17.8% in the two highest brackets (9–10).
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Participants were asked to indicate if they identified with one of four specific ethnic identifies. Of the 6597 participants, about 12% identified as Aboriginal and about 6.3% as either Torres Strait islanders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders or Australian South Sea Islanders.
<b>Home</b>	Participants were asked to indicate their home situation based on four options. About 79% reported living with both parents, another 19.6% reported living with a single parent, and about 1.1% reported living with relatives.
<b>Studying / Work</b>	Participants were asked to indicate whether they were studying or working and if so at what level. Of the 6597 participants, more than 99% reported being at school, with less than 1% of responses distributed across another six options (at university, at TAFE, unemployed, casual work, part-time work, full-time work).
<b>Grade / level played</b>	Participants were asked to indicate the level or grade of RL played in 2017. Of the 6597 that responded, the largest group (56.1%) reported playing in the Lower grades/divisions, with the next largest group (27.5%) reporting playing in Regional teams. Of the remaining 16.4%, almost 11% reported playing in Premier Grade or A grade and another 5.6% in State competitions.
<b>Years played</b>	Participants were asked about the number of years they had played official RL. Of the 6597 participants, about 2/3 had played either 1–2 years or 3–4 years, and less than 8% had played official RL for more than 8 years.
<b>Return to play</b>	Finally, participants were asked if they would return to playing RL in the future. Of the 6587 that responded (10 did not respond), 87% stated that they would, about 11% were undecided and about 2% said they would not be returning. The choice to return was not influenced by the number of years of playing RL, gender, SES, or by being associated with a specific branch of the RL. However, older players were significantly less likely to state that they would be returning to the Junior RL in the future. Also, players with one of four specific ethnic identities were significantly more likely than others to state that they would be returning to Junior RL in the future.
<b>What they liked most about Junior RL?</b>	When asked to use one of 12 statements to indicate what they liked most about Junior RL, more than 2/3 (68%) were most likely to report that they just want to be an NRL player (37%) or that they just like playing the game (31%). Another 18% reported that they liked being part of a team (10%) or that they liked spending more time with their friends (8%). The responses of the remaining 13% were distributed across another eight statements.
<b>What is main reason for playing Junior RL?</b>	Participants were also asked to select the main reason the player chose to play RL from a selection of 10 statements. Of the 6597 that responded, a slight majority (54%) agreed either that family members played or/and were involved at the club (33%) or that they wanted to become an NRL player (21%). Another 31% agreed that friends played (14%), they watched it on TV (9%) or they wanted to be part of the team (8%). The responses of the remaining 15% were distributed across another five statements.

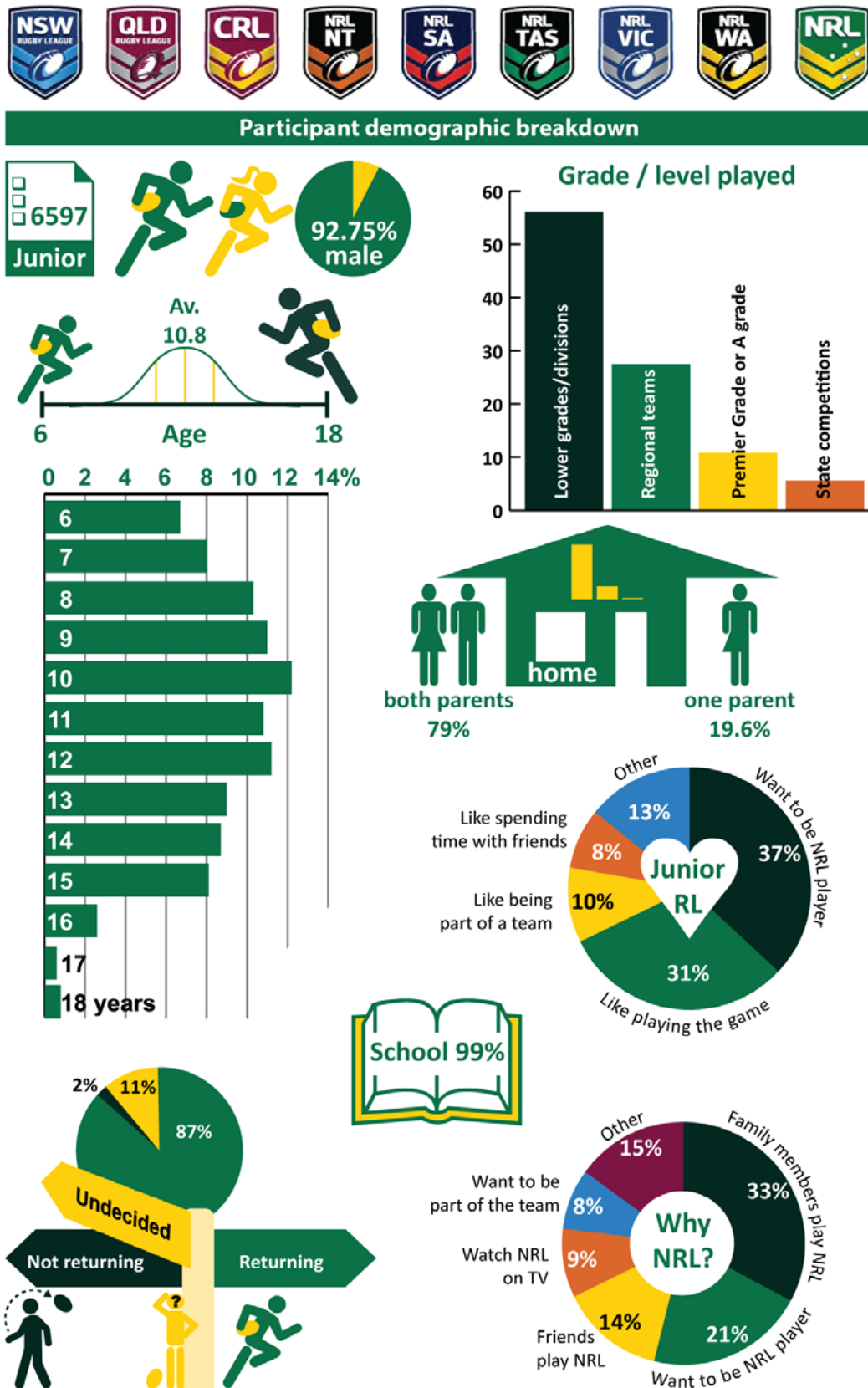


Figure 1.5 Demographic infographic

## 2 Introduction

### 2.1 National Rugby League—Vision, Mission and Key Priority

Australian sport, in the early 21st century, is a consumer-driven industry, and highly competitive. Therefore, individual sporting organisations need to be strategic, with the ability to draw on rich data and theory to inform future decisions and practices. What is more, sporting organisations need to have a clear Vision, and Mission Statement, that are above all else, measurable, logical and ultimately achievable. The National Rugby League (NRL) has a Vision to become “The Greatest Game of All”, a Mission and Key Priority,

*To bring people together for the best sports and entertainment experience*

To this end, the NRL has a three-pillared approach to improving the game and fulfilling its Vision, Mission and Key Priority. This is heightened by recognising that player: *recruitment, transition and retention* are decisive elements to understand and consolidate, so as to ensure that RL remains highly competitive and attractive. With this in mind, it is a strategic aim of the NRL to implement critical research that will produce findings that will go towards informing future practices associated with the NRL’s three major initiatives (2017), with these being:

1. **Unite**—more players across ages, segments and markets.
2. **Excite**—more fans watching and engaging.
3. **Inspire**—be the most inspirational game.

Of importance, it is envisaged that this research will inform key stakeholders, policy makers and guide future strategic planning throughout the NRL’s Key Priority and initiatives.





## 3 Background

### 3.1 Australia's Sport Development—external influences and RL's alignment

Sport development is “a process whereby effective opportunities, processes, systems, and structures are set up to enable people to take part in sport and recreation, or to improve their performance to whatever level they desire” (Eady, 1993). More specifically, sport development systems have two main objectives: 1) to increase the number of participants actively engaged in sport and 2) to enhance the quality of performances in sport. Accordingly, the Australian Sporting Commission<sup>11</sup> (ASC) has outlined a number of important ambitions for sport development and participation in Australia. At the national level, the ASC advocates to see more Australians, particularly youth, participating more broadly and that individual National Sporting Organisations (NSO), such as the NRL, achieve continual and sustained year-on-year membership growth and positive and sustained retention rates. To achieve such an aim, “the ASC highly regard sporting bodies that reflect effective organisational qualities, that is, well-governed, strategic, embracing of commercial opportunities, adopting new technologies and delivering user-friendly sports opportunities that cater to all Australians, by way of age, gender, culture and individual sporting aspirations. The ASC wants sports to be sufficiently agile to ensure what they offer is what Australians want, while at the same time staying true to what makes an individual sport unique and great. The ASC currently recognises more than 90 different sports in Australia, each vying for their share of participants, funding and infrastructure allocation” (ASC, 2017). This count is not taking into consideration the innumerable other leisure pursuits outside of sport. Australian sporting organisations that fail to recognise or accept the changing landscape, risk losing relevance and ground to other sports and leisure activities, that are willing and able to adapt to changing societal dynamics, unique life transitional phases and evolving customer demands.

Currently, there are three identified organisational components that the ASC has indicated that Australian sporting organisations need to recognise as part of their wider strategic approach (i.e., player recruitment, transition and retention). The NRL has committed and invested considerable resources (both financially and human) so as to ensure that their player retention approach addresses 1) organisational requirements 2) meets players' differing personal levels of skill acquisition, and 3) acknowledges and caters to individual players' differing levels and types of motivational (intrinsic / extrinsic) and participation needs. The NRL is committed to implementing a cyclic research and evaluation process, by which, strategies are examined, refined and re-introduced, with the aim to build sustainable and positive environments for all players, irrespective of their age, gender, culture and individual sporting aspirations. In order for RL to maintain successful sport development programs, there is a need to know more about the interrelationships and interactions that exists between recruitment processes, transitional phases and retention rates.

With this said, the NRL recognises that there is an interplay between three elements, and that these elements are supported by the aforementioned 3 Ps—performance, participation and personal development (within a Junior RL player context). Revisiting

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<sup>11</sup> Acknowledgement – reference, throughout section 3.1, taken from ‘The Australian Sports Commission’s participation gameplay’ [ausport.gov.au/play.sport.australia](http://ausport.gov.au/play.sport.australia).

the RL's key directives, priorities and elements are important considerations, as such an approach goes to legitimise further NRL strategies pertaining to Junior development. The guiding elements of the NRL's retention strategy are:

### **3.1.1 Player Recruitment**

Recruitment requires the assistance of significant others, as well as the proliferation of many smaller, local-level RL club / school / community programs committed to sustain and maintain current positive player satisfaction levels, whilst implementing initiatives that heighten avenues for recruiting new player prospects. In its simplest form, recruitment is the manner by which a club enlists new members and players. Once the member or player has been introduced to RL's club subculture, the processes by which individuals are retained or lost begins. This, in turn, requires a proliferation of school / community-based programs (Appendix A) catering to multiple motives and market segments. In order to enhance the articulation between task and social benefits of participation, 'social support systems' need to be designed into the program. Mere provision of programs is inadequate. Sport programs are social systems with their own internal dynamics, they are embedded in a broader system of social relations (Green, 2005). Adequate program design and implementation require meticulous planning and continuous evaluation of the internal social system, as well as its articulation with the wider social fabric within which it is embedded.

### **3.1.2 Player Transition**

Transition requires that RL programs (both at a club and organisational level) be linked vertically and horizontally so that players be aided in processes of relocating and socializing into new levels of involvement (e.g., novice to elite, coaching, refereeing, executive positions). Internal RL programs must be designed to optimize individual members' and players' ambitions, promote commitment, and sustain and communicate potential transitional pathways throughout the RL landscape. Program design must provide recruits with opportunities to learn about and to come to value both social and task rewards associated with participation. This includes opportunities to undertake new and significant roles, as well as training in goal planning.

### **3.1.3 Player Retention**

Retention is mediated by the player's motivation and the ways the player is socialized into the game and RL's individual club subcultures. What is more, retention is dependent on the commitment a RL player develops to the club's subculture and/or to the organization. Commitment refers to the level of engagement with the game and/or club. Specifically, and in relation to this research, improving retention rates requires a concerted multifaceted approach and will focus on a number of important player motivational elements, these being:

- 1. Individual characteristics**—related to age, gender, life transitional phases,
- 2. Performance factors**—coaching and player experiences,
- 3. Social identity**—prestige and social status,
- 4. Social setting**—socialisation, setting and characteristics.



In its simplest form...to understand retention rates and why sustained tenement in the game by players, there are two questions to address, these being:

- What influences players to remain in the game, and
- What influences players to leave the game?

Once such questions are understood, RL will be in a better, more informed position, to tailor future strategies to support and address individual retention rates and player experiences. Whilst 'retention' is an important aspect of the strategic plan and development, this research aimed to investigate '*what influences players to remain in the game?*' across Junior RL cohorts (2017), with specific attention directed towards understanding patterns of associations and differences between variables. To further assist in such a research undertaking, the motivational elements are identified and measured against the four key experiences (*coaching, player, club, and socialisation*).

## **3.2 Understanding continued participation in Junior sport (RL)**

### **3.2.1 Australia's sporting position in the 21st Century**

Australia's passion for and value of sport is a characteristic that, on a global scale, is often used to define the Australian culture and image (Australian Sports Commission [ASC], 2015; Nicholson & Hess, 2007; Stewart, Nicholson, Smith, & Westerbeek, 2004). Our reputation for and engagement with sport has been a feature of Australian society and way of life for decades (Horton, 2000), from our own active participation, to attending live sporting events, or watching matches unfold from the comfort of our own home. Regardless of why Australians engage in and with sport, it is of great value and importance, as our sporting experiences help construct our personal and national identities (ASC, 2015; Stewart et al., 2004). Sport is a practice that has demonstrated its capacity to unite Australia's diverse population, thus highlighting the discovery of a shared identity through sport becoming social capital across the nation (ASC, 2015; Stewart et al., 2004; Tonts, 2005). The ASC (2015) outline two significant issues Australia is currently facing in regards to sport and physical activity: ensuring sports remain relevant and viable, and keeping all Australians healthy and active. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) reported that approximately 60% of the Australian population aged 15 years and over (11.1 million) had participated in sport and/or physical recreation at least once within the 12 months prior to the survey. The 2016 AusPlay survey (ASC, 2016) reported that Australians in the 21st century have become even more active through the increased participation rates in sport-related (e.g.: team sports) and/or non-sport-related physical activities (e.g.: gym memberships; hiking).

### **3.2.2 Motivation and Junior sport participation**

Research concerning motivations for why Junior players remain an active participant in a sport is difficult to characterize, with the theoretical and methodological approaches used to investigate the phenomenon divided. In any case, and specific to this study, clarity will be given to such a question by investigating how the social system of the game and culture is related to three motivational factors, these being: 1) a player's abilities and characteristics, (2) the influence of significant others, including parents, siblings, coaches, and peers, and (3) the availability of opportunities to play and experience success in the game. Understanding factors that motivate players to continue participation in sport, can

help key stakeholders cultivate an environment that fosters long-term participation and positive retention rates (Talpey, Croucher, Bani, & Finch, 2017).

For the sake of this research, 'motivation' can be defined as the reasons (experiences) people give to explain why they continue to participate in a sport, with an assumption that this motivation arises from links they derive from the experiences (or interactions) between the characteristics of the individual (e.g., age, gender, SES, number of years and life transitions), performance factors (coaching and playing), the social identity (e.g., prestige, status, fitness level), and the social setting in which they participate (e.g., club characteristics, sense of community, socialisation) (Kellett & Warner, 2011). Measuring a player's individual motivation levels requires attention given to determining, to what degree, players differ depending on independent levels associated with:

1. intrinsic motivation (IM),
2. extrinsic motivation (EM),
3. amotivation (AM).

Interestingly, this research goes to support links between these aforementioned motivational levels and continued player participation in Junior RL. Data provides direct links and reference to personal experiences (Visek et al., 2015) and various individual motivational reasons as to why Junior players remain active members of the RL culture. What is more, a player's motivation to join or remain in the game is linked to the Social / Symbolic Interactionist Theory (SIT) which describes how people react toward things or events based on what they think that particular situation means to them. When positioned to investigate sporting cultures, the SIT approach focuses on how Junior players experience sports and how identities are related to sport participation and sport cultures. Sporting participation, are intrinsically connected to 'motivation' and have a number of questions which refers to each player's choice to continue and remain with a RL club.

Specifically, in terms of the multiple motives for Junior RL participation trends, it is suggested that RL programs focus on fun, social interaction, fitness, skill development, and play, particularly when those programs are targeted at Junior RL grassroots level. Interestingly, in a recent study, children cite 'fun' as the primary reason for participation in organized sport and its absence as the number one reason for youth sport attrition (Visek et al., 2015). This research report goes to present similar findings. Therefore, to be competitive and successful in the current climate, RL needs to be agile in meeting customer demand and implement programs that cater to a range of markets rather than to just one subdivision of the environment. This suggests the need for a range of programs, and more importantly, a range of approaches and implementations. It is argued that modified sport programs (e.g., non-competitive, child-centred programs) can reach parents who would otherwise choose not to return or register their child into RL (see Appendix A). The need to cater appropriately to different market segments is well understood in marketing, but the implications of benefit segmentation for sport program planning and implementation have been inadequately examined. Indeed, one source of player retention problems might be the failure to offer a sufficient assortment of program variations to cater to a diverse and changing array of participant motivations (Kellett & Warner, 2011). This 'attraction process', as set out by Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, (2008) advocates that the funds, programs and strategic direction offered by Australia's

sporting organisations need to focus on increasing mass participation and place an emphasis on Junior development and retention.

### **3.2.3 Australia's Junior Sport Participation**

Not only are a significant number of Australian adults considered physically active, but so too are younger Australians. The ASC (2015) aims to increase sport participation at a national level, especially junior participants, through their Play.Sport.Australia. campaign. The ABS (2012) reported a total of approximately 1.7 million (60.2%) children under the age of 16 participating in at least one organised sport and/or non-sport-related physical activity outside of school hours within the last 12 months. In 2016, this number increased to 3.2 million (69%) Australian children participating in at least one organised sport and/or non-sport-related physical activity (ASC, 2016). These statistics demonstrate a 90% increase in children's participation in sport and physical activity within a four-year period. Of the 3.2 million physically active children, 0.9 million (19%) reported being physically active outside of school hours at least three times a week (ASC, 2016). Reasons for children's lack of participation outside of school hours could be due to one of the top four barriers reported: (a) parents could not afford the cost of the sport and/or had transport issues; (b) the child does not like physical activity; (c) lack of time and/or too many other commitments; and (d) being the wrong age to participate in particular sports and/or activities (ASC, 2016).

An AusPlay survey conducted in 2017 revealed correlations between parents' sport participation and that of their child's. Parents who were reported as actively engaging in sport and physical activity were seen to be positive influences on their child's involvement and participation in organised sport outside of school hours (ASC, 2017). 72% of children who had at least one active parent were physically active and participated in organised sport(s) outside of school hours (ASC, 2017). Additionally, parents who also volunteered and contributed to their child's organised sport further increased the likelihood of their child's participation in physical activity. There was an 89% participate rate in organised sports for children whose parents played sport and volunteered (ASC, 2017). These statistics indicate that not only do a significant number of Australian children participate in junior sports, but how this number can increase if at least one parent is physically active themselves and also willing to volunteer at their child's sporting club or organisation.

In 2015, the ASC (2015) recognised over 90 different sports existed in Australia, with each sport competing for their share of participants. The ABS (2012) reported trends at three-year intervals from 2006 to 2012 for the top 10 organised sports Australian children participated in. For both males and females, swimming had the highest participation rates for children in 2006, 2009 and 2012 (ABS, 2009, 2012). Soccer was ranked second for 2006, but third in 2009 and 2012, where dancing took over as having the second highest number of participants after swimming. Rugby League only made the top 10 list for males and was consistently ranked as 8th across the six-year period (ABS, 2012). There was slight fluctuation in participation numbers over these years, but nothing of great significance. AFL, however, was ranked as the third most popular sport for males, with almost double the participant numbers (98%) of RL by 2012 (ABS, 2012).

Morgan (2014) revealed that in 2014, swimming remained the top sport for children aged six to 13, with an estimated 1,198,000 participants. Of the top 20 sports listed for this age bracket, 10 of these were identified as team sports (Morgan, 2014). Soccer was the most

popular team sport and ranked as second on the list, after swimming, with 1,194,000 participants. Rugby League, however, placed 13th on the list with only 229,000 children participating across the country (Morgan, 2014). Although AFL was ranked 11th on this list, approximately 438,000 children between the age of six and thirteen participated, which is almost double the participant numbers for RL (Morgan, 2014).

In 2016, the ASC (2016) reported that swimming had maintained its position as the most popular activity for children outside of school hours, with an estimated 1,378,967 participants. In line with this research, RL was ranked as 11th on the top 20 list of most popular activities for children with 126,754 having participated. (ASC, 2016). AFL, however, ranked as the third most popular activity with 366,462 children participating across the country, more than double the number of RL participants (ASC, 2016). Rugby League was listed as the 7th most popular sport outside of school hours for boys with 121,387 participating; however, did not make the top 10 list for girls. In comparison, AFL was the third most popular sport for boys with 320,650 participants and was also ranked the 10th most popular sport for girls with 45,812 participants (ASC, 2016). These statistics further evidence AFL's popularity amongst children in recent years compared to RL, as participation statistics for AFL continue to be more than double that of RL.

The statistics presented reinforce that AFL is the more popular football code for children to participate in (ABS, 2012; ASC, 2016; Morgan, 2014). It can be suggested that these numbers reinforce the notion that geographic location influences children's participation in a particular football code, as it would be embedded in the local culture and the code often taught and/or played at school (Australian Government Culture and Recreation Portal, 2008). Rugby League has been recognised as a 'male only' sport since its inception, with the closest version of RL participation for women being Touch Football. However, this is set to change with Australia's first Women's RL being launched late 2018. The AFL engaged the female population with their women's league in early 2017, which has positively filtered down to local sporting clubs and schools across the country. This has made AFL more accessible for females, with participation pathways encouraging females to join regardless of skill level (AFL Queensland, 2018). Through introduction of a Women's League for the RL, it is hoped that increased participation rates in the sport at all levels will occur across the country.

The meta-analysis conducted by Hulteen et al. (2017) reported international sporting and physical activity participation data, in which three regions (Americas, Europe, Western Pacific) were represented for children, and five regions for adolescents (Africa, Americas, Eastern Mediterranean, Europe, and Western Pacific). No clear trends in participation rates could be reported for children and adolescents, as the popularity of activities varied according to the region. Team sports were the most popular in the Americas, whereas more lifelong activities, particularly swimming, running, and cycling, proved more popular in the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Pacific (Hulteen et al., 2017). Based on this study, the most popular activities Australian children participate in (swimming and soccer) are reflected at an international level. It can be suggested that these activities are more popular due to their international standing and not being gender specific. This reinforces the significant disparity in participation numbers for AFL and RL, as the geographic reaching and inclusive nature of AFL has evidenced such significant participation numbers.

It is recognised that sport is now competing with new technologies and entertainment. To achieve the ASC's (2015) goal of increasing junior participation in physical activity, sport

needs to be organised, well-governed, and address the needs of Australians. Therefore, junior sporting frameworks need to be explored to ensure they are helping promote this vision, especially regarding the increase of junior participants in the RL sector and retaining them.

### **3.2.4 Junior Sports Frameworks**

The analysis of international junior sports frameworks, from other sporting nations, draws parallels to Australia's approach to junior sports. Of importance, is the belief, that all young Australians have the right to participate in a variety of appropriate sporting activities that are safe and enjoyable. AUSSIE Sports was launched by the Australian Sports Commission in 1986 as a sport education program that targeted primary school-aged children (Richards, 2016). The objective of this program was to increase opportunities for Australian children, specifically in their final three years of primary school, to participate in sporting programs and experiences that were consistent and of quality (Richards, 2016; Richards & May, 2017). The AUSSIE Sports program was considered more holistic than previous attempts at junior sporting programs, as it was seen to target both sectors of education and sport. This was an approach based on shared responsibility of all stakeholders involved—schools, communities, and sporting organisations. Recognising the influence parents and coaches have on junior sporting participants, codes of behaviour were first introduced under this program for both parents and coaches. Emphasis was placed on participation instead of competition in an attempt to shape and create positive sports environments and help promote good practice (Richards, 2016). Despite the program's positive influence on junior sport participation, issues amongst clubs and organisations arose that Australian Sporting Commission needed to address.

The proliferation of sports and sporting clubs/associations across the country led to conflicting standards and gaps in sport delivery, further resulting in an incomplete and less than enjoyable experience for young Australians (ASC, 1994). In response to this issue, the Australian Sporting Commission (ASC, 1994) published the National Junior Sport Policy that was, and continues to be, the framework used to guide the development of junior sport in Australia. While each national sporting organisation is provided the autonomy to create their individual junior sport policies, this national document provides “the framework and principles which should influence and govern the sport's policy development” (ASC, 1994, p. 7). Through the National Junior Sport Policy, a more systematic and co-ordinated approach to junior sport across the country has been provided so that junior sports across schools and communities are delivered in an efficient and equitable manner (ASC, 1994).

The National Junior Sport Policy (ASC, 1994) contains seven sections that detail how schools and the community can approach junior sport so that it is co-ordinated and complementary. Similar to the AUSSIE Sports Program, the details within these seven sections of the National Junior Sport Policy (ASC, 1994) outline the conduct for all stakeholders involved (participants, parents, coaches), and indicates that this framework is not the sole responsibility of one agency; everyone has ownership and its ultimate success is reliant on all agencies that are involved with junior sport (ASC, 1994). Although skills and performance of junior participants are a focus of the policy, it primarily emphasises the nature of participation over competition, thus attempting to maintain a positive sporting culture amongst junior clubs and organisations.



There is no specific junior or youth participant policy for RL; however, there is a National Code of Conduct (ASC, 2014) that RL participants, at all levels, are expected to adhere to, both elite athletes and junior participants alike. The key aims mandated in Australia's National Junior Sports Policy (ASC, 1994) are reflected in this RL Code of Conduct (ASC, 2014). The delivery of a safe, inclusive, and enjoyable sporting environment is not the sole responsibility of a single entity or organisation; individual codes of conduct are provided for players, coaches, referees, officials, parents, and spectators. This shared responsibility assists the increase in RL participation rates and positive sporting experiences, and further building an environment and community where RL is viewed as a social asset (ASC, 2014). The four key beliefs RL embraces are 1) Inclusive, 2) Positive, 3) United, and 4) Disciplined and are reflective of the National Junior Sports Policy (ASC, 1994). Whilst continued skill development is encouraged of RL players at all levels, participation, positive experiences, and sportsmanship are viewed as paramount in helping develop one's performance. Further, the Code of Conduct (ASC, 2014) recognises the errors of past sporting programs being modelled and developed from adult and elite athlete rules and expectations. Instead, the NRL (ASC, 2014) outlines that youth programs are to be tailored appropriately and reflect children's specific abilities and needs. This is an example of how Australia's National Junior Sports Policy (ASC, 1994) guides the design and conduct of Code of Conduct (ASC, 2014) across the NRL. The National Junior Sport Policy (ASC, 1994) and key values, is reflected in sporting policies throughout a number of other countries around the world, such as New Zealand, United States of America (USA), and England.

### **3.3 Summary**

Sport is a part of Australia's national identity and has become a social capital. Australia is a highly active nation, with a significant number of children reported as participating in sport and/or non-sport-related physical activity (ASC, 2016). Rugby League is one of four football codes boasted across the country; however, its participation rates are significantly lower than other club sports, such as soccer and AFL, due to it being restricted to specific regions of Australia and viewed as a 'male only' sport. The National RL Code of Conduct (ASC, 2014) mirrors the Junior Sport Policy (ASC, 1994) by way of aiming for increased participation, inclusiveness and engagement. It is imperative that sporting policies continue to reflect the 3Ps, so as to maintain and heighten positive and quality sporting opportunities that are aimed to increase junior participation / retention, as well as build participants' skills and personal development.

## 4 Theory

### 4.1 Theoretical basis of claim and approach

There are a number of theoretical approaches and models that underpin this research undertaking. Foremost, is the theoretical basis of claim that goes to support the research aim, in so much as to understand RL's Junior and Senior retention rates. With this in mind, the overarching theoretical lens derives from an Interactionist Perspective<sup>12</sup>. In relation to RL and retention rates, this approach will be used to give meaning to how individuals experience the game of RL in Australia and how such experiences impact on player retention rates. By employing interpretive research methods, this research will shed light onto the processes and reasons associated with why RL players become involved, stay involved, and what are the multidimensional experiences that impact on (positively or negatively) and determine a players' short and long-term involvement, engagement and the transitional pathways. More specifically, this research approach will give reference and draw from a number of frameworks, to interpret data and provide a foundation to give meaning and understanding to the phenomenon under investigation. Such theories and models are identified as:

3. **The 3 Ps—performance, participation and personal development,**
4. **The Social / Symbolic Interactionist Theory (SIT),**
5. **The Sport Motivation Scale (SMS).**

The reliability characteristics of the survey instrument were based on the adoption of both the SIT and SMS theoretical frameworks, to which heightened both the validity and reliability of the instrument. This approach was modified for the needs of this research undertaking, that is, specific reference was taken from both the SIT and SMS theoretical frameworks, so as to give direction and legitimacy for the selection and design of the survey questions. The aim of the survey questions was to investigate the experiences and the impact (influence) these had on a player's decision to return to the game in 2017. By adopting a theoretical approach to the survey design and question selection, it placed the analysis in a better position to give meaning and interpretation to the collected data. In short, the SIT and SMS theories, associated with understanding sport participation, were used as a theoretical lens for data analysis.

### 4.2 The 3 Ps—*performance, participation and personal development*

The 3P's of performance, participation, and personal development are reflected in and remain central to quality junior sporting systems and experiences. Performance-based programs occur throughout the world and are where children are identified as having raw talent in a particular sport and then selected to train and compete in that sport at an elite level (Côté & Hancock, 2016). While performance-based programs are focused on elitism and early selection and specialisation (Collins, 2010; Côté et al., 2011), it does not address the need of short-term enjoyment in sport and physical activity. Children's primary motives to engage in sport are to have fun and socialise, and too often they are unable to

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<sup>12</sup> Interactionism is a theoretical perspective that derives social processes (such as conflict, cooperation, identity formation) from human interaction. In relation to this study, investigation will be aimed at understanding how individual players shape NRL culture and are themselves shaped by the culture. This relationship is through understanding the meaning that arises in social interactions.

participate in a variety of sports and physical activities that provide the instant gratification that they seek (Côté & Hancock, 2016). However, research suggests that 'participation' cannot be a sole focus on sporting programs, as children's personal development needs to be considered to assist in lifelong participation in physical activity (Côté & Hancock, 2016). Therefore, programs were developed that specifically focus on educating children on personal development and life skills, such as goal setting, and how they can transfer to different contexts (Côté & Hancock, 2016). This sole focus on personal development, however, can be viewed as diminishing the value of knowledge and skills of specific sports that are also viewed as important to encouraging lifelong participation in sport and physical activity (Côté & Hancock, 2016). Consequently, youth sport programs that primarily focus on either performance, participation, or personal development can be detrimental to children, as the importance of the other two objectives is reduced, thus affecting children's sporting experiences and lifelong participation in physical activity.

It has been contested that the incorporation and implementation of the 3Ps in junior sporting programs is impractical, in which past youth sport programs have been tailored to specifically meet these outcomes independently (Ford, Ward, Hodges, & Williams, 2009; Siedentop, 2002a, b; Weiss, Stuntz, Bhalla, Bolter, & Price, 2013). However, Côté and Hancock (2016) indicate that youth sporting programs can be designed and structured to develop all the 3Ps simultaneously (Côté & Hancock, 2016). The incorporation of all 3Ps can strike a balance that allows intrinsic motivation and lifelong participation to be developed through early diversification of activities, which helps develop personal development, build foundations for potential elite performance, and increase participation and retain players (Côté & Hancock, 2016). With this said, the NRL Code of Conduct goes to support the 3Ps, where key objectives are achieved. In particular, the 3P's will be introduced in an attempt to not only to help increase and retain players, but also to continue developing the skills and abilities of players and create a positive sporting culture where personal development growth can occur simultaneously and be supported.

### **4.3 The Social / Symbolic Interactionist Theory**

The Social / Symbolic Interactionist Theory (SIT) is a term used to describe how people react toward things or events based on what they think that particular situation means to them. "Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theoretical perspective in sociology that addresses the manner in which individuals create and maintain society through face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions" (Carter & Fuller, 2015, p. 1). When positioned to investigate sporting cultures, the SIT approach focuses on how people experience sports and how identities are related to sport participation and sport cultures. Broadly, using SIT as a theoretical lens in sport, identifies how individuals develop and maintain identities as players in RL, how players give meaning to the game and the characteristics of RL's subcultures, change sports to match the perspectives and identities of those who play them and importantly, makes sport organizations more democratic, less autocratic, and less hierarchically organised. Of particular importance and relevance to this study, is the premise that such an approach, allows for the interpretation of how players are socialised into the game, through the game and out of game.



## 4.4 The Sport Motivation Scale

The Sport Motivation Scale (SMS)<sup>13</sup> consist of a number of sub-scales, that measure three types of motivations for sport participation. This scale consists of questions related to measuring a participant's intrinsic motivation (IM), extrinsic motivation (EM), and amotivation (AM).

### 4.4.1 Intrinsic Motivation

There are three types of IM identified as *IM to Know*, *IM to Accomplish Things*, and *IM to Experience Stimulation*.

- Players are IM to 'Know' when they try to discover new training techniques for the sheer pleasure they experience while learning something new.
- Players are IM to 'Accomplish' when they try to master certain difficult training techniques in order to experience personal satisfaction represents an example of intrinsic motivation to accomplish things in the sport domain.
- Players are IM to 'Experience Stimulation' when they engage in an activity in order to experience stimulating sensations (e.g., sensory pleasure, aesthetic experiences, as well as fun and excitement) derived from one's engagement in the activity. Players who participate in their sport in order to live exciting experiences are intrinsically motivated to experience stimulation.

### 4.4.2 Extrinsic Motivation

There are three types of EM that have been identified as *external regulation*, *introjection*, and *identification*.

- Players are EM to 'External Regulation' when they participate in sport in order to receive praise from their coach or because they feel urged to do so by their parents are motivated by external regulation. In this case, the sport is performed not for fun but to obtain rewards (e.g., praise) or to avoid negative consequences (e.g., criticisms from parents).
- Players are EM to 'Introjection' when they participate in sports because they feel pressure to be in good shape for aesthetic reasons and feel embarrassed or ashamed when they are not in best form.
- Players are EM to 'Identification' who participate in sport because they feel their involvement contributes to a part of their growth and development as a person.

### 4.4.3 Amotivation

- Players are AM when they are neither intrinsically motivated nor extrinsically motivated. When players are in such a state, they no longer identify any good reasons for why they continue to train. Eventually, they may even decide to stop practising their sport.

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<sup>13</sup> Acknowledgement – reference, throughout section 4.3, taken from: Pelletier et al. (1995) Toward a New Measure of Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, and Amotivation in Sports: The Sport Motivation Scale (SMS).

## 5 Methods

### 5.1 Aim of research

The aim of this research was to understand why individual players (Junior) chose to remain in the game of RL and what did players like most about their experiences. Specifically, investigations were aimed at determining to what level players' experiences, (linked to: *coaching, player, club, and socialisation*), influenced their motivation to return to play in 2017. In an attempt to investigate the levels of influence / associations between a player's experiences and RL, participants were seen as 'acting agents' in narratives of their personal experiences. It is to be noted, such an approach is only one subjective model of approaching the phenomena of player experiences in RL. However, it is envisaged that findings will go towards informing current and future decision makers as to what aspects of a Junior players RL experiences are working well, and as such continue to strengthen such strategies as well as understanding what are the predominant concerns from players. This will allow resources to be better directed towards aspects of player experiences that can be practically resolved through strategic development and planning. What is more, this research undertaking aligns itself with the ASC's three key areas of concern and indirectly with the 3Ps (performance, participation and personal development), in terms of insight into:

1. changing participation trends,
2. driving demands for lifelong participation, and
3. aspects for building sports' capacity.

Specifically, this research will provide evidential baseline data that will go towards better understanding what is influencing Junior players to remain in the game of RL, and inform current and future policies, program design and practices that will heighten player performance, create lifelong participation (within / throughout the game itself) and develop avenues for supporting player's personal development.

### 5.2 Primary research questions

To achieve such a stated research aim, a number of primary research questions were proposed, these being:

1. What experiences influence a Junior player to return to play RL?
2. Why do Junior players continue to participate in RL?
3. Why do Junior players join RL?
4. What do Junior players like most about playing RL?
5. To what level does a player's experiences (linked to: *coaching, player, club, and socialisation*) associate positively or negatively?
6. What kinds of motivations (external / internal) ensure continued involvement?

7. How can RL facilitate the processes by which a player develops long-term commitment to his or her club?
8. What critical themes emerge from the data that represents the current position of Junior RL and player experiences?
9. What critical themes emerge from the data that represents potential solutions to improving and sustaining Junior RL players?
10. What initiatives are positioned by RL that are aimed to heighten a Junior player's performance, participation and personal development?

### 5.2.1 Secondary research questions

To support the primary research questions, a number of secondary research questions were proposed, these being:

1. What experiences / motivations contribute to Junior RL players to enter into and remain active in RL? A player's experiences (linked to: *coaching, player, club, and socialisation*).
2. Do experiences differ between the characteristics of the players (patterns of differences) (e.g., age, years of experience, SES and State affiliations)?
3. Do experiences differ between the characteristics of the players' performance factors (coaching and player)?
4. Do experiences differ between the characteristics of the players' social identity they derive from the experiences (e.g., prestige, status, fitness level)?
5. Do experiences differ between the characteristics of the players' social setting in which they participate (e.g., club characteristics, sense of community, socialisation)?

### 5.2.2 Quantitative data collection

1. To what level of significance (patterns of differences) ( $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.01^{**}$ ) do Junior players' differing demographic variables (i.e., age, years of experience, SES and State affiliations) associate with their RL experience (negative or positive)?
2. To what level of significance (patterns of associations) ( $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.01^{**}$ ) do Junior players' experiences (across *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*) associate with their RL experience (negative or positive)?
3. How significant (positive or negatively  $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.01^{**}$ ) are Junior players' experiences (across *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*) in determining if they return to play RL?
4. What is the most significant experience (positive or negatively  $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.01^{**}$ ) (across *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*) that causes negative experiences?

### 5.2.3 Qualitative data collection

1. How can RL's Junior players' experiences be improved in order to heighten participation and sustained engagement?
2. What is the most evident reason/s for why Junior players join and remain in the game of RL?
3. What is identified as possibly the most important reason for why Junior RL players return to the game?

## 5.3 Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from Griffith University Ethics Committee. It was deemed that due to participants' data being de-identified, this research was exempt from a full ethics review.

## 5.4 Survey design and construction

A mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) approach was employed to investigate Junior RL player's experiences (2016–17) and ascertain *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation* they decided to join and remain in the game and what they liked about playing RL. Quantitative data provided the 'foothold' and was concerned with gaining knowledge using a scientific method of inquiry, whilst the qualitative data provided further rich insights. Positioned within an interpretivist paradigm and methodology, the qualitative data were sorted using Creswell's (2008) frames for coding and was analysed using Merriam's (2002, 2009) thematic analysis techniques. By combining both quantitative (Mean, %, correlations, p values) and qualitative (player commentaries) methods of inquiry, the results from this study can be better aligned with comparing and contrasting past research indicating that sport participation is grounded in decision-making processes based on the theoretical basis of claim involving self-esteem, social support, social inclusion and social acceptance. Data can then be further aligned with the 3Ps—performance, participation and personal development.

This report and its findings draw upon literature concerning Junior sport engagement and sporting organisations (such as the NRL) may design and implement innovative strategies to better heighten immediate Junior players' performance, participation and personal development. Such an approach provides a 'springboard' so as to better interpret meaning from the data and investigates sport's social processes and impacts from human interaction. In relation to this study, the survey design was aimed at tailoring question items so as to better understand how individual Junior players shape RL's culture and are themselves shaped by the culture. This relationship is through understanding the meaning that arises in social interactions.

Survey questions supported a mixed methods approach, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative responses. Questions throughout the survey were constructed with the intent to address the research questions and aim, that is: to understand individual Junior players 'lived experience' throughout the 2017 RL season. Specifically, investigations were aimed at determining to what level 2017 Junior players' experiences, (linked to: *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*), impacted on their 2017 RL season. Each of the four player experience domains had a number of self-reflecting questions, resulting in detailed participant profiling. An initial pilot test ( $N = 25$ ) was undertaken of the survey

to ensure questions were understood and that participants could understand survey requirements. A 5-point Likert scale for agreement was used (*Strongly disagree* = 1, *Neutral* = 3, *Strongly agree* = 5).

## 5.5 Participant sample and recruitment

The sample was drawn from across Junior (N = 6597) RL players who participated in the 2017 season. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the National Rugby League's Participation Strategy and Project Manager, as well as from the Coaching and Education Programs Coordinator (QLD). An email invitation, containing a direct hyperlink to the survey instrument, was circulated to the membership list of those players (Junior) who played RL in 2017. Junior players were categorised as being under the age of 18 at time of survey. It was encouraged that parental assistance was undertaken for Junior players (younger than 15 years of age) completing the survey.

## 5.6 Data collection process

Data collection took place over a two-month period, beginning 28/08/2017 and concluding 30/10/2017. A number of follow up email reminders were sent during this five-week period. Data were gathered using a web-based approach on the Survey Monkey platform. Participants were asked to respond to a number of formalized questions and open-ended questions. To increase the level of reliability and validity associated with this survey questioning framework, a number of data collection instruments and approaches were modified for this data collection undertaking. Each approach, to data collection, was aimed at understanding Junior player's personal experiences associated with the four key variables, these being: *coaching*, *player*, *club* and *socialisation* and how influential these were in their decision to remain in the game of RL. From such a process a specific player profiling was made possible.

### 5.6.1 Demographics

Descriptive statistics were drawn from measuring questions pertaining to Junior participants' gender, postcode (SES), date of birth, ATSI identification, home situation, education / employment status, and previous player experience (e.g., years of experience playing RL) and level of competition.

### 5.6.2 Quantitative questions—closed questions

Participants were asked to complete a series of closed questions associated with addressing the research aim. Each question was self-reflecting and required to indicate their personal level of agreement (*Strongly disagree* = 1, *Neutral* = 3, *Strongly agree* = 5). Questions were designed to measure a Junior player's experience/s and the level of influence these experiences had on them throughout 2017. An example of this latter response question was presented as being:

- What did you like most about playing RL in 2017?
- Why did you continue to play RL?
- What influenced your decision to join a RL team?

Furthermore, questions were developed to investigate specific topics / issues associated with the four key experiences. These are outlined below as being:

1. **Coaching**—the coach / coaching team and appropriate knowledge about the game (rules, positioning and tactics), fair player selection, rewards / incentives for the player,
2. **Player**—support, fun and enjoyment, game scheduling / draw was fair,
3. **Club**—general organisation, communication,
4. **Socialisation**—team spirit and belonging, valued.

As a guiding framework and to add reliability to the measurement instrument, a number of scales were utilised and modified for this research. The questions for this research were framed with reference to The Social / Symbolic Interactionist Theory (SIT) and the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS). Each scale and subscales provide legitimacy as to the design and development of the survey questions in relation to investigating participants' experiences in 2017.

### 5.6.3 Qualitative questions—open-ended

This research was interested in how players' experiences (linked to *coaching*, *player*, *club*, and *socialisation*) impacted on their 2017 RL season. Primarily, the adoption of a qualitative approach, was to examine more deeply the social processes associated with a player's decision. Participants were asked to respond in writing to a series of open-ended questions (selected examples below) that focused on:

1. *Please feel free to elaborate further on the player's social experience throughout 2017 (Positive or Negative).*
2. *Were there any other factors relating to the player's socialising experience that contributed to them returning?*
3. *Is there anything that could have been done to improve the player's experience?*

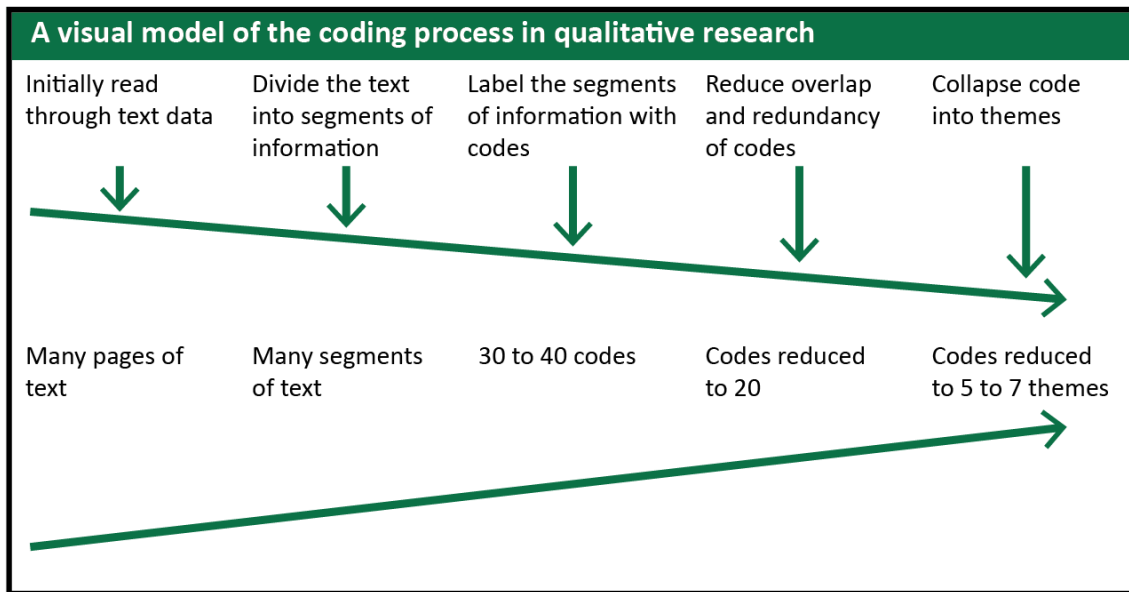
When participants completed their responses, they were asked to indicate their willingness to be contacted by a member of the research team. Those who were willing provided their name and contact information. These follow up conversations allowed the investigators to add clarity to responses received or to gather additional information pertaining to particular responses.

### *Theoretical context and research paradigm*

A qualitative (interpretive) data collection approach was designed and implemented in order to explore and develop a better understanding of the experiences Junior players had whilst playing the 2017 RL season. This study will be located within the interpretive paradigm and provides a framework for this research, by way of how the data is (a) collected, (b) analysed, (c) results presented and (d) results interpreted. In conducting a basic interpretive study, the research will seek to discover and understand the perspectives of the key participants (Junior RL players) in an attempt to determine and present their individual experiences.



This study is based on developing thematic categories and analysis by using Creswell's (2008) *Visual Model of the Coding Process in Qualitative Research* (Figure 5.1). Within this study, the collection and analysis of the interview data is what Creswell (2008) describes as 'hand analysis of qualitative data' (p.246). That is, the researcher will read the data obtained from participants' interviews and online comments, mark it by hand, and divide it into parts. Creswell's (2008) steps range from the initial exploring of the data through to the organisation of the data. This process is defined by Creswell (2008) as, "the process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data" (p.251).



**Figure 5.1** Visual Model of the Coding Process in Qualitative Research

Source: Creswell, 2008

### ***Establishing Trustworthiness—Validity (credibility, transferability), Reliability (dependability, confirmability)***

Achieving trustworthiness consists of processes that support such aspects of research related to: Validity - (a) credibility, (b) transferability and Reliability - (c) dependability, (d) confirmability. To test the survey for validity, a continuous 'peer review' process (NRL Game Development Officers and ethics committee members) was undertaken prior, during and whilst the instrument was implemented within the field of research. Credibility was achieved by providing detailed processes to record, analyse and present commentaries, whilst transferability was heightened by implementing concise and rigorous methods for collecting and analysing data, describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. In addressing reliability, an attempt to demonstrate that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny has been presented, this dependability was achieved by detailing the nature and aim of the study, coupled with specific guidelines for its implementation and question/s design. Lastly, confirmability was maintained by implementing a method and interpretive framework that ensured that data presentation was not affected by the researcher's personal viewpoint / stance. The researcher documented the procedures for checking and rechecking the data throughout this study, as outlined in the seven steps to data analysis.

## 5.7 Data analysis

### 5.7.1 Quantitative analysis

Quantitative data analysis was undertaken using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (PASW20). Data preparation involved the development of one SPSS file to incorporate all responses from the final survey undertaken. The initial data analysis used Frequencies to provide a profile of respondents by personal variables (demographics). The mean ( $M$ ) was calculated using SPSS to allow comparison across groups. The general approach to rating scale analysis was to consider the relative level of agreement, regardless of level of RL, for sets of items related to a particular aspect of player experience, that is, positive and negative aspects of the coaching experience, the player experience, the club experience, and the socialisation experience. After considering a specific subscale, nonparametric correlational analyses (Spearman's rho) considered the extent to which level of experience (Junior); gender, number of years of RL experience, SES, and the subset of four specific ethnic identities influenced these ratings. Spearman's rho correlation ( $r$ ) matrix was used to examine the strength of the association between personal variables,  $p$  values indicated statistically significant associations, at the one- and two-tail ( $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.001^{**}$ ) and Optimal scaling was used to further explore associations between the four key player experiences (linked to: *coaching*, *player*, *club* and *socialisation*) and their associations to their decision to remain in 2017 and what influenced their decisions to join a RL team. Initial quantitative data analysis was focused on measuring the overall nation-wide responses rather than by individual player's level of competition or state representation.

### 5.7.2 Qualitative analysis

Once the key results of the quantitative analysis were completed, the qualitative data were scanned in an effort to find explicit commentary pertaining to the statistically significant findings. In order to do this, the textual information gathered from the open-ended questions was downloaded from the Survey Monkey platform into MS Word documents. From there, the qualitative data were independently reviewed by a researcher and summarized. Qualitative data were analysed using content analysis to reveal the most frequently occurring concepts and themes. Participants were asked to complete an online survey, consisting of a number of open-ended questions. These responses were collated in a single Word file, with an extra paragraph return between successive responses to indicate changes of speaker. Through this analysis, key themes and concepts associated with the open-ended question were identified. This type of analysis revealed the themes or concepts that were associated with the questions. Specifically, data presentation and analysis will link to the four key experiences. Participants were asked to share their experiences (lived or witnessed) concerning their *coaching*, *player*, *club* and *socialisation* experiences. They were further encouraged to provide possible solutions and recommendations for improving the four experiences across RL.

Qualitative data analysis procedures provided an important tool to understand hidden information, build a profile of the participants' expectations and present future recommendations. Overall, the qualitative data analysis was generally used to obtain a greater level of information and evidence about the research aims and subsequent findings. To further assist in the thematic categorisation, this study is based on undertaking thematic analysis using Creswell's (2008) *Visual Model of the Coding Process in Qualitative Research* (Figure 5.1). Within this study, the analysis of the interview data is what Creswell (2008) describes as 'hand analysis of qualitative data' (p.



246). That is, the researcher read the data obtained from participant survey responses, mark it by hand, and divided it into parts. The data were systematically coded and placed into common themes and matched against the four experiences and why players continued to play RL in 2017 and what influenced them to join a RL team. Creswell's (2008) steps range from the initial exploring of the data through to the organisation of the data. This process is defined by Creswell (2008) as, "the process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data" (p. 251).

### *Inductive and deductive approach*

Participants' responses were coded using both an inductive and deductive approach. An inductive analysis (qualitative) allowed for themes to emerge from the data, without trying to fit it into a pre-established coding frame, or the researcher's assumptions. This approach allowed the researcher to uncover reasons why participants liked their 2017 RL experience. Conversely, a deductive analysis (quantitative) approach tends to yield less rich description of the data. The inclusion of both approaches (mixed methods) allowed for a more rich and detailed thematic development and statistical analysis that was able to capture unique elements of the data, and elements related to a Junior RL player's 2017 experience/s.

### *Generating themes*

To obtain a better understanding as to the 'lived experience' of participants, this study utilised an interpretive, qualitative approach, consisting of online open-ended questionnaire and one-on-one interviews to collect data. This data was thematically coded and analysed by using Creswell's (2008) decoding processes and coupled with Leximancer software to develop concepts and to cross-reference themes. The ability of thematic analysis to explore large amounts of textual information to discover trends, emergent themes, as well as their relevance to structures and discourses has made this method integral to this study. Responses to selected questions from the online survey and one-on-one interviews, were transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word. Transcribed files were then analysed using Creswell's (2008) seven-step approach to thematic analysis. Collected data were analysed using a seven-step process, these being:

- 1. Transcribing:** transcripts were recorded verbatim.
- 2. Immersion:** written transcripts were read and re-read to identify descriptive codes, explore and organise the data.
- 3. Initial coding:** descriptive codes manually extracted and analysed for main central codes, process of segmenting and labelling text.
- 4. Theme identification:** central codes were analysed for thematic codes and allocated to the appropriate descriptive code, form descriptions and broad themes in the data.
- 5. Defining:** thematic codes were elaborated upon and associated with appropriate central codes, specific themes generated.
- 6. Reviewing:** all data was reviewed, themes were recorded, above stages were repeated to ensure no loss of data and eliminate any duplicated data, reduce redundancy.
- 7. Refining:** thematic codes were refined and defined, thematic sorting and checking

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Quantitative—outcomes

#### 6.1.1 Rating scale responses

The general approach was to consider the relative level of agreement, regardless of the level of Junior RL, for sets of items related to a particular aspect of a player's experience, that is, positive and negative aspects associated with four themes: *coaching*, *player*, *club* and *socialisation*. Junior responses were combined for analysis to provide a more representative sampling across the player experiences.

After considering a specific subscale, specific analyses examined the extent to which level of experience (Junior); gender, SES, specific ethnic identities (any of the four options), and number of years of RL experience influenced these ratings, establishing patterns of associations and patterns of differences. Group differences that proved to be significant were further examined. This correlational study is non-experimental study, requiring the researcher to explore relationships without manipulating or randomly selecting the subjects of the research. The correlation study is investigating strength of relationships and significance of associations and differences between variables. Examples of research questions for this correlational study are:

#### 6.1.2 Aim:

The aims of this research were:

- To investigate the extent to which a Junior player's (N = 6597) Rugby League (RL) season (2017), was influenced by four main experiences, being: *coaching*, *player*, *club* and *socialisation*, and
- How such experiences re-enforce and align with the 3Ps.

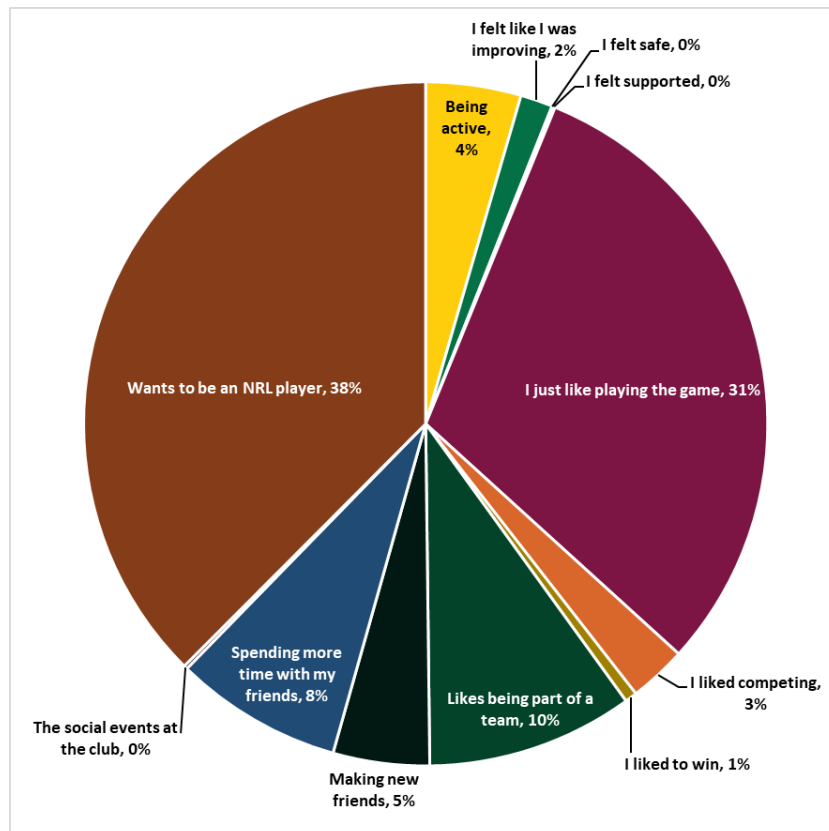
#### 6.1.3 Focus questions

- To get a sense as to why Junior players continue to return to RL, participants were asked a number of focus questions, these being:
  - What did Junior players like most about playing RL?
  - What is the main reason/s Junior players join RL?
  - What were the players' *coaching*, *player*, *club*, and *socialisation* experiences throughout the 2017 RL season?
  - What is the relationship between players' four experiences and the level of impact / influence these had on their decision/s to return to play RL?

A number of items were asked that went to re-enforce these above focus questions and were related to investigating why and what influenced Junior players decision to return and continue engagement with RL. Finally, where significance was examined, only highly significant positive, negative and differences (Mean, %,  $r$ ,  $p < .05^*$  and  $p < .001^{**}$ ) were reported. For significance levels, the smaller the decimal fraction, the higher the level of significance.

### *What did Junior players like most about playing RL?*

As illustrated in Figure 6.1, when asked to use one of 12 items to indicate what they liked most about Junior RL, more than 2/3 (68%) were most likely to report that they just want to be an NRL player (37%) or that they just like playing the game (31%). Another 18% reported that they liked being part of a team (10%) or that they like spending more time with their friends (8%). The responses of the remaining 13% were distributed across another other eight items.



**Figure 6.1** What does the player most like about playing Rugby League

### *What is the main reason/s Junior players join RL?*

As illustrated in Figure 6.2, participants were also asked to select the main reason the player chose to play RL from a selection of 10 statements. A majority (54%) agreed either that family members played or/and were involved at the club (33%) or that they wanted to become an NRL player (21%). Another 31% agreed that friends played (14%), they watched it on TV (9%) or they wanted to be part of the team (8%). The responses of the remaining 15% were distributed across another five statements.

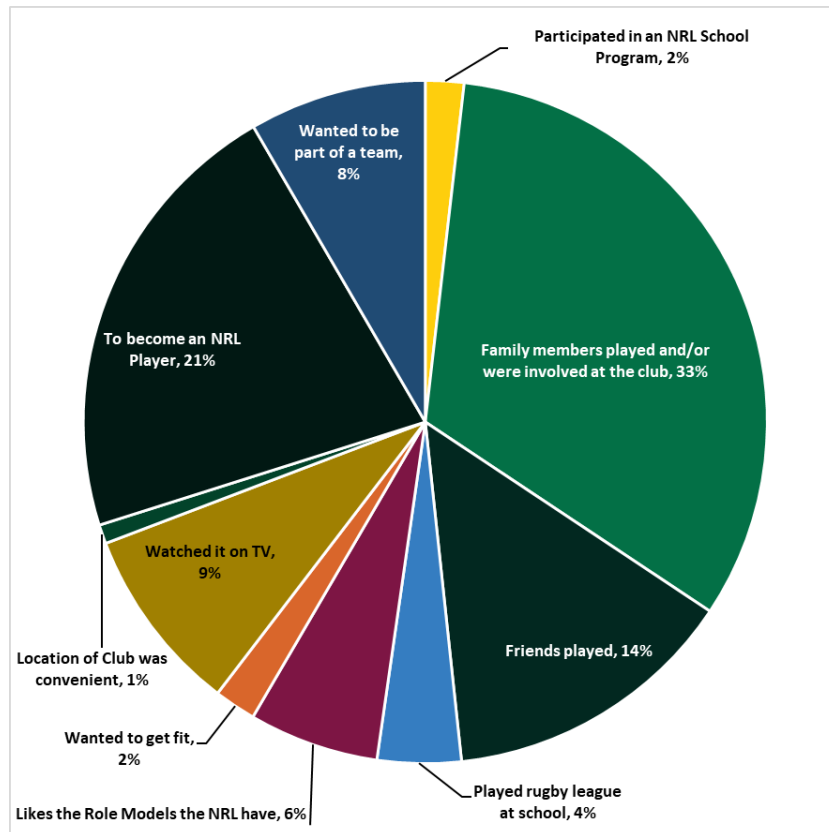


Figure 6.2 What was main reason for playing Rugby League



Figure 6.3 Reasons Junior players like playing RL

## 6.2 Patterns of associations

There were a number of noted patterns of associations throughout the Junior RL group. Only the most significant ( $M$ ,  $r$ ,  $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.00^{**}$ ) relationships have been presented. Overall, participants generally demonstrated positive, similar responses, concerning the four experiences. This is reflective of a group that returned to play in 2017. A summary of the most significant responses ( $M$ ), against each of the four experiences (Table 6.1 to Table 6.4), from highest to lowest, are recorded below as follows.

### 6.2.1 Coaching experience

As indicated in Table 6.1, on average, participants rated the coaching experience most highly in terms of coaches demonstrating excellent knowledge about the game. They rated it least highly in terms of coaches ensuring that player selection was fair and equitable.

**Table 6.1** The coaching experience

Statistics	Mean	SD
Demonstrated excellent knowledge of game	4.67	0.802
Ran training sessions that were safely conducted	4.53	0.947
Maintained a fun and enjoyable training environment	4.22	0.940
Maintained and encouraged clear and open communication with players	4.19	0.969
Demonstrated excellent knowledge about the training	4.15	0.954
Demonstrated a professional approach at all times	4.15	1.010
Ensured an appropriate level of competitiveness	4.14	0.953
Ensured that player selection was fair and equitable	3.55	1.112



**Figure 6.4** Patterns of association: Coaching

### 6.2.2 Player experience

As indicated in Table 6.2, on average, participants rated the playing experience most highly in terms of the games being fun and exciting, and games being safely conducted. They rated them least highly in terms of games scheduling/draw being fair.

**Table 6.2** The player experience

Statistics	Mean	SD
Games were fun and exciting	4.76	0.807
Games were safely conducted	4.65	0.776
General atmosphere was positive	4.05	0.822
Social gatherings were well conducted	3.98	0.894
Results were pleasing	3.93	0.938
Playing times were convenient	3.41	0.873
Personal rewards / incentives	3.31	0.956
Game scheduling / draw was fair	3.27	1.022



**Figure 6.5** Patterns of association: Player



### 6.2.3 Club experience

As indicated in Table 6.3, on average, participants rated the club environment most highly in terms of commitment to training sessions and competitiveness during the game. They rated it least highly in terms of rewards/incentives for players.

**Table 6.3** The club experience

Statistics	Mean	SD
Commitment to training sessions	4.30	0.794
Competitiveness during the games	4.21	0.797
Professionalism when dealing with players	4.17	0.899
'Value for money' for players	4.04	1.002
Communication with players	4.02	0.961
General organisation	3.49	0.971
Provision and maintenance of club facilities	3.48	0.926
Rewards / incentives for player	3.39	1.042



**Figure 6.6** Patterns of association: Club

### 6.2.4 Socialisation experience

As indicated in Table 6.4, on average, participants rated the socialisation experience most highly in terms of looking forward to game days. They rated them least highly in terms of feeling overwhelmed and burnt out.

**Table 6.4** The social experience

Statistics	Mean	SD
Looked forward to game days	4.52	0.751
Looked forward to training	4.31	0.849
Felt it was a safe environment	4.30	0.760
Felt that they had support of the coach	4.26	0.971
Felt that they had support of peers	4.15	0.882
Felt a strong sense of team spirit and belonging	4.12	0.965
Felt as if contribution to the team was valued	4.11	0.925
Felt that they had the support of the club officials	4.05	0.940
Felt that enough team / club social gatherings organized outside of game time to increase peer / family bonding	3.10	1.110
Was feeling overwhelmed and 'burnt out'	2.16	1.125



**Figure 6.7** Patterns of association: Socialisation

### 6.3 Patterns of differences

There were a number of noted patterns of differences throughout the Junior RL group. Only the most significant ( $M$ ,  $r$ ,  $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.00$ ) relationships have been presented. Importantly, the main patterns of differences, across the four experiences, were linked to a number of independent variables. These variables, in assorted combinations, go to directly impact on Junior players' experiences. These are represented as being:

1. years of NRL experience,
2. age-related,
3. socio-economic status (SES),
4. state affiliation,
5. ethnicity.

Such data patterning are important considerations, as they present specific detail as to which type of Junior player is either more or less critical of his / her experience. By viewing the data, a demographic profile, representing these variables, can be identified. It has been indicated that Junior players who, 1) have more years of RL experience, 2) older, 3) with an ethnic background and 4) have a state affiliation with either NSWRL or QRL are *generally* more inclined to be significantly less likely than others to rate the four experiences highly (that is, negative about their experiences). This was particularly evident throughout the participants' club and player experiences. There were differing patterns across these five variables, however, in *general* the Junior player who demonstrated these variables were significantly more likely to rate their experience as lower than other participants. Whilst data indicates that NSWRL and QRL participants were generally more critical of their experience, it was confirmed that NSWRL Junior players were more inclined to leave the game when compared to other state affiliations. These are important considerations and findings, as such data provides specific insight/s into aspects of the player experience that are deemed to be negative. From such data, RL can look at implementing micro strategies to address these identified associations of differences.

#### 6.3.1 Coaching experience

##### *Years of experience*

As indicated in Table 6.5, players with more years of experience were less likely than others to rate coaches as demonstrating a professional approach at all times; maintaining a fun and enjoyable training environment; ensuring that player selection was fair and equitable; maintaining and encouraging clear and open communication with players; or running training sessions that were safely conducted.

**Table 6.5** Items where players with more RL experience rated the coaching experience significantly differently

Number of years played official club Rugby League	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Demonstrated a professional approach at all times	-.052**	0.000
Maintained a fun and enjoyable training environment	-.092**	0.000
Ensured that player selection was fair and equitable	-.089**	0.000
Maintained and encouraged clear and open communication with players	-.070**	0.000
Ran training sessions that were safely conducted	-.052**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

### *Socio-economic status*

As in indicated in Table 6.6, on average, participants from higher SES areas rated aspects of the coaching experience more highly than others in terms of the coach demonstrating excellent knowledge about the training, ensuring an appropriate level of competitiveness, demonstrating a professional approach at all times, maintaining a fun and enjoyable training environment, ensuring that player selection was fair and equitable, maintaining and encouraging clear and open communication with players, and running training sessions that were safely conducted.

**Table 6.6** Items where players from higher SES areas rated the coaching experience significantly differently

SES	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Demonstrated excellent knowledge about the training	.046**	0.000
Ensured an appropriate level of competitiveness	.039**	0.001
Demonstrated a professional approach at all times	.051**	0.000
Maintained a fun and enjoyable training environment	.048**	0.000
Ensured that player selection was fair and equitable	.061**	0.000
Maintained and encouraged clear and open communication with players	.055**	0.000
Ran training sessions that were safely conducted	.045**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

*State affiliation*

As indicated in Table 6.7, players from NSWRL were significantly less likely than others to rate coaches as ensuring an appropriate level of competitiveness, and as demonstrating a professional approach at all times.

**Table 6.7** Items where players from NSWRL rated the coaching experience significantly differently

NSWRL	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Ensured an appropriate level of competitiveness	-.036**	0.004
Demonstrated a professional approach at all times	-.042**	0.001

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

As indicated in Table 6.8, players from QRL were significantly less likely than others to agree that the coach demonstrated excellent knowledge about the training; ensured an appropriate level of competitiveness; demonstrated a professional approach at all times; maintained a fun and enjoyable training environment; ensured that player selection was fair and equitable; and maintained and encouraged clear and open communication with the players.

**Table 6.8** Items where players from QRL rated the coaching experience significantly differently

QRL	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Demonstrated excellent knowledge about the training	-.039**	0.002
Ensured an appropriate level of competitiveness	-.037**	0.003
Demonstrated a professional approach at all times	-.052**	0.000
Maintained a fun and enjoyable training environment	-.036**	0.003
Ensured that player selection was fair and equitable	-.040**	0.001
Maintained and encouraged clear and open communication with players	-.041**	0.001

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

### 6.3.2 Player experience

#### *Years of experience*

As indicated in Table 6.9, players with more years of RL experience were significantly less likely than others to rate the playing experience highly in terms of the game scheduling / draw being fair, games being safely conducted, games being fun and exciting, results being pleasing, personal rewards / incentives, playing times being convenient, general atmosphere being positive, or social gatherings being well conducted.

**Table 6.9** Items where players with more years of RL experience rated the playing experience significantly differently

Number of years played official club Rugby League	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Game scheduling / draw was fair	-.101**	0.000
Games were safely conducted	-.090**	0.000
Games were fun and exciting	-.132**	0.000
Results were pleasing	-.103**	0.000
Personal rewards / incentives	-.076**	0.000
Playing times were convenient	-.058**	0.000
General atmosphere was positive	-.127**	0.000
Social gatherings were well conducted	-.054**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

#### *Age-related*

As indicated in Table 6.10, older players were significantly less likely than others to rate the playing experience highly in terms of the game scheduling / draw being fair, games being safely conducted, games being fun and exciting, results being pleasing, personal rewards / incentives, playing times being convenient, general atmosphere being positive, or social gatherings being well conducted.

**Table 6.10** Items where older players rated the playing experience significantly differently

Age in years adjusted	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Game scheduling / draw was fair	-.088**	0.000
Games were safely conducted	-.108**	0.000
Games were fun and exciting	-.164**	0.000
Results were pleasing	-.157**	0.000
Personal rewards / incentives	-.095**	0.000
Playing times were convenient	-.066**	0.000
General atmosphere was positive	-.164**	0.000
Social gatherings were well conducted	-.074**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)



*Socio-economic status*

As indicated in Table 6.11, players from higher SES areas were significantly less likely than others to rate the playing experience highly in terms of the games being fun and exciting, the results being pleasing, the playing times being convenient, or the general atmosphere being positive.

**Table 6.11** Items where players from higher SES areas rated the playing experience significantly differently

SES	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Games were fun and exciting	-.069**	0.003
Results were pleasing	-.073**	0.002
Playing times were convenient	-.046*	0.049
General atmosphere was positive	-.048*	0.037

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

*State affiliation*

As indicated in Table 6.12, players from QRL were significantly less likely than others to rate social gatherings as well conducted

**Table 6.12** Items where players from QRL rated the playing experience significantly differently

QRL	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Social gatherings were well conducted	-.041**	0.001

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**6.3.3 Club experience***Years of experience*

As indicated in Table 6.13, players with more years of RL experience were significantly less likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of value for money for players or for rewards/incentives for players.

**Table 6.13** Items where players with more years of RL experience rated the club environment significantly differently

Number of years played official club Rugby League	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
'Value for money' for players	-.045**	0.000
Rewards / incentives for player	-.065**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

*Age-related*

As indicated in Table 6.14, older players were significantly less likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of professionalism when dealing with players, value for money for players, or rewards/incentives for players.

**Table 6.14** Items where older players rated the club environment significantly differently

Age in years adjusted	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Professionalism when dealing with players	-.046**	0.000
'Value for money' for players	-.040**	0.001
Rewards / incentives for player	-.066**	0.000

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*State affiliation*

As indicated in Table 6.15, players from the NSWRL were significantly less likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of commitment to training sessions, competitiveness during the games, professionalism when dealing with players, value for money for players, rewards/incentives for players, provision and maintenance of club facilities, communication with players, or general organization.

**Table 6.15** Items where players from NSWRL rated the club environment significantly differently

NSWRL	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Commitment to training sessions	-.036**	0.004
Competitiveness during the games	-.078**	0.000
Professionalism when dealing with players	-.073**	0.000
'Value for money' for players	-.112**	0.000
Rewards / incentives for player	-.060**	0.000
Provision and maintenance of club facilities	-.070**	0.000
Communication with players	-.091**	0.000
General organisation	-.101**	0.000

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

As indicated in Table 6.16, players from the QRL were significantly less likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of commitment to training sessions, competitiveness during the games, professionalism when dealing with players, value for money, rewards/incentives for players, provision and maintenance of club facilities, communication with players, or general organisation.

**Table 6.16** Items where players from QRL rated the club environment significantly differently

QRL	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Commitment to training sessions	-.041**	0.001
Competitiveness during the games	-.079**	0.000
Professionalism when dealing with players	-.084**	0.000
'Value for money' for players	-.123**	0.000
Rewards / incentives for player	-.068**	0.000
Provision and maintenance of club facilities	-.060**	0.000
Communication with players	-.099**	0.000
General organisation	-.104**	0.000

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

### *Ethnicity*

As indicated in Table 6.17, players with one of four specific ethnic identities were significantly less likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of value for money for players.

**Table 6.17** Items where players with one of four specific ethnic identities rated the club environment significantly differently

Ethnic identity (2 groups)	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
'Value for money' for players	-.052**	0.000

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

## 6.3.4 Socialisation experience

### *Years of experience*

As indicated in Table 6.18, players with more years of experience were significantly less likely than others to rate the socialisation experience highly in terms of feeling it was a safe environment, feeling that they had the support of the coach, looking forward to training or looking forward to game days. Players with more years of RL experience were more likely than others to feel overwhelmed and burnt-out.

**Table 6.18** Items where players with more RL experience rated the socialisation experience significantly differently

Number of years played official club Rugby League	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Felt it was a safe environment	-.044**	0.001
Felt that they had support of the coach	-.050**	0.000
Looked forward to training	-.094**	0.000
Looked forward to game days	-.037**	0.004
Was feeling overwhelmed and 'burnt out'	.045**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

*Age-related*

As indicated in Table 6.19, older players were significantly less likely than others to rate the socialisation experience highly in terms of feeling as if contribution to the team was valued, feeling a strong sense of team spirit and belonging, feeling it was a safe environment, feeling that they had support of peers, feeling that they had support of the coach, feeling that they had the support of the club officials, looking forward to training, or looking forward to game days. However, older players were significantly more likely than others to be feeling overwhelmed and burnt out.

**Table 6.19** Items where older players rated the socialisation experience significantly differently

Age in years adjusted	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Felt as if contribution to the team was valued	-.096**	0.000
Felt a strong sense of team spirit and belonging	-.093**	0.000
Felt it was a safe environment	-.101**	0.000
Felt that they had support of peers	-.084**	0.000
Felt that they had support of the coach	-.090**	0.000
Felt that they had the support of the club officials	-.034**	0.008
Looked forward to training	-.120**	0.000
Looked forward to game days	-.083**	0.000
Was feeling overwhelmed and 'burnt out'	.101**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

*Socio-economic status*

As indicated in Table 6.20, players from higher SES areas were more likely than others to rate the socialisation experience highly in terms of feeling a strong sense of team spirit and belonging, feeling that they had support of the coach, feeling that enough team/club social gatherings were organised outside of game time to increase peer/family bonding. Players from higher SES areas were also less likely than others to feel overwhelmed and burnt-out.

**Table 6.20** Items where players from higher SES areas rated the socialisation experience significantly differently

SES	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Felt a strong sense of team spirit and belonging	.048**	0.000
Felt that they had support of the coach	.042**	0.001
Felt that enough team / club social gatherings organized outside of game time to increase peer / family bonding	.045**	0.000
Was feeling overwhelmed and 'burnt out'	-.067**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

***Ethnicity***

As indicated in Table 6.21, players from one of four specific ethnic identities were significantly less likely than others to feel they had the support of the coach. Also, players from one of four specific ethnic identities were more likely than others to feel overwhelmed and burnt-out.

**Table 6.21** Items where players from one of four specific ethnic identities rated the socialisation experience significantly differently

Ethnic identity (2 groups)	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Felt that they had support of the coach	-.036**	0.004
Was feeling overwhelmed and 'burnt out'	.114**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

***State affiliation***

As indicated in Table 6.22, players from NSWRL were significantly less likely than others to feel their contribution to the team was valued, they had the support of the club officials, or that enough team/club social gatherings were organised outside of game time to increase peer/family bonding.

**Table 6.22** Items where players from NSWRL rated the socialisation experience significantly differently

NSWRL	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Felt as if contribution to the team was valued	-.049**	0.000
Felt that they had the support of the club officials	-.053**	0.000
Felt that enough team / club social gatherings organized outside of game time to increase peer / family bonding	-.063**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

As indicated in Table 6.23, players from QRL were significantly less likely than others to feel their contribution to the team was valued, that it was a safe environment, that they had the support of club officials or that enough team/club social gatherings were organised outside of game time to increase peer/family bonding.

**Table 6.23** Items where players from QRL rated the socialisation experience significantly differently

QRL	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Felt as if contribution to the team was valued	-.042**	0.001
Felt it was a safe environment	-.037**	0.004
Felt that they had the support of the club officials	-.068**	0.000
Felt that enough team / club social gatherings organized outside of game time to increase peer / family bonding	-.059**	0.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

As indicated in Table 6.24, older players were less likely to state that they would be returning to the Junior RL in the future. In contrast, players with one of four specific ethnic identities were more likely than others to state that they would be returning to Junior RL in the future. It would seem that age (older) and ethnicity have a significant impact on retention trends amongst Junior RL players.

**Table 6.24** Subgroups significantly correlated with decision to return to RL in future

Will return to playing Rugby League in the future?	Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)
Age in years adjusted	-.086**	0.000
Ethnic identity (2 groups)	.040**	0.001

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## 6.4 Patterns of associations and differences for leavers vs. stayers

There were a number of noted patterns of associations and differences throughout the Junior RL group, pertaining to leavers verse stayers. Only the most significant ( $M$ ,  $r$ ,  $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.00^{**}$ ) relationships have been presented. Importantly, the main data patterns, across the four experiences, were linked to a number of independent variables. These variables, go to directly impact on and reflect a Junior player's 2017 experience. These are represented as being:

*Leavers* (2016) were significantly more likely than stayers to be:

1. living with single parents,
2. at university,
3. unemployed,
4. doing casual work,
5. part-time work or full-time work,
6. less likely to be playing in State competitions or Premier, A Grade or A division RL,
7. associated with the NSWCRRL,

*Stayers* (2017) were significantly more likely than leavers to be:

1. male,
2. at school,
3. younger (<15),
4. associated with the QRL,
5. more likely to be playing in State competitions or Premier, A Grade or A division RL,
6. planning to return to playing RL in the future.



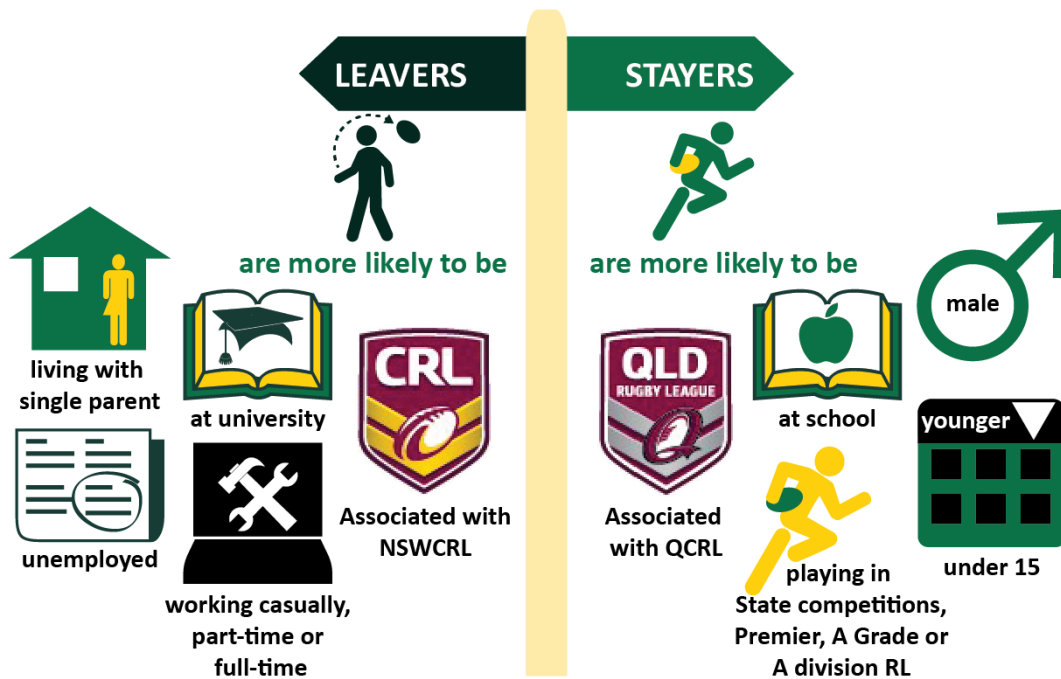


Figure 6.8 Stayers vs leavers

Leavers and stayers did not differ significantly in terms of SES, ethnicity or number of years that they'd played official club RL. Stayers were more positive than leavers on all measures related to all four experiences—*coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*.

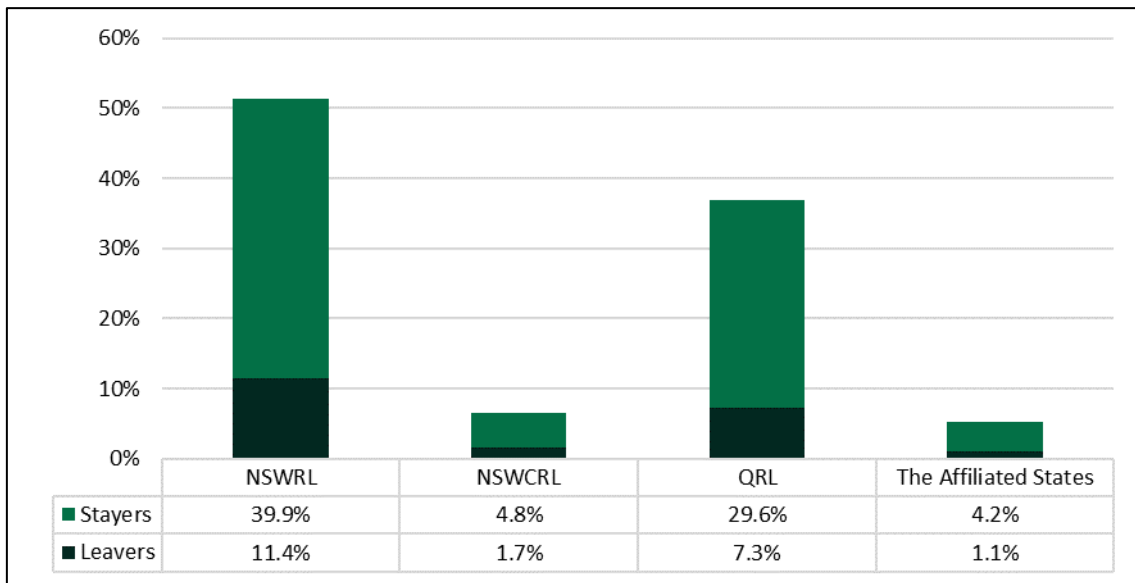
### 6.4.1 Leavers vs. stayers

#### The four NRL States

Leavers were significantly more likely to be associated with the NSWCRRL, with stayers more likely to be associated with the QRL.

Table 6.25 Leavers vs. stayers: the four NRL States

The four NRL States		Cohort		Total
		Leavers	Stayers	
NSWRL	Count	960	3,347	4,307
	Standardized Residual	1.2	-0.6	
NSWCRL	Count	140	406	546
	Standardized Residual	2.1	-1.1	
QRL	Count	608	2,482	3,090
	Standardized Residual	-2.2	1.1	
The Affiliated States	Count	93	350	443
	Standardized Residual	-0.2	0.1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>1,801</b>	<b>6,585</b>	<b>8,386</b>



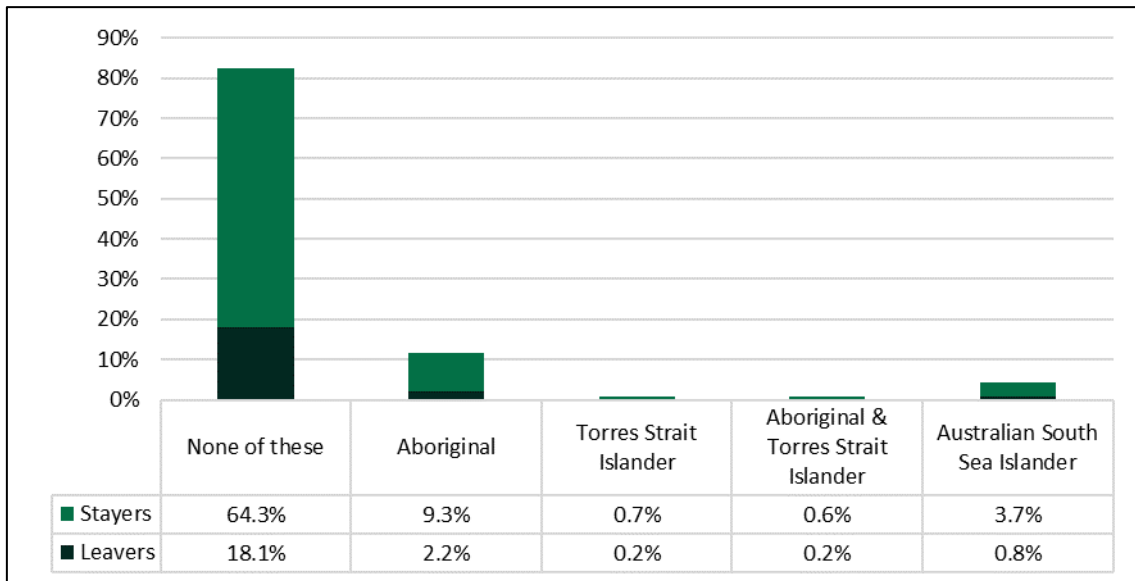
**Figure 6.9** Leavers vs. stayers: the four NRL States

*Ethnic Identity*

Leavers and stayers were non-significantly different in terms of specific ethnic identity.

**Table 6.26** Leavers vs. stayers: Ethnic identity

Specific ethnic identities		Cohort		Total
		Leavers	Stayers	
None of these	Count	1,522	5,398	6,920
	Standardized Residual	0.9	-0.5	
Aboriginal	Count	186	784	970
	Standardized Residual	-1.5	0.8	
Torres Strait Islander	Count	13	56	69
	Standardized Residual	-0.5	0.2	
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	Count	16	51	67
	Standardized Residual	0.4	-0.2	
Australian South Sea Islander	Count	67	308	375
	Standardized Residual	-1.5	0.8	
<b>Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>1,804</b>	<b>6,597</b>	<b>8,401</b>



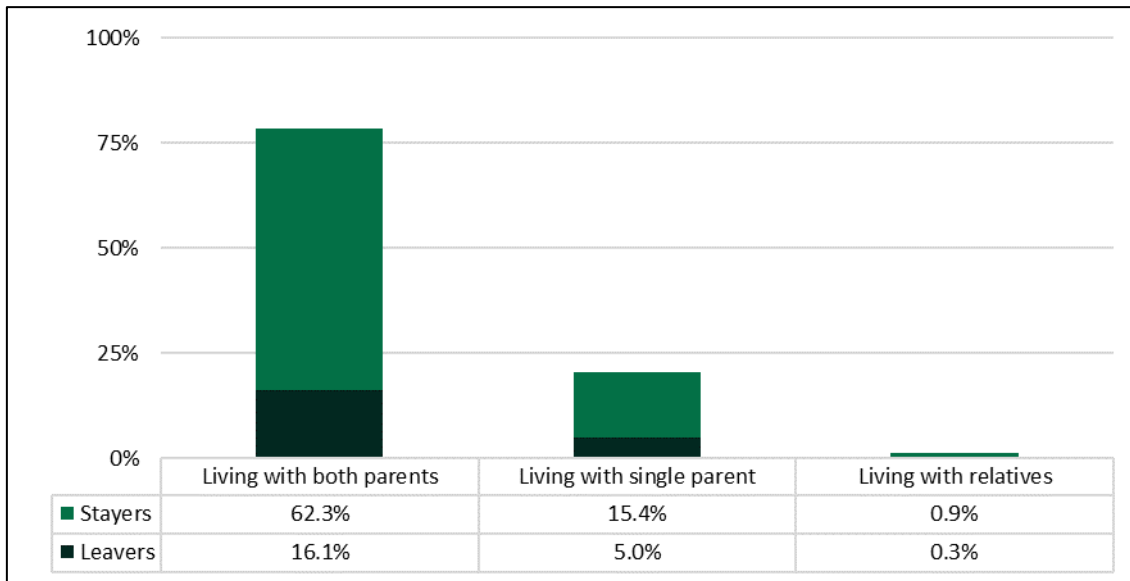
**Figure 6.10** Leavers vs. stayers: Ethnic identity

*Home Situation*

Leavers were significantly more likely than stayers to be living with single parents.

**Table 6.27** Leavers vs. stayers: Home situation

Home situation		Cohort		Total
		Leavers	Stayers	
Living with both parents	Count	1,310	5,063	6,373
	Standardized Residual	-1.5	0.8	
Living with single parent	Count	407	1,249	1,656
	Standardized Residual	2.8	-1.5	
Living with relatives	Count	22	72	94
	Standardized Residual	0.4	-0.2	
<b>Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>1,739</b>	<b>6,384</b>	<b>8,123</b>



**Figure 6.11** Leavers vs. stayers: Home situation

### *Work/Study*

Leavers were significantly less likely than stayers to be at school. Leavers were particularly more likely to be at university, to be unemployed, to be doing casual work, part-time work or full-time work.

**Table 6.28** Leavers vs. stayers: Work/study

Education / Work situation (Jun)		Cohort		Total
		Leavers	Stayers	
At school	Count	1,691	6,552	8,243
	Standardized Residual	-1.9	1	
At university	Count	7	3	10
	Standardized Residual	3.3	-1.7	
At TAFE	Count	5	6	11
	Standardized Residual	1.7	-0.9	
Unemployed	Count	14	3	17
	Standardized Residual	5.4	-2.8	
Casual work	Count	19	11	30
	Standardized Residual	4.9	-2.6	
Part-time work	Count	10	4	14
	Standardized Residual	4	-2.1	
Full-time work	Count	58	18	76
	Standardized Residual	10.3	-5.4	
<b>Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>1,804</b>	<b>6,597</b>	<b>8,401</b>

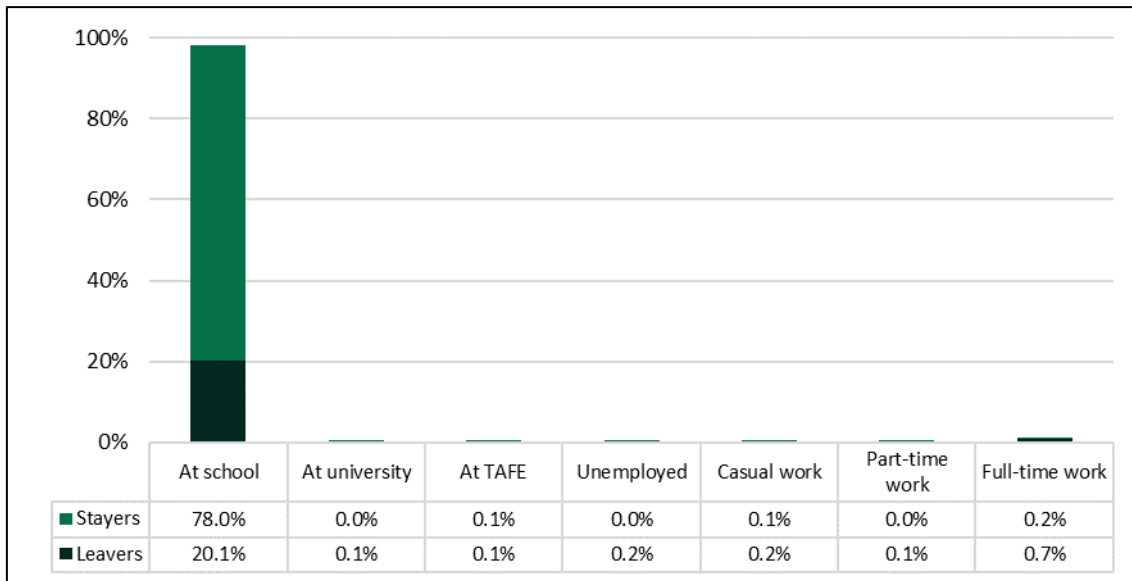


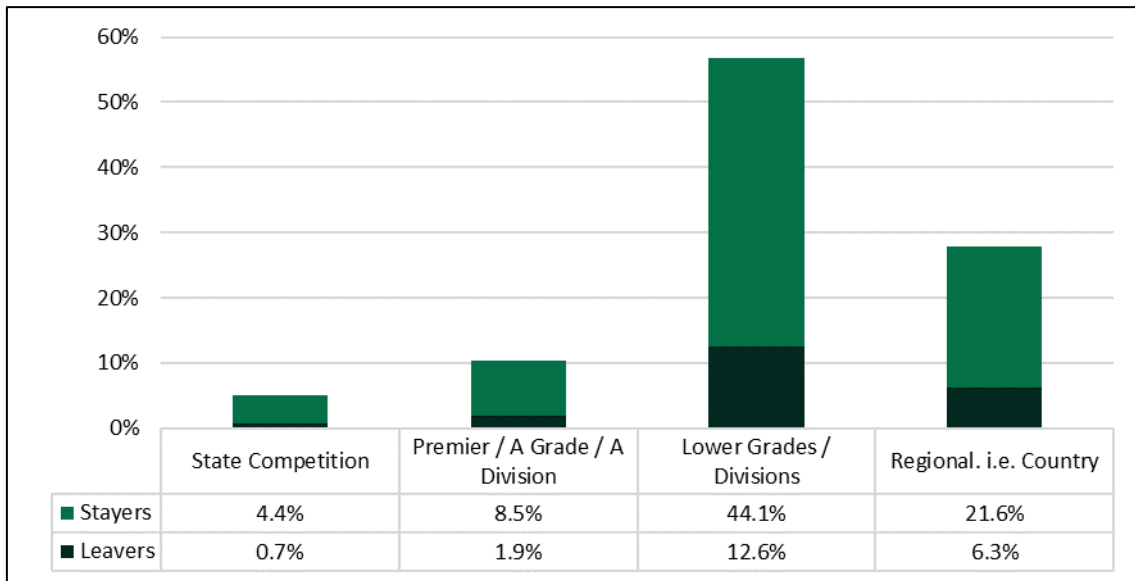
Figure 6.12 Leavers vs. stayers: Work/study

**RL Levels**

Leavers were significantly less likely than stayers to be playing in State competitions or Premier, A Grade or A division RL, with stayers more likely to be associated with these RL levels.

Table 6.29 Leavers vs. stayers: RL levels

Level/grade played the majority of Rugby League in 2016		Cohort		Total
		Leavers	Stayers	
State Competition	Count	52	338	390
	Standardized Residual	-3.4	1.8	
Premier / A Grade / A Division	Count	146	658	804
	Standardized Residual	-2	1	
Lower Grades / Divisions	Count	973	3,417	4,390
	Standardized Residual	1.1	-0.6	
Regional. i.e. Country	Count	484	1,673	2,157
	Standardized Residual	1.1	-0.6	
<b>Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>1,655</b>	<b>6,086</b>	<b>7,741</b>



**Figure 6.13** Leavers vs. stayers: RL levels

## **6.5 Summary of four experiences**

### **6.5.1 Coaching experience**

On average, participants rated the coaching experience most highly in terms of coaches running training sessions that were safely conducted. They rated it least highly in terms of coaches ensuring that player selection was fair and equitable. Players with more years of experience were less likely than others to rate coaches as demonstrating a professional approach at all times; maintaining a fun and enjoyable training environment; ensuring that player selection was fair and equitable; maintaining and encouraging clear and open communication with players; or running training sessions that were safely conducted. On average, participants from higher SES areas rated aspects of the coaching experience more highly than others in terms of the coach demonstrating excellent knowledge about the training, ensuring an appropriate level of competitiveness, demonstrating a professional approach at all times, maintaining a fun and enjoyable training environment, ensuring that player selection was fair and equitable, maintaining and encouraging clear and open communication with players, and running training sessions that were safely conducted. Players from NSWRL were less likely than others to rate coaches as ensuring an appropriate level of competitiveness, and as demonstrating a professional approach at all times. Players from QRL were less likely than others to agree that the coach demonstrated excellent knowledge about the training; ensured an appropriate level of competitiveness; demonstrated a professional approach at all times; maintained a fun and enjoyable training environment; ensured that player selection was fair and equitable; and maintained and encouraged clear and open communication with the players. Male players, players from higher levels of SES, players with one of four specific ethnic identities, and players from the NSWCRRL did not rate the coaching experience significantly different from others.

### **6.5.2 Player experience**

On average, participants rated the player experience most highly in terms of the games being fun and exciting, and games being safely conducted. They rated them least highly in terms of games scheduling/draw being fair. Older players were significantly less likely than others to rate the playing experience highly in terms of the game scheduling / draw being fair, games being safely conducted, games being fun and exciting, results being pleasing, personal rewards / incentives, playing times being convenient, general atmosphere being positive, or social gatherings being well conducted. Players with more years of RL experience were significantly less likely than others to rate the playing experience highly in terms of the game scheduling / draw being fair, games being safely conducted, games being fun and exciting, results being pleasing, personal rewards / incentives, playing times being convenient, general atmosphere being positive, or social gatherings being well conducted. Players from higher SES areas were less likely than others to rate the playing experience highly in terms of the games being fun and exciting, the results being pleasing, the playing times being convenient, or the general atmosphere being positive. Players from QRL were less likely than others to rate social gatherings as well conducted. Male players, players from higher SES areas, and players with one of four specific ethnic identities, and players from NSWRL or NSWCRRL did not rate the playing experience significantly differently from others.



### 6.5.3 Club experience

On average, participants rated the club environment most highly in terms of commitment to training sessions and competitiveness during the game. They rated it least highly in terms of rewards/incentives for players. Older players were significantly less likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of professionalism when dealing with players, value for money for players, or rewards/incentives for players. Players with one of four specific ethnic identities were significantly less likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of value for money for players. Players with more years of RL experience were less likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of value for money for players or for rewards/incentives for players. Players from the NSWRL were more likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of commitment to training sessions, competitiveness during the games, professionalism when dealing with players, value for money, rewards/incentives for players, provision and maintenance of club facilities, communication with players, or general organisation. Players from the QRL were less likely than others to rate the club environment highly in terms of commitment to training sessions, competitiveness during the games, professionalism when dealing with players, value for money, rewards/incentives for players, provision and maintenance of club facilities, communication with players, or general organisation. Male players, players from higher SES areas, and players from NSWCRRL did not rate the club environment significantly different from others.

### 6.5.4 Social experience

On average, participants rated the social experience most highly in terms of looking forward to game days. They rated them least highly in terms of feeling overwhelmed and burnt out. Older players were significantly less likely than others to rate the socialisation experience highly in terms of feeling as if their contribution to the team was valued, feeling a strong sense of team spirit and belonging, feeling it was a safe environment, feeling that they had support of peers, feeling that they had support of the coach, feeling that they had the support of the club officials, looking forward to training, or looking forward to game days. However, older players were significantly more likely than others to be feeling overwhelmed and burnt out. Players with more years of experience were less likely than others to rate the socialisation experience highly in terms of feeling it was a safe environment, feeling that they had the support of the coach, looking forward to training or looking forward to game days. Players with more years of RL experience were more likely than others to feel overwhelmed and burnt-out. Players from higher SES areas were more likely than others to rate the socialisation experience highly in terms of feeling a strong sense of team spirit and belonging, feeling that they had support of the coach, feeling that enough team/club social gatherings were organised outside of game time to increase peer/family bonding. Players from higher SES areas were also less likely than others to feel overwhelmed and burnt-out. Players from one of four specific ethnic identities were less likely than others to feel they had the support of the coach. Also, players from one of four specific ethnic identities were more likely than others to feel overwhelmed and burnt-out. Players from NSWRL were less likely than others to feel their contribution to the team was valued, they had the support of the club officials, or that enough team/club social gatherings were organised outside of game time to increase peer/family bonding. Players from QRL were less likely than others to feel their contribution to the team was valued, that it was a safe environment, that they had the support of club officials or that enough team/club social gatherings were organised

outside of game time to increase peer/family bonding. Players from NSWCRRL did not rate the socialisation experience significantly differently from others.

More generally, training and games were particularly highly rated (positive experiences), whereas player issues such as player selection, rewards/incentives and game scheduling were less highly rated (negative experience). Based on the above, these Junior RL players particularly enjoyed events such as training events and games and were less highly concerned about more personal issues.

## 6.6 Qualitative outcomes

### 6.6.1 Synopsis of conceptual framework—themes and domains

In keeping with Creswell's (2008) *Visual Model of the Coding Process in Qualitative Research*, a process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data was undertaken. Participants' commentaries were sorted based on the combined identified, ranked major player reasons for returning to play in 2017, against the associated four experiences (*coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*). The data will be analysed and present major themes, giving a more direct and explicit understanding associated with each of the four experiences.

As an extra layer of data interpretation, an example of individual participants' commentaries will be presented and matched to each major theme. Analysis of the data allowed for the ranking of participants' comments based on the number of 'hits' recorded for each term, thus allowing for thematic categorisation to unfold. From such an identified process, a pattern is presented, representing participants' thematic categories, by way of identifying associations between participants' comments (lived and witnessed experiences) and recommendations for depicting a Junior RL players' 2017 experience.

The analysis of the qualitative data had two main aims, these being:

- In the first instance, a general overall (Junior RL players) data analysis was done to present general themes from the qualitative data. Participants were asked to share their experiences (lived or witnessed) against the four experiences: *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*.
- Secondly, investigate, in more depth, the two main aims of the research, with these being:
  1. What does the player like most about playing RL?
  2. What was main reason for joining RL?

From the initial data coding, as set out by Creswell (2008) and above identified seven steps, a number of major themes were constructed from the participants' recorded commentaries. These major identified themes were then aligned with the four domains. Following analysis of the data collected from all phases of the study, three major themes emerged that could be considered as representing the participants' experiences concerning their 2017 RL experience. Each theme emerged in different context and within different narratives—recounted in various ways and applied to different experiences. The analysis of the data identified three major themes, with these being:

- Friendships—making new mates and being with friends.
- Playing the game—being physically active.
- Games are fun and exciting—look forward to playing games.

### **6.6.2 Thematic presentation and discussion**

The following section will present and discuss these three major themes (*friendship*, *playing the game* and *games are fun and exciting*) and the inherent physical, social and emotional benefits such experiences impact on the Junior RL 2017 season.

#### ***Friendships—making new mates and being with friends***

The overall theme of ‘friendships’ was identified by many of the participants as an important factor of their 2017 RL experience. Promoting social connectedness and interaction amongst peers is an important element of sporting programs for youth (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). One of the greatest benefits of playing sport and physical activity is to assist with the development of social competence. It is widely understood that sport participation can support youths’ ability to build relationships, learn to resolve conflicts, negotiate and regulate their behaviours. In sport, participants usually have increased feelings of success and optimism as they act as their own agents and make their own choices. Being involved in sport and physical activity programs is a known stress release; it is often linked to child wellbeing. One of the most important ways youth make sense of their social worlds is through interactions with peers and becoming socially connected (playing) with others. Being involved in organised sporting clubs, helps children to develop a sense of belonging in a group as they interact with others and learn how to negotiate rules for positive social interactions. Such heightened opportunities to make friendships goes to promote a positive RL experience for Junior players, whereupon the 2017 season promoted opportunities for participating children to develop friendships and peer interaction that otherwise may not be occurring in other settings. Friendships was conceptualized in this study, with a typical participant comment being indicated as being:

*I just love the game and everything about it. It is fun and I have made friends for life playing this sport. Being in a team and all working to achieve the same thing.*

#### ***Playing the game—being physically active.***

The theme of ‘playing the game’ was consistent throughout the analysis. It was closely aligned with ‘being physically active’. Australia’s physical activity guidelines indicate that early years should undertake at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (PA) every day, with a maximum of two-hour screen-based activity for entertainment/non-educational purposes a day (Keegan, Keegan, Daley, Ordway, & Edwards, 2013). Keegan et al., (2013) go onto argue that physically active children are healthier, happier and more socially connected than those who have more sedentary lifestyles. With exercise habits commencing early in life and development of healthy lifestyle behaviours among children translating into reduced risks in adulthood, quality PA commenced at a young age is vital (Jenkinson & Benson, 2010). The recent global trend of an increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity in young children is well-documented, with Australia being no exception. The government’s growing concern about childhood physical inactivity and obesity has helped to create greater interest and discourse around sport participation and its contribution to children’s health (Dwyer et

al., 2003). Playing the game, was conceptualized in this study, with a typical participant comment being indicated as:

*I loved putting myself out there, even though I am still learning ball skills and getting to play the sport I love. I love feeling fit and active every day at training and this helps me play great football on Saturday. I dream of being as good as my idols like Billy Slater.*

### ***Games are fun and exciting—look forward to playing the game.***

A prominent theme was associated with participants indicating that their experience was that the 'games are fun and exciting'. Research focused on the concept of fun, with respect to basic needs satisfaction, has variously suggested that fun and enjoyment is more proximal to certain basic needs (Cox, Smith, & Williams, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sollerher, Apitzsch, Rastam, & Ejlertsson, 2006). Interestingly, in a recent study, youth cite 'fun' as the primary reason for participation in organized sport and physical activity and its absence as the number one reason for youth sport attrition (Visek et al., 2015). Specifically, in terms of the multiple motives for youth participation in sporting clubs, it is suggested that training and games focus on fun, social interaction, fitness and skill development. It is further understood, that young children engage in an activity in order to experience stimulating sensations (e.g., sensory pleasure, aesthetic experiences, as well as fun and excitement) derived from one's engagement in the activity. Children who participate in sport are more inclined to continue participation in order to live enjoyable experiences. There is an abundant amount of literature that supports the approach to increasing / sustaining children's participation in sport and physical activity through heightening fun and enjoyment throughout offerings (Colley et al., 2011). Similarly, Côté and Vierimaa, (2014) maintain that early sporting experiences that focus on fun and short-term rewards, offers a better chance of motivating children to uptake long-term involvement in sport. Games being fun and exciting, was conceptualized in this study, with a typical participant comment being indicated as being:

*I loved playing rugby league. It is very family and friend oriented and I feel at home when I am playing. Rugby league is fun and makes me happy. I feel excitement at every game and hope to achieve my full potential in the future.*

From the combined qualitative data, an illustration of the main themes can be presented. Figure 6.14 depicts the main three themes and their underpinning concepts. The figure further identifies major points of reference from associated literature that goes to support the three themes and the impact on players' experiences and the 3Ps: *performance, participation and personal development*.

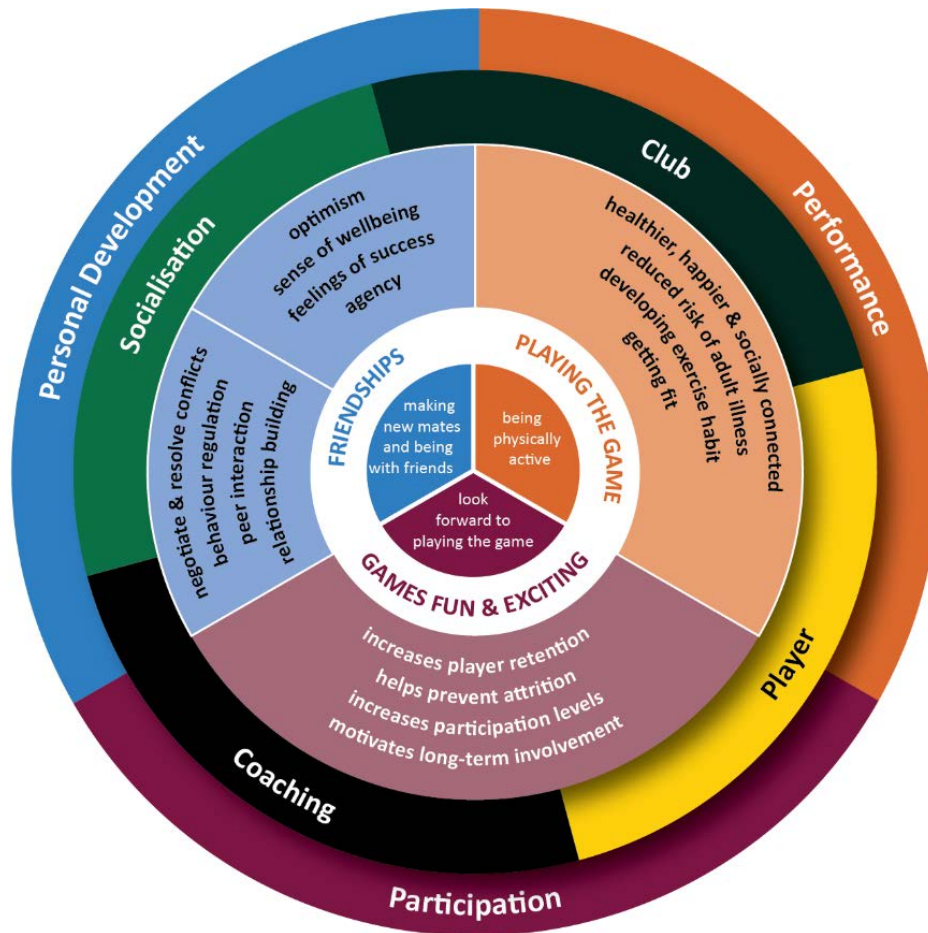


Figure 6.14 Three qualitative themes

Thematic coding will be applied to each of these main reasons, presenting a selection of personal participants' commentaries. Only the most highly (positive) rated / significant ( $M, r, p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.000^{**}$ ) experiences (Table 6.30) are addressed, with supporting, commentaries (examples) matched to each. What is more, the eight recommendations, presented in this report, are based on only the most highly (positive and negative) and significant associations ( $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.000^{**}$ ) to the four experiences, these being:

Table 6.30 Summary of highly vs. lowly top-rated items per focus

Focus	Highly rated	Poorly rated
COACH	Demonstrated excellent knowledge of game	Player selection fair and equitable
PLAYER	Games fun and exciting	Game scheduling/draw was fair
CLUB	Commitment to training sessions	Rewards/incentives for players
SOCIAL	Looked forward to game days	Enough social gatherings

Below are specific *positive* examples of participants' commentaries associated with the four experiences (*coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*).



*Four experiences—Junior***Table 6.31 Junior experience—Positive responses across the four main experiences—coaching, player, club and socialisation**

Theme	Participants' commentaries
<b>COACHING</b> Demonstrated excellent knowledge of the game	... I loved traveling to different clubs and seeing how they keep their fields and run their canteen and coach their teams.
	...having a good coach who made sure that everyone in the team treated each other properly, went to training, and that it was about the whole team playing together not just the better players.
	...playing with my friends and getting to learn new positions and skills that my coach taught us.
	...seeing kids develop and gel together as one team. The friendships made the joy on the kids' faces. Being able to coach the team and bond with them as a whole.
	...getting out there and training with my mates playing and just enjoying myself. The coach I had was very experienced about the game.
	...coaches were very mindful to ensure that young players were trained at an appropriate level and ensure no injuries. Catered to various developmental needs of each child.
	...club maintained great fields and this increased safety. No injuries as a result of professional approach to training.
<b>PLAYER</b> Games fun and exciting	...after playing for five years, winning my first grand final this year was amazing. My team worked so hard all year and our coach, manager and all the parents really supported us so much. This was by far my best year playing footy and I can't wait for next season. The games were heaps of fun with my mates.
	...I just love playing the game, scoring the tries, doing some big hits and putting others through gaps. It's also great to watch my teammates do awesome runs and score brilliant tries and do big hits.
	...I just love the game and everything about it. It is fun and I have made friends for life playing this sport. Being in a team and all working to achieve the same thing.
	...the atmosphere every time you go to the games is different it's like you going to the finals everyone warming up (players). Parents setting up cheers on the sideline to cheer for our kids. It's just an amazing feeling. We get to meet new people and watch incredible talents from kids as young as 6years of age
	....playing the game being competitive and a good sportsman—so much fun to play. I LOVE THE GAME AND CAN'T WAIT FOR NEXT SEASON BRING IT ON.
	...great team sport. Fast-paced, coaches ran training safely.

Theme	Participants' commentaries
<b>CLUB</b> <b>Commitment to training sessions</b>	<p>...that my child could be involved in a club with such great tradition, that encourages all children to get involved come along for promotional videos, meet the seniors etc. To see my child, build new friendships and improve their skills, gala days were overall a great day.</p>
	<p>...had a great season with the team training, had more success on the field and made new friends.</p>
	<p>...my son loved simply playing NRL. He was only 7 for most of the season. The fantastic club, committee, coach and supporting staff meant that he could enjoy training and playing each week with his mates without having to worry about anything else.</p>
	<p>...my son has enjoyed everything about training this year and his team with his mates were good enough to win the competition he has a great bunch of mates that play the game and a great coach he also loves watching the game on TV thank you rugby league for the enjoyment that my son gets out of it.</p>
	<p>...I watched my son grow every week as he went to training. I have noticed a lot [of] changes in my son which is all positive. He has learnt a lot thanks to his coach and the great club he plays for.</p>
	<p>...I was impressed as to the coach's commitment to training and how they ran the sessions. Very professional and made my son want to go back each time.</p>
<b>SOCIALISATION</b> <b>Looked forward to game days</b>	<p>...the Dagwood dogs in the footy canteen are the greatest!</p>
	<p>...if I wasn't playing RL, I would probably just sit at home. It gave me a chance to be fit and socialise with my friends while also learning lots of different skills.</p>
	<p>...what I enjoyed most about my Rugby League experience in 2017 is playing with my friends and also playing against my friends from other teams.</p>
	<p>...I loved that football is very family and friend oriented. I feel at home when I'm playing. Football makes me happy. I feel excitement at every game and hope to achieve my full potential in RL.</p>
	<p>...my son love for football is second to none, he sleeps &amp; breathes footy. Footy is in his blood, which comes from his grandfather, uncles, cousins who have played the game for many years. He comes from the bush where footy is bred into them. Footy is all about responsibility, routine, friendships, mateships &amp; following directions. Footy for him, his main goal is to be a professional footy player in the future especially for the Penrith Panthers, although his idol is Jonathon Thurston.</p>
	<p>...watching both my son &amp; daughter play, grow confidence, have fun and the overall atmosphere at a game. Nothing beats rugby league no matter what the age.</p>
<p>...what I loved most about Rugby League is waking up on that Sunday morning excited to see how many line breaks and hit ups I can make this week and see our team improve over the season. Constantly pushing my body harder and harder each week to become a better</p>	



Another way of presenting the qualitative data is by aligning individual player's comments with the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS)<sup>14</sup>. This approach is legitimized, by the premise, that Junior sport participation is highly impacted and influenced by participants' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Interestingly, the majority of reasons, that influence a Junior players' continued engagement in the game of RL, align with the identified SMS. This scale consists of questions related to measuring a participant's intrinsic motivation (IM), extrinsic motivation (EM), and amotivation (AM). The SMS consist of a number of sub-scales, that measure three types of motivations for sport participation. This scale consists of questions related to measuring a participant's intrinsic motivation (IM), extrinsic motivation (EM), and amotivation (AM). Qualitative data significantly presented reoccurring themes that identified with the three aforementioned motivational scales. A section of the most common participants' quotes is outlined below as being:

### 6.6.3 Intrinsic Motivation

*'Know' when they try to discover new training techniques for the sheer pleasure they experience while learning something new.*

*I love learning new skills and positions. I love trying new things and above all I love doing a break and off-loading for my mates to score.*

*'Accomplish' when they try to master certain difficult training techniques in order to experience personal satisfaction.*

*I liked best when the coach would give us new strategies and game plans to take on the field. When they work and we score, it's the best feeling.*

*'Experience Stimulation' when they engage in an activity in order to experience stimulating sensations (e.g., sensory pleasure, aesthetic experiences, as well as fun and excitement) derived from one's engagement in the activity.*

*Playing as a team with a great group of mates. I didn't know these boys before I started playing RL, and after one season, they've become my close mates. It's so much fun playing RL every Saturday with mates.*

### 6.6.4 Extrinsic Motivation

*'External Regulation' when they participate in sport in order to receive praise from their coach or because they feel urged to do so by their parents are motivated by external regulation.*

*Hearing my coach give me honest, helpful feedback about my game and ways I could improve and what areas I'm really good at.*

*'Introjection' when they participate in sports because they feel pressure to be in good shape for aesthetic reasons and feel embarrassed or ashamed when they are not in best form.*

*If I wasn't playing RL, I would probably just sit at home. It gave me a chance to be fit and socialise with my friends while also learning lots of different skills.*

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<sup>14</sup> Acknowledgement – reference, throughout section 4.3, taken from: Pelletier et al. (1995) Toward a New Measure of Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, and Amotivation in Sports: The Sport Motivation Scale (SMS).

*'Identification' who participate in sport because they feel their involvement contributes to a part of their growth and development as a person.*

*All kids should play a sport no matter what. It is how they make friends meet mates. As for RL it's a great game keeps kids fit and out of trouble. The support system at our club is fantastic ...no kid feels unwanted.*

### 6.6.5 Amotivation

*neither intrinsically motivated nor extrinsically motivated. When players are in such a state, they no longer identify any good reasons for why they continue to train. Eventually, they may even decide to stop practising their sport.*

*This year was a bit tough, I had some boys in my team that for some reason decided to not be my friends (we've all played together for many years) The coach made me the Captain and I think they were jealous, they put crap on me all season.*

## 6.7 Summary of data patterns—quantitative and qualitative findings

### 6.7.1 Quantitative findings: highest identified $M$ , $r$ , $p < 0.05^*$ and $p < 0.00^{**}$ .

*Associations—generally demonstrated positive, similar responses, concerning the four experiences:*

- **Coaching**—knowledge of game,
- **Club**—commitment to training,
- **Player**—games fun and exciting,
- **Socialisation**—looked forward to games.

*Differences—there are a number of variables which have significant impact on a Junior players decision as to whether or not participation continued, these being:*

- Years of RL experience,
- Age-related,
- Socio-economic status (SES),
- State affiliation,
- Ethnicity.

*Leaver vs Stayers—there are a number of interesting variables between those Junior players who have decided to leave compared to those who decided to stay in the game of RL.*

Leavers were significantly more likely to be associated with:

- NSWCRRL,
- Living with single parents,
- Being at university,
- Being unemployed,
- Doing casual work, part-time work or full-time work.

- Not playing in State competitions or Premier, A Grade or A division RL.

Stayers were significantly more likely to be associated with:

- QRL,
- Being at school,
- Playing in State competitions or Premier, A Grade or A division RL,
- Being male,
- Being younger (< 15),
- Generally, more positive on all measures related to all four experiences—*coaching, player, club and socialisation*.

### **6.7.2 Qualitative findings—highest identified reoccurring themes**

This qualitative research provides key insights, outlining how RL can influence motivations and behaviours that Junior players have towards RL. The three major, large themes, that cut across the data sets, were recorded as being:

1. Friendships—making new mates and being with friends.
2. Playing the Game—being physically active.
3. Games are fun and exciting—look forward to playing games.

### **6.7.3 Seven key findings**

Summarised (Figure 6.15), there are seven key findings from the data (quantitative and qualitative), these being:

1. provide sport delivery that focuses on fun and enjoyment rather than competition,
2. provide training and game experiences that are inclusive, promote equal treatment, and focus on fun and participation regardless of skill level and ability,
3. provide training and game draws that are fair and easy to attend - time commitment,
4. identifying and understanding the needs of motivational needs amongst Junior players – intrinsic and extrinsic motivational needs.
5. maintain that all individual differences (experiences and motivations) are catered for, to heighten participation trends.
6. that a number of variables that impact on a Junior player's RL experiences, especially: 1) years of experience, 2) age and 3) state affiliation.
7. build on identified positive aspects across the four experiences.

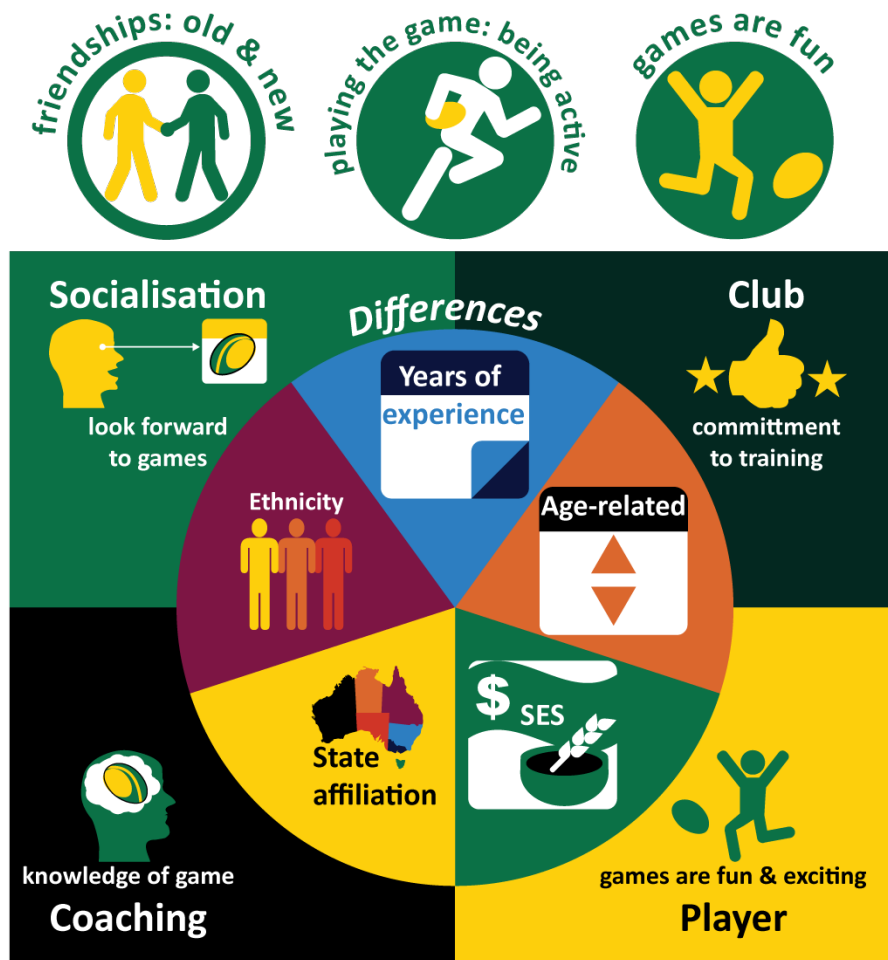


Figure 6.15 Summary of findings

## 7 Discussion

### 7.1 Summary of data findings

The aim of this study was to understand Junior RL players' four experiences associated with their *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*. It was important to get a sense as to why Junior players continue to return to RL, with a general focus in determining questions related to:

1. What does the player like most about playing RL?
2. What were the main reason/s for playing RL?

Determining *why* individual Junior players join and remain in the game of RL are important considerations, as it allows future policies and plans to be strategic and proactive, rather than reactive in nature. In its simplest form, to understand patterns associated with youth sporting participation trends, there are two questions to address, these being:

1. What influences players to join the game, and
2. What influences players to remain in the game.

Once such questions are understood, RL will be in a better, more informed position, to tailor future strategies to support and address individual Junior RL participation rates.

For this report undertaking, the influences (four experiences) that impact on a Junior player's decision to join and remain in the game and what influenced their decisions was under investigation. To assist in the interpretation of data findings, a theoretical basis of claim was made, with this being aimed at interpreting an individual player's motivation to engage in RL from the 3 Ps (performance, participation and personal development), Social / Symbolic Interactionist Theory (SIT) and the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS) motivational (intrinsic / extrinsic) perspective. What is more, this study defined motivational levels as key reasons players give to explain *why* they join / continue / re-engage with RL. This study has found that Junior players' motivational factors that influence their decisions to join and remain in the game of RL in 2017, arises from links (or interactions) between the:

- **individual characteristics of the player** (e.g., age, division, experience, number of years played and negatives associated with four experiences),
- **social identity** they derive from the game (e.g., prestige, status, rewards),
- **social setting** in which they act (e.g., socialisation, making new friends, playing with mates, club organizational characteristics, sense of community and team spirit).

## 7.2 Player profiling and the 3 Ps—performance, participation and personal development

From the data, a Junior player's profile has emerged. From such profiles, recommendations can be proposed. However, it should be identified that such data are describing patterns of associations / differences and that for a more 'wholistic' approach, both data sets (qualitative and quantitative) should be taken into consideration. To minimise the subjectivity of the interpretation of the data, a number of data collection approaches have been implemented across groups, hence minimising biases and heightening the rigour of the research approach, findings and subsequent recommendations. Of particular note, this research and its findings, mirror other similar research concerning youth participation in sporting programs, in so much as supporting the design and implementation of the 3 Ps—performance, participation and personal development. Côté and Vierimaa (2014) maintain the importance of a balanced approach to youth sporting programs by indicating,

*The keys to this balance are focusing on early diversification, deliberate play and fun (proximal variables for the athletes) to develop intrinsic motivation, competitive spirit and lifelong participation. In doing so, youth will build a foundation for elite performance (if they so choose), participation and personal development. (p.10).*

Specific findings from this research, and similarities to past investigations, exist around a number of common elements as to why Junior players remain active participants in a sport. These commonalities are associated with their experiences as being due to 1) achieving intrinsic / extrinsic motivations, 2) socialisation factors and 3) fun and enjoyment (Coakley, 2004). Furthermore, it is understood that when players end their active participation in one sport, they often initiate participation in another—one that is more or less competitive and fulfil the aforementioned experiences (Coakley, 2004). Such findings and statements give further interpretation to the patterns of associations identified in this research report, especially between groups (Junior vs Senior).

Due to the nature of this type of research Junior players return to the game of RL a player does not necessarily remain or leave a game due to just one positive or negative experience. It can be indicated that there are a number of experiences that combined, influence the player's decision to remain an active participant. The findings from this research have identified the top reasons and a number of key experiences specific to Junior experience/s in 2017. It can be concluded that these combinations consistently present themselves as key findings throughout this study and are represented as the most significant relationships. With this said, the data sets reliably bring forth a number of key findings, presenting 'patterns of associations and differences', providing a platform for recommendations.

There are eight identified recommendations that have come from the data. Recommendations are based on the research findings and are designed to address each of the four player experiences, that are across: *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation*. There are also attempts to align findings against the 3Ps. Specifically, and in relation to this research report, determining why players remain in the game, requires a concerted multifaceted approach and will focus on a number of important variables that cut across the four experiences, these being:

1. **Individual characteristics**—age (related expectations), gender, life transitional phases
2. **Performance factors**—coaching and player experiences,
3. **Social identity**—prestige and social status,
4. **Social setting**—socialisation experiences, club setting and characteristics.

This study and its findings have identified, that the breadth and depth to which these variables impact on an individual player is dependent on his / her age, SES and number of years involved in RL. It can be further maintained, that to a large extent, this report and its findings align with the 3Ps—*performance*, *participation* and *personal development*. Rugby League is in the process of designing, implementing and evaluating a youth sporting program that goes to address these elements of the four experiences and also the 3Ps. It is envisaged that the foundational principles of the Player Development Framework will be aligned (and vice versa) with the five program objectives, which go to build:

1. connection,
2. confidence,
3. character,
4. competence,
5. contributions:

With this said, the overall aim of the NRL's Junior Player Development will be to provide an environment that fosters:

- A sense of belonging and the feeling of being valued within the RL community—**CONNECTION**.
- Belief in one's own ability, the confidence to have a go' and the feeling that one can rely on their peers—**CONFIDENCE**.
- Moral and socioemotional development as well as sportpersonship that will contribute to the overall positive RL environment, develop good citizens and influence socialisation—**CHARACTER**.
- Personal mastery within the technical, tactical and physical skills of RL, appropriate to developmental stage—**COMPETENCE**.
- A desire for players to continue their involvement in the RL community beyond playing to help the game advance—**CONTRIBUTION**.



### 7.2.1 Performance

#### *Commitment by the coach and themselves at training and games*

Early specialization programmes where youth (10–18) are identified and selected at a young age to compete and achieve at an elite level of performance are common in several countries around the world and in various sports. The aim of many sporting programs is to put them through rigorous training programmes with the long-term goal of developing elite athletes. The human and physical resources invested in these programmes are important as youth are seen as raw potential that need to be developed. While there is some sport research that supports a positive relationship between deliberate practice training and elite performance, several dimensions of the theory of deliberate practice have not been supported. In other words, diversity (instead of specialization) during childhood has a positive effect on future elite performance as well as long-term participation in sport (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014).

With this said, the NRL has in place plans and strategies to delay specialisation in childhood and recognises the benefits of diversification by supporting:

- Specialisation does not hinder elite participation in late specialisation sports such as RL, where peak performance is reached after maturation. This delayed specialisation also refers to positional play within the game.
- The fostering of positive peer support relationships, leadership skills and contributes to high performance, especially tactical awareness.
- An overemphasis of winning is directly related to early specialisation and deliberate practice as opposed to focusing on deliberate play and player development and can lead to early stratification and perpetuate relative age and maturation effects.
- An optimal model of delivery, competition structures and registration options will be implemented nationally that align with recommended stages of early and late specialisation and will account for the varying stages of maturation.

### 7.2.2 Participation

#### *Playing the game and being involved.*

Youth sport programmes that supposedly focus on involvement of all youth are among the most popular extra-curricular activities for children. It is noted that internationally, 25 million youth (aged 10–18) participated in some form of recreational sport during the previous year. Although youth sport programmes should lead to lifelong participation in sport, the dropout rate during adolescence is alarming with an estimated one-third of all participants between 10 and 18 years of age withdrawing from sport programmes every year (Kelley & Carchia, 2013). While youth sport clearly provides opportunities for long-term participation, there appears to be a void between the potential of youth sport and some of the negative realities of youth sport programmes, as evidenced by the dropout rate. Today's recreational sport programmes supervised by adults are requiring higher levels of investment from earlier ages and focus on certain aspects of sport participation (e.g., development of skills) that often do not coincide with children's motives to participate in sport in the first place (e.g., have fun and be with friends). In other words,

sporting programmes that do not instantly offer rewarding and enjoyable environments, often discourage children from participating in a sport.

With this said, the NRL has in place plans and strategies that are aimed at increasing participation by Junior players. One of the key issues for RL will be to provide innovative 'ways of working' that assure that Junior players have positive rather than negative experiences throughout their RL experience, whereby improving performance measures, sustaining long-term participation and heightening personal development is seen to increase retention rates across Junior RL clubs.

### **7.2.3 Personal Development**

#### *Developing social networks (friendships) and resilience.*

Certain sport programmes are explicitly designed to teach life skills and personal development. In such programmes, athletes learn about personal development assets, such as goal setting or perseverance, and are explicitly taught to transfer such assets to other life settings (e.g., goal setting in educational environments). However, if sport is only perceived as a support for personal development in other domains, there is a risk to undermining the value of sport-specific knowledge and skills also beneficial to long-term sport participation (Turnnidge, Hancock, & Côté, 2014). The majority of sporting programs have a sole focus of reflecting and supporting adult priorities for maintaining sporting participation and do not necessarily align with children's motivation to participate in sport. With this in mind, RL have developed an approach that caters to children's intrinsic and extrinsic motivations when it comes to sport participation.

### **7.3 Mental health and players—points to consider**

Mental health has historically languished unaddressed in the Australian sporting landscape. The National Rugby League (NRL) has had several high-profile players reveal their struggles with mental health in recent years. Specifically, the game of RL attracts individuals who fit into every high-risk category for mental health; young men, risk-takers, relocated people, indigenous and Pacific Islands people. With such a group in mind, there are a number of unique triggers that can potentially exacerbate mental health issues, these being: unrealistic expectations on young athletes, the relocation process from home to a new club, giving players an identity outside being a footballer, dealing with behavioural issues, being injured and retirement.

Mental health (wealth) has a stigma that is tied into weakness and is absolutely the antithesis of what athletes want to portray. The ways by which athletes appraise and cope with these stressors can be a powerful determinant of the impact the stressors have on both their mental health and their sporting success (Lazarus, 2000). Interestingly, some, though not all, research suggests that this population (athletes) has an increased risk of mental health problems, including eating disorders and suicide (Baum, 2005). In a recent national survey, of elite athletes in Australia, found that almost half acknowledged symptoms of at least one of the mental health problems that were assessed, with prevalence rates similar to those reported in the community (Gulliver, Griffiths, Mackinnon, Batterham, & Stanimirovic, 2015). It is understood, that due to the intense mental and physical demands placed on athletes, as a unique aspect of a sporting career, and that these may increase their susceptibility to certain mental health problems and risk-taking behaviours (Hughes & Leavey, 2012). Furthermore, the peak competitive years for

athletes tend to overlap with the peak age for the risk of onset of mental disorders. (Gulliver, 2012).

While it is well established that physical activity has a positive effect on mental health, a review has found that intense physical activity performed at the elite athlete level might instead compromise mental wellbeing, increasing symptoms of anxiety and depression through overtraining, injury and burnout. (Peluso & Andrade, 2005). Developing a comprehensive understanding of the mental health and psychological wellbeing specific to athletes has the potential to advance models of care and management of this population, which may, in turn, facilitate performance gains. (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Such an understanding is required to provide guidance for sport practitioners—including coaches, medical staff and sport psychologists—in developing the coping abilities of elite athletes and, in turn, improving their emotional wellbeing. (Nicholls & Polman, 2007).

With this said, the NRL has in place plans and strategies that:

- Place an emphasis on personal development and well-being within the RL community,
- Create an environment that fosters camaraderie, respect, self-esteem, patience, dedication, teamwork, selflessness and resilience.
- Cultivate an environment of belonging that values inclusion, confidence and a sense of community.
- Provide valuable experiences and life lessons that will assist participants in their personal lives and deliver positive contributions to the broader community.

#### *NRL Player Wellbeing Framework—supporting mental wealth and mental literacy*

The NRL recognises that mental illness doesn't discriminate. In Australia, 1 in 2 people are affected by mental illness, and at the crisis end, suicide is the largest killer of individuals aged 15–44. It is also recognised that mental health is a leading cause of suicide amongst young males. Mental health is Australia's single largest health issue and, with the NRL being one of Australia's largest sporting communities, it is well positioned, to invest and undertake a leadership role that is aimed at improving the outcomes for those affected, especially at the grassroots (Junior RL players, clubs, coaches and community)

The NRL aims to be a constant driver associated with strategies, plans and policies that go to:

1. Heighten reach to all national clubs and players to reduce stigma around mental illness.
2. Stimulate help-seeking behaviours by educating and informing our community with appropriate resources and literature.
3. Connect RL communities with expert partners.
4. Develop elite players to be leaders in mental health literacy advocacy within their clubs and communities.

## 7.4 Player Wellbeing

At the core of promoting player wellbeing is the development of a player in all aspects of his / her life. A player that is more balanced and centred will have greater resilience in coping with stresses as they arise. This wellbeing model includes:

- **Physical wellness.** Having sufficient energy, vitality, mobility and functional capacity to undertake all daily activities.
- **Psychological wellness.** Possessing the cognitive and emotional resources to express feelings and ability to adjust to life's challenges with general feelings of positive self-worth.
- **Socially and community engaged.** Possessing an interest and building relationship inside and outside of football.
- **Culturally connected with their origins.** Feeling a sense of cultural pride, and belonging to one's culture of origin beliefs, common customs and values.
- **Vocationally engaged.** Having a plan for personal career goals away from the playing field that will provide with purpose, income and fulfilment.
- **Financially grounded.** Possessing the economic understanding of satisfying their current and future financial needs.
- **Spiritually nurtured.** Having guiding beliefs, principals, values and behaviours that give meaning and purpose to one's life.

## 8 Recommendations

The following eight recommendations are based on only the highly (positive (x 4) and negative (x 4)) most significant associations ( $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.000^{**}$ ) associated with the four experiences, these being:

**Table 8.1** Summary of highly vs. lowly top-rated items per focus

Focus	Highly rated	Poorly rated
COACH	Demonstrated excellent knowledge of game	Player selection fair and equitable
CLUB	Commitment to training sessions	Rewards/incentives for players
PLAYER	Games fun and exciting	Game scheduling/draw was fair
SOCIAL	Looked forward to game days	Enough social gatherings

79,



**Figure 8.1** Recommendations

## 8.1 Coaching experience

### 8.1.1 Recommendation 1. Training sessions safely conducted (positive)

The identified, highly rated item, associated with '*demonstrated excellent knowledge of game*', is closely aligned with the second most highly rated item, being '*training sessions safely conducted*'. With this in mind, recommendation 1 is centred on acknowledging the intrinsic nature of good knowledge and heightened safety – aspects that are critical in any contact sport. Participants noted highly significantly ( $p < 0.000$ ) their positive agreement levels associated with 'training sessions safely conducted'. This is not surprising, given that safety is one key motivational factor, participants identify for remaining in organised sporting programs. This is especially the case when parents view operations throughout clubs and their approach to training and game days. Whilst this has been deemed as a positive experience associated with 'coaching' there is need to consider the below strategies:

- Maintain current coaching practices concerning 'safety' across all clubs.
- Share best practice across the RL landscape demonstrating how 'safety' in training sessions is being designed, implemented and sustained.
- Ensure that coaches are adequately equipped with resources (equipment) to maintain a high level of 'safety'.
- Provide incentives and support for coaches to seek theoretical and practical training which goes to upskill them pertaining to innovative training and safety principles.
- Ensure policies that addresses 'player safety' are in place. Clearly and commonly understood directives associated with safety in games and training is a recommendation in moving forward for Junior RL. Policies concerning:
  1. Required number of hours of training prior to games (player fitness).
  2. Conditions and preparation of the training and playing surface of ovals.
  3. Concussion and injury return.
  4. Player positioning within game—weight, skill level and maturation phase.
  5. Availability of protective gear for players—headgear etc.

### 8.1.2 Recommendation 2. Player selection fair and equitable (negative)

Participants noted highly significantly ( $p < 0.000$ ) their negative agreement levels associated with 'player selection being fair and equitable'.

- Player selection needs uniformity across the clubs. Policy design and implementation at the club level needs further investigation concerning the fair and equitable player selection—based on long-term player development rather than short-term game competition and results.
- More research to investigate strategies to heighten player selection based on fairness and equity.

## 8.2 Club experience

### 8.2.1 Recommendation 3. Commitment to training sessions (positive)

There is strong positive ( $p < 0.000$ ) agreement across the Junior players concerning the club's commitment to training sessions. It would seem that the Junior RL clubs have invested a considerable amount of resources to ensure that the players experience with training is enjoyable. The literature on athletes' development in sport clearly indicates that sport programmes for youth (< 15 years of age) should be aligned with the specific needs of this age group. Based on a modified version of the approach of Côté and Vierimaa (2014) to Junior development, this report advocates a number of recommendations that should be considered for the future high-level delivery of training sessions:

- Regulate length of season to 3 or 4 months, with a maximum of 6 months.
- Limit lengthy travel to organized training and competitions.
- Provide healthy competitive opportunities in training sessions, but do not overemphasize winning.
- Discourage early specialization in one sport—subject to maturation process and injury considerations.
- Allow children to play all positions in a given sport—subject to maturation process and injury considerations.
- Promote deliberate play within training sessions which mirror the larger context of the game.
- Ensure that Junior training are conducted with appropriate age-related competitiveness.
- A view to design / implement modified games and rules to reduce an over-emphasis on winning, especially for Junior players. Offering a variety of intensity levels that are scaffolded in nature and complexity.
- Design play and practice activities that focus on fun and short-term rewards.
- Understand children's needs and do not 'over-coach'.

### 8.2.2 Recommendation 4. Rewards/incentives for players (negative)

In respects to the players' club experience, there was a common significant ( $p < 0.000$ ) lower level of agreement, associated with the club's 'rewards and incentives for players'. In the context of Junior players, this is an important motivational factor and has been identified as an important element across both stayers and leavers to the game of Junior RL across the 2016–2017 season. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that clubs, coaches and stakeholders invest resources to determine how best design and implement polices associated with this important aspect of the Junior RL game.

- Build on existing 'best practice' associated with clubs' rewards and incentive programs—for training and game participation.
- Create communication platforms that share RL coach's 'best practice'—what works and what does not. Tailored for Junior players.



- Create a shared common mechanism to ensure that clubs practice fairness and equity concerning player rewards and incentives. What does it look like and how to implement across Junior RL clubs?

The lack of personal player rewards and incentives was a frequent experience expressed across the two groups (stayers and leavers). It would be highly advantageous for the NRL to invest in more frequent incentives and rewards for various aspects of the game, that is, training, competition, end of year progress and so on. This key experience was significant in its level of agreement across the two groups. Such a pattern of response from participants, concerning this item, goes to re-enforce the theoretical basis of claim concerning the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS). To increase player retention rates and player transition, it is recommended that, at the individual club level, there is a concentrated effort / attempt to implement a system of rewards and incentives for player performance (both in training and game). Such an approach and design framework need to consider both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational aspects (see The Sport Motivational Scale). More research is required to determine what types and frequency of rewards and incentives would be welcomed. A move to implement a tailored and structured reward program for players, officials and administration in recognition of players' abilities, commitment and administrative roles throughout the various club levels.

### **8.3 Player experience**

#### **8.3.1 Recommendation 5. Games fun and exciting (positive)**

There is a highly positive and significant ( $p < 0.000$ ) association between why a Junior player remains in the game and the 'fun factor'. Junior players who remained in the 2017 RL season indicated that the games were fun and exciting. However, interestingly, it was further noted that Junior players with more years of player experience (more than 4 years), were less likely (negatively significant) than others to agree that the game was a fun and enjoyable experience ( $p < 0.01$ ). Recognise that there is a difference between Junior players when it comes to years of experience in RL—expressed needs concerning certain aspects of the game—one approach does not fit all.

- Ensure that Junior training and competition is structured and delivered at levels that cater to all players' skill abilities, interests and physical maturation and importantly a player's years of experience in the game. This latter aspect is frequently overlooked when it comes to training and competition.
- Ensure that there is an added emphasis in Junior training environments that are based on fun, engagement and inclusivity. Data indicated a significant relationship between the 'fun factor' and Junior experiences. There is an abundant amount of literature that supports the approach to increasing / sustaining Junior participation in sport through heightening fun and enjoyment at training and games.
- Develop a shared, common platform which identifies training and game initiatives that heighten fun, engagement and inclusivity in Junior club experiences.
- Recognise that the longer a player stays in the game, the more likely he / she will be less likely to agree that the training is fun and enjoyable (more critical). A need to ensure that training techniques and environments are new and innovative, rather than repetitive in delivery across the continuous year levels.

- Added theoretical and practical upskilling for coaches, so as to allow them to be equipped with the most relevant training strategies for ensuring inclusivity across years of experience.
- More research to investigate and identify what constitutes favourable Junior training and playing environments so as to ensure sustainable enjoyable player experiences.

### **8.3.2 Recommendation 6. Game scheduling/draw was fair (negative)**

In respects to the players' experience, there was a common significant ( $p < 0.000$ ) lower level of agreement, associated with the players' experience and expressed concern about the 'game scheduling / draw being fair'. In the context of Junior players, this is an important motivational factor and has been identified as an important element across both stayers and leavers to the game of Junior RL across the 2016–2017 season. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that clubs, coaches and stakeholders invest resources to determine how best to design and implement policies associated with this important aspect of the Junior RL game.

- Seek stakeholders' recommendations as to how best create a draw and schedule which is fair for all players. This aspect of the player experience draws support from Côté's (2014) general approach to improving Junior sport participation, by indicating that by limiting lengthy travel to organized training and competitions, a Junior player will become more likely to remain an active participant in the sporting program. It can be hypothesized that Junior players, and parents, are significantly motivated, to remain in RL, representative of the distance required to travel to game/s.

## **8.4 Socialisation experience**

### **8.4.1 Recommendation 7. Looked forward to game days (positive)**

There is a highly positive and significant ( $p < 0.000$ ) association the socialisation experience of looking forward to game days. However, they rated least highly in agreement concerning feeling overwhelmed and burnt out and that they felt enough 'team / social gatherings organised outside game'. Data suggests that players feel that the team spirit is lacking on many occasions and that there were not enough social gatherings outside of games. Given that players join sporting clubs for a myriad of reasons (social/career player), it would be advantageous for clubs to invest more in creating a more club/team spirit around social gatherings. Players join sporting clubs based on: *Social identity—prestige and social status*, and *social setting—socialisation, setting and characteristics*.

- More research needed at the club and team level to determine and tailor social events that would heighten social networks.
- At the club level, there is a need to establish various approaches to heightening team spirit and socialisation throughout the differing Junior and Senior groups— one approach does not fit all.

- Platforms and initiatives that create transparency and avenues to contribute to overall club planning and other game-related activities (player selection policies, grievances, training and game days etc.).
- Invest in designing strategies which assist Junior players' team and clubs to implement tailored programs to address youth engagement.
- Marketing of Junior RL involvement needs to be designed to emphasise a sense of 'belonging', teamwork and participation, rather than competition for elite players.
- Utilise experienced players in recruitment activities and organising social bonding and events outside of game time.

#### **8.4.2 Recommendation 8. Enough social gatherings (negative)**

There is a highly significant ( $p < 0.000$ ) negative response identified by Junior RL players concerning their socialisation experience. Junior players indicated a significant negative association with the item '*enough team/club social gatherings outside of game time*' ( $p < 0.000$ ). Given that the majority of Junior RL players join and remain in the game for the socialisation aspect of the experience, it would be logical for individual clubs to invest in a more co-ordinated attempt to bring a more social connectedness to the Junior playing experience. This approach would ensure that all players' motivational needs would be addressed.

- At the club level, there is a need to establish various approaches to heightening team spirit and social connectedness—one approach does not fit all.
- Platforms and initiatives that create transparency and avenues to contribute to overall club planning and other game related activities (events that are designed to cater to Junior club members etc.).
- Invest in designing strategies which assist Junior players' team and clubs to implement tailored programs to address youth engagement and social connectedness.
- Marketing of Junior RL involvement needs to be designed to emphasise a sense of 'belonging', team work and participation, rather than competition for elite players.

It is of importance to view the quantitative and qualitative data and how each goes to support one another. Combined, these data sets and findings are important considerations to ensuring sustained participation rates and positive experiences by Junior RL players. Of interest, is the high correlation between Junior players' experiences and motivational factors of:

1. What did the player like most about playing RL?
  - Wanting to be an NRL player (37%).
  - Like playing the game (31%).

2. What was main reason for playing RL?

- Family members influenced their decision to play (33%).
- They wanted to become an NRL player (21%).

The three major, large themes, that cut across the qualitative data sets, and go to support the quantitative data, were recorded as being:

- Friendships—making new mates and being with friends.
- Playing the Game—being physically active.
- Games are fun and exciting—look forward to playing.

## 9 Conclusion

### 9.1 Investigating Junior RL player experiences

Nearly 3.2 million children (69%) participated in some form of organised sport or physical activity outside of school hours throughout 2017. Two and a half (2.5) million Australian children (54%) aged 0 to 14 are active at least once a week through organised sport/physical activity outside of school hours. Only 19% or 0.9 million children are active at least three times per week. These findings highlight the critical role of organised club sport and physical activity programs in schools to maintain satisfactory activity levels of Australian children. Physical health or fitness is the strongest motivation for non-sport-related physical activity. And whilst this is also the lead motivation for children playing sport, Juniors are significantly more likely to also play sport for the fun/enjoyment and social aspects. Such responses mirror similar findings throughout this research report, which highlights the need to implement training and games that are designed to heighten fun and social connectedness for Junior RL players.

With this said, it is recognised that at the highest level, there is a need for RL to understand *why* and in *what* capacity Junior RL players' experiences contribute to their individual decision to remain an active member of the game. In addition, at a more discrete level, there is a need to broaden RL's understanding of the interrelated issues that shape its landscape, by differentiating between populations studied (e.g., Juniors, male vs. female, SES, state affiliation, years of RL experience and living arrangements), the fluctuating life demands of Junior RL players (e.g., Junior to emerging adult life transitional phases) Figure 9.1, and the level of impact and realities that such personal experiences as: *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation* have on these independent and personal differences.

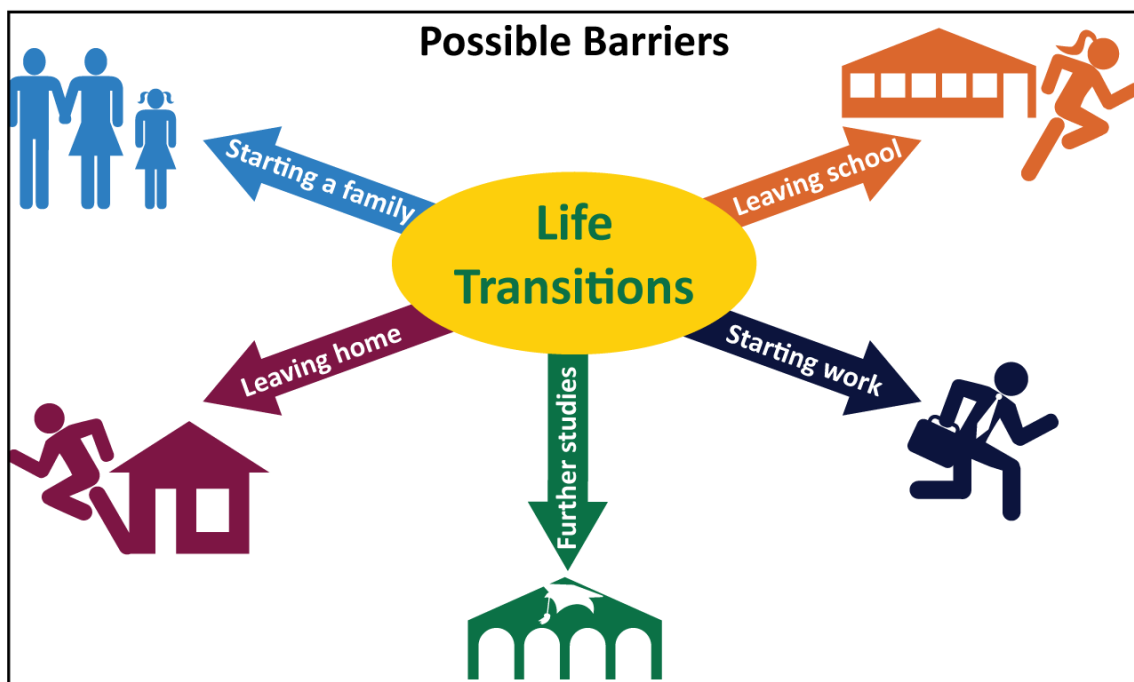


Figure 9.1 Life transitional barriers

Whilst understanding *why* Junior players remain as active participants in the game of RL is important, there is an additional need to explore what may entice them to develop a long-term commitment to the game into long-term Senior RL players. To assist in such a research approach and aim, this study employed a mixed methods approach to examine Junior RL players' motivations for playing in 2017 and what initially influenced their decisions to take up the game of RL. It aimed to investigate the factors contributing to initial and sustained engagement with the RL, as well as the reasons why players engage with the game. A nationwide, online survey was developed, consisting of specific questions aimed at understanding Junior RL players' 'lived experiences' that were seen to be associated with their decision to return to the game in 2017 and experiences throughout the 2017 season. A number of important findings (quantitative and qualitative) and subsequent recommendations have emerged from the data, which are directly related to a player's age, stage of development and life transitional phases. There are a number of patterns of associations and differences that present important insights into the 'lived experiences' of the Junior RL player.

Given that Australian sport has become a highly competitive industry, driven by participation numbers, the NRL need to ensure that they have 'cutting edge', innovative strategies for retaining RL players. A possible underlining reason for fluctuating participation trends could be in relation to the increasing popularity of other sporting codes which are potentially proving a significant barrier in the retention of Junior players in RL—this could especially be the case for many Junior (grassroots) players who have indicated that reduced opportunities for heightened fun and social connectedness cause players to look to other sporting codes. Importantly, Junior players frequently and significantly ( $p < 0.000$ ) indicated strong associations with their reasons *why* they continue to remain and return to the game of RL, as being related to:

- **fun and enjoyment,**
- **rewards and incentives,**
- **able to play with mates,**
- **make new friends,**
- **performance aspects (tackling, scoring tries, running the ball).**

Combining data for 2014 of Australians aged 14+ and aged 6–13 shows a breakdown of the most popular sporting pursuits, to which RL is placed 13th for 6–13-year olds, 19th for 14-year olds, with an overall positioning of 15 out of 20 (see Table 9.1).

**Table 9.1 Top 20 Sports and Activities by regular participation rate**

	Age 6–13	(000s)	%	Age 14+	(000s)	%	Total Age 6+	(000s)	%
1	Swimming	1198	48.8	Swimming	1949	10.1	Swimming	1949	10.1
2	Soccer	1194	48.7	Cycling	1419	7.3	Cycling	1419	7.3
3	Cycling	924	37.7	Hiking/Bushwalking	847	4.4	Soccer	847	4.4
4	Athletics/Track & Field	778	31.7	Aerobics	623	3.2	Dancing	623	3.2
5	Basketball	748	30.5	Soccer	596	3.1	Basketball	596	3.1
6	Dancing	743	30.3	Dancing	560	2.9	Hiking/Bushwalking	560	2.9
7	Cricket	631	5.7	Tennis	471	2.4	Tennis	471	2.4
8	Netball	503	20.5	Netball	343	1.8	Cricket	343	1.8
9	Tennis	490	20	Basketball	340	1.8	Athletics/Track & Field	340	1.8
10	Gymnastics	444	18.1	Cricket	328	1.7	Netball	328	1.7
11	Australian Rules	438	17.9	Martial Arts	242	1.3	Aerobics	242	1.3
12	Hiking/Bushwalking	232	9.5	Body Surfing	231	1.2	Australian Rules	231	1.2
13	<b>Rugby League</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>9.3</b>	Surfing	211	1.1	Gymnastics	211	1.1
14	Softball	218	8.9	Australian Rules	184	1	Martial Arts	184	1
15	Martial Arts	215	8.8	Volleyball	133	0.7	<b>Rugby League</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>0.7</b>
16	Volleyball	189	7.7	Gymnastics	125	0.6	Body Surfing	125	0.6
17	Baseball	165	6.7	Horse riding	122	0.6	Surfing	122	0.6
18	Field Hockey	144	5.9	Rugby Union	113	0.6	Volleyball	113	0.6
19	Roller blading/skating	127	5.2	<b>Rugby League</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>0.6</b>	Softball	110	0.6
20	Horse riding	119	4.9	Field Hockey	103	0.5	Field Hockey	103	0.5

Source: Roy Morgan Research, 2014. [www.roymorgan.com/findings/6123-australian-sports-participation-rates-among-children-and-adults-december-2014-201503182151](http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/6123-australian-sports-participation-rates-among-children-and-adults-december-2014-201503182151)

Other data, albeit older (2012), can be presented and seen to reflect historical and similar sporting participation trends amongst Australian children (see Table 9.2) - it can be noted the positioning of RL against some of the more traditional Australian sports. The latest AusPlay data for the period July 2016 to June 2017 shows that 58% of adults and 69% of children participated in sport-related activities. Football (soccer) remains the most popular club-based sport in Australia for adults and children combined; although netball is more popular for girls (0-14). Regular community-based sport participation in Australia generates an estimated AUD\$18.7B value p.a. in social capital (Clearinghouse for Sport, 2018).



**Table 9.2 Children (0 – 14 years of age) organised out of school hours activities**

Top 20 activities	Population estimate	percent of population
Swimming	1,378,967	30.0
Football	674,094	14.7
Australian football	366,462	8.0
Gymnastics	341,200	7.4
Netball	332,018	7.2
Dancing (recreational)	329,003	7.2
Basketball	300,622	6.5
Tennis	280,239	6.1
Cricket	256,930	5.6
Athletics, track & field	203,873	4.4
<b>Rugby league</b>	<b>126,754</b>	<b>2.8</b>
Karate	121,877	2.6
Dance Sport	106,901	2.3
Hockey	76,922	1.7
Touch football	76,039	1.7
Lifesaving surf	65,986	1.4
Fitness/gym	59,282	1.3
Rugby union	57,429	1.2
Taekwondo	49,261	1.1
Martial arts	47,279	1.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2012). *Sports and Physical Recreation: A Statistical Overview, Australia, 2012. cat. no. 4156.0*. [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4156.0](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4156.0)

This research and its findings acknowledge that sports and the discourses that constitute them, have become one of the more influential narratives in Australia's early twenty-first century culture. Specifically, this report is concerned with giving meaning to and understanding the multifaceted processes and influences that contribute to the phenomenon under investigation, that is:

- What does the player like most about playing RL?
- What was the main reason/s for playing RL?

Such questions give rise to addressing the main aim of this research report, that being:

- Why do Junior RL players return to play the game?

## 9.2 Concluding comments

In order to improve Junior RL players' experiences, there is a need for RL clubs to consider the findings and recommendations that have come out of this report. Whilst the recommendations come from a 'strength based' position, it is imperative that the NRL

endeavour to maintain positive player experiences, whilst at the same time, minimise aspects of the game which have been indicated as a negative influence. Participants, in this research, have indicated overwhelmingly that the main reason they return to the game of RL is due to the wider social aspects the sporting organisation and nature of the game. Other important, positive and negative, factors / elements, that impact on a Junior player's experiences are related to:

- Join and remain in the game of RL because they want to be an NRL player,
- Friendships, making new mates, being physically active and being with friends are further (main) reasons for why Junior players join and remain in the game of RL.
- Felt that there are not enough team / club social gatherings organized outside of game time to increase peer / family bonding,
- Expressed a need for the player selection process to be fairer,
- NSWCRRL Junior players are more likely to leave the game,
- Junior players with single parents are more likely to leave the game,
- Most Junior RL players who remain in the game are at school,

To a large extent, this report and its findings are supported by the identified theoretical basis of claims, ascertaining that a player's decision to remain an active participant in RL (2017) was largely influenced and based on such above intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. It is a further recommendation from this report, that investigation into how to best develop appropriate social activities for Juniors would be a positive step forward. Equally, attention should be given to why NSWCRRL Junior players are more likely to not return to the game of RL. Based on these findings, it would be reasonable to suggest that RL needs to invest in a more concentrated effort around aspects of the game, that are more focused on social engagement and cater to individual motivations (especially in Junior groups), rather than solely aimed at ensuring high levels of competition and game results. The latter approach will not encourage or sustain player retention at the grassroots, nor, given the increasingly competitive market, ensure future player recruitment and growth into the 21st century.

It is anticipated that the results of this research will help to inform the future development of RL's short and long-term strategic approach to improve players' recruitment, transition and retention rates. Of importance are findings from this research report which will provide a map of RL's retention rates as it currently stands and allow for the identification of the most appropriate ways to proceed in attempting to encourage the development of a nationwide action plan to address player retention rates. What is more, findings from this study can be applied to identify and tailor practical measures that could be implemented to specifically address players' experiences associated with: *coaching, player, club* and *socialisation* factors. In so doing, it would be possible to substantially reduce the rate of rejection of potential strategies, programs and policy implementation, and save resources from being wasted in areas where the data makes it clear that a certain group would be unlikely to benefit. It would also identify which actions would be deemed more appropriate to undertake and would facilitate a greater awareness and confidence in

individual stakeholders and ultimately allow for a more effective and efficient engagement with Australia's Junior RL players. This will ultimately go towards facilitating better communication and practices and will offer the greatest possible scope in pursuing excellence in delivering and achieving RL's Vision, Mission and initiatives across Australia.

From the participants' responses, it can be summarised, that whilst the majority of the players who did return to play in RL 2017 season were happy with the greater part of the game's delivery and subsequently their personal experiences, there were a significant number of players who, whilst still remaining in the game, identified a number of negative experiences. These negative experiences, by returning players, went to mirror the same identified experiences from players that failed to return to RL in 2017. It would seem that irrespective of a Junior player's personal experience, with the game of RL, there are a number of systemic, common negative experiences that players encounter. These negative experiences seem to align with such aspects of 1) fairness, 2) socialisation and connectedness, 3) general organisation and 4) fun and enjoyment. These motivational factors are characteristic of either discouraging or encouraging youth into levels of sporting involvement. In the immediate future, and as a possible springboard for implementing change, it is an endorsement from this report that consideration be given to additionally exploring the feasibility of designing and implementing a further action plan/s concerning the eight recommendations.

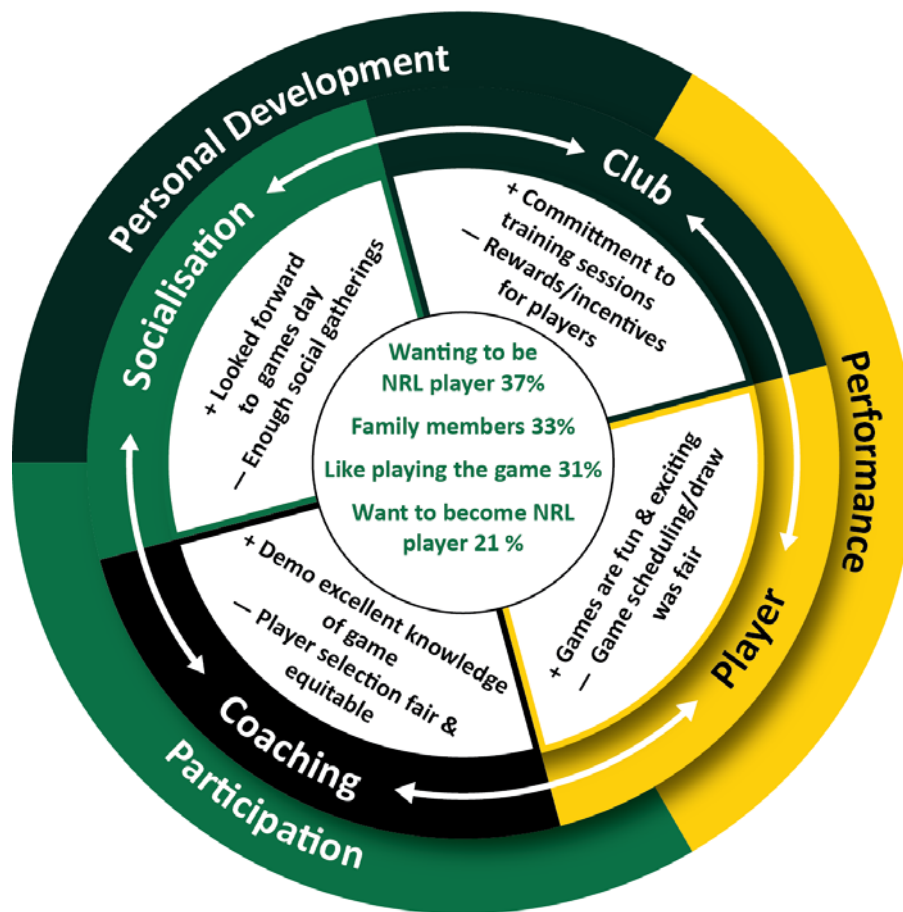


Figure 9.2 Conceptual Model representing 3Ps and four experiences (Fig 1.1)

Representing a significant ( $p < 0.000$ ) association with high level of agreement and high (+) / low (-) Mean. + indicates positively associates with agreement level (positive or negative) ^ Main themes

### 9.3 The Future of Australian sport—NRL take note

The Future of Australian Sport report will play an important role in shaping long-term policy, investment and strategic planning within government, the sport sector and broader community. The report highlights six sports megatrends that may redefine the sport sector over the next 30 years and ultimately impact on RL.

Six megatrends<sup>15</sup> have been identified within The Future of Australian Sport report (Hajkowicz et al., 2013), which will impact on the makeup of sport in Australia over the next 30 years. These megatrends will have an indirect impact on the future of the NRL, by way of participation rates and future market share competition. These megatrends will impact on aspects of what sports, physical activities and leisure pursuits individuals will uptake over the next 30 years. These trends can be linked to six below identified themes, each of which give an idea as to the future direction sporting organisations will need to adopt concerning traditional training and game delivery models, these being:

- 1. A Perfect Fit.** Personalised sport for health and fitness - Individualised sport and fitness activities are on the rise. People are fitting sport into their increasingly busy and time-fragmented lifestyles to achieve personal health objectives. Participation rates in aerobics, running, walking, along with gym membership, have all risen sharply over the past decade while participation rates for many organised sports have held constant or declined. Australians are becoming more health conscious, increasingly playing sport to get fit, rather than getting fit to play sport (Hajkowicz et al., 2013).
- 2. From Extreme to Mainstream.** The rise of lifestyle sports - Captures the rise of lifestyle, adventure and alternative sports which are particularly popular with younger generations. These sports typically involve complex, advanced skills and have some element of inherent danger and/or thrill-seeking. They are also characterised by a strong lifestyle element and participants often obtain cultural self-identity and self-expression through these sports. These sports are likely to attract participants through generational change and greater awareness via online content (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) (Hajkowicz et al., 2013).
- 3. More than Sport.** The attainment of health, community and overseas aid objectives via sport - The broader benefits of sport are being increasingly recognised by governments, business and communities. Sport can help achieve mental and physical health, crime prevention, social development and international cooperation objectives. Sport for children and adults is an effective means of reducing the rising rates of obesity and chronic illness. If managed appropriately, it can be an effective mechanism to help achieve social inclusion for marginalised groups and reduce crime rates (Hajkowicz et al., 2013).
- 4. Everybody's Game.** Demographic, generational and cultural change - To retain strong participation rates, sports of the future will need to cater for senior citizens. They will also need to cater for the changing cultural make-up of Australia. Australian society has become, and will continue to become, highly multicultural. Different cultures have different sporting preferences and recreation habits.

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<sup>15</sup> A megatrend is defined as a major shift in environmental, social and economic conditions that will substantially alter the way people live. Megatrends occur at the intersection of multiple trends. A trend is defined as an important pattern of social, economic or environmental activity that will play out in the future (Hajkowicz et al., 2013).

Sporting organisations will be challenged with capturing the interest and involvement of diverse cultures (Hajkowicz et al., 2013).

- 5. New Wealth, New Talent.** Economic growth and sports development in Asia - Population and income growth throughout Asia will create tougher competition and new opportunities for Australia both on the sports field and in the sports business environment. Asian countries are investing heavily in sports capabilities and, especially in the case of China, have rapidly improved gold medal outcomes at the Olympics over recent decades (Hong et al., 2005). As disposable incomes grow, the populations of Asian countries are becoming more interested in sport. This may create new markets for sports television, sports tourism, sports equipment, sport services and sports events (Hajkowicz et al., 2013).
- 6. Tracksuits to Business Suits.** Market pressures and new business models - Market forces are likely to exert greater pressure on sport in the future. In some sports, elite athletes have had considerable pay rises and large sponsorship deals. This has not occurred in other sports. Sports with higher salaries may draw athletes away from those with lower salaries. Loosely organised community sports associations are likely to be replaced by organisations with corporate structures and more formal governance systems in light of market pressures. The cost of participating in sport is also rising and this is a participation barrier for many people (Hajkowicz et al., 2013).

The NRL would be well placed to consider these forecasted megatrends, so as to stay agile and ahead of the competition. To a large extent, the findings (both quantitative and qualitative) from this report and subsequent eight recommendations, should be read in conjunction with the future orientation megatrends, so as to better predict and cater to maintaining a competitive edge across the future landscape of Australia's sporting organisations. Unless the NRL becomes sufficiently agile and looks to morph away from traditional models of delivery (training and games), it can be predicted that participants (esp. Junior players) will opt for other sporting codes and attractive physical activity fads (i.e., Ninja Warrior, Cross Training), where their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are met (i.e., social connectedness and fun).

In closing, the National Rugby League (NRL) has a Vision to become, "The Greatest Game of All", and a Mission and Key Priority, "To bring people together for the best sports and entertainment experience". To achieve such a Vision, Mission and Key Priority, and to ensure the broadest level of participation and performance excellence, it is a recommendation from this report, that RL invests in a new model of engagement, ensuring that the future approach is based on supporting players of all ages, skill levels, genders, expectations (social and playing) and differing intrinsic and extrinsic motivational needs. The findings from this report clearly align with RL's future directions.

This research report adds to the body of literature on player retention and will enable strategies to be developed in order to retain players in RL.

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## Appendix A NRL sporting schools' programs

### *EARLY CHILD CARE*

#### **Munchkin League**

<https://playnrl.com/munchkin-league>

Munchkin League is a new and exciting Early Childhood Development Program. The program is designed specifically for 3–5-year-olds, of all abilities and skills, and runs over eight 45-minute sessions. A philosophy of learning through play, promotes physical activity in a fun and interactive environment. Children are supported and encouraged by qualified Early Childhood educators. Munchkin League engages children in learning fine and gross motor skills, problem-solving abilities and communication and teamwork. The program supports social and emotional growth and assists children to develop independence, self-confidence and self-awareness. Munchkin League provides an opportunity for children to learn to respect others, try something new and make lots of new friends.

### *PRIMARY SCHOOL*

#### **Backyard League Foundation: Year 2**

<https://playnrl.com/schools/school-programs/backyard-league-infants-program/>

The Backyard League, Foundation to Year 2 Program uses story-based learning to assist young students to understand the skills and concepts of Rugby League. Students will meet the story's characters, Red, Bluey and their friends who will help children of all abilities gain a basic comprehension of Rugby League concepts. Lessons which follow on from the story component have been designed alongside a story that requires students to practice fundamental movement skills and active play through minor games. Students will learn to be aware of space and game boundaries, as well as fair play and personal safety. The three-week program has been developed to provide non-contact, safe and age-appropriate activities that provide an introduction to and understanding of Rugby League, which is delivered by fully qualified NRL Game Development Officers. In 2017, the NRL will be introducing a new book and activities which will follow on from the current foundation to year 2 program.

#### **Backyard League Program: Year 3–6**

<https://playnrl.com/schools/school-programs/backyard-league/>

NRL Backyard League is available to your school via the Australian Sport's Commission Sporting Schools program. The NRL Backyard League program can be delivered before/during/after school. There is also an option to request additional sessions through the online booking system. NRL Backyard League is one of the most affordable Sporting Schools options available and are delivered by qualified NRL staff so a quality experience is assured. When selecting NRL Backyard League to be delivered in your Sporting Schools program you will receive funding to support coach delivery costs, with Foundation to Year 2 students receiving a take-home copy of the 1,2,3 Rugby League storybook and a soft Steeden football\*. Year 3–6 students receive a Steeden NRL football\*.

The Backyard League program is an exciting program that aims to introduce students to Rugby League in a safe, non-competitive and fun environment. The program equips



students and teachers with the tools to play a version of our great game in any setting while delivering important education, health and welfare messages. The NRL recently partnered with the University of Wollongong to test the effectiveness of a new Backyard League program which is underpinned by an innovative games and sports teaching approach. The research findings suggest there is strong evidence that the new Backyard League program improves gameplay understanding and is closely linked to higher levels of motivation, increased participation and more positive attitudes towards playing games and sports. The program has been developed to cater for a range of learners and has been designed to improve participant understanding of 'why' and 'how' rather than simply what to do. The units are based on gameplay and involve the students in active learning. The program allows the facilitator to use both questioning and direct instructions appropriate to student understanding and development. NRL Backyard League Games are stopped at regular intervals and participants are challenged to reflect on their participation in order to mature the play. Students are encouraged to think strategically about game concepts and will become tactically aware and be able to become decision makers during the game.

### ***SECONDARY SCHOOL***

#### **League Integrated Fundamentals Training (LIFT)**

<https://sportingschools.gov.au/sports/national-rugby-league/schools/NRL-secondary-school-bookings>

The NRL League Integrated Fundamentals Training (LIFT) program has the intention of providing opportunities for our Junior High School students to participate in highly engaging and interesting physical movement patterns that promote an introductory understanding of physical literacy. Our program focuses on educating Australian teenagers about the importance of movement to enhance physical literacy.

#### **Teacher Delivered Program**

<https://playnrl.com/schools/school-programs/playnrl-programs/>

The NRL offer a teacher delivered program as one of the package options when submitting a booking. A teacher delivered program can be an option in the case that an NRL Game Development Officer cannot deliver your program or the teacher is confident with the delivery of rugby league and would like to deliver the program at their school. This may be a particularly appealing option in those cases where the school have already had an NRL Game Development Officer at their school delivering Sporting Schools previously.

Teacher Delivered Program pack includes:

- Player Activity Cards
- 20 x Coloured Bibs (mesh)
- 1 x Heavy Duty Ball Bag
- 10 Steeden Rugby League Footballs
- 1 x Whistle
- 20 x Markers
- 1 x Play NRL Ambassador Shirt



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