The Principles of Best Practice in this guide are for player development managers, and AFL and AFLW club leaders and football departments. They provide guidance and suggestions on how clubs should approach AFLW player development and what to focus on. They have been developed to help clubs support their AFLW players’ needs and development. This guide will assist club leaders to create a strategic direction for player development in women’s football. These core principles will help align the industry on how to support AFLW players to thrive as individuals and as athletes.

The NAB AFLW is a rapidly evolving competition, with many unique features which makes it different to the men’s game. Players are part-time professional athletes who juggle multiple life domains, training and contact time at the club occur after-hours, the season and the game are condensed and AFLW players’ pathway into the elite competition are as varied and diverse as the women themselves. These factors have shaped the environment to be one that is incomparable to that of the men’s competition. Because the competition is different, the needs of AFLW players are different, and the support they require to thrive is equally unique.

This Principles of Best Practice encompasses five pillars. Each pillar outlines a domain of player development, informed by recent research and consultation. The pillars are considered to be the most effective way of maximising player development outcomes in AFLW. Each of the pillars intersect and relate to each other. If one pillar is developed, others will gain mutual benefit.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Our PDM role has been crucial to the effective functioning of our AFLW program, particularly given the number of players who have needed assistance in relocating, finding new employment and off-field support. This includes support in attaining educational opportunities and encouraging players to explore passions or interests outside of football.

I am of the personal belief that our players are in a better position to consistently perform on-field when they are supported and have a sense of grounding away from the game. Our PDM is a significant driver in this space.

When you feel supported as a person within a club, you know you can be the best athlete. The Player Development Manager role is crucial to allowing players thrive through supporting all the aspects of the individual, above and beyond how well we play and train. These principles will provide the foundations for AFLW athletes to make best possible contribution to the football program, and for the football program to provide the best environment for AFLW athletes to thrive.
GILLON McLACHLAN

In just four years since its launch for the 2017 season, the NAB AFLW competition has made an indelible mark on our game, and altered the trajectory of Australian football.

While our game has dealt with the significant impacts caused by Covid-19, the AFL Commission remains strongly committed to the growth of our game and the expansion of opportunities for women and girls.

Our commitment to opportunities on the field also extends to the growth and development of those who play our game as individuals. To not just be the best athlete, but to be the best person they can be.

This handbook seeks to outline the most effective ways of maximising player development outcomes in the AFLW.

The continued development of players as people is a priority, to serve the key goal that our AFLW competition will continue to be the elite sporting competition for women in this country.

A strong and vibrant AFLW competition, with players able to achieve their full potential both on and off the field, will continue to provide both aspiration and inspiration to young girls.

In 2020 the AFL and BHP announced a game-changing AFLW partnership, focused on creating more opportunities for women to play, umpire and coach footy in the AFLW and in communities across Australia.

The three-year partnership will build on the two organisations’ shared ambitions to improve opportunity and equality in both business and sport.

As part of the partnership, BHP have provided vital funding to ensure each of the 14 AFLW clubs can employ a dedicated Player Development Manager (PDM) for the female playing group. This PDM role ensures each club can provide support and development plans for female players, including pathways to consider becoming AFL coaches and umpires, as well as academic and/or workplaces pursuits.

This guide will further equip the BHP funded Player Development Managers with more resources to continue to support the development of AFLW players development.

AFL, AFL clubs, and the AFLPA need to develop a sustainable model for the provision of an effective player professional development program, including transition out of the game”

In a very short time, NAB AFLW has become a major part of the Australian sporting landscape. The presence of female players in football clubs across our country, from community to elite, has changed the face of Australian football indelibly for the better.

From our debut in 2017 with eight foundation clubs to 14 clubs in 2020, our player numbers have grown to 420 female footballers training and playing at AFL clubs across the nation. The AFLW season length has increased with the years as well, with 2021 scheduled to include nine home and away rounds and three weeks of finals, and 2022 increasing to 10 Home and Away.

Players are contracted for a period of six months and in 2019 clubs were able to offer two-year playing contracts to players. There is $8.7m in total player payments available with a further 39% of players receiving payments under additional service agreements. All 14 of our AFLW clubs also have separate employment agreements with a number of AFLW players.

Many players have come to our league with well-developed careers away from football in a variety of industries. Juggling their passion and love for football and their non-football careers can often cause pressures in all aspects of life, particularly as they strive to excel in all that they do. Equally, we have witnessed an increase in players coming through the talent pathways from Auskick to AFLW who are putting their lives on hold to pursue their football ambitions. The role of the AFLW Player Development Manager is vital in assisting players to continue to plan and progress their non-football lives.

In 2020 our players' age range was between 18 and 38 years. Some had just finished their secondary school life, others are parents raising families, and some identify as Indigenous or from a culturally diverse background. This is part of the beauty of AFLW - everyone can see a little of themselves in our players.

Our progress has meant increased interest and attention on AFLW, with this has also come increased expectation. Expectation on performance, team success, behaviour and approach. The AFLW season is intense and fast-paced and every round counts when you are aiming to make finals. With all that players are juggling, the right amount of support is crucial to help manage the pressures.

It is vitally important for all of us to work together to support AFLW players to achieve all that they aspire to achieve. The AFL, AFLPA, clubs, sponsors and of course the players themselves all have a role to play in achieving success both in football and non-football related careers. This guide is written in consultation with PDMs, players, industry experts and with insight from other sports also working with female elite athletes whilst all aligning with the AFL’s Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy.
Principles of Best Practice aim to align the different AFLW clubs in a shared understanding of how to promote player development, by describing five industry-relevant pillars of practice. The pillars are informed by independent research conducted with the players themselves and ensure players thrive as athletes and individuals in the professional sporting context.

A comprehensive needs analysis was undertaken at different levels of the AFLW competition, including studies with research partners Deakin University and La Trobe University.

The needs analysis aimed to identify the current gaps in how player development for AFLW players is conceptualised and addressed by the AFL, AFLPA and the clubs. Both the environmental context and the individual player needs were examined to identify focus areas for player development – the five pillars.

An industry comparison with other elite and professional female sporting codes was also conducted to better understand the broader needs of female athletes in high performance sports. This needs analysis has informed the five pillars of best practice.

**AFLW PLAYERS’ DEVELOPMENT NEEDS**

Specific guidelines and recommendations for developing female athletes’ needs exist in some sporting codes, but are often limited to the Science and Sport Medicine components of female sport. Player development and wellbeing are less of a focus. The need for female sporting codes to disseminate information and education about women’s health was identified, with greater attention needed on areas such as body image, weight gain, menstruation, contraception and pregnancy and their influences on training and performance (1).

Research projects commissioned by the AFL and the AFLPA conducted by Deakin University also informed the pillars. The qualitative studies of AFLW players and football department staff investigated the environment of women’s football, AFLW competition operations, club culture and player wellbeing, education and development needs.

A number of themes unique to the needs of females in elite sports programs emerged, including:

- a need for work-life balance, as players juggle both career, study, relationship and football commitments,
- developing support staff that are responsible for directly developing and supporting AFLW players,
- widening diversity and inclusion of AFLW players in the media,
- providing better resourcing to support AFLW players’ commitments in and outside the game,
- AFL to embed the AFLW as a unique partner in the elite football environment, rather than an inferior component of the men’s program (2).

A number of key recommendations emerged from the qualitative research project relating to managing cultural disruptions; recruiting and coaching; the AFLW season; team culture; supporting AFLW players; outside life; and between AFLW seasons. The research also unearthed a culture of comparison and perceived disruption with the male programs in clubs. This is at odds with a key component of the evolution and opportunity for the AFLW, which is to stand alone as a leader in female professional sport (3).

The competing life commitments that the AFLW players must balance in order to commit to their part-time football contracts, was evident throughout the research themes, including:

- the financial and career costs of relocation for a six-month competition,
- the demands and stress on mental and physical performance expectations due to the short season,
- the philosophical motivations of players in the AFLW,
- the struggle to balance career and education commitments
- the desire to commit to high performance trainings after hours (3).
It is evident from this research that the role of the player development manager (PDMs) in AFLW is critical to facilitate and support player development while navigating the competing demands of AFLW players’ football and non-football endeavours. In a scoping exercise conducted by the AFL in partnership with La Trobe University and BHP, the club PDMs were surveyed to understand what success looks like for an AFLW PDM. This survey identified the perceived successful outcomes for the role and areas of professional development and growth wanted by PDMs.

The PDMs defined success as building rapport with the players, and engaging players in successful inductions in order for them to feel connected to their clubs. The development and execution of tailored individual development plans for players were other keys to success. Individual development planning is designed to support a player’s journey throughout their football career and includes supporting transition from the game, as well as building general life skills. Professional development needs for the PDMs included understanding mental health, instilling value in the players, professional and personal development, along with building resilience and inclusion in the club (4).

A follow-up feedback survey of the same group of PDMs gave greater insights into the day to day supports provided by PDMs to their players. These included mental health, off-field career support and the management of relationships. Findings from the survey were a need for further mental health knowledge and skills, clarification of the PDMs core responsibilities and role definition, disclosure and confidentiality procedures, as well as guidelines for using time effectively when working with players on limited contact hours and how to deliver individual consultations and group workshops.

The Principles of Best Practice were developed in response to this comprehensive needs analysis as a way to align the industry in a shared understanding of how best to promote player development. The five pillars include areas of focus for PDMs to promote and support the development of AFLW players from induction through to their transition out of the game.
WHAT IS PLAYER DEVELOPMENT?
Athlete Development Programs have existed in the elite sporting environment for many years, acting as the off-field guidance and support that is needed to ensure young athletes who enter an elite sporting program have their non-athletic endeavours nurtured during their time in the sport, including life skills, education, personal development, vocational training and wellbeing. Player development supports athletes during their sporting careers, and just as importantly, sets a foundation of skills that support the transition into their life after elite or professional sport. Australian sporting organisations approach the development of their elite athletes in different ways, however, all look to find balance within an athlete’s life, supporting the everyday life skills and wellbeing of the individual, as well as navigating them through possible tertiary education and career development. Most programs work towards the goal that athletes leave their sport skilled and employable in other areas and confident in their future aspirations.

ROLE OF THE PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MANAGER IN AFLW
The primary role of the PDMs in AFLW, is to facilitate and coordinate the support of non-athletic endeavours of their club’s playing list. Non-athletic endeavours encompass personal and professional development, education, vocation and career development, wellbeing support and the coordination of mental health and wellbeing services. Secondary responsibilities may arise in the PDM role, such as coordinating housing and relocation, relationship management, player performance demands and game day duties. With varied duties of the role, a PDM must be mindful not to compromise their primary focus on players’ off field development. This can be a challenge and involves avoiding any conflicts of interest between player development, personal wellbeing and on field performances. Relationship skills, such as engagement, building trust, influence and leadership are core skills needed to fulfil the PDM role.

The role relies on the ability to build and maintain strong relationships with not only the players within the club, but the extended group of stakeholders, including coaches, support staff, players’ families, AFLW, and AFLPA.
The best practice principles in this guide have been developed to help clubs support their AFLW players’ needs and promote their off-field development and non-athletic endeavours. Five pillars have been identified from the comprehensive needs analysis, that describe the unique domains that underpin player development for AFLW. These five pillars call out where support should be prioritised and will assist club leaders to create strategic direction for player development in women’s football that supports and retains women in the sport. The core principles described by the five pillars will also help align the industry on how to best support AFLW players to thrive as individuals and as athletes.

AIMS
- Align the industry in their efforts to support and develop AFLW players.
- To guide the focus of PDMs and clubs by identifying the unique needs of AFLW players.
- To ensure AFLW players thrive in their sport and in their lives.

OBJECTIVES
1. To describe five pillars of best practice that focus the Industry’s efforts to support and develop AFLW players.
2. To use the five pillars to guide AFLW Clubs’ strategic direction and the roles and responsibilities of the PDMs.
3. To inform evaluation efforts to continuously improve AFLW player development.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF BEST PRACTICE ARE:

- **LEADING PLAYER DEVELOPMENT:** SAFE AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
- **EMPOWERING AFLW PLAYERS**
- **MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING**
- **MANAGING MULTIPLE COMMITMENTS**
- **THRIVING IN HIGH PERFORMANCE**
The needs analysis of player development programs of AFLW clubs identified areas of improvement in relation to the players’ access to support services, due to the after-hour commitments of training and the part-time nature of the AFLW programs. Many staff working in the AFLW programs have limited time and resource to contribute to AFLW players because they work over and above their existing roles within the club. The limited allocation of resources for AFLW leaves staff stretched for time or with competing demands and blurred lines in relation to clarity of their roles in AFLW (3).

With varied duties of the PDM role, this pillar ensures PDMs do not compromise their primary focus on players’ off-field development. PDMs must avoid any conflict of interest between player development, personal wellbeing and performance. The AFL’s commercial partners BHP shares an interest in female opportunity, inclusivity, wellbeing and development, therefore through their funding, AFLW players have been provided with a PDM, whose role is to focus solely on their personal and professional development.

The first pillar of best practice, Leading Player Development: Safe and Effective Practice, ensures there is a safe and trusted level of support provided to players, that is consistent across the AFLW clubs. This pillar ensures player development and support is provided by PDMs who are appropriately credentialed, meet the minimum qualification standards set by the AFL and BHP and have continuing professional development and performance monitoring. This role exclusively fosters and develops non-athletic endeavours, including personal and professional development. This pillar ensures AFLW players can trust their PDM. Placing standards on the PDMs qualifications ensures they are competent, can meet the responsibilities and expectations of the role, and can uphold boundaries to maintain trust and safety.

**BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES**

**RESPONSIBILITY/ACCOUNTABILITY**

Have the minimum qualifications and skills to competently develop and support the unique needs of AFLW players. To clearly understand the responsibilities of a PDM. To meet the expectations of the role, and avoid conflicts of interest.

**PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Building rapport with players, influencing clubs and industry stakeholders, maintaining appropriate working relationships, and staying within the boundaries of the role. To maintain the trust and safety of the players.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Embarking on continual professional development and performance monitoring, ensure PDMs have skills needed to develop and support female athletes in professional sport.
A primary pillar of player development is supporting systemic and culture change to create equality and inclusiveness in clubs to allow the women’s game to thrive. In this pillar, the AFLW is viewed as a celebration of difference, and therefore effective player development activities should reflect its unique culture and difference. Reflections on club environments from the needs analysis reported limited understanding and consideration of the stress and demands on female players, suggesting a need for more supportive and inclusive opportunities for females (2). Promoting AFLW players to maximise their opportunities in education, employment, and commercial and community involvement is a part of this pillar. Responding to women’s health needs has also been identified as an industry wide information and education gap. Recommendations informed by this pillar included providing evidence-based information to both athletes and PDMs on the relationship between women’s health needs and the high performance environment (1) (9).

The best practice principles in this pillar are viewed from two areas of unique value: the support and opportunities that are provided to players, and the specific health needs of females in order to achieve maximum wellbeing and performance outcomes. Empowering female athletes is an important aspect of best practice, with this pillar providing a sense of belonging in the football industry and ensuring there is equal opportunity.

---

**BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAND ALONE LEADERS</th>
<th>Celebrate the difference that is AFLW, embracing unique culture and systems of support for female players.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLEXIBILITY</td>
<td>Flexibility towards managing and coordinating player circumstances, and an understanding of the challenges and priorities of each individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE</td>
<td>Providing safe and inclusive club environments that consider gender-specific needs, along with culturally safe environments for Indigenous and other diverse players, to support all women, and ensure players remain in the game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOMEN’S HEALTH</td>
<td>Access health-related resources and support for women’s specific health needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

The support for AFLW players should not be viewed as a challenge to the game, but be seen as a celebration of unique characteristics that make the game its own.”

Emma Harris – AFLW Player Development Support Manager
Literature about athlete welfare continues to highlight the importance of considering the mental health and wellbeing of female athletes in the sporting industry. There is a need for ongoing education, coordination and referral networks to respond to female athletes with mental ill health (1) (3) (6). Policy and culture reform that is informed by prevention science is needed to reduce risk factors for mental ill health and promote mental fitness and wellbeing. Considerations of proactive mental health monitoring, along with a clarification of confidentiality policies and procedures are also recommended to ensure best practice (1). In AFLW, it is identified that life stressors, such as balancing multiple commitments, performance demands and expectations, relationships, media, and injuries has the potential to negatively impact player wellbeing (3) (6). PDMs currently working in the clubs identified mental health and wellbeing as a priority area for their own professional development. They highlighted professional issues such as confidentiality, consent, and referral processes as areas in which they require further education in order for them to successfully deliver on their role with players (4).

The AFL Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy was developed to guide the planning and implementation of wellbeing initiatives, mental health promotion and prevention programs and mental healthcare services. The Strategy is committed to a vision that ensures everyone involved in the AFLW is mentally fit and ready to thrive and support each other. PDM’s have a crucial role to play in reducing risk factors for mental ill health by helping players to cope with life’s transitions and stressors (6). The strategy and the BHP Wellbeing Framework informed the best practice principles of this pillar. They aim to guide PDMs in their ability to safely respond to mental ill health in order to coordinate mental healthcare as well as equip PDMs with strategies to promote mental health and wellbeing in AFLW Players by providing considerations that underpin best practices in supporting female players.

We all have a responsibility to continue to build mentally healthy environments for AFLW players, to ensure our players are mentally fit and ready to face the challenges of being professional female athletes and to thrive as footballers and people”

Dr Kate Hall, Head of Mental Health and Wellbeing, AFL
The strength of the AFLW program comes from the multiple roles players sustain while engaging in their football commitments. By the nature of AFLW’s unique competition, players have rich and productive off field lives. Many entering into AFLW hold established careers in the workforce, while others are consciously building their work experience or involved in some form of tertiary study. When the time comes, their transition out of the game appears to be relatively smooth due to the maintenance of work or study throughout their time playing (3). However, balancing these commitments, along with relationships and family life, involves complex and at times stressful role strain, and stretched time management. The dual roles of the playing cohort has been identified as one of the primary stressors associated with the AFLW player’s experience (2).

It is widely reported that there are difficulties in holding down a full time job while being an elite female athlete, with evidence that some players are giving up employment and career paths due to limited flexibility towards football commitments, time constraints and the need to relocate to participate in AFLW clubs. Other non-athletic commitments, such as the management of domestic responsibilities (motherhood, family, income), may also be influence AFLW’s ability to retain players. The work required to balance multiple commitments, and the impact it may have on performance, as well as the physical demands of conditioning on wellbeing may start to see a trend in players prioritising football for short periods of time. That is, engaging full time, in a part time contract, to the detriment of their careers, wellbeing, and financial position.

BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

**TRANSITION**
Support and management for players is in place at key transition times, including the start and end of their AFLW career, as well as critical stages throughout their career (e.g. injury return, parental leave, moving interstate).

**BALANCE**
Maximising players’ engagement at clubs, by promoting stability and balance in other areas of the player’s life, identifying barriers and areas of needed support.

**EDUCATION AND CAREER**
Importance of professional development and career guidance away from football commitments.

**STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS**
Building rapport and maintaining relationships with a player’s wider community and support networks, to ensure positive involvement with AFLW.
The principles outlined in the previous four pillars come together with the aim of supporting players to thrive in a high performance environment. Players in part-time professional sporting programs require specific resources and support to thrive in high performance settings. The characteristics of the AFLW competition throw potential challenges at the concept of high performance training. Player relocation for only part of the year, after hours training, high intensity condensed seasons, short games and many other elements unique to the AFLW competition result in a number of social, emotional, and physical stressors only experienced by players in the AFLW competition. Added to this is the rapid increase in the public profile of AFLW players through television, media and social media coverage. AFLW players may be inexperienced and unsupported in managing negative public scrutiny and female athletes are exposed to social media and cyber abuse. These impacts on players require significant support and development in order to adapt to and manage (3) Thriving in High Performance provides players with an optimal opportunity to perform to their potential. The pillar encompasses knowing what it takes to train and compete at an elite level, managing oneself in that environment, while having the chance to develop oneself. Thriving sets the scene of positive opportunities that pave the way for a high standard in the AFLW environment, encapsulating what it is to be a part of the AFLW Vision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>THRIVING NOT SURVIVING</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Players to thrive physically, socially, mentally, and culturally through the ongoing demands of the AFLW environment, both anticipated and unpredicted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ONGOING LEARNING</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Players to learn and grow throughout their AFLW experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIGH PERFORMANCE BEHAVIOURS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling uncompromising standards of high performance behaviours in all aspects of the players’ engagement in the AFLW environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Emma Harris – AFLW Player Development Support Manager, AFL
Dr Kate Hall – Head of Mental Health and Wellbeing, AFL
Nicole Livingstone OAM – Head of Women’s Football, AFL
Nicky Couston – Wellbeing and Prevention Programs Manager, AFL
Shenae Beus – Commercial Integration Manager, AFL
Madeline Penny – Women’s Football Growth and Development Manager, AFL
Berndette Sierakowski – Player Development Manager, St Kilda Football Club
Rebecca Mathers – Player Development Manager, Adelaide Football Club
Alicia Eva – AFLW Player, GWS Giants
Dr Erin Hoare – WHO Research Fellow and Former AFLW Player
AFL Mental Health Steering Committee Members
Ben Smith – General Manager – Player Development, AFLPA
Billymo Rist – Head of Program Development, AFLPA
Justine Whipper – General Manager – Player Development, Australian Cricketers Association
REFERENCES


(6) AFL Industry Mental Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2020-2022, Melbourne 2020
THIS IS
GEN W

THIS IS
AFLW