



University of  
**Southern**  
**Queensland**

**SUPER-ELITE ATHLETE PERFORMANCE IN INTERNATIONAL AND  
PROFESSIONAL SPORTS – THE DAVID NILSSON STORY**

A Thesis submitted by Susan Wilson-Gahan

for the award of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis stories the Baseball journey of David Wayne Nilsson - an Australian who became a Major League Baseball All Star in the United States of America, an Olympic silver medallist and award winner, a gold medallist in international competition, a successful club and national coach, and the owner of Australian national Baseball leagues and clubs. The thesis explored and defined the systemic interactions that had significant impacts in developing and consolidating the physical and personal attributes, and the sport-specific skills, that facilitated David Nilsson's success as a Baseball player, and that positioned him as a sportsperson of historical note in Australia's sporting landscape. The thesis addresses the question – “which bioecological systems and which physical and personal attributes and sport-specific skills, are significant; and how significant are they in the development of super-elite athlete performances in international and professional sporting contexts?” Data collection came principally from primary source accounts gathered in 22 field interviews with identified people who witnessed or shared in Nilsson's journey. The study's qualitative, phenomenological research design employed an innovative integration of Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (2005) and the life course/life history approach suggested by Biesta et al. (2005), and redefined this approach as “biographical storying”, to map and retell the story of Nilsson's journey. The fusion of developmental systems approaches to life with an examination of individual physiology, psychology and behaviours provided a platform for analysing significant influences in developing David Nilsson's super-elite athlete performances in both professional and international contexts.

**Keywords:** biographical storying; Urie Bronfenbrenner; Major League Baseball; David Nilsson; phenomenology; super-elite sports performance.

## **CERTIFICATION OF THESIS**

I, Susan Wilson-Gahan declare that the PhD Thesis entitled Super-Elite Athlete Performance in International and Professional Sports – The David Nilsson Story is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Date: 07.09.2022

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## TABLE OF ACRONYMS

<b>ABF</b>	Australian Baseball Federation
<b>ABL.</b>	Australian Baseball League
<b>AFL</b>	Australian Football League
<b>AIS</b>	Australian Institute of Sport
<b>AM</b>	Order of Australia
<b>ARF</b>	Australian Rules Football
<b>ASC</b>	Australian Sports Commission
<b>DH</b>	Designated Hitter
<b>DL</b>	Disabled List
<b>DMSP</b>	Developmental Model of Sport Participation'
<b>DMGT</b>	Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent
<b>FTEM</b>	Foundation, Talent, Elite, Mastery framework
<b>IBLA</b>	International Baseball League of Australia
<b>ICC</b>	International Cricket Council
<b>INF</b>	International Netball Federation
<b>IOC</b>	International Olympic Committee
<b>MLB</b>	Major League Baseball
<b>MVP</b>	Most Valuable Player
<b>NBA</b>	National Basketball Association
<b>NILCORP</b>	Nilsson group,
<b>OBP</b>	On base percentage
<b>OPS+</b>	On base plus slugging - compared to other players
<b>PPCT</b>	Process-Person-Context-Time model
<b>QSA</b>	Queensland Studies Authority
<b>SABR</b>	Society for American Baseball Research
<b>UN</b>	United Nations.
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>WBSC</b>	The World Baseball Softball Confederation

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# **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS**

## **1.1 Chapter introduction**

When I commenced this doctoral research, my intent was to write a biography of Australian Baseball player David Nilsson – an athlete who succeeded at super-elite levels of international sports performance and as a professional Major League Baseball (MLB) player. As I progressed through the fieldwork and the associated research reading, it became apparent to me that I was interested in more than just Nilsson’s record as a sportsperson. I became curious about what contributed to his development as an athlete to the point where he was able to reach the summit of success in super-elite, professional, international sporting contexts. The result is not a standard biography but instead a qualitative research study that generated the biographical storying of Nilsson’s development, in an attempt to illuminate and explain the significant influences in his journey to the top and how those influences contributed to his success. The story of Nilsson’s journey is embraced, but there are additional analyses and research findings not originally anticipated, and that arguably make the thesis more interesting and more useful in the field of sport and athlete development. Furthermore, the additional analysis of the data considerably strengthens the contribution of the thesis to multiple fields of knowledge.

The introductory chapter provides an outline of the research completed and an overview of the contents of each chapter. It explains the scope of the research, and it describes the research purpose, the research question that was addressed and an outline of the concepts that were significant in the research and that are intended to be informative for the reader.

A number of the components of the research are defined in this introduction in order to facilitate ease of understanding, and to clarify the ‘ground zero’ of the research and the foundation on which the research was built. To build the picture of just how significant Nilsson’s achievements were and where he would rank in the world of sport, the concepts of expert, super-elite, elite, professional and international have been defined as they are referred to throughout the thesis. I have also included some insight into the sport of Baseball itself to allow readers to familiarise themselves with some basic concepts of the sport before reading any further.

David Nilsson is the focus of the thesis; therefore, this first chapter includes a brief introduction to Nilsson himself and a summary of some of his achievements as a Baseball player. The place of sport in society is discussed in this chapter to explain the significance of Nilsson’s career and life story and of the influences of the environments in which Nilsson grew up, developed as an athlete and performed, and to which he returned in his post-athletic career.

## 1.2 The purpose of the research

The primary objective of my research was to disinter and to analyse critically the evidence related to the environmental and contextual influences on the life course and career journey of David Wayne Nilsson, a former Australian representative Baseball player who played catcher<sup>1</sup> for the Milwaukee Brewers in MLB in the USA, from 1992 to 1999, as part of a long and successful career in both amateur and professional ranks. He was an Australian Baseball Hall of Fame inductee in 2005, a Sport Australia Hall of Fame inductee in 2008 and a Baseball Queensland Hall of Fame inductee in 2009. In 1999, Nilsson was named in the MLB All Star game in the National League team. He was the first Australian to make an MLB ‘All Star’ Game until Grant Balfour (2013) and Liam Hendriks (2019, 2022) were named in the American League All Star teams (SABR, 2022).

The Milwaukee Brewers inducted Nilsson into their Wall of Honor in 2014 (MLB, 2013). Nilsson was the recipient of the Coca-Cola Amatil 2017 Queensland Sport Coach of the Year at the annual Q Sport awards (Q Sport, 2017).

In 2018, Nilsson was named a ‘Queensland Great’ (Queensland Government, 2018). Nilsson was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2019 Queen’s Birthday Honours in recognition of his “service to baseball as a player, coach and mentor” (Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019).

As a teenager, Nilsson won the Helms Award as ‘Most Valuable Player’ (MVP) of the 1988 National Baseball Championships of Australia, known as the Claxton Shield (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, pp. 3-36). He is still the only teenager to have won this award, and the fact that he won the award in his first Claxton Shield competition in the senior or open age division made the achievement even more momentous. Nilsson was named Player of the Tournament at the Intercontinental Cup in 1999 – the first major International Baseball competition in which the Australia Men’s Baseball Team won a gold medal. In the same tournament, he was named in the ‘All-World Team’.

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<sup>1</sup> **Catcher** – is a position for a Baseball player. When a batter takes his or her turn to hit, the catcher crouches behind home plate, in front of the (home) umpire, and receives the ball from the pitcher. This is a catcher’s primary duty, but he or she is also called upon to direct and lead the other players in a defensive play. The catcher typically calls for pitches by means of hand signals; therefore, the catcher must be aware of each pitcher’s mechanics and strengths, as well as the batter’s tendencies and weaknesses. Fielding foul tips, blocking balls in the dirt, preventing wild pitches from becoming run scoring opportunities for the opposition and contact with runners during plays at the home plate are all part of the catcher’s job (Morris, 2012).

At the Sydney Olympics in 2000, Nilsson won the Olympic Baseball competition ‘Batting Award’ with a batting average<sup>2</sup> of .565 (Flintoff & Dunn, 2011). He led Australia to a Silver Medal at the Athens Olympics in 2004, in a contentious struggle with the highly credentialled team from Cuba. The game was so controversial that it still engenders commentary in 2022, with many internationally respected Baseball pundits referring to the 2004 Olympic Baseball final as the game in which Australia was denied the gold medal through some questionable umpiring decisions. Interestingly, in a vault of recordings held by MLB, the video of that game is the only one missing from the 2002 Summer Olympic Games Baseball tournament files (MLB, 2022). A more comprehensive account of Nilsson’s sporting biography and synthesis of his life journey to this point in time is included in Chapter 2. In 2022 and beyond, Nilsson is still writing history in Australian sport, as the coach of the ‘Brisbane Bandits’ Baseball team in the Australian Baseball League and as the newly appointed manager (coach) of the Australia Men’s Baseball Team.

Nilsson’s story is a story worth telling and will add to the body of work associated with Australia’s sporting history, and research around the significant influences in the life of sportspeople who invest enough and for long enough in a sport to become super-elite performers.

### **1.3 The significance of the research**

Importantly for this doctoral study, the storying of Nilsson’s journey is intended to add to the bank of historical and biographical research in Australian sport scholarship and Australian social history. It does this by placing Nilsson’s career in the broader context of the Australian sociocultural environment and Baseball cultures, and by employing an innovative integration of bioecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 2005) and the combination of life course and life history approach suggested by Biesta, Hodkinson and Goodson (2005), redefined by the author as biographical storying, to chart and tell the story of Nilsson’s journey to the ranks of a super-elite, professional player in an authentically international team sport.

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<sup>2</sup> **Batting average** - to measure a hitter’s success at the plate, the batting average is determined by dividing a player’s number of recorded hits by his or her total at-bats to generate a number between zero (shown as .000) and one (1.000). In recent years, the league-wide batting average has typically hovered around .260. The game’s best hitters can surpass .300, and a handful of players throughout history have even finished a season with a batting average higher than .400, meaning four hits for every 10 at-bats -- although no one has done so across a full season since Ted Williams batted .406 in 1941 (Major League Baseball, 2018, n.p.).

According to the 2017 “Intergenerational Review of Australian Sport” produced by the Boston Consulting Group in conjunction with the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS):

“Sport plays an integral part in the lives of Australians. Over 90% of Australian adults have an interest in sport, with 8.4 million adults and three million children participating in sport each year. Further, nearly 8 million attend live sports events each year”, (p. 4).

Furthermore, sport generates “2–3% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employs more than 220,000 people and attracts 1.8 million volunteers” (p. 4). “Sport also makes a major contribution to health and wellbeing, with high levels of participation by children creating the foundations for an active, healthy life.” The report adds that “participation in sport improves outcomes in core academic fields, as well as teaching life skills and improving retention” (p. 4). “The network of clubs and competitions brings people together like few sectors can and is a rich source of social capital, with international success building national pride and reinforcing Australia’s global reputation, with the result that for every dollar spent, sport is returning \$7 of total benefits to Australia” (p. 4).

Research in the area of sport is significant because sport is important in Australia and the story of a lesser known high achiever adds diversity and depth to the library of sporting legacy.

#### **1.4 The place of sport in society**

Coakley (2003) suggested that sport reflects society, and that society is reflected in sport. If this is held to be true, then research involving sport history becomes highly significant for sociological and cultural understandings. Sport is exceptionally popular around the world, and sporting events, sporting teams and sporting figures are prominent in the media. Sport is an activity whose popularity and appeal cut across social and political divisions. High profile sporting figures can be well-known and popular, appearing in all media, not solely because of their sporting prowess, but also because of their “acquired fame and star status” (Smart, 2005, p. 34). This research is the first academic attempt to disclose and analyse critically the significant social and cultural influences that shaped Baseball star David Nilsson’s development and subsequent success as an important contributor to Australian sporting history. This research makes a unique contribution to scholarly studies of and historical recordings in Australian sport and Australian history.

The proposition examined in this thesis was that David Nilsson developed advantageous physical and psychological attributes that combined with significant environmental influences to create superior, sport-specific skills that enabled him to achieve the biggest profile in Australian Baseball history, a significant career and ‘All Star’ status in MLB in the USA, and award winning/category winning status in other international competitions. This proposition deliberately problematises the study of David Nilsson’s sporting career, by interrogating his individual sporting talents against the backdrop of broader sociocultural and environmental influences that frame the development of sporting expertise, and that evoke a wider theoretical and methodological significance for the construction and evaluation of sporting biography scholarship. The research uncovers and analyses those socioecological and environmental factors that have proven to be influential, and in some cases pivotal, in focusing Nilsson’s development and drive to success.

Determining the question that would frame the research and capture the results of that research was the next challenge. The question is by necessity comprehensive and multifaceted, because analysing the significance of the influence of the component parts of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model of Human Development (2005) is complex.

### **1.5 The research question**

To establish the conceptual framework and research design for the study to be undertaken, researchers need a clear idea of what they are trying to find out and how they will go about doing so. For this reason, questions are employed to focus the research. Research questions define the parameters and the scope of the research and give direction to the inquiry. They also serve to inform data collection and critical analysis of the corpus of data. The following research question defined the parameters, scope and direction of this thesis as well as informing the data collection and analysis.

The thesis addresses the question – “which bioecological systems and which physical and personal attributes and sport-specific skills, are significant; and how significant are they in the development of super-elite athlete performances in international and professional sporting contexts?”

Addressing the research question involved the investigation of contributing influences on Nilsson’s success and the finely grained examination of influences on the bioecological systems, environments and contexts, in order to define the significance of each influence in

developing Nilsson’s attributes and sport-specific skills and in shaping his career. To organise this process more efficiently, I employed several operational questions. During the data collection and analysis phases of the research, I found that neither the individual nor any of the bioecological systems operated in isolation.

The research and operational questions were framed within the paradigm of constructivism that was congruent with the direct phenomenological methodology used for informing the research methods, data collection and data analysis in this study. The emergent themes were contextualised through the key elements of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Bioecological Theory of Human Development and helped to clarify the significance of each contributory environment and event. This process facilitated an interrogation of the ways in which many of these contributory influences and impacts overlapped with one another and were interrelated, thus demonstrating the usefulness of Bronfenbrenner’s later research around proximal processes – 2005 and beyond.

Bioecological System/s	Operational questions
Individual	What were the physical and personal attributes and sport-specific skills that facilitated Nilsson’s success?
Mesosystemic interchange of individual, microsystem and exosystem	Which influences in the microsystems and exosystems of Nilsson’s development made significant contributions to his physical and personal attributes and sport-specific skills, including the athlete’s ‘five tools’ favoured by Baseball scouts: hitting, power, fielding, arm strength and speed? (Dieringer & Zuccarell, 2012).
Mesosystemic interchange of individual, microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem	Q1. Which systems facilitated Nilsson’s MLB career? Q2. How did Nilsson manage the transitions between various cultures and ideologies?

<p>Mesosystemic interchange between individual, microsystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem</p>	<p>Q1. Did the socio-historical context in Australian society impact on recognition of Nilsson’s successes?</p> <p>Q2. How did Nilsson experience life after a professional career, including ‘giving back’ to Baseball in Australia?</p>
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*Table 1 Alignment of operational questions with bioecological systems.*

### **1.6 The rationale for and scope of the research**

The qualitative research in this study thoroughly examined the social, environmental and contextual influences that when combined with advantageous physical and psychological attributes create superior sport-specific skills and facilitate super-elite performance. These influences and attributes enabled Nilsson to achieve a noteworthy career at the highest level of professional Baseball, MLB in the USA, and other successes on the international scene. The research deployed elements of oral history within a phenomenological and constructivist framework. Biographical storying, drawing on a combination of life history and life course data, was used as the narrative tool to retell Nilsson’s story. Constructivist theories and phenomenological methodology contributed to the conceptual framework for the research, and a bioecological perspective was utilised to systematise data collection and analysis.

Just as phenomenologists seek to understand a person’s or persons’ perspectives as he, she or they have experienced and understood events (Leedy, 1997), the researcher sought to understand, record and retell those same perspectives. As is elaborated in Chapter 5, the Research Design, the researcher has significant personal interest in the phenomenon under study, and in the broader implications and applications of the findings. The phenomenon in this instance is the experience of being and defining oneself as a Baseball ‘star’ in the sociocultural context of Australia, including becoming an MLB player, an MLB ‘All Star’, an Olympian and Olympic medallist, a Sporting Hall of Fame Australia inductee, an Intercontinental Cup gold medallist, and a Baseball Australia and Baseball Queensland Hall of Fame inductee.

Major areas for examination emerged in Nilsson’s story that have delivered insights on several levels, including those at an individual level through an examination of the personal attributes and life course of David Nilsson; those at a sport-specific level through an examination of personal and physical attributes, sport-specific skill and knowledge development, and the opportunities available to a gifted athlete in a medium status sport within

the dominant culture; and those at the wider societal level, through understanding the impact of sociocultural environments and contexts on athlete development, including overcoming barriers to that development experienced by elite and super-elite Australian athletes who are forced to ply their trade overseas in order to make careers in authentically international, professional sports.

Whilst an athlete's story is shared in this thesis through biographical storytelling, the journey of the athlete also expands the breadth of knowledge and understanding of the world of sport beyond the research. The research provides a systematic and chronological analysis of Nilsson's development as an athlete and of his career in super-elite, professional and international sport. Examination of Nilsson's life course and of the significant influences on and contexts of his career provides an explanation of the success that he enjoyed as an Australian, in the USA's number one sport and in the most lucrative and prestigious 'bat and ball' sport in the world (Forbes Sports Money, 2017), and portrays his experiences as one of the most successful Australian sporting exports in his era (Flintoff & Dunn, 2011). Furthermore, Nilsson's biography extends current theoretical and methodological understandings of critical analysis of life history/life course and the innovative use of a bioecological systems approach to constructing a biographical story.

Analysing the biographies of sport stars can provide useful insights into various environmental and contextual influences that impacted on the development and achievements of the athletes for the stakeholders invested in the mentoring, coaching and administration of organised sports. The study of an athlete such as David Nilsson can be used as being representative of a wider group of sportspeople, if factors that affected him have the potential to affect others in similar ways, with similar outcomes. Furthermore, biographical study and study of the sociocultural aspects of sport and physical activity are a component of the school curriculum in Australia (Kirk, 1996; Queensland Studies Authority [QSA], 2010-2017), with sports history and biography contributing to the various health and physical education syllabi and to the curriculum in the learning area of English, thereby positioning an analytical, research-based biographical story as a useful research resource for teachers and students.

This study was intended to make a significant contribution to theoretical and methodological knowledge in the scholarly field of sporting biography, and in policy and practice knowledge in sport. Theoretically, the influences on, the character of and the impact of sporting expertise are identified and elaborated through the integration of the psychological, sociological and sociocultural approaches outlined above. Methodologically, the study evaluates the innovativeness and effectiveness of combining a bioecological systems

framework with life history/life course approaches to designing and authoring a biographical story of an athlete's journey.

In recent years, Federal Government agencies in Australia were forced to digest reports about the perceived failure of Australian athletes at the London (2012) and Rio (2016) summer Olympic Games, and to consider future models of and directions for sports funding and player pathways. In this context, research into social and environmental influences that are significant in developing personal attributes and athlete success has developed meaningfully. The potential exists for several follow-up journal publications emanating from the research process itself and from this thesis.

Scouts attached to a variety of major sporting organisations attend sporting fixtures all over the world in an attempt to identify athletes with the potential to 'make it' at the top level in sports. They take a risk and sign athletes who they think have the essential combination of factors to be successful at the highest level in the sport to lucrative contracts with their organisations. Coaches and scouts talk about athletes who have the 'full package' of attributes, but little is written that quantifies the components of this desired 'full package'. As was noted above, Baseball scouts identify 'five tools' primarily in reference to positional players such as 'catcher'. A scout will rate a player's skill level for each of the 'five tools': hitting, power, fielding, arm strength and speed (Dieringer & Zuccarell, 2012). This research exposes the 'five tools' concept as naïve and encourages 'talent scouts' and sports administrators to expand the parameters under which they define and identify 'talent'. To succeed at the top levels of Baseball competition, athletes certainly need more than the 'five tools' historically used in talent identification. What makes up the 'full package' must be identifiable if it is to be trainable. The real question is, can these attributes and qualities be distilled and trained?

The story of David Nilsson and his success has not previously been told. Indeed, the *Courier Mail* journalist Frances Whiting referred to Nilsson as "Australia's most successful athlete you've probably never heard of" (2014, n.p.). The recording of Nilsson's story and the examination of his rise to fame in this thesis provides new historical research in Australian Baseball and in the study of the bioecological foundations and history of Australians in sport. At a minimum, Nilsson's story is worth analysing at the policy development and practices level of organisations, in order to evaluate the types of changes needed in approaches to talent development.

## **1.7 Elite, super-elite, professional and international defined**

A surprising discovery made during my research was the plethora of publications that identified as being concerned with one or more of elite, professional or international sports performance levels, but failed to define what they meant by these three labels in the context of their research. The definitions need to be clarified and established in this introduction because the use of the terms is contested space for several reasons. Readers must be enabled to understand the differences in performance levels and successes of athletes. In recent years, the term super-elite has been added to the dictionary of sports performance superlatives. Authors using this terminology refer to “athletes who had won multiple medals at major championships” (Hardy et al, 2017). Adding super-elite to the definitions improves clarity surrounding the level of performance and success that Nilsson achieved, but the research fails to set parameters beyond medals at international events – they do not even clarify that these medals need to be won in open age competition.

The word “expert” is often used when referring to elevated levels of performance, including sporting performance, but surely that is insufficient and underplays the levels referred to in this thesis. Ericsson and colleagues (Ericsson, 1996, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2014; Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson et al., 2006; Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996; Ericsson et al., 2007; Ericsson et al., 2007; Ericsson & Smith, 1991) have written extensively about expertise and expert performance, including sports performance, and they proffer a definition of ‘expert’ that includes success at an international level, but they set no parameters for the comparative judgement needed to categorise further success of the measure achieved by Nilsson.

### **1.7.1 Super-elite versus elite levels of athlete performance**

‘Elite athlete’ was anecdotally the most contested of these three descriptions. Many athletes claiming to be elite athletes compete at vastly diverse levels in sport and, for this reason, the decision was made to conceptualise a barometric standard with three components – ‘elite’, ‘professional’ and ‘international’ – and, later in the research, to extend elite to super-elite – to enable me to describe fully the level of athletic performance reached by athletes of Nilsson’s calibre. Throughout the time period spent in researching for and writing this thesis, the world of sport has continued to evolve, and, in the mid-2010s, the term ‘super-elite’ started to emerge in relation to sports performance. The criteria for ‘super-elite’ differ widely from study to study and sport to sport, with some defining consistent achievement at international level, and others going as far as to limit the term to Olympic gold medallists. This indecision

highlights the dilemma that needed to be resolved when describing the level of Nilsson's achievements. The loose use of terms such as 'elite' in reference to age groups as young as five years of age highlighted a need for the development of consistent terminology in sports related research, in order to avoid an artificial mythology (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2018) creeping into youth sport and youth sport development. There is more significant discussion about this terminology in Chapter 7, Thesis Conclusions. In the context of this thesis, Nilsson was identified as super-elite, having won medals at the highest levels internationally, and having played professionally for a number of years in a sport that is authentically international, as explained in Section 1.7.3.

Care must also be taken to differentiate between 'expert' and 'elite'. As with the other three terms, 'elite', 'professional' and 'international', the concept of 'expert' is contentious. I contend that one can be an expert in a physical activity or a movement or in the strategies needed for competent performance in sport, without reaching 'elite', 'professional' or 'international' levels of performance in competition. One can know how to perform with 'textbook technique' precision without being the best or even highly ranked. Those who can perform or who know expertly, but not at an elite level, could possibly make good teachers, instructors or coaches, and may have taken on these roles.

Every year, thousands of young athletes from countries spread around the globe, and a range of sports, present themselves for drafts and the signing of professional contracts. One must assume that these athletes have reached an elevated level of competence and performance - enough to take them to the next level in their chosen field. At this stage, they are probably already 'experts' in the performance of the skills and strategies of a sport, having achieved the specified 10,000 hours or 10 years or both. In Basketball, for example, athletes who have reached this stage undoubtedly can all shoot baskets, dribble the ball, pass and catch the ball, block an opponent, form a screen, do a lay-up and a jump shot, and defend – they can all perform without breaking the rules; they know the rules inside and out. There is little doubt that they can also routinely 'run the plays' and fulfil their roles in team strategies. Some of them will make it to the highest level of elite competition, signing professional contracts; they will compete and win professionally; some will also be chosen to represent their nations internationally and achieve success over an extended period and 'make it'; but most will not do so. This does not diminish the expertise of those who fail to reach the three barometers of the high performance being used in this research to benchmark the level of success of sports stars: 'super-elite', 'professional' and 'international'. They can still be experts; they simply do not possess, or have not managed to harness, the physical and psychological characteristics and

to respond to the interplay of bioecological influences and processes in the same way as those who do go on to succeed at the high-performance levels of super-elite, professional and international sports.

Starkes (1993) offered the most comprehensive and workable description of the high-performance benchmarks when she described the domains of expert performance as “consistent superior athletic performance over an extended period” (p. 6). She contended that, to obtain expert status, athletes must excel in four or more domains, and she defined the four minimum domains as “physical, technical, cognitive (tactical/strategic; perceptual/decision making), and emotional (regulation/coping; psychological)” (p. 6). The research and publication of work in the area of expert or high-performance sporting arenas are comprehensively dichotomised and analysed in both Chapter 3, the Literature Review, and Chapter 7, Thesis Conclusions.

One useful research source that does provide realistic and workable definitions and parameters is one devised by the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS). The AIS, under the auspices of the Australian Sports Commission (ASC), utilised the ‘Foundation, Talent, Elite, Mastery’ (FTEM) framework, which consists of four macro phases of the skill and performance development of sporting participants, which are further differentiated into 10 micro phases” (Australian Sports Commission [ASC], 2018). More information about this framework is included in Chapter 3, the Literature Review. In summary, they identify ‘Foundation,’ ‘Talent’ and ‘Elite/Mastery’ as three macro phases of athlete development, with three micro phases of ‘Foundation,’ four micro phases of ‘Talent,’ followed by two phases of ‘Elite’ and finally ‘Mastery’ (Australian Sports Commission [ASC], 2018, n.p.). All of the phases were of interest and significance in this research, but for the component of this introduction considering definitions, the elite and mastery phases were focal. The ASC defines Elite 1 as senior elite representation: “the E1 phase represents achievement of an elite athlete status through selection and representation at the highest senior levels of international or professional sport” (Australian Sports Commission [ASC], 2018, n.p.). The E2 phase is defined as the “achievement of medal-winning performances at peak competitions such as world championships, Olympic and Paralympic Games, world cups, or relevant professional league accolades” (Australian Sports Commission [ASC], 2018, n.p.). Mastery athletes are those who “achieve sustained success at E2 by repeating their wins or relevant accolades over multiple high-performance cycles (greater than four years)” (Australian Sports Commission [ASC], 2018, n.p.).

Demonstrating the difficulty of defining levels of expertise, the word ‘mastery’ was once used to define performance in the senior Physical Education syllabus (Queensland Studies Authority [QSA], 1998) assessment and exit criteria. The word ‘mastery’ is certainly not used in the same context by the ASC, and the ASC is not referring to the same caliber of athlete as that to which a criterion in senior schooling assessment refers; however, the ASC terms serve the purpose of setting parameters and establishing Nilsson’s place in the hierarchy of high-performance sport in an Australian context.

### **1.7.2 Professional levels of athlete performance**

For their research about elite and non-elite football players, Kavussanu et al. (2011) determined that ‘elite’ players are those who are ‘signed’ for a professional club at either their centre of excellence or a training academy, with ‘non-elite’ being defined as those players who play regularly for local club and/or school teams but who have not signed a contract to be paid by a professional club. This definition may work for some areas of research, but it is inadequate for my purposes and for the discussion of Baseball in an Australian context. To define ‘elite’ as professional eliminates many athletes who represent their country in a sport at the highest levels of international competition in events such as World Championships, World Games, Olympic Games, Intercontinental Cups, Commonwealth Games and the numerous other iterations of high-level sporting contest, but who are not ‘professional’ with a contractual obligation to a professional club or sports academy, nor are they earning a wage for doing this.

To explain at a very basic level, how can we compare an ‘elite’ (highly ranked), professional Australian Rules Football (ARF) player with any athlete who has competed on the international scene, with or against the best athletes from other countries across the world? Both athletes are considered by many pundits to be ‘elite’, and it is possible to concede that they have reached the top level of performance in the sport that they play. In the case of ARF and Baseball, it is like comparing apples with oranges. Athletes who are professional ARF players compete in the Australian Football League (AFL) and are indeed competent in their sport-specific skills and strategies. The best of these athletes has supreme levels of strength and conditioning, work ethic and output. On the other hand, a Baseball player may represent Australia at the Olympics Games and bring home a medal, but not be a ‘professional’. The physical attributes and psychological make-up of athletes from both sports may well be similar on the same test regime, completed in the context of their own sport. In this case, neither ‘elite’ nor ‘professional’ is adequate to define the difference between the sample athletes and the

arenas in which they compete, the opportunities for professional careers afforded to their sport and thus the magnitude of their achievements.

### **1.7.3 An international level of athletic performance**

What other measure can differentiate athletes from one another? Where they have played and against whom they have played are certainly points of difference. If one competes at an international or global level and reaches the top, with outstanding results, the achievement sets one apart from, and above, most other athletes. Therefore, when I refer to authentically ‘international or global’ sport, I am referring to any sport that is represented in a sizeable number of national federations affiliated to an international governing body, and that has a high level of participation in world or continental championships (Robinson, 2016), such as the sports of the Olympiad. Inclusion in the Olympics is again insufficient to define the absolute best sportspeople, although it comes close to doing so. In some sports, such as swimming, finishing on the podium at the Olympics certainly elevates the swimmer’s status to that of a successful athlete on the world stage – elite, international and probably professional, in that their careers are supported by government funding and swimming is their ‘job’.

But...Baseball itself has been in and out of the Summer Olympic Games program. Baseball flirted with the Olympics throughout the 20th century, often being showcased as a demonstration event, including at the Summer Games in ‘Baseball mad’ Seoul, South Korea in 1988. After a successful re-entry into the Summer Olympics in Seoul, Baseball was added as an official Olympic sport in 1992 for the Barcelona-hosted Summer Olympic Games, but was ousted again for London in 2012, in all probability because England did not have the land available to develop the facilities needed and would not have used the facilities post the Olympic period. How the facilities will be utilised after the Olympic Games is one of the defining criteria for the inclusion of a sport, since the Summer Olympics host cities of Athens (2004), Beijing (2008) and Rio de Janeiro (2016) were left with some costly ‘white elephant’ facilities.

Despite professional Baseball players being permitted to compete in the Olympics since 1986, they often do not do so, since the Olympics overlap with the MLB season. Some MLB organisations will not release their players for the Olympic period. As was noted above, for London in 2012, Baseball was dropped from the Olympic ticket; this was the first time since 1936 that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) shrank the number of sports (Grannan, 2018). The IOC cited the MLB’s unwillingness to alter its season as a significant factor for

dropping Baseball. The snub did not last, and in 2016 the IOC announced that Baseball would return to the Summer Olympics in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games.

Further commentary about the definition of ‘international or global’ is necessary to elevate Nilsson’s status to the level that is appropriate. The following data are used for comparative purposes only and are not meant to denigrate any sport or to diminish the achievements of the athletes. If we consider sports like Cricket and Netball, we can acknowledge the claims of ‘World Champions’ for the winners of World Championships and World Cups, but is there a fair comparison between the ‘world’ as defined by each sport? Both Cricket and Netball are legacies from colonial periods, with Netball still included in the Commonwealth Games and Cricket being played by large numbers in (British) Commonwealth or former (British) Commonwealth countries. Netball is played in significant numbers in a small number of Commonwealth countries. According to the International Netball Federation (INF) (2022), there are 38 member countries worldwide that are playing a sufficient number of regular international test matches (six matches over a rating period) to qualify for a world ranking.

According to the International Cricket Council (ICC) (2022), there are 106 member nations falling into two member categories: Full Members and Associate Members.

“**Full Members** are the governing bodies for cricket of a country recognised by the ICC, or nations associated for cricket purposes, or a geographical area, from which representative teams are qualified to play official Test matches” (ICC, 2022). There are 12 such member nations.

“**Associate Members** are the governing bodies for cricket of a country recognised by the ICC, or countries associated for cricket purposes, or a geographical area, which does not qualify as a Full Member, but where cricket is firmly established and organised - 94 Members” (ICC, 2022).

Sports are the masters of spin when it comes to publishing their participation numbers, requiring researchers to employ their critical inquiry skills and to delve more deeply to gain a clearer and more accurate comparison between sports. For example, while the ICC lists 11 nations in the East Asia Pacific region, only two of those nations, Australia and New Zealand, are full members, while in Europe the ICC lists 34 member nations, with only two of those nations being full members: England & Wales, and Ireland (ICC, 2022). In Asia, the ICC acknowledges 21 member nations, with five of those nations being full members: India,

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan (ICC, 2022). It will be interesting to watch future developments in Afghanistan to see if this Western influence can survive. The ICC lays claim to 17 members in the Americas, but only one of those nations, West Indies, is a full member. Cricket can claim to having some of the healthiest participation numbers of any sport because it is played in the heavily populated subcontinent countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (United Nations, [UN], 2022). In terms of population and population density, these four nations all reside in the top 10 list (United Nations [UN], 2015). Baseball is played in significant numbers in five of the most heavily populated nations, China, the United States, Japan, Brazil and Mexico, and in six of the nations that are included in the top 10 list of countries ranking highly in both total population (more than 20 million people) and population density (more than 250 people per square kilometre): China, Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea and the Philippines (United Nations [UN], 2022).

The World Baseball Softball Confederation (WBSC) is the world governing body for the sports of Baseball and Softball. It was established in 2013 through the merger of two former world governing bodies: the International Softball Federation (ISF), and the International Baseball Federation (IBAF). In 2013, the IOC recognised the WBSC as the sole competent global authority for the sports of Baseball and Softball. “The WBSC has 198 National Federation Members in 140 countries and territories across Asia, Africa, the Americas, Europe and Oceania and 13 Associate members” (World Baseball Softball Confederation [WBSC], 2022, n.p.). Moreover, “Professional and other significant national Baseball Leagues and organisations are included as Associate Members of the WBSC” (World Baseball Softball Confederation [WBSC], 2022, n.p.) only if they endorse and work in partnership with the WBSC and have enough members to be considered major sports in their respective countries. While the organisations are combined, the statistics about participation and the number of member nations are calculated and recorded separately. According to the WBSC website (accessed in February 2022), Baseball as an individual entity has 20 member nations in Africa, 32 member nations in the Americas, 26 member nations in Asia, 41 member nations in Europe and 14 member nations in Oceania (World Baseball Softball Confederation [WBSC], 2022). These numbers represent comprehensive coverage of the global continents and confirm that Baseball is an authentically international or global sport. The associate members in Baseball represent an additional substantial number of players. I must stress that these numbers represent active playing members. Much of what is published on the internet about popular sports in the world calculates popularity using a complex formula that includes spectators and is biased towards the sports played in the country of origin of the information.

This may seem a very convoluted discussion to have about a small number of definitions. However, I deemed that it was necessary to define these parameters to quantify the magnitude of Nilsson's achievements as an athlete and his place on the 'world of sport' stage. This discussion establishes the scale of Nilsson's success and provokes a consideration of the comparative achievements of 'sports stars', including other Sport Australia Hall of Fame inductees. An understanding of what differentiates Nilsson's achievements from those of some of his more famous compatriots is important to the discussion and conclusions of this thesis. It also underscores the significant contribution to the vault of knowledge that this thesis represents.

### **1.8 An overview of the thesis chapters**

This thesis consists of seven chapters. It shares the complete research journey, commencing with the initial conception of an idea, through the mire of formulating, analysing, evaluating and concluding that something worthwhile has been researched and achieved. From the first stumble into biographical storytelling, through the development of the final conceptual framework and research design, to the gathering, analysing and making meaning from the enormous wealth of data and literature, the research journey has been interesting and engaging. While there were changes in direction (and some misdirects), and various offshoots were added to the story, one thing has remained constant: the story of David Nilsson's extraordinary journey is one worthy of sharing, and I am pleased to play a part in this outcome.

Chapter 1 introduced the purpose of the research and the research question to be addressed, along with the scope and significance of the research. It also introduced Nilsson himself, with a brief overview of his achievements. In addition, the chapter included some information about the place of and importance of sport in society to confirm that this research will be useful and of interest. The introduction contained the definitions of 'elite', 'professional' and 'international' as they have been used in this thesis, and to set the scene for the level of sporting performance with which this research has dealt.

Chapter 2 is the story of Nilsson's sporting journey to this point of time in his life. It includes the statistics from his MLB career and statistics from other significant international competitions, in which Nilsson excelled. The chapter includes information about other Australian players who have played in the MLB. It also introduces information about the Nilsson Baseball dynasty in Queensland, with statistical data and commentary from Nilsson's brothers and some of his nephews who have signed professional contracts with MLB organisations.

Chapter 3 reviews the key literature that informed the main aspects of the research. These aspects include biographical storytelling, a number of factors in the development of both the physical and the psychological attributes and sport-specific skills of athletes, and bioecological theories and models of human development. This chapter also looks at significant environmental influences on initial and sustained participation in sport, the development of expertise and talent, and talent development frameworks and programs.

Chapter 4 considers the conceptual framework for the research and explains how a bioecological framework was combined with biographical storytelling to share David Nilsson's journey in the sport of Baseball. It outlines what a research-based sports biography can tell readers. This chapter also reveals more about me and my role as researcher. This entails consideration of a number of factors, including: my positioning in the research and in the Baseball communities in Queensland and Australia, together with my background and connections with the research; my epoch and positioning; my ontological beliefs; and, finally, my reflexivity - how my values, beliefs, acquaintances and interests have influenced my research or work. In addition, my epistemological reflexivity is considered in an attempt to identify the foundations of some of my relevant knowledge, and to ascertain if there are any negative implications of this prior knowledge for my conclusions. Axiology is also included and discussed in the context of the research.

Research design and methodology, including method, are addressed in Chapter 5. Initial discussion in this chapter centres on the choice to utilise qualitative research with a constructivist approach. The chapter considers the use of direct phenomenological sociology as a theoretical paradigm. The main focus in Chapter 5 is on the methodology and the collection of data. Before data collection could commence, it was necessary to complete and have approved an ethics application, and to consider the ethical issues involved in working with and observing people who were well-known to the researcher. The decisions around the selection of participants – how many and why they were selected, and how they were recruited to participate – are explained in this chapter. There is also a detailed outline of how the data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and the collection of artefacts – historical records, media stories and interviews, and playing statistics. Every person who was approached to be involved was willing and very generous with their time and recollections. Each of the player participants shared his own story in Baseball, including the highs and lows, and some of the heartbreaking disappointments.

Chapter 6 is concerned with the data analysis and interpretation of the corpus of data to answer the research question. Participant responses, observations and artefacts were

analysed into themes utilising the systems and proximal processes of the bioecological model for human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Nilsson's life course/life history was analysed and mapped against the bioecological systems, looking at the microsystem – family, values, identity; the macrosystem, including social and sporting communities; and the exo- and chronosystems, where the development of expertise and the 'athlete's tools' were applied to Nilsson's journey, along with systemic influences such as sports development programs and player pathways. Chapter 6 also considers the impact of playing and being involved with Baseball in the anglicised Australian culture and sporting landscape and examines the diasporas of professional sport and Nilsson himself – his resilience and resolution.

Chapter 7 considers the final outcomes and significance of the research. What is the significance of the answers to the research question, and what are the conclusions that can be drawn from the research? Attention is drawn to potential future applications of the research, along with suggestions as to who might find this information useful and pertinent and how they might use the information and in which type of environments.

## **1.9 Chapter Conclusion**

The intention of this chapter was to introduce the research purpose, the research question to be addressed and the concepts that were significant in the research and that are informative for the reader. In addition to these imperatives, I briefly introduced the reader to David Nilsson, the main focus of the thesis, and to some of his achievements. The place of sport in Australian society and in the wider global contexts is examined, emphasising the thirst for knowledge and new understandings in this significant field of interest. The introductory chapter also includes a summary of each chapter in the thesis, including the conceptual framework, the unique research design and the wealth of literature that has been written about sport and sports performance.

Discussion of each aspect of the research highlights the innovative approach used and underscores the importance of telling the story of David Nilsson's journey. While the store of research and literature related to sport is enormous, the overwhelming majority of the existing research is quantitative in nature and the personalisation so necessary to understanding athlete motivation, resilience and long-term success at the highest levels of performance is simply missing. All the athletes who have ever donned an Australian or professional sporting code uniform can talk about themselves to a biographer or write about themselves in an autobiography, and their stories will be interesting to a small audience. Through adding a

research focus and gathering data that construct a narrative around high performance sporting achievement, the story becomes useful, and the product and findings contribute knowledge that can be utilised by sports administrators, coaches and athletes in ways that can be beneficial.

## **CHAPTER 2 DAVID NILSSON'S BASEBALL JOURNEY**

### **2.1 Chapter introduction**

Chapter 2 is split into two distinct parts. Section 2.2 looks at the origins of Baseball and the popularity of Baseball in the USA, while Sections 2.3 and 2.3.1 explain the rules and the process of playing the game. Section 2.3.2 deals with the organisational structure of Baseball in the USA. These are considered important inclusions for Australian audiences owing to the lack of exposure that the sport and the athletes receive in Nilsson's home country. Sections 2.4 through to 2.5.7 catalogue Nilsson's playing journey and the story of his playing career from the early beginnings in Brisbane to the lofty stages of the MLB, and the podium at both the Intercontinental Cup and the Olympic Games. Sections 2.6 and 2.7 detail Nilsson's post-playing career forays into League ownership and coaching while Section 2.8 provides a brief insight into the immediate family Nilsson shares with his wife Amanda. Section 2.9 is the chapter conclusion. Retelling a Baseball player's career requires the inclusion of statistical data that are sourced from official records, and that cannot be paraphrased or altered in any way. The sources are acknowledged throughout the chapter, and terms are explained in the footnotes.

### **2.2 Baseball – America's 'favourite' pastime**

In a thesis about a Baseball player for an unfamiliar audience, it is essential to describe for understanding the sport of Baseball itself. As I noted below, I was able to make use of one participant to help to compile this 'simplified' version – a type of 'Baseball 101 for Beginners'. I have initially attempted to explain the sport from my perspective as a long-term observer, before leaving it to the expert to fill the gaps and to use the accepted terminology. Novices may find my version simpler to understand.

The origins of Baseball are murky, with a lot of mythology surrounding them. The game appears to have evolved from earlier bat-and-ball games popular in the United Kingdom and Western Europe, such as Stool Ball, Tip Cat, Pesapallo and Rounders (Carroll, 2007. p. 66). The evolution of Rounders into Baseball is popular theory debunked by Carroll (2007). His extensive research uncovered the information that "the earliest references to 'base ball' (so called) are early-to-mid eighteenth century" (p. 66), while Rounders has no historical reference prior to 1827. Another historical book, John Montgomery Ward's *BASE-BALL: How to Become a Player - with the Origin, History and Explanation of the Game*, originally published

in 1888, included the information that “the game was played in a simple form under the name ‘base ball’ in England and America as early as the eighteenth century” (Ward, 1888). Alexander Cartwright of the New York Knickerbockers was credited with drawing up the rules for modern day Baseball in 1845 (Onibalusi, 2017).

For many years, Abner Doubleday was credited with inventing the game, and the first game was believed to have taken place in Cooperstown, New York, the home of the MLB Hall of Fame. Historians now agree that neither Doubleday nor Cooperstown had anything do with the game’s origins. Modern Baseball’s actual roots seem to be in several similar bat-and-ball games that were played throughout the United States in the 19th century, with a version from the New York City area becoming popularised and spreading across the country during and after the Civil War. “Instead of denoting one founder of Baseball, the historiography has coalesced around a collection of men who advanced the game toward its modern version” (Arango, 2010, n.p.), along with Cartwright, Henry Chadwick, a pioneering journalist in scorekeeping and statistics. Renowned Baseball historian, John Thorn (2012), suggested there are others who should be added including Daniel Lucius Adams, a Knickerbockers player credited with establishing 90 feet as the distance between bases, and Louis Fenn Wadsworth, credited by some with setting the standards of nine players and nine innings.

It is reasonable to draw the conclusion that many Australians know very little about the game, about the role of the catcher or about the importance of being a successful hitter – both at an individual level and as a contribution to team success. It is also reasonable to assume that most non-Americans do not have the smallest inklings of how difficult it is to open just one season on the 25-man roster with an MLB team. Consider, then, how difficult it is to start several seasons on the 25-man roster, or to claw your way back to the 25-man roster after being on the injured list. Owing to this assumed ‘ignorance,’ I have gone into detail about Baseball and the structures of Baseball, in order to emphasise the magnitude of Nilsson’s successes in terms of both longevity and statistical outcomes.

*There is a difficulty in explaining Baseball to non-Americans that lies in the fact that Americans learn the game like other people learn their first language, so the knowledge is innate* (GP, interview, 17 January 2015). It is not something that happens consciously, from an independent and unencumbered starting point upon which subsequent learning builds, but instead through a passive and gradual seeping into the brain of many fragments from many sources over many years (Mahoney, 2016). This may be similar to the way in which Australians learn Netball or Cricket, but it must be said that Americans are submerged in Baseball in a

much more overt, continuous and enveloping cultural bombardment than Australians are with any sport. MLB has a long season with a lot of games, and every one of those games is televised.

Baseball participation and fandom, like many aspects of life, are all about the vocabulary of the discourse. If you join a conversation with Baseball fans, you will hear about signs, steals and sacrifices. One needs to be familiar with the vocabulary to join the discussion. Likewise, there are many things about Baseball that every fan knows to be true, and that have been true since ‘dinosaurs roamed the Earth’, yet they may not be written rules of the game. The three basic authorities of the sport are: the Official Baseball Rules - which provide the on-field rules of the game; the Major League Rules - which provide the off-field rules of the game; and the Basic Agreement - that is, the collective bargaining agreement between team owners and players, renegotiated approximately every five years (GP, interview, 17 January 2015). Understanding this was important for me when I was interviewing the former players, coaches and officials, and when I was observing the Baseball communities during games. The simple act of being comfortable with common discourse and terminology, and of being able to show an understanding of the game, meant that these communities embraced me.

### **2.3 Baseball - how to play**

In this section of the chapter, I use my own words to describe Baseball based on my learnings over the years of my peripheral involvement. This results in a Baseball explanation contributed by a non-playing ‘lay’ person. I have included quotations from one of the players who participated in the data collection interviews. This participant has made a career of preparing Baseball athletes, athlete development programs and coach accreditation programs at national and state levels; coaching high-performance Baseball at state, national and international levels; scouting for an MLB organisation; and working for government sporting institutions in the areas of both coach and athlete development. As a state and national representative player in Australia, he was consistently referred to as the greatest fundamentalist in Australian Baseball by ABC Baseball commentator Arthur Pagonis. The employment, playing and coaching achievements and experiences of this participant make him an ‘expert’ commentator.

The inclusion of this endorsing evidence may be an unnecessary step, but it does help to highlight the diverse levels of knowledge and understanding that can be applied in a sport.

The information about Baseball itself is included here because Baseball is one of the authentically international sports that receives little media exposure in Australia

From my perspective, Baseball is a more complex and nuanced game than most, with defensive strategies alone providing enough material for (another) PhD thesis. I need to reiterate that these are my words and my explanation. I did check the accuracy of my explanation with ‘experts’, and I have quoted one of them. It is not my intention to attempt to prove that Baseball is in any way superior to Cricket; however, comparisons with Cricket do place the rules of Baseball in a context that many people with family heritage emanating from the United Kingdom, South Africa, the West Indies or the subcontinent will understand. For example, what would the answer be if we asked, “To where or to whom does the fielder throw the ball after it is fielded?” In Cricket, this is a relatively easily answered question – the ball goes back to the bowler or is thrown at the wicket. In Baseball, the answer depends on several scenarios: the game score; the innings situation – which innings it is, how many outs have been made in the innings; how many runners are on base; where in the field the ball is hit; and a number of other scenarios that are too advanced and complex for this discussion.

In Cricket, when the ball is hit, in most instances the fielder returns the ball to the wicketkeeper or bowler with no pressure on the fielder or the throw because the batters cannot run, or score runs. Sometimes in Cricket, there is pressure on the throw because the batters are scoring runs, or because the batters have miscalculated and there is a chance of a ‘run out’. The fielder then throws at the wicket or to someone close to the wicket in an attempt to hit the bails, causing them to fall off the stumps, thus forcing the batter out. In Baseball, there is pressure on the fielder with almost every ‘in play’ throw – for example, to the cut off player; to the pitcher; to the base player; to home plate - unless the ball is ‘dead’ (not ‘in play’ - for example, over the fence, lost or damaged) or the fielding team has decided that there is ‘no play’ to be made. This decision is transmitted through the thought processes of players who know when a play is ‘on’ or ‘not on’. This knowledge is not innate but learned over many seasons of participation as a player or a spectator, but no-one needs to yell instructions because the players know what has to be done.

Starting from the simplest point, Baseball is a bat-and-ball game played between two teams with nine ‘on-field’ players each. One team is the offensive team (which is batting, and trying to score runs), and the other is the defensive team (which is fielding and trying to prevent the opposition from scoring runs). Teams take turns to bat or field in a part of the game called

an ‘innings’. The batting team attempts to score runs by hitting a ball, pitched by a player called the pitcher.

*Each ‘play’ begins with the pitcher delivering the ball to the batter (hitter), who tries to strike the ball with enough force and in the right direction to get it past the fielders, so that he or she can reach first base safely. (GP, interview, 17 January 2015)*

The game is played on a ‘diamond’: the shape is visible when the field is viewed from an overhead perspective, and home plate is at the bottom, with two lines (foul lines) running 90 degrees to one another for a distance of 300 to 330 feet (as the official rules are controlled in the USA, imperial units are used). Joining these two lines in a convex arc, and thus completing the diamond shape, is the home run fence. The ground within the right angle formed by the foul lines, even beyond the home run fence, is called ‘fair territory’, while that space outside the foul lines is called ‘foul territory’.

A base is placed 90 feet from home plate on each line, and another is located at the intersection of the two lines drawn into fair territory at right angles from these. In conjunction with home plate, these three bases thus form a square. Viewed from above again and moving in an anti-clockwise direction from home plate, the bases are referred to as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> base respectively.

The ball used is the same weight and size as a cricket ball, although white in colour and stitched in the same pattern as can be observed in a tennis ball. The batter, or hitter, uses a round, club-shaped bat, between 32 and 36 inches in length and weighing 31 to 36 ounces, and made of wood, in professional ranks, or various composite materials at an amateur level.

The object of Baseball is to score more runs than the opposition. In order to score a run, offensive players must complete an anti-clockwise circuit of the bases, touching each base in sequence, and then touch home plate before they are forced ‘out’ by the fielding (defensive) team, and before three outs have been made on their team (the batting team) in that inning. Only when home plate is reached in this manner does a player score. A run is therefore quite difficult to achieve – in a quality game, six runs will usually be sufficient to win.

Players on the batting team take turns hitting the ball pitched by the pitcher, who is a member of the opposition or fielding team. The pitcher stands on the pitcher’s mound and steps one foot or the lead leg from the pitcher’s plate to pitch the ball. The batter swings a bat at pitches deemed strikes (because they cross home plate inside the strike zone) and tries not to swing the bat at pitches deemed balls (these balls cross the home plate vicinity but are outside

the strike zone). *The pitcher's role is by far the most critical to the outcome of a game, and generally, in the battle with the hitter, the odds are in a pitcher's favour. The pitcher must start from a stationary position but may otherwise use any means they like to propel the ball from the throwing hand toward the plate (GP, interview, 17 January 2015).*

The catcher (Nilsson in the case of this thesis) squats behind the 'plate', between the batter and the umpire. The catcher and the pitcher direct play in consultation with each other, through a series of signals that help the pitcher to communicate to the catcher where each pitch will be placed. This also gives the catcher a good indication of where the ball will be received if the batter fails to make contact. In this respect, the catcher's role is also critical. If a catcher fails to catch a pitched ball that has not been hit – be it a 'strike' or a 'ball' – the baserunners can advance around the diamond, bringing them closer to scoring a run. The catcher also attempts to catch any ball that is hit into 'foul territory' and is within reach, because this means that the batter is out. This can be crucial, and catchers sometimes dive into the dugout to catch these foul balls.

*Power, movement, and deception are the key weapons in the pitcher's arsenal. Elite power pitchers throw at up to 105 mph [168 kph], and consistently above 95 mph [152 kph]. This gives the hitter little time to recognise the location of the pitch and deliver the 'meat' of the bat to that location on time. Additionally, thrown Baseballs often travel with considerable rotation, causing them to deviate in the air, even at high velocities, and most pitchers can vary the delivery slightly to make the pitch curve in the opposite direction to the fastball. Some pitchers are able to vary their delivery so that, even if they do not throw extremely hard or with much movement, they are able to upset the hitter's timing and induce weak contact or deceive them into swinging at unreachable pitches. (GP, interview, 17 January 2015)*

For catchers, this means being agile and fast to react, so that no ball escapes past their gloves or their bodies. If the ball does escape or pass the catcher, any baserunners can advance around the bases and sometimes even cross home plate to score a run while the catcher is retrieving the ball. The performance of the catcher is crucial in every game because the catcher is the first and last line of defence. Catchers can catch a batter out at home plate before the batter has a chance to run, and they can stop runners from scoring by blocking them from reaching home plate safely, or by catching the ball at home plate when the runner is a 'forced runner'. They can also 'throw' baserunners out, and thus prevent them from advancing to the base to where they were attempting to run. Nilsson had this positional responsibility in his

Major League career and also with the national team from Australia, along with the other major responsibilities of playing catcher.

The batter is aiming to get ‘on base’, and then to advance around the first, second and third bases to reach home plate and to score one run. The batter can get ‘on base’ through hitting the ball safely into ‘fair territory’ without its being caught on the full, or through ‘out-psychoing’ the pitcher and watching four pitched ‘balls’ pass somewhere near home plate but outside the ‘strike zone’.

*As a rule, hitters must hit the ball hard if they are to reach a base safely, as it is exceedingly difficult to penetrate the defence. Although the catcher is behind the hitter (like a wicketkeeper), the other eight defensive players are all in the 90 degrees that make up fair territory and, with one rare exception, a hitter or runner cannot advance if the ball is hit into foul territory. Moreover, a hitter is obliged to run if the ball is hit into fair territory. To make things more difficult still, each defensive player uses a highly specialised glove that makes it a great deal easier for them to secure the ball than using bare hands. (GP, interview, 17 January 2015)*

To advance successfully around the bases to home plate to score, the baserunner (as they become known after reaching first base) is aided by his teammates (the other batters) and hindered by the fielding team, including the pitcher, catcher, first, second and third base players, the short stop and right, centre and left outfielders (Figure 1). A baserunner’s advance can also be hindered by the ‘failure’ of the batting team to keep their team ‘at bat’ long enough for the baserunner to score a run by touching home plate.

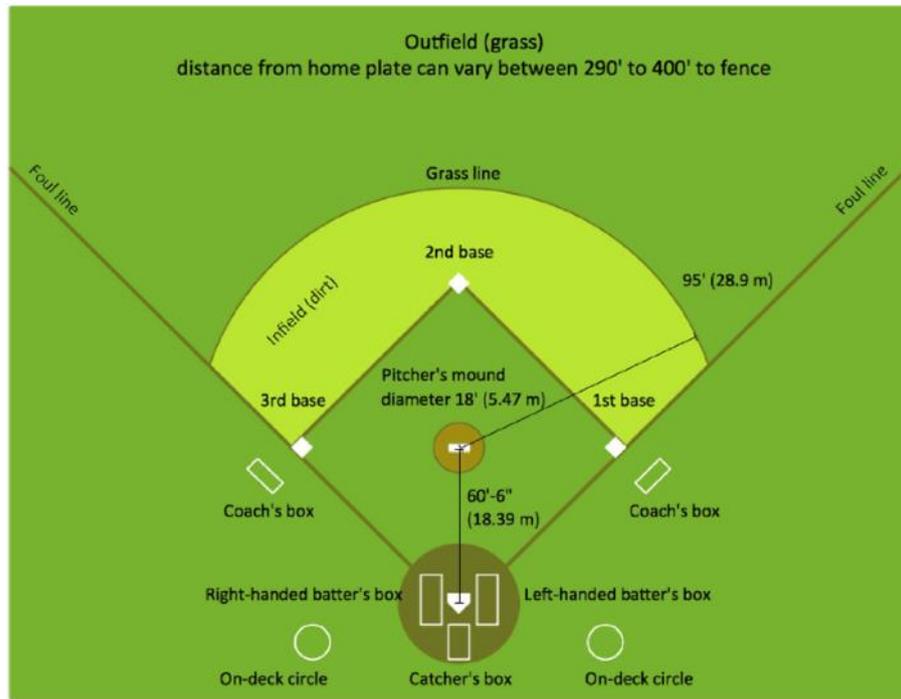


Figure 1. Coloured Baseball Field. <https://www.conceptdraw.com/How-To-Guide/baseball-colored-baseball-field>

The fielding team attempts to prevent the batter from making it to first base and becoming a baserunner.

*The fielders can prevent the batter from reaching first base in one of three ways:*

- 1) catching the hit ball on the full (before it touches the ground);*
- 2) fielding the ball and throwing it to first base so that a teammate can touch that base, while in possession of the ball, before the batter/runner can touch the base;*
- 3) tagging the batter/runner with the ball before they reach first base. If the ball is hit some distance, and the hitter wishes to, he or she may try to reach second or third base, or even home plate, but can be put out by being tagged by a fielder in possession of the ball if they are not in contact with a base. Those who choose to remain safely on a base give their teammate, the next hitter, a chance to hit the ball and enable the previous batter to advance around the bases towards home plate or possibly score a run by crossing home plate. (GP, interview, 17 January 2015).*

There are other ways that a hitter can be ‘put out’.

*Other means by which a hitter can be dismissed are a fly ball (where the batted ball is caught before touching the ground) and the strikeout. In the latter, a pitcher is able to accumulate a total of three strikes on the hitter by either inducing him or her to swing and miss the ball or pitching the ball through the strike zone [an imaginary rectangle that is the width of home plate and extends vertically from the bottom of the hitter’s kneecaps to the bottom of the sternum], without the hitter making contact with the ball. (GP, interview, 17 January 2015)*

A player on the batting team who reaches a base safely and becomes a baserunner can attempt to advance to subsequent bases during their teammates’ turns at bat in the following circumstances: on a safe hit, on a wild pitch or throw, on an error by the fielding team or by ‘stealing’ a base.

The teams change from batting to fielding, and vice versa, whenever the fielding team forces three players from the batting team out of play. One turn ‘at bat’ for both teams constitutes a completed inning.

*Hitters bat in a circular batting order from one through to nine, determined by the manager [head coach], with the order starting again after the number nine hitter. The better hitters will bat higher in the order, as they will often come to the plate more frequently in a game, and certainly over a season. Hitters can also reach first base by drawing a base-on-balls: by facing four pitches that neither pass through the strike zone nor induce them to swing. (GP, interview, 17 January 2015)*

A game is composed of nine innings, and the team with the greater number of runs at the end of the nine completed innings is the winner. In the ‘normal’ form, Baseball has no game clock, although the intent is that all games end at the completion of the ninth inning. In Baseball, each player has a turn ‘at bat’ multiple times in any game, as the batters simply bat in turn, from the top to the bottom of the batting order (1-9) on repeat throughout the game.

*In the words of a former player, Baseball is a game where the ultimate result rests on the accumulated impact of the contests between the hitters and the pitcher. An ineffective pitcher, who cannot consistently either induce weak contact with the bat, or beat the bat entirely, will permit the offensive hitters to hit the ball hard with greater frequency, and thus tip the balance in the offense’s favour. (GP, interview 17 January 2015)*

The role that the catcher plays in this contest between pitcher and batter is pivotal. The catcher controls each pitch after release from the pitcher's hand, particularly when no contact is made with the bat, or when contact is made that sends the ball into foul territory where it is reasonable to assume that a catch can be made that would put the batter out. The catcher also controls any throw to a base that is an attempt to put out the batter who is running to first base or beyond.

*The role of the other players in the team, collectively called 'position players', is two-fold: they must contribute to some degree to both offence and defence. These are two quite separate skill sets, and a player who excels at both, like Nilsson, is highly valued. In addition to the catcher, whose function is to receive pitches, there are four players [infielders] distributed evenly around the infield [the zone in the vicinity of the bases, out to about 40m distance from home plate], and three outfielders [who defend the much larger area between the infield and the home run fence]. (GP, interview, 17 January 2015)*

The catcher works closely with the other infield players to ensure that advancing baserunners are 'put out' before they reach the base safely. The catcher needs to be doubly alert, firstly to glove the ball and then to make an accurate throw to the appropriate base to enable the player at the base to put the baserunner out in the most efficient way. This 'play' is made to stop the advancing baserunner from reaching a position in the infield from where he or she might score a run on the next successful hit.

*Assembling a high-quality team is a matter of finding the ideal balance between offence and defence. Certain defensive positions are considered so important that a player's offence is not prioritised. These are those positions found "up the middle", because they are required to perform more defensive duties: the catcher, the two middle infielders and the centre fielder [who patrols the middle of the outfield, the largest portion of the whole field]. In contrast, the corner infielders and corner outfielders must provide offence if they are to justify their positions. Of course, the ideal team is composed entirely of players who both hit and field very well, but, in reality, even the best teams do not achieve this. (GP, interview, 17 January 2015)*

Nilsson did achieve this as an individual player. He could hit the ball and was also a reliable defensive player at his favoured catcher position.

### 2.3.2 Baseball organisational structure in the United States

This information is included to demonstrate the level of commitment, tirelessness, perseverance and resilience essential to a successful career in the MLB. The whole experience and the scrutiny are exhausting, as this quotation from Nilsson demonstrated:

*I did not intend to retire. [Nilsson retired early from MLB at the age of 29.] I just needed a short break of six to eight weeks because I was mentally exhausted and fatigued from the responsibility and the attention 24 hours per day, seven days per week, all year 'round. Maybe I also had a bit of depression. I probably needed a mentor. If I had this time over, I would go on a two-month holiday to declutter my head. I needed to find some space to decompress. I had lost all interest (DN, interview, 1 August 2017).*

The MLB season schedule consists of 162 games for each of the 30 teams in the American League (AL) and National League (NL), played over approximately six months, from the start of April to the end of September - a total of 2,430 games (MLB, 2018), not including post-season games. The 'Post-Season' occurs after the regular season and includes all of the financially lucrative final series' games, taking virtually one whole month and involving all the 'play-off' games (elimination series) that ultimately decide which two teams will play in the 'World Series' over a best of seven games, to determine the MLB Champions for a season. During the regular season, there are also special occasion series and games, such as the 'All Star' game in which Nilsson played.

It is the need to maintain and impress the fan base, coupled with the television and other media exposure, which place the players under constant scrutiny and pressure to produce results that generate ticket sales and spectator numbers. In any list of sporting audiences and spectator numbers, Baseball ranks highly owing to the simple fact that more games are played and there are more leagues than in many other sports. Leagues are competitions and vary in size, level of competition and the basis of compilation. For example, the Australian Baseball League is a semi-professional/professional competition based in Australia that involves teams from each mainland state capital city, one from Canberra, one from Auckland and one from the Republic of Korea (which is based in Geelong, Victoria).

In a table of the top 15 ranked men's leagues in the world in terms of total spectator attendance, Baseball ranks 1<sup>st</sup> (MLB, USA), 2<sup>nd</sup> (NPB, Japan), 6<sup>th</sup> (Minor LB, AAA, USA), 11<sup>th</sup> (Minor LB, AA, USA) and 13<sup>th</sup> (KBO League, South Korea) (ESPN, 2017). The number

of games in a regular MLB season in the USA is listed as 2,430 (as was noted above). Baseball takes out the first three spots in the number of games played in sports in a regular season, with Minor League Baseball AAA on 2,034 and Minor League Baseball AA on 1,975. The next ranked sport is National Hockey League (NHL), USA and Canada (Ice Hockey), with 1,271 games. The number of games pushes attendance figures for the regular season to the top of the table (ESPN, 2017). Major League and Minor League Baseball, along with some of the independent and county leagues, do not have only a regular season; they also have pre-season and post-season, and they open the gates to spectators during ‘Spring Training’, ‘Instructional League’ and other opportunities, such as ‘Pitchers and Catchers’. Minor League Baseball (MiLB) “is a hierarchy of professional Baseball teams that are affiliated with MLB” (probaballinsider.com, 2018). Each MLB team “has their own network of minor league teams (sometimes called ‘farm teams’ or ‘farm leagues’) which are used for player development” (probaballinsider.com, 2018). Nearly every Baseball player who is called up to the MLB has played MiLB. There are several levels of MiLB:

1. **AAA or triple A** is the highest MiLB level, and where players are most likely to be called up to the parent Major League team.
2. **AA or double A**
3. **Class A advanced or ‘High A’**
4. **Class A, or ‘Low A’**
5. **Class A short season or ‘short season’**
6. **2 Rookie ball teams** – these teams usually play between 70 and 80 games in a season. This is where newly drafted players often start their pro careers.”

(probaballinsider.com, 2018)

For citizens of the USA, the pathway to an MLB appearance is to be drafted straight “out of high school, junior college, or college, in as high a round as possible” (probaballinsider.com, 2018). Any Australian trying to break into professional Baseball must be scouted and offered a free agent deal. Once an Australian player is ‘signed’ to an MLB organisation, the journey to being elevated to play in the MLB begins with transnational migration and cultural change. Alternatively, Australians can independently fund a trip to the United States to play in independent leagues or ‘College ball’ and hope to be scouted from there (GP, interview, 17 January 2015). After the minor leagues, players can be promoted to

the '40-man roster' and the '25-man roster'. The 25-man roster is a full roster of active Major League players in an organisation. A typical 25-man roster will have a combination of 12 position players and 13 pitchers or 12 pitchers and 13 position players. The 40-man roster includes a combination of players on the 25-man roster, the 7- and 10-day injured lists, the bereavement/family medical emergency list and the parental leave list, as well as some Minor Leaguers. Theoretically, players on this list are the next players to be called up to 'the Show'. It's a long way to the top...and this chapter now retells the story of Nilsson's journey to that pinnacle, commencing with Section 2.4, Who is David Nilsson?

## **2.4 Who is David Nilsson?**

"David Wayne Nilsson was born on December 14, 1969, in Brisbane, the capital of the state of Queensland, Australia. He is the fourth of Tim and Patricia Nilsson's [both deceased] four sons" (Costello, 2013, n.p.). The family of six siblings also includes two daughters, who did not play Baseball but who 'tagged' along with the family until they were old enough to be working part-time or to stay at home alone (NP, interview, 27 October 2015). The four sons followed in their father's footsteps in playing Baseball. Their father's influence on and legacy in this Baseball space were substantial and pivotal in Nilsson's career.

Tim Nilsson was a printer and, 10 years before Nilsson's birth, Tim started 'Bros Nilsson Printco' in Milton, Brisbane in 1959 (NP, interview, 27 October 2015). The family continues to own and operate the business, which was forced to relocate after the 1974 floods in Brisbane and is now located in Brendale, Brisbane. The business now trades as Dingo Print, in acknowledgement of the 'Aussie' nickname bestowed on Nilsson in his time with the Milwaukee Brewers. Nilsson is the major investor/owner and Managing Director (NG, interview, 30 January 2015). His siblings jokingly labelled him an "afterthought" because they were born in quick succession, and he arrived several years later.

Being born later into a Baseballing family may well have proved advantageous in the development of his expertise. This lucky stroke of birth order and chronology certainly entrenched Nilsson in the Baseball culture in Brisbane and Queensland from an early age and contributed to his love of the game and the development of his expertise.

Nilsson is part of an Australian Baseball clan. He is the third of the four Nilsson brothers to be contracted or 'signed' to an MLB organisation in the United States. Bob, Gary and David each represented Australia at an International level. The four Nilsson brothers

played in the various formats of national Baseball Leagues in Australia. Nephews Jay Nilsson (Bob's son) debuted in the minor leagues in 2006; Mitch Nilsson (Gary's son) and Daniel Nilsson (Ron's son) represented Australia at the Youth World Championships, and both continue to play in the Australian Baseball League for the Brisbane Bandits – a team managed by their uncle David Nilsson. Mitch Nilsson played in Single A in the United States after being signed by the Cleveland Indians. He is currently in the national team, 'Team Australia', a team also coached by his uncle David, and he competed in Australia's first appearance at the 'Premier 12' competition. The relationship between this extended family and Baseball is certainly unusual in Australia.

There is no doubt that Nilsson is a highly accomplished Australian Baseball player who achieved significant success on the world stage. Arguably the most successful Australian player in MLB history, he ended his Major League career on 3 October 1999 with 837 games played, 789 (safe) hits, 105 home runs and a .284 career batting average. The well-regarded USA MLBMLB almanac *The Bleacher Report* (2011) named Nilsson the best catcher in Milwaukee Brewers history. Nilsson was part of the first all-Australian battery<sup>3</sup> in Major League history when he caught to Victorian Graeme Lloyd, pitching for the Brewers. Australian Baseball analysts Flintoff and Dunn (2011) wrote that "David Nilsson owns the biggest profile in Australian Baseball history" (pp. 34-48). In the Australian Baseball League, Nilsson set numerous records. He accumulated these achievements despite his career being sidelined for lengthy periods owing to foot, shoulder and knee injuries, and Ross River fever (DN, interview, 17 July 2012).

After his retirement from MLB at the relatively youthful age of 29, Nilsson led a group that purchased the Australian Baseball League, to keep it afloat under a new name and structure. Nilsson has been heavily involved in several attempts to form and retain a successful national league of Baseball in Australia. He continues to be involved in coaching in Australia from junior club 'ball'<sup>4</sup> to the Australian Baseball League level. He had successfully led the Brisbane Bandits to four Australian Baseball League (ABL) championship wins in four successive years: 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. He was the first coach to achieve the 'threepeat'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In Baseball terminology, a 'battery' refers to the combination of Pitcher and Catcher on one team.

<sup>4</sup> 'Ball' is a shortening of Baseball as in "Let's go down to the 'ball park'". 'Play ball' is used to commence play and to restart play after a break: 'play ball'.

<sup>5</sup> Threepeat – means to repeat something three times. It appears to be a corruption of 'repeat'.

in ABL history. In the 2018/2019, Nilsson was successful in taking the Brisbane Bandits to a fourth title, defeating the Perth Heat in a contest between the two most successful teams in the Australian Baseball League history. Winning four national league titles in consecutive years placed him amongst the greats of Queensland team sport coaches.

## **2.5 Nilsson – career chronology**

Many young Australian Baseball players aspire to sign contracts with professional Baseball organisations in the United States. It is an exceedingly long journey from initial participation in the sport to that first signing of a contract with a Major League organisation, and an even longer journey to an actual ‘career’ in MLB, especially a career in the starting line-up for an MLB team. Nilsson achieved a career as a starter (a player in the starting line-up for each game) as a position player, and that is something unique in Australian Baseball circles. Some came before him and stayed more years than he did in the MLB, but no other Australian player can claim Nilsson’s length of time as a starter with a Major League team.

*Regarded as Australia's best-ever MLB player, Nilsson finished his MLB career with a .284 batting average, 105 home runs and 470 runs batted in. He created history in 1999 when he became the first Australian to be named an MLB All-Star after finishing with a .309 batting average in 115 games for the Brewers. He remains the only position player ever named from Australia for an All-Star Game. (USA Today, 2018, n.p.).*

Nilsson’s career can be broken down into several different periods of time, each marking a transition in his career or a transition between countries and cultures.

### **2.5.1 Nilsson chronology - the early years**

Nilsson started playing Baseball because his family was immersed in the world of Baseball before he was born. He simply followed suit. He painted a story of the younger ‘kids’ having fun at the ground while the adults were busy playing, officiating, scoring, coaching or working in the canteen. This time spent with other ‘kids’ who loved the unstructured play, with no adult or bossy older sibling interference, developed their skills so that, by the time that they were old enough to pull on a uniform in an official competition, they had skills that other ‘kids’ of the same age had not had the chance to develop.

This advantageous start in the game, taken into competition, makes these children stand out. They are praised and recognised as being ‘good’, and this is a catalyst for more serious involvement, in that it motivates these children to ‘invest’ and stay involved in the sport. They go on to be selected in representative teams, where they develop more advantageous skills than their non-representative player teammates. The representative players work with better coaches and attend more practices. They play more games, at a higher level, and they become better players. This is a great outcome for the players who stand out when they are young, but my thesis conclusions discuss the damaging impact that this process has on ‘depth’ in the rank and file membership of a sport, and often on the ‘early developers’ themselves, in addition to the exclusion at an early age of ‘late developers’ who may go on to be the best athletes.

Nilsson did indeed stand out from an early age, and he began playing representative Baseball at a younger age than most children. “Dave started with Tee Ball in the U/9s, then went on to the junior levels of U/11s, U/13s and U/15s” (Clark, 2003, p. 90). Lismore Baseball stalwart Reg Baxter was Nilsson’s coach when he played in the Queensland U/12 state baseball team. Reg remembered being impressed by Nilsson, saying that he had *something special*. “He was a porky little bloke with bowlegs and three foot two high, but chocker block full of confidence. You could see he was going to make it because he had the determination” (Clark, 2003, p. 90). Nilsson represented Brisbane and Queensland from the U/13s continuously until he moved into the Queensland team for the Claxton Shield at the age of 16.

A partial record of Australian Schoolboys Baseball included on the now defunct Australian Baseball League Alumni (ABLA) website included Nilsson on several lists: “Players who have competed in Interstate Secondary Schools Baseball Championships and signed Professional Baseball Contracts; Players who have played at the Australian Secondary Schools Baseball Championship and also in the Claxton Shield and/or Australian Baseball League”, and includes Queensland as runners up in 1991, the last year that Nilsson played. It is worth remembering that Nilsson left school aged 14 years and 9 months and signed a professional contract at 17 years of age, an age when most of the other players on these lists were still at school and playing in these championships. Baseball has been played in schools in Australia since the early 1900s. Another noteworthy record is that, in New South Wales, the longest running State-wide Knockout for schools is the Proud Shield Baseball competition. “It began in 1908 and was won by Fort Street High” (ABLA, 2010, n.p.).

Nilsson played for Australia as a junior, but he was advanced to the open age category at such an early age that his international career as a junior was limited. He recalled playing at a national level in representative U/13 teams at the age of nine.

*I played rep[resentative] Baseball at nine – Brisbane Metro North U/13, and Qld U/13. Had success in Baseball all the time. There were small numbers and less talent. I had skills that other kids didn't have. Some kids had better body control, but I was always taller and stronger. (DN, interview, 30 June 2010)*

In 1985, Queensland won the U/16 National Baseball championships with Nilsson as catcher. In 1986, Nilsson was a first year U/18 state team player with Steve Gilmore as coach. Gary Nilsson came back from the United States to take on the role of pitching coach, with Lyle Brown as assistant coach. Patricia Nilsson was the team scorer. Steve remembered his thoughts on Nilsson:

*I thought he was good before the tournament, but I didn't know how good until play started. He put on a hitting display throughout the tournament. He was great at RBIs [runners batted in] and in clutch situations<sup>6</sup>. At that stage, Dave used to have Patricia drive to him to Holloway [field] to watch A Grade strategies and plays. He was a real student of the game. I gave him one game off and, when the game got tight, I noticed him putting on his cleats ready to come into the game and hit. (Steve Gilmore interview, 30 January 2014)*

Queensland won the U/18 nationals in 1986, and *we went on a two week trip with Steve Gilmore, Lyle Brown, and Gary Nilsson* as team management (DN interview, 30 June 2010).

As a teenager, Nilsson grew to six'3" (190.5 centimetres) and 185 lbs (84 kilograms), a 'handy' size for a Baseball player. Years of practice in the skills of the game and his height were advantageous. Nilsson also had considerable shoulder width. He was always competent with the bat and had a 'good arm'. These physical attributes, combined with his sport-specific skills, made Nilsson an attractive prospect. He moved quickly through the youth ranks in Queensland, and during the summer of 1986 he toured the United States with the Queensland Rams State Baseball team under the watchful eye of the coach at that time, Mike Young. After the tour, Nilsson stayed in Chicago with Young's parents and played with semi-professional team the Park Ridge (Illinois) Orioles.

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<sup>6</sup> Clutch situations are crucial or pivotal points in a game where something extraordinary or very effective is needed to push a game to victory.

*“I played in the Claxton Shield when I was 16, with Mike Young as coach in the 1986/87 season. The Queensland Rams travelled to the West Coast of the USA on a Baseball tour, playing a variety of teams in different Leagues. At the end of the tour, Mike invited me to stay on and live with his parents in Chicago and to play semi-professional Baseball.”* (DN, interview, 30 June 2010)

During this stay, Nilsson was watched by a number of scouts and “*was about to sign with Dave Nelson, form coordinator with Oakland, before John Galloway trumped the deal and signed me for the Brewers*” (DN, interview, 30 June 2010). Milwaukee Brewers scouts, Kevin Greatrex and Bill Castro, had first identified Nilsson as a genuine ‘prospect’. Kevin Greatrex was of note as one of the first two Australians to sign with an MLB franchise. He played with the Wytheville Reds and the Tampa Tarpons, two minor-league affiliates of the Cincinnati Reds (Baseball Reference, 2018). Milwaukee’s scouting director, Dan Duquette (the future general manager of the Montreal Expos and the Boston Red Sox) said,

“He was just 16 then and was playing against guys 24-25. He has a good arm and is a natural left-handed hitter with some power. David’s amateur background is limited, but we think we have a chance to make him into a player. And he can go back to Australia in the winter and play.” (Haudricourt, 1987. p. 3)

Nilsson was 17 years old when the Milwaukee Brewers signed him in January 1987 as an amateur free agent. After he had signed and before he left Australia for ‘extended spring training’ in the United States, Nilsson helped the Queensland Rams to victory in Australia’s National Baseball Championships, the Claxton Shield. Nilsson won the batting award, ‘the Helm’s Award’ and ‘Rookie of the Year’ award.

Nilsson made his professional debut that year with the Helena Brewers. He batted .394 for the 55 game season, which ranked him third in the Pioneer League in batting average. Nilsson was still being billed as a switch hitter at that time, and he was listed as such on his Baseball cards until 1993. Nilsson himself and the archives record that he batted only as a ‘lefty’ in the ‘big leagues’. Milwaukee started him at catcher from the beginning, sensing his potential in the position. He was omitted from the league ‘All-Star Team’ at catcher that year, an honour that went to Frank Colston, who topped Nilsson’s batting average by just .003. At the time, *Baseball America* rated Nilsson the number two prospect in the league (Costello, 2013, n.p.).

### **2.5.2 Nilsson chronology - 'A' ball**

In 1988, Nilsson underwent the first of many knee surgeries, and he was unavailable for the Claxton Shield finals. That Spring, the Brewers moved him up to Beloit in the Class A Midwest League, and the teenage Nilsson played full season 'A' Ball with the Beloit Brewers (1989 Baseball Guide), and he hit “.223/.310/.310” (p. 456), with 4 homers and 41 RBIs. He was recovering from surgery and took some time to adjust to the move.

He followed the Beloit Brewers season playing with the Stockton Ports of the California League (high Class A) for the summers of 1988 and 1989. He improved his batting lines from the previous season and finished the season with “.244/~.317/.335” (Baseball Almanac, 1990, p. 148). He also won praise for his defence from Tom Haudricourt, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* baseball columnist, who did note, however, that, “after seeing Nilsson at Beloit and in Stockton the first year, the Brewers weren't sure if they had a big-league prospect or a mere novelty” (Haudricourt, 1991, p. 2). Nilsson went on to prove that he was both: a big-league prospect and an Australian.

### **2.5.3 Nilsson chronology - a significant improvement**

In 1990, Nilsson returned to Stockton, where his batting line was .290/.362/.426 (Baseball Guide, 1990, p. 418). Stockton won the California League title, and Baseball America rated him the league's 8th-best prospect (Baseball Almanac, 1991, p. 142).

Nilsson returned to the United States for the 1991 season, when he played for the El Paso Diablos and hit “.418/~.475/.598 in 65 games at the AA [double A] level” (Baseball Almanac, 1991, p. 110). He was promoted to the AAA (triple A) team, the Denver Zephyrs, and he hit “.232/~.348/.347” (Baseball Almanac, 1991, p. 110). Nilsson did not qualify because he had not played enough games. Had he qualified, he would have led the Texas League in average by 54 points (Baseball Almanac, 1991, p. 110). Nilsson was named a Texas League 'All-Star' at catcher, and “Baseball America named Nilsson the league's number four prospect after Rodriguez, Royce Clayton and Raul Mondesi” (Baseball Almanac, 1991, pp. 212-213). “His .366 composite average led the affiliated minor leagues” (Baseball Almanac, 1991, p. 187). Milwaukee ended Nilsson's season early because he was experiencing problems with his left shoulder. He underwent shoulder surgery on his non-throwing left shoulder in August that year (Haudricourt, 1991). This meant that he missed a “September call-up” (Baseball Almanac, 1991, p. 187). He was rated “Milwaukee's number two prospect behind Tyrone Hill” (Baseball Almanac, 1993, p. 126). MLB manager, Tom Trebelhorn, said that “he has matured nicely

physically, and also as a player. He has shown tremendous improvement” (Haudricourt, 1991, p. 2). Former big-league catcher and coach, Andy Etchebarren, added, “No question about it, he’s a legitimate prospect. Not just a chance prospect, but a legitimate one. He listens and works hard – that’s how he has made improvement” (Haudricourt, 1991, p. 2).

#### **2.5.4 Nilsson chronology - MLB career**

On his return to the US in 1992, Nilsson hit “.317/~.376/.479 for Denver” (1993 Baseball Almanac, p. 124). His performances earned him a trip to ‘The Show’ after backup catcher Andy Allanson injured his thigh in May 1992. Nilsson’s debut came at old Tiger Stadium in Detroit on May 18. The Brewers trounced the Tigers, 9-1. In his first at bat, Nilsson struck out against Eric King but impressed when he “delivered a 3-run bases-clearing double off the pitching of Kevin Ritz later in the game, closing out the scoring” (1993 Baseball Almanac, p. 124). After Allanson returned, Milwaukee was reluctant to send Nilsson back to the MiLB in Denver. He was eventually sent back to Denver in July on a rehabilitation assignment after he went on the disabled list (DL) with an injured wrist. He returned in mid-August and finished out the season with the Brewers. Overall, he hit “.232/.304/.354 for the Milwaukee Brewers with 85+ average ‘On Base plus Slugging’ (OPS)”<sup>7</sup> in 51 games. He was one of the 10 youngest players in the 1992 American Baseball League. In his first game in the majors, he hit 9th in the Brewers line-up and played catcher.

Nilsson had played in just 10 Australian Baseball League games in the 1992/1993 Australian season, owing to undergoing wrist injury and surgery in February. He made a rapid recovery and was the most frequently used catcher for the Brewers in 1993. They had moved their starting catcher for the previous several years, B. J. Surhoff, to third base. On 14 April 1993, he was joined by Australian pitcher Graeme Lloyd to form the first ‘All-Australian battery’ in Major League history as Lloyd came on in the ninth inning of a blowout loss to the California Angels. “It wasn’t a real great moment, was it?” Nilsson said. “I’m just ashamed that it happened in a game like that. I just wished it would have happened in a better game” (Berghaus, 1993). Nilsson hurt his shoulder sliding in May, and, after he got off the DL, he

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<sup>7</sup> “On-base plus slugging (OPS) is a sabermetric baseball statistic calculated as the sum of a player’s on-base percentage and slugging average. The ability of a player both to get on base and to hit for power, two important offensive skills, are both represented in the statistic” (Society for American Baseball Research [SABR], 2018). “*Sabermetrics* is the empirical analysis of baseball, especially baseball statistics that measure in-game activity” (Society for American Baseball Research [SABR], 2018).

went down to 'Triple-A' New Orleans until mid-June on another injury rehabilitation assignment. In 100 games for the Brewers, he hit “.257/.336/.375” (1994 Baseball Almanac, n.p.). having had a few injury rehabilitation appearances in the minor leagues.

Nilsson's first 'full' major league season with the Brewers was in 1994, “hitting .275/.326/.451 with 28 doubles in 109 games” (Costello, 2013, n.p.). On 8 June 1994, Nilsson partially tore a ligament in his thumb. As a result, he could serve as DH only until 19 July 1994. He was able to convince the team doctors that he would still be able to 'swing the bat' if he did not have to have a cast. He did have to wear a protective splint whenever he made it to a base and became a baserunner. At the time he said,

*“I must say I am concentrating on the ball a lot more. It is hard to explain. I cannot really wrap my thumb around the bat. I just wrap my fingers around it and keep my thumb away from the bat.”*

Nilsson hit a grand slam home run on 17 June 1994, one of the highlights of an eight-one win over the Yankees, prompting teammate Greg Vaughn to say, *“I'm going to go slam my thumb in the door”* (Haudricourt, 1994, 1B). “He hit eight sacrifice flies to tie Carlos Baerga and Robin Ventura for fourth in the American League statistics for 1994” (1995 Baseball Almanac, n.p.). The 1994 season was shortened by a player strike, and Nilsson was able to return to Australia earlier than usual.

In 1995, Nilsson contracted Ross River Fever while playing in Australia and, as a result, he started the MLB season two months behind schedule. Joint pain is one symptom of this draining disease, and it can take months to recover. Nilsson first appeared for the Brewers on 24 June that year (Costello, 2013. n.p.). Despite the late start, Nilsson hit over “.400 at all three rehabilitation stints and returned to hit .278/.337/.468 for Milwaukee” (1996 Baseball Almanac, p. 315). Nilsson's OPS+ was 103 in 1995. He was used primarily as a corner outfielder rather than as a catcher, a move that diminished his value (1996 Baseball Almanac, p. 315.). “His half-season homer and RBI totals (12 and 53)” (Costello, 2013. n.p.) might have been his best statistics had he been able to play the full season. He played only two games behind the plate that season, to conserve his energy (Costello, 2010. n.p.).

Before arriving for spring training in 1996, Nilsson had played only 11 games in Australia, owing to a dispute with his ABL team, the Melbourne Reds. He started the MLB season late again owing to a stress fracture in his left foot. He returned from the DL on 9 May 1996 and, on 17 May,

“he hit two homers in a game for the first time in the majors – in fact, he did it twice in the same inning at Minnesota’s Metrodome. He followed up with two more the very next night. The feat was one he accomplished nine more times in the majors.” (Costello, 2013, n.p.)

Despite the early set-back and late start to his season, he had a productive year,

“setting career MLB highs in average (.331) and OBP (.407) while slugging .525 for a 130 OPS+. He hit 33 doubles and 17 home runs, scored 81 runs, and drove in 84 runs in 123 games. He was 6th in the 1996 American League in batting average”.

Veteran Chicago Baseball writer Jerome Holtzman wrote a feature on the “emerging young slugger” (Holtzman, 1996) describing his hitting style.

“Nilsson hits out of a straight-up stance, parallel to the plate, with a solid setup. He has a short stroke, has power to all fields and appears to have good discipline. But, like most young players when he goes into a slump, he starts to overswing. Once he conquers this fault, he should put 20 to 25 points on his batting average.” (Holtzman, 1996, n.p.)

The 1997 season was a mixed bag for Nilsson. He signed a \$10.8 million three-year contract with the Brewers (Costello, 2013; Baseball Almanac, n.p.). During the season, Nilsson served as first base and DH regularly, and “hit a career high, .278-20-81 in 156 games, with 629 plate appearances” (Baseball Almanac, n.p.), also a career high. 1997 was the first season since 1994 that Nilsson managed to stay off the DL list. He made the decision not to return to the ABL so that he could spend his time working on conditioning in the USA. Instead, Nilsson found himself in need of knee surgery and was slow to recover. He spent most of spring training rehabilitating his knee, returning to action in March. One week after his return to the game, he had to have arthroscopic knee surgery and was out of action until May. The result of the time on the DL was that he had what he considered to be a disappointing year, hitting: “.269-12-56 in 102 games” (Baseball Almanac, n.p.).

In 1998, Nilsson “hit .269/.339/.437” (Baseball Almanac, n.p.) for the Brewers. There is not much information available for the 1998 season because the focus in the documentation is on what happened in Australia. Nilsson decided to invest US\$3.5 million of his own money to buy majority ownership of the struggling Australian Baseball League. The contract was finalised on Christmas Eve. Nilsson wanted to focus on his young compatriots rather than relying on American imports. Dave said, “The players there are good enough that, unless there

are particularly good pro players coming over, we don't want to take away a spot. Pros won't take the place of local kids." Nilsson planned to add teams from the Asian Leagues, specifically Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. The competition was renamed the "International Baseball League of Australia" to reflect this aspiration (Costello, 2013, n.p.).

Nilsson's last major league season came in 1999 when he was only 29 years old. He had a successful campaign hitting ".309/.400/.554 with career highs in slugging, OPS+ (140), 62 RBIs and 21 home runs for the Brewers" (Baseball Almanac, n.p.). Despite his knee issues, Nilsson was moved back to catcher in 1999, after having played just 15 games there from 1995 to 1998. He was physically healthy enough to catch regularly for the first time in five years. That year he was named to the All-Star team for the first time. In the 8th inning of the 1999 All-Star Game, he replaced Mike Lieberthal as the National League catcher, becoming the first Australian to play in an MLB All-Star Game. He struck out in his only All-Star Game at-bat, facing John Wetteland in the 9th inning.

For many years, Nilsson was the only Australian to be named and to play in the All-Star team. Nilsson suffered a broken thumb when struck by a foul tip near the end of August 1999. He returned for three games at the tail end of the season, but those were his last games in the majors.

Nilsson had a total of 27 minor-league games during 1995, 1996 and 1998. After a break from playing in 2001 and 2002, he returned to the playing field in the summer of 2003 with an appearance for Telemarket Rimini in Serie A1 in Italy. He "hit .280/.561/.920 with 11 RBI in 9 games" (Honkbalsite.com, 2003, n.p.).

Nilsson then attempted a comeback in the major leagues. He signed with the Atlanta Braves in 2004 to prepare for the 2004 Athens Olympics. He "hit .236/.323/.309 in 16 games for the Richmond Braves in AAA, 5 years after he had last played in organized Baseball" (2005 Baseball Almanac, p. 73).

### **2.5.5 Nilsson chronology - Baseball in Australia**

Nilsson returned from the USA to Australia for the 1989/90 summer season when the first Australian Baseball League replaced the Claxton Shield as the national level competition. Nilsson played for the Gold Coast Clippers and hit ".277/.386/.429". He did not rank among the league leaders in any statistics (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-36).

In the 1990/91 Australian Baseball League, Nilsson played for the Daikyo Dolphins. He had a remarkable season, and his efforts drew attention to his prospects. "He batted

.400/.453/.785” (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-36). He placed second in batting average behind another Milwaukee prospect named John Jaha. He was also third in slugging average behind Jaha and another Australia, Tony Adamson. Nilsson ranked fourth in the league in “hits recorded (54), home runs (12), ‘Runners Batted In’ or RBIs (37) and 2nd in total bases (27)” (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 4-4). His oldest brother Bob also played in the Daikyo Dolphins team. The Nilsson brothers helped the Daikyo team to finish best in the league with a 31-9 win/lose record. Nilsson was named in the ‘All-Star’ team “at catcher and won the Most Valuable Player (MVP) Award” (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 5-4).

In the Australian summer of the 1991/92 ABL, Nilsson returned to lead the Daikyo Dolphins, “hitting .403/.519/.613” (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p 3-36). Nilsson actually led the league in hitting average but, because he played only 20 games, he did not qualify for the title. Daikyo went on to win the title, providing some compensation for Nilsson (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007).

Nilsson hit .160/.300/.200 in 10 games in the 1992/93 Australian Baseball League, in what was possibly his least successful year.

Returning to Brisbane for the 1993/94 Australian Baseball League, Nilsson played with the Brisbane Bandits and enjoyed a successful campaign, “producing at a .362/.474/.695 ‘clip’”. He homered on his first swing of the season. To reduce strain on his legs, he played third base for half of the campaign” (1995 Baseball Almanac, p. 315). In an impressive season, Nilsson led the ABL in slugging by 25 points, and was second in batting average, third with 47 RBI, equal 4th with 28 walks and second in OBP (Flintoff & Dunn, 1995, p. 4-7). He was named ABL ‘All-Star’ team catcher (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 5-7). The Milwaukee Brewers decided to let Nilsson stay in Australia for the ‘play-offs’, altering the original plan that he return to the United States for spring training. In the ‘play-offs’, Brisbane recorded an upset win over the Sydney Blues to take out the championship, with Nilsson’s help. In the final inning of the last 93/94 season round, he formed a unique ‘brother battery’ with Gary Nilsson pitching for the final inning of the last round (Flintoff & Dunn, 1995, p. 315).

Nilsson signed a five-year deal with the Waverley Reds, playing 54 games in the 1994/95 ABL. Nilsson batted “.388/.471/.775 with 56 RBI” (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3.). Nilsson led the league in hitting by 23 points, led in slugging, was second in RBI (56) and led in OBP (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 4-8). Nilsson gathered his third ABL title after delivering a crucial ‘two-run single’ in the final off the pitching of MLB teammate Graeme Lloyd (Flintoff

& Dunn, 1996, p. 328). He was again chosen as the All-Star catcher (Flintoff & Dunn Australian Baseball Almanac, 2007, p. 5-8).

After a dispute lasting six months, Nilsson was able to negotiate a compromise with the Waverley Reds, enabling him to return to Brisbane, and his family and friends. He was required to finish the 1995/96 ABL with the Waverley Reds, after which he would be free to return to Brisbane (Baseball Almanac, 1997, p. 334). “He saw limited on field action during this season and ended the season with .250/.415/.469” (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-36).

After his return to Brisbane for the 1996/97 ABL season, Nilsson became a player-manager. His season was cut short owing to his undergoing knee surgery, but he returned from injury strongly and “batted .420/.500/.640, with a double and a home run in his first game of the season” (Baseball Almanac, 1998, p. 307). Brisbane reached the finals and lost in the three-game series. Nilsson played in only 16 games, which meant that he had not played enough games to qualify for any trophies but would have won the ABL batting average had he met the qualification requirements.

The 1997/98 series received little publicity, but the champions were the Melbourne Reds. As previously noted, Nilsson did not play in the ABL in the 1997/98 season, having chosen to stay in Phoenix, Arizona, USA to work on his strength and conditioning.

The 1998/99 season of the ABL saw Nilsson kit up for the Gold Coast Cougars. The Nilsson owned team snatched the last ABL Championship from Sydney in a best of three series played in Sydney. Ron Johnson was Manager, with Peter Gahan as Assistant Coach. Sydney were the firm favourites to win the series, and it was errors in the third game by some of Sydney’s most highly credentialed players that helped the Cougars to the win (GP, interview, 17 January 2016).

During 1998/99, Nilsson became the majority owner of the Australian Baseball League, which was renamed the International Baseball League of Australia. The Australian Baseball League had failed to gain a substantial foothold and did not generate enough money to make it sustainable. Having struggled every year, the ABL was saved from certain liquidation when Nilsson took over the licence.

Nilsson holds the ABL record for all time batting average (.351) and all-time slugging average (.661). His brothers Gary, Bob and Ron also played in the ABL competition. According to Flintoff and Dunn,

“there is one name that seems inexorably linked to the now departed ABL, the Intercontinental Cup and probably the immediate future of Australian Baseball...Australia’s greatest Baseball product, David Nilsson. David was a legend of the Australian Baseball League, led our team to its historic first ever international Baseball triumph and is now majority owner of his new International Baseball League of Australia (IBLA).” (n.p.)

Nilsson played in the Australian season for the first time in five years when he appeared in the 2004 Claxton Shield. He went 5 for 11 with 4 home runs and 12 RBI, and even pitched well in one stint on the mound (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-36). He led the 2004 Shield in home runs and RBI (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 4-17), and was named to the All-Star team at DH (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 5-17). Queensland made it to the finals before losing; facing Chris Oxspring and Craig Anderson, Nilsson drove in all four Queensland Rams runs in their 7-4 loss in the championship game (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 12-42).

#### **2.5.6 Nilsson chronology - national representative career**

MLB is reluctant to make changes to the season schedule to accommodate events that are not planned, organised and managed by them or by the World Baseball Softball Confederation (WBSC), the international governing body of the sport. The Summer Olympics fall inconveniently in the middle of the ‘Major League’ season, and franchises, understandably, do not want to release their expensive contracted players to play while the regular season continues. The Summer Olympics do not generate any monetary rewards for the MLB organisations or the players. For these reasons, many of the national teams are filled with Minor League and uncontracted players. For Nilsson, this meant that his representative career as an open aged athlete fell conveniently at the end of his MLB career.

Nilsson became a free agent and represented Australia for the first time as an adult in 1999 when he donned the green and gold for the International Baseball Federation (IBAF) Intercontinental Cup in Sydney. In this competition, the host nation defeated a heavily favoured Cuba in the final of the eight-team tournament and “Nilsson hit .379/.457/.517 with a Cup-high 12 RBI” to take out the Most Valuable Player (MVP) honours (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-36). This was the first major international event that Australia had ever won. “Nilsson was 0 for 4 against the Cuban national team with an RBI in the Gold Medal game; fellow catcher Gary White stole the limelight with the big hit. Nilsson was third in averages for the tournament

behind Akinori Iwamura of Japan and Claudio Liverziani of Italy and made the All-Star team at catcher” (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-36).

There was a lot of speculation surrounding Nilsson’s intentions at the end of the 1999 season and during the 1999/2000 Australian season. The IOC had awarded the XXVII Olympiad to Sydney, Australia. This announcement was made in 1993, giving professional Baseball players from Australia plenty of time to contemplate representing their country at a ‘home’ Summer Olympics. To achieve this, a player had to convince the organisation that held their contract to release them in the middle of the MLB season. Professional stars in several big revenue sports were denied participation in the Olympics at that time, including Baseball and Basketball players. Olympic athletes could not accept endorsements or prizes, and professionals were not allowed to compete in the Olympic Games until 1971. In 1971, the IOC eliminated the stipulation that competitors be amateurs. From this date onwards, athletes were permitted to receive compensation for time away from work during training and competition. They were also permitted to have sponsors, including sponsorship from national organisations, sports organisations and private businesses. In 1986, professional athletes were given permission by the International Federation of each sport to compete in the Olympic Games. One of the more famous outcomes of this new relaxation of rules was the participation in the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympic Games of a Basketball team from the USA that was comprised entirely of well-paid National Basketball Association (NBA) stars. The team was dubbed ‘The Dream Team’ (Olsen, 2017).

There was a degree of journalistic licence extended to stories about Nilsson’s patriotic sacrifice. One example came from Lisa Olson, who wrote,

“Nilsson’s patriotic buzz kicked in. If he stayed with the Brewers, he would have been ineligible for the Olympics since MLB insisted on making this strictly a minor-league affair. At some point, though even his family thought it was quixotic, Nilsson began to think about what it would be like to represent his nation.” (Olsen, reported in Costello, 2013, n.p.)

Bob Watson, co-chairman of the Olympic Baseball steering committee, a former ‘big-leaguer’ and ‘Yankees’ executive, summed up the feeling of many when he commented, “I don’t see anybody here giving up players [during the season]” (Costello, 2013, n.p.). It was widely reported that Nilsson took a contract in Japan because Japanese professional Baseball organisations permit the players to represent their country in the Summer Olympics

competition. Even venerated sporting sylloge, *Sports Illustrated*, reported that Nilsson had gone to Japan to play because it would enable him to compete in the Olympics representing Australia (DN, interview, 30 June 2010). In another example,

“Nilsson became a free agent in the offseason following that year but opted not to sign with any MLB teams because of his desire to play for Australia in the 2000 Olympics. He was widely applauded for this move as he was turning down big money, \$4 million, to represent his country, something very rarely seen in Baseball. According to the *Business Review Weekly*, before leaving the US, Nilsson had been Australia’s second highest earning athlete behind Greg Norman.” (Books LLC, 2010, n.p.)

Nilsson himself denies these romanticised stories. In reality, Nilsson was a free agent at the end of the 1999 season and free to represent his country. His performances in the Intercontinental Cup drew a lot of interest, and Nilsson was courted by several MLB clubs (Associated Press, 2000). In January 2000, he opted to sign a one-year, \$AUS 2 million dollar deal with the Chunichi Dragons, a professional Baseball team based in Nagoya, Japan that plays in the Central League of Nippon Professional Baseball because *I didn’t have a contract in the USA* (DN, interview, 30 June 2010). Chunichi was extremely aggressive in its approach and sweetened the deal by agreeing to allow Nilsson to play in the Olympics. Just as importantly for Nilsson, the Dragons signed a three year deal with the Australian Baseball League (ABL), which Nilsson then owned, facilitating the all-important link between Australia and Japan – a link that Nilsson viewed as fundamental to the success of his new League.

Nilsson was the first Australian to play in the Japanese Leagues, and the Dragons had high expectations of him. The experience did not go well for a number of reasons. He had been told that he would play exclusively in left field because the Central League had no DH. In one exhibition game, and without warning, the team manager, Senichi Hoshino, called him out of the left field position and put him ‘behind the plate’. Nilsson recalled, “I had no clue what was going on. I had no preparation, didn’t know how to communicate with the pitcher, what pitches he threw or what signals to call for” (Graczyk, 2000).

Nilsson admits that it was tough in Japan. He had a valuable experience in the minor leagues, but *Nagoya was not westernised, and access and accommodation were not as easy as in the [United] States* (DN, interview, 30 June 2010). Nilsson was married by then and had two small children: *Jacob was two years old and Tyla was a baby. We lived on the third floor and there was no lift. Cooking was problematic. The interpreter did more than interpret and*

Nilsson was never sure what was being said or how he was being represented (DN, interview, 30 June 2010), which compounded their feelings of isolation and exclusion. Nilsson felt that *he was not treated with respect* (DN, interview, 30 June 2010). The tough adjustment impacted on Nilsson's game, and he did not produce his best with the Chunichi Dragons, hitting only “.180/.206/.262”. The Dragons sent him to their farm club in the Western Minor League. His batting improved, but he developed a painful lower back injury and returned to Australia for treatment. Nilsson returned to Japan for just three more games. The League has a roster limit of two non-Japanese position players, which led to Nilsson being sent back to the Minor League and then being released so that he could head back to Australia (Graczyk, 2000).

During this time, Nilsson was offered an MLB contract, but his agent misrepresented him, and he missed the contract. Chunichi interpreted this as Nilsson ‘playing games’, trying to manipulate a better contract. “*Clubs wanted me; they just weren't sure I wanted to play. I fired the agent*” (DN, interview, 30 June 2010). Players in the Nippon Professional Baseball League can choose the name that appears on their jerseys, and Nilsson was registered as “Dingo” (Bavasi, 2012, n.p.). Nilsson would later use the name Dingo on a line of Baseball clothing that he released in Australia.

In the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Nilsson was a stand-out performer for the host nation.

“He hit .565/.667/.957 with 6 runs, 6 doubles and 6 RBI in 7 games as a ‘designated hitter’ (DH) and ‘first base’ player. He led the Olympics in average, 151 points ahead of runner-up Doug Mientkiewicz. He also led in both slugging and OBP, while he tied with Brent Abernathy for the most doubles. He tied Byung-kyu Lee and Nobuhiko Matsunaka for third in hits (13), trailing Abernathy and So Taguchi.”

Nilsson's performance was not enough to elevate Australia to the podium, with the team finishing with a 2 -5 record, finishing ahead only of South Africa (2001 Baseball Almanac, 2001, p. 401). Nilsson was named to the ‘All Star’ team and won the MVP award.

After the Sydney Olympics, Nilsson *was worn out and needed a break. I planned to take a six-month break. Boston called with a three-year deal. I agreed and took a 48 hour*

*series of flights, only to fail the physical. They signed Manny Ramirez*<sup>8</sup>, a Dominican who went on to play 19 seasons in the ‘big’s’.

*Oakland called in December 2000. I said ‘No’, and after that I couldn’t get back in* (DN, interview, 30 June 2010). Nilsson did not play in 2001 or 2002.

Nilsson went on to represent Australia in the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics, where they won an historic silver medal, being defeated in controversial circumstances by Cuba in the gold medal game. Nilsson had a productive Olympic performance, “batting .296/.441/.444 with 6 runs in 8 games to tie for the Australian lead in runs. He had a perfect fielding percentage at catcher and threw out 5 of 8 attempted base-stealers. He had six walks to tie Nick Theodorou for third, trailing Canadians Danny Klassen and Pete LaForest. In the Gold Medal game, he was 0 for 4 with a walk in a 6-2 loss to Cuba but he almost delivered a key hit. Down 6-2 with two on and none out in the 9th, Nilsson faced Danny Betancourt. He hit a long shot to centre field that almost was a homer, but CF Carlos Tabares ran it down and caught it at the warning track.” (2005 Baseball Almanac, p. 423)

Nilsson also represented his country in the inaugural World Baseball Classic in 2006. He was 0 for 5 with a strikeout for Australia. In 2007, he became head coach of the MLB Australian Academy (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-36). In 2008, he was inducted into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame.

### **2.5.7 Nilsson chronology – Australian Leagues statistics**

Overall, Nilsson hit .284/.356/.461 with 105 home runs and a 110 OPS+ in the major leagues. He batted .358 with a .661 slugging percentage in Australian baseball competitions from 1989 to 2004, with 52 home runs in 735 AB and 196 RBI in 247 games. He was first all-time in average, 24 points ahead of Greg Jelks. He was also 20th in RBI, tied for 11th with 7 triples and tied for 17th in home runs (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-52). He ranked first in slugging, 46 points ahead of Jelks, and in OBP, 27 points ahead of Jelks (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-53). Nilsson was one of only seven ‘400 season’ men in the history of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ramirez had a remarkable career: “as of 2015, he ranked ninth all-time in career slugging percentage (.5854), has 555 major-league home runs (placing him number 14 — and he’s got another 29 postseason home runs — more than any other player), and is number 32 in career on-base percentage (.4106). He won the American League batting crown in 2002 and was World Series MVP for the Boston Red Sox in 2004. He’s a 12-time All-Star, with nine Silver Slugger awards, and he’s third all-time in grand slams. And yet his judgment was questionable. He was suspended for 50 games for testing positive for banned substances in 2009, and when he tested positive again in 2011, he retired rather than take the prescribed 100-game suspension.” (*New York Times*, May 10, 2009)

competition, “led by Brendan Kingman with his extraordinary .487, John Jaha .445, David Clarkson .444, Andrew Scott .414, Steve Hinton .403 and David Nilsson .400” (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-52), but Nilsson and Jaha used wooden bats, while the others who made the list hit with aluminium bats, which have since been banned. David Nilsson’s ABL-Best .356 career average is just one testament to his lofty standing in ABL history. Another ‘Who’s Who’ of the league’s power men lists the ABL leading sluggers as David Nilsson .648, Greg Jelks .639, Adam Burton .613 and Tony Adamson .606 - the only players to top the .600 slugging percentage (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-52).

As for the greatest players to play in the ABL, Flintoff and Dunn (2007) were prepared to ‘stick their necks out’ a truly short distance by nominating David Nilsson. They cited the fact that Nilsson featured in the USA’s prestigious MLB All-Star Game in Boston during 1999 as impossible to top at that time (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-52).

## **2.6 Nilsson Chronology – investing in Baseball in Australia**

Nilsson’s first investment in the future of Australian Baseball came in 1998, when he purchased the embattled Gold Coast Cougars (Clarke, 2003). The team won the ABL final series to lift the last ABL cup for this iteration of a national league (GP, interview, 17 January 2016).

Nilsson saved the ABL from almost certain liquidation by paying A\$5 million for the rights to a national Baseball competition for 99 years. Nilsson was confident that his own leadership skills and years of experience in the Claxton Shield and the ABL “would keep high level Baseball viable in Australia and perhaps attract international sponsorship and participation” (Clarke, 2003, p. 122). The league was renamed the International Baseball League of Australia (IBLA). The old ABL was to continue under the control of the new Nilsson group, NILCORP, with clubs from Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and the United States invited to join the competition. A complex three way deal among the IBLA, the Australian Baseball Federation (ABF) and the previous owners of the ABL had been signed. For a few months, there was peace, with stakeholders believing that Baseball in Australia was entering a new period of prosperity, and that Nilsson had bottomless pockets. Flintoff and Dunn observed at the time:

...no doubt, if he succeeds in establishing a league at least comparable to the ABL for the long-term, his standing as Australia’s most significant baseball individual will be

permanently etched in Australian MLB history...if it is not already! What happens next will have a lot to do with David Nilsson's determination to establish his new league.... [W]e suspect he will need plenty of support and some large slices of luck along the way. (Flintoff & Dunn, 1999, p. 52)

The peace was not to last, with the ABL owners withdrawing from the deal with NILCORP and the ABF, a matter of weeks after the initial agreement had been signed and the media releases had been distributed (Clarke, 2003). There is a long history of conflict and disagreement surrounding the ending of the ABL and the years of the IBLA. It is clear from papers available at the time that Nilsson paid his money for the rights to the competition, but many of the old guard from the ABL expected that Nilsson would clear the debts of the ABL itself and the various clubs that were in financial trouble (Clarke, 2003). Many people were disillusioned. Nilsson himself was frustrated that people did not understand the terms of the deal, and others were frustrated at the changes that the new IBLA would bring to the old ABL format and conditions. Nilsson's group reverted to nine-innings games and made the transition to wood-only bats. Acceptance of this change of bats was hastened by the near fatal incident involving Owen Smyth (Clarke, 2003). Players were under contract to the IBLA/NILCORP, there was more accountability of clubs and there were fewer licences in the hopes that this move would strengthen the club system, the heart of Australian Baseball, with more quality players (Clarke, 2003). Nilsson's leadership rang in other changes but reverted to the name "the Claxton Shield" competition, in the hopes of revamping a proud tradition. His vision for the IBLA also included single games rather than series; international competitions; and a state of origin series. He was committed to developing Australian players and decided against having Major League affiliated, American imports. Players were less than enthusiastic. They expected a free flow of money and were disappointed to learn that *the plan was to start basic and build when the profits grew* (DN, interview, 22 January 2015).

The IBLA began in December 1999 with a high quality series against a visiting Japanese team. However, home series were held only once or twice per month in the three-month series, there were very few games over the summer holidays and crowds were low. There were the usual and perennial problems, with grounds being unsuitable for high level Baseball, and cancellations, such as the long anticipated 'All-Star' game, that frustrated fans. There were also continuing complaints of teams from the previous ABL being abandoned financially. The first season was characterised by cost cutting and decreased services in venues.

There was no serious media coverage, and there were fewer home runs owing to the use of wooden bats.

The first IBLA championships series was played between Western Australia and Queensland, with Queensland prevailing. There was little media attention and continuing financial insecurity, resulting in the IBLA making no plans for any 2000/01 national league. The IBLA concentrated instead on international series between the national team of Australia and visiting teams. This did keep the IBLA alive for another year. However, the IBLA was never able to overcome the disastrous legacy of the ABL and was abandoned. On 9 September 2001, the attacks on the World Trade Centre and other American sites led to the MLB deciding that no players or teams could fly to Australia to play in the IBLA.

In 2007, Nilsson became Head Coach of the annual MLB Australian Academy Program (MLBAAP) (Flintoff & Dunn, 2007, p. 3-36). The best 80-85 prospects aged 18 years and under from around Australia were invited and stayed in camp at the Radisson Resort, Palm Meadows on the Gold Coast of Queensland, for eight weeks. The Radisson resort had its own Baseball field, built as a training facility for Japanese and other visiting international and national Baseball organisations and teams.

Nilsson had previously been involved as a hitting instructor. He was replaced as Head Coach in 2008 by John Deeble, who stayed in the role until the MLBAAP ended. Nilsson returned for several years as hitting instructor. Over the years, the format of the camp changed, and the number of players reduced, as well as the length of stay. Initially, the camp was free, but, as the Australian dollar rose against the US dollar and the cost of hosting the camp became unsustainable, players were asked to contribute approximately \$1000 each to stay for the length of the camp. There was always a lot of discussion about the value of the program and the quality of the players. When the MLB installed a new Commissioner, an evaluation of the camp took place and several employees based in Australia were retrenched or reassigned. The Palm Meadows facility was closed, and the camp shifted to Benowa and was reduced to three weeks. Nilsson's involvement had been sporadic. He held philosophical differences with the Head Coach, the on-field co-ordinator and the pitching coordinator. After the move to Benowa, there was a lot of discussion about the value of continuing the camp. The decision was made that there was more value in sending a select group of 25 players to extended spring training in the USA instead of holding the camp. Nilsson has regularly involved himself in hosting and conducting tours to the USA and hosting his own Academy (GP, interview, 14 September 2014). He is, by all accounts, a particularly good instructor and team manager.

Nilsson returned to the national team coaching staff as an assistant coach for the 2018 Japan Series, after a long absence. He had been Manager of the Brisbane Bandits Australian Baseball League team, and at that stage had taken them to three consecutive Australian Baseball League titles. “The Bandits went 86-48 while winning ABL titles in 2016, 2017 and 2018” (USA Today, 2018). They won again in 2019. It was the success of two national championships wins at the helm of the Brisbane Bandits that saw Nilsson named as Coca-Cola Amatil 2017 Queensland Sport Coach of the Year mentioned in Chapter 1 (Q Sport, 2017).

In June 2018, Nilsson was named manager (coach) of ‘Team Australia’ as it aimed to qualify for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Nilsson had long dreamt of being selected to coach the national team but had been hindered in this pursuit by politicking at the Australian Baseball League level. Changes to the management and structure in 2017 removed the previous barriers to his appointment. A representative from the Australian Baseball Federation said that “the former Milwaukee Brewers catcher would lead the team in games at the 2019 Premier 12 tournament, which doubles as the first chance for 2020 Olympic qualification”.

“The Premier 12 is the world’s premier international baseball tournament, where the top 12 ranked teams compete across four countries, with the championship game taking place in Tokyo on 17 November 2019” (WBSC, 2019). Australia won the right to compete for the first time in 2019 through being ranked seventh in the world. Prior to the event, ‘Team Australia’ General Manager Glenn Williams saw the event as a crucial opportunity to “enhance Australia’s international reputation”. He went on to say, “after narrowly missing out on a spot in the 2015 edition, there has been a concerted effort devoted to ensuring Australia would be represented in 2019”. Williams further said that

“a lot of hard work across the entire national team program has put us in this position and it is an honour to be confirmed in the event. We have an opportunity to secure Olympic qualification at the Premier 12, and we will be doing everything in our power to get an Australian team to Tokyo 2020” (WBSC, 2019).

Nilsson “could also manage Australia at the 2021 World Baseball Classic” (USA Today, 2018). This is something for which a manager hopes – to have a team long enough to establish a culture and to be able to see the results of all the arduous work and ‘the plan.’ In this regard, Nilsson is no different from any other coach/manager.

## 2.7 Nilsson Chronology – post playing career

In June 2018, Nilsson was recognised as a Queensland Great. The Queensland Greats Awards recognise the efforts and achievements of extraordinary people for their remarkable contribution to the history and development of the state. Nilsson was one of six individual recipients in 2018. The Queensland State Premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, was quoted as saying, “Tonight, we acknowledge six extraordinary individuals and one institution who have inspired us through their exemplary work, and passion to go above and beyond” (Queensland Government, 2018). Ms Palaszczuk went on to say,

“All of these Queenslanders are great in every sense of the word. They have made a profound and sustained difference in their respective sector—differences that have reverberated across the state and will leave a lasting and positive impact on many Queenslanders” (Queensland Government, 2018).

‘Queensland Greats’ are honoured with commemorative plaques that are displayed at the Roma Street Parkland in Brisbane. In receiving this award, Nilsson joined the likes of Eddie Mabo, Clive Berghofer AM and Steve Irwin. Very few sporting greats are included in the current list of 85 individual recipients assembled over the award’s 18 year history, with Tennis superstar Rod Laver AC MBE, Rugby League player Wally Lewis AM, Cricketer Matthew Hayden, Tennis player Ashley Cooper AO and Greg Norman AO (Queensland Government, 2018) the only other players acknowledged up to 2018 when Nilsson was honoured (Queensland Government, 2018). In 2022, there are now 115 individuals, 18 institutions and 8 posthumous recipients honoured as Queensland Greats (Queensland Government, 2022) and very few are sportspeople or people associated with sport. Nilsson’s acknowledgement reads

“David Nilsson AM, *Queensland baseball legend*. David Nilsson AM is a retired professional baseball player and one of the most successful and influential players in Australia’s baseball history. In 1999, Mr Nilsson purchased the first Australian Baseball League to keep the reality of professional baseball alive in Australia. Mr Nilsson represented Australia at the Olympics in 2000 and 2004, captaining the team to seventh place in Sydney before leading it to the historic silver medal in Athens. Mr Nilsson has been the head coach of the Brisbane Bandits professional baseball team in the Australian Baseball League since 2014 and has led the team to four consecutive and historical championships. He is a great supporter of baseball in Australia, investing in the sport and serving as an administrator and role model for young players” (Queensland Government, 2019).

In June 2019, Nilsson added the Order of Australia (AM) to his list of honours and recognitions. Recognised for his success and his services to Baseball, he is the first Australian Baseball player or coach to be bestowed with this honour.

Concurrent with Nilsson's playing career and post career-investment in Baseball in Australia, both financially and with time committed to coaching and administration, was his life outside Baseball. In that life, he married and became a father, in addition to being a strong mentor for his nephews. He also became a Born-Again Christian – another life course altering decision that has led to quandaries about where to live and where to raise his children. Section 2.8 includes a brief synthesis of Nilsson's personal life and the beginnings of his commitment to God and an American influenced approach to Christianity.

## **2.8 Nilsson chronology – personal life**

Nilsson's early life has been documented in this chapter and throughout this thesis. His family life as an adult away from his parents contributed to his success, providing stability and support. Nilsson's wife Amanda provided some interesting background knowledge not previously disclosed. She met Nilsson on the Gold Coast in 1990. She retold the story thus: *I was at a nightclub on the [Gold] Coast. I saw him and fancied him – tall guy [Amanda is also tall]. I asked him to dance, and he said, "No." Two hours later he asked me to dance, and I said, "No." He came back and asked again 10 minutes later. He was Australian but had an American accent. He explained that he plays Baseball. I had no idea who he was. I told my father, and he knew who Nilsson was – it meant nothing to me. The next day there was a story in the paper about him [Nilsson] being named to the 40-man roster in MLB. I knew he was leaving Australia in eight weeks. He went back to the US. He was very serious - intense/very witty/sarcastic. We stayed in touch. International phone calls were very expensive. We communicated for 10 minutes each time on the phone. He flew me over about five weeks later. We came back home for the Australian season. Missed family. For five years, he did the back and forth trips. In 1994, I moved over there full-time. We got married [on] 21 October 1995. I was 25 years old when we married.*

*We lived on the Gold Coast and then Melbourne when in Australia, then in Phoenix and Scottsdale in the US. While David was with Milwaukee, Jacob was born. David had knee surgery. Tyler was born on the Gold Coast [on] 20 November 1999. Grace was born [on] 20 July 2006 at Mt Tambourine, Ashleigh [on] 1 July 2008 and Eli [on] 5 April 2010. Dave was*

*finished in the US by then. Oakland, Boston, Italy, and Japan were all before the last three kids were born (AN, interview, 27 October 2016). Amanda Nilsson commented on their time with the Brewers, Wives didn't really watch, distracted – not just by babies. It was a nice social experience. The whole MLB experience was unbelievable (AN, interview, 27 October 2016). A life of planes, hotels, adrenalin, plus, plus, plus. Some players have issues with alcohol and drugs – and morality. The mentality of professional sport is different. There was never a dull moment. David wanted to be a family man. Raising children on the road – you just adjust. The players at the Brewers were all mid-20s to 30s, all in the early years with children. They were mostly Christians who were home schooling. We were recognised in Milwaukee. I was married to someone famous. In Australia, no-one noticed so we had more privacy. We did experience home sickness. There is a lot of sacrifice in being an athlete and being married to one. Competing for a career is cut-throat. We experienced 'failure' at first. You have to have resilience. I just provided a stable, uncomplicated home life, with no problems. I provided support, and that freed him to focus on baseball. There was always mutual respect and mutual love – always. The money brings with it commitment and expectation. Financially, it was easy. The money was good – really good, and he had the power as long as he played well. There are highs and lows but mostly highs – it's a wonderful lifestyle. David was a rock – never showed emotions, kept things real, but it comes to an end and there is a real transition and an adjustment to being home all the time - depression after stepping down. I never wanted to travel, but I feel like America is also my home. The two older kids feel American (AN, interview, 27 October 2016).*

*Of his marriage Nilsson said, it helped solidify my role in the big leagues. It brought balance and maturity. Amanda was a great support and decision-maker. She helped me maintain focus by looking after everything else. Elite athletes require this – all relationships are about you (DN, interview, 30 June 2010).*

*It was Amanda who first introduced Nilsson to religion. There was a strong 'born again' Christian movement at the Brewers. Nilsson had grown up without religion in his own family: It was a zero factor in my life, in our life, in the family's life. I've learned about my family's view on religion because I've become a Christian -- not because I've been told. My dad grew up as a Jehovah's Witness, so he's opposed to anything Christianity, anything God. He has a hatred towards God. So the big joke in our house: he would never celebrate birthdays, Christmas Day -- never celebrated it, he never celebrated any of that stuff – went and mowed the lawn. Mum bought presents. Now here's the deal: you ask any of my brothers 'why?' [and]*

*they wouldn't know. Since I've become a Christian, I've learnt about other religions. I was like, you are kidding me (DN, interview, 30 June 2010).*

More discussion about the role of religion at the Brewers organisation is included in Chapter 6 when discussing the influence of elements in the macrosystem. Religion also features in Chapter 7, Thesis Conclusions, as a focusing and control mechanism - a tool that diminished the risk-taking behaviours of players, irrespective of how sincere the original conception of an intention to commit to God was.

## **2.9 Chapter conclusion**

Nilsson exists in a number of communities within the sporting world. There are several Baseball communities in which he has distinct roles. At the local club level in Brisbane, and at the State representative levels in Queensland, he is a family member - brother, son, father and uncle, a coach, a mentor, a Queensland Baseball Hall of Fame inductee and a 'legend'. At the national Australia team representative level, Nilsson is a former player and mentor for his teammates and considered by many to be a 'legend' of the game. At an Australian Baseball national competition and Claxton Shield level, he is a former playing star, manager, sponsor, founder of various iterations of national competitions and facilitator. In 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 at the Australian Baseball League (ABL) level, he is a successful manager (coach) and a mentor to the athletes with whom he works, an advocate for the ABL, a former player and, again, a 'legend'. At an international level, he is a former MLB (MLB) player, an MLB All Star and a Milwaukee Brewers 'legend'. For some fans of Baseball, he is undeniably a 'legend' at the MLB level.

In Baseball communities and beyond, the man is a 'legend' of the sport – a phenomenon who has experienced a relatively rare phenomenon. The past and present Baseball players who participated in the research as interviewees, and the players whom I observed in and around Baseball communities, have experienced a similar phenomenon at varying degrees. They are all enriched, changed or influenced by their experiences of the phenomenon of being a Baseballer and belonging to that community for life. Many of them credit Nilsson with being a positive influence on their playing careers and the game of Baseball itself in Australia.

To cement the identified need for the research into Nilsson's development and career fully in the minds of the readers, one must examine the existing research published in all areas of interest to be interrogated in the thesis, in order to establish the gaps and silences. This was

accomplished through completing a comprehensive literature review, then analysing and synthesising the information and learning, in order to identify what is yet to be studied in depth. Chapter 3, the Literature Review, provides that insight.

## **CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **3.1 Chapter Introduction**

Chapter 3 is a review of the literature associated with the three interrelated areas of research incorporated in this thesis. Initially, the review looks at sporting biographies and the retelling or storying of periods of life. Next, the review includes an introductory overview of the ‘Bioecological Model of Human Development’ (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) to establish the research grounding behind the conceptual framework developed for the research design. Finally, the literature review considers the multiple stratum surrounding children’s initial and sustained participation in sport, physical activity and movement and the development of sporting expertise in the context of the relevant societal and political structures. The research for this thesis focused on children and their initial and early years participation in sport because the research is examining the significance of the microsystem and the individual child’s response to the opportunities presented in that context. Consideration of the literature related to this area of the thesis entails exploration of the multiple factors that can be enablers or barriers to participation and retention in sport, physical activity and movement.

Additionally, research into relevant aspects of the development and pursuit of excellence in sport is discoursed. For the many millions of children who have commenced participation in some form of sport, physical activity or movement across the decades of these recreations being organised in Australia, a small percentage remain involved in their sport or activity of choice long enough to reach super-elite professional levels in authentically international team sports. Research literature illuminates and considers why this might be and what it takes to ‘make it’ to the top. Whilst each of the pertinent areas of development is mentioned, it was not my intention to delve deeply into each of these factors. Each factor in athlete participation and development provides a platform for comprehensive research and much of this research has been completed or is underway. My interest and intent were to synthesise these factors to consider how they are connected and how they combine to produce the best athletes at the highest levels of sport and to provide a broader theoretical lens and understanding.

### **3.2 Identifying the need for the research**

Research in a variety of disciplines – anthropology, sociology, history, gender studies, journalism, leisure studies and media studies (Bernstein and Blain, 2002), draws on the sporting spectacle and experience to lure conclusions and develop sociological understandings.

Coakley (2003) suggested that sport is a reflection of society and society is reflected in sport. If this is true, then understanding and recording the impact of sport on society and in society is an imperative. The link between sport and the bioecological exosystem of an era is significant. Governments and nationalists around the globe employ the sports arena to plume their feathers and pump-up national pride. The link between sporting success and fierce patriotism is evident in the thirst for media coverage and among spectators at sporting events. The popularity of sport transcends social and political divides. Some sporting personalities do acquire celebrity status that extends well beyond their playing careers (Smart, 2005). Success in the sporting context is not the defining factor in determining which sports stars become ‘household’ names.

While many sports stars pen autobiographies or are convinced to collaborate on a biography, it is difficult to uncover many that are research based, with those that are employing research designs based on popular theoretical frameworks such as racism, gender (masculinities or feminism), moralities, media studies and identity. Genuine research-based academic storying of the journey to super-elite, professional sporting success at an international level is indeed rare and highlights a beckoning gap in the research fields in, and about sport. Much of the research into sport is quantitative in nature and this highlights another gulf in the collective body of works concerned with sport, sporting attributes and success. The call for more qualitative research has been made and there is some response, as discussed in this chapter. Bernstein and Blain (2002) also identify a lack of research work related to religious affiliation and sporting success. Religion was a significant factor in Nilsson’s adult life and professional career. The stabilizing effect of religious affiliation will be considered

Moving from the storying of a sporting star’s journey to the personal attributes that contribute to success of the sporting star themselves, I found that a quantity of research has been published in relation to the contribution of deliberate practice in the development of expertise (Ericsson, 2014; 2006; 2005; 2004; 2003; 1996: Ford, Ward, Hodges & Williams, 2009: Ward, Hodges, Williams & Starkes, 2004: Helsen, Starkes, & Hodges, 1998: Starkes, Deakin, Allard, Hodges & Hayes, 1996), talent identification and development (Abbott,

Button, Pepping & Collins, 2005; Abbott & Collins, 2004; Chan, 2012; Guellich, Emrich & Prohl, 2004; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006), some contributory factors such as birth date and birth place (Baker and Logan, 2007; Côté, MacDonald, Baker & Abernethy, 2006), and influences of family and peers (Côté, 2002; 1999), including nature versus nurture debates. There is, however, a distinct lack of research that synthesises the multitude of influencing factors and personal attributes from a bioecological perspective, to examine and identify the most significant factors in the journeys of the supremely successful athletes. In the context of this research, supremely successful athletes are defined as those who reach the top tier of elite, professional performance in genuinely international sports (these descriptions and the need for them was explained in Chapter 1). The lack of comprehensive research is troubling given the enormous sums of public monies devoted to government funded sporting institutions, programs and identified athletes, to achieve success on the podiums at international sporting contests. Through the qualitative research techniques of informal interview and observation of athletes who fall into the category of super-elite, international, professional sporting star, it is possible to gain a much more comprehensive understanding of their journeys; the pivotal moments, the significant influences and the personal characteristics that have facilitated their success. To build a story of one journey to sporting success, the researcher is required to consider more than statistical, quantitative approaches. They need to secure the additional, personalised data provided for through qualitative methodologies to ‘flesh out’ the story. The fact that this is a rare approach is another reminder of the gaps and silences created by the lack of qualitative research in the field.

To examine the literature related to the research for this thesis it was necessary to delve into the many aspects of athlete development and the long journey to ultimate success in open age competition. It was also necessary to examine literature related to aspects of the research design – the biographical storying, the bioecological framework and the phenomenological methodology used for data collection. While the latter is dealt with in depth in the chapter outlining the research design, this literature review introduces sporting biographies and synthesizes information related to the bioecological framework of human development before focusing on identified factors that contribute to sporting success at the highest levels. The use of personalised experiential storying to retell a sporting history or journey through the lenses of athletes’ memories was deemed to be a logical vehicle for the story of Nilsson’s career, therefore, the review commences with a brief discussion pertaining to ‘biographical storying.’

### **3.3 Biographies of sporting ‘stars’**

The contemporary ‘sports star’ is a product of the complex process of historical development resulting from the emergence of commercially focused, professional sports, a growth in media interest and a dramatic rise in the value of endorsements and sponsorships. The focus on attributes and performances and identification of some sporting figures as ‘outstanding’ has become a prominent feature of contemporary sport. Smart (2005) suggests that the elevation of some sporting figures to star status became a focus of modern sports from the moment they began to attract spectators and media coverage. There were other significant social and political influences on the popularity of sport, including the political backdrops of two World Wars, the Great Depression, racial discrimination and later the introduction of television, particularly colour television, and video recording of sporting contests. Media coverage and recording of sporting contests has delivered sport to a much wider audience than to those spectators who attend the games. The broad social and historical processes that provided the cultural and economic context in which sports stars have become celebrity figures is relevant in this research.

Sports biographies feature in both academic and popular writing. Popular biographies of sports stars can be purchased in bookstores and newsagents, while sports biographies with a more academic focus are harder to find (Bale, Christensen & Pfister, 2004). It can be difficult to distinguish between academic and popular biographies; however, one notion is that popular biographies sacrifice analysis, interpretation and insight in favour of speedy production and economic considerations. Few sports biographies have grown from research projects, yet the need exists, with popular accounts often appearing banal and filled with cliché (Bale, Christensen & Pfister, 2004). Critical analysis of the life course/life history and playing career of an individual ‘sports star’ such as Nilsson will illuminate significant factors that impacted on the development and achievements of this sporting phenomenon. The lessons to be learnt from the journey of one such ‘sports star’ can be instructive for coaches, scouts, managers, developing athletes, and sporting organisations and provoke attitudinal changes in sports development programs and the construct of player pathways. Furthermore, this kind of sporting biographical storytelling represents an intended significant contribution to theoretical and methodological knowledge, respectively by extending our understandings of the formation and influence of sporting expertise and by deploying in a single study the previously separate bioecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) and life course (Biesta, Hodkinson, & Goodson, 2005) approaches to studying people’s lives

One might ask - do the biographies of sports stars differ from those dealing with individuals from outside the sporting realm? Many writers contend that sports biographies are de-politicised (Földessi, 1995) due to the focus of sports peoples' lives being major sporting events such as the Olympic Games, a major international competition, or, in the case of Baseball, a Major League career. McNeish, (1991) noted that "international athletes are unpolitical and 'self-worshipping', unaware of events occurring under their noses." (p. 17). Whilst this might be an accurate observation of some sports stars, it would be difficult to argue that this is the characteristic that separates sports stars from stars of the screen or well-known musicians. There is a tendency for sports biographies to reflect a sporting career rather than a life, which may be the result of bodies and minds having a limited life in sport and the sportsperson finding they are no longer able to participate in the activity that made them famous and their biography worthwhile (Bale, Christensen & Pfister, 2004).

Long before a sports star becomes famous enough to have a biography written about them, their journey in the sport begins. Their initial participation in an activity or sport is influenced by family or carer decisions and sometimes modelling, but their sustained involvement and their investment in sport takes many years. During those years, the influences differ and the context of involvement changes, with the final result demonstrating commitment, competence and resilience far beyond the limits of most people. Nilsson's story reaches beyond the playing career and nominal historical data to critically examine and analyse his development and the significant factors that gave him the opportunity to have a super-elite, international and professional sporting career. Part of that analysis involves examination of the systems of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), that is; the initial influences of the direct interactions of the Microsystem; the Mesosystem connecting the systems to the microsystem; the time and historical influences of the Chronosystem; the norms and values of the culture in the Macrosystem and indirect environments of the exosystem, such as government, economics, and politics.

### **3.4 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development**

Bioecological theory is introduced in this chapter to demonstrate the relevance of the concepts included in Bronfenbrenner's theories of human development (1977, 1979, 2005), and to explain the evolution of those concepts into the Bioecological Model of Human Development (2005) and further, to situate those concepts as a major contributor to the

conceptual framework developed for this research design. Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 2005) ecological and bioecological perspective offer insights that can enhance our understanding of human development and provide a useful framework for examining social and cultural influences on human development, both at a personal level and as an athlete. "Bronfenbrenner explicates that the world of the child... consists of five systems of interaction: microsystem, exosystem, mesosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem" (Swick & Williams, 2006. p. 371). The Microsystem consists of one's most immediate environment (physically, socially and psychologically), and stands as the venue for initially learning about the world. "Exosystems are the contexts we experience vicariously and yet they have a direct impact on us" (Swick & Williams, 2006. p 372), for example, a younger child may attend sporting fixtures with older siblings and parents and listen to them talking about sporting contexts, and thus identify with the context, despite not being an active participant. Mesosystems are about being in relation with each other "in ever expanding circles of triads and even more expansive relations" (Swick & Williams, 2006. p 372), as happens in sporting organisations at the various levels – club, regional, state, national and international. Mesosystems are not a discrete system but rather an interactive space where systems meet. This space will be referred to as mesosystemic interchange. Macrosystems are the "larger systems of cultural beliefs, societal values, political trends, and 'community happenings'" and function as a powerful influence on what, how, when and where we carry out our relations. Chronosystems frame all the dynamics of families in historical contexts within the different systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, Swick & Williams, 2006).

Each system depends on the contextual nature of the person's life and offers an ever-growing diversity of options and sources of growth. Unlike 'Behaviourism' (Pavlov & Anrep 2003; Skinner, 2011; Watson, 2013), which can be considered important in skill acquisition and even in sustaining interest in sport through reward for effort and performance, Bronfenbrenner's model examine the influence of multiple levels of the environment on human development, not just behaviour, and acknowledges that individuals are *active* within these contexts. Though no specific mention is made of leisure, recreational or sporting contexts in representations of the original theory or the later model, these surely played a significant part in an Australian child's development before the technological age and have been included in some of the modifications made to Bronfenbrenner's original model. He did, however, include neighbourhood and community, so it is safe to assume that recreational and sporting or physical pursuits are not neglected or overlooked but rather included in the context in which they are

likely to be found. He incorporates many of the core assumptions of ‘Cognitive and Social Constructivist’ theories (Packer & Goicoechea 2000; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Piaget, 2013), while simultaneously taking a serious look at the active, developing person within a context that is dynamic and changing. Bronfenbrenner saw a kind of dialectic between the individual and the environmental context; the individual can exert an influence over his/her environment at the same time the environment exerts an influence on the individual. On the nature-nurture issue, (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Burke, 1928, 1973; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; McCall, 1981; Ge, Conger, Cadoret, Neiderhiser, Yates, Troughton, & Stewart, 1996; McCrae, Costa Jr, Ostendorf, Angleitner, Hřebíčková, Avia, & Saunders, 2000; Samaroff, 2009) a debate that cannot be ignored in this context, Bronfenbrenner and colleagues acknowledge that each has a role, and observed development is really the result of an interaction between the two – nature and nurture (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner’s original theoretical model of human development called ecological systems theory evolved over time and was modified by many others, (Berk, 2000; Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Hoare, 2009; Freiberg, Homel & Branch, 2010; Millar, Lake, Cottrell & King, 2012; Ndiaye, Silk, Anderson, Horstman, Carpenter, Hurley & Proulx, 2013), however, the basic idea of the person developing in the context of various “systems” or environments is something that Bronfenbrenner is credited with. The “mature” (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield & Karnik, 2009. p. 198), form of bioecological models of the mid-1990s and beyond, focus on proximal processes at the centre of the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model and the bioecological theoretical model of human development proposed by Bronfenbrenner and Ceci in 1994. The bioecological systems perspective presents a powerful interpretive lens through which to understand achievement at the super-elite, international and professional levels.

Application of this lens to existing literature suggests that many factors influencing sporting achievement have not been examined through qualitative research. The journey to the ultimate development of super-elite, international, professional sporting star status is long and arduous, beginning at the catalytic grassroots level of participation. Researchers have highlighted the parent/carer role as critical in promoting the physical and athletic development of their children. Bloom (1985) and Côté, (1999) reported that parental support and other resources are imperatives in nurturing talent.

The next focus of the chapter is examination of the beginnings of the journey to super-elite, international, professional sport performance – the catalysts for initial introduction and the early years of participation in sport and links these beginnings to Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem and mesosystemic interactions. Section 3.5 considers the questions, what influences children to begin playing a sport and what are the significant influences that lead them to stay involved?

### **3.5 Grassroots beginnings - why do children play sport?**

“Physical activity is critical to healthy development of children” (Chen, 2013, p. 1).

Parents and carers involve children in sporting contexts and contests for a variety of reasons. The benefits of participation in sport are cited as being multidimensional. Ideally and philosophically, the child who plays sport develops social relationships - a circle or community of friends and associates; they interact with a broad variety of people of different ages; they learn respect for each other, the officials and any opponents; they enjoy being involved and their emotional health is developed through the different experiences – highs and lows, of participation, thus strengthening their resilience; they learn self and social management skills, including appropriate and inappropriate behaviours; their cognition is challenged as they learn new skills, rules, strategies and tactics, and teamwork in team sports while they are physically active, all of which is positive for the health of mind, body and social relationships. Parents, educators and those involved in research have cited involvement in physical activity and sport as a positive means of children deriving beneficial outcomes such as competence in motor skills, self-confidence, sportspersonship, and interpersonal skills (Weiss, 1995; Wiggins, 1996). Sport is seen as a vehicle for socialising - teaching children to interact effectively with peers, while developing leadership skills, cooperative behaviours, and building cohesive relationships.

Allender, Cowburn and Foster, (2006) completed a review of qualitative studies examining motivations and barriers to participation in sport and physical activity among children and adults. They compiled the findings of these studies into data tables of participant characteristics. For young children, experimentation, unusual activities, parental support and safe environment were found to be motivators, while competitive sports and highly structured activities were found to be barriers to participation (p. 829). For teenagers and young women, the motivators were found to be body shape, weight management, new social networks, family

support, and peer support, while barriers to participation are negative experiences at school, peer pressure, identity conflict, PE (physical education) uniforms, dominance of boys in classes, competitive classes, and lack of teacher support (p. 829). Lastly, for adults the motivators are; a sense of achievement, skill development, medical sanction, support networks and enjoyment, with lack of social network, anxiety in unfamiliar surrounds, identity conflict, negative school experiences and a lack of role models listed as barriers to participation (p. 829). Young children enjoy the opportunity to experiment with different activities and dislike being forced to compete with an emphasis on winning.

MacPhail et al. (2003) found that children are motivated to participate by experiencing several types of physical activity and sports and that enjoyment and support from parents is crucial to continued participation. While Cope et al, (2013) found that “children’s participation in sport is mediated by five primary factors: 1) perception of competence; 2) fun and enjoyment; 3) parents; 4) learning new skills; and 5) friends and peers” (p. 1.). The findings propose that social-cultural context influences children’s motivation to participate. Parents are normally the initiators and the enablers in children’s opportunities to be physically active, with Bostock (2001) learning that mothers with young children preferred their children played in safe environments. Parents are more supportive of sports and activities with easy access, safe environments, good ‘drop-off’ arrangements that also have activities available for other members of the family (Porter, 2002). Biddle et al (2013) suggest that “psychologists must look to social, organisational and community-level correlates in addition to individual correlates” (p. 25), to identify significant influences other than age and gender that drive participation in physical activity.

Children need to be motivated to develop and sustain a physically active lifestyle (Chen, 2013). These motivations can be categorised into those focusing on children's physical activity motivation ‘as a mental dispositional process, those conceptualizing the motivation as an outcome of person–environment interactions, and those attempting to dissect the motivation as an outcome of social–cultural influences and educational policies’ (Chen, 2013. p. 441.). She also found that children’s participation in sport is motivated by enjoyment and the development and maintenance of social support networks. Barriers to participation include transitions at key stages of the life course and having to reorient individual identities during these times (Chen, 2013.).

For all ages, ongoing participation in sport and other forms of physical activity and movement is influenced by several integrating factors. Identification and categorisation of

these factors is complex. To facilitate ease of understanding, Bailey et al, (2010) selected “three domains that underpin participation and development in sport: the biological (physiological); psychological; and social domains” (p. 1 & 2). These three domains are nominated in what is called the ‘Biopsychosocial Model of Development’ and reflect the biopsychosocial nature of development (Bailey et al, 2010). The domains are used to thematicise the characteristics of human development (Kiesler, 1999) and in combination, reflect the complex, dynamic and non-linear nature of development (Abbott et al, 2005). Biopsychosocial approaches are relatively new to sports science, though Smoll & Smith are well-known for their attempt to take the diversity of influences on sports participation seriously from the mid-1990s. Their work focused on the biopsychosocial perspective of children and youth in sport and examined youth sports from biological, psychological, and social perspectives, examining such aspects as readiness for participation including motor learning and the acquisition of sport-specific skills; social processes such as gender, and family base of support for participation in sport (Smoll & Smith, 1996).

The biopsychosocial approaches are similar in nature to the bioecological paradigms, with the main point of difference being the prominence given to biology. Nilsson had clearly observable biological advantages for performance in Baseball. While biology is considered in the research for this thesis it is not a focus. The more interesting aspect of this biopsychosocial model of development is the confirmation that psychosocial factors impact on athlete participation and development. Both the bioecological and the psychosocial models or frameworks attempt to understand or explain the multifaceted nature of development and the dynamic interaction between biological, psychological and social factors which play a significant role in human functioning (Engel, 1977). ‘The Bioecological Framework’ goes beyond factors which act directly on the person to include the broader community, including the national and international political and economic environments. Approaches that focus too narrowly on one factor or process, such as the physiological component, ignore the complex interplay of processes and influences and assume that development is linear in nature (Abbott et al, 2005. p.84).

In Section 3.6 the focus is on the significant psychological and social factors which play a motivating role in sports participation and enjoyment and can be directly linked to the positive social and emotional health and wellbeing experienced through peer relationships and support.

### **3.6 Peers and peer support**

The study of peer relations among children and adolescents in developmental psychology is common but the quality of friendships, peer acceptance, and the development of social competence through participation in sport has rarely been evaluated (Brustad, 1996; Weiss & Duncan, 1992). Paediatric sports psychology frequently mentions the importance children and teenagers place on peer relationships in sport. Literature on sport participation motivation consistently cites affiliation opportunities as being just as important as learning and improving skills, experiencing the excitement of competition, and enjoying being physically active (Weiss, 1993). Specifically, being with and making new friends is salient to sport involvement for young people, and the lessening of positive affiliation contributes to ceasing participation. Peer interactions such as arguments or negative treatment have been identified as barriers that impinge upon children's attraction to physical activities and enjoyment of them. (Kunesh, Hasbrook. & Lewthwaite, 1992; Scanian, Carpenter, Lobel, & Simons, 1993; Weiss, 1991). Negotiation and resolution of conflicts impacts on feelings of self-worth that emanate from perceptions of peer evaluation.

Peer influences are also salient within the physical domain of in sport. Horn and colleagues (Horn & Hasbrook, 1986; Horn & Weiss, 1991) have shown that peer comparison and evaluation serve as important sources of a child's perception of their physical competence, beginning from their early years and becoming increasingly influential between the ages of 8 and 14 years. The peer group continues to be a central source for judging personal competence in the physical domain throughout the teenage years (Horn, Glenn, & Wentzell. 1993). Peer relations and judgements are important in decisions concerning continuing physical activity and psychological health and well-being. Theories of motivation highlight perceived social regard as a central source of self-perceptions, affect, activity choice, effort, and persistence (Weiss & Chaumeton, 1992; Weiss & Ebbeck, 1996). Significant others serve as mirrors through which children and young people judge their own self-worth, competence, and feelings about themselves. Perceived social regard includes the feedback and evaluation from parents, coaches, and peers within the sport or physical activity domains. Research literature addressing parental influences and coaching behaviours has expanded exponentially, yet there is a surprising dearth of literature about the role of peer relations within the sport social context. This is all the more surprising given the number of articles about the role of sport as a socialising vehicle for the development of quality friendships and supportive peer relationships.

Several studies have examined motivation for participation in exercise utilising self-determination theory (Teixeira, et al, 2013), but these studies differ from the purpose of this research where the motivation for initial and continued participation in competitive team sport and the triggers that drive an athlete to pursue super-elite performance in professional, authentically global sports is being examined. Studies examining the need for social relatedness in this context, are rare and dated, possibly because the higher an athlete reaches the less participation in sport becomes about health and wellbeing and the more it becomes about success and winning.

At some stage in their development, athletes who continue in a sport or activity to reach super-elite levels of professional, international sports performance move from simply participating to making a commitment to the sport and deciding to specialise in it. There is wide debate about the most appropriate stage or age for an athlete to move into the specialisation phase which is the focus of Section 3.7 of this chapter, ‘From participation to specialisation in sport.’

### **3.7 From participation to specialisation in sport**

In principle, sports can be classified as either early specialisation or late specialisation sports (Balyi & Hamilton, 1999). Early specialisation refers to starting to specialise in a sport at an early age. Some sports, such as swimming, gymnastics, figure skating, tennis and golf, may require athletes to forego other sports in order to hone the sport-specific skills required for success at the top levels. In other sports such as track and field, boxing and martial arts, rowing and team sports, athletes benefit from specialising later in their physical and psychological development and can enjoy a wider variety of sporting and movement activities in the early years. In the early years, the emphasis can be on the development of fundamental motor movements and strategic and tactical awareness. Baylis and Hamilton suggested that early specialisation sports require a four-stage model of development while late specialisation sports require a five-stage model of development (1999). The models are essentially the same with the late specialisation model adding “FUNDamental” prior to, “Training to Train; Training to Compete; Training to Win and Retirement/Retaining” (Baylis & Hamilton, 1999). The focus of their work was on late specialisation sports due to their speculation that most sports are late specialisation sports. They suggested that early specialisation sports need to develop their own

sport-specific models for athlete development, combining the FUNdamental and Training to Train Stages into one stage.

The years between the ages of nine to twelve are acknowledged as the most important periods for motor development (Balyi and Hamilton, 1995; Rushall; 1998; Viru et al., 1998). It is during this time, that children are considered physically and cognitively developmentally ready to learn the fundamental movement skills that form the foundation for most other more specialised movements and activities. Fundamental movement skills such as running, jumping, bounding, hopping, balancing, landing, skipping, striking/hitting, throwing, and catching are the foundation stones of the majority of team sports and most land-based individual sports. Developing other components of successful movement and fitness such as agility, coordination, power, speed, anaerobic capacity and power outputs, and muscular and aerobic endurance, lay the foundation of athletic competence. It is only after children have mastered the fundamentals of movement that they can learn the sport-specific skills, strategies and tactics that facilitate progression into more elite levels of sport performance.

### **3.7.1 Sport-specific Skill Acquisition**

There are three stages of skill acquisition posited by Fitts and Posner in 1967 which have been widely applied to acquisition of skill in sport. They are the ‘cognitive,’ ‘associative’ and ‘autonomous’ phases of skill development. Experienced practitioners have learned that skill development will occur at different rates and ages and as children move through the stages to the autonomous phase of skill development, some will become more expert than others. Other researchers use different names to describe the same or similar stages – ‘declarative,’ ‘procedural,’ ‘automatic’ used by Anderson (1982, 1993, 2007; Anderson et al, 2004; Taatgen, Huss, Dickison & Anderson, 2008); or ‘presentation’, ‘practice’ and ‘production’ used by Byrne (1986).

Cognitive, associative and autonomous are terms that work well for this context. A brief explanation of the phases of skill acquisition is included here for clarity, adapted from Fitts and Posner (1967). The three stages are characterised by significant shifts in competence. The cognitive phase is when the individual learns the subroutines of the action to be performed and the desired outcome, through observing demonstrations, listening to explanations and acting on feedback as they then practice the skill repeatedly. The practice is characterised by many errors until the skill is learned. Individuals then move into the associative phase of skill development which is characterised by practice of the subroutines in the correct sequence and

learning the timing required in performance. The associative phase can take a long time and many, or even most, people do not develop beyond this phase.

This is another area that lacks research evidence, yet the information would be most useful in determining influences on drop-out or disengagement from physical activity, particularly sports. In the associative phase, the skill can be performed in the correct sequence of subroutines with the correct timing without consciously thinking about the skill, in other words, the movement becomes automatic. Once the autonomous phase is reached, speed and efficiency are increased, you are less distracted by interference, such as an opponent, and less cognition is required for the skill so cognition can be focused on tactics and more specialised use of the skill. It is only at this stage that individuals can genuinely think about strategic use of skills. For example, in Baseball, once you can hit the ball with ease you can deliberately place the ball in play and vary the type of hit; once you can throw and catch without thinking about the performance of the skills, you can think about what to do with each throw after the catch is secured – the best place to throw to, to add the most value for the team.

How do parents and coaches and the athletes themselves, make the decision about which path to follow – early or late specialisation, when moving from the participation level to the specialisation level in sport? One side of the argument suggests that experts acquire domain-specific skills as a result of the specialised activities in which they participate throughout their development, while the other side advocates for a broad range of sampling experiences before children decide to specialise later in their development (Baker, 2003).

A solid foundation in movement competence enables athletes to develop better trainability for long-term sport-specific development (Balyi, 2001.). Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993) suggested that the acquisition of expert performance involves operating within three types of constraints: ‘motivational’ (p. 371), ‘effort’ and ‘resource’ (p. 370). Côté used this framework for his 1999 research interviewing athletes and their families about an athlete’s the path to a career in sport. From his research he identified three stages of athlete development that he termed ‘the stages of sport participation.’ Côté identified the initial stage, as the sampling stage, occurring between the ages of 6-13 (p. 401.). The sampling stage consists mostly of play, enjoyment and experimentation with a variety of physical activities. Côté labelled the second stage “the specializing years” (p. 404.) and determined that this stage occurs “from ages 13-15 when athletes chose one or two activities or sports and focus their skills with more structured practices” (p. 404.). He termed the third stage the ‘investment years’ saying that these occur around age 15 (p. 408.). This stage is illustrated by the quest for a super-

elite level of performance with more time, effort, and intense deliberate practice needed. Côté also concluded that the ‘investment years’

In research focused on the role of deliberate practice and play in career progression in sport, Ford, Ward, Hodges and Williams (2009) contrasted two groups of ‘Soccer’ players in the context of the ‘Developmental Model of Sport Participation’ (DMSP). This model supports the importance of late specialisation and early diversity between 6 and 12 years of age (Côté, et al., 2007). One group progressed to the professional ranks while the other group did not. The elite players who went on to attain professional status accumulated more hours per year in soccer play activities, but not in competition or other sports. Accordingly, their finding suggests that practice and play in the primary sport between six and 12 years of age contributes to the development of expert performance in Soccer. The findings highlight the need to derive an appropriate balance between domain-specific deliberate practice (e.g., team practice) and participation in domain-specific play, for example, fun activities that likely foster motivation and independent decision-making skills in the development of expert performers in soccer (p. 74).

In the study of ‘specializers versus samplers in youth sport,’ Strachan, Côté, and Deakin (2009, p.77-92) compared experiences, personal development and sport outcomes in two different trajectories of sport participation. While ‘asset possession’ and ‘sources of enjoyment’ were similar for both groups, they reported differences in sport experiences and burnout. The “samplers” experienced higher levels of the integration of sport and family and linkages to the community, while the “specializers” reported higher levels of physical/emotional exhaustion and more experiences related to diverse peer groups. The differences highlight the importance of examining specific pathways of development in sport to gain a deeper understanding of youths’ experiences in sport.

A number of descriptive and theoretical models of athlete development have been constructed. One model that gained a lot of traction with sporting organisations in Australia is ‘The Developmental Model of Sport Participation’ (DMSP; Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007), reproduced in Figure 1. The DMSP was the outcome of research involving athletes from Canada and Australia and attempted to move towards a prediction of athlete development, assessing the variables that can impact on progression in a sport. The DMSP was also an attempt to understand the journey of an athlete from entry into a sport through to withdrawal or dropout from the sport, with consideration of the sampling, specializing and investment phases. According to Côté and colleagues (Côté, 1999; Côté, Baker, & Abernathy,

2003; Côté & Hay, 2002) movement through DMSP is dependent on deliberate play, deliberate practice, and amount of involvement in sport. They described deliberate play as sporting activities delivering instant and maximum enjoyment, immediate gratification and intrinsic motivation. Highly structured sporting activities designed explicitly to improve performance, motivated by performance goals, requiring substantial effort and no immediate rewards, are defined as deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). While the DMSP is a comprehensive model, Côté and Hay (2002) note that the complex influences and decision-making surrounding sport participation need more in-depth analysis.

Côté, Lidor and Hackfort (2009) examined the question, ‘to sample or to specialize’ in relation to sport and presented seven postulates about youth sport activities that lead to continued participation and elite performance. They used the ‘Developmental Model of Sport Participation’ (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007), (Figure 2), because it provided a comprehensive framework for sport expertise, outlining three different pathways of involvement in sport. In the first two pathways, early sampling is seen as the foundation for both elite and recreational sport participation based on involvement in various sports and participation in deliberate play. Pathway three suggests that the course to super-elite performance is through early specialisation in one sport. Early specialisation implies a focused involvement on one sport and a large number of deliberate practice activities with the goal of improving sport skills and performance during childhood. They suggested that any approach to analysing the journey to sporting expertise should consider the complex interplay of the athlete, the sport and the environments (Hackfort, 1986). They proposed seven postulates associated with the different pathways suggested in the DMSP - five postulates focus on the influence of sampling and deliberate play on youth’s participation, performance, and personal development in sport and two postulates focused on important transitions (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014 p.1). In 2014, Côté & Vierimaa, published research grading the evidence supporting the seven postulates and discussed their findings in relation to the 3 Ps of sport outcomes – performance, participation and personal development and suggested that “the seven postulates associated with the DMSP can be adapted and used to structure youth sport programs that meet the multiple needs of youth in sport (p. 568). The DMSP model and the 7 postulates have been sufficiently supported by research, affirming the roles that “early diversification and deliberate play have in the development of an integrated sport system that value athletes’ performance, mass participation, and personal development through sport (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014. P. 568).

Many parents are convinced that their child should specialise at an early age. There is pressure from sporting organisations and talent scouts to direct children towards the sport they represent as soon as the child shows any signs of being more competent than their peers at a particular activity. The philosophical underpinning of this early specialiser approach is that to develop expertise that will lead to careers at super-elite, professional levels in international sports, children must start early and contribute many hours to their development.

While there is contention about the age at which a child should start to specialise in a

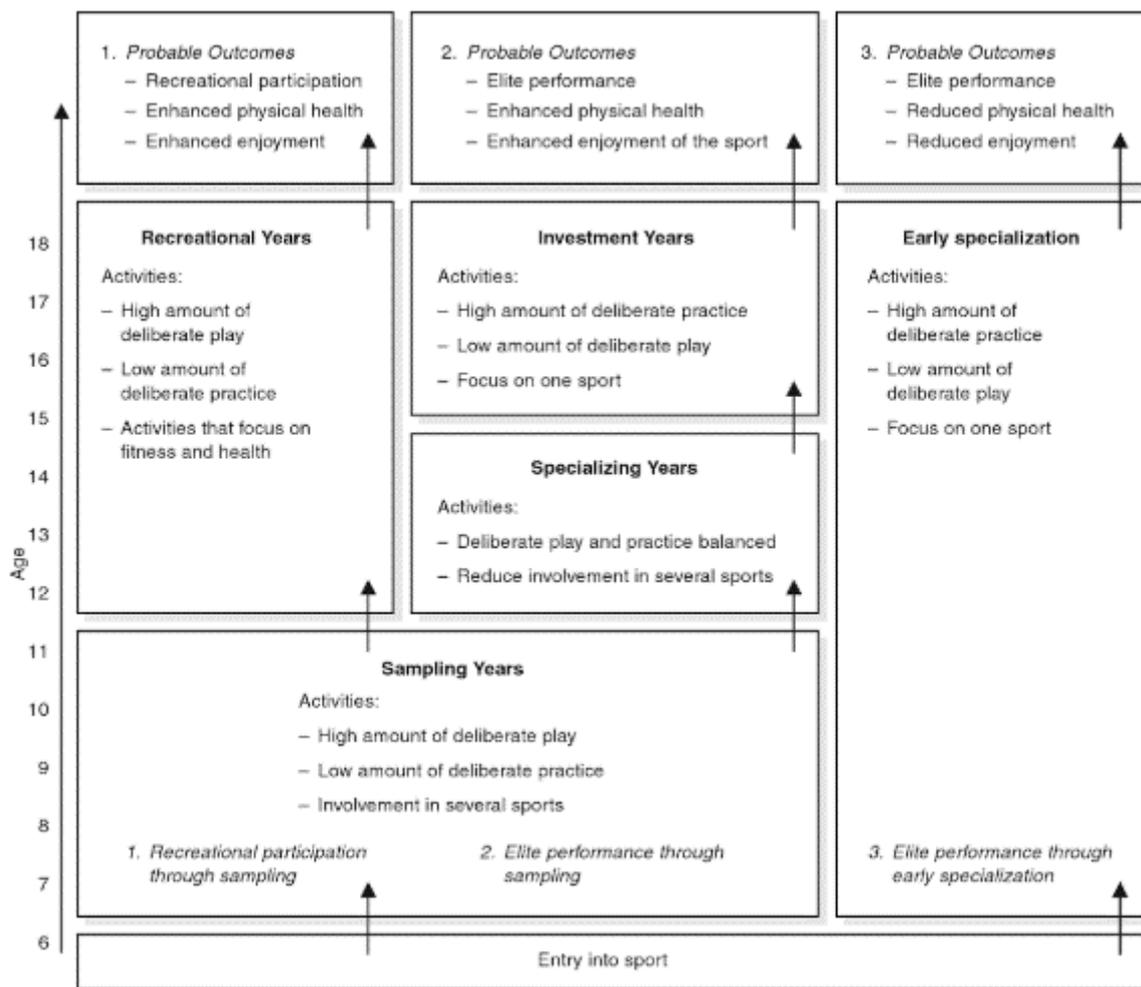


Figure 2 Developmental Model of Sport Participation (Côté et al., 2007)

specific sport, there is little debate that the development of fundamental movement skills should occur in positive, supportive environments if these skills are to contribute significantly to future athletic achievements. Once those skills are learned or reach a certain level of competence and children are comfortable performing them, some children will progress to higher levels of competitiveness through being selected as representatives or in representative

teams. Representative teams may be organisation based, based on a geographic location or grading or seeding based. In school sport in Australia, geography-based teams are usually divided into District, Regional, State and National levels.

In club sport, an athlete might represent a club, then a broader association before moving into a state-based squad, before being selected in a state team. In the 'Greater Brisbane League' in Queensland Baseball, players will register with a club and play in a team from that club, for example, Redlands Baseball Club Inc. which may be graded. These club teams play against other club teams in a Southeast Queensland based weekly competition for a defined 'season.' Players from Redlands Baseball Club teams can then be invited to trial for a regional Brisbane South representative team. Regional representative teams play against each other in Queensland State Titles. From this state-based competition, a Queensland squad is selected to train for several weeks before a team is selected to play in the National Championships (Baseball Queensland, 2018). The most standout athletes at these National Titles are then selected in a team to represent Australia in international competition.

These representative teams or squads of selected players identified by coaches, benefit from increased practice with more qualified coaches and have the opportunity to play more competition games at higher levels of play. Each player selected also has the opportunity to develop better skills and more advanced understanding of game strategies because of the calibre of player they are training with and against.

The effect of these processes is that children who develop physical competencies and possibly grow earlier, have a huge advantage over children and adolescents who are denied these opportunities and also over those who develop at a later age. The system is skewed towards early developers having all of the advantages while late developers have few to no advantages and may drop out of the sport before they reach their optimal development. This issue is discussed in more depth later in the chapter when the discussion turns to talent identification and development programs.

### **3.8 The Athlete**

Section 3.8 is concerned with other aspects of the athlete that are simply non-modifiable factors that have been studied for their possible impacts on success, such as birth order, date of birth and place of birth.

### **3.8.1 Birth order, date of birth and place of birth**

Researchers in the field of talent identification and development have long known that an athlete's month of birth may impact their likelihood of reaching elite levels of performance because of relative age effects (RAE). Current research suggests that the population size of an athlete's birthplace may also have a large influence.

In many sports, children are grouped by age to set parameters for competition and evaluation, this is particularly evident in school sport. Research consistently confirms that the older children in an age cohort are more likely to attain higher levels of proficiency. RAE has been reported in various educational settings and in sports such as ice hockey, baseball and swimming. Several explanations account for RAE. Firstly, children born in the first quarter of a year are actually older than those born in December, for example. They will grow earlier and reach other developmental milestones before their younger peers, increasing the likelihood of them being taller, more muscular, faster, stronger and more competent or coordinated when performing physical tasks. As a consequence, they may experience more success which in turn leads to increased psychosocial investment in a sport which then leads to an increased probability of retention in the sport. Another impact of RAE is that the older children are more likely to be selected in representative teams that are in turn, more competitive and receive improved coaching, facilities and playing time. This improved experience of deliberate practice further widens the gap between them and their younger peers and begins a cycle of privilege which is difficult for the younger peers to break (Baker and Logan, 2007).

In addition to RAE, Côté, MacDonald, Baker & Abernethy (2006) found that city size or the population of the town or city where an athlete is developed, also has significant impact. They looked at professional athletes from baseball, basketball, ice hockey and golf to determine this effect and also found some evidence that this effect is consistent across team and individual sports and also across countries, providing strong preliminary support for the concept of a 'birthplace effect.' Although the results in the Côté, et al study are consistent, the exact mechanism for birthplace effect have not been identified. Several factors have been proposed as significant. For example, adolescents in smaller rural communities receive more social support, have higher levels of self-efficacy, and experience fewer conflicts with others than those from larger cities. Smaller towns and rural communities may also provide environments that are more conducive to the development of sporting expertise simply because there is more space for play and the spaces are safer (Kyttä, 2002).

Baker and Logan (2007) set out to examine the impact of date of birth and place of birth for National Hockey League draftees to determine if either of these factors impacted on when players were chosen in the draft. They concluded that “contextual factors such as relative age and size of birthplace have a significant effect on likelihood of being selected in the NHL draft” (p. 1). Their results reinforce the conclusion that an athlete's developmental environment impacts on the likelihood of achieving super-elite level performance. The Baker and Logan study (2007) confirms the existence of relative age effects and birthplace effects proposed by Côté *et al*, (2006). Côté and colleagues concluded that if a town or city is too small or too large, the environment will not be conducive to the development of super-elite athletes because of factors such as the amount of available recreational space, safety, including transport safety and transport options and costs. Children born in the first quarter of the calendar year or the competitive season for a sport, are much more likely to be selected for representative teams and therefore have an increased capacity to develop athletic abilities and to practice those capacities in higher levels of competition.

### **3.8.2 Defining Talent**

What is talent? Does talent take you to the super-elite, professional, international levels in your chosen sport, art, or career? Is talent all that is needed to be a more superior athlete than your peers? ‘No matter how talent is defined, those who believe that innate talent exists also assume that early signs of it can be used to predict future success’ (Howe, et al 1998, p. 399). This section of the chapter examines the subtly varied factors of talent, giftedness and expertise and the development of each. Determining which of these factors should be considered first illuminates that particularly important conclusion that the processes of finding and developing talent and expertise are not linear. What becomes clear is that expert knowledge and skills, combined with above average levels of competence, are no guarantee of success at the highest levels of elite, international, professional sporting performance.

Helsen, Hodges, Winckel & Starkes, (2000) researched the roles of talent, physical precocity and practice in the development of soccer expertise. In their attempts to define talent they cited and considered several studies. They contend that “‘talent’ is both an appealing and common-sense explanation of what underlies skill in sport” (p. 728). They also contend that “coaches take for granted that differences in talent determine who will succeed” (p. 728). A study by Starkes et al., (1996) suggested that the best figure skating coaches feel that talent plays a role but does not amount to anything unless even the most talented prospects practise hard. Sport development programs administer elaborate testing protocols to participants in an

attempt to detect talent at an early age and then select individuals who display particular physical, or personality attributes considered desirable for success in the sport. The Canadian National Ballet School select “children from the age of 7 based on physical maturation, anthropometric characteristics, personality tests and studies of their parents” (Helsen, Hodges, Winckel & Starkes, 2000. p. 728), hoping to identify children who will become skilled dancers after 10-12 years of practice. Top European soccer teams subject children to extensive screening and selection processes to identify athletes who will “be sponsored and supported in team-affiliated junior programs” (Helsen, Hodges, Winckel & Starkes, 2000, p. 728).

Searching for and attempting to identify talent in young athletes is not a new idea. Many taxonomies have been introduced in seminal works, in attempts to explain the psychomotor abilities that underlie certain types of skills (Poulton, 1957; Fleishman, 1972; Ackerman, 1988). Research on motor behaviour does not support the notion of transferability of performance from one motor task to another, even when the performance appears to rely on the same or similar subroutines and movements (Marteniuk, 1976, 1976; Proteau, Marteniuk, Girouard & Dugas, 1987; Schmidt, 1988; Schmidt & Lee, 1999; Starkes and Deakin, 1984.). Several researchers have challenged the notion of talent in sport (Helsen, et al, 2000; Starkes et al., 1994; Starkes and Deakin, 1984; Starkes, 1987). Research attempting to prove the possibility of modifiability and trainability of physiological factors, such as muscle properties (e.g., Tesch and Karlsson, 1985) and heart size (e.g., Elovianio and Sundberg, 1983), demonstrated that height is the only biological factor necessary to attain elite standards of performance (Ericsson et al., 1993). The comprehensive review of the role of talent by Howe et al., (1998), employing a multidisciplinary, thorough analysis of positive and negative evidence and arguments, suggested “that differences in early experiences, preferences, opportunities, habits, training and practice are the real determinants of excellence” (Howe, Davidson & Sloboda, 1998, p. 2). They delineated five properties of talent and evaluated existing literature with respect to these properties. They suggested that the following are properties of talent:

- “1. It originates in genetically transmitted structures and hence is at least partly innate.*
- 2. Its full effects may not be evident at an early stage, but there will be some advance indications, allowing trained people to identify the presence of talent before exceptional standards of mature performance have been demonstrated.*
- 3. These early indications of talent provide a basis for predicting who is likely to excel.*

4. *Only a minority are talented; if all children were talented, then there would be no way to predict or explain differential success.*

5. *Talents are relatively domain-specific.*” (Howe et al., 1998, p. 3).

The current literature does not support two of these properties - that talent provides a basis for predicting excellence and is domain-specific. This finding is crucial because these are the very characteristics so many sporting programs use to justify early talent identification and selection into development programs. The authors concluded that it is difficult to support the notion that future sporting success can be predicted on the basis of measures for identifying talent. They also noted that “we have never met a coach who felt he or she was unable to ‘see’ talent” (Helsen, et al., 2000, p.729). Expanding on this thread they examined how coaches perceive and select potential talent and concluded that what coaches see as early talent might simply be “physical precocity associated with a relative age advantage” (p. 729). As part of their comprehensive research Helsen, et al., (2000), also reviewed studies that assessed the “progress of international, national and provincial players based on accumulated deliberate practice, amount of practice per week and relative importance and demands of various practice and everyday activities”, finding a positive and linear relationship between accumulated individual practice in addition to appropriate team practice and skill (p. 730).

Colvin (2008), Synd (2010), Duckworth (2016) and numerous other researchers and authors have disputed that talent is the number one of indicator of future sporting success. It almost defies belief that sporting scouts and sports funding organisations still try to identify talent and sporting organisations still suggest that they are developing talent. Synd writes of his own experiences as an elite, international Table Tennis player. He has published an autobiography along the lines of small-town kid makes good against the odds – something he calls the ‘myth of meritocracy’ (p. 7). He claims that many athletes are encouraged to tell the same story – the story of an ordinary kid, born into an ordinary suburb of an ordinary town, with no silver spoon, no advantage from nepotism or anything else, “a triumph of individuality; a personal odyssey of success, a triumph against the odds”, a kind of sentimental ‘American Dream’ rags to riches story of so many athletes. He suggests that this is far from reality for most athletes and focuses on a few exceptional athletes aside from himself, to support his claims.

In his second book, ‘Bounce’ (2010), Synd concedes that the circumstances in his life were more important than any innate talent he had at the Table Tennis table and while the story

of him and his whole neighbourhood and their success in Table Tennis is extraordinary, he now realises the huge advantages he had in the systems of his life that made the start of his journey possible. He had opportunity, and resources not available to most people: a Table Tennis table in his own childhood home; an older brother who was also an avid, champion player who wanted to play all the time with him; an exceptional coach who loved and advocated for the sport and was a teacher at the school he was zoned to attend; membership to a local club that gave each member a set of keys and 24 hour access to a Table Tennis table; and a street and neighbourhood filled with Table Tennis champions, making his practice games challenging and high quality.

Colvin (2008) writes about the extraordinary story of the very 'talented' Tiger Woods. Tiger was born into a second marriage, with an older father, the only child of doting parents who pledged to make him their focus. His father had been a teacher of young army cadets and was a lifelong sports enthusiast and a golf fanatic. He worked hard at the game himself and reached a handicap that placed him in the top 10 % of players. Tiger was given his first golf club at seven months of age. Tiger sat in a highchair in the garage and watched his father hit golf balls into a net for hours. His father developed a "new techniques for teaching the grip and the putting stroke" (p. 30) to a child too young to talk, who is then taken to a golf course where he plays and practices, before the age of two. By the time he first represented the United States in the Walker Cup, he is 19 years old and considered very young, but he has been playing and practicing golf for 17 years. Colvin writes about successful people who are not sportspeople - Wolfgang Mozart, John D Rockefeller, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and comedian Chris Rock, to name a few. In each case he exposes the myth of naturally endowed talent present at birth and identifies just how much practice and demanding work each of these people had done in their field of endeavour, before they enjoyed enormous success. He also writes about NFL star Jerry Rice. Jerry Rice's story is significant in this thesis because it is the story of one athlete that confirms the findings of several larger studies. Rice was considered the "greatest receiver in NFL history" (Colvin, 2008. P. 52) despite not being fast enough to have club franchises clamouring after his services and having to wait for the 16<sup>th</sup> team pick in the draft before a team offered him a spot. He holds records for "total receptions, total touchdowns and total receiving yards" (Colvin, 2008. p. 52), greater than the next best record by 50%. What made him so good – most commentators of the game agree it was because he worked harder in practice and in the off-season than his football playing peers. At team trainings he worked harder and longer than others and in the off season he trained six days per week on his own, doing conditioning work in the morning and strength training in the afternoons.

Research tells us that arduous work alone is not the defining difference between extraordinary success and not quite making it. There were other factors in Rice's story: He spent less than one percent of his football related time playing games of football; his practice was designed by him to work on his specific needs; Rice and his coaches focused on what he needed to be dominant rather than on other factors like speed – something other coaches may have considered desirable and necessary to work on; he was supported by others but worked predominantly on his own; the hard work wasn't fun, but it was necessary and he played at the top of his game for longer than any other wide receiver – playing 20 seasons and retiring at 42 years of age (Colvin, 2008). While this is the story of only one athlete, the conclusions support the conclusions of other research referred to in this chapter about the development of expertise. This highlights the confusion in terms when we talk about talent. Rice was successful because of arduous work so how much of his success could be attributed to having naturally endowed talent in the sport? His story reaffirms the need to ask the questions – is there such a thing as talent and if there is, is talent defining in success?

### **3.8.3 Talent v's giftedness**

Could it be that past research has not clearly defined the notions of talent and giftedness? Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) (2000), proposes two definitions of giftedness and talent that will be useful for further discussion in this thesis. He differentiates between 'Giftedness' and 'Talent.' His model refers to giftedness as

“possession and use of untrained and spontaneously expressed superior natural abilities, called aptitudes or gifts in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of his or her age peers.” (p. 1).

Gagné designates 'Talent' as the

“superior mastery of systematically developed abilities (or skills) and knowledge in at least one field of human activity to a degree that places an individual within at least the upper 10% of age peers who are or have been active in that field or fields.” (p. 1).

The Gagné DMGT model proposes that there are “four aptitude domains: intellectual, creative, socioaffective and sensorimotor” (2006, p. 1.), where the sensorimotor domain refers to the physical abilities involved in sport. He suggests that talents emerge progressively in any field of human activity or performance and acknowledges that intelligence can be ‘modelled into... the strategic planning by an athlete’ (2000, p. 2). Gagné also introduces readers to the

concepts of the developmental process, intrapersonal catalysts, environmental catalysts and chance. He contends that natural abilities are the “raw material” (p. 2) that are the starting point of the developmental process, and it is through systematic learning and practicing that the higher levels of proficiency are attained. He further submits that intrapersonal and environmental catalysts can facilitate or hinder the development of that possible full potential indicated by the baseline level of innate talent. Intrapersonal catalysts are both physical and psychological, and both can be influenced by genetics (2006).

### **3.8.4 The development of expertise**

Research into the development of expertise is not new and much has been written about developing expertise in diverse areas (Bloom, 1985; Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007). Some research uses the terms expertise and talent interchangeably but for the purposes of this research, they are considered separately, mainly because of the huge field of research devoted to talent development, specifically in sport. Bloom’s landmark book, ‘Developing Talent in Young People’ (1985) which looked at talent in diverse areas such as mathematics, music and sport, found that the only innate difference between elite performers that was of any significance turned out to be height and body size – and they mattered primarily in sports! Later research that builds on Bloom’s findings revealed that the amount and quality of practice are key factors. Scientific research has concluded that it takes a minimum of 10 years or 10,000 hours of training for an individual to reach expert status or elite levels of performance. For athlete and coach, this translates into slightly more than 3 hours of training or competition daily for 10 years (Baker, Côté, & Abernethy, 2003). Consistently, studies show that experts were made, not born. Nilsson’s story will reiterate the minimum of 10 years required to develop expertise but will also suggest and highlight that the 10 years or 10,000 hours of practice theories are inadequate in explaining his success and that the multitude of contextual and environmental variables and influences impacting on the development of super-elite, performance cannot be discounted.

How might one describe or define an ‘expert’? In a proficiency scale adapted from Hoffman’s 1998 work, Chi (2006) describes six levels of proficiency from novice to master, with ‘expert’ the penultimate level. In this model of expertise an ‘expert’ is defined as,

“a ‘distinguished’ or ‘brilliant’ journeyman, highly regarded by peers, whose judgments are uncommonly accurate and reliable, whose performance shows consummate skill and economy of effort, and who can deal effectively with certain types

of rare or ‘tough’ cases. An ‘expert’ is also one who has unique skills or knowledge derived from extensive experience with subdomains.” (Chi, 2006. p. 22). Chi further delineates the highest level of proficiency as a ‘master,’ defined as,

“any journeyman or expert who is also qualified to teach those at a lower level. Traditionally, a ‘master’ is one of an elite group of ‘experts’ whose judgments set the regulations, standards, or ideals. Also, a ‘master’ can be that ‘expert’ who is regarded by the other ‘experts’ as being “the” expert, or the “real” expert, especially with regard to sub-domain knowledge” (2006. p. 22).

The definitions from Chi work well when discussing expertise and mastery in sport and makes them suitable to work with. Chi (2006) divided the study of expertise into two approaches. The first approach examines the individual ‘expert’ and how they operate in their domain of expertise. The second approach examines the ‘expert’ in comparison to the novice. An assumption of this approach is that the novice can become an expert. In this sense, the more knowledgeable group can be considered the ‘experts’ and the less knowledgeable groups, the ‘novices’ (a beginner, new, with minimal exposure to the domain), the ‘apprentices’ (learning and immersed in the domain, often with an ‘expert’ or ‘master’ mentor) or ‘journeymen’ (people who have achieved a level of competence but have not progressed to expert level) (Chi, 2006. p. 22.). Proficiency levels can be assessed through domain specific results or outcomes. One goal of this approach is to understand how we can enable a less skilled or experienced person (a novice or a journeyman) to become more skilled, since the assumption is that expertise can be attained is acknowledged. This goal illuminates our understanding of the development of expertise because we presume that the expert acquired knowledge about a domain from learning and studying (Chi & Bassok, 1989) and from deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2004; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Weisberg, 1999). The goal is to understand how experts became that way so that the information can be shared with others to help novices learn to become more skilled and knowledgeable, ultimately moving to the ‘expert’ stage.

Ericsson suggested that the major problem “confronting the scientific investigation of extraordinary achievements and their creative nature, is their uniqueness” (1994, p. 1). He claimed that by focusing on the highly replicable skills of exceptional performers one can identify expert levels of performance that correspond to phenomena that can be measured scientifically. Ericsson aimed to address how expert performers develop successful adaptations to the demands of activities in the corresponding domain. He acknowledged that in some

domains, such as individual sporting disciplines (e.g., the 100m sprint), the performance is measured in units of time or distance while in other domains, performance is evaluated in relative terms through comparison with other contemporary performers, describing these types of expert performance by absolute standards that are independent of the social and historical context. Ericsson used Gymnastics as an example of an event where he claimed, competitors 2212 to each other. This is not strictly accurate. Gymnastics performances are compared to a set of criteria and marks, including marks for the degree of difficulty of each skill and predetermined deductions for transgressions deemed errors. In competition, the performers are ranked according to the mark they achieve, with placings (and medals) being awarded according to the ranking. On the superficial level they are indeed compared to each other, but this is not the intent, even though it appears to be the outcome. It is subtle. Educators work in this space and understand the nuances of criterion-based assessment, a grading that is then used to rank order students or 'performers' (Norton, Tilley, Newstead & Franklyn-Stokes, 2001; Norton et al., 2002; Price, Rust & O'Donovan, 2003; Biggs, 1996, 1999, 2002, 2003), but coaches and selectors may not have the same level of understanding.

There are several fundamental theoretical assumptions in attributing 'experts' with more knowledge and skill than 'non-experts.' One assumption is that 'experts' have acquired more in-depth or useful knowledge and superior skills in a domain (Ericsson & Smith, 1991) and that this knowledge and these skills are organised or structured (Bedard & Chi, 1992). A second assumption is that fundamental capacities and domain specific reasoning are the same or similar in experts and novices, apprentices, and journeymen. The third assumption is that difference in performances of experts and those who are not, yet expert is determined by the way they use their knowledge and skills in the domain (Chi, 2006).

Understanding the ways in which experts excel has been the subject of abundant research literature (Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988; Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Ericsson, 1994, 1996, 2004, 2006, 2014; Feltovich, Ford, & Hoffman, 1997; Hoffman, 1992). Most of the research has focused on how experts excel, either in an absolute context or in comparison to novices and highlights six basic premises in the development of sporting expertise.

1. Generating the best: 'Experts' excel in generating the best solution, even under pressure of time and can implement or perform these solutions faster and more accurately than non-experts (Klein, 1993).

2. Detection and recognition: ‘Experts’ can detect, ‘see,’ and perceive deeper vision than non-experts (Lesgold, Rubinson, Feltovich, Glaser, Klopfer, & Wang, 1988; Chi, et al, 1981).
3. Qualitative Analysis: Experts spend more time analysing and devising solutions or responses to domain specific scenarios (Simon & Simon, 1978; Voss, Greene, Post, & Penner, 1983).
4. Monitoring: Experts are more competent at self-evaluation and reflection and better at detecting errors in their own performances. They are also more capable of understanding their own capacity to ‘solve’ or save a situation that has developed in their domain (Chi, 1978; Chi, Glaser and Rees, 1982).
5. Strategies: Experts are more successful at selecting the best strategies to use in a given scenario and also more proficient at using the same strategies more successfully (Larkin, McDermott, Simon & Simon, 1980). Experts know which strategy is better in a scenario and are more likely to employ strategies that have proven to be more effective more frequently (Lemaire & Siegler, 1995). Experts are also more opportunistic at utilising sources of information and resources.
6. Cognitive Effort: ‘Experts can retrieve relevant domain knowledge and strategies with minimal cognitive effort’ (Alexander, 2003, p. 3). They can also perform skills with greater autonomy and exercise more control over components of performance when and where control is the best option (Schneider, 1985; Ericsson, et al, 2006).

These six premises provide a basis for further exploration about what it is that makes an expert athlete superior to their peers, enabling them to reach the highest level of super-elite, international and professional sport. Conversely, experts also come with shortcomings because of, or in spite of, their expertise. We can observe this in sporting performances where experts sometimes do not reach the lofty heights of their sport, or if they do, they cannot perform according to expectations at that level and do not last long in the top competition levels. This observation leads to the conclusion that there is more than expertise at play in reaching super-elite, international and professional performance.

For their 2003 paper, Baker, Côté and Abernathy examined the role of sport-specific practice in the development of decision-making expertise in field hockey, netball, and basketball. They gathered data from fifteen expert decision-makers and thirteen experienced non-expert athletes about the quantity and type of sport-specific and related practice activities each had undertaken throughout their sporting careers. They found that the experts had

“accumulated more hours of sport-specific practice from the age of 12 years onwards than did non-experts, spending on average some 13 years and 4,000 hours on concentrated sport-specific practice before reaching international standard” (p. 1.). A significant negative correlation existed between the number of additional activities undertaken and the hours of sport-specific training required before attaining expertise, suggesting a functional role for activities other than sport-specific training in the development of expert decision-making.

There are some experimental studies showing how limiting deliberate training to improve on specific aspects of performance can increase performance even among elite individuals, such as athletes competing at the international level (Ericsson, 2003b).

K. Anders Ericsson (1994, 2004, 2006, 2014), who is internationally acknowledged as one of the leading theoretical and experimental researchers on expertise, studied the cognitive structure of expert performance and investigated how expert performers acquire their superior performance through extended deliberate practice (e.g., high concentration practice beyond one's comfort zone). Ericsson edited ‘The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise & Expert Performance’ (2006), containing contributions from over 100 researchers in the area of expertise and top performance in a wide variety of domains. The commonly reported findings suggest that genuine superior performance requires struggle, sacrifice, and honest self-assessment. The handbook further explains that it takes over a decade to achieve expertise and time needs to be wisely invested in ‘deliberate practice’ that focuses on tasks beyond the current level of competence and comfort. Authors in ‘The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise & Expert Performance’ contend that skill in sport is easy to measure and compare, but this is a simplistic view of sports which applies mostly to sports where performance is judged in time or distance and every competitor competes in the same contextual environment. This is not true of Baseball, where strategic awareness and deep knowledge of the game and competent adaptation to varying simple and complex contexts at the highest levels of international and professional performance separates the super-elite performers from their elite peers.

In 2005, Ericsson published an article ‘Recent Advances in the Study of Expertise’ focused on the development of expertise, in which he updated his research and theories. The issue is devoted to interest in the new trend of capturing expert performance in the laboratory and how superior performance is acquired through training and extended deliberate practice. The study of expertise covers a surprisingly diverse range of fields including chess, music and sport, for example, examining the entire range of development from beginner to world class performer at the highest levels.

Chi (2006) explored two approaches to study the characteristics of experts. In one approach, truly exceptional people were studied in an attempt to understand how experts “perform in their domain of expertise” (p. 21). Her research identified seven ways in which experts excel and seven ways in which they fall short. Prior to Chi’s research, the vast majority of research into expertise had focused on the ways in which experts’ greater skills, knowledge, physical and psychological attributes, have facilitated them reaching the pinnacles of excellence. It is, of course, equally important to know ways in which people on the path to becoming experts are limited or limit themselves. This developing field of knowledge will help to define boundaries “for shaping a theory of expertise” (p. 27).

### **3.9 Influences on the development of sport-specific skills**

Sport scientists have examined numerous factors influencing the acquisition and manifestation of elevated levels of sporting performance. Baker and Horton (2004) reviewed factors affecting the development of expert performance in sport, identifying primary and secondary influences. Primary influences include genetics, training regimes and psychology while secondary influences include socio-cultural and contextual environments (p.1). Lewontin (2000) suggested human behaviour should be viewed as ‘the consequence of a unique interaction between the genes it carries, the temporal sequence of external environments through which it passes during its life, and random events of molecular interactions within individual cells’ (p. 17–18).

Gulbin, Croser, Morley, & Weissensteiner (2013), built on previous research findings to develop what they called “an integrated framework for the optimisation of sport and athlete development” (pp. 1319-1331). They compared and contrasted several well-known athlete development models before devising the “*Foundations, Talent, Elite, Mastery* (FTEM) framework” (2013, p. 1322). The FTEM sport and athlete development framework was generated by multidisciplinary sport practitioners. They combined 21<sup>st</sup> Century theoretical research perspectives with extensive empirical observations from the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) to develop the FTEM framework. The authors claim that the FTEM framework is unique when compared to other models and frameworks because of a number of factors. Firstly, it integrates general and specialised phases of development for participants within the “active lifestyle, sport participation and sport excellence pathways” (p. 1322). Secondly, it introduces the idea of ten phases of development, in an attempt to fully understand the

continuum of athlete transition from participation to specialisation, to representation, to mastery and through doing so avoids chronological and training prescriptions and thirdly it acknowledges the considerable influence “of many developmental support drivers at the sport and system levels” (p. 1319).

The FTEM framework offers a viable and flexible approach for stakeholders interested in researching, managing and optimising athlete development and sports pathways. Despite being an addition to the scene and a self-proclaimed update on the other models considered as well as being very comprehensive, the model itself is really aimed at producing winning performances in high performance sport and does not consider the bioecological influences on the journey. Little space is given to the first stage of the framework – ‘Foundation 1 and 2’ (p. 1324) where foundation learning and acquisition of movement skills and physical literacies enables the participant to move to Foundation 2 (F2) (p. 1324). In the ‘F2’ phase, movement competencies are advanced and refined. ‘F2’ is characterized by exposure to varied and diverse movement experiences, establishing a “healthy developmental trajectory from sampling to specialization” (Baker, 2003; Côté et al., 2009).

### 3.9.1. Talent

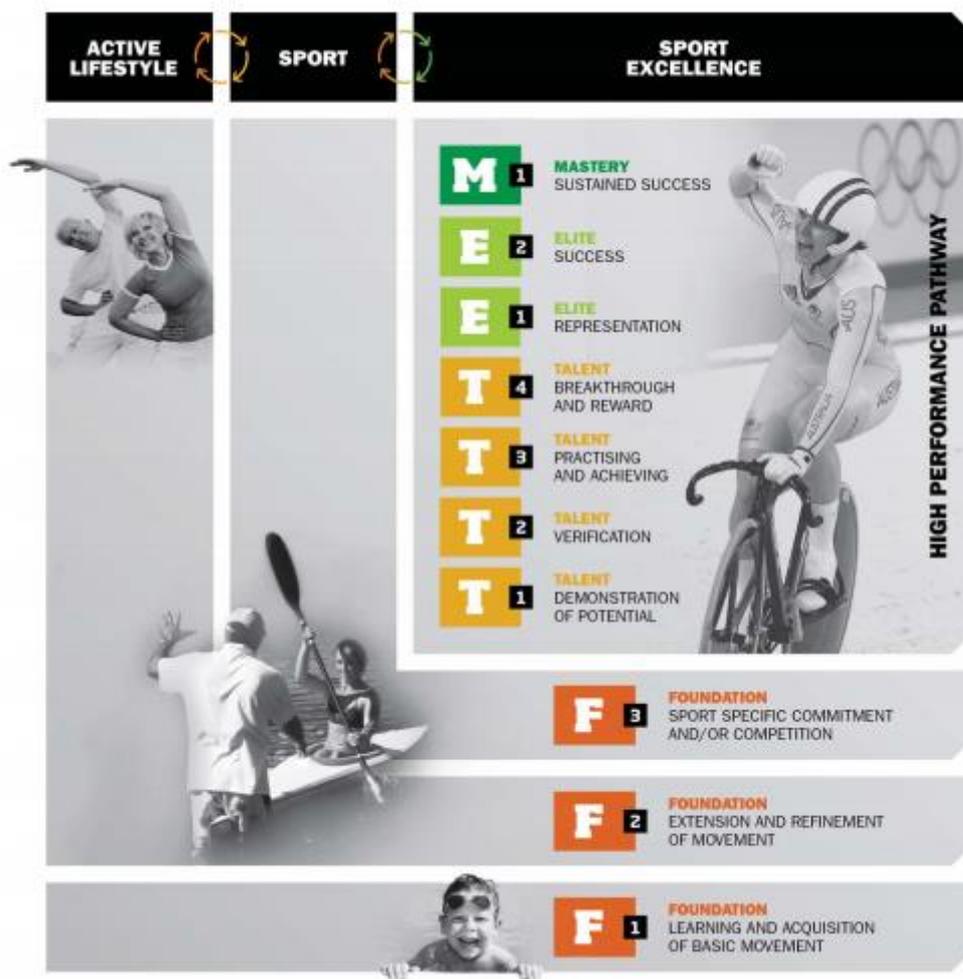


Figure 3: The integrated FTEM (Foundations, Talent, Elite, Mastery) framework for the optimisation of sport and athlete development. Image courtesy of the Australian Sports Commission, <http://www.ausport.gov.au>

#### Identification and development programs

It appears that the current trends in sport programming are characterised by institutionalisation, elitism, early selection, and early specialisation (Hecimovich, 2004; De Knop, Engstrom, & Skirstad, 1996; Hill, 1988; Hill & Hansen, 1988). In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s many sport programs were requiring higher levels of investment from earlier ages and were actively discouraging children from participating in a diversity of activities (Gould & Carson, 2004; Hecimovich, 2004; Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996; Hill, 1988; Hill & Hansen, 1988). We can observe sports that still have this emphasis on early specialisation, for example, swimming, tennis and football. However, there seems to be unmistakable evidence suggesting that sport programs such as these may not be providing an optimal

environment for youths' lifelong involvement in sport or even for future success in elite participation (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy 2007; Guellich, Emrich, & Prohl, 2004).

Elite sporting programs currently have narrow parameters for talent identification and development that do not examine contributing personal and environmental influences that have shaped an athlete's talents and potential for success. Indeed, the Gulbin et al, 2013 research that was influential in shaping the implementation of the controversial and now defunct, 'Australia's Winning Edge' (ASC, 2012) funding model, outlining Australia's performance targets 2012-2022 (ASC, 2012) was critical of the Henrikson, Stambulova and Roessler (2010) 'Athlete Talent Development Environment Model'(ATDE). The Henrikson et al, model was used in two case study field research projects to examine the "dynamics of the micro and macro developmental environments" (Gublin et al., 2013, p. 1321). It incorporates a holistic, ecological approach to athlete development that requires working with and in diverse environments and use of qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews and participant observation (Henrikson et al, 2010. p. 213). The authors used Bronfenbrenner's 1979 model and Patton and McMahon's 2006 'System Theory Framework' (p. 213) to develop two working models; the "Athletic talent development environment model (2009, p. 123) and the "Explanatory working model: the environment success factors model" (2009, p. 123).

Excellent results in psychological profiling and physical measures are no guarantee that an athlete can combine these elements with what they can draw from their life course, in order to produce results in the top echelons of their sport in events such as the Olympic Games or in Premier Leagues. In their study 'Practice to play in the development of sport expertise' (Côté et al., 2007) found that individual sport development varies due to differences in learning opportunities and psychosocial environments in which learning takes place. They found that unique environmental experiences during childhood can lead to motivation to practice and differences in the types of skills acquired and also influence how and when exceptional abilities are developed. Retrospective studies of elite athletes indicate critical incidents that promote a child's investment in one sport, including positive experiences with a coach, encouragement from an older sibling, early success, and enjoyment of the activity (Côté, et al, 2007).

Evidence suggests that the making of an expert athlete frequently begins in environments where children are exposed early and regularly (Baker, Côté & Abernathy, 2003; Soberlak & Côté, 2003). Relative age effect (Musch & Grondin, 2001) and the size of the town or city a child grows up in (Curtis & Birch, 1987) have been identified as two variables associated with achievement of expertise. Relative age effect indicates that those children born

in the first three months of the year have a greater probability of eventually becoming elite athletes (Baxter-Jones & Helms, 1994; Dundink, 1994; Helsen, Hodges, Van Winckel & Starkes, 2000). Côté, et al (2007) conclude that smaller populations offer increased opportunities to experience success in sport, which in turn increases self-efficacy and the motivational drive to play and practice more. They present more opportunities for the type of developmental experiences and practice associated with expert performance. Examination of these two variables indicates at first glance that Nilsson was atypical, however, a deeper look into the relatively smaller size of the Baseball communities in Australia and Queensland and the age cut-offs for seasons when Nilsson was a child, reveals that he may well have benefited from both these variables.

Each four-year Olympic cycle offers individuals and nations the opportunity to excel at one of the highest levels in sport (Vaeyens, Güllich, Warr, & Philippaerts, 2009). Many countries have systemic identification and development pathways for athletes where talented athletes are identified and invited into development programs, often run through national or state-based institutes of sport such as the Australian Institute of Sport and the Queensland Academy of Sport. Some of these athletes are fortunate enough to receive ‘scholarships’ which come with a financial stipend, affording them the opportunity to train and focus full time on their sport. In other sports, scouts or talent identification personnel are tasked with finding gifted or stand out athletes in ‘age based’ junior competitions and programs and then predicting which of these athletes has the talent and the potential to make it to the top levels of the sport, years in advance of the child being able to compete at that level. ‘Forecasting years in advance the next generation of sporting experts and stimulating their development remains problematic’ (Vaeyens, Güllich, Warr, & Philippaerts, 2009, p. 1). The authors determined that success in senior, international, elite sport is not a guaranteed outcome of early onset, high volume, discipline-specific training and competition, or involvement in institutional talent development programs.

Burgess and Naughton (2010) undertook a review of talent development of “postpubescent adolescents involved in team sport” (p. 103). They concluded that most talent development pathways are exclusionary in nature with identification of so called ‘talent’ being based on subjective rankings and assessment of skills performed in isolation rather than in authentic game play. They contended that talent identification processes and programs may result in premature stratification, dissatisfaction and early disengagement. Burgess and Naughton (2010) also suggest that coach education programs should include information and

understanding of adolescent psychology and development. They acknowledge that talent development issues are being experienced worldwide in the nations that have the economic power to support such programs. “Talent development issues are global and not exclusive to ... athletes in “team sports” (p 103). ...” because of the many factors associated with growth, development, and maturation, the same strategies employed with elite adult athletes are unlikely to be sustainable in adolescents” (p. 103). The authors concluded that the significant factors that impact on adolescent development in sport can be grouped into three categories, the first being factors that can impact performance such as nutrition, injury prevention and/or management, physical maturation and athletic competence, including cognitive abilities in ‘reading’ game play and appropriate and timely application of sport-specific skills. The second group of factors includes competing social and cultural activities which need to be acknowledged and mediated through such strategies as long-term goal setting. The third group of factors are relationships with key people such as peers, family, teammates, coaches – all those who may influence things like training habits, motivation, decision making, sport and training specific skills and knowledge of game play. At this transitional stage, the coach becomes increasingly important, and they must understand that their role in long-term athlete development and longevity in the sport supersedes the need for short-term successes, such as winning junior level premierships (Burgess and Naughton, 2010).

From 2000 to 2016, Reeves, McRobert, Littlewood & Roberts (2018) completed a scoping review of research related to sociological predictors of talent in junior elite Football (Soccer). They started with “1107 potential studies” (2018, p. 1) and found that most did not meet the eligibility criteria, resulting in the researchers being left with a pool limited to 12 journal articles. After two follow up searches, they were able to add one more article, leaving a total of 13 articles aligned with “four potential sociological predictors of talent in Football: 1) hours in practice; 2) coach-child interaction; 3) parental support; and 4) education” (Reeves, et al, 2018, p. 1). In the review of “potential sociological predictors of talent in junior elite football 2000 – 2016” (p. 1), Reeves, McRobert, Littlewood and Roberts, interrogated the often used “four-category model of potential predictors of talent in youth football” devised by Williams and Reilly (2000). They determined that historically, the identification and selection of promising individuals into youth soccer academies has been linked to a coach or talent scouts' subjective, preconceived image of the ideal player (Williams & Reilly, 2000). However, it is now accepted, that when used in isolation, this approach can result in repetitive misjudgments in talent identification processes (Meylan, Cronin, Oliver & Hughes, 2010).

There is increasing emphasis in the use of science-based support systems offering a more holistic approach to talent identification in soccer with anthropometric, physiological, psychological, maturational and sociological characteristics being considered in addition to technical (Figueiredo, Goncalves, Silva, & Malina, 2009) competence (Meylan et al., 2010). Sporting scouts have used all these characteristics of youth soccer players who drop out, persist, or move up, either in isolation or various combinations to predict future development of expertise and talent (Figueiredo, Goncalves, Silva and Malina, 2009).

It is a safe conclusion that more research into the sociological predictors of talent and the sociological influences on talent development is needed.

### 3.9.2 Developing ‘talent’

In 2006, Morgan and Giacobbi published research that examined “the talent development and social support process of highly successful collegiate athletes” (p. 295). They used multiple perspectives of athletes, coaches and parents to identify experiences and influences on the athletes during their athletic development while at College in the USA. Using semi structured interviews and grounded theory analytics they concluded that nurturing of athlete talent development depends on a “favourable interaction between perceived genetic dispositions, practice, situational factors, and mental characteristics” (p. 295). They further identified the importance of “social support in dealing with challenges as a salient theme” and

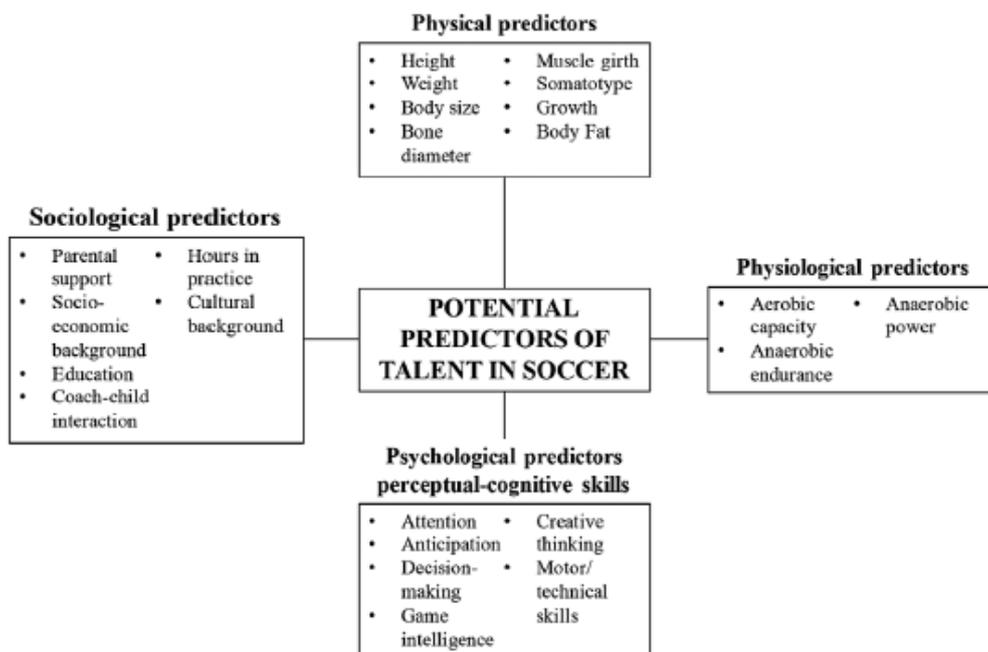


Figure 4: Model of potential predictors of talent in soccer. Adapted from Williams and Riley, *Talent identification and development*, (p. 665.).

suggested that this factor ‘should be addressed by sport psychology consultants and coaches’ (p. 295).

Morgan and Giacobbi’s 2006 conclusions are supported by the findings of Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler (2010) who considered a holistic approach to the milieu of environments in which athletic talent is nurtured. Their research used a “holistic ecological approach to talent development” (p. 212) and moved the focus away from the athlete to the multiple environments in which the athlete grows and develops their capabilities. Henriksen et al (2010) recognised the difficulties inherent in “recruitment, retention and transitions of athletes; (212) in the complex and competitive socioecological contexts of the 21st Century. The decision to look beyond the micro system of the pre-elite athlete (family, coach/es and peers), to the broader influences of the macro, meso and chrono systems of the era, enabled Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler to build on the social sport psychology research of Martindale, Collins and Abraham (2007) and Martindale, Collins and Daubney (2005). Martindale and colleagues introduced the term ‘talent development environment,’ thereby focusing beyond the athlete to the environment but limited their work to the sporting environment and the athlete relationships with coaches, club and organisation. Whilst this was ecological research in nature because it went to a level beyond the athlete to include the environments in which talent would be developed, it was not holistic in approach.

Henrikson, et al (2010) expanded their research to examine ‘systems’ beyond the microsystem to include the interactive impacts and influences of the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). They considered and collected data around several aspects of the athlete and the athlete’s life. Their focus was on athletes who were considered “prospects” (Henriksen, et al, 2010, p. 216) that is, athletes who are experienced and considered expert in the sport, trying to break into world class competition and rankings. In the microenvironment or system, interactions are with a large number of interconnected personnel. They include other athletes who are elite; other prospects; opposition teams and athletes; experts such as biomechanists and dietitians (though this contact may not be direct but may be through elite athletes sharing their knowledge with the prospects), (Henriksen, et al, 2010, p. 216); families; peers; and the school. In the macro and exosystems, they considered the diverse levels of the sporting federation; the national political and sociocultural environments; the role of mass media; the historical time frame in the environment; values of the athlete, the organisation, the era, and other external to the athlete factors. They concluded that “young, talented athletes are imbedded in the athletic talent

development environments” (Henriksen, et al, 2010. p. 221) and contend that that this must be taken into consideration when attempting to understand “the complex nature of talent development in sport” (Henriksen, et al, 2010. p. 221). Studying successful environments that use a holistic, ecological approach, may enable researchers to identify and recommend strategies for establishing environments that nurture sporting talent.

One last area of athlete development that must be included in this literature review is the area of sports or performance psychology. This important dimension of athlete development and performance may be the most defining and may be manageable, if not controllable.

### **3.10 Psychology of performance**

‘Experts’ in the area of sport, some qualified to comment and some self-appointed, have traditionally believed in natural talent. That is, someone who looks like an athlete and moves like an athlete, is an athlete and therefore has the potential to be successful. Professional sporting organisations pay substantial amounts of money to ‘back’ the talents of developing players and secure a contractual commitment to their organisation from these identified athletes. Often this talent identification has been based solely on physical attributes and performance as an adolescent. Sporting scouts and professional sporting organisations are now acknowledging that psychology related to maturation and psychosocial aspects of life can have a significant impact on athlete development. This psychology differs from the psychologies of mental toughness and cognitive agility required before, during and after competition.

There is now little debate that psychology is a major factor in the development of sporting expertise and elite performance, with the literature now acknowledging that the psychological state of the athlete contributes more than 50 percent of athlete performance outcomes (Kunst & Florescu, 1971). Psychology is a science. The field of psychology is “multifaceted, with many sub-disciplines, including sport and exercise psychology” (Cotterill, 2018, p. 1). What is fundamentally important is developing an understanding of an individual’s thoughts and behaviours; how these are developed and how they change in response to a variety of personal, interpersonal and environmental influences. The psychology of performance focuses on the way the mind needs to work to be able to perform at the highest levels on repeated occasions. According to Thomas, French and Humphries, (1986) performance is “a complex product of cognitive knowledge about the current situation and past events, combined

with a player's ability to produce the skill(s) required" (p. 259). In other words, it is essential to have the sport-specific skills, but it is also essential to know when and how to apply each skill or sequence of skills in a performance environment – a combination of knowledge, decision making and execution of motor skills. The ability of athletes to perform at their best when it matters is a key characteristic of the sports performance environment (Cotterill, 2018). Performers who succeed consistently and regularly, in the high-pressure environments characteristic of elite, professional sport "have developed specific strategies to cope with and excel under the pressure" (Cotterill, 2018, p. 1).

Other researchers have acknowledged the need to look beyond performance psychology to find the key personal characteristics and environments that nurture talent. Dweck (1996, 1999) recognised that psychology is important in aspects of developing sporting expertise other than performance. A 'growth' or 'incremental mindset' (Dweck, 1996, 1999) puts an athlete in the position to grow their talents and experiment with new ways of honing skills and strategies. By contrast, a 'fixed' or 'entity' mindset, where the belief is that ability is a 'gift' and 'stable' and cannot be further developed, is limiting for any performer.

Psychology is also important in explaining resilience – the capacity to deal with situations and failures as well as successes that are bound to happen along the non-linear and dynamic pathways to elite sports performance (Bailey, et al, 2010). Athletes, coaches, and applied sports psychologists have consistently referred to mental toughness as one of the most important psychological characteristics related to outcomes and success in elite sport, although researchers have, until relatively recently, devoted little time to studying this concept.

The category of performance psychology referred to as sports psychology, has become an essential part of both team and athlete preparation for competition. Many professional sporting organisations and national teams now add a sports psychologist to the team management staff. Psychology is important in athlete performance but is also important on the journey to success at the top levels of elite, professional sport. In the Olympic sports, many Australian athletes relocate to countries and competitions far from Australia to develop their skills and to gain more international or consistently higher-level competition than is available in the Oceania region. The American College system and larger sporting franchises in the U.S.A., the U.K. and Europe, offer the opportunity to either complete a tertiary qualification while training and playing on a scholarship or offer the opportunity to sign a contractual obligation to an organisation which then pays a wage, possibly bonuses for winning, and in some cases, provides accommodation and meals.

### **3.11 Transitioning from junior to elite levels of sport**

Research by Hollings, Mallett and Hume (2014) and Bjørndal, Andersen and Ronglan (2018) examining transitioning from junior to elite levels of sport, complement each other's conclusions. Hollings et al (2014) determined that athletes who transitioned successfully displayed “, i) a significant commitment to a clearly defined and realistic goal; ii) achieved early international success at the senior grade; and iii) had a single dominant identity and key strength” (p. 457). Bjørndal et al, reported that five of the nine athletes made a successful transition to the elite, adult level, while four experienced a “loss of motivation and meaning” (p. 533) citing a lack of immediate success at the adult level, burn out, repeated or not resolved injuries or exhaustion. Research surrounding the transitional from amateur into professional athlete or ‘athlete as career’ moves are complex, underpinned by social, cultural and gendered discourse and mobility to pursue a sporting career internationally appears to present itself as a by-product of privilege (Ryba, Ronkainen, & Selänne. 2015).

Hollings et al (2014) determined that the athletes who did not make the successful transition were characterised as having “i) competing demands and tensions in their social, academic/career lives, and ii) a lack of progression” (p. 457). Hollings et al concluded that “there is a paucity of research examining psychosocial aspects within key transition periods of the talent development pathway” (p. 458). They acknowledge that “the transition from junior to senior level in high performance sport is a complex process involving a unique mix of genetic and environmental influences” (p. 458) and that better understanding of these complexities is needed to be able to adjust talent development to account for these complexities (Hollings et al, 2014).

### **3.12 Transnational migration**

The move to ex-patriot status to chase a sporting dream can be exceedingly difficult, with social, emotional, and cognitive psychology, being important determinants of the success of such a move. The outcome of this is that any athlete who decides to undertake the journey to elite and super-elite levels of international sport, must possess psychological characteristics that apply to coping with major changes in everyday life both within and outside of the sporting context. Elevated levels of performance psychology will be insufficient.

The playing and training environments will be some of the most familiar environments these athletes will have to deal with. That said, the training and playing environments are much more brutal than anything they will have experienced in their home countries, where they have likely been at the top in the sport. When they begin the next phase of the journey, they start at the bottom rung of the next ladder, along with dozens of other hopefuls. Any approach to psychology must therefore be through a more holistic and sociocultural perspective than being solely focused on sport psychology.

These moves overseas and into unfamiliar cultural, climatic, financial, and living conditions frequently occur when the athlete is transitioning from success at a junior level in a sport, into the adult, elite level (Bon, Doupona, Wilson-Gahan, Capranica, Guidotti, 2022). They are also often, relatively young. In Baseball, for example, junior players can be ‘signed’ at 16 years of age, then move to the USA when they finish secondary schooling (GP, interview, 17 January 2014). At this stage, they are 18 years old. They move away from family and friends and the social support networks they have grown up with, including the sporting communities. They land in a country that has English as the official language but find themselves in ‘farm’ camps with dozens of other young prospects who communicate in languages other than English, often Spanish or Portuguese. It is an isolating and challenging experience. The athlete needs to be considered in a holistic way and their personal attributes beyond athleticism, and expertise in sport-specific skills is not all that is needed in their box of ‘tools’. Section 3.13 considers the place of attribution theory in sport psychology research and more comprehensive conclusions about the psychological attributes of successful athletes are drawn in Chapter 7 – Thesis Conclusions.

### **3.13 A place for attribution theory**

In 2011, Mark Allen, conducted a systematic review of content themes in sports attribution research covering the years 1954 -2011. His aim was to explore general themes that have emerged in the field and identify areas for future research. Sport attributions have been linked with a number of cognitive, affective and behavioural variables, including expectations, self-efficacy, team cohesion, self-esteem, emotions, persistence and performance. These cognitive, affective and behavioural variables are significant in Nilsson’s development, with the additional focus on environments and significant ‘other’ people and are therefore, considered in this literature review. Allen concluded that there is a lack of qualitative studies

in sport and that there is a need for more research to consider those attributions made by coaches and parents. Discussion surrounding his research is included in this chapter because Allen's scoping review revealed a lack of qualitative research in the area of sport and established the lack of holistic approaches to athlete development in both the research and the literature. It is important because how athletes are feeling about themselves, their performances and their team and living environments, are defining factors in their careers, after they have met the first hurdle of being 'signed,' at which point their journey starts again at a new and more challenging level.

McAuley and Duncan (1990) suggested that attribution theory associated with sporting achievement was largely driven by Bernard Weiner's (1985, 1979, 1972) two-dimensional taxonomy of 'achievement motivation and emotion' (p. 37). McAuley and Duncan further suggested that "empirical evidence provides consistent support for" ... "three causal dimensions – locus of causality, stability and controllability" (p. 37). They concluded that these three dimensions impact future behaviours depending on how each individual's response or reaction influences future actions and expectations. How this information relates to Nilsson's situation becomes clearer when we apply these ideas to analyse Nilsson's story through the application of Bronfenbrenner's research in Chapter 6.

Research for this thesis also uncovered a lack of information related to the attributions of individual athletes taking part in team sports. Attributions are not to be confused with attributes such as the physical and skills-based attributes sports scouts may look for in athletes they hope to sign to professional contracts and then develop into 'superstars.' Attribution theory is more closely aligned with educational psychology, sports psychology or just psychology, some might call it 'mindset,' which will be discussed in more detail later in the thesis. There was a flurry of research based on attribution theory in the 1970s through to the 1990s, with Landers (1983) claiming that attribution theory is one of three most tested social psychology theories in the field of sport. In their 2014 publication, Graham and Folkes contend that "research in the social psychology of sport and physical activity has undergone rapid expansion and development in the past decade, providing social and behavioral scientists with a better comprehension of an integral part of ... society" (p. 37). The authors further contend that sporting contexts are a natural "testing ground for a theory that attempts to understand the psychological underpinnings of "why" questions" (p. 37). The importance of applying sports psychology in athletic endeavour is now understood and a sports psychology is an acknowledged and prolific field of research, beyond the scope of this research. However, the

lack of research consolidating the theoretical underpinnings with determinable and predictable results for individuals involved in team sports, still exists. The age of attribution theory research publications and the small number of current papers contributing to this field of research, suggest that it is no longer favoured. That said, ‘Attribution Theory’ laid a foundation and was applied in sport, just not in qualitative research, which seems counterintuitive. The search for the ‘holy grail’ of foolproof transitioning from talented athlete to sporting superstar continues, thus revealing another gap in the research literature that should be filled to inform grassroots and development programs in sporting pursuits.

Allen’s 2011 conclusions and identification of gaps in the research literature assert the need for more research utilising qualitative research methodologies and affirm the use of a bioecological framework for a new perspective in examination of the significance of various ‘systems’ in influencing an athlete’s development.

### **3.14 Chapter Conclusion**

An exploration of the relevant literature included in Chapter 3 revealed a surprising lack of research devoted to the comprehensive and complex interplay of personal and physical characteristics, sport-specific skills and knowledge, and the environments in which athletes position themselves, to create positive circumstances in which to nurture their development and enable them to maximise their potential for success at super-elite levels of authentically international and professional sports.

Following examination of the relevant literature, the next component of the research was to identify a conceptual framework on which to base the collection of data, the data analysis and the research outcomes or conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **4.1 Chapter Introduction**

There is a “paucity of literature” (Green, 2014, p. 1) that attempts to help the researcher to understand the terms “theoretical and conceptual framework” and how they should be used. These terms are extensively used in research and can be used interchangeably. For the purpose of this research, I determined that the concepts of interest were encapsulated within the theories. While the theories informed the design of the research, it is the concepts and their interactions with one another that I used and about which I have written in the study’s conceptual framework. Understanding the concepts underpinning the theories used in the conceptual framework is one ingredient in understanding the direction that the research should take and informs and is informed by the research question.

This chapter explains the concept of using an adaptation of bioecological theories of human development such as those proposed by Bronfenbrenner (2005), from a constructivist perspective, in combination with what I have termed “biographical storytelling”. The success of using this chosen conceptual framework in combination with the research design outlined in Chapter 5 hinges on the complex interplay of bioecological theories of human development used in two ways, combined with direct phenomenology theory to conceptualise the research. Initially, bioecological theory was used for determining what was relevant to examine in which areas of Nilsson’s life and in the lives of the other participants. Later in the research process, bioecological theory was used for the thematic analysis of pivotal events and for the identification of significant commonalities among participants’ experiences and memories.

The combination of the conceptual framework and the research design worked to address the research and operational questions, while the biographical storytelling of Nilsson’s journey conveyed the narrative. Biographical storytelling was the vehicle used for relaying the information in the life journey of Nilsson. The complex interweaving of multiple concepts influencing my research for this thesis did make the identification of the conceptual framework somewhat thought-provoking and complex. My ultimate decision was to challenge convention and to work with a distinctive juxtaposition of theories and concepts. As Goodson and Sikes (2009) noted, “any separation of theoretical, methodological, practical, epistemological, ethical, ontological (and so on) aspects of research is in essence artificial” (p. 19) because all aspects form the philosophical perspective of the researcher. This reflected my experience as a researcher, whereby in the initial period, on an almost daily basis, I questioned aspects of my chosen conceptual framework. A bioecological theory was used to inform the research

parameters and the data analysis, which in turn were influenced by the constructivist and interpretivist nature of all memory recall and storytelling. The ensuing storying of these same memories through the eyes of the different participants and the researcher immersed me in research that could not be neatly pocketed, but that is certainly distinctive.

The conceptual framework can be viewed as performing the functions of a skeletal structure in supporting the research. I worked with the concepts embedded in significant theories acting as useful lenses through which to analyse the data collected in the investigation. The interrelatedness of the particular concepts – bioecological theory, phenomenology and biographical storying – provided a mind map to support the research direction and the conclusions. The aim of collecting the research data was to identify and report significant factors influencing the development and success of one athlete, David Nilsson, at the highest levels of international competition and elite, professional sport. At the same time, I found it necessary to entrench background knowledge about the development of sporting expertise, and how talent has traditionally been thought of, presented and developed. I included this discussion about physiological and psychological characteristics and sport-specific skill acquisition in Chapter 3 as part of the literature review.

## **4.2 Bioecological Model of Human Development**

The first consideration in this chapter is the examination of Uri Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development (1979) and how the concepts in this theory pertained to this research. The bioecological model “is an evolving theoretical system for the scientific study of human development over time” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 3). The bioecological model defines development as the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of humans as both individuals and groups over the life course (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner was a prolific researcher, research publisher and “consummate developmental scientist” (Lerner, 2005, p. x). His original theorising and critiquing of the work of others in the field of human development commenced in the 1960s, and it continued into this century (Lerner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner first questioned the idea of research into human development that was neither contextualised to environments nor interactive in nature. He is considered by many to be the foremost theoretician of human development over more than 50 years of contributions to the field of research. He was in esteemed company with Piaget, Erikson, Baltes, Magnussen, Gottlieb and other well-known members of this elite group

(Damon & Lerner, 1998). The fundamental concepts that Bronfenbrenner proffered have been used in developmental systems models of human development since the 1970s. His theoretical vision was embodied in his bioecological theory of human development - a theory that continues to evolve, providing a powerful and comprehensive understanding of the dynamic, multilayered ecology of human development. Scholars of human development consider Bronfenbrenner's 1979 book, *The Ecology of Human Development*, a "watershed contribution to understanding human ontogeny" (Lerner, 2005, p. xii). His theories and the evolution of his systems models provide an appropriate and pertinent conceptual basis for examining the development of humans as instruments of sporting prowess.

In the early years of his research, Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) focused on context, and ignored or discounted the role that a person plays in her or his own development. Despite his own criticism of himself, his theory was always ecological and stressed person-context interrelatedness. In the later years of his prolific research journey, Bronfenbrenner and colleagues introduced us to the additional ideas of proximal processes, and these proximal processes were referred to as key factors in development from the 1990s onwards (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). It was also from this time that he discussed the Process-Person-Context-Time model (PPCT) that has become the essence of his theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Context refers to environments and situations experienced by and engaged with by humans.

Ecological models of health and human development describe an equal focus on the person and the environment. Because the terms "person" and "environment" are vague and perhaps ambiguous, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994, 1995, 1998) and colleagues Ceci (1994), Crouter (1983) and Morris (2006) proposed more finely grained facets of the terms and described how the convergence of the terms may influence outcomes in health. It is appropriate to reason that this convergence of influences impacts on other aspects of human development such as learning and the development of expertise in any field of endeavour.

Specifying these influences can direct the development of strategies for achieving the desired outcomes. Ecological theory also draws attention to the dispositions, resources and characteristics of the individual that influence outcomes. Hostility as an individual disposition has been linked with poorer outcomes, whereas dispositions such as self-efficacy and self-motivation are linked with improved adherence to desired behaviours such as training (Grzywacz & Fuqua, 2010). Another factor that can be observed in sport is that different individuals will respond differently to feedback from the social environment. In the case of

sport, research shows us that receiving constructive feedback about performances results in positive responses from athletes.

“Positive feedback seems to be beneficial while negative feedback could even cause harm, even if to a relatively small extent. ...coaches should therefore make an effort to provide more positive feedback and less negative feedback” (Zach & Furmann, 2022).

### Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model of Human Development

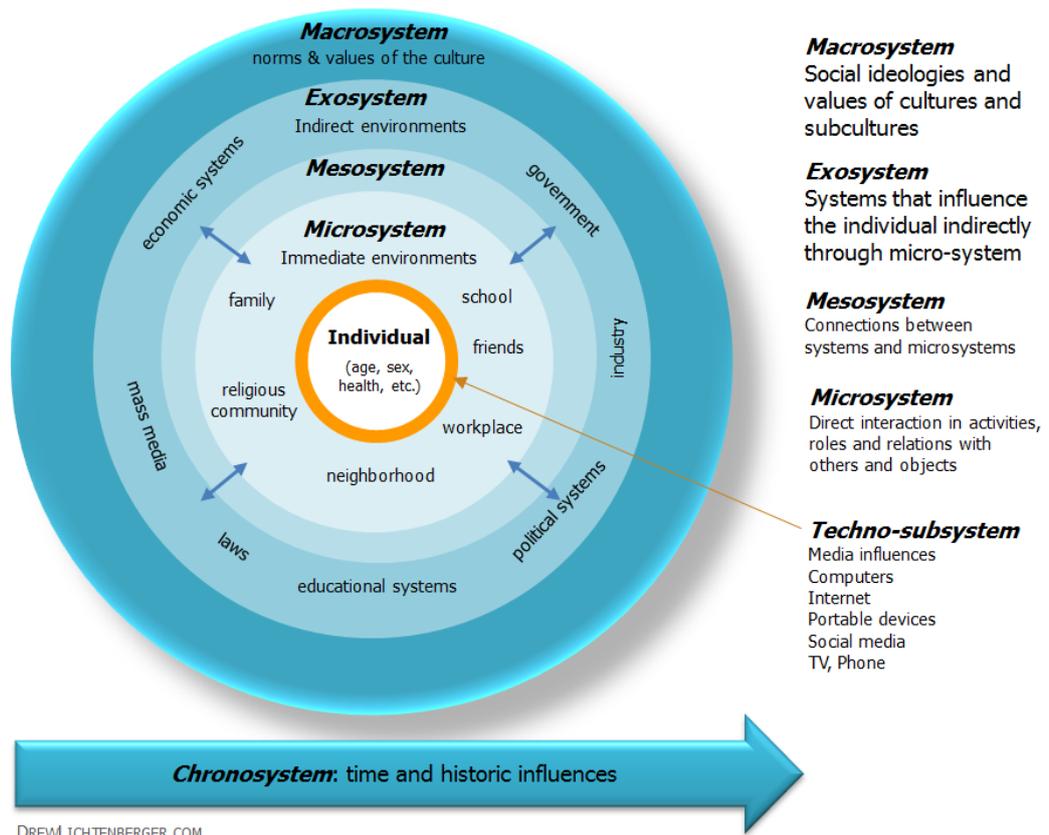


Figure 5: Uri Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model of Human Development (Lichtenberger, 2012, p. 1). <http://drewlichtenberger.com/6-shaping-influences-human-development/>

Figure 5 is a diagrammatic representation of Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) “Bioecological Model of Human Development” as it evolved to explain the many systems in which humans exist and represents the spheres of influence radiating out from the central person as follows. In the central position are the person and their distinguishing characteristics such as age and gender (this was true at the beginning of my research and when Bronfenbrenner was documenting his research and postulating his theories, but, in the time frame of this thesis,

gender has become contested space and the status of a person's gender is now considered to be more fluid). Most proximal to the person is the microsystem environment where there is direct social interaction with social agents such as activities, roles and relations with others and objects, including family, peers, school, community, workplace and religion. We are not simply recipients of experiences, but also contributors to the construction of our environment. Next, Bronfenbrenner included the mesosystem, which involves the relationships among the microsystems in our lives. Many of the same influences exist in an interactive process – exerting influence and being influenced.

The third system is the exosystem, where Bronfenbrenner and peers proposed that economic, political, education, government and religious processes influence people indirectly through microsystems. The exosystem can also be described as the setting in which there is a link among contexts. The exosystem acknowledges that a person can be actively involved in one context but inactive in other contexts. Next, we encounter the macrosystem, which embraces the overarching beliefs and values, social ideologies, and values of cultures and subcultures. “The macrosystem setting refers to the actual culture of an individual. The cultural contexts involve the socioeconomic status of the person and/or his or her family, his ethnicity or race” (Lichtenberger, 2002, p. 1), and the status of the country in which he or she lives, whether developing or developed. From this perspective, there are some interesting anomalies when we are considering sporting contexts. We have developing nations that are rich in particular sporting contexts and developed nations, such as Australia, that are wealthy countries but that still have sporting contexts that do not attract government funding or sponsorship support.

The distal chronosystem envelopes all in time and historic influence. Throughout one's life, there are shifts and transitions that can be socio-historical such as the political climate, the financial stability of the nation, war or peace, or personalised major life events such as changing employment, moving house or location, marriage or divorce, having children, or the death of a loved one. In 2002, in keeping with the changing landscape of society, Lichtenberger modified the Bronfenbrenner diagrammatical representation to include a techno-subsystem that includes media influences, computers, the Internet, portable devices, social media, television and telephone interactions, and interacting at the individual level. The techno-subsystem is certainly relevant to 2022, but it was also relevant when Nilsson was moving into adulthood and planning his Baseball career goals, with television, computer technology and the Internet all features of the landscape (Zobel, 2014) that brought sport to our fingertips.

For an understanding of the later or ‘mature’ versions of the bioecological model represented in Figure 5, it is best to refer to the explanation provided by Bronfenbrenner himself in collaboration with Morris (2006). They depicted the bioecological model as addressing two developmental processes. The first process defines the phenomenon under investigation – that is, the biopsychosocial characteristics of human beings. The second process is focused on developing scientific tools for assessing continuity and change, with both occurring over time. The two processes are interdependent and products of “emerging and converging ideas based on theoretical and empirical grounds” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 4), a process that Bronfenbrenner and peers called “developmental science in discovery mode” (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, pp. 999-1000). The dynamic, interactive relationships of the four core principles define the properties of the Bioecological Theory. The four principal components are: process; the biopsychosocial characteristics of the developing person; environmental contexts; and the time period or periods; and they are referred to as “Process, Person, Context, Time” (PPCT) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 794). Process is considered to be a central or core concept, with interactions between environments and organisms being referred to as “proximal processes” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 6). Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) proposed that it is these proximal processes operating over time that produce human development. These theoretical concepts are an agreeable and appropriate fit for the research undertaken in developing this thesis, whereby I identified and categorised the significant influences on the development of Nilsson as an athlete – a development that took place over an extended period of time.

Experience is a critical element of bioecological theory, and the way in which people experience the environments that they traverse is theorised as being pivotal in development. Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) suggested that very few external influences of physical conditions and events can have significant objective impact on human behaviour and development, but rather, the influence is a result of the diverse ways that each person experiences the same phenomena. Dynamic subjective and objective forces are drivers of human development coupled with how environments are perceived at each stage from infancy to old age (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner (2005) differentiated between “experiential” and “experience” (p 5.), defining the former as being more relevant to cognitive development and perception, with the latter relating to feelings such as anticipation, hopes and beliefs in relating to self, others and activities. They further suggested that experiential equalities are both emotionally and motivationally charged and can contribute powerfully to shaping the course of development into the future. This suggests that

positive experiences early in life can have a profound impact on future decisions and directions. For example, each of the former players interviewed for this thesis indicated early positive experiences in Baseball environments as being definitive in their feelings about the game and their subsequent decisions to remain involved.

Traditionally, such phenomena as parent–child interactions and the behaviour of others towards the developing person have been considered as being environmental. The bioecological model makes a critical distinction between the concepts of environment and process. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2005) defined the properties of the model through propositions. Proposition I is that “human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate external environment” (p. 797). For effect, the interactions need to be regular and to occur over an extended period of time. Enduring forms of contact in the immediate environment are referred to as proximal processes, and these proximal processes are posited as the primary engines of development (Gottlieb et al., 2005; Tobach, 1981; Tobach & Schneirla, 1968).

Proposition II is the second defining property, explained thus:

...the form, power, content and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person, the environments in which the processes are taking place, the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration, and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person is living. (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. xviii)

The characteristics of people are referred to and appear twice as interactional influencing factors in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) “Bioecological Theory of Human Development”. Initially, they appear as one element in the proximal process, influencing form, power, content and direction, then they reappear as qualities of the developing person that emerge at a later point in time. The characteristics of the person function as both an indirect producer and a product of development (Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981; Lerner & Castellino, 2002). In my final exploration and explanation of the bioecological theory, the noteworthy features of proximal processes need to be explicated.

1. For development to occur a person must engage in an activity regularly.
2. For effectiveness, the activity must be experienced regularly over time.
3. Developmentally effective proximal processes are reciprocal and multidirectional.
4. Proximal processes can involve interaction with objects and symbols.

5. Moderating factors produce substantial changes in the content, timing and effectiveness of proximal processes.
6. Proximal processes must increase in complexity and extent to maintain effectiveness within the developmental stages of human growth.
7. The principal persons with whom humans interact [change] across the life course as people other than parents, often referred to as “significant others” (Mead, 1934), play increasingly important roles. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005, p. 822)

In ecological research, “the principal effects are likely to be interactions” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 38). Other factors identified as being significant in the development of humans are maternal responsiveness; advantaged and stable home environments; and parents who possess and exhibit the knowledge and skills that they wish their children to acquire. Environmental contexts influence proximal processes and developmental outcomes owing to the resources provided and the level of stability and consistency over time that proximal processes require for effective functioning (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

The concepts presented in the bioecological model, the systems theory and Bronfenbrenner’s continual efforts to refine and improve his theories resonate well with the purpose of this research and provide a useful framework for the exploration of significant influences on Nilsson’s development. The conception of Bronfenbrenner’s model is optimistic and humanistic, emphasising the human capacity to grow, adapt to different circumstances and contexts, and keep developing to shape their own futures.

Examples of the application of Bronfenbrenner’s “Bioecological Theory of Human Development” (1979) were found throughout my research. Each of the former players interviewed directly acknowledged the importance of the microsystem of family as being responsible for their initial introduction to Baseball and as the support mechanism of their continued participation. The participants did not all cite the facilities in the local community or the local club as being influential, but they did all mention those facilities and clubs as being an integral part of their involvement in Baseball:

*The field was across the road from our house, so my brothers, cousins and I played nearly every afternoon after school. (GP, interview, 17 January 2012)*

*My Dad took my brother and I around the corner to the local club and it started from there. I was hooked. (TT, interview, 22 April 2014)*

This selection of quotations was chosen because they were from player participants who grew up in different geographical locations: the Northern Rivers of New South Wales; Brisbane; Melbourne; and the United States. Family involvement and access to a facility in the local community were significant factors for all of the player participants, and their stories were remarkably similar. These examples also highlighted the influence of the ‘exosystem’ and the ‘mesosystem’ in that government policy, politics and economics have an influence on the types of sporting and recreational facilities available in any community.

There is a reciprocal interaction with sports like Baseball because there needs to be an enormous amount of work and advocacy performed by Baseball community members to influence any form of political or economic input into local facility funding. One needs only to travel to the more remote rural areas of each Australian state and the Northern Territory to realise that Baseball complexes are not routinely built in Australian towns or housing developments as they are in the USA, Japan and Cuba, for example. Fortunately, there is a lot of open space in Australia that can be used for sporting complexes, and motivated, hard-working club and association committees have capitalised on this availability of land (GP, BM and GS, interviews, 26 October 2014).

Many of the participants had played Cricket or played Cricket as an alternative sport in the Baseball ‘off-season’. Cricket is the dominant bat and ball sport for men in Australia (Australian Institute of Sport, 2016), and there is covert pressure on young Australians to play sports considered to be culturally appropriate. Indeed, when we went to enrol our daughter at her first school, my husband was asked what he did for a living. He was working full-time for Baseball Queensland Incorporated at the time and said so. The Headmistress scoffed at this and called him a traitor, saying, “Why don’t you play an ‘Australian’ sport?” Anti-American sentiment is an attitude that some older Australians still possess, and some participants did refer to having to defend their sport.

A few of the player participants had excelled at other sports, being state or regional representatives, but still settled on Baseball as their number one niche. VP represented Queensland in Baseball and one of the Football codes, ultimately having to choose between the two; he chose Baseball. *Not for money, but for love of the game. I got to do pretty cool things and go places I would never have been – I went to the Olympics twice* (VP, interview, 2 August 2015). The choice was actually quite easy for these participants, with most reporting that they did not really care what other people thought because *We were having the best time and I was travelling all over the country and all over the world with my mates* (VP, interview, 2 August 2015). These comments again highlighted the interaction between the individual at

the centre of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological theory and the microsystem, in particular, but also the values of the dominant culture as referred to in the macrosystem.

While it is alluring, and many researchers have been tempted, to treat Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory as though the primary focus is person-context influences (Tudge et al., 2009), these researchers have ignored the proximal processes of the later versions of the theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Very few publications include the application of the PPCT model, explained earlier in this section, to the research that they have undertaken (Tudge et al., 2009). Several include individual characteristics and contextual variables such as gender and social class, but not the full PPCT model. By contrast, I have applied the complete PPCT model in my research, and, in subsequent chapters, I demonstrate clearly how this was achieved.

### **4.3 Constructivism**

The next conceptual aspect of this thesis that I address is the constructivist paradigm of learning or knowledge development. Constructivism is pertinent because of the concept of individuals developing socially constructed interpretations of situations, events and knowledge to develop new learning. This happens in sport and social groups in the same way that it happens in the classroom and is therefore not the sole province of education settings. Education is happening everywhere, every day, in various forms. Constructivism is a theory of knowledge creation that stresses the active processes involved in this creation. Constructivist theory emphasises that knowledge is continually changing, and that each person constructs their own knowledge from their learning in life (Somekh & Lewin, 2011). Again, we see the mention of processes and interactions in the formation of knowledge, as we do in bioecological theories of human development.

Constructivism is an epistemology, a learning or meaning-making theory (Rakov et al., 2009) where individuals create or construct new knowledge through the interaction of what they already know and believe and the ideas, events and activities with which they come in contact (Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Richardson, 1997). Knowledge is acquired through involvement (Kroll & LaBoskey, 1996). Constructivist settings are characterised by active engagement, inquiry, problem solving and collaboration with others. Constructivism describes knowledge as "developmental, non-objective, viable constructed explanations by humans engaged in meaning making in social communities" (Fosnot, 2004, p. 1). In the rawest forms,

constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning – describing ‘knowing’ and how one comes ‘to know’.

Constructivism is oft cited in educational research and research about learning. While the research for this thesis is not specifically about learning in an educational sense, it is about learning and meaning-making in a socially constructed context. Constructivism describes learning that is an active, contextualised process of constructing knowledge based on firsthand experiences and assumptions of the environment. These assumptions are continuously tested through social negotiation, with each person forming a different interpretation and construct of knowledge (Cooper, 1993; Ertmer & Newby, 1993; Piaget, 2013; Vygotsky, 1980). From Creswell’s (2014) perspective, the main elements of constructivism are: “understanding; multiple participant meanings; social and historical construction; and theory generation” (p. 6). In Vygotsky’s theory of social constructivism (1978), he introduced us to “zones of proximal development” and emphasised the critical importance of the social interaction and context in cognitive development. Bronfenbrenner also wrote about the proximal zone, with his “proximal processes” being interactive within and between the systems. Vygotsky extended constructivism into social settings where members of groups collaboratively create a culture of shared meaning, anecdotes and artifacts with and for one another.

Derry (1999) and McMahon (1997) contended that “social constructivism emphasises the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding” (Kim, 2013, p. 2). This definition underscored the presence of this terminology in my thesis. Each participant had a different world view and a unique perspective of events and people in the Baseball communities, but they constructed that meaning and understanding through interactions with others in the same community and in the greater Australian society. This is a demonstration of the credibility of Bronfenbrenner’s theories of human development and of the interrelatedness of the processes through the various systems related to social experience and the interpretation and recall of events. The human experience embraces individuals, their families, friends and communities, mass media, economics, politics, societal values and norms, and all are influential in the social construction of meaning.

The data gathering for this thesis depended not only on the construction of meaning but also on interpretation on various levels and in different contexts. The researcher had to interpret the data to identify themes and commonalities in experiences and recollections to add authenticity, while the participants each interpreted socially situated events and experiences to make meaning of their world and, in this case, events in their experiences of the ‘world’ of

Baseball. Schwandt (1994) described the interrelatedness of interpretivist and constructivist research approaches as “sensitising concepts that steer researchers towards a particular outlook or worldview”. Creswell (2009) suggested that the terms are synonymous. In both persuasions, researchers and participants aim to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. This goal is variously spoken of as an abiding concern for the life world, for the emic point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor’s definition of a situation, for Verstehen. The world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors. (p. 118)

Many of the ideas in these approaches stem from phenomenology (Creswell, 2014). Interpretivists reject the notions of “theory-neutral observations” and the idea of universal scientific laws. In this paradigm, knowledge consists of those constructions about which there is a relative consensus among those competent to interpret the substance of the construction. “Multiple ‘knowledges’ can coexist when equally competent (or trusted) interpreters disagree” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 113). For this thesis, I used the term “interpret” to describe a form of meaning-making used by the participants in constructing their own reality of events and memories rather than the definitions used to describe the interpretivism associated with the positivist paradigms of social research (Corbetta, 2003).

Social constructivists suggest that individuals seek to make meaning from the world in which they live, work and play, and seek to develop subjective meanings of their experiences that are multiple and varied (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2011; Mertens, 2015). Through appreciation of this status, the researcher uses open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews in order to find out how each participant constructed meaning from interpreting their engagement with the world. From a constructivist viewpoint, we are all born into a world that comes complete with culturally constructed meaning, and we each engage with and make sense of the world through our social and historical perspectives (Creswell, 2014).

Creswell (2014) further suggested that any generation of meaning arises in and out of social interaction with a community. He theorised that qualitative research is largely inductive, with the researcher using data collected in fieldwork to generate meaning. Constructivism emphasises the active process of building knowledge (Somekh & Lewin, 2011). Constructivism holds that knowledge is not mechanically acquired, but actively constructed within the constraints and offerings of the environment. The social or realist constructivist tradition is often credited to Vygotsky (1962). Learners are believed to be enculturated into

their learning community and appropriate knowledge, based on their existent understanding, through their interaction with the immediate learning environment. Learning is thus considered to be a largely situation-specific and context-bound activity (Eggen & Kauchak, 1999; McInerney & McInerney, 2010; Woolfolk, 2001). These distinct theories have shared concepts. They are all recognisable as elements of my research and demonstrate the appropriateness of utilising this conceptual outlook in constructing the research methodology.

#### **4.4 Defining and Developing Talent and Expertise**

While trying to determine the psychosocial and physiological characteristics of Nilsson's person and the aspects of his journey that set him apart, it was necessary to consider talent and the development of talent and expertise as factors that may be unique to Nilsson and other athletes who achieve the same levels of success. As we discovered through reading the literature review in Chapter 3, research into the development of talent and expertise is not new and much has been written about this phenomenon in diverse areas. As we also discovered through the literature review, there exists a plethora of research findings about sport coaching, talent identification and development, developing expertise and everything else to explain, conjecture or muse about the origins of 'freakishly' good sportspeople. However, no research has yet defined the 'it factors' or *je ne sais quoi*.

I introduce this discussion into the conceptual framework because it is an underpinning philosophical approach central to the research. I am attempting to identify the significant factors in Nilsson's journey to success that require acknowledgement of some physiological advantages that he may have had, plus how his 'natural' attributes were developed to the stage of 'eliteness'. It is not sufficient to say that, because Nilsson is tall, was fit and could swing a bat, he made it to the 'Big Leagues'. If this were true, everyone with these same attributes would be an 'MLB All Star'. In attempting to isolate significant factors and influences, it was necessary to examine all the aspects of his journey to success. I have a working knowledge of the research and theories about the development of sporting expertise and factors in success, but I needed more than my awareness to be able to utilise this information in formulating questions for the interviews that I conducted and for the observations that I made. The player participants in my research travelled the same or similar journeys to Nilsson, but none made it as far as he did. I had to ascertain where the differences lay. Is talent the key? Is practice? What is talent – how is it defined and is it significant in the journey to the super-elite levels of

international professional sport? Which environmental factors are significant, if any? It was these ‘unknowns’ for which I was seeking answers.

In Chapter 3, I introduced the work of Ericsson et al. The theory that this group proposed after studying violinists was that to be an expert you need to accumulate 10,000 hours of practice or 10 years of experience. As an explanation of the difference among very good, better and best, Ericsson and his colleagues suggested that a lot more extra practice explains the difference. This is an insufficient explanation of the success of elite professional athletes performing on the international stage. Again, if this were all that it took to reach the very highest levels, then the podiums would be overflowing. Imagine the number of children who achieve this amount of practice and experience but do not progress beyond a local representative level. Competitive swimmers make the perfect example. Tens of thousands of children worldwide (possibly millions) have slogged up and down those pool lanes, twice a day, six days per week for 10 years – that is from 7 years of age to 17 years of age, for example. I am not sure that it is possible to put a figure on the number of those children who go on to win medals or to make the finals at the Olympic Games or the World Championships, but I do know that it is a ridiculously small percentage. Even if I were to compare the number of participants in the sport with the number of Olympic medallists in that sport in a four-year period, the percentage would be less than one per cent.

It is virtually impossible to find these data. The most relevant information that I was able to access came from the ASC’s 2016 “AusPlay – Participation data for the sports sector, summary of key national findings: October 2015 to September 2016” report that identified “what drives Australians to be active?” (p. 8). The report identified a range of reasons for participation in sport-related and non-sport-related activity, including physical health or fitness as the strongest motivator in both categories. Respondents identified “fun, enjoyment and social aspects” (p. 8) as the most likely reason for participation in sport-related activity. Only five per cent identified “performance or competition” (p. 8) as the motivator for participation in sport-related activity, with one per cent nominating “performance or competition” as the driver for participation in non-sport-related activity.

From these data, we can conclude that those training for high performance sport are in this one per cent, doing the strength and conditioning work for the sport. One can also assume that elite, professional athletes are included in the five per cent of participants who cite performance or competition as the motivator for being active but who do not make up the majority of people in that category. I myself trained for performance and competition in several sports but was not professional or international and did not consider myself ‘elite’. It is safe to

conclude that the percentage of athletes who reach elite, professional ranks in internationally recognised sports is exceedingly small indeed.

Might it be that the quality of practice differs for those who succeed at the highest levels and those who do not reach the elite and super elite levels of performance? Ericsson et al. (2006) suggested that it is extra practice and more purposeful practice that separate the top elite performers from the ‘almost made it but not quite’ group. This also seems an unlikely explanation on its own if we consider team sports where every athlete coached by the same coach does not attain the same level of success. This disparity in outcomes actually applies equally in team sports as it does in individual sports, again highlighting differences between athletes doing the same training while achieving vastly different outcomes. In his book, *Talent is Overrated – what really separates world class performers from everybody else* (2010), Geoff Colvin shared the stories of a number of highly accomplished performers. Among the sportspeople whom he discussed were Tiger Woods and Jerry Rice. The golfer Woods needs no introduction, but Rice is less well-known, especially outside the United States, because he was a player in the National Football League (NFL). Colvin suggested that both these sports stars were distinguished from their counterparts because of purposeful practice and extra practice that addressed their particular needs or even weaknesses. Whilst Woods can be considered to have reached the top in super-elite, professional, international competition, it is hard to rank an NFL player in the same category because they do not compete at a significant international level.

The same could be said of Australian Rules Football (ARF) players, and yet they are well represented in the Sport Australia Hall of Fame. More discussion about this is included in Chapter 7, Thesis Conclusions. “If talent and extra, more purposeful practice, are not an explanation for separation between the best and the very best, what else can explain the phenomena?” Coyle (2009) took the idea of talent further and suggested three basic elements of what he referred to as the talent code: “deep practice, ignition and master coaching” (p. 7). He suggested that external influences within the micro and mesosystems of life can be influential in producing the international elite of sport. He mentioned ignition, which can be interpreted as motivation, another factor or element in success that I discuss in more depth in Chapters 3 and 7 of this thesis.

One feasible and conceptually apposite explanation that stands out as plausible for those rare sportspeople who do succeed at the very highest levels of super-elite, professional, international sporting contest is in the work around “Mind Set” by Carol Dweck (2006). Dweck contended that, for people to achieve their fullest potential and to keep striving and learning,

they need to have what she defined as a growth mindset (2006). Whilst appealing in its simplicity, this explanation is not sufficient as a stand-alone asset in the research. There are other factors that present as relevant while none are essential – there are always ‘outliers’ who can skew the data, as Gladwell explained in his well-regarded 2008 publication, “Outliers – the story of success”. All of this leaves me still searching for that ‘magical combination’ of factors that combines to create super-elite, performances at professional level in international sports. Can this ‘magical combination’ of factors be crystallised? Are there enough commonalities to give credence to the idea that the ‘magical combination’ that produces athletes with the sought after ‘full package’ can be identified, achieved and replicated repeatedly, across sports and across nations?

In the *Cambridge Handbook of Expertise & Expert Performance* (2006), Ericsson et al. contended that skill in sport is easy to measure and compare. This is a simplistic view of sports that applies mostly to sports where performance is judged in time or distance and where every competitor competes in the same contextual environment. However, it is not true of Baseball (nor most other team sports), where strategic awareness and deep knowledge of the game combined with competent adaptation to varying simple and complex contexts separate the elite performers from their less expert counterparts. There are other complexities in assessing elite level preparation such as positional requirements – this means that athlete preparation is not the same or even similar for all athletes in a team, depending on the position that they play. In Baseball, for example, the catcher has separate roles, responsibilities, skills and psyche from the pitcher. In addition, none of the theories or ideas surrounding this issue dwells on what makes some athletes unique in their responses to the same developmental circumstances and privileges. Is the difference between athletes who reach elite professional levels in international sports, and those who strive but do not ‘make it’, psychology, genomics, psychological preparation for training and performance, heightened resilience or a combination of biopsychosocial factors? This is the crux of my research and a question not yet answered in print.

In my efforts to unearth the magical formulae for success and to re-tell Nilsson’s unique story, I employed a method to which I refer as “biographical storying” because the thesis is not a whole of life exposé as in a traditional biography and the journey is incomplete, with the subject very much alive. Discussion about this technique is the subject of Section 4.5.

#### **4.5 Biographical storytelling of the life journey**

Because this thesis describes stages of a life that is still being lived and a career in sport that is ongoing but that has witnessed many transitions, it is not easily categorised. In this section, I discuss a variety of ideas about writing or retelling of the stories of lives to explain how I arrived at the term “biographical storytelling” to describe writing about Nilsson’s achievements in sport. Biographical storytelling may be considered a contentious choice for research, and much has been written both criticising and praising the writing of biographies or life stories as credible research; however, the choice of this method of storytelling worked well with my research purpose. It was important for me to examine Nilsson’s life story from birth until the present because the foundations for sporting success at the highest levels are found at various collecting points in the life story. One does not decide overnight that they will become an MLB phenomenon, then wake up the next day to find that they have achieved that status.

While this research is qualitative in nature, the story that emerges falls into the overarching category of narrative, a category that embraces a variety of research practices, including biography (Creswell, 2002, 2014), where “the intent is to collect and interpret lives of others as part of human understanding” (Roberts, 2002, p. 15). Biographical life writing is variously described as journalism, art, a literary endeavour, fiction, history, science and sociology, or the narrative of a life lived by one person and written by another (Backscheider, 1999; Bowen, 1968; Manen, 1990; Petrie, 1981; Roberts, 2002). Biographical research encompasses a range of types, including oral history and sociology. “The appeal of biographical research is that it is exploring, in diverse methodological and interpretive ways, how individual accounts of life experience can be understood within the contemporary cultural and structural settings” (Roberts, 2002, p. 5).

Basit (2010) described biography or life history a little differently. She saw it as a “chronology of life against a thematic network” (p. 105), like a network of elite level Baseball players interacting in the microsystems, exosystems and macrosystems of Baseball clubs or MLB organisations. Life course research empowers participants to remember and retell the story of momentous events in their own lives in their own words and manner. Life course research charts a journey over a period of time, with participants retelling the stories of the journey to the researcher in their own words. Researchers involved in this type of research commonly have an interest in “people’s lived experience and an appreciation of the temporal nature of that experience” (Elliot, 2006, p. 6). Participants do have control over what they reveal but usually reveal more than they intended to if the researcher has been able to establish

rapport successfully and to foster a safe environment. Researchers interweave their own reflections and analysis into the narrative (Basit, 2010).

Another level of context and complexity is added to descriptions of this form of research or storying if we consider the work of Biesta et al. (2005), whose research explored the points of differences between the life story and the life history. From their perspective, the life story is the “story we tell about our life”, and life history is the location of this life story within the historical, social and political context. To recount a history of a sportsperson without situating the story in the Australian and historical political and economic times would be to omit huge influencing factors in the story. When we consider bioecological theory, we would be omitting the chrono, macro, exo and mesosystems, and additionally, the techno subsystem of influence. These factors, outside the immediate control of individuals, do impact on our life stories. It is how we respond to and interact with these factors that shapes our individual and collective stories.

Life stories are the starting point for life history research, but they are by their nature already removed from the life experience because they represent a participant’s *interpretation* of his or her own life (Goodson & Sikes, 2009, p. 16), thereby confirming life history research as a form of *interpretative research*. The transformation of life story into life history adds a further layer of interpretation and is thus another factor that cements life history research as constructivist and interpretive in nature. Life history research is basically *retrospective*, focusing on the stories that people relay about the course of their ‘lives-so-far’. All autobiographies and biographies of sports stars could thus be considered to involve life history research at some level.

Biographical research is primarily interested in life (Roberts, 2002), not just a small snippet of life, but the life story of the subject, the telling of which leads to conclusions and findings. The subject of a biographical account is inevitably a complex and nuanced individual because life is complex, and the journey has many facets to be examined. This proved to be the case with Nilsson. This complexity provides an important opportunity for the researcher to encounter and examine the subject with due consideration being given to the public and private persona. There is a tension between the power of knowledge that the biographical subject holds about their own life and the power that the researcher has in presenting the final account. The tension between the roles of various participants and the conflicting roles of this researcher in this particular biographical research provided a platform for discussion and expansion in this thesis, as evidenced in Chapter 5. The conflict between researcher as researcher and as a friend,

or between researcher who possesses some knowledge and researcher seeking new knowledge, added intricacy and changed the approach to participants and to Nilsson himself.

The main concept for the conceptual framework in this diorama of theorising and postulating about terminologies is that the story of an unfinished life journey will be told, and that it is biographical in nature. Because of the complexities involved and the number of terms being used to describe slightly various aspects of recounting biographical stories, I decided to use the term “biographical storying” as an encompassing term to describe the result of the research; thus the thesis contains the “biographical storying” of Nilsson’s journey.

#### **4.6. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter synthesised the conceptual ideas in the thesis and demonstrated how the concepts melded together and complemented the research design to address the research question and the operational questions at the heart of the thesis. Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theories and Model of Human Development (1979 - 2005) were discussed in depth, as was the later work of Bronfenbrenner and colleagues in redefining his model and addressing his own criticisms of his earlier work.

The chapter also explained the constructivist approach or interpretation of events and pivotal moments and decisions that each participant and the researcher brought to the research. There was a brief discussion about talent and expertise because development of these aspects of an athlete’s journey are significant and defining in a sporting career. The final consideration in the chapter was the discussion about biography and the various forms of the storying of lives that were identified and used, and how this information confirmed my decision to use biographical storying.

Chapter 5 synthesises the combination of the conceptual framework and the research design and how they worked together to address the research question, while the storying of Nilsson’s journey in Chapter 2 conveys the biographical component of the thesis.

## **CHAPTER 5. RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **5.1 Chapter introduction**

This chapter outlines the research design utilised in the thesis through synthesising the philosophical assumptions and conceptual perspectives of the inquiry strategy, and by clarifying the position and voice of the researcher in addressing the research question. Identifying and understanding the concepts underpinning the theories utilised in the research design are one ingredient in comprehending the direction that the research should take, and that ingredient informs and is informed by the research question. Another essential function of this chapter is to define the ontological, epistemological and axiological positioning of the researcher and the relationship between the participants and the researcher. As a consequence, the research design and the methodological ideas are presented in this chapter as being closely aligned with the purpose of the study and with the research question – “which bioecological systems and which physical and personal attributes and sport-specific skills, are significant; and how significant are they in the development of super-elite athlete performances in international and professional sporting contexts?”

Theory use varies considerably in the study of a life (Creswell, 2009), and a marriage of constructivism/interpretivism (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), phenomenology and life story theory generated the conceptual framework for this research, as was described in Chapter 4. Social constructivism is often combined with interpretivism (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), as it was in this research. Let me briefly recapitulate the discussion in Chapter 4 of constructivism and apply it to the data collection phase of the research. The constructivist paradigm interprets social reality and the ways in which it is viewed by the research participants (Basit, 2010; Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) theorised that the interpretivists’ approach “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life world” (p. 67). Denzin’s (1989) interpretive approach relied less on theories and turned to sharing the meaning of experiences by the persons who experience them – an approach that resonated with the interpretation of lived experiences and with the purpose of this research. The intention of the research was to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Robson, 1993), and to reflect individual constructions as accurately as possible.

When contemplating a methodology, a pre-research review of scholarly literature and preliminary inquiry with research experts at my place of work were instrumental in helping me to determine that a qualitative approach was preferable for my research. The potential of the phenomenological method emerged because of its perceived capacity to process authentically

the subjective and value-laden information from a relatively small group of participants. Access to Nilsson and the other participants, combined with my status in the Baseball community, also steered me towards a phenomenological method. From this starting point, I began mapping my research plan, and I found some of the work of Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2011) particularly useful and helpful in this regard – for example, the diagrammatic representation of the process seen in Figure 6.

Denzin and Lincoln provided a useful diagrammatic representation of the elements of the research design, as is illustrated in Figure 6. In the original model, Figure 6 depicts the researcher as the principal component (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) because the history of the researcher influences each phase of the research design and the investigation process.

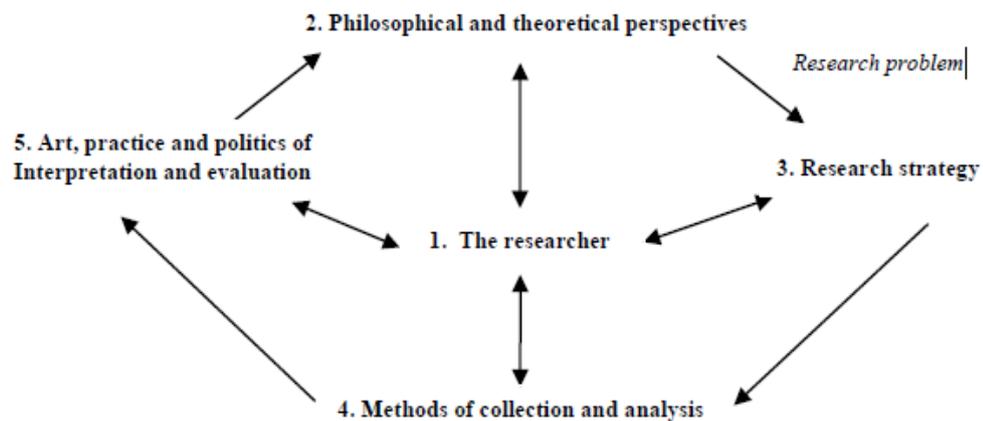


Figure 6: Elements of the research process and the relationships between them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 23).

While initially being guided by this model, I modified the subsections to represent more accurately my own interpretation of the overarching research design of the study (Figure 7). From my perspective, the central tenet of the research was not the researcher but the research question/s (or problem/s) – that is, the need to identify what it is that you are trying to find out

should be known, before the most appropriate methodologies and theoretical or philosophical perspective were selected.

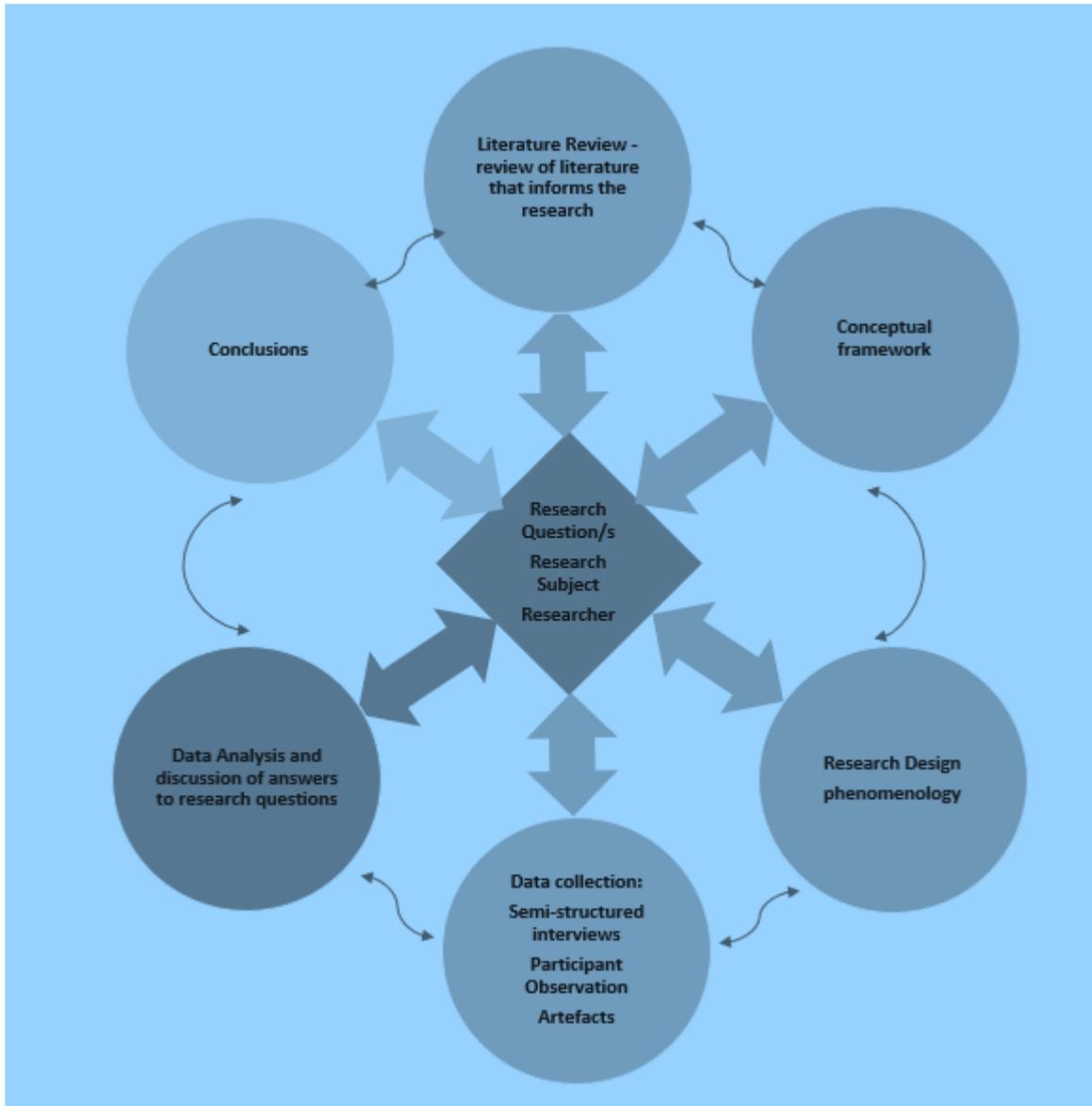


Figure 7: The research process conceptualised for this thesis (Wilson-Gahan, 2014).

To elucidate the information needed to answer the research question, I was guided by the theoretical underpinnings and the relevant concepts contained within the theories. This helped me to operationalise the research design by informing, in the simplest terms, what I was going to do, when I was going to do it and how I would do it. In developing my research design, I needed to consider my own distinctive positioning within the research, in conjunction with my relationship with the various participants, including the subject of the story being told.

Aspects of my own lived experiences pertinent to the influence of these experiences on the investigation, interpretation and evaluation are discussed later in this chapter.

From a socially constructed, interpretivist perspective, there is no benefit in working with large data sets because this presents the temptation to take decontextualised extracts from interviews rather than exploring how the participants understand their activities at a deeper, more meaningful level. A constructivist interpretation is concerned with how participants see insiders and outsiders in everyday life. In this case, the Baseball insiders had specific knowledge, attitudes and values that set them apart. Specifically, in Australia, Baseball can be seen as an American sport in opposition to the more rarefied Anglo-Saxon influenced sport of Cricket. This societal attitude does impact on the psyche of Baseball players and is most often met with covert defiance with respect to the place of the sport on the world stage and about the skills, knowledge and strategies of the game, especially in comparison to what is viewed as the more simplistic game of Cricket.

## **5.2 Qualitative Research**

According to Creswell (2013), “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 43). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggested that “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Hammersley and Aitkinson (1995) contended that in a qualitative study “research design should be a reflexive process operating through every stage of the project” (p. 24). Each process influences and is informed by the other processes in the study. While the researcher is collecting and analysing data, she or he is simultaneously developing and modifying theory, themes or findings, refocusing research and interview questions, and dealing with ethics and credibility issues. Creswell (2013) proposed that qualitative research has an “emergent design” (p. 47). In this emergent design, nothing can be “tightly prescribed”, but instead “all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and start to collect data” (p. 47). This was my experience as a researcher, which validated the decision to use qualitative methods and open-ended, semi-structured interviews.

This notion of flexibility was supported by Payne and Payne (2004). They suggested that, during the research process, it is likely that the researcher will need to be prepared to be flexible in approach and may progress through research stages in a non-sequential way. This is because the researcher may have to respond to something that a participant has said or to

something a participant reveals in the interviews or during observations. “Rather than starting with a theoretical hypothesis, and trying to test it, they explore the data they encounter and allow ideas to emerge from them (i.e., using inductive, not deductive, logic)” (Payne & Payne, 2004, p. 176). Some critics think that the net result of this flexibility is that qualitative research lacks a design regiment. This idea was refuted by Yin (2009), who stated that “Qualitative research simply requires a broader and less restrictive concept of design” (p. 19) than quantitative research designs. The result is a research design that is reflexive and responsive, making this approach suitable for the quite personal research that is conducted through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. If I had been unable to redirect questions in response to participant narrative, or had I needed to follow a rigid agenda of question and response, none of the interviews would have yielded data as rich and openly expressed as was the case in this study.

The qualitative design is based on interpretivism (Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Kuzel & Like, 1991; Mertens, 2015; Secker et al., 1995) and constructivism (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontologically speaking, multiple realities or multiple truths based on one’s construction of reality can exist. Reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1991; Berger et al., 2002), and is therefore in a constant state of flux. On an epistemological level, there is no access to reality independent of our minds, no external referent by which to compare claims of truth (Smith, 1983). The investigator and the object of study are interactively linked so that findings are mutually created within the context of the situation that shapes the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This suggests that reality has no existence prior to the activity of investigation, and that reality ceases to exist when we no longer focus on it (Smith, 1996, 2004; Yardley, 2008). The emphasis of qualitative research is on processes undertaken and meanings that are derived from the data. Qualitative researchers are concerned with the changing nature of reality created through people’s experiences – an evolving reality in which the researcher and the researched are mutually interactive and inseparable (Sackmann & Phillips, 2004).

Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) definition of qualitative research is informative for research scholarship:

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world: It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible....They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self....Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world....Qualitative researchers

study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.” (p. 5)

I deployed qualitative methods of research to facilitate the collection of accounts by community or family groups and as part of the process of “seeking to interpret the meanings people make of their lives in natural settings, on the assumption that social interactions form an integrated set of relationships best understood by inductive processes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 41). In the case of this thesis, accounts from both community members and family members were sought and reproduced, making phenomenology the most suitable research method for the study.

### **5.3 Phenomenology**

There are two conceptual propositions supporting phenomenological method within qualitative research design. The first is that the reality of a set of human experiences will be uncovered through the detailed yet subjective descriptions provided by the people being studied (Creswell, 2014), and the second is that “establishing the truth of things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57) begins with the researcher’s perception. The researcher is able to rely upon “intuition, imagination and universal structures to obtain a picture” (Creswell, 2013, p. 52) of the experiences under study. Because of this, I was aware that my own knowledge and experiences would be useful in adding authenticity to and enhancing the significance of the research outcomes. I mobilised these elements of qualitative research in deciding that a qualitative approach was more suitable than a quantitative approach and by taking a phenomenological approach to data collection.

Qualitative research was deemed more suitable because I needed the participants to be open and not to feel hindered by research parameters and restraints when making their responses. Additionally, taking a phenomenological approach to data collection, while acknowledging the constructivist (interpretive) nature of participant responses, enabled me to collect data and to make observations in the natural settings of the participants, mostly in and around Baseball contexts.

“Edmund Husserl is generally regarded as the intellectual founder of phenomenological philosophy” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 88), launching the phenomenological movement in the early 20th century (Van Manen, 2014). Husserl described phenomenology as “the descriptive philosophy of the essences of pure experiences”, aiming “to capture experience in its

primordial origin”, stating that “only knowledge from immediate experiential evidence can be accepted” (Husserl, 1999, p. 13).

Titchen and Hobson (2005) described phenomenology as the investigation of everyday experience from the perspective of those living the experience, proposing that only those who experience the phenomenon can understand the experience. Moustakas (1994) and Giorgi (2009) defined phenomenological research as a design for inquiry evolving from philosophy and psychology, with the researcher recounting the lived experiences of a phenomenon as described by individual participants. Creswell (2014) defined phenomenological research as “a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study” (p. 245). These definitions and explanations of phenomenology are unsurprisingly similar in what appears to be the linear evolution of a useful definition. Creswell provided one clear and easily understood explanation of phenomenological research in 2014:

“phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants. This description culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon.” (p. 14)

In an earlier publication, Creswell (2013) attempted to define the common features of phenomenology, relying on the work of Moustakas (1994) in promoting a psychological perspective, and on van Manen (1990), whose work was based on a human science orientation. Those common features are listed below:

- “an emphasis on a phenomenon to be explored” (p. 78)
- exploring the phenomenon with a “group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (p. 78)
- philosophical discussion – focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and how they have both objective and subjective experiences of the phenomenon in common with others
- the researcher ‘brackets’ themselves out of the research to concentrate on the experiences of the participants in the study
- data collection typically involving interviews with “individuals who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 79)

- data analysis summarising “‘what’ the participants have experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it” (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 79)
- culminates in discussion about the essence of the experience for individuals, incorporating the ‘what’ and ‘how’ described above. “The essence is the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study” (p. 79).

The researcher’s attention in direct phenomenology is directed towards participants’ subjective perceptions and consciousness of their lived experiences, with the aim of presenting these perceptions clearly and understanding their basic structure and meaning through a process of interpretation. Direct phenomenology is centrally concerned with seeking shared meanings that can then be generalised into themes of subjective lived experiences (Titchen & Hobson, 2005). Lived experiences can be defined as experiences of which a research participant has actually been a part or else the participant has experienced the same phenomena. What became clear to me was that the player participants had experienced two phenomena in common. The first was their own lived experiences as Baseball players who reached national representation honours as a minimum level of achievement, and the second was that they all experienced the phenomenon of Nilsson. I address this in the last two chapters of the thesis.

The strengths of the direct phenomenological approach are that it incorporates lifeworld determinants, rational understandings and subjective meanings as well as integrating social action (Creswell, 2014). That phenomenological research is a form of qualitative research is inherent in the characteristics of the methods employed to complete the research inquiry. Phenomenological interviews (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Kvale, 1983; Payne & Payne, 2004; Somekh & Lewin, 2011) are a powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of the embodied, emotional and aesthetic experiences of performance phenomena. Phenomenology could be identified as a particularly authentic qualitative research context for developing a fuller biographical story that encompasses the life course and the life history of a subject. What results is a storying of the stories (McCormack, 2011), with the researcher recounting the stories of the storytellers or participants. It is because of this confusion in defining biography and my own quandary about the ultimate outcome of my research that I made the decision to call the narrative component of the thesis “biographical storying”, as discussed in Chapter 4. In Section 5.4, I consider the role of the researcher and the positioning of the researcher in the research.

## **5.4 The researcher**

Central to the research undertaken is the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The centrality of the researcher's positioning and purpose is evident in qualitative research and in phenomenology owing to the involvement of the researcher in the personalised processes of gathering and analysing data. Figure 5.1 and 5.2 outlined this centrality and the connectedness among each of the areas of research consideration. Qualitative phenomenological research is personal and interpretivist (Creswell, 2014; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994) in character, with the researcher immersed in sustained experiences with the participants and additionally, in this case, with Nilsson himself. "This introduces a range of strategic, ethical and personal issues into the qualitative research process" (Locke et al., 2013, p. 110).

Researchers must confront their own potential biases, their values and relevant aspects of their backgrounds that may impact on their interactions with participants and on their interpretations of the data collected. There may even be a bias in the selection of participants that results from prior knowledge of the community being observed. In light of this, the relevant aspects of a researcher's background must be disclosed and any connections with research must be clearly enunciated, with measures being taken to retain the integrity of the research (Hatch, 2002; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

### **5.4.1 The role of the researcher**

The practice of research involves more than philosophical assumptions. Researchers must declare themselves to maximise the credibility of their findings and assertions. Somekh (2011) noted that social research is centred on people and their life contexts and is concerned with "philosophical questions relating to the nature of knowledge and truth (epistemology), values (axiology) and being (ontology)" (p. 2). As Creswell (2014) suggested, ontology relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics. In qualitative and phenomenological research, researchers embrace the notion of multiple realities. They use the words of participants to represent these multiple realities, reporting on how the participants view their experiences differently (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). One epistemological assumption is that researchers must close the gap between themselves and those being researched. Guba and Lincoln (1988) referred to this as "objective separateness" (p. 94). In other words, researchers must form a close enough bond to be able to know what the participants know (Creswell, 2014), while striving to maintain objectivity and enough space to be able to report accurately what they see and learn – warts and all. To be as objective as they can be, researchers express their own values or axiological positioning. I have declared my interest in sports and sports

performance and my admiration for challenging work leading to success. Beyond that, my values in relation to Nilsson and his success do not coincide with the values of many of the participants because of my career interests. I have expanded on this later in this chapter where I discuss my positioning in relation to the research and the researched.

Blaikie (2000) contended that ontology is the starting point of all research, after which one's epistemological and methodological positions logically follow. He suggested that ontological claims and assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality. He also asserted that researchers need to enunciate the interrelationship clearly among what they think can be researched (their ontological position), the epistemological position that informs "What we can know" and "How we can know about it", and the methodological approach or "How to go about acquiring the knowledge" (Blaikie, 2000).

I contend that the critical social and cultural environments and contexts that were significant in developing Nilsson's personal attributes and sports specific talents were identifiable through analysis of the data gathered. We can 'know' about these influences using qualitative research methodologies to acquire information about Nilsson's development, through conducting and analysing interviews with Nilsson and other significant stakeholders. We can add to knowledge through collecting and analysing supplementary forms of data about pivotal events and common themes shared by interviewees and participants in the sub-cultures of Baseball and elite sport. In addition to describing my role as the researcher, I had to declare my background and positioning as these are viewed as exerting influence on my research direction and the conclusions that I have drawn in my thesis.

#### **5.4.2 Researcher positioning**

"Our readers have a right to know about us" (Wolcott, 2010, p. 36). They are concerned with what prompted our interest in the research topic or field or both, the purpose of the research and what the outcomes will be for the researcher. Readers are not interested in how we, the researchers, drink our coffee, but they are interested in our connection with the research and the researched. In light of this, I attempted to adhere to what might interest the reader in reading about my positioning in the research for this thesis. My career is in the field of Health and Physical Education teaching. In addition to the role of teacher and administrator in schools, I have taken on the duties of organising, administering, coaching and learning about sport and other physical activities such as dance and gymnastics as an integral part of my life. Becoming a teacher of Health and Physical Education is often an offshoot of long-term involvement in various forms of movement, physical activity and sport and of an interest in the field, and this was certainly the case with me. As a consequence of long-term involvement in movement

contexts, one extension of being a teacher of Health and Physical Education is to develop an interest in coaching and subsequently elite level sport.

While the two activities of teaching Health and Physical Education and coaching sport are almost polar opposites in intent and audience, Health and Physical Educators like me do experience delight in seeing ‘their’ students performing at levels of excellence in the sporting arena and have a strong appreciation of the achievements of elite and professional sportspeople, gymnasts and dancers. Perhaps this comes from not following that path themselves or that path not being available to them. The answer lies beyond the scope of this research. I would, however, conjecture that part of the interest comes from knowing what it takes to reach the highest level of expertise and performance in sport and aesthetics such as dance and gymnastics, while also having an appreciation of the visual appeal and beauty of high level physical performance.

These ideas are subjective speculation on my part. In all my years of experience as an educator and a coach, I have rarely spoken with my colleagues about why they stopped pursuing elite or professional sport but chose rather to become educators and/or coaches. I do know, anecdotally at least, that many educators and coaches did not reach elite professional sport levels because they simply were not good enough. Others stopped owing to injury, and some stopped because of family circumstances and financial needs, as was the case with a number of participants in my research. To continue the pursuit of excellence in sport and the huge financial rewards of top level international, professional sport, there are many sacrifices to be made for no guarantees of success, fame and fortune. A sustained, single-minded and somewhat selfish ‘eye on the prize’ attitude and philosophy is central. The findings of this thesis have shown that the right kind of support from family and friends is also essential, combined with a myriad of other factors that are illuminated in the subsequent chapter.

I include the next few paragraphs because they help to identify my positioning and how I have arrived at these ontological, axiological and epistemological positions. When I finished Year 12 in 1973 and I decided to go to University rather than to concentrate on sport, my decision was symptomatic of the socio-political and socioecological era in which I lived. Very few people who had career or further education options would have chosen the pursuit of sport over the education and employment options in the early 1970s, post-Vietnam War period in Australia (McHugh, 1998; Pierce et al., 1991). At the time, much of sport was still amateur in nature and it was difficult to earn a living participating in individual sports other than Tennis ([www.apworldtour.com](http://www.apworldtour.com), 2017) and professional Golf ([www.golfeurope.com](http://www.golfeurope.com), 2017). There was no Australian Institute of Sport, no Australian Sports Commission ([www.ausport.gov.au](http://www.ausport.gov.au),

2017) and no government funding for sportspeople. Australian Government funding for athletes was formalised in August 1987 (Bloomfield, 2003; Ferguson, 2007).

Like many of my peers, when I graduated from Year 12, I was offered scholarships to attend Teacher's College and University, and I was guaranteed employment on completion of my qualification. University was free in the Whitlam government era (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Rizvi & Lingard, 2011), and an offer of scholarship money, fully funded tertiary study and secure employment was considered very attractive for young people. I did not hesitate to take up the offer. A post-war Australia with no conscription (National Archives of Australia, 2017) gave young people options and unheralded freedoms. These options were seen as extraordinary and too good to pass up by parents who had endured World War II and the Vietnam War. As an example of the prevailing attitude of parents at the time, I offer this story from my own family: when representatives of the Wollongong Golf Club approached my parents suggesting that my then 17-year-old younger brother take a year off study at the end of Year 12 to try to break into the Pro Golf circuit, my parents said an emphatic "No". They expected that he would take advantage of the privilege of university studies before even contemplating attempting what they perceived as being less secure adventures. Their decision was symptomatic of the era, as was my own. Surprisingly, my parents considered my brother's psychological characteristics when making this decision, which in hindsight, was incredibly forward thinking of them.

The teaching scholarships on offer during this time period came with a bond, which resulted in the majority of my peers moving directly into teaching to start a career. However, we were beginning to see a changing attitude in society and, during my time at the Wollongong Institute of Education in the mid-1970s, some of my peers were paid to play Rugby League in Sydney; Peter Wynn, Stevie Morris, Stephen Folkes and Robert Stone, to name a few. The money from Rugby League supplemented their teaching scholarships, but all of these athletes completed their teaching qualifications and moved into employment in schools for varying lengths of time. Three of these men later made careers in League or associated with their League status, with Steve (Slippery) Morris being the only one who returned to teaching Health and Physical Education post his Rugby League career.

After my cohort graduated from University in 1977, the first Australian Football (Soccer) League started in 1978 and one of my peers followed that dream and the small stipend offered because he, or his family, had higher sporting aspirations. He had been the captain of the Australian Schoolboys national team and he had the type of athlete profile in which sporting bodies and clubs were interested, then and now. His parents and he were unusual for the era in

that they were “£10 Poms” (Hammerton & Thompson, 2005), and they knew of the lucrative contracts for Football stars back in the UK and Europe. These examples aside, it was still rare for anyone who had a future outside sport to view sport as a possible profession in 1970s Australia. This era did contrast with the era in which Nilsson was raised, and the possibility of a career in sport had become a reality by the time that he was born, though possibly not for an Australian Baseball player.

The 1960s and 1970s in Australia were a transition period in Australian sport as well as politically and financially. This transition period would become pivotal in sporting contexts for future generations, with professional sport becoming a more prominent feature in Tennis, with the Open Era of Tennis arriving in 1968 (<http://www.atpworldtour.com/en/corporate/history>) and Cricket with the arrival of World Series Cricket in 1977 (the sportsrush, 1977-79, n.p.), for example. The introduction of television, and especially colour television, also had an impact on the amount of money that could be generated through sport. “The advent of colour [television] created a powerful new advertising medium and it also supercharged sports broadcasts with Rugby League in colour a massive hit, as was the telecast of the 1976 Montreal Olympics” (televisionau.com, 2014). The Australian Broadcasting Control Board (ABCB) decreed that, from 19 October 1974, stations were permitted four weeks of live colour broadcasts of four hours maximum per week, with a maximum of two hours per day. The ABCB specified that these first test broadcasts were to be sporting events or annual festivals, including, interestingly, a Baseball broadcast:

- ABC: Day 3 NSW Open Golf Championship
- ATN 7, CTC TV: Manly Eagles vs Auburn Orioles Baseball from Oriole Park, Sydney
- SAS 10, TVW7: Cricket: Gillette Cup Live: WA vs SA from WACA
- ATN 7: Castrol Six-Hour Motorcycle Race, Amaroo Park
- GTV 9: 1974 Melbourne Cup. (Barnett, 1975; Television.AU, 2017)

Advertisements televised in colour were also permitted during these broadcasts, thus opening a veritable floodgate of commercial interest in television advertising. According to Eric McRae, Tasmanian Television Ltd.’s managing director, as quoted in the *Hobart Mercury* on 7 June 1978, “we’ve also found...quite a lot of new product categories have come our way, just because of the colour facility. It’s awakened a new interest in television

advertising – advertisers are more excited and there’s more attention from the public” (<http://www.televisionau.com>, 2017).

Indeed, advances in technology have enabled sport to flourish as an industry and a spectacle. Readers will recall from reading Chapter 4 that modified versions of the bioecological framework of human development now include technology as a major influence in our lives (Lichtenberger, 2002). Sport and success in sport were beginning the evolution to becoming a recognisable, professional option worth considering and worth working towards. The enormous impact of evolving socioecological circumstances, such as the end of the Vietnam War and the end of conscription and compulsory military training, on athletes and sport is pertinent to the research about Nilsson and is elaborated in later chapters. The impact on my own positioning, knowledge and opinions was enormous, albeit subliminal. Colour television brought the spectacle of sport into our lounge rooms, and our expectations about the entertainment value of sport started to evolve. From the 1990s, the Internet became more widely available to the public (Curran, 2012; Kleinrock, 2010), thereby increasing exponentially our capacity to source information about sport and sportspeople.

My interest in Baseball, and especially Baseball at the elite levels, came almost entirely from the family into which I married. The Gahan family is another dynasty of Baseballing siblings and cousins from Lismore in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Australia. When I met my spouse, he was an Australia and Queensland representative and he had been named in the World All Star team at the Intercontinental Cup in Edmonton, Canada in 1981. I was quickly immersed in this world, and I have lived in this world for more than 40 years. I developed a love of the game and an interest in Australians who have pursued the sport at the highest levels.

I am well versed in the difficulties facing young Australian Baseball players who decide to pursue the dream of an MLB career because of my husband’s work as a scout with a US based MLB franchise. I also confess to an admiration for any sportspeople who deal with living below the poverty line (owing to little or no government funding being available and little media recognition for the sport or the athletes), loneliness and other discomforts in order to continue their involvement in a sport and in pursuit of a dream.

Does this make me biased or influence my thinking about Nilsson? I admire what he achieved in the same way that I admire anyone who has reached the top of their chosen field – whether that is academics, the arts or sport. However, I do not feel that I connected with Nilsson on a close personal level. There is no compulsion to be protective of him or defensive in the face of criticisms about him. I interviewed Nilsson seven times and I have spoken with him on

too many occasions to count, yet I could not suggest that we have a close friendship or ease, nor do I feel completely relaxed in conversation with him. This may be suggestive of a lack of interest in anything that I brought to the table or discomfort in being ‘alone’ with me. It is true that he preferred to communicate through my spouse, and he wanted him present at the start of the initial interviews. During the research period, I did observe that his interactions with women other than those in his family were minimal. It is also worth noting that, even when I have been to his home, it has been in the context of Baseball and the focus has been on the men and their conversation about the sport. In fairness, it is Baseball and sport more broadly that brought these people together and also that brought them to me.

What I previously deemed to be the impersonal aspects of Nilsson’s personality may well be traits that stand him apart as an athlete and that helped him to secure his achievements. It may be that his interests are so unilaterally focused and lacking in diversity that he does not possess much social capital. Alternatively, he could simply be shy or introverted. It is difficult to reconcile the characteristics of an introvert as belonging to an athlete who chose one of the world’s biggest sporting stages for his performances. Some of the participants alluded to the perceived aloofness and the impersonal behaviours presented by Nilsson. One former player who played in the same State and National schoolboys and club representative teams as Nilsson for a number of years said that Nilsson never acknowledges him and “probably does not know his name” (BP, interview, 12 December 2014).

Nilsson maintains public and private personas like most people. His wife paints a picture of a man whom I have rarely been permitted to see. These protective behaviours may be typical of those that celebrities develop. The celebrity role of Major Leaguer Baseball players is split in public domains. They need to reveal enough to promote their professional ‘brand’ and to meet contractual obligations to the organisation and the league, but they also go to great lengths to circumnavigate exposure and to protect their private, domestic lives (Evans & Wilson, 1999; Ferris, 2004; Hanson & Cox, 2015; Holmes, 2005). These protective behaviours could have been a hindrance to research credibility, which made it an imperative that Nilsson was able to relax in my presence and that I was able to use humour to lessen his guardedness. The interviews with and reflections of other participants provided a variety of perspectives on the Nilsson personality that helped me to build a picture of the man who is the sports star. These protective behaviours or privacy protection mechanisms did not prevent me from interrogating his development as an athlete as evidenced in the interviews, where he felt free to talk about the Baseball aspect of his life and his parents and siblings. He had ascended

to the throne of MLB before he met his wife. In Chapter 6, we learn about the impact of marriage and children on his ‘groundedness’ and resilience during his MLB playing career.

Being famous and having a reputation and personal identity closely aligned with sporting achievement create enormous pressure for the athlete, and we see many sportspeople fall from grace and even fail at life after sport – unsustainable relationships, drugs, crime, suicide (Hanson & Cox, 2015). This said, researching and biographical storying of a sporting life are not about sensationalism, especially when one is writing a thesis. Researchers are not constantly probing for that inside scoop that will hit the headlines, as a journalist would be. In this research, I was aiming for understanding and data to analyse for meaning-making. The net result is the story of how one Australian man made it to the top in his chosen sport and enjoyed the riches and the fame in the USA and more recently in Australia.

Nilsson’s experience is like that of so many other Australian sports stars involved in genuinely worldwide international and Olympic sports, in that the recognition and rewards are not available on home soil or, if they are, it is only for short bursts every four years to coincide with the Olympic Games cycle. Because of this, one knows that what initially motivates the continued involvement of athletes and the sacrifices that they are prepared to make is not simply extrinsic reward. Understanding this context makes the identification of the lesser-known motivators, circumstances and events even more interesting for the researcher. To this end, it is essential that researchers are able to analyse and identify how their own “theoretical and personal biographical perspective might impact on their relationships with research subjects” (Elliot, 2012, p. 155) and with other participants. This perspective also extends to their interpretation and presentation of data.

### **5.4.3 Agency**

Discussion of the researcher’s positioning in the research and in the Baseball communities segues nicely to the consideration of agency. ‘Agency’ has been central to theorists throughout the history of sociology. Most social scientists acknowledge agency as being important. Ahearn (2001) defined agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112). Universally understood, agency deals with “questions of personal causality” (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). Marshall (2003) posed the question, “Is agency an aspect of human nature or a variable?” (p. 57). Somekh and Lewin (2011) defined agency as “the capacity of a human being to take action and exercise control in formal or informal social groups” (p. 320).

One may question whether agency is inherent to social action or a differential property that some possess more than others (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). We may ask, “Can we explore

and quantify an individual's agency with any surety?" Current models focus on how apparently free actions lead individuals to reproduce their social structural milieu:

The social environment, social context, sociocultural context or milieu refers to the immediate physical and social setting in which people live or in which something happens or develops. It includes the culture that the individual was educated or lives in, and the people and institutions with whom they interact...and may not imply equality of social status. Therefore, the social environment is a broader concept than that of social class or social circle. (Casper, 2001, p. 465)

In this research, the participants had both the capacity to 'take action' (they could refuse to participate or agree to be a part of my research) and control in formal settings such as the interviews. Participants had less control over my observations of their actions in various Baseball related contexts. My own position on this is that everyone has control over their personal actions unless the social structures in their environments take that control away from them.

#### **5.4.4. Epoché and epistemology**

My own positioning facilitated my epoché, meaning that I attempted to set aside or bracket any assumptions, beliefs and biases about being an elite level 'Baseballer' in order to explain the phenomenon in terms of an inherent system of meaning and to examine how the phenomenon is experienced by the participants (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010). I was able to bracket my assumptions and beliefs because I did not really have any. Having never played Baseball, I had not thought a lot about sporting success in a purely Baseball context. I was therefore open to new learning and innovative ideas. Any position that I had in relation to Baseball at the beginning of my research journey was formed through my own connection with sporting contexts, through reading and research, and through listening to my extended family and friends involved in Baseball discussing and analysing specific players, plays and games.

As a result of this fledgling status, during the data collection phase of the research, I was comfortable to assume the position of naivety and to acknowledge that I knew little of the actual phenomenon of being an elite level Baseball player or what makes them 'tick'. It was also evident that I did not 'know' Baseball from a player perspective. I appreciate and have experienced the difference between knowing a sport through spectating and knowing a sport through participation over many years. The difference in experience is significant.

Epistemological objectivity was achieved because my work has separated me from a focus on elite sport to a position of valuing physical activity, movement and sport for the

contributions that they can make to personal, social and community health. This transition in thinking and values is attributable to my profession and my professional growth. It relates directly to believing in the health and wellbeing aspects of regular participation in physical activity for all dimensions of health, including the social, emotional, cognitive and physical benefits derived from being active and involved. After a lifelong involvement in sport and a career long involvement in education focused on health education and physical education, I am no longer bewitched by the idea of being the best or winning in sporting contexts. This values stance has been far more influenced by the demands of my professional work and the influence of my students, where ensuring that programs are inclusive and engaging for all young people, not just the kinaesthetically competent or gifted, was my key to satisfaction and success.

Travers (2001) contended that all researchers bring epistemological assumptions into the research process, even if they are unaware that they do so, and that these assumptions influence how each person understands and interprets the qualitative data being gathered and analysed. Interpretivists employ qualitative methods to address meaningful characteristics of human group life. Interpretivists believe that the objective of sociological analysis should be to address how members of society understand their own actions (Travers, 2010). A good example of this was revealed when interviewing various participants who were active Baseball players about their involvement in altercations and fights with opponents. Views about the catalyst for these events were consistent, but each player who had joined the more memorable affrays had a different reason for doing so. The pitcher who had the bat thrown at him reacted to his own indignation and threat to his safety, whereas the right outfielder who ran in to join the action may have wanted to defend or support his teammate or may simply be outraged that such unsportspersonlike behaviour could occur.

Some players may think that such an action is deserving of a full protest from the opposition team and, as a consequence, respond with their fists. Others may not have run in to take part in the fight because of their strong feelings that an action such as throwing the bat at the pitcher is punishable within the rules of the game and that no additional action from the opposition team is necessary. These players accept the umpire's decision and are 'content' with the penalty decision that the umpire imposes. **THUS**, each player will have a different interpretation of the situation and reasons for becoming involved or not becoming involved in an on-field fight. On other occasions, every player participant interviewed in this research confirmed a common reason for fighting against the representative team from another state in one Claxton Shield game held in Brisbane. That reason was common dislike of a particular

opposition player who had done something or continually did things that annoyed the whole 'in play' team and many on the bench.

#### **5.4.5 Reflexivity in qualitative research**

In the simplest forms, reflexivity can be defined as a “heightened awareness of the self, acting in the social world” (Elliot, 2012, p. 153). Giddens (1991) suggested that “what characterizes the self in late modern society is the ability to reflect on personal identity, coupled with an awareness that one’s identity is chosen and constructed” (p. 53). Wolcott (2010) contended that researchers “convey their background...how it informs their interpretation of the information in the study and what they have to gain from the study” (p. 47).

As I considered reflexivity in this research, I acknowledged that my own background and experiences in sport have shaped my “axiological assumptions” (Creswell, 2014, p. 20) but not my more significant values. My ontological positioning is that, while I fully appreciate the situation with elite sport and the combination of factors that influence an athlete’s journey to success at the super-elite levels of professional, international sport, I have not experienced this level of success myself. Consequently, my assumptions leading into the research were based on my own imperfect reality (Corbetta, 2003). My pre-research analysis of the interplay of the bioecological influences and personal and physiological attributes needed for athletes to reach ‘the top’ was based on a critical reflection of cause-effect relationships. My thinking in the past has been influenced by the oft mooted idea that, for athletes to reach the top in their chosen sports, they must be or possess the ‘full package’ of physical and psychological attributes plus the sport-specific skills and knowledge of game strategies and be able to pull all of this together in competitive contexts. Indeed, as we have read in Chapter 3, Baseball scouts search for the ‘five tools’ as the key to gambling that a young player is worth investing in ([www.baseballexaminer.com/faqs/scouting\\_faq.htm](http://www.baseballexaminer.com/faqs/scouting_faq.htm)).

Thoughts of fame and glory never drove me as an athlete; rather, what drove me was intrinsic reward and competitiveness. This axiological positioning derives from my experiences as an athlete and my professional work, with the combination of both leading me to conclude that elite sport has little to do with health and wellbeing and everything to do with money and winning. This axiological clarity gave me an advantage when formulating a research approach in that I was able to eliminate several theoretical concepts and constructs as being inappropriate for eliciting the type of information that the data analysis needed to reveal, based on the framework for inquiry.

It is worth noting that none of the athlete participants interviewed thought that their Health and Physical Education teachers or their Health and Physical Education classes were significant in their sporting success. Only two of the players mentioned schoolteachers as having some influence as coaches of representative teams in school sport. Because of this separation of values and life focus, I was able to be objective and I had no influence on Nilsson, nor he on me. I appreciate the achievements and the demanding work of the most successful athletes, but that does not mean that I admire all of their personal characteristics. Money, prestige, fame and all the extrinsic trimmings do not impress me. I am far more interested in whether people are just decent citizens and treat other people equitably and with empathy and compassion. In other words, I am not in awe of Nilsson, but I am a believer in 'giving credit where credit is due'.

It is interesting to reflect on the ideas of identity and agency in the context of Nilsson's story. Each former player who was interviewed or observed did identify himself in the context of Baseball and being a Baseballer. In each case, the participants spoke in a way that suggested that their own identity was closely tied to their success in Baseball, in the same way that many people identify themselves or are identified through their chosen career, especially professionals. What makes this discovery interesting is that this identity cut across all aspects of their lives, so that each participant was known as a Baseballer rather than, or as well as, a naturopath or a refrigeration mechanic, for example. This happened not only in the context of Baseball circles but also in many aspects of their lives. Very few of the participants achieved professional status in Baseball, yet for many of them Baseball appeared to define their dominant identities. On the other hand, despite experiencing success in a number of sports, I do not view any one sport as defining me as a person. Many interesting philosophical discussions can develop from the whole concept of identity, but identity would appear to be very much aligned with sporting achievement, dare I say, for men in particular. Men are introduced socially in this way, and they are eulogised in this way and talked about in this way. The reputation of famous sportspeople such as cricketers, swimmers or rugby players is a reputation and identity for life. Imagine Ian Thorpe, for example, being known as anything other than a swimmer. It is difficult to find any other aspect of life that so defines a person's identity equally for good amateurs and professionals. Perhaps only some amateur musicians and artists who have reached recognition in their branches of the arts have identities so closely interwoven with an activity that is not their profession. Of course, for Nilsson, Baseball was, and still is, his profession.

In research methodology, reflexivity indicates the researcher's self-awareness and identity within the research context. Alversson and Skoldberg (2006) described this notion thus: "In reflective empirical research, the centre of gravity is shifted [to the] consideration of the perceptual, cognitive, theoretical, linguistic, textual, political and cultural circumstances that form the backdrop to – as well as impregnate – the interpretations" (p. 6). Their description resonated well with the bioecological methodology used for analysis in this research and the personal relational methods of data collection. In this context, I needed to identify myself as a researcher and I needed to retain this identity consistently. More than that, I needed to ensure that the participants thought of me in this way rather than as the wife of another player. At the same time, I was building on the already established relationship to encourage open and honest communication and using my known identity to achieve this outcome. As a consequence, the interviews were a constantly negotiated space. I needed to act reflexively in relation to what was being said in order to formulate the direction of the next question, while at the same time reflecting on and responding to the shifting dynamics of the relationship to maintain the open flow of the conversation.

In terms of any conclusions to be drawn from the research, it was essential for me to invoke an epoché or position of refraining from prejudging, literally suspending any urge to draw conclusions until I was at that stage in the research. This bracketing or setting aside of assumptions seemed relatively easy for me, and I conclude now that it is because I am not personally, emotionally invested in the outcomes. The findings are relevant to my research but not relevant to my life or my values.

### **5.5 Methods of data collection**

"Method" refers to the procedures and techniques that we can use to acquire knowledge (Hay, 2002, p. 64). The methods of data collection used in this research included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and the collection and analysis of artifacts, which included text, oral and multimedia forms. All the types of data collected served to complete the life story in more detail and through different lenses. Explanation of each method, including the procedures and techniques for each, is considered in this section.

In the data collection phase of this thesis, the other participants and Nilsson himself, as the central subject of the research, had the capacity to take control over the type of information shared and the way in which that information was shared. They also had control over how they presented themselves for the interviews and in the interviews. Participants may have been

influenced by their social environment, their knowledge of academics and research, and possibly also my gender (Somekh & Lewin, 2011). Consideration also needs to be given to whether the participants shared memories in the same way as they would if I were a male and/or another representative level Baseball player. One benefit that I had was in interviewing most former players, coaches and administrators at a Baseball complex before and after Australian Baseball League games or in and around Baseball facilities. This made the participants more relaxed and more open than they may have been had the interviews taken place on a university campus. I am sure that this informal setting worked in my favour, with participants being less guarded and less formal than they may have been in another setting. They were also more likely to participate because it was convenient for them to meet at the locations chosen. It is equally evident that all participants behaved in an appropriately controlled and rational manner for a social context. This was not a risk to the authenticity of data collected or the retelling of stories – the participants did not feel, for example, that they should curtail swearing, though the level of crudity may have been managed more than it would have been if I were male.

The salient point is that the stories were told, and that the data were collected with the lack of very colourful language being the only apparent concession to my gender and my role as researcher. I have cross referenced the stories and events multiple times, and I am satisfied that the interviews elicited the information that addressed the research question and shared significant similarities in the recall of pivotal events.

### **5.5.1 Semi-structured Interviews**

To facilitate the research process and to elicit the information needed to address the research question, data were collected from a number of significant individuals through semi-structured interviews. The data collected through the interviews complemented and strengthened the information collected through overt participant observation of the Baseball cultures in Queensland and Australia.

Strategic methods for collecting data in phenomenological research include semi-structured interviewing. Semi-structured interviews were utilised because this type of interview presents the opportunity to collect complex, information rich interpretations and memories, including many quotations that can be used in writing up the research (Bernard & Ryan, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, 2014; Roberts, 2002; Somekh & Lewin, 2011). Interviews involve a series of steps, and several authors have suggested seven steps in this process (Creswell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rubi & Rubin, 2009). I

employed adaptations of these processes to suit my context. Initially, I decided on my research question. The interviews were intended to provide the bulk of the material for my thesis, and I hoped that the information obtained would answer or help to answer the research question. The questions needed to be open-ended while also focusing on understanding the central phenomenon forming the basis of the research.

### **5.5.2 Selecting and contacting the interviewees**

The next step that I had to take was to identify those participants whom I thought would be best to interview, the type of interview to use – face-to-face, focus group or telephone – and where the interviews would take place. Ensuring that I had workable and multiple options for recording the procedures was essential. I used a tablet computer, my mobile phone and a small USB adaptor recorder in addition to taking notes. Interviewees first agreed to the interviews and arranged to meet me, then they completed a consent form. I adopted an interview protocol for the interviews. I have done an enormous amount of interviewing through my professional work and through the volunteer work that I do, so understand the importance of adherence to schedules and to ensure that I had time to ask all the questions that needed to be answered. Having a list of questions as a prompt for myself and plenty of space to write responses was an important ingredient for success. Another consideration for open-ended questions is refocusing the conversation if the interviewee starts to become side-tracked. Because of my familiarity with the interviewees, I also had to resist the temptation to add to or join in, thus changing the context to conversation rather than interview.

Interviewees were selected because of their relationship with Nilsson and his extended family, or because of their association with Nilsson through Baseball. Initial contact with interviewees was made through face-to-face or telephone conversations. Interviewing was felt to be a positive way to start the participant–researcher relationship. Information about the research aims was disseminated to the potential participants, and their consent to be interviewed was obtained (Appendices 3 and 4). For people in other locations, an initial telephone call was followed by an email message with the information about the research and the consent letter attached. As was expected, most interviews took place face-to-face, with Skype and email being used where necessary for people who lived outside Australia or in other states and territories of Australia. With ethics clearance I was able to identify the Nilsson, his wife and his mother. The identities of other participants is recorded with coded initials. Participants were afforded anonymity to encourage openness without fear of reprisal.

Data collection from primary source accounts for this thesis came principally through information gathered in a significant number of field interviews. The Baseball community was receptive to the research project and to “helping out” with interviews. People who consented to participate in interviews included: Nilsson himself and seven members of Nilsson’s family; seven former Australian and Queensland representative players; two other positional players from Australia who progressed to MLB in the United States; one coach who worked with Nilsson at the Brisbane Bandits and at the MLB development camps held at the Gold Coast each year; one former player who had played in Queensland State representative Baseball teams with Nilsson as a junior; one former coach from Queensland Schoolboys Baseball teams; and one former administrator from the Australian Baseball Federation. A prominent sports journalist well known to the Nilsson family consented to a formal interview and to assistance with the collection of data, including historical media about Nilsson and Baseball in Queensland and Australia.

When interviewing Nilsson and the other player participants, I sought to follow each of their journeys into and within Baseball. Initial childhood participation in sport is often prompted by the child’s parents (Allender et al., 2006; McPhail et al., 2003; Rowe et al., 2004), and is thus influenced by the activities in which the parents have been involved and around which they feel comfortable. By asking each of the former players about their beginnings in and connections with the sport, I was able to find common themes in motivation to commence Baseball and further motivations to maintain that involvement that aligned with Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory of human development (2005).

One other aspect of the phenomenon of being an elite level Baseball player that became apparent was how personal identity had been formed in the context of Baseball, and how quickly and early in their playing experiences that had happened. Consequently, I further sought to understand how identity (including one’s identity as an elite level Baseball player) and agency (the ability to exert control over one’s life) impacted upon each former player’s dispositions, practices and achievements (Biesta et al., 2005). When interviewing the other non-Baseball player participants, I aimed to understand how the achievements of the players with whom these non-players associated themselves had impacted upon the individual identities of these non-players. Each of these non-players had assumed an identity in Baseball based on their association with an elite level Baseball player or personnel associated with the sport itself. In order to do so, I examined the meanings, significance and impact of a range of formal, informal, tacit and incidental experiences from the perspectives of the participants. More importantly, I did so against the background of their unfolding lives. I aimed to

understand, in other words, the transformations in dispositions, practices and achievements that had been triggered by changes in the life course (Dominicé, 2000).

### **5.5.3 Interview format and data**

The researcher conducted a minimum of one in-depth, semi-structured interview with each participant, with the mode of communication being determined by participant preference and the practicalities of each option. Face-to-face interviews took place in locations that were convenient for the participant. Once approval had been given by participants, the interviews were recorded using audio recording technology and the recordings were transcribed by the researcher. A copy of the interview transcript was forwarded to the participant for comment. This enabled the participant to verify the content, and to clarify or to add further information. Some participants were asked to consent to a subsequent interview, with the second interview being extensively guided by the responses given in the first interview.

Interviews followed a predetermined pattern to begin with because I had formulated a method of helping each participant to relax.

Participants were provided with a page of *sample* questions about their own introduction to Baseball when they signed the permissions, and all permissions were gathered a minimum of two weeks before the interviews took place. This process enabled the participants to be assured that the process would not be threatening and gave them a chance to think about some of their responses in relation to themselves and their own experiences of Baseball. With the exception of the Nilsson family members being interviewed, the participants did not know who else was being interviewed, and they were asked not to discuss the research with others. In all interviews the participants were relaxed, and the conversation was open and friendly. I was able to allow the conversation to flow so that a fuller recount was obtained, and all pertinent information was included. Initially, in each interview with a player, coach, official or administrator, participants were asked to answer questions about themselves and their own involvement in Baseball. These questions had a double benefit, in that the participants all felt good about themselves when moving into the questions about Nilsson and about significant or benchmark events, and also in that the responses revealed several themes common to all participants and their involvement in the game.

In addition to recording the interviews, I also took comprehensive notes, asking for clarification where necessary. Because the questions were open-ended and all participants were relaxed during the process, several of the interviews went for longer than the estimated hour needed. This was not onerous for the participants and indeed it resulted from the participants

wanting to continue reminiscing and recalling exciting and good times in their collective pasts when they had experienced the highs of success in elite level sport and moments of glory. Very few participants mentioned lows or negatives during the interviews, although the participants who knew me more closely were more readily relaxed and talkative, and laughed more confidently. The participants who were former Baseball players were successful representative Baseball players, and they were chosen for this reason. These were the players who had the most contact with Nilsson. Interviewing people who have had negative experiences in Baseball was not part of the brief for this research. I do acknowledge that for all of the athlete or player participants there was some regret that the ‘highs’ of this period of their lives could not continue indefinitely.

#### **5.5.4 The interviews**

The interviews yielded two types of data: ‘emic’ accounts, which came from the interviews with persons within the culture that were descriptions of behaviour or belief in terms that were meaningful to the participant (consciously or unconsciously); and ‘etic’ accounts, which described the behaviours or beliefs of an observer in terms that could be applied to other cultures where the participant attempted to be culturally neutral (Creswell, 2009). My own observations were substantially etic in nature because of my peripheral position (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) in the Baseball culture, depending on the direction of the interviews and the perspectives or perceptions of the interviewees, with evaluation of similarities and applications to other sporting cultures and sports stars being components of the analysis. For example, in the literature review, I was able to establish that research has confirmed the importance of family influence in initial introduction to and participation in particular sports and physical activities. The literature review also affirmed the trend of athletes reaching the point of investment in a sport where they move from playing for enjoyment and love of the game to the idea of pursuing representative honours and perhaps professional careers.

The interviews provided a number of examples of these differing perspectives, with the player participants describing on-field incidents and game results, ‘plays’ made in particular games, significant changing of a pitcher or pitchers, errors made in play or charged against a player, fielding decisions made by players or coaching staff members, base running decisions made by a player or base coaches or both – the list is as long as the playbook<sup>9</sup>. In this respect,

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<sup>9</sup> The playbook for each team outlines everything that the players need to know. This would include: the organisational procedures and policies; daily routines; communication protocols; codes of conduct both on and off the field; arrangements for washing of uniforms; and team travel arrangements (for example, “be at the team bus 45 minutes before scheduled departure”); in addition to very important fundamental

using a focus group may have facilitated easier checking of data, but I had decided that for the purposes of rigour and authenticity, I did not want interviewees cross pollinating one another's thinking or recall.

The family members were interviewed privately and individually. Nilsson's brothers seemed to enjoy opening up and sharing their opinions and stories about their younger brother. They controlled their social behaviours, but they did not hold back on insults or criticisms. Nilsson's mother and wife were very genuine in their love for and admiration of Nilsson. They showed respect towards him and his achievements, but they did not talk as though these were the most important aspects of their respective relationships with him (although his wife did mention that the money is nice and makes life extremely comfortable). In summary, the interviews were productive and invaluable as a method of data collection, and they provided a wealth of material for my research.

Rather than interpreting this as meaning that the communities of Baseball attract likeminded people, I concluded that being a part of, or belonging to, some particular aspects of the phenomenon of the Baseball culture is what appeals to those who stay involved. People who share a social environment often develop a sense of solidarity and congregate in social groups. They may think in similar styles and patterns, even when their conclusions differ, and they tend to trust and help one another. It is intriguing that a sense of community and trust exists in competitive sporting environments, transcending club, state and national loyalties to the point where the number one allegiance is to the sport in question – in this case, Baseball. The love of the game and the shared experiences, and in Australia the shared frustrations, create an extraordinarily strong social bond.

## **5.6 Participant Observation**

One major aspect of the research in this study was participant observation, which is a widely used research strategy. Adopting this strategy, the researcher aims to maintain or gain close relationships with a person or a group of people and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in the environments in which they interact over an extended period of time (Spradley, 1980, 2016). Spradley (2016) contended that there are three primary

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information about how the team will approach each game – offensive plays, defensive strategies and team signals. (PPGP, interview, 17 January 2015)

elements in participant observation: “a place, actors and activities” (p. 39). When undertaking participant observation, “you will locate yourself in some place; you will watch actors of one sort or another and become involved with them; you will observe and participate in activities” (Spradley, 2016, p. 39). Phenomenologists can utilise the fieldwork strategy of participant observation as a useful tool for collecting data. I found it useful to identify “place” and to undertake some observations before determining all of the “actors” whom I would approach for interviews. The activity was of course Baseball at local, state and national levels of competition, although I was not able to observe Nilsson playing or coaching at an international level during the data collection phase.

An explanation of research fieldwork attributed to phenomenologists is found in relation to the social construction of what sociologists ordinarily treat as data, gathered through concrete interactions. Phenomenologists categorise behaviours and persons situated in social life, with statistics and interviews being generated at the initiative of the researcher (Creswell, 2013; Cicourel, 1968, 1974; Sudnow, 1967). Methodologically, more recent phenomenology studies focus on the relationship between the observer or the researcher and the participants, abandoning the notion that descriptions are absolutist and independent of the researcher’s point of view (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Creswell, 2013; Douglas, 1976). The relationship must be disclosed, and the researcher positioning, and voice must be described to verify phenomenological research processes and outcomes (Wolcott, 2010). My own background and positioning as the researcher in relation to the research for this thesis have been reported in detail in the previous section of this chapter.

Participant observation involves detailed observation of the sporting, social and family cultures, with data being collected through interviews, observations and documents. For the participant observer, the main objective is to participate in a social group while, at the same time, employing the insights and understandings of a sociological observer. The point is to observe and experience the world as a participant, while retaining an observer’s eye for understanding, analysis and explanation. Sociologists who use participant observation aim to discover the nature of social reality by apprehending the other participants’ perceptions, understandings and interpretations of the social world. The strategy of collecting qualitative data through participant observation originated in the fieldwork of social anthropologists (Bernard & Ryan, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Genzuck, 2003), whereby participant observation was used to construct a narrative in the same way that the data were used in this research. A key principle of the method is that one may not merely observe but must also find a role within the group in which to participate in some manner, even if only through the lens of the periphery

(Bernard & Ryan, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Genzuk, 2003). The researcher is a participant in two ways: through conducting the interviews and making the observations about the group, while simultaneously having a peripheral role in the group.

In some ways, participant observation is the most natural but also a highly challenging method of collecting data for qualitative and phenomenological research. The researcher is immersed in a relevant social context that connects her or him with basic human behaviours in anticipation that this immersion and observation will reveal the hows and whys of human behaviour in the particular context. This type of discovery is normal, in that we have all done this repeatedly in our lives, learning what it means to be members of our own families, our work groups, and our personal circles and our associations (Guest et al., 2012). The challenge lies in observing in a formal sense for the purposes of research in order “to systematize and organize an inherently fluid process” (Guest et al., 2012, p. 75). This means not only being a ‘player’ in a particular social milieu but also fulfilling the role of researcher: taking notes; recording voices, sounds and images; and asking questions that are designed to uncover the meanings behind the participants’ thoughts and behaviours. Through retelling stories and reconstructing events, the participants describe their perceptions of what they recall happening, thus privileging the researcher with an insight into the participants’ views and actions (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

There are certain event boundaries that can exist in a phenomenological study that may hinder the researcher. For example, critics argue that overt observational study is limited by the public fronts socially constructed by participants (Bernard & Ryan, 2009; Douglas, 1976). They contend that gatekeepers ensure that the research never goes beyond what the participants will allow the researcher to hear and see (Bernard & Ryan, 2009; Douglas, 1976). This tendency could have been a barrier in my research. There were times when I felt somewhat constrained by an expectation of social niceties, requiring me to adopt a negotiated way of representing myself and the research as the key to the cooperation of participants. Because of this circumstance, I was bound to utilise observational and interview techniques designed to make the participants feel comfortable and trusting, and to reassure them that my new role would not shift the balance of power or change the existing relationship in any significant way.

Bernard (2006) identified five reasons for conducting participant observation research that are summarised below:

1. Opening up the areas of inquiry to collect a wider range of data.

2. Reducing the problem of reactivity, where reactivity refers to the responses of the researcher and the research participants to each other during the research process (Johnson & Turner, 2003; Paterson, 1994).
3. Enabling researchers to know what questions to ask.
4. Gaining intuitive understanding of the meaning of one's data.
5. "Addressing problems that are simply unavailable to other data collection techniques" (p. 80).

In addition to Bernard's (2006) five reasons for using participant observation, Guest et al. (2012) suggested some other benefits of using the technique, including the following:

- "To establish the topics of inquiry for later, more structured data collection." While it was not necessary for me to participate in observation in order to establish the topics for inquiry, I was educated by observing the participants. I did need to establish a consensus of pivotal events through casual conversation with non-participants to ensure that I asked useful follow up questions in the interviews with the participants.
- "To avoid suspect self-reported data." Some participants may not admit to negative behaviours nor accurately report their part in undesirable behaviours. Similarly, some people have inflated opinions about their own place in the hierarchy of the social context, making observation a necessary tool in determining actuality.
- "To identify behaviours that might go unreported or be missed due to the limitations of procedural memory<sup>10</sup>." Some behaviours are so automatic or unconscious that we may miss them in interviews but see them in context while observing.
- "To lessen reporting biases." Researcher conclusions may be clouded by misconceptions about behaviours and events if these are not observed in context.
- "To integrate the observed behaviour into its physical context." The setting for observation is critical to understanding the behaviour in context.

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<sup>10</sup> Procedural memory refers to long-term memory of how to do things – like bike riding. In Baseball, despite many years of not playing, the former players can remember the mechanics of the skills and the strategies. They never go away, and we can physically perform them while we are healthy (probably with less accuracy), and we can envisage them for as long as our minds stay active.

- “To see the behaviour you are interested in as it happens.” “Participant observation puts you in direct contact with the phenomena of interest in a way unrivalled by other data collection methods” (Guest et al., 2012, p. 81).

The reasons cited above for using participant observation confirmed the inclusion of this strategy in the research. The observations did help me to structure the data collection as far as I was able to perform a type of cross checking of interview responses with what I was observing. The observations also helped me to establish genuineness.

In participant observation, the researcher develops close relationships with the participants over an extended period of time in order to observe their practices through involvement in the environments in which they interact (Genzuk, 2003). As a peripheral observer of Baseball cultures, particularly in Queensland and Australia, and the people involved over a period of 37 years, I had already developed workable relationships with most people being observed and/or interviewed. As a participant observer, the researcher has to work hard to remain impartial and to avoid approaching “the observation milieu with preconceived ideas based on prior knowledge” (Basit, 2010, p. 124) and experiences.

I was prepared to refine my judgements and to empty the feed-store of knowledge, held beliefs and conclusions before the observations commenced, and thus I was prepared to have my knowledge renewed through different perspectives and accounts. However, it became apparent to me very quickly that I did not have many preconceptions about the topics and events to be addressed. What was even more surprising and pleasing for me was that my friendship with most of the participants was not based on conversations about Baseball, despite the shared experiences and the context. Two examples of preconceptions that I had to set aside were firstly, the belief that athletes do not reach the top of their sport without a lot of demanding work and secondly, the assumption that Nilsson sacrificed his Major League career to represent Australia in the Summer Olympics. I was not strongly tethered to either of these ideas, the former more so than the latter, and I found myself prepared to change my pre-research ‘knowledge’. I am a believer in the concept that no knowledge is absolute - all knowledge is fluid and depends on interpretation and socially constructed discourse. Perhaps this is an advantage when undertaking qualitative, phenomenological research. While accepting the possible barriers to impartiality that may exist in being known to the community being observed, it must be acknowledged that the insider perspective is an asset that can enable the researcher to comprehend context specific language, nuances and complexities that a non-participant researcher may overlook (Basit, 2010).

I have discussed how my personal history and profession, coupled with my knowledge of and status in the sport of Baseball in Queensland and Australia, have impacted on the role of researcher. I need now to look at the impact of these factors on my observations. Immersion in the Baseball culture of Queensland and of Australia and, to a lesser extent, of the United States was seen an ingredient for successful research in this study. Being immersed through marriage and parenthood in the Australian Baseball culture and being a long time 'student' of Baseballing communities in Europe and North America did afford me some advantages when I was observing participant behaviours in the Baseball context. To a large extent, the relationships with the participants were already established and I was able to feel as much at home within the culture as being a supporter of the game and being related to players, coaches and administrators can permit - not entirely a member of the 'inner sanctum' of players but probably as close as an observer can be. This positioning made my stance one of observer as participant (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). At this level of observation, also known as moderate participant observation (Li, 2008), the participant group may have known that they were being observed but I was able to participate in activities as desired while maintaining my purpose of observation.

The previously established relationships and acceptance into the Baseball culture also privileged me as a participant observer because my presence was not new or unusual and people carried on as normal, not totally cognisant that I might be 'taking note or notes'. They did not feel threatened, nor change their usual behaviours, when I was there because my being present was an ordinary, everyday occurrence. However, the group members did still control, to a certain degree, the level of information being shared (Adler & Adler, 1994). They were able to have private conversations that did not include me, and the males were able to enter the change/locker rooms after games. These places, which were once domains of male privacy, have been infiltrated by female journalists since 1975, when Robyn Herman and Marcel St. Cyr were permitted into the locker rooms after a National Hockey League (NHL) All Star game in Montreal (Zinzer, 2010). Three years later, *Sports Illustrated* went to court to secure Melissa Ludtke access to the locker rooms after the 1978 MLB World Series games (Zinzer, 2010). Despite these hard won rights for female sports journalists, I did not feel the need to be confrontational or controversial about entry into these spaces. There was little benefit for the research being undertaken in my being able to access the locker rooms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when my research was predominantly centred on the past.

My own previous exposure to Nilsson and his development as a player was minimal because age differences between my husband and Nilsson meant that they did not play for Queensland or Australia in the same years. Living in a different geographical location also impacted on my early knowledge of Nilsson. I was living and working on the Far North Coast of New South Wales, while Nilsson lived and played Baseball in Brisbane. Thus, I entered the research phase having a contextually authentic and rich perspective on the Nilsson family's involvement in Baseball but no preconceptions of significant influences on David Nilsson's development and little knowledge of his story.

My observations were casual and subjective because I did not want people to know that they were being observed, nor did I want anyone to feel that they were being scrutinised, which may have altered their behaviours. It is difficult to be objective when you like the sport and the atmosphere and would choose to be there outside research time. There is a shared understanding and expectation in the Baseball communities. Spectators know what they have come to watch and why they have chosen to watch games live, rather than through a live-streaming platform. A verifiable feeling is that people are present at games because they like to watch Baseball.

Aside from the sport itself, there are aspects of the setting that make the games spectator friendly. When games are scheduled in daylight hours in summer in Queensland, there is shade at the grounds, and all of the grounds that I attended had a club house and a canteen. At the Australian Baseball League games in Brisbane, where I watched Nilsson coaching the Brisbane Bandits, the atmosphere is incredibly positive and social. The chatter between friends and acquaintances, the commentary, activities and the food on sale are all evocative of Baseball traditions. The commentary is quite different from that of our more traditional sports, and there is plenty of music and fun for children. There is a real effort to make going to the 'Ball Game' a safe family outing. There is little to no yelling of profanities and no evidence of drunken hooliganism. There are activities for children to participate in during breaks such as the famous '7<sup>th</sup> innings stretch'. The 7<sup>th</sup> innings stretch is a Baseball tradition. It is a break in play at the completion of the 7<sup>th</sup> innings to give grounds crew a chance to sweep the infield and where lucky seat or ticket number draws take place and there can be a prize giveaway (such as a car or a holiday) and other fun activities. The 7<sup>th</sup> innings stretch is when signature songs such as "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" may be sung.

The food at Baseball games in Australia caters to a diverse audience. Several players originate from parts of Asia, predominantly Japan, and various ethnic groups are catered for in

a deliberate marketing strategy. The customary hotdogs are consumed, and numerous food trucks provide an array of flavours from across the globe. Observation of spectators during daytime and night-time games provides the visual ‘sense’ that night-time games are popular, and the timing of a night-time Baseball game makes it an attractive sporting option as a family outing. That is, there is a sporting spectacle, food and drink are available, seating is comfortable and there is a result after two or three hours of play. During the Australian Baseball League season, there is a mixture of day and night games. The night-time games are played under lights, which is a cooler option for Queensland and most parts of Australia in summer.

Spectators behaved naturally and seemed to enjoy their outings. Many of the past players, coaches and administrators support the Brisbane Bandits and Baseball more generally, and obviously enjoy catching up with former teammates at the games. The shared understanding of Baseball game strategies and tactics, dialogue and knowledge is evident. Most adults know who Dave Nilsson is, and they know about his fame and have at least a cursory understanding of his achievements as a player and as a coach. I chose to sit among the daily ticket holders, rather than among the members, at some games, and this enabled me to start conversations with random spectators who were not known to me. They had no idea who I was, which did give me some freedom to engage in casual conversation where I could assess their level of knowledge and understanding. This was illuminating and did confirm that Nilsson is well-known and respected within the wider Baseball community in Brisbane and Southeast Queensland, even among visiting fans from other clubs across Australia.

### **5.7 Historical artefacts**

Analysis of field notes, media clippings, journals, statistical almanacs, anecdotal stories and recall provided individual perceptions of Nilsson’s journey. The design and plan for a particular analysis depend a lot on the general approach taken and the type of outcome expected – in short, the analytic purpose.

Interview transcripts were supplemented with information from magazine and newspaper articles and Baseball Almanacs, as well as video and auditory records that could be sourced. Records from Nilsson’s playing career in the USA and in Japan can now be sourced from reliable websites and electronic sources, and Nilsson himself has checked the records collected against his own records for accuracy. Many inaccuracies in data were identified by Nilsson, and these were corrected for this account. The portfolio of information available through newspaper clippings and magazine articles provided a snapshot of the sporting journey

of Nilsson, yet little is recorded about the personal journey, which made the interviews an essential component of the research and they provided rich data to add to the story. A full list of the artefacts engaged with is contained in Appendices F and G and throughout Chapter 2.

### **5.8 Ethics approval**

Ethics and integrity dictated the conduct of the research and the analysis of the recollections of each participant as well as the ways that the findings were communicated. Ethical guidelines set the parameters that enable the researcher to “operate defensibly” (Basit, 2010, p. 56) when conducting the research. Interviews had to be conducted with sensitivity, and to be conducted in such a way as to preserve the dignity of participants, ensuring that they were not harmed or hurt in any way during the research process, while still achieving quality research outcomes (Basit, 2010). Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland – number H11REA026 (Appendix 1). Data collected in interviews were stored electronically in password protected files privately and securely at the researcher’s home office.

When undertaking biographical research, one must always bear in mind that the purpose of the research is to be non-manipulative and to aim for objectivity while conducting interviews and considering the views of all the participants. With this purpose at the forefront, I had to limit my participation to that of facilitator during interviews, then to switch roles to co-creator of meaning for analysis. The perspectives of participants were appropriately acknowledged and candidly represented in the writing up of the thesis. If I had a distinct perspective of a particular event or memory, I could not waive the rights of the interviewee to be represented in the way that they wished to be represented nor could I ‘correct’ what the interviewee had said. For example, several participants referred to Nilsson’s first appearance in the Claxton Shield and his winning of the Helm’s Award, but each thought that he was younger at the time than he was. Nilsson himself had already corrected some media stories about the same topic for me, so I knew the ‘facts’. The participants and the media had his age as anywhere between 15 and 19. I was later able to verify Nilsson’s account to be accurate when I saw the actual Helm’s Award trophy, which confirmed that his age at the time was 18.

Participant observation is limited to contexts where the person or culture being studied understands and permits the observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). In this situation, adherence to the ethical guidelines and parameters revealed when initially seeking permissions is an imperative if the researcher is to maintain integrity and to be trusted. Should the researcher

discover information not previously made public, the researcher must address the quandary of what to do with that information if she or he feels that it will add to the story being told. Because of these factors, my 'place' in the Baseball communities under observation had the potential to restrict my analysis more than any of the ethical guidelines that were applied to the research. I felt strongly bound by ethical and personal boundaries that could be considered stricter in this research than they would be in normal circumstances, and those boundaries had to be carefully managed. This did not mean that I automatically made the decision to withhold relevant information in a shocked or automatic reaction to possible fall-out. Instead, I needed to negotiate with participants the right to share aspects of their recounts and the way that the information would be shared in my writing.

Given the huge volume of data collected through the interviews, observations, and print and visual media, I could have ignored any contentious differences in accounts; however, I did pursue these differences, believing that it was the ethical and credible thing to do. I was able to resolve most of them through sharing other people's accounts as if they were my own memories. This was necessary only when I had 'proof' that what an interviewee was sharing was historically inaccurate.

### **5.9 The rigor and trustworthiness of the data**

While credibility issues in biographical research can be created by inaccurate reporting and failing memories (Denzin, 1989; Roberts, 2002), "validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants or the readers of an account" (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). Establishing credibility or validity in qualitative research is not without challenges, and various authors have flooded our minds with a "confusing array" (Creswell & Miller, 2009, p. 1) of alternative terms. Others have constructed typologies of validity, including "Maxwell's five types, 1992; Luther's four frames, 1993 and Schwandt's four positions, 1997" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 124). Despite this confusion and kaleidoscope of definitions, there is general consensus that qualitative researchers need to demonstrate the credibility of their findings.

The study's trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000) were established and enhanced through employing the following strategies: the use of rich, thick descriptions from participants; presenting discrepant information; spending prolonged time in the field; and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009, 2013). A set of criteria for establishing trustworthiness as a measure of rigour was proposed by Guillemin and Gillam (2004): learning

the context and ethical co-construction; conscious reflexivity; and prolonged engagement. Understanding the context and ethical co-construction are based on the aspiration of prioritising the voices of participants because qualitative researchers aim to reflect the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the participants as closely as possible. This does not mean that prioritising the meanings of participants denies the researcher a voice or the opportunity to co-construct meaning (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Efforts taken to manage issues of reactivity and bias can help researchers to describe qualitative data in a way that is credible (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004, p. 205).

In this research, one potential source of interference could have come from me as the researcher not giving credibility to accounts that differed from my own memory of events. By employing conscious reflexivity, I heightened my researcher's interpretive awareness in critically evaluating data from multiple perspectives; thus, the ethical co-construction of information through multiple participants was achieved (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Seale, 2002). Additionally, adhering to an ethical standpoint helped to clarify my researcher perception and subjectivity (Lietz et al., 2006). The need for prolonged engagement meant making multiple visits to Baseball environments and having numerous informal conversations with the main participants, in order to build further rapport and to experience immersion in the culture of Baseball players, their support networks and fans of the game.

### **5.10 The delimitations and limitations of the research**

Every study has delimitations and limitations. The delimitations are those characteristics that define the boundaries of a study, thus restricting its scope. They are controlled by the researcher and include the choice of research objectives and question/s, the interview questions, the conceptual framework and research paradigm, and the participants and context chosen for the investigation. The most significant delimitation is the choice of research focus. The purpose statement explains the intent of the research and implies an agreement about what the study will not cover (Ellis & Levy, 2009; Simon, 2011; Simon & Goes, 2013).

Limitations are the possible shortcomings or influences on the outcomes that cannot be controlled. Some limitations may result from the delimitations imposed by the researcher such as the number of participants or the scope or length of the study (Ellis & Levy, 2009; Thomas & Nelson, 1996). Another limitation was the creation of "no go zones" by the subject himself.

There were aspects of Nilsson's values and beliefs that any researcher would have liked to explore further, such as his feelings about education and his deep religious convictions. I

quarantined these areas as ‘off limits’ for challenge during this research because of my role as researcher and the imperative not to influence the thinking of participants or the outcomes of the research. To challenge these values and beliefs may have crossed a principled boundary created by my own regard for the subject and his family and by the need to sustain Nilsson’s cooperation in the research. Failure to elicit meaningful clarification from Nilsson about the formulation and the impact of these values and beliefs left perhaps inevitable gaps and silences in his story. As religion, marriage and children entered his life only after he had reached the ‘show’<sup>11</sup>, they cannot be deemed significant in his development as an athlete. They were, however, significant in his career as a Major Leaguer, in the decisions that he made around his financial security and geographic location and in his behaviours and values as a player and a person.

In deciding to use one subject to explore the research question, I imposed a delimitation and made a fundamental assumption, informed by research. Whilst every athlete’s journey is unique, there are themes that came through strongly in the research that permitted extrapolations to other athletes and contexts. The story of Nilsson’s journey shared enough similarities with those of other elite athletes in similar circumstances to ensure that the outcomes or conclusions about these aspects of his journey have credibility and can be applied to inform practice in other sporting contexts. Limitations that cannot be completely controlled are participant honesty or loss of memory. These limitations have been countered through the use of multiple participants’ giving accounts of the same noteworthy events, experiences and people, providing me with the capacity to define commonalities and contextualised themes.

### **5.11 Chapter conclusion**

In this chapter, I have outlined the principles and practices of the research design, including qualitative research, phenomenology and the methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. I found it essential to position myself and my voice in the research because of my close connection with the Baseball context. In addition, through my profession, which is frequently connected with the context of sport and my extensive volunteer work in sports coaching and administration, I possess knowledge and values that had the potential to influence my receptivity to any challenges that unsettled this knowledge and these values. It was

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<sup>11</sup> The “show” is another name used to identify MLB.

necessary to explain my background and positioning in relation to the research very thoroughly.

One central objective to which I adhered was to give the participants a voice and to honour their right to be heard. The use of participant observation and semi-structured interviews afforded the participants the opportunity to be heard and quoted. I also outlined the parameters of the research, its delimitations and limitations, and its analytical processes, accounting for credibility and ethical practices. Additionally, I explored different facets of the research design, making the explicit links with the study's conceptual framework clear. Having established the conceptual and methodological foundations, I now use these understandings to address the findings and to answer the research question.

## **CHAPTER 6 DATA ANALYSIS**

### **6.1 Chapter introduction**

Chapter 6 connects the identified thematic lenses with the research data to facilitate analysis of the corpus of data with the aim of answering the research question. The focus of the chapter is on the application of the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) in Nilsson's life from his development as an athlete during his childhood in Brisbane and as a Baseball player in the heady days of his career in MLB as a starting player for the Milwaukee Brewers.

The chapter includes a brief review of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Model of Human Development in Section 6.2, before Section 6.3 restates the research question and describes the systems analysis of the interview data, and how the data aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems model of human development. In Section 6.3.1, the analysis delves more closely into Nilsson's physical and psychological attributes and in Section 6.3.2, the development of his sport-specific skills – the individual encased in the nested arrangement of systems. Section 6.4 considers the significance of the microsystem and the immediate environment as influences in the early years of participation in the sport of Baseball. This section focuses on the Nilsson family microsystem, considering relations and psychological ties within and external to the family. The significance of family in the microsystem and the importance of that influence were affirmed through the interview data collected from other players, from Nilsson's family and from Nilsson himself. Section 6.5 explores the importance of "Process, Person, Context, Time" (PPCT) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 794), in the mesosystemic interplay of individual, microsystem and exosystem as they were enacted and manifested in Nilsson's life. In Section 6.6, the chapter explores the PPCT relationships in the mesosystemic interplay among individual, macrosystem and chronosystem. The chapter concludes in Section 6.7 with a synthesis of the main ideas and findings of the research included in this chapter as they pertain to addressing the research question.

In this research, the focus was on thematic analysis, which primarily had a descriptive and exploratory orientation, with a modification of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems model serving as a thematic analytical framework. Analysis and interpretation involved close examination of insight into and attention to the purposes of the research to identify trends and patterns and the system or the environment to which these could be attributed. Themes about learning, expertise, motivational theory, skill acquisition, coaching

pedagogy, resilience, sports psychology, and the location of sport and the sporting/physical body within the dominant culture emerged through the literature review process, and these themes informed the final formulation of the research question and the data analysis. Data analysis was concurrent with data collection, with the asking of analytical questions and redirecting questions and note taking occurring throughout the data collection period because of the open-ended nature of the questions and the use of semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2009, 2013, 2014).

## **6.2 Revisiting the Bioecological Model of Human Development**

In Chapter 3, the Literature Review, and Chapter 4, the Conceptual Framework, Uri Bronfenbrenner's initial ground breaking theory of human development was introduced and explained. The theory evolved over decades of research, with Bronfenbrenner introducing the concept of a series of systems where human interactions take place over time, thus impacting on and influencing human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). He proposed that these interactions occur in an ever expanding, increasingly complex and interconnected circle of cultural, economic and political settings that impact on the development of each individual in diverse ways (Hess & Schultz, 2008).

Bronfenbrenner further suggested that our development is an outcome of our environments, much like our health and wellbeing (World Health Organization [WHO], 1986). He went on to decode the complex impact of each of the identified systems in advancing or restraining development. In later research, there was a transition in Bronfenbrenner's findings from a focus on the environment to a focus on "*Proximal Processes*" as the catalysts for development. As we read in Chapter 3, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) defined these four principal components as process, person, context and time, with emphasis being placed on the symbiotic interactions among them. In essence, the interactions between the person and the systems placed in a context and a chronology of time are significant in defining the impact of each system and of the era on the development of each person. And so it is for the development of sporting performance that attains super-elite, international and professional levels. Bronfenbrenner's updated theory was redefined as a Model of Human Development (2005), and it was the model used to identify the systems of overlapping influences that emerged as themes in the data gathered from the participant interviews in this research.

### 6.3 Bioecological systems analysis

Analysis of the data collected was designed to uncover those themes pertinent to addressing the study's research question and the operational questions that contributed to answering the research question.

The thesis addresses the question – “which bioecological systems and which physical and personal attributes and sport-specific skills, are significant; and how significant are they in the development of super-elite athlete performances in international and professional sporting contexts?”

In addressing the research question, I relied heavily on the data provided by Nilsson himself and by the Nilsson family. As a measure of rigour to confirm the findings and conclusions, all of the interviewee responses were categorised into themes aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) systems model. The overwhelming majority of the player participants, as well as the non-playing research participants who regularly observed the Nilsson family, consolidated the information about the influence of family and the microsystem, but were lacking in specific details about the significance of this context in Nilsson's development. This is probably the result of their own ages at the time and the inherent lack of analytical discourse in which children of this age would engage. Through recounting their memories of their own lived experiences, the interviewees were able to lend credibility to the idea that the microsystem is significant as a starting point in athlete career development.

In total, 20 player participants were interviewed, with 19 of them mentioning immediate family as the first influence, and the most important influence, in the early years of their involvement in Baseball. The remaining participant was introduced to Baseball by his sister's boyfriend – a person ensconced in the family microsystem. *“I went to Baseball because a boyfriend of one of my sisters suggested I should try it.” “At the age of 10, I was hooked.” “It was sort of a fluke.” “The first day, I just grabbed the ball and started throwing it, never dreaming what it would lead to. And 17 years later, here I am. What if I hadn't gone that day? It's all pretty amazing.”* (Costello, 2016, audio)

When the identified players and family members were interviewed, I did not adhere rigidly to the sample interview questions that were submitted for the ethics application (see Appendix B). The interviews were semi-structured, which permitted the interviewees to pursue a train of thought or a memory in as much detail as they were prepared to share with me. This flexibility provided through the semi-structured interview format enabled me to redirect questions and to pursue an interviewee's memory in full detail. While the questions themselves

may not be easily identifiable as being linked to the bioecological systems framework, the responses did meld into the framework and demonstrated the pivotal and defining influence of the microsystem in determining each player's initial introduction to the sport and the significance of family support in sustaining involvement in the early years. This significance is demonstrated through the interview responses in Section 6.3.2.

The operational questions outlined in Chapter 1 that contributed to addressing the research question are also considered in this chapter. The first of these operational questions concerned Nilsson as a person. That is, "What were Nilsson's physical and psychological attributes and sport-specific skills?" The second operational question was concerned with the mesosystemic interchange of the individual and the microsystem. That is, "Which influences in Nilsson's social and cultural environments made significant contributions to the development of his physical and psychological attributes and sport-specific skills, including the athlete's 'five tools' so favoured by Baseball scouts: hitting, power, fielding, arm strength and speed (Dieringer & Zuccarell, 2012)?" Initially, I consider the first of these operational questions. Because physical characteristics are specific to the individual but because they are influenced by genetics, they can be considered the product of the microsystem. Psychological attributes and sport-specific talents have their foundation in the microsystem and develop through the proximal processes of individual to microsystems.

It was easier to identify the family influence in initiating the development of physical attributes and sport-specific talents than it was to distil the specific influential family values, moments and events that shaped Nilsson's psychological attributes – especially those that led him to the top of the world stage in Baseball. The development of the personal attributes is dependent on experiences, environments and the actions of others, but also on the responses of the individual to those experiences, environments and actions of others.

Confirmation of the Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) theory of proximal processes was evident in the data collected from the interviews. The four principal components of the expansion in Bronfenbrenner's model were the proximal processes – process, person, context and time, previously referred to as "PPCT", with the symbiotic interactions between these proximal processes being identified as incredibly significant (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). The interactions between Nilsson and the systems, when placed in a context and on a timeline, can reveal a chronology defining the impact of the interrelatedness of the systems, and of the era, on the development of Nilsson's personal attributes. More about this finding is considered in Section 6.3.1, where I deliberate in more depth about the physical and personal attributes of Nilsson, along with his sport-specific skills.

### 6.3.1 Nilsson's physical and personal attributes

In any diagrammatic representation of Bronfenbrenner's theory, the individual is the epicentre or nucleus, making examination of Nilsson, the individual, a natural first step in this analysis. Anthropometric studies have been a feature of athlete centred research dating back as far as the 1960 Rome Summer Olympic Games (Tanner, 1964). Anthropometric measurements are used to assess the size, composition and proportions of the human body. Examples of anthropometric measurements relevant to this research are height, weight (or mass), circumferences (upper arm, mid-thigh, calf, chest and abdominal sagittal diameter), and limb lengths (knee height, arm-span, demi span, half span) (National Institute of Health Research, 2021). Contributions of genetic components in sporting performance have been confirmed, and research has moved on to identify which genetic profiles make the most significant contribution to success. Compelling evidence suggests that "genetic factors influence several phenotype traits<sup>12</sup> related to physical performance and training response as well as to elite athletic status" (Eynon et al., 2011, p. 3063). Size and strength play a part in success and enjoyment, as do the player's own actual or perceived levels of competence, which in turn influence the player's level of confidence. Individual anthropometric and physiological characteristics of Nilsson are a factor in the microsystem and in his responses to that environment.

Nilsson did benefit from being taller and stronger as a youngster and, unlike very many early developers who stand out as young players, Nilsson's growth continued, and he reached a 'good' height and maintained a powerful build. The physical characteristics of height and strength are common in his family; however, he is the tallest at 190.5 cm, with a very powerful upper body – both physical characteristics that are advantageous in Baseball skills like hitting and throwing, in addition to the blocking of pitched balls and throwing to bases that are required of catchers - commencing the movement from a squatted position, to stop advancing baserunners. The time taken for this movement from normal squatted catcher position to move into throwing position, releasing the ball and the ball arriving at the desired base is referred to as pop time<sup>13</sup>, with the speed of pop time being defining in play making in Baseball, so defining

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<sup>12</sup> A phenotype is an individual's observable traits, such as height, eye colour and blood type (The National Human Genome Research Institute, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> "Pop Time" refers to a combination of a catcher's footwork (getting into throwing position), exchange (glove to release) and arm strength – which impacts on the velocity of a throw. On steal or pickoff attempts by a catcher, Pop Time represents the time elapsed from the moment that the pitch hits the catcher's mitt to the moment that the intended fielder is projected to receive his throw at the center of the base. A large part of his success is dependent upon the runner's speed, the throw's accuracy and the pitcher's delivery length. With a quick Pop Time and an accurate throw, a catcher is doing what he can to stop the opposing running game (MLB, 2022).

that MLB keeps statistics on average Pop Times. According to the MLB website, “Pop Time is a much better assessment of a catcher’s ability to throw out baserunners than the strength of his arm alone. A catcher with a great arm is not going to throw out many baserunners if it takes him a while to transfer the ball to his throwing hand and then release the throw” (MLB, 2022). In addition to anthropometric measures, significant genetic or heritable components in performance have been identified. Those relevant to Baseball and Nilsson include agility, throwing, kinematics and reaction time. Whilst some combinations of gene variants may produce an athlete with a propensity to succeed at the highest levels in sport, the number of other variables influencing outcomes makes predictions based on genetics an inexact science. Genetic factors may influence the sport in which an athlete is most likely to compete successfully (MacArthur & North, 2005).

In the interests of avoiding a lengthy lesson in the biomechanics of human movement, I have attempted to synthesise the main factors that make height and consequent arm span (length of lever) an advantage in Baseball, if a player is competent enough to control both. Human movement takes place through a system of levers. The length of an ‘able bodied’ athlete’s lever cannot be modified; however, athletes can use, or be taught to use, their levers more efficiently. Levers rotate about an axis as a result of force being applied to cause movement against a resistance or weight (Floyd, 2015). In the human body, we can think of the contraction of muscles as the force generated, bones such as the humerus act like a bar and the joints, like the elbow, are an axis. There are three types of levers. Each has force, axis and resistance, and these three points determine the type of lever and the type of motion for which it is suitable (Floyd, 2015). Long levers (an arm, or an arm holding a Baseball bat) can generate more force and more velocity if used efficiently. This results in a hit ball travelling further and faster. The faster that the ball travels, the harder that it is for a fielder to catch the ball or to handle it at all. The further that a ball travels, the bigger the advantage for the team in many circumstances in Baseball. As noted by one player participant, in terms of the ‘five tools’ of Baseball raised earlier in this thesis, young players rated ‘being able to hit the ball’ as the most important skill. *If you can hit the ball, you can advance to a base and become a baserunner, which means you have the potential to score a run* (GM, interview, 5 December 2015).

Again, the taller, longer limbed catcher, who has good control of their longer limbs, can throw the Baseball with more force and more velocity, giving the catcher a chance of

throwing the ball to the relevant infield player covering the base (fielding team) faster than a baserunner (batting team) can run between bases, thus forcing the baserunner out. Longer levers can be harder to control, but, when coaches and scouts find ‘that athlete’ with the magical combination of long levers and controlled, competent movement, they can become very animated (GP, interview, 17 January 2016). Of course, there are variations, and there are always outliers in sport, as there are in any field of endeavour - athletes who defy the odds and the anthropometric and physiological characteristics historically attributed to particular sports and positions in team sports. A substantial body of research evidences the contribution of anthropometric and physiological factors in super-elite performance. The length of limbs, like height, is a product of genetics and can therefore be attributed to the microsystem.

Genetics aside, other factors such as birth date, birth order and place of birth were considered in Chapter 3, the Literature Review. Birth date is another factor attributable to the microsystem of family and family planning. Birth date or relative age effect (RAE) has been shown to advantage athletes (Baker & Logan, 2007), and, with Nilsson, being born in December may have been an advantage in the early years of his participation because the season started in September/October each year, placing him in the first quarter of the year of play. However, evidence suggests that any early advantage gained through RAE disappears by the time that athletes reach the elite level (Rees et al., 2016).

The microsystem is also influential in an athlete’s physical development through adequate nutrition, exposure to regular physical activity and attitudes towards being active and towards participation in sport.

In another quite random and unintentional result in my research, the participants selected for interview were all above average height. There are those who would contend that this was no accident because people of above average height are more likely to achieve success in many team sports. Indeed, in many, if not most, Talent Identification testing regimes, height and weight are recorded. Coaches and scouts often observe or lament that *all sports are chasing the same kids* (GP, interview, 17 January 2016). Of course, this is not the entire story. Sports like Handball, Volleyball, Basketball and Rowing do rate height and arm span as important attributes, but an equal number of sports do not emphasise these physical traits: Gymnastics, Surfing, Skateboarding and BMX, to name a few. In Baseball, height is more important in pitching and hitting than in any other aspects of the game.

Nilsson was this athlete with desirable physical attributes: *physical strength, height, big hands, ‘Big League’ hitter’s forearms and hands, good coordination, durable body and knowledge to call the game* (GS, interview, 28 November 2015). While physical factors and

skill competence are significant in enabling progress to the highest levels of a sport internationally, there must be more. Psychological responses to environments, opportunities, injuries, and every enabler and barrier on the journey must be navigated and subjugated for an athlete to succeed. This is not about emotion or superlatives or ‘true grit’, but about pragmatism, determination, belief in oneself and focus, with elements of single-mindedness and stubbornness added in for amplified impact. For some athletes from poorer nations and/or disadvantaged circumstances, there is added pressure and added motivation, to be able to help their families out of poverty. The prospect of making millions of dollars through competing in a game that you love, or at which you perform well, is an appealing one.

Nilsson admitted that he had *no weight of expectation* placed on him by his family or anyone in Australia. *I wanted it. Part of it was the role of representation of Australian Baseball. Making noise for Australia. I understood my role for future generations of young Baseballers in Australia.* He felt that he had developed *resilience through being the youngest* in the family.

*I never felt spoilt or was not conscious of it. I had a path of trying to get back to the level of my older brothers - to be part of it. I had plenty of drive. I didn't realise until much later that I had a clearly defined goal.* (DN, interview, 30 January 2015)

*Leaving school early was part of the plan. Hard work in the job at the mattress factory was not as appealing as playing Baseball for a living. But my early experiences of work...the reality was not great, getting up early, etc. I was very conscious that some people do this for life. Every hour of every day I wanted to quit, but just needed to stick it out to get money to be free to quit and just play Baseball. To have the opportunity to train, but also to have more time to rest. I was hanging out at Queensland practices for days – had heard all the stories about Mike Young [coach] and how he worked. I was determined that nothing Mike did was going to break me. All good coaches do things to test the character of players. I knew what I was getting into. Mike had decided I would play Claxton Shield, and I made it impossible for Mike not to pick me. It's what people do when no one's around that separates the elite from the good athletes. As an athlete, you have to feel that you train harder than others. I was being groomed to sign a pro[essional] contract. Mike was trying to get me signed – saw benefits for himself and for other Australians, but it wasn't a topic of conversation. Motivation was representing Australia and yourself really well - money was a bonus.* (DN, interview, 30 January 2015)

The impact of psychology on performance has long been a subject of research, and there is now a body of research surrounding all levels of athletic performance, including the super-elite (Rees et al., 2016). Rees et al. (2016) identified that

“more successful athletes display higher levels of motivation, confidence, perceived control, mental toughness, resilience, ability to cope with adversity, greater resistance to ‘choking’ in high pressure situations and command a wide range of mental skills such as goal setting, anxiety control, imagery, self-talk and decision making” (p. 1045).

The data collected in this research confirmed that Nilsson certainly exhibited these qualities, but that the motivation and drive impacted on things other than athletic performances. For the adolescent Nilsson, aiming to play MLB was a driver of life choices and an enormous motivator. He was able to set goals and to work doggedly towards achieving them. He did not allow himself to have a Plan B or an alternative vision for his life course. His plan was MLB – he may have had alternative paths to MLB mapped, but MLB was the only destination. One does wonder if this single-minded psychological goal setting were a factor in success - not allowing himself to consider the possibilities of ‘What if you don’t make it; what if you fail?’

*Nilsson’s personal qualities helped him. He was confident and had a good mental make-up. Backs himself to do well. Was not afraid of failure and learnt from it. He was a hard worker – always wanted more. Extra at training. U/16 – evolved masculine body from overweight youngster. By the time he was U/18, he was slim/trim with muscles. Similar build to others in family – beneficial mixture of genes. (GS, interview, 28 November 2014)*

Nilsson never valued his school education. He had the attitude that school was:

*glorified babysitting. I had no academic focus. I quit school in Year 10 to take an apprenticeship. I am the sixth kid, and my family thought I should quit school and go to work as soon as I turned 15. Worked odd jobs. Worked in a Mattress Factory to make money. I hated every minute of working there, but I knew I needed to work to make enough money to be able to quit and just train and play Baseball over summer. Played 60 games of club baseball over the summer, plus Claxton Shield. I trained harder than anyone else trained – 20 to 24 hours per week outside games and played five or six games per week. I caught trains to Holloway field to train. I was very*

*focused on Claxton Shield, but I began to see possibilities of a future in US Baseball.*  
(DN, interview, 30 January 2015)

Nilsson was talking about the year that he debuted in the senior Queensland team in the 1986/1987 season, played in the Claxton Shield competition for the first time and won the Most Valuable Player Award – the Helm’s Award as the Most Valuable Player (MVP), in addition to the Rookie of the Year award, a unique double achievement. Transitioning from junior level to senior level competition at such a young age and making the transition so successfully evidenced a psychological mindset of both confidence and self-actualisation – personal attributes essential for high level sports performances.

That year, the Queensland Under 18 team also won the national championships after a memorable two-week trip with Steve Gilmore, Lyle Brown and Garry Nilsson as the coaching staff. It was a pivotal year and a catalyst for Nilsson’s future career.

Güllich et al. (2019) identified significant psychosocial strengths that super-elite athletes possess, some of which can be applied to Nilsson. These include: focus on an outcome and mastery of skills; handling anxiety and the ability to perform under pressure; diversity of sports experiences; demographic factors; ruthlessness or selfishness to achieve desired success; and feeling emotionally supported by coaches who showed a genuine interest in them. Nilsson acknowledged that *the Minor league was good bridging*, and that staying in Chicago with Mike Young’s parents *softened the landing in the USA* for a very young Nilsson. *I stayed in Chicago – it was good. Mike’s parents were great. Despite being made welcome and having the security of a known family connection, there was a major shift in environments and possibilities.* Nilsson acknowledged that

*...the thinking has changed now but when I went [chasing the MLB dream] my thoughts were not about the ‘big bucks’ or the potential for financial security. Financial incentives were not the major focus. The initial \$50,000 signing bonus was huge – it meant I could buy new jeans.* (DN, interview, 30 January 2015)

According to Dweck (2006), psychological traits, or a growth mindset, are of equal or greater importance to or then expert sport-specific skills, excellent physical competence or any other of the individual, sociocultural and environmental factors that may impact on performances. It is almost a taken for granted assumption that athletes competing at the highest level of international and professional levels of sport have reached the same mastery level of technical skills and that, in team sports, they all understand the strategies and tactics of the game. It is, then, the psychology or mastery of the psychology during performances that separates athletes.

Athletes who reach the super-elite level may reveal comparable attitudes, attributes and thinking (Rotella, 2015), which leads to the conclusion that the attribute separating the super-elite from the next levels of performers is desirable psychological attributes (Sheard, 2013). Evidence that psychological attributes determine success is so persuasive that some researchers are convinced that psychological attributes are key contributors to super-elite performances in sport (Rees et al., 2016). It is a contention of this thesis that psychological attributes are also extremely significant in determining an athlete's capacity to deal with rejection, poor performances, non-selection and financial, emotional and social adversity, in addition to managing all levels of success. Memorable examples of this lack of capacity to deal with pressure situations or, alternatively, being too confident after achieving impressive, medal predicting qualifying times are played out in media coverage of events such as the Olympic Games. It simply is not enough to have mastered the sport-specific skills and to have the desirable physical attributes – athletes must have the 'mastered the mind'. While Nilsson did not say anything negative about his older brothers and their lack of progress in the United States, he did observe and make decisions about what he had to do to make his journey more successful.

Quotations from Nilsson's interviews attested to the influence of the microsystem on the development of desirable psychological attributes. Nilsson's father coached his sons in the early years and was always supportive and believed in them. Nilsson told me himself that his father was a calm and kind coach – *even when they lost, he never made a big deal about it – was never angry, still bought them an ice cream* (DN interview, 27 January 2015). *Tim was quiet – not pushy* (GS, interview, 28 November 2014).

Nilsson's mother recalled that David was

*...always more determined. He was really into Baseball. Watched it whenever he could – he would sit and watch for hours, totally absorbed. He set a goal. He was mentally strong enough to go back [to the US] after the Chicago experience. Resilient. He never criticised his brothers, and they supported him. He learnt from their experiences.* (Pat Nilsson, interview, 27 October 2016)

The psychology to manage transnational migration and separation from 'home' is a distinct but essential set of emotions to deal with external to the new Baseball environments. One thing that was different for the youngest Nilsson brother to 'sign' and leave Australia was that he was not in a relationship when he left. *Both of his older brothers were in long-term relationships when they left Australia, and both married those partners when they came back*

(Pat Nilsson, interview, 27 October 2016). I have known athletes in this situation, and there is no consistent or predictable pattern to what happens in the relationships to be able to draw a conclusion one way or another about whether relationship/partner status and long distance relationships help or hinder progress to the higher levels in sport. There are coaches who verbalise the opinion that 'being in love' can be too great a distraction, but probably an equal number who think that relationships are stabilising and positive. The lack of research into this important aspect of an athlete's psyche suggest that researchers have not valued this knowledge or the impact of it on athlete performance. Does this indicate that coaches and managers are applying a 'one size fits all' approach, thereby missing an important element of each athlete's emotional needs and psychological make-up?

While the psychology to deal with super-elite level, high performance sporting environments develops through interactions or proximal processes with wider environments, in the younger child, the home environment, or microsystem, is an important influence on the development of emotional responses to situations. Parents teach their children to play nicely, to share, to control anger and to avoid physical responses to disappointments or conflicts. Parents set the tone and the patterns of behavioural response, helping children to learn appropriate and socially acceptable ways of interacting with others. These behaviours relate to emotions and psychology.

Nilsson arrived on the Baseball scene in the US *with no weight of expectation – I wanted it, the role of representative of Australian Baseball. I was making noise for Australia and understood the role for future generations of young Baseballers in Australia* (DN, interview, 5 August 2017). Nilsson understood that *Baseball has a high level of failure and a Pandora's box of possibilities* (DN, interview, 5 August 2017). Nilsson was able to 'manage' the variables well enough to have eight years in the 'Majors'. The PPCT interactions within and between the microsystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and Nilsson were positive and affirming, and therefore motivational, and they were a further catalyst for sustaining his effort and retaining his involvement. No-one asked Nilsson to take on any sort of ambassadorial role, but he assumed this added pressure voluntarily – a demonstration of his own values and a deeply seated understanding of how momentous it was for an Australian Baseballer to have earned a spot in the 'Big Leagues'. The clarity of thought and the depth of analysis demonstrate psychological self and social management beyond the expectations of a 17 year old. *The motivation was representing Australia and yourself really well* (DN, interview, 5 August 2017). How many prospects from nations outside the US even contemplate the significance of

their role in this context, and how many managers appreciate that the added burden of representing a nation's reputation is being carried by transnational migrants in sport?

The psychology behind athlete performances is well researched, though the traditional notions of goal setting, visualisation/imagery/mental rehearsal, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, arousal, positive self-talk, mood and self-confidence remain in vogue (Karageorghis & Terry, 2011). More modern techniques such as mindfulness, the use of music and psychological profiling have all been added in recent years. It is possible to base an entire thesis on the subject of sports psychology; however, that was not my intention. This thesis has confirmed the importance of psychology in achieving success at the super-elite echelons of professional and international sports, but my conclusions also confirmed that the psychology of performance is only a component of the overall mastery of psychology essential to successfully negotiating the journey to the top.

### **6.3.2 Sport-specific Skills**

In terms of the development of sport-specific skills, the microsystem of the Nilsson family was again a highlight. Nilsson learned from playing with his father and his brothers. He studied the game from an early age, and he understood the skills and the strategies. He also learned the skills of the game from playing often – both casually and in formal competitions.

The awards won from an early age were further testament to his knowledge and understanding of the game. Participants in this research who played at state, national and international levels with Nilsson all conceded that his contributions to team strategy and team morale were significant in team success. This comment from Nilsson's mother was testament to his dedication to learning and understanding the game.

Patricia Nilsson became a scorer and David

*...tagged along. He was always good, even when he was short and chubby. He was a real student of the game. He watched his brothers play when the Claxton Shield was televised and was totally absorbed. When the older boys played night Baseball at Perry Park, David could be heard behind the fence encouraging his brothers and the team. They were never negative with each other; they supported each other both on the field and in public interactions with others. (Patricia Nilsson, interview, 27 October 2016)*

Chapter 2 retold the chronology of Nilsson's Baseball journey and provided objective, measurable data that demonstrated his sport-specific skills. He had the 'five tools' of Baseball essential for being identified and signing an MLB contract: hitting, power, fielding, arm

strength and speed (Dieringer & Zuccarell, 2012). It is interesting for me that understanding of the game and the strategies do not make the list of tools – they are all physical attributes. One assumes that coaches will do the work with strategies, and that each coach will require different strategies, so they are less relevant.

Interviewees who remembered Nilsson as an U16 Queensland Representative player observed:

*It was a really windy day – no home runs, but Nilsson hit one unforgettable home run. Many people remember him from that hit. After that tournament, Dave [David Ozinski, Director of Coaching for the Australian Baseball Federation] did testing on all the kids. Nilsson threw at least 30 metres past all the others - raw arm strength. (GS, interview, 28 November 2014).*

*When asked “What were your first impressions when you saw David play?”, this participant who coached Nilsson in both Queensland state teams and Queensland schoolboys teams answered, As a player – unparalleled – so many good things. All Star team, etc. Everyday player. He was head and shoulders above the rest. (GS, interview, 28 November 2014)*

Another participant, when asked when he first became aware of Nilsson, told a story about playing T Ball: *Nilsson comes up and hits right handed, places the ball with power against all fielding positions. When he was 12, the coach had Nilsson warming up the A grade pitcher. He caught them all or fired them back. “What were your first impressions when you saw David play?” I’d never seen a big leaguer. David was special – switch hitter. Good hitter, left-handed catcher – good chance to make it. David was always that good – way above anyone else. (TT, interview, 21 December 2015)*

Another interviewee had this recollection of Nilsson:

*In the early years, I have no memory of him being special as a player. When he reached U/18, it was obvious he would be special. Hitting. Started catching late. Used to play 1<sup>st</sup> base. Chubby kid. U13 & U15 was not dominant, then he had a growth spurt and was tall, slimmer at 16 or 17 - became dominant. (NG, interview, 30 January 2016)*

Nilsson’s mother recalled that *he was always good. He was short and tubby, but he could hit the ball and throw hard (Pat Nilsson, interview, 27 October 2016).*

Collectively, those interviewed told the same story – that is, that Nilsson stood out as a player from about his mid-teens, although several participants had him being dominant at a much earlier age. Again, I found myself wondering if those selected to participate had limited memory of Nilsson as a minor because they were children themselves at the same or a similar time and were caught up in their own experiences. Perhaps the parents of these children would have been more knowledgeable or had more memories of Nilsson. Whatever the situation, it is obvious that he did start to stand out and to have an impact, and that those who did recall remembered Nilsson as a good hitter, and a switch hitter, with a strong arm – high praise in Baseball circles.

Using Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model of Human Development (2005) to categorise data into influences within and between systems, and to analyse the significance of the interactions between Nilsson and each system, requires an in-depth examination of those processes. The most immediate and first system with which children interact is the microsystem. Section 6.4 travels through the PPCT interactions between Nilsson and the microsystems of his early life, starting with his family and his introduction to Baseball.

#### **6.4 Baseball participation and the microsystem**

The interviews with the player participants (referred to with non-identifiable initials as pseudonyms – for example, GM) confirmed the significance of their own microsystem of family and friends in their initial involvement in Baseball and during the early years of their involvement. The responses validated the literature findings referred to in Chapter 3. Very few mentioned the significance of family influence once they had reached the investment years referred to in Chapter 3, and it is at this juncture that the analysis branches out to encompass interaction with the exosystemic, macrosystem and chronosystem.

What became clear is that, even after the children had moved into broader circles in Baseball, many of the participants’ families stayed involved in the sport and in the clubs with which the players had started their Baseball involvement in Australia. The family members held administrative roles in the club or with the team, such as scoring and other support roles, like volunteering in the canteen.

None of the players mentioned a parent as being the coach of a team for which they were playing once they reached the investment years. From this stage, parent support was more peripheral – helping with finances, transport, accommodation, and meals, and just being there

to talk to about Baseball. At this stage, the players were ‘hooked’ on the sport and were working towards levels for which their parents did not have the expertise required to offer the requisite knowledge and skills input. Four of the player participants specifically mentioned state level success in other sports, but they each chose Baseball when it came time to make a choice. *There are other well-known Australian sportspeople who chose Rugby League over Baseball - for example, Cooper Cronk and Dale Copley (GP, interview, 17 January 2014).*

Responses to the first three interview questions elicited what I assumed were relatively predictable responses. The players were each asked at what age and where they started playing Baseball, and then why they started playing. This question was important in ascertaining the significance of the microsystem of the family in influencing each player’s initial contact with the Baseball environment. It was also important to coerce gently the cooperation of each interviewee, and to help them to relax into the situation.

The majority of the players interviewed had close family already involved in Baseball when they started playing or attending Baseball themselves. Most of the players interviewed were second or third generation members of families involved in Baseball. Those who were first generation players had older siblings, parents and/or friends involved. In fact, only one participant started for a different reason: “...at the age of 10 he picked up a ball for the first time after the boyfriend of one of his sisters convinced him to try the game” (Costello, 2013, n.p.). The boyfriend played Baseball himself and convinced the player to go along to a club and try it, meaning that this could also be classified as family and friend influence. As the researcher, I momentarily wondered if this finding represented a coincidence or a subconscious bias on my part when selecting the participants. I was able to eliminate bias in my selections by reflecting that I had prior knowledge of the ‘back story’ of only one player before my research started.

All the player participants were asked how old they were when they started playing Baseball, and where they started playing Baseball. I asked this question to relax the participants and to encourage them to talk. Talking about themselves and their own families helped them to overcome any initial feeling of threat and any reservations. This enabled them to feel more comfortable in the interview situation, and there were lots of laughs. The responses were unsurprisingly similar given what was revealed in the literature review, Chapter 3, in relation to the significance of family influence on a child’s initial contact with a sport or a physical activity (Côté, 1999; Romani, 2019). The series of responses included below confirmed the microsystemic influence of family and the concept that attending Baseball was a family affair and part of the weekly routine.

The initial interview questions were designed to examine the influence of the microsystem. The quotations gathered during the interviews indicated the consistency with which the players identified aspects of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) microsystem of family and friends as being significant influences on their participation and on their attitudes towards the game of Baseball. Being 'around' the sport, at the Baseball field and in the club environment, before they were participants in the sport, were all significant factors for the overwhelming majority of the player participants. Those who started the game at a later age had still experienced playing Baseball in large extended family groups on community recreation fields close to their homes.

Something that proved to be particularly significant was the absence of adult intervention in the unofficial semi-structured play environment where children made up their own rules contextualised to the environment in which they were playing, and where they umpired their own games. This experience often happened at the club grounds after the official game or when the children were too young to be involved in the official scheduled games. I discuss the significance of this finding in more depth in my conclusions, but I do understand the importance of uncovering this shared enjoyable and skill developing experience in the early years of each player's exposure to Baseball.

One former player highlighted this experience of freedom to play with friends from Baseball as an important part of the enculturation into the community and a contributor to the love of the game.

*The kids were all there with their families. With their Dads, Uncles and their Dads' friends all playing in games, the kids were left to throw and hit and play games in the spaces between the grounds. The only rules were that we weren't allowed near the river or behind Grounds 3 and 4. (GM, interview, 4 November 2015)*

The second question addressed was about family influence on the player participants' involvement in Baseball. Several of the participants had already mentioned family influence in their response to the first question. Nilsson himself said: *"I watched my father, and I went with him to Baseball. I was four years old. Dad was involved with two clubs in the inner suburbs of Brisbane. These clubs were close to our homes at the time"* (DN, interview, 4 August 2014). The impact of that was that the answers to both questions are considered and reported together in this section. The intersection of these responses demonstrated the beginnings of what Bronfenbrenner (2005) referred to as the proximal processes.

The following is a series of quotations from the player participants that confirmed the significance influences on the microsystem for each of them. Each person identified family,

and in particular fathers, as highly influential in the initial stages of their participation in the sport.

*I started by watching my father and older brother. I started playing at a young age. I played in the morning on Sundays, worked in [the] canteen or on field preparation, showered, then went back to watch A Grade. My parents were on the club committee; my sisters always went, so the whole family was involved. (NG, interview, 30 January 2015)*

*I was nine years old. My family influenced me to play – my father went to Mt Gravatt and formed a Baseball club on the south side of Brisbane, associated with a Soccer club. My older brother played. We had unlimited time playing because there were two of us, so we could throw and hit in the backyard. (TT, interview, 17 January 2015)*

*I started Little League at eight years of age in Lake Worth, Florida, USA. I played Little League to age 10, then moved on to Baseball (GS, interview, 18 January 2014).*

*I started at Ipswich Musketeers. I was at the field on weekends prior to the age of five. Dad was doing ground maintenance, so I went with him and played around with Baseball gear (WS, interview, 23 June 2016).*

*I was there all the time. I loved it - still do. No pressure: I wanted to play (NG, interview, 30 January 2015).*

*I wanted to play. Loved it. I had a choice between Cricket and Baseball and chose Baseball (WG, interview, 5 August 2017).*

*My brother and I had unlimited time to play. Dad was the coach and helped as grounds crew and we were just there. Mum worked in the canteen (TT, interview, 3 August 2014).*

When asked about the influence of their family on their participation in Baseball, all the player participants reaffirmed the major influence of the family microsystem. The influence of the microsystem was not solely about the family providing the opportunity to play Baseball, but also about the role-modelling of members of both the immediate and the extended family – fathers, brothers, aunts, grandparents, cousins. The quotations from player participants that are included below bore witness to the significance of family influence and, in addition, confirmed that each player responded positively to the Baseball environment – “*I loved it.*”

*I wanted to be like Dad – Dad loved the game. I pretty much grew up around winter ball<sup>14</sup> in New South Wales on the Central Coast. (WG, interview, 5 August 2017)*

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<sup>14</sup> “Winter Ball” refers to Baseball played in the winter months rather than in the usual summer months.

*Dad played, so I just went along to play.* He joked that he had no choice but then corrected and said, *No – I wanted to play* (NB, interview, 12 August 2014).

*I went to watch my older brother and my dad. I first played when I was asked to fill in for my brother's team* (MB, interview, November 2018).

*I was born into the sport – third generation, grandparents, obviously Dad* (WS, interview, 19 July 2017). It was interesting to note that this player participant assumed that I knew about his father. I did not know anything about his father's playing or coaching career because it had all happened in the years before I entered Baseball circles, and the majority of his father's involvement had occurred in Ipswich, which is geographically separate from the Northern Rivers of New South Wales where I was living at that time.

*I was a bat boy for the teams my Dad played in and coached. I had my first [Baseball] gear before I was toilet trained. I was hitting a pitched ball when I was very young* (WS, interview, 19 July 2017).

*I loved the environment at the club/field. Played at a school oval prior to Spring Street [the original home ground of the Musketeers Baseball Club in Ipswich, Queensland]. Spring Street was very cool, then Tivoli<sup>15</sup> happened when I was Under 10. Dad was still playing. Grandma played Softball. She is still involved. Grandad was on the committees. My grandmother's influence was significant. My mother and father met at Softball. My father and my aunties played Softball and Dad's sisters.* (WS, interview, 19 July 2017)

When considering the influence of family, participant GS was circumspect, indicating that he had previously thought about this aspect of participation in Baseball.

*I have thought about this a lot. For some families, being involved brings positive outcomes – family bonding – something to talk about. Some families are too caught up – and miss family time! Lots of kids benefit from family involvement, and for others it is detrimental.* (GS, interview, 18 January 2014)

The interviewee referred to a comment by Harvey Dortman (an acclaimed American Baseball mental skills coach): *Some parents are too high maintenance.* He then referred to a saying by Socrates as an analogy: *Socrates refers to "play with or slay the father"* (GS, interview, 18 January 2014).

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<sup>15</sup> "Tivoli" refers to the then new home ground of the Ipswich Musketeers Baseball Club, the Tivoli Sporting Complex in Tivoli, Queensland.

Nilsson reflected on the influence of family in his own initiation into the sport.

*My three older brothers and my father played. It just happened. I didn't object. It was enjoyable, just part of life. We played at home in the yard, my older brothers and friends and Dad, all the time. The uniform was a bit embarrassing at first, but the game was exciting – different. I loved a bat that I was given – it came from the US.* (DN, interview, 22 July 2014)

*My father was well-known. My parents split when I was in Year 7. I went to the Sunshine Coast with mother and played for Brisbane North/Pine Rivers as my first regular team. Brisbane North coaches knew my father, so I felt included* (WS, interview, 19 July 2017).

*My mother was around more in the early years, scoring, managing and stuff like that. She was not on the committees when I was older.* This change could be explained by the participant moving away from his mother's home to live with his father, with the two homes being hundreds of kilometres apart. *At the end of Year 9, I moved back to live with my Dad for Years 10, 11 and 12 and started playing again in Ipswich* (WS, interview, 19 July 2017).

*My family was very involved at a club and state level. History was made when the club folded after my Dad was replaced. I guess I followed his lead and started coaching to give back to the sport* (TT, interview, 5 December 2013).

*I started T-Ball<sup>16</sup> at five years of age in Lismore. My Dad was influential initially – my dad and his mates. My grandfather played, my father played, and my older brother played. Later, my younger brother also played. My uncles played too. My Pop watched all of our games* (GM, interview, November 2018).

*I threw with my brothers and my Dad at home. We had simulated games in the house with a tennis ball* (GM, interview, November 2018).

Nilsson considered his family situation to be unique, and extensive searches of sporting records indicate that this is a reasonable assumption. To have four Australian brothers all playing at the national level or in national teams, and for three of them to sign MLB contracts from the 'land down under,' is a record that cannot be erased and has not been bested in Australian Baseball.

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<sup>16</sup> T-ball or Tee-ball is a modified version of Baseball designed for younger players, where the ball is hit from a Tee that must be placed with the stem over the centre of the front of Home Plate and may be adjusted to suit the batter (School Sport, Victoria, 2021).

In the Bullpen interview - From Down Under: An Interview with David Nilsson, conducted by Mark Dewey, 7 February 2022 (Hadfield, 2022), Dewey had Nilsson opening up about stories not told in the research interviews.

*I grew up wanting to be like my older brothers. They are five, seven and 10 years older than me. I just followed them around. My father was really good at sport. We were always playing sport – that was my life. As far back as I remember, Baseball was always my number one sport. Dad’s journey was about being instrumental in building clubs and getting kids involved in Baseball. My father was instrumental in building clubs. Grew up being only kid in school playing baseball. Only played 10 or 12 games a year. Never saw anything of Baseball on television or in the media. When I was 10 or 12, Baseball was so far away it was on the moon. My brothers were in state teams, and I wanted to be in those teams. When I was about 14 or 15, an American coach talked about MLB, and it was then that the MLB came onto my radar. I developed a passion for Baseball. I stayed up until 2.00 a.m. waiting to hear snippets about Baseball on CNN. Compared to nowadays and my 11 year old son knows everything about Baseball and can read all the stats from the MLB website. (Nilsson, interview with Mark Dewey, 7 February 2022)*

There are other Australian families that have had multiple family members compete at an international level in Baseball, but my research did not unearth any Australian families that had three brothers all sign contracts in the most prestigious and lucrative league in a genuinely international sport: MLB. At the time, it was certainly unique in Australia and in Australian sport and it remains that way.

*At that time, there was no exposure to professional scouts in Australia – Bob signed with Cincinnati Reds when I was seven, then Garry signed with Tigers. When Garry came back home, I would go through his bags and find Baseball stuff. Having two older brothers sign and play professionally probably sounds routine in the US, but in Australia it was unheard of. Even with two brothers who had signed, I knew nothing. My brothers didn’t give me much, but I still wanted to play Baseball with them. (Nilsson, interview with Mark Dewey, 7 February 2022)*

In this interview, Nilsson also talked about his memories of playing against Graeme Llyod as a youngster in Australian junior titles, when he played for Queensland and Lloyd for Victoria. It is indeed surreal that two Australians who competed against each other in the junior ranks both made it to MLB, and not only that but were signed by the same organisation and played together in the same team.

Nilsson's mother mentioned several things that highlighted the importance of the close family unit for Nilsson, and of the four brothers and their father all being immersed in the same sport. The family home at Deagan, in suburban Brisbane, had a large yard and the "kids" all played Baseball in the back yard. The Nilsson brothers *were joined by other kids from the neighbourhood*, and this enjoyment of the game *led to other kids playing sport*. When the family moved to Stafford, another suburb in Brisbane, the boys and their parents

*...spent all day Sunday at the Baseball field. Tim was coaching and playing. I worked in the canteen, leaving the little kids to play together. They used white nappies as bases. David was three or four years old – probably both.* (Patricia Nilsson, interview, 27 October 2016)

The noteworthy influence of family is universally acknowledged in research related to the development of athletic expertise (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2013; Hopwood et al., 2015; Kay, 2000; Kay & Spaaij, 2012). Support of family provides the integral environment for the development of identity, discipline, self and social management, temperament and appropriate responses to winning and losing or missing out, and also plants the seeds for motivation to achieve and valuing the role of hard work in successfully reaching goals (Hellstedt, 2005; Weissensteiner et al., 2009).

Player responses to the initial interview questions confirmed the significance of the microsystem in influencing their involvement in Baseball. The players further confirmed the significance of all the participants' responses to, or how they were influenced by, the opportunities provided through their families and the neighbourhood or community. These responses were affirming of the notion of proximal processes being a two-way, reciprocal interaction. That is to say, the microsystem influenced Nilsson, but Nilsson's responses or reactions to the offerings of the microsystem were also influential in his enjoyment of the sport and kept him 'coming back for more'.

Children are adaptable and can turn a small space in a neighbourhood into an area for play and be happily engaged for hours, without adult interference or close supervision. The unstructured or semi-structured play is an important part of social, emotional and cognitive growth, and may contribute to the development of sport-specific skills. While Early Years Learning and Curriculum Frameworks (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) acknowledged the importance of these opportunities for growth, it is difficult to find research evidence confirming the significance of these

‘moments in time’ in the ultimate development of super-elite levels of performance in professional and/or international sports, yet these environments are important foundations in developing the responses of the individual to perceived success and failure.

It is also in these environments where children have the opportunity to develop resilience – where decisions are made about whether or not to take your bat and go home sulking about being ‘out’, or whether to accept your fate and carry on because you want to be a part of the action. Being the youngest in a family competing in the same sport may contribute to resilience. My observations of participants in this situation is that the youngest child really does have to develop the resilience to ‘tough things out’ or be left out. Nilsson’s brothers admitted that there was no tolerance of crying and no special treatment for him. *We could still make David the loser. I have no memory of him crying. We just kept the game going. On Sundays at Baseball, we played all day - on the field and after game time* (GN, interview, 30 January 2015). Another player confessed that he and two of his brothers made life difficult for their youngest brother. *He used to whinge about wanting his turn at bat [in neighbourhood games of Cricket], so, before we bowled to him, we wet the cement driveway and the ball, so that he got out straight away* (GP, interview, 17 January 2016).

The child learns much from these interactions and can respond in ways that enable their growth or respond in ways that stifle or harm that growth. Parents and carers are a fundamental driver of the responses of the children under their care. Examination of this interconnectedness among the microsystem, the exosystem and the individual is the focus of Section 6.4.

### **6.5 The mesosystemic interplay – individual, microsystem, exosystem**

In Bronfenbrenner’s model (2005), the mesosystem is not a discrete system but signifies the interplay or interconnectedness of the microsystems and the reciprocal influences on the individual, with tentacles initially creeping into the exosystem. This interplay between the systems and the individual, and the individual’s response to the environments and opportunities, are significant. One child’s response to being granted opportunities to play sport varies from the next child’s, despite their being raised in the same environments and being provided with the same opportunities. For example, while Nilsson thrived in the Baseball communities and the club environment, safe and secure and surrounded by family support, other children who do not have the same network and connections may feel intimidated and that they do not belong. It takes a strong and resilient child to keep turning up for the love of the game if they feel like they do not belong.

Other significant factors in the development of sporting expertise that positions the foundation for a professional career in international sports and super-elite success are aspects of life such as the neighbourhood or community – the proximity to open spaces and the number of children in the immediate vicinity or school playground who are willing to join in any ‘local rules’ games and, in this case, the communities involved in Baseball with which Nilsson was able to interact on his journey. Social connections are made in the mesosystemic space where the microsystem of Nilsson and his family interacted with other spheres of influence in the exosystem.

Facilitating engagement in sport involves people and environments beyond the family and the immediate community. Initially, those experiences can be categorised into the theme of influences exerted by and within the exosystem. The mesosystem connects people with systems outside the microsystem. We observe this when children begin to engage in community sport and to interact with other children to whom they are not related, and with adults who may coach them or manage their involvement in the sport. In the exosystem, children experience their first interactions with coaches, and this early mesosystem interaction among the individual, their microsystems and the exosystem can be pivotal. At this stage, children are also exposed to an opposition and to officials or volunteers managing the games. They may also be required to travel to venues and locations outside their normal community environment. For Nilsson, these trips to other locations were often in the family car with teammates. In his retelling of these stories, there was a sense of excitement and feelings of security, confidence and friendship.

At the exosystemic level (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), aspects that influence participation beyond the immediate inner circle of family are the individual’s extended family, sporting clubs and associations, government agencies responsible for working with sporting clubs and associations to develop facilities, government and community programs that fund participation in sport, the economic situation of families and their capacity to support their children’s participation in sport.

The availability of Baseball Clubs and grounds in the wider community is another significant factor that connects the microsystem or immediate environments with the exosystem or indirect environments. In a real-life confirmation of movie storylines, the famous Kevin Costner line from the movie *Field of Dreams* – “If you build it, he will come” (Robinson, 1989) – is affirmed. Children initially play sports that they can access, those that have facilities in their community or close to their community. Consider the sports that receive the most funding and the most media coverage in Australia. Both funding and media coverage are

factors in children's' initial attraction to engaging in a sport. Funding makes it possible for associations and clubs to build infrastructure, and media exposure places particular sports in the foreground of children and their responsible adults. Participants cluster in these sporting hubs. For underexposed sports, it is harder to win funding for infrastructure, harder to find volunteers to run the organisations and harder for people to 'find' the sport.

Like countless children and parents in this vast land, I can attest to the fact that parents will drive many kilometres to deliver their children to sporting fixtures, but some/most would define a boundary or a limit for the sake of the rest of the family and perhaps their own lifestyle. There is no significant store of research data to confirm or deny this assumption. My conclusion is based on my own observations and experiences as an athlete, a coach and a parent, and on being the spouse of a national team athlete and coach and the mother of two national team athletes.

Parents move whole families interstate or overseas to facilitate a child or children pursuing a sporting dream. Alternatively, they will send a child to a boarding school or a homestay arrangement, or the child might win a sporting scholarship to a school or an American College, for example, or sign a contract with a professional organisation. Nilsson has just done this for his younger son and his older daughter who is a singer and musician. The family (minus the older son) has packed up and moved back to Arizona, Nilsson knows that his younger son shows potential, and he now knows all of the angles and pitfalls. Providing a stable secure and close home environment or microsystem is a positive.

Australians are mobile in the pursuit of sporting dreams but, before reaching that level of high performance or striving for high performance levels, all children start in a local club or organisation – on a court, on a field, in a swimming pool or on a track, being nurtured by volunteer parents and/or interested advocates of a sport. For each of the participants in interviews for this thesis, the parents played a key role in association and club governance and fund raising. In the early years, coaches and officials are volunteers, and parents pay for equipment, training and uniforms, and provide transport.

One of the significant conclusions drawn from listening to the interviews with the players and to Nilsson's mother Patricia was that unstructured free play with other children is particularly important, possibly pivotal. Left to their own devices at the Baseball field, the children had a chance to enjoy the game and to develop the skills of the game without any adult interference, and without advice or 'coaching' from adults. The children in this environment were free to learn without criticism or correction, and to learn through their own trial and error. When these children are old enough to play in formal competitions, they are already ahead of

the children who register for the first time at the identified starting age. This gives them confidence and self-belief, and it makes them stand out from the newcomers; thus begins the cycle of accolades, positive feedback and, eventually, representative teams. Whether or not a child can build on this early advantage depends on several factors related to the proximal process interchange between individual and microsystem.

Two additional important observations that appeared to be very significant in Nilsson's case are the gender make up of families and the number of children in the family. Perhaps it is simply the number of children in a family playing the same sport. That is, if families have more than one child or family member involved in the sport, this appears to present an enormous advantage. As noted in the quotations above, many of the participants cited playing casually with family members away from the club or field. It is even more advantageous if the children all play the same sport – the whole family can travel together to Baseball and spend the majority of a day involved in the sport. The parents can work on the committee, on the grounds or in the canteen and mix with other parents, forming strong social bonds. The children play their own fixtures and then 'hang around' while their older siblings play their fixtures. In the 'hanging around' time, the children interact with the other children and often continue to play the sport in an unstructured format. The sense of community is real – it is a community or neighbourhood of likeminded families. There is a sense of belonging and comfort that the children come to love and tie to their own developing identity. On the other hand, it is more difficult to feel a part of the community if the parents have to rush the child off to another venue or sport for another sibling. Parents may also feel more secure leaving their child in the safe community to be watched over by other adults whom they trust, while they fulfil other obligations, if this sense of community pervades.

The influence of family and local community microsystems was acknowledged in the preceding analysis. The mesosystemic interactions between the microsystems of Nilsson's childhood were identified and were not complex because of the strength of the Nilsson family's commitment to Baseball and the amount of time spent in Baseball communities, environments and activities. The microsystems of Nilsson's early life and early years in Baseball did not function independently but were interconnected and asserted influence upon one another.

The next systems within Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Model of Human Development are the macrosystem and the chronosystem. The macrosystem is where social and cultural values and attitudes and ideologies of the culture, imposed by society and experienced by individuals, exert influence without direct contact or interaction (Hamway et al., 2022, n.p.), while the

chronosystem considers the significance of the historical and temporal aspects of time, and how the effects of history and time influence an individual's development. Section 6.6 focuses discussion on the significance of those influences in the remaining systems of Bronfenbrenner's Model of Human Development (2005) on Nilsson's baseball story.

### **6.6 The mesosystemic interplay - individual, macrosystem and chronosystem**

Section 6.6 analyses the significant influences in Nilsson's life beyond the microsystem. The question of "which systemic, environmental and contextual influences had significant impacts on Nilsson's continued development, consolidation of sport-specific skills and enduring motivation that facilitated his success?" is examined.

In Section 6.5, I sought to address further questions, such as "What were the catalysts for Nilsson's MLB and professional career aspirations and the significant forces that sustained his determination to reach the goals that he set himself in Baseball?" In an attempt to uncover the underlying motivators, Nilsson and the other player participants were asked why they had stayed involved in Baseball as they moved through the teenage years and into adulthood. Nilsson himself provided an appraisal that may shed some insight.

*There was never any pressure to aspire or to chase honours - no goal setting. We all played in the yard, both Baseball and Cricket. It was just a good time. Did not think about girls or other things outside of sport. Mum scored and is still doing the scoring for the Queensland Schoolboys teams. Dad played until he was 50.*

Nilsson painted a picture of a somewhat idyllic lifestyle, simply doing the thing that you loved in a safe, secure environment, with people whom you loved, and with whom you were connected through a shared experience and a shared knowing of 'This is what it's all about' – 'Life is good'. I do remember similar experiences myself when we lived in a small country town and many of my school friends and their families were involved in the same sports. As children, we had freedom and the safety and security of a closely knit community. Parents 'looked out' for one another's children, as did other members of sporting and service clubs and school communities. The data demonstrated that a positive foundation in a community of like-minded people who look out for one another keeps players involved in the sport. However, to achieve the higher aspirations in Baseball, there has to be an inevitable separation from the 'known' comfort of club, region, state and national Baseball communities in Australia.

### 6.6.1 Macrosystem significances and influences

Beyond the experiences of the close microsystems and the individuals' responses to interactions between the systems, the individual must branch out into the wider world to explore a future in professional sport and the super-elite level in sports that are significant internationally. We can probably all name several Australians who have travelled overseas and based themselves in other countries in order to play more regular high level competition and to avail themselves of the opportunity to join professional leagues and organisations that enable them to live off the earnings of their chosen sport. The most recognisable names are probably those of Basketball players Lauren Jackson and Andrew Bogart, or Football players Samantha Kerr, and Tim Cahill. Olympic team sports such as Baseball, Basketball, Football, Handball, Hockey, Volleyball and Water Polo all attract transnational migrants seeking professional careers not available at the same competitive levels and for the same financial remuneration in Australia. Athletes from individual and small team water sports such as kayaking and canoeing, spend several months of the years training at the AIS facility in Italy while competing on the European circuit, and most road cyclists with ambitions to be professional leave Australia to live, train, and compete in Europe and the Northern Hemisphere. Australians who can, take scholarships to American Colleges to pursue, not only Baseball, but sports such as Track and Field, Volleyball, and Basketball.

In (Field) Hockey, for example, despite Australia having an enviable international record in both men's and women's Hockey, seven of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games Men's Hockey Silver Medallists were all on contracts with clubs in the Netherlands or Belgium. Hockey Australia revealed that "Tokyo Olympians Tom Craig, Tim Brand, Matt Dawson, Trent Mitton and Lachlan Sharp are playing in the Hoofdklasse in the Netherlands, while Jack Welch and Corey Weyer are running around for Royal Herakles in Belgium's top division" (15 October 2021, n.p.). The coach is also Australian. Craig commented on the full time and professional nature of the clubs, "it's obviously a lot more professional than the club scene in Australia". He said he was

"thoroughly enjoying the experience. It's awesome. The league here is really well done. They have a lot of things that are desirable about a club hockey season. They always have the men, and the women play at the same time, back to back every Sunday. People can go and get three and a half hours of hockey and the kids can run around, and you always know exactly when the games are on" (Hockey Australia, 2021. n.p.).

These comments evidence the comfort of a microsystem within the macrosystem of sport in a foreign nation. It should be noted that those comments were made in 2021. There are obvious differences between 2021 and the 1980s, and also between Hockey in Europe and Major League Baseball, but the experiences for Australians as transnational migrants are analogous. If athletes arrive in a sporting community microsystem where they feel welcomed, secure and as though they belong, they are more likely to stay. Athletes are more mobile than they were when Nilsson first went to Chicago, with international competition now a feature in the preparation of athletes and teams from Australia.

Because of the experiences of his older brothers, Bob and Garry, Nilsson knew what to expect in terms of the hardships to be faced when trying to break into the 'Big Leagues' in the USA. He felt that he was better prepared. Again, we witness the interchange of the microsystems in Nilsson's life influencing his personal behaviours and the athlete's story. Anecdotally, I have watched many 'talented' Australian sportspeople who were lured overseas to pursue their dreams of a career in professional sport never achieve the desired outcomes. The world of sport is filled with traveller's and those living out of suitcases while plying their trade internationally.

It is my conclusion from several conversations with, and observations of, participants who found themselves in this situation that there is some notion that 'signing' meant that they had reached their goal as soon as their signature was dry on the contract. Some have not understood that 'signing' is simply the start of a whole new and harder journey to success at the super-elite, professional level in an international sport. Athletes who stand out in a national context in Australia in global sports find themselves in a milieu of other hopefuls scrambling to be noticed, jockeying to have time on the court or on the field with the coaching staff watching, and desperate to impress enough that they are retained by the relevant sporting organisation. Many do not make the transition to the next level or do not cope with the heightened expectation, workload and competition for a place in a team.

Their interactions with the macrosystem and chronosystem that take them further away from the comforts of the closer and more easily accessed systems that they have experienced to this point require a strength and resilience not previously needed. Nilsson successfully negotiated this space, while most do not progress and are released from their contracts. They still retain the 'signing' bonus and can benefit financially if they are wise with their investments; however, the path to the ultimate success is littered with those who did not make

it, as well as with ‘journeymen’ who have lived contract to contract, on minimal and below standards of income, and never make it to ‘The Show’.

Nilsson thought that he had some advantages when it came to bridging the gap between cultures. The simple act of thinking that you have an advantage and know what to expect may well make the transition between cultures and leagues easier to navigate; however, in a recent interview on “In the Bullpen” with broadcaster Mark Dewey (2022), listeners were given some insights into the level of confidence but also into the level of naivety of a young Australian Baseball player, given the opportunity to play in the USA for the first time. Nilsson travelled to the USA with the Claxton Shield winning Queensland team – he was 16 years old, *hanging around with a bunch of older guys*, and feeling pretty good about himself. He had just won the Helm’s Award at the national senior championships in Australia. The team played against the University of Southern California (USC), 12 times national college champions. After the game, the players were sitting around in the club house when Nilsson was approached by an *old guy who said*, “You’re a hell of a ball player; how would you like to come to college here at USC?” Nilsson had no idea who he was and replied, *No thanks - I’m good. The Americans in the room were shocked and completely stunned because the coach speaking was Rod Dedeaux, a legendary College Baseball Hall of Fame Coach, but I found that out later.*

Any young American ball player would have understood the enormity of the offer and the situation, been completely humbled and accepted with sincere gratitude. Dedeaux has a Baseball field at USC named after him in addition to the Rod Dedeaux Research for Baseball Institute (RDRBI). Dedeaux Field has been used extensively by the entertainment industry in the production and filming of several motion pictures, including *Mr Baseball*, *The Big Leaguer*, *A League of their Own* and *For Love of the Game*. Rod Dedeaux is important in Baseball circles, and the young Nilsson had no idea who had made him this initial offer of a College scholarship for Baseball and an earlier start on the MLB journey. Nilsson said, *I had an apprenticeship. I had never thought about going to College.* It is apparent that Nilsson did not have anyone present to advise him either, because no-one explained until later the opportunity that he had passed up and by whom he had been approached. This interchange between Nilsson and Dedeaux highlighted one of the cultural differences between America and Australia with which Nilsson had to deal.

The interchange between systems or the mesosystemic interchange between the individual, in this case Nilsson, and the broader reach of the macrosystem - the attitudes and ideologies of the cultures in both the USA and MLB environments – and the beginnings of navigating environmental changes that occur over the life course, attributed to the

chronosystem, were evident. Nilsson remembered some of the setbacks of living in the USA and the years of his transition to that environment.

*There was no internet, no mobile, no fax machine. I left and it was like, goodbye (see you when you get back), which was to be six or seven months at a time. I always knew I would come home in the off season, but I realised that you are basically on your own. There are constant reminders of the isolation of being Australian and how far from home you are. You have to be more independent (DN, interview, 5 August 2017).*

Among the many athletes who venture overseas to pursue professional sporting contracts and sporting careers, there are those who do not adjust to the new environments and those who are simply not good enough on their first attempt and return to the comforts of home. Others stay for the College experience, competition, and education (free for those on scholarships) but find the initial adjustments very difficult. Tennis player Ash Barty is an example of an athlete who reached the pinnacle of success in a global sport yet retired because she didn't want to continue life on the road away from family and friends.

The cultural values of the Australian macrosystem resulted in Nilsson being less well known in his native country than he is in the USA. When MLB came to the Sydney Cricket Ground in 2014, *Courier Mail* journalist Frances Whiting interviewed Nilsson and revealed her own cultural background and biases. She noted that “the SCG was transformed into a bona fide red, white and blue ball park, attracting some 80,000 fans, where a tall, amiable bloke called David Nilsson, 44, felt right at home”, adding that, “while many in his home state of Queensland may not know Nilsson, they sure do know him in American baseball circles – particularly in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, home of the beloved Milwaukee Brewers where Nilsson was once the team's favourite, if imported, son” (Whiting, 2014, n.p.). In a comprehensive interview, Whiting makes a few naïve comments but uses journalistic licence to write a good sports story and gives Nilsson credit for his extraordinary achievements.

Nilsson mentioned several times in the data collection interviews that he always felt a responsibility to represent Baseball in Australia well. He was never requested to fulfil any sort of ambassadorial role, but it was understandable that he felt that he needed to represent Australia in a positive light. *It was a different world in the USA.* When asked “What drove you to stay?”, Nilsson responded that *it was a combination of stuff. I was considered this sort of golden child of Australian Baseball, and I carried that tag proudly. I carried that Australian flag, and I took that role seriously (DN, interview, 5 August 2017).*

One of the most jarring stories that Nilsson recalled that highlighted the difference in cultural values between the US and Australia was his experience when he was inducted into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame. It was evidence of the time and the era in Australian sport and, therefore, representative of the influence of the chronosystem, while being firmly embedded in the macrosystem where the norms and values of the culture pervade. Nilsson described the occasion thus: *It was the most embarrassing night of my life. It was humiliating. I was conflicted because it was a wonderful honour, but I was angry about the way it was handled and the lack of communication. I am disappointed with the plaque and what's on it – a crappy photo of me when I was young and not as fit as when I was playing pro ball. The wording on the plaque is not accurate. I am disappointed with what I said and angry with the way Baseball was displayed and portrayed and that I was not represented by the Baseball community. I trusted people to invite others for me and there was a poor turn out - two friends, three brothers and their wives and one table of ABF 'officials'. Queensland people were not told. I was leaving the next day to go and live in US. The video footage was of a 17 year old in practice gear and the Channel 7 guy said he worked hard to find footage* (DN, interview, 26 June 2014). A 'Google' search of David Nilsson Baseball yields hundreds of photographs and links to MLB game footage. Nilsson had his own 'card' for each season and there are dozens, if not hundreds, of newspaper and web based artefacts about him in his Brewers uniform and his national team uniforms. A sampling of these is included in Appendix F. What is also easily searched on the internet is photos of Nilsson at the top of his career and the various Baseball cards dedicated to him. Examples of these images are located in Appendix G.

This was suggestive of a very real lack of respect for the sport of Baseball and for the magnitude of Nilsson's successes. My own observation is that Australian media is heavily invested in 'Commonwealth' sports, especially when referencing the team sports category, and of course, in AFL, which has no international competition of any substance. One thing that was impressive about Nilsson's induction into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame was the rarefied company of recipients who were inducted on the same night – swimmer Ian Thorpe, Winter Olympics gold medallist Alisa Camplin, and tennis players Todd Woodbridge and Mark Woodforde. As with all of these awards and acknowledgements, there is a disparity in achievements and in the level of competition that they represent. This reiterates the need for the Chapter 1 definitions of super-elite, professional and international, and demonstrates the somewhat negative influence of the macrosystems and chronosystems of the Australian

sporting landscape in which athletes who achieve success in non-mainstream sports are positioned.

Altogether different experiences were enjoyed at the Baseball Australia and Baseball Queensland Hall of Fame inductions, with Nilsson acknowledging that the Baseball Queensland induction *was the most enjoyable. People were relaxed around me and dropping guard and talking to me. It was a nice feeling.* The original foundation microsystem and exosystem of influence *always feels like home* (DN, interview, 26 June 2014). This may speak more about Nilsson's own level of comfort, with the microsystem of 'home' being his comfort zone.

### 6.6.2 Nilsson and religion

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Section 2.8, when Nilsson was playing with the Milwaukee Brewers, he became part of a Born-Again Christian group that existed in the organisation. During the data gathering research phase of this thesis, Nilsson talked a lot about his Christian beliefs – beliefs to which he still holds firmly. *We were befriended by Born-Again Christians in the Brewers organisation. The group was Christian – non-denominational. It made a difference in their lives. Provided peace, a different perspective. It is an environment that forgives mistakes. It is not about perfection. Fame is tough to deal with. Professional sport is very consuming. Athletes are still human, not perfect, but error free performances and private lives is what fans want to see. Dealing with it was different. Brewers guys were consistent in their actions. I see more non-believing people acting out roles. My Christian beliefs are every bit of what I am/was as a player – some days I struggled more with my actions. Being a Born-Again Christian reminded us that we had a very fortunate life, and to be grateful and to appreciate circumstances* (DN, interview, 30 June 210).

When asked the question “What is important to you?”, Nilsson replied, *Most important is my relationship with God and how that plays out in relationships. You think in a way that honours God. Understanding how God wants you to treat and react to people affects your perspective. Australia sees itself as being Christian and being built on Christian values – but it's not. The US is a Christian country and has Christian values: Professional sport, Christianity, Church – there is a huge divide in Australia. The two countries are built on different values.* Nilsson says that *2½% of Australians are Born-Again Christians. In America, Christian faith is written into the Constitution and is the thread of the US lifestyle. That's why Obama struggled. Obama's principles - he didn't have Christian values, he is pro-abortion.*

*Politics is about power, not Christianity. In Australia, no one cares. Muslims see Australia as having no founding principles. There is no conviction in Australia. Muslim extremists are not representative of all Muslims. 98% of Muslims are lovely people. Any group of people has extremists. The only thing that can change someone's heart is the word of God (DN, interview, 30 June 210).*

*We want to be role models with the kids. We share the Bible and what it says. The ideals and methodology are no different. Nilsson's values are taught through word of God. Every parent teaches kids ideals and perspectives on lives. Teaching children there is no God has a radical impact on children. Every parent teaches about empathy, honesty etc. in the same way – they do it through the Bible, the word of God.*

*Everyone has a view on God, Jesus – all differ – same person but different relationship. I focus on what I think (DN, interview, 30 June 210). While the commitment to religion was lauded at the Brewers, this influence did not receive the same positive reception back in the Australian context. The overt Christian rituals imposed on the teams with which Nilsson played drew criticism and cynicism. He talked about Bible studies and made the team pray, so I kept my distance. I thought he was a bit weird. As a coach, he was a great strategist, but his people skills and motivation were lacking (GM, interview, 4 November 2015). Nilsson was the nucleus of the national team at the Olympics and in the Intercontinental Cup, but his expectation that everyone would follow his religious rituals turned people off. For anyone raised a Catholic who went through all of that indoctrination at school, Nilsson's brand of religion seems naïve and very basic. I steered clear (BM, interview, 4 November 2015). The difference in values embraced in the macrosystem of the USA and almost shunned in the macrosystem of Australian Baseball revealed Nilsson's failure to adapt to the cultural shift. His response is to lament Australia's Godlessness and direction, to the point where his children were home-schooled using a religious doctrine from the US (DN, interview, 30 June 210).*

This insight into religious conviction and influence was interesting from an analytical perspective. With the group, Nilsson and his wife discovered a secure microsystem within the larger microsystem of the Brewers organisation and the macrosystem of the MLB, which in turn is an exosystem within the macrosystem of the USA. There is the constant reciprocal influence and exchange across each system within the larger systems and, in different contexts, some systems change their own placement within the whole. The systems are not hierarchical in all contexts, but the one constant is that finding a microsystem of familiarity, belonging and

security within the more distal and distant systems of the bioecological model means finding a 'home'. At each phase and change, Nilsson had to manage himself and then to manage himself with his growing family. Belonging at the Brewers was helpful and led to success, with the contracted athlete delivering on his contractual obligations. After he left the Brewers and tried to find his feet in Australia, Japan and Italy, he found himself somewhat adrift and sometimes alienated.

Nilsson did not thrive or succeed in macrosystems where English was not the first language spoken, and he found living in Japan particularly different. He and his family did not adapt well enough to stay. Evaluating the circumstances of Nilsson's experiences in Japan and Italy as being suggestive of him somehow failing to transition smoothly to those cultures would be to oversimplify the myriad of colliding barriers to success. Multiple factors impacted on his performances and his decisions. Nilsson was in a post MLB career and was disappointed with the results in Sydney in 2000. Transnational migration is difficult for anyone when there is a language barrier, and when the practices and living conditions in the new environment are vastly different. He and his family had felt at home with the Brewers and had been embraced in the USA, and the reality is that it was this environment and those experiences that he wanted to replicate. He did not disgrace himself with poor off field (or on field) behaviours, but he did not perform at the level expected or needed and, rather than persist, he decided to leave.

We are all exposed to media coverage of the socially inappropriate behaviours and the struggles to adapt experienced by some highly paid and publicised sports personalities. Keeping successful sporting personalities on task and focused on their job must be a very difficult task. Anecdotally, the media is filled with stories of bad behaviour, where public drunkenness, drug taking, violence (including domestic violence), out of control gambling, excessive partying, highly publicised infidelities and sometimes crime find their way into this money and publicity fuelled privilege party. Developing a strong sense of community and family through shared religious values is an effective 'control' mechanism for the 'stars' whom an organisation has to manage. It worked well with Nilsson, who is committed to his faith and now finds Australia somewhat lacking in Christian values compared to the US. The religiously convicted era of Nilsson's interviews provides rich data from which to draw conclusions and these are discussed in Chapter 7 – Thesis Conclusions.

## 6.7 Chapter conclusion

The efficacy of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Ecological Model of Human Development and of the addition of the PPCT proximal processes as an analytical tool was established in the case of all the player participants in this study, as it was with Nilsson. If we consider Nilsson's height, physical size and gender, we have 'nature' factors that were important in complementing the 'nurture' influence of the Nilsson family microsystem or microenvironment (Côté, 1999).

The research data corroborated the significant influence of the microsystem and family and friends in the introduction to the game of Baseball for all the player participants. This influence is perhaps especially meaningful in a sport like Baseball, which sits outside mainstream sports in Australia. There is exposure to T-Ball in school Health and Physical Education and Sport programs, but it is rare to find a school that teaches the full version of Baseball in the Health and Physical Education program or that has a school team that competes in regional and intrastate competitions (GS, interview, 30 January 2014).

The initial sections of Chapter 6 outlined the analysis of data related mostly to the significance of the individual and the microsystem, including the mesosystemic interplay among these microsystems, the exosystem system and the individual. The next sections of data analysis focused more specifically on the significance of the macrosystem and chronosystem, and the mesosystemic interplay between these two systems and the individual, the microsystems and the exosystem. These interactions and relationships may appear to be less important; however, they prove to be very significant once athletes reach the so called 'investment years' in their sporting journeys and beyond that into the professional and international stage phases.

It is difficult to isolate influences as being from one system or another because they are interrelated, and, ultimately, the individual must engage in interactions in all systems to be able to progress to super-elite, professional levels in international sport. The individual's responses to opportunities or the offerings of each system are determining factors in the individual's realisation of their own aspirations. At each and every step in the journey, the athlete could be derailed, become disillusioned or drop out. The evidence revealed in the data is that Nilsson was able to navigate each step in each bioecological system and to overcome each hurdle to reach the pinnacle of super-elite success in Baseball, and, while not unique in Australia, it is extremely rare. What is unique is that his success came as a positional player and hitter, rather than as a pitcher, and as a starter who played for the whole game, rather than as a bench player

or a relief pitcher. This does not diminish the roles of bench players and relief pitchers, but it does mean that Nilsson's input contributed to entire games.

Analysis of the data collected provided a strong body of evidence upon which to base my conclusions. To dwell further on the evidence and the data would be superfluous, indulgent and repetitive, which leads to the inevitable decision that I should progress to Chapter 7 - Thesis Conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSIONS**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This thesis examined the biographical storying of David Wayne Nilsson's journey in Baseball while seeking to identify the significance of bioecological systems in developing super-elite athlete performances in professional and genuinely international sports. The data revealed that the influence of bioecological systems, along with social and environmental circumstances and the political and policy climate of the era, are all significant. Just how significant formed the basis of my extended research for the thesis.

The unique combination of storying, conceptual framework and methodology provided the platform to identify the significant influences on Nilsson's journey. The research undertaken dissected the significance of the systems of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bioecological Model of Human Development in Nilsson's development and career in Baseball. This final chapter affirms the answers to the research question and synthesises the significance and implications of Nilsson's story, the conceptual and methodological design of the research, and the contribution of new knowledge to the field, before drawing conclusions and bringing the story to a close.

### **7.2 Findings that address the research question**

The research question for this thesis asked, "Which bioecological systems, and which physical and personal attributes and sport-specific skills, are significant; and how significant are they in the development of super-elite athlete performances in international and professional sporting contexts?"

The use of the systems of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bioecological Model of Human Development to categorise or thematise the data demonstrated that this systems theory was a suitable tool for the type of phenomenological research conducted. Analysis of the corpus of data identified the significance of Nilsson's physical and personal attributes, including his psychological skills, in his success. It also identified the unique circumstances of the family microsystem during his early and developmental years and the success that he had as the individual at the centre of the Bioecological Model in setting a goal to play MLB and his mindset in pursuing that goal all the way to a sustained career in MLB. The data therefore established that the interplay between Nilsson and each of the bioecological systems of Bronfenbrenner's Model was reciprocally responsive.

The data strongly demonstrated the significant influence of the microsystem and Nilsson's responses to relationships, opportunities and events within that system. Beyond the microsystem, the exosystem extended the depth of Nilsson's Baseball connections, opportunities and relationships. Nilsson's responses and his success demonstrated that he had significant influence on his own success while benefitting from the dedication, commitment and hard work of others in making Baseball available in Australia and in his community. The reciprocal PPCT interactions were demonstrated, with Nilsson continuing to benefit from positive interactions and relationships within the systems and embracing opportunities. The data also bore witness to Nilsson's resilience in managing transitions between the US and Australia, and between the various leagues in the US, and in returning from injury to work his way back into the starting line-up of an MLB team in the macrosystems of the US and MLB.

At the individual level, if we consider Nilsson's height, physical size and gender, we have 'nature' factors that were important in complementing the 'nurture' influence of the Nilsson family microsystem or microenvironment (Côté, 1999). The 'nature' factors were significant, but Nilsson has physical competencies that made him stand out from an early age. The research data did not present any convincing argument that these competencies were 'talent'. Nilsson started practising his Baseball skills at a young age, with experienced and competent older brothers and his father, and had several advantages when it came to practising and developing his sport-specific skills. These circumstances simply point to the unique opportunity that the family microsystem presented.

What is clear is that the 'five tools' identified by scouts as a basis for signing young players are not enough, and that the 'full package' must include psychological competencies and emotional controls, confident belief in self and the resilience to cope with change and to 'bounce back' from disappointments or setbacks. Nilsson had the psychological skills and responses that enabled him to succeed in the US and the unique circumstances of his early life. Some organisations now use psychometric testing in an attempt to identify those athletes with desirable psychological traits in addition to the sport-specific skills. There is a gap in the research with respect to the efficacy of this testing in identifying athletes who have the psyche to succeed at the super-elite, professional and international levels and matching the testing results with success.

The microsystem of Nilsson's family was very significant. He had four brothers and a father all playing Baseball, which helped to develop his sport-specific skills. By his own admission, he wanted to compete on the same level as his older brothers when he was a young

child, and he was determined to be good enough to play with them. With his whole family involved in the experience of Baseball, his ventures into the Baseball community in clubland simply extended that family experience. He met and interacted with likeminded people and enjoyed the experiences of the exosystem where he felt that he belonged and where he was genuinely included. He loved Baseball, as did his father and his brothers. His mother also loved the sport and stayed involved as a volunteer long after he had departed for the US. He experienced early success and knew that his teammates and coaches rated his sport-specific skills highly. The knowledge that others thought of him as being a good player helped to build his confidence, which really does help when you 'step up to the plate' to hit/bat or when you have to make the big 'plays'. A significant factor that stood out for me was the calm and unpressured way that his parents behaved. They were there for him at Baseball, as were his brothers and sisters. They did not criticise or put pressure on him, and they were not disappointed with losses or, if they were, they did not verbalise that disappointment on the car trip home. Importantly, in the developmental years, his parents and brothers did not criticise other players or the coaches. The aura of confident calm pervaded the whole family.

When Nilsson went to the US and ultimately to Milwaukee, he found another microsystem within the macrosystem of MLB and the US - a comfort zone, a place to call 'home' while in the US and a feeling of belonging. He also felt a sense of achievement in producing commendable performances that kept him in the line-up and in having reached his goal.

In conclusion, the microsystems that existed within the wider systems and the way that Nilsson navigated each system were significant, but so was the era or the time. Nilsson developed and played MLB during a period of stability in the US and relative calm in the world as it impacted on him in his daily life. He was retired from MLB before 9/11 and before the period of player strikes that negatively impacted on some of the younger Australians in the years that followed. He also played most of his MLB career before the high stakes policies of the Australian Sports Commission started putting a price on every international and Olympic medal.

### **7.3 Conceptual significance of the thesis**

I utilised Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bioecological Theory of Human Development, with a distinctive juxtaposition of a constructivist perspective and a direct phenomenology

approach, in combination with what I have termed “biographical storying” to conceptualise the research. This was complex, but unique. The interweaving of multiple concepts influencing my research and the decision to challenge convention did achieve the desired outcome. Because the research journey was lengthy, research in other areas such as socioecological theory became more prominent over the time period, and those giving peripheral advice suggested changing to socioecological theory, narrative research or case study as the most suitable approaches. I diligently researched these options, with the research persuading me to adhere to the plan and the combination arrived at. Phenomenology was the most appropriate option for a researcher in my position in the Baseball community, and Biographical Storying does convey Nilsson’s life course thus far, while appreciating that he is still very much alive and active in the Baseball communities. Nilsson’s playing statistics are published and some of the anecdotes about him have been shared in print, but Nilsson was able to confirm and, in some cases, correct the statistics and to retell the anecdotes from a more informed, personal perspective.

Bioecological theory was used for determining what was relevant to examine in which areas of Nilsson’s life and in the lives of the other participants. In the data analysis phase of the research process, the bioecological model was used for the thematic analysis of significant influences and pivotal events, and for the identification of significant commonalities among participants’ experiences and memories.

The combination of the conceptual framework and the research design worked to address the research and operational questions, while the biographical storying of Nilsson’s journey conveyed the narrative that I set out to share.

### **7.3.1 Biographical storying**

Biographical storying was the vehicle used for relaying the information in the life journey of Nilsson. Detailed analysis of the story of one star in a minor sport in Australia may be a catalyst for the closer examination of other minor sports, the media treatment of these sports and lack of suitable acknowledgement of the worthy stars in sports media, in the media more broadly and through other public platforms – perhaps even the Sport Australia Hall of Fame. There is pressure on young Australians, perhaps particularly on males, to participate in sports and, moreover, in the traditional sports.

Analysing the biographies of sport stars provides useful insights into various environmental and contextual influences that impacted on the development and achievements of the ‘star’ for sectors such as education and stakeholders invested in the mentoring, coaching

and administration of organised sports. The study of an athlete such as David Nilsson can be used as representative of a wider group, if factors that affected him have the potential to affect others in similar ways, with similar outcomes. Conversely, if the subject is found to be atypical, this will also be informative.

What are the complex intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that inspire young athletes to swim against the tide, and not only to participate in a sport considered the number one American pastime, but also to pursue this sport at the expense of more traditionally ‘Australian’ sports that are more socially acceptable? Nilsson’s story does illuminate this to some extent. He loved the game and he set himself aspirational goals with a clear end game in sight. Public acknowledgement in Australia was not part of the dream – the dream was simply to make it to the MLB and to have a career in the MLB. He did receive some acknowledgement and had a profile within Baseball circles nationally and internationally. There was some media coverage of his achievements in Queensland, mostly driven by those who knew him or his family or who were involved in Baseball in Australia. *Courier Mail* journalist Bernie Pramberg was a friend of Tim Nilsson’s and played Baseball himself. He published articles about Nilsson and provided some publicity for Baseball in Queensland while he was actively involved himself. However, Nilsson’s star shone more brightly in the US because of his career in MLB and the publications in some sporting and media circles.

Rory Costello’s (2013) compilation about Dave Nilsson for SABR listed 58 references (see Appendix F), which were mostly media artefacts. My own research uncovered several more references to Nilsson as evidenced in the Reference List of this thesis. That said, when Nilsson was named a Queensland Legend, there were those in the Australian and Queensland media who had never heard of him, as evidenced by the *Courier Mail*’s Frances Whiting in her story, “Hey now, you’re an All Star” (Whiting, 2014, n.p.) referenced in Chapter 2. Additionally, Whiting’s story demonstrated a lack of knowledge of Baseball in Australia and of the length of time that Baseball has been actively functional in Australia while assuming that her readers had the same low level of knowledge that she did prior to researching the story. Whiting employed several Baseball idioms and played creatively with Baseball words and phrases in her feature, emphasising the infiltration of Baseball terminology into cultural discourse in this country – for example, ‘out of left field’, ‘step up to the plate’, ‘my bad’, ‘3 strikes – you’re out’, ‘strike 3’, ‘batter up’, ‘on deck’, ‘curve ball’, ‘safe’ - this game could last as long as a ball game. Sadly, exposure to the game and the successful Australian Baseball players has not kept pace with the adoption of the jargon or the wearing of baseball caps.

Nilsson's story is significant, and the extracts contained in this thesis have been checked for authenticity and come directly from the primary source. The need for this approach meant that qualitative methods were the most appropriate because there is no story to be told without human interaction and human interpretations. Without human involvement, all that we would have is a list of statistics.

#### **7.4 Methodological significance**

The thesis was grounded in qualitative methods. The research deployed elements of oral history within a phenomenological and constructivist framework. The potential of the phenomenological method emerged because of its perceived capacity to process authentically the subjective and value-laden information from a relatively small group of participants. Access to Nilsson and the other participants, combined with my status in the Baseball community, also steered me towards a phenomenological method.

Biographical storytelling, drawing on a combination of life history and life course data, was used as the narrative tool to retell Nilsson's story. Constructivist theories and phenomenological methodology contributed to the conceptual framework for the research, and a bioecological perspective was utilised to systematise data collection and analysis. The unique combination of research elements was successfully combined to paint the collage of an athlete's story - a story of phenomenal sporting success that should have been told before now. The story does contribute to the biographical storytelling field of research while adding to the possibilities of phenomenology and the use of bioecological models of human development to systematise and thematise the corpus of data. Section 7.5 discusses the contribution of Nilsson's story to the library of research.

## **7.5 Contribution to the field**

### **7.5.1 Nilsson's story**

No story has been written about David Nilsson or any other Australian Baseball player who has played in MLB – the premier competition for Baseball and the highest level of competition to which any Baseball player can aspire. The recording of Nilsson's story and the examination of his rise to the super-elite, professional levels on the international stage provide new research in Australian Baseball and in the study of the sociocultural foundations and history of Australians in sport.

Nilsson's story is of interest to the Baseball communities in Queensland, Australia, the United States of America and the wider audience of Baseball fans around the world. Biographical study and study of the sociocultural aspects of sport and physical activity are a component of school and university curricula in Australia (ACARA, 2012; QSA, 2010), and sports history and biography contribute to that curriculum, positioning an analytical research based biographical story as a useful commodity for educators and students alike. At a minimum, Nilsson's story is worth analysing for the thousands of young Baseball players who are trying to break into MLB - a type of 'how to' manual for aspiring professionals.

Whilst Baseball has been played in Australia since the gold rushes, and Australia has achieved international success in the sport, including a gold medal in the Intercontinental Cup and a silver medal at the 2004 Athens Summer Olympic Games, Baseball remains a medium level participation sport in Australia, and television coverage has waxed and waned. Several historical events may have led to sports that are considered 'American sports' being pushed to the background. Ironically, Baseball terminology has infiltrated the everyday speech of Australians without Australians even knowing from where the terms come and not understanding the meaning of some of the phrases.

It can be argued that sports nationalism has played a decisive role in unifying Australia, and that sport is viewed as an essential ingredient in defining Australian culture. Sport is a major feature of Australia's continued links with England and an intense sporting rivalry steeped in historical feelings exists today, with neither country enjoying being beaten by the other. Perhaps this partly explains the penchant of the Australian media for ignoring extraordinary efforts in 'minor sports' to focus back page coverage on the Cricket, AFL and Rugby League. The Australian Sporting Hall of Fame is in itself homage to the dominant culture, and an examination of the equivalence of achievements of the inductees is indeed

revealing of certain prejudices. Where does the American dream ‘fit’ in the aspirations of a young Australian boy amidst this history and tradition? Understanding of bioecological influences contributing to Nilsson’s success and writing his story may raise his profile, and the profile of Baseball in Australia and of other Baseball players who have reached ‘The Show’, ultimately engendering respect for both the players and the sport. This theme and the impact of it on developing Baseball players and the sport itself were evaluated in the context of Nilsson’s story and will be informative for sporting and Baseball organisations in Australia.

Retelling Nilsson’s story may result in an interrogation of the whole philosophical debate about sport and, in particular, about the enormous inequities in sports funding in Australia, and the focus on high-performance sport above grassroots community participation and health and wellbeing. Research into personal attributes and environmental and contextual influences significant in athlete success should be of interest to many, meaning that there is significant potential for further research related to the thesis.

### **7.5.2 Provocation of exiting models of athlete development**

The young Nilsson was developed as a player largely by volunteer coaches and administrators without the advantages of government funding that now exists, or the sponsorships enjoyed by high profile sports in this country. He was not motivated by the presence of MLB scouts with lucrative contracts and promises for the future, searching out potential in the Australian Baseball scene because they had not yet invested in Australia – and yet he made it to ‘The Show’, in one of the richest and most watched sports in the world (*Forbes Sports Money*, 2012).

That Nilsson succeeded without government or agency funding is worth exploring because these support mechanisms are now considered pivotal in athlete development, success and retention. The efficacy of the sports funding models employed in Australia, along with talent identification and development programs, is interrogated and discussed in this section. Nilsson was probably fortunate that Baseball in Australia has developed super-elite performers and super-elite performances in spite of lower levels of media exposure. A lower media profile and lower levels of funding result in less pressure to produce podium finishes being placed on national teams and athletes.

The national sporting body of Baseball has greater levels of autonomy than some of the higher profile sports. There are benefits and disadvantages in this situation. Autonomy works

well if the sport has competent leadership and administration, a strong and agreed upon strategic direction and an achievable yet aspirational plan for the future. Success for the sport also depends on honest evaluation on a regular basis. Success is not focused on high performance and podium finishes. Success means developing the grassroots level of participation and building strong, sustainable clubs and participation and retention numbers, finding workable levels of funding and sponsorship, and ensuring seamless transitions in leadership at all levels, while having the capacity to support the athletes who have the physical and personal attributes, and the sport-specific skills, to make it to super-elite, professional performances at an international level. What we witness with ARF is success at all of these levels with the exception of podium finishes in super-elite, international performances. This begs the question, “Does eliminating the pressure to perform on the international stage and produce podium finishes facilitate the growth of the sport at the grassroots levels, resulting in success on the domestic front?”

The Sydney Olympics in 2000 were Australia’s most successful Olympic Games, with athletes winning 58 medals, including 16 gold medals. After 2000, the medal tally progressively declined until in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 Australian athletes won 29 medals in total, eight of which were gold (Australian Olympic Committee [AOC], 2022). The Australian Federal Government agencies digested reports into the perceived failure of Australian athletes at the 2012 London and 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics, and decided on the future direction of funding for sport that would embrace more focus on participation and raising participation levels for Australians. However, because of my involvement in an unfunded Olympic sport, I can attest to the fact that the change in direction is not yet evident federally, nor in some of the institutions that are supposed to represent the needs of Australia’s best athletes.

Continuing this theme, consider Australia’s success at the Commonwealth Games. Australia does extremely well at this level of competition, but can we be honest enough to admit that the major sporting nations and many of the Olympic sports are not present? Sports commentators and the sports, such as Netball and Cricket, will call Australia World Champions and the World’s best, when the ‘world’ is not competing. The performances may be considered elite, but are they super-elite and international and professional? Where were the continents of the Olympic Games – the Americas, for example? Where are the most successful nations in Olympic competition history (IOC, 2022)? The decision makers in the state and territory sporting institutes and academies have agendas in the sports in which they are involved or about which they know themselves. The capacity to foresee a future where all athletes and

sports are treated equally, funding is fairly distributed and the focus is not on international medals and podium finishes, but on participation in physical activity by all Australians and on the health and wellbeing of participants, does not seem to infiltrate policy.

Nilsson's story highlights his development as an athlete without the financial support offered by funding agencies like SportAus and demonstrates that Australians can achieve super-elite performances on the international stage in professional sports without the allocation of huge amounts of funding. This finding engages debate about the inequitable allocation of monies to sports that have the potential to produce the most medals in international events and the entrenched behaviour of preferencing the allocation of tax payer dollars to high-performance sport rather than programs that engage the community in physical activity for the health and wellbeing benefits or a focus on team sports that have the potential to impart learning beyond the game and health and wellbeing benefits beyond the physical.

Nilsson's story also highlights many of the bioecological factors that are forgotten or overlooked by sporting bodies and funding agencies when considering how to develop and nurture performers. Nilsson's parents were involved in a positive way. They supported the participation of their sons but did not push any of them beyond the goals they had set for themselves. They did not interfere but provided a safe and secure microsystem in which each child could develop. They ventured beyond the microsystem into the exosystems of community Baseball and showed support through a calm and reassuring presence and volunteering at the field, in the organisation or with scoring. The children had the opportunity to play Baseball in the neighbourhood and at the field without strict rules and adult interference. The children had uncomplicated lives that were not overscheduled, and their parents were seemingly oblivious to the drawcards of money and fame that are pushed at children and parents alike in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## **7.6 Optimising Athlete Development**

In this thesis, I differentiated between talent development and the development of expertise because my ontological assumption is that these two aspects of athlete competence occur at different places in the growth spectrum from novice to master. At the outset of this research, I believed that innate physical competence does exist, and that it is this inherent competence that can be developed to the expert or mastery levels of expertise needed to achieve at the super-elite, professional levels of international sport. That said, I have experienced and

acknowledge that some children develop physical competences in different activities or sports, and it is a rare child who has competence in *all* areas of physical activity. My definition of competence was not confined to the physical attributes and sport-specific skills needed in sporting contests, because athletes need highly functional psychological attributes in their personal skills arsenal to enable them to perform under pressure, and at the level required for the specific competition. The higher the level of competition, the greater the expectations placed on athletes by their management staff, by themselves and by the organisations or nations that have invested in them.

In Baseball, athletes need the psychological skills to perform as part of a team. This can include being under the direction of a coach or coaching staff, and working with a myriad of support staff, such as sports scientists, strength and conditioning coaches, dieticians, physiotherapists, media and marketing people, the administrators of the organisation or the sport, or a Board of Directors. But they also need to perform as an individual with the bat, in the field, or with the ball, in the case of pitchers. An athlete can still be noticed and have organisations and clubs interested in them, even when they are playing in a team that is not winning. This is not true in all team sports, meaning that Baseball has a more significant individual competition in terms of careers, cocooned inside the team competition. The movie *Moneyball*, based on the 2003 nonfiction book by Michael Lewis, *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*, is an account of the Oakland Athletics Baseball team's 2002 season and their general manager Billy Beane's attempts to assemble a competitive team. In the film, Beane and assistant general manager Peter Brand, faced with the franchise's limited budget for players, build a team of undervalued talent by taking a sophisticated sabermetric<sup>17</sup> approach to scouting and analysing players. What the movie highlighted is the apparent lack of loyalty shown to players by the MLB organisations. Players were traded mid-season, without hesitation and without consultation. Players were simply told, 'This is what is happening'. The scenario seems heartless and cut throat, but such is the financial investment in athletes and in sports. It seems counterintuitive that organisations expect loyalty from players.

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<sup>17</sup> **sabermetrics**, the statistical analysis of Baseball data. Sabermetrics aims to quantify baseball players' performances based on objective statistical measurements, especially in opposition to many of the established statistics (such as, for example, runners batted in and pitching wins) that give less accurate approximations of individual efficacy. While the term *sabermetrics* applies only to baseball, similarly advanced statistical analyses have gained popularity in nearly every other spectator sport during the 21st century (<https://www.britannica.com/sport>, 2022).

Sport has become big business, and athletes at the highest levels are commodities. Many of the original intents of parents involving their children in sport are lost at the super-elite, professional and international levels. Involvement in sport at the highest levels has little to do with health and wellbeing and everything to do with money. Winning has become paramount. A team needs to make it to the finals or the podium, or, in the case of Baseball, to the post season play-offs. If they do achieve this goal, the pay outs are enormous and, with the sale of televising rights and the profits from merchandising sales, astronomical.

Talent scouts attached to a variety of major sporting organisations attend sporting fixtures in Australia and all over the world, in an effort to identify athletes with the potential to ‘make it’ at the top level in sports. They take a risk and ‘sign’ athletes who they think have the essential combination of factors to be successful at the highest level in the sport to lucrative contracts with their organisations. Coaches and scouts talk about athletes who have the ‘full package’ of attributes, but little is written that quantifies the components of this desired ‘full package’. Baseball scouts identify ‘five tools’ primarily in reference to position players such a ‘catcher’. A scout will rate a player’s skill level for each of the ‘five tools’: hitting, power, fielding, arm strength and speed (Dieringer & Zuccarell, 2012). The research for this thesis exposes the ‘five tools’ concept as naïve. The identification of factors that contribute to the ultimate success of athletes at the top level is a useful reference and informative, especially if factors not previously identified or thought significant prove to be noteworthy in Nilsson’s story. Athletes certainly need more than the ‘five tools’ to succeed.

As a coach or manager, Nilsson has a lot to offer younger players who are interested in pursuing the MLB dream. He understands that *Baseball has a high level of failure and a Pandora’s box of possibilities* (DN, interview, 5 August 2017). Because Nilsson was able to ‘manage’ the variables well enough to have eight years in the ‘Majors’, he can share his knowledge. However, anyone who has been a high level performer who has turned their hand to coaching can confirm that each athlete’s psychological response to that knowledge and the sharing of it will differ – evidence of the PPCT interactions within and between the microsystem, the exosystem and the individual. Some athletes will listen and learn, while others want to take their own journey and learn their own lessons in life. Given that each person is different and that each person’s interactions with and within the bioecological systems differ, that perspective may be reasonable, while at the same time being difficult to digest for potential mentors and, dare I say it – parents!

The conclusion is that coaches, managers, mentors, teachers, parents, and significant adults in children's lives should share their stories and experiences when asked about those experiences or for advice or, alternatively, find a way of working learning experiences into training and motivational programs. Ultimately, adults need to come to terms with not being able to control all of the variables in a young person's life journey. Adults with jurisdictional responsibilities do have to let young people 'stumble and fall.' Incorporating the sharing of experiences into actions, programs and policies in a functional and practical way is a better option than 'telling' young people, 'This is what you should do because this is what I did,' or 'This is what I wish I had done.'

There appear to be two very distinct pathways for and outcomes of participation in sport that do not align: the pathway to high-performance with a proportionately small number of success stories, littered with broken bodies or broken spirits; or the pathway to increased retention and the enjoyment of just being physically active in inclusive environments that encourage all participants. Fortunately for Nilsson, he developed in an Australian high-performance landscape that did not over-reach into Baseball at the state and club levels, or that possibly did not rate Baseball highly enough to meddle in it. As a consequence, Australia won medals in international competitions and the Olympic Games without the weight of expectation. A complete contrast to these successes, and to the success of individual athletes who have gone on to professional careers in MLB, were the results at the Sydney Olympic Games. For the 'home' [Olympic] Games in Sydney in 2000, organisations outside Baseball became invested in the results of the Baseball competition, and several of the players felt enormous pressure to perform in front of a crowd made up mostly of Australians, including their friends and families.

One focus of high-performance sport funding must be on the psychology of the individual internal to and external to performance environments, and on the strategies to deal with environments and situations or circumstances that movement and sport participants may have to navigate. Each individual must be supported in their environments or microsystems, public policy must be appropriate and meet the needs of athletes and the community, health services should focus on improved health outcomes rather than on winning high-performance contests, actions in the community need to focus on the provision of and the advocacy for environments and policies that facilitate movement, participation and retention, and people, all people, need to be provisioned to move. Improving personal skills should lead to increased levels of participation. Personal skills need to be enhanced through opportunities to learn and

practice fundamental movement competencies and sport-specific skills, in addition to understanding motivation to move and be active. Beyond the initial years of involvement in physical activity and sport, each person needs to find their niche – the place, space, or microsystem where they are comfortable being active and perhaps progressing to the pursuit of excellence and high-performance, if that is *their* goal.

The psychological mindset to manage transnational migration, in addition to fame and expectation off the field, coupled with the pressure to perform on the field, is developed throughout the sporting journey, with the individual athlete (a ‘person/human’) becoming the epicenter of control in response to the place, the context and the time. The capacity to pinpoint the significant contributing influences in the bioecological systems interactions of the athlete that result in the development of the most effective psychological mindset presented as the most difficult and complex aspect of this research. What is evident is that the person must feel supported and valued in each of the bioecological systems through which they need to navigate and progress, and by the people whose opinions the athlete values. Incidents that derail potential careers in sport may not always be obvious to an outsider – it could be another athlete in the team, a coach, team management, a parent, a sibling, or a life event. While I have not written much about the health of athletes, I have included information about psychological responses and about injury and the part that they can play in determining the length of an athlete’s career. In Section 7.7, I draw some conclusions about high stakes performance environments and pivotal incidents in the early development and the long-term careers of athletes.

### **7.7 Sport and health and wellbeing**

Super-elite, high-performance sport at international levels and in professional contexts has little to do with the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical health of athletes. In Australia, we appear to have lost site of the very benefits that participation in sport should generate. Parents and some adults involved in sports administration simply want to provide opportunities for young people to participate with no hidden or ‘higher’ agenda. All participants can enjoy the camaraderie of sport and competition, the emotional outlet of being physically active and enjoying the physical sensation of doing the activity, the cognition of strategies and teamwork, and the physical act of participation and recovery. These are the feelings that young athletes need to experience in the microsystems of club sport. What we

observe in Nilsson's story is that the recreation of those same feelings of belonging, and joy in playing, through the contextual and environmental arrangements at each level of performance is essential. When we take these feelings away from participants in an overzealous focus on results and destroy the joy, we lose participants, and we lose philosophically.

An analogy to health promotion campaigns can be drawn. Australia has experienced success with campaigns aimed at reducing levels of smoking, road deaths and deaths from AIDs (Wilson-Gahan, 2022). Just as educators need to be careful that data is used to inform planning and not to invoke fear, the influential and responsible adults in the lives of young athletes need to understand that telling young people or anyone to do something 'because I know', or 'this worked for me', or 'I have experience', is ineffective - as a one-dimensional approach. Listening to the stories of successful athletes does not increase an athlete's personal skills or capacities to navigate the steps to super-elite performances on the international stage or in the top echelons of professional sports. There must be action in the other bioecological systems of individual experiences – the exosystem, the macrosystem and the mesosystemic interactions between the individual and each of the systems, and mesosystemic interactions between the systems themselves.

Australians have witnessed apparent success in addressing some health issues through the use of developing personal skills, mostly through producing health campaigns that increased knowledge – smoking and HIV campaigns are examples (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] (2020). However, in both of these health issues, the increased knowledge about disease mechanisms was only a small component of the health promoting action that led to the success of these campaigns. In both cases, health authorities and governments also: a) introduced significant public policy; b) created supportive environments for not smoking and avoiding contracting and sharing the HIV virus; c) introduced intersectoral and multidimensional action into communities advocating health promoting behaviours and practices; d) reoriented health services to address preventative measures; and e) upskilled personal skills through information sharing and the strong voices of community members. The same philosophy can be applied in sport, because a multidimensional and multisectoral approach is more likely to succeed in promoting physical activity for health and wellbeing benefits (WHO, 1986), which will still enable progress to super-elite performances on the international stage or in professional contexts while encouraging and facilitating the retention of more people in physical activity and movement. The World Health Organisation has commenced a serious push in this direction with the "WHO Sports and Health Programme" (WHO, 2022).

[The] WHO Sports and Health Programme was established to capitalize on the great potential of helping people worldwide [to] lead healthy lives through promoting participation in sports and working with the sports community to advance health for all. The overall objective of the WHO Sports and Health Programme is to accelerate progress on Sustainable Development Goal 3, which is to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages by implementing WHO's 13th General Programme of Work for achieving universal health coverage, addressing health emergencies and promoting healthier populations. (WHO, 2022)

WHO has partnered with the IOC in promoting the philosophy that sports and health go hand in hand, offering people all over the world, of different abilities and ages, the chance for happier, healthier and more productive lives. How does this align with Nilsson's story? Nilsson's story, and indeed the stories of several other Baseball players and the national teams from Australia, showed us that the funding models employed by the ASC/SportAus, and the distribution of resources are inequitable and not addressing the most important aspects of children's participation, grassroots development and retention in sport and physical activity. The IOC and WHO both appear to be well ahead of the 'mindset' and the values and traditions of the macrosystem in Australia and Australian sport.

## **7.8 Chapter conclusion**

Investigating super-elite, international, professional sports performance – the David Nilsson story provides an insight into the significant influences on Nilsson's Baseball journey. The research also elicited sufficient information from other participants to draw conclusions based on common experiences. All of the former player participants pursued the MLB dream with the exception of one. That one exception had grown up in the US and has focused on coaching, leading the national team to a successful run under his leadership. Of the group who continued to follow the dream with transnational migration to the US and other professional leagues globally, only one other player was 'called up' to 'The Show'. The remainder invested many years in pursuit of the dream but did not progress to the Major League. The one other MLB player interviewed was Glenn Williams, who signed for \$925,000 in 1993 and who debuted in the Majors in 2005 with the Minnesota Twins, where he established a post-1900 major league record for most at-bats, and most hits, in a career in which the batter hit .400 or better (.425): he collected 17 hits in his 40 at-bats (Baseball Reference, 2020. n.p.). Williams looked full of promise until shoulder surgery landed him back in the Minors, where he stayed. He holds an

impressive record with the national team as a player and an Olympic Games silver medal. He and Nilsson played together for Australia and have coached young players at the MLB academy on the Gold Coast annually until that camp was disbanded.

As of 2022, 36 Australians have played in at least one MLB game, with 24 pitchers and 12 position players (SABR, 2022). Nilsson is still considered to be the stand out performer.<sup>18</sup> It is doubtful that any of these players are household names in Australia. Nilsson is not even known outside Baseball circles. His successes have been acknowledged, but there is little interest in his story and in the story of his family – which is unique in some ways and familiar in others. Just today, ABC News Breakfast, (ABC, 2022) showed the emotional phone call home to his mother of an American who had finally been called up to the Majors after 10 years in the Minor Leagues. It is such a journey and so many fail to negotiate that final hurdle. For an Australian to have managed the systemic interchanges of life, as well as transnational migration, to succeed at super-elite levels of professional performances in an authentically international sport is unique and a story well worth sharing.

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<sup>18</sup> The other half of the first Australian battery to play MLB, Graeme Llyod played 10 years in the Majors as a relief pitcher and, to date, is the only Australian to win a World Series - in 1996 while playing for the New York Yankees, who defeated the Atlanta Braves in a six-game series. Lloyd was awarded the win for Game 4 of the series, replacing Mariano Rivera in the 9th inning and forcing the left-handed batsman Fred McGriff into a double play (MLB, 1996). Lloyd became a two time World Series champion for the Yankees in 1998, defeating the San Diego Padres. Lloyd is still the only Australian-born Baseball player to have won a World Series (Baseball-Reference, 1998).

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A. Ethics Approval



University of Southern Queensland

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OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND HIGHER DEGREES

Helen Phillips  
Ethics Officer  
PHONE (07) 4631 2690 | FAX (07) 4631 1995  
EMAIL [ethics@usq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@usq.edu.au)

Wednesday, 23 February 2011

Ms Susan Wilson-Gahan  
15 Pointer Ct  
Shailer Park QLD 4128

Dear Ms Wilson-Gahan

Re: Research Project - Student Ms Susan Wilson-Gahan (PHDP), Supervisor Dr Ken Edwards.

The Chair of the USQ Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) recently reviewed your responses to the HREC's conditions placed upon the ethical approval for the below project. Your proposal now meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)* and full ethics approval has been granted.

Project Title	David Nilsson biography - a narrative ethnography
Approval no.	H11REA026
Expiry date	31/12/2015
HREC Decision	Approved

The standard conditions of this approval are:

- conduct the project strictly in accordance with the proposal submitted and granted ethics approval, including any amendments made to the proposal required by the HREC
- advise (email: [ethics@usq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@usq.edu.au)) immediately of any complaints or other issues in relation to the project which may warrant review of the ethical approval of the project
- make submission for approval of amendments to the approved project before implementing such changes
- provide a 'progress report' for every year of approval
- provide a 'final report' when the project is complete
- advise in writing if the project has been discontinued.

For (c) to (e) proformas are available on the USQ ethics website: <http://www.usq.edu.au/research/ethicsbio/human>

Please note that failure to comply with the conditions of approval and the *National Statement (2007)* may result in withdrawal of approval for the project.

You may now commence your project. I wish you all the best for the conduct of the project

Helen Phillips  
Ethics Officer  
Office of Research and Higher Degrees

## Appendix B. Participant Information



University of Southern  
Queensland

### Participant Information Sheet

**TO:**

**Full Project Title: David Nilsson biography**

**Principal Researcher: Susan Wilson-Gahan**

I would like to invite you to take part in the research project I am undertaking into David Nilsson's early development and his journey as a Baseball player. The research will be used in the writing of a PhD thesis. If David Nilsson is in agreement, the writing could generate journal articles and possibly a book

#### **Procedures for the study are outlined below.**

- Each participant will be interviewed separately. The interviews will be approximately two hours of time commitment. I anticipate that each participant will need to be interviewed twice only. I anticipate that the subject will be interviewed six times. This may change depending on the direction the interviews take and whether any clarification is needed.
- The research will be monitored by my research supervisors, Dr Patrick Danaher and Dr Robert Mason.
- Any benefits for the participants will be intrinsic. There may be some extrinsic benefits for the subject through public acknowledgement of his achievements. Others may benefit from the research as this story will provide a model for young athletes aspiring to achieve elite levels. The sport of Baseball may benefit through recognition of the standard of performance being achieved by Australian players.
- The subject and his family have given approval for the interviews to take place. I anticipate that the sharing of information will be a positive experience for all concerned and will not present any risks.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. Any information already obtained from you will be destroyed. Your decision to take part or not to take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will not in any way affect your relationship with the University of Southern Queensland

Should you have any queries regarding the progress or conduct of this research, you can contact the principal researcher. Please notify the researcher, Susan Wilson-Gahan if you decide to withdraw from this project.

*Susan Wilson-Gahan*

*Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts*

*School of Linguistics Adult and Specialist Education*

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*E. [susan.wilson-gahan@usq.edu.au](mailto:susan.wilson-gahan@usq.edu.au)*

If you have any ethical concerns with how the research is being conducted or any queries about your rights as a participant, please feel free to contact the University of Southern Queensland Ethics Officer on the following details.

Ethics and Research Integrity Officer

Office of Research and Higher Degrees

University of Southern Queensland

West Street, Toowoomba 4350

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Email: [ethics@usq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@usq.edu.au)

## Appendix C. Participant Consent



University of Southern  
Queensland

### Consent Form

TO:

**Full Project Title: David Nilsson biography**

**Principal Researcher: Susan Wilson-Gahan**

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I confirm I am over 18 years of age.
- I understand that information gained during the study may be published and I may be identified if the researcher deems that my comments add positively to the narrative.
- I understand that the interview will be recorded and that the recording of the interview will be filed electronically in password protected files.

**Name of participant**.....

**Signed**..... **Date**.....

If you have any ethical concerns with how the research is being conducted or any queries about your rights as a participant, please feel free to contact the University of Southern Queensland Ethics Officer on the following details.

Ethics and Research Integrity Officer  
Office of Research and Higher Degrees  
University of Southern Queensland  
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## Appendix D. Sample Interview Questions

1. At what age and where did you start playing Baseball?
2. Why did you start playing Baseball?
3. What other sports or activities were you involved in whilst at school?
4. Do you remember your HPE and sport at school? Any memories? Any successes? Any influences on your development as a sportsperson?
5. Who coached you in the early years of T ball and Rookie ball? At which club?
6. What cemented your love of the game of Baseball for you?
7. Why did you stay involved in Baseball?

Discussion will be about the early years of his life and his playing, successes and influences. Most of my questions will lead to further questions that come from the responses. The discussion about the early years will flow onto discussion about early representative playing success and how he came to be signed to Pro ball.

Areas which we will discuss or where I will let David lead the conversation and the direction of the conversation:

- A. Family experiences and influences – Parents and siblings
- B. Representative Baseball in Australia – Junior State and National teams; Claxton Shield, Australian representation
- C. Early years in the United States, then in Minor Leagues. Vision and goal for the future.
- D. Signing the first pro contract with the Milwaukee Brewers and the years with the Milwaukee Brewers.
- E. His wife and children – impact and influences
- F. Religion – importance and influence of religion on life and playing
- G. Pro ball post the Brewers.
- H. Japan
- I. Italy
- J. Australian National Leagues
- K. Maintaining focus
- L. Values – the importance of Baseball
- M. Support for Australian Baseball
- N. Coaching
- O. The future

Basically, David Nilsson will be retelling his story the way he sees it. When I interview his family and the people he played with and was coached by, it will be about their memories of playing Baseball and their memories of David their perceptions of him, his development as a player and his career.

## Appendix E. Participant Consent for Minor



University of Southern  
Queensland

### Consent Form Minor

**TO:**

**Full Project Title: David Nilsson biography**

**Principal Researcher: Susan Wilson-Gahan**

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to my child's participation.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my child's involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw my child from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my child's status now or in the future.
- I understand that information gained during the study may be published and my child may be identified (not by name) if the researcher deems that their comments add positively to the narrative.
- I understand that the interview will be recorded and that the recording of the interview will be filed electronically in password protected files.

**Name of participant**.....

**Name of parent/guardian**.....

**Signed**..... **Date**.....

**Signature of child as participant**

**Signed**..... **Date**.....

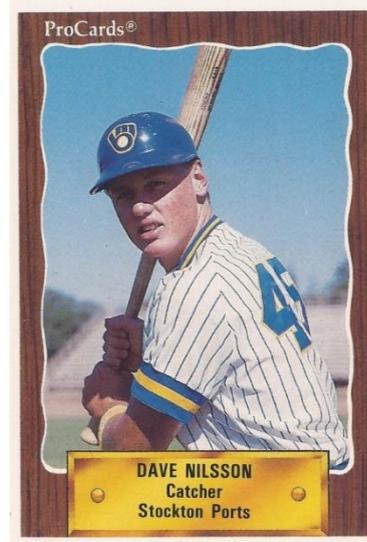
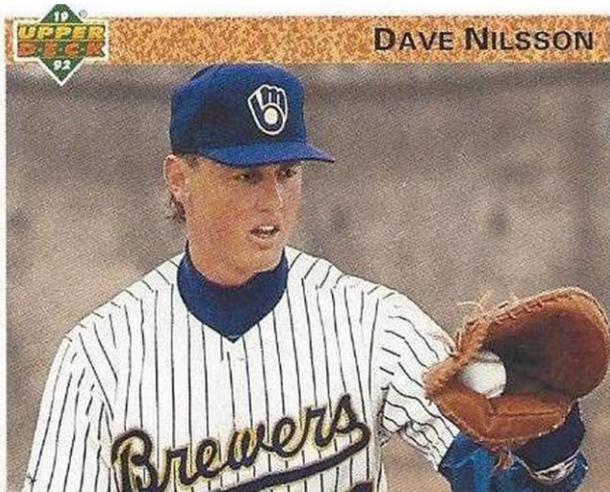
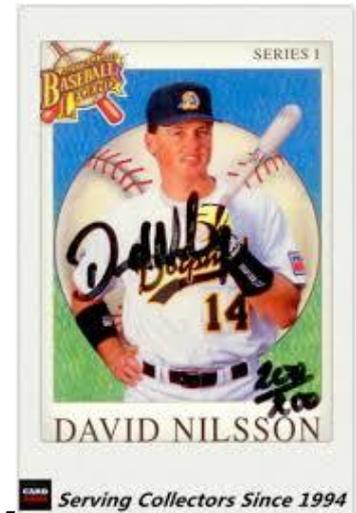
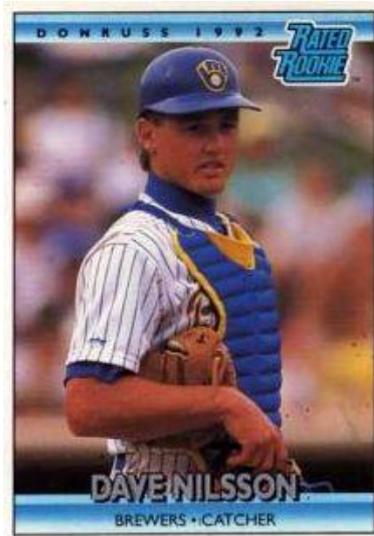
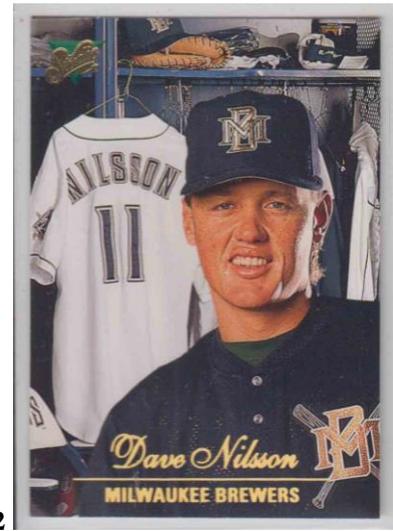
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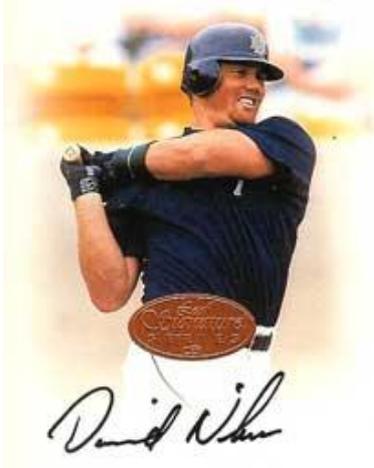
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Appendix G. David Nilsson photos and video footage



DAVE NILSSON



MILWAUKEE BREWERS

9



10



11



12

## Image Credits

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2. Getty Images
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7. Upper Deck Pro Cards
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### Media release for Image 8

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