The use of massage therapy (MT) within the New Zealand sporting environment has increased extensively in the past decade and now plays an important role within the countries national sport of rugby union particularly for elite level players. While MT is utilised by professional rugby players little is known about how their utilisation and their perceptions of MT and massage therapists.

Rugby union has been regarded as New Zealand's national sport since the turn of the century with the elite national team known as the All Blacks. In 1995 the game became a professional sport creating extra demands and expectations on the players to fulfil their individual player contracts. In this professional era of rugby, it is important that players optimise their physical fitness in order to maximise their performance and stay injury free during all tiers of competition. In order to maximise their performance, the majority of rugby players at elite level utilise sports medicine as an integral part of their training program (Barnett, 2006, p.9). Sports massage is an important part of sports medicine and is commonly used by elite rugby union players. The aim of this study was to explore key areas of New Zealand elite rugby players’ utilisation of massage therapy.

**Methods**

- **Pilot study**
  - Qualitative approach
- **Participants**
  - Three participants
  - 2015
  - Inclusion criteria: participants must have played in New Zealand All Blacks at some point in their career
- **Interviews**
  - Semi-structured interviews
  - 14-16 minutes in duration
  - Two phone interviews
  - One face to face interview

**Thematic Analysis**

Study approved by SIT Human Research Ethics Committee

**Reasons for Use**

- **Recovery After Training or a Game**
  - “After a big tough game your muscles feel a bit sore, massage helps me recover so by Wednesday I am ready to run as fast and as hard as I can” (Adam).
  - “I have two types of massage one is for recovery and is a general flush the one I had more recently was for an injury” (William).
  - “I am generally very strict with my two massages a week, it is helpful with reducing injury as we put our bodies under a lot of stress” (Adam).

- **Relaxation**
  - “There is a lot of joy lying on that table to relax” (Adam).

- **Injury Rehabilitation**
  - “After surgery there is a lot of scar tissue, massage helps to break that down” (William).
  - “Specific massage of injuries helps the rehabilitation process and helps you get back playing if you are injured or have a little niggle” (Adam).

**Frequency of Use**

- The participants’ massage treatment is funded by the New Zealand Rugby Union - they received two 45 minute massages weekly during the rugby season (Feb-Nov).
- Massage therapy is rarely used by rugby union players in the off season (Dec-Jan).
- All participants commented their frequency of massage therapy use has not changed during their professional rugby careers which span 10-13 years.
  - “I will occasionally have a relaxation massage in the off season but it is not something I generally do outside of rugby” (David).

**Perceptions of Massage Therapy**

- **Enjoyable**
  - The participants commented it was difficult to comment on the behalf of others but from experience believed the majority of elite rugby players enjoy massage therapy.
  - “I think the boys embrace it and look forward to their massage every week” (David).
  - “Although one or two of the guys in the team may not enjoy it, I definitely do it's an important part of being a professional rugby player” (William).

- **Important**
  - “Massage therapy is an important part of being a professional rugby player the All Blacks medical team encourage getting massage and it's something that is compulsory for the team” (William).
  - “Massage therapy is an important part of being a professional rugby player and it’s something that is compulsory for the team” (William).

- **Consistency is Key**
  - All participants attributed the longevity of their professional rugby careers to their consistent use of massage therapy.

**Essential Characteristics of Massage Therapists**

- **Knowledge of Anatomy**
- **Professionalism**
- **Confidence**
- **Firm Pressure**
- **Approachable**
  - “I think massage therapists need a really good knowledge of what they are doing, you can always tell when they are not 100% sure” (Adam).
  - “I just know when a massage therapist is thorough in their work, they get the job done and are professional” (Adam).
  - “You just know when a massage therapist is thorough in their work, they get the job done and are professional” (William).
  - “Some massages are not firm, you feel bad saying go harder, for me it’s easier to say that’s a bit too hard” (David).

**Summary**

This pilot study highlights that elite rugby players in New Zealand hold massage therapy in high regard. It is seen as an important part of sports medicine and they believe it has assisted with their longevity as professional rugby union players.