

SPORT AND THE LAW

Gender relations in football



Female football fans discuss player misconduct

KIM TOFFOLETTI and PETER MEWETT

Over the past five years we have witnessed considerable public and academic debate around allegations of gender-based violence by football players — this column included. In the aftermath of the sexual assault scandals that rocked the 2004-05 AFL and NRL seasons came a litany of other incidents, including ex-AFL player Wayne Carey being accused of attacking his girlfriend with a wine glass, claims that Manly Sea Eagles player Brett Stewart sexually assaulted a 17-year-old girl and, in recent weeks, the investigation into Rugby League and group sex on the ABC's Four Corners program. Media sources report player transgressions with disturbing regularity, suggesting that despite League and club efforts at player education and codes of conduct, the task of remaking masculinity in sport and teaching respect for women remains a work in progress.

What we tend to hear less about are women's perceptions of gender relationships in football and their affinity with the game. Women fans know that football is, in many ways, a man's world. It's no secret that the four dominant codes played nationally — Australian rules, rugby league, rugby union and soccer — are overwhelmingly male dominated. Those playing football at its highest levels are male, as are the coaches and most administrators. Sure, we can point to examples of successful women in senior management roles of football organisations, like AFL Commissioner Sam Moysten, but they remain few and far between.

Despite women's lack of institutional presence and power in football, female football supporters feel very strongly that they are not 'on the outer'. They consider football to be their game as much as men's. Given that victims who claim to have been sexually assaulted by footballers are invariably female, how do women fans of male-dominated sports feel about derogatory acts against women?

What we found from talking with self-designated footy tragics is that, for many of these women, reconciling players' misconduct with continuing support of their sport is an ongoing process. No one we spoke to condoned violence. Ask a female Australian rules football fan what she thinks about footballers and

sexual misconduct, and it's likely she will have given the matter considerable thought.

Many of our interviewees spoke knowledgeably and reflectively about the influence of football culture and team bonding on player attitudes. Clubs were pinpointed as institutions holding the power to influence young men's actions off the field. The women often voiced the opinion that club cultures promoting drinking as part of team bonding rituals are complicit in fostering bad behaviour. Team bonding was associated with a type of blokey performance of maleness, where being 'one of the boys' involved the objectification of women. Fans noted that elite footballers are now well-paid celebrities and that clubs and Leagues should guide players on how to deal with fame. Interestingly, women were viewed as both a perk and a pitfall for a footballer.

The players weren't made out to be entirely innocent, though. The fans we spoke to had little time for reprehensible antics and rarely excused player misconduct against women as a case of 'boys being boys'. Men need to be responsible for their own behaviour, with parents and clubs seen as instrumental to laying the foundations for young men to learn how to respect women. At the same time, players accused of assault against women were sometimes referred to as 'bad eggs' — individuals in a group of pretty decent guys who smeared the reputation of others.

Amidst these insights, certain mythologies about gender-based violence and stereotypes of male and female behaviour remained largely unquestioned. One of the common stereotypes that prevailed in discussions of sexual misconduct and footballers was the 'groupie' — a woman who, by virtue of seeking out players, puts herself in a situation that may lead to sexual assault. 'Victim blaming' explanations of player misconduct assume that a woman making an allegation must be 'wanton', finding herself in trouble because she acted inappropriately. What remains unsaid is that 'responsible' women don't hang around footballers let alone act in sexually forward ways. By default, footballers are painted as the 'prey' of women who transgress the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour.

REFERENCES

- 1 Sally Kift, 'Sex and the Team Player' (2005) 30(3) *AltLJ* 136; see also Emma Mitting, 'Breaking down the boys club: Football and violence against women by men', this issue.

In another gender myth, hormones are to blame, especially when it comes to men's sexual urges, which are said to be natural, inevitable and uncontrollable. For some of the fans we interviewed, testosterone makes men sexually aggressive, which then may lead to unconscionable acts toward women. Of course, these biologically-based explanations assume 'real' men to be heterosexual, and fail to reflect on why all men or footballers aren't potential miscreants, given that testosterone is a hormone present in all men (and women, for that matter).

For the most part, our interviewees supported the widely held view that team culture, male bonding between players and the performance of masculinity underpin a form of masculine gender legitimacy that can degrade and objectify women. This makes us wonder whether female fans find it harder to cheer players whose antics are so often negatively directed

toward women. Going on what female supporters have said, the answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. Although none of the women we interviewed stopped going to the football as a result of player misconduct, negative player attitudes toward women served as a reminder of football's wider tendency to dismiss, downplay and disrespect women.

By listening to how women footy fans discuss allegations of player misconduct, we can interpret what they think about violence, sport and their relationship to football culture. It also gives us a sense of how gender-based violence is perceived by supporters with a considerable emotional investment in sport. In our view, these are important dimensions to developing and targeting initiatives to educate individuals and communities about sexual assault. It is also another step in tackling and dispelling myths about violence, which feed off gender stereotypes of men and women that abound in the sporting sphere.

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Breaking down the boys club

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Contemporary literature suggests that prevention rather than intervention is a preferable way of stopping men's violence against women. To prevent violence against women by men requires an understanding of how violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours against women prevail in the community. This column seeks to explore the subworld of football as one way of understanding the creation and perpetuation of violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours. (Here, 'violence-supportive' means not so much behaviours and attitudes which are themselves violent, nor necessarily those which are explicitly pro-violence, but those which condone, foster or normalise violence.) It also suggests how prevention strategies can be tailored to meet the needs of the football community and society at large. It does

not focus on footballers as a group that may be more likely to perpetrate violence against women. Writing from an Australian perspective, 'football' here refers to the AFL, NRL (rugby league) and rugby codes, which are both culturally dominant and inherently contact sports.

The subworld of football

In 2005–2006 there were 10.5 million persons aged 15 years and over who participated in sport in Australia.¹ In addition to coaches, officials, administrators, voluntary workers, social participants and spectators the overall sports following in Australia is significant. Football, in particular, receives much media coverage, advertising and sponsorship. Despite the strong following of football, collectively, as a national sport and its important

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1. ABS, *Sports and Physical Recreation: A Statistical Overview*, Report No 4156 (2008).

role in Australia's national identity the academic study of football (and sport more generally) has a relatively marginal status.² However such sociological analysis is needed. Football may be what ethnographers deem a 'subworld', that is, essentially, a space to analyse a specific cultural process within a particular aspect of dominant culture.³ Analysing football as an influential element of the dominant contemporary culture allows us to deconstruct, at least in part, why violence against women by men is relatively accepted and unquestioned.

Football and its impact in creating violence-supportive community attitudes and behaviours

Legitimate violence

Football as a body contact sport is inherently violent. Although boundaries are drawn when it comes to extreme violence (as highlighted by the creation of harsher penalties for unacceptable on field violence in the late 1990s)⁴ such boundary-drawing simultaneously legitimises certain types of violence as part of the game. This has consequences for broader community attitudes to violence, namely that violence is justified in certain contexts. This type of attitude often underpins many violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours.

Popular misogyny

Football as both an organised enterprise and a culture popularises misogyny. For example, Wayne Carey in 1996 made degrading comments and physically assaulted women at a hotel. However, his actions did not threaten his captaincy or his spot in the team that week.⁵ Recently, a NRL club decided to let a player compete in the season opener despite being charged with the alleged sexual assault of a 17 year old girl. The NRL intervened and suspended the player for five weeks.⁶ In another incident, the AFL did not consider an on-field sledge referring to a woman as a slut as 'perverse' (and therefore unacceptable) because the player concerned believed he was talking about a woman of consenting age, when in fact his opponent's daughter to whom he referred was just three years old.⁷ Canterbury Bulldogs' team initiations allegedly involved urinating on women and sex workers,⁸ which if true is an atrocious example of how football as a culture can disrespect women. Overall, the result is that football culture exports into the broader community attitudes that women are lesser, disposable, sexual objects open to abuse.

Public and private

Football culture may reinforce both the private and public domains, as men in the football community routinely fail to police each other's behaviour in the 'private' domain. This is evidenced by wilful blindness by team mates, or by the AFL often issuing a 'no comment'.⁹ This failure to delve into the 'private' where violence is concerned is reinforced by on-field dynamics. Violence on the field is maintained through a code of silence, as men hurt on the field are expected neither to complain nor show pain.¹⁰ This supports the view that violence is to be 'borne' or 'silenced' and people who speak up about violence are breaking the rules on dealing with it. Further, football privileges

the public domain over the private by suggesting that loyalty to the team comes before personal or romantic relationships.¹¹ These attitudes and behaviours export into the broader community the belief that it is okay not to speak up about violence against women because it is essentially a private matter.

Women ask for it

Football culture also exports into the broader community the attitude that women ask for violence. For example, the formal responses of the AFL and NRL to allegations of violence against women often construct the modern player as a victim of celebrity culture and suggest that it is unfair to punish men for committing violence against women when such women 'were not letting up'¹² or when these women 'maliciously cried rape for an ulterior purpose'.¹³ Further, those inside football culture sometimes argue that wives and girlfriends, by conforming to the roles they are given within that culture, accept the violence. Worse, wives and girlfriends may be expected to accept violence as a pay off for the social capital attached to their spouses or boyfriends.¹⁴ Fostering suggestions that women ask for violence also allows men to shirk agency in perpetrating such violence against women.

Football and its impact on the construction of violent masculinity

Masculinity, while socially constructed, is not simply an expression of shared male nature. Rather, it is an ideal or standard set by the values (social, economic and political) and cultural relations of a society.¹⁵ Football as a reference point for masculinity is significant as it is a culturally exalted way of performing masculinity and thus forms part of the broader project of hegemonic masculinity.¹⁶ This has consequences for the debate about violence against women.

For men, the consequence of performing masculinity in this context is the linking of violence with masculinity. Violence and aggression are highly valued and legitimised by football because the violent expression of physical power is a key 'skill' in the game. Further, the historical development of contact football codes in particular, and male sport in general, is closely linked to a perceived need for men to have an outlet for their (supposedly) naturally aggressive tendencies.¹⁷ These factors have contributed to the perception that violence and physical power are exclusively masculine preserves.

For women, two consequences of the performance of masculinity through football are degradation, and the masculine exclusion of women. The aggressive and violent nature of football leads to the assumption that women ought not participate (although women do play, albeit with no tackling!)¹⁸ Further, the organisational structure that supports football excludes women. Efforts to incorporate women have often been tokenistic, reducing women to 'supporting and nurturing roles, cheerleaders, mothers' wives, girlfriends and or decorative objects'.¹⁹ This exclusion of female opinions, involvement and experiences, coupled with the misogynistic culture of football, constructs women as the 'other'.

Overall, football is linked to hegemonic masculinity as it is a culturally exalted and normalised way of performing

2. David Rowe, Jim McKay, Geoffrey Lawrence, 'Out of the Shadows: The Critical Sociology of Sport in Australia, 1986-1996' (1997) 14 *Sociology of Sport Journal* 340, 345.

3. Todd Crosset and Becky Beal, 'The Use of "Subculture" and "Subworld" in Ethnographic Works on Sport: A Discussion of Definitional Distinctions' (1997) 14 *Sociology of Sport Journal* 73, 81.

4. Brett Hutchins and Janine Mikosza, 'Australian Rugby League and Violence 1970 to 1995: a Case Study in the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony' (1998) 34 *Journal of Sociology* 246, 252.

5. Nina Philadelphoff-Puren, 'Derelection: Women, Rape and Football' (2004) 21 *The Australian Feminist Law Journal* 35, 46.

6. Siobhain Ryan, 'Tanya Pibersek says decision of Manly's Brett Stewart "Disappointing"', *The Australian* (Sydney), 11 March 2009.

7. Deb Waterhouse-Watson 'All Women are Sluts: Australian Rules Football and Representations of the Feminine' (2007) 27 *The Australian Feminist Law Journal* 155, 160.

8. Philadelphoff-Puren, above n 5, 45.

9. Ibid 46.

10. Hutchins, above n 4, 250.

11. Martin Mills, 'Football, Desire and the Social Organisation of Masculinity' (1997) 16 *Social Alternatives* 10, 11.

12. James Hird, 'It's a Tough Gig' *Herald Sun* (Melbourne) 16 June 2004.

13. Sally Kift, 'Sex and the Team Player: when a Team becomes a Gang' (2005) 30(3) *Alternative Law Journal* 136, 137.

14. Hutchins, above n 4, 255.

15. Jackson Katz, *The Macho Paradox* (2006) 119.

16. Hutchins, above n 4, 258.

17. Mills, above n 10, 12.

18. Hutchins, above n 4, 256.

19. Ibid 255.

masculinity. Further, the football context sustains and perpetuates dominance and oppression in the gender order as certain masculine subjectivities, which are dangerous to women, are constructed through the linking of masculinity and violence and the construction of women as the 'other'.²⁰ It follows from the logic of violent masculinity that men can commit violence against women because that is just 'being a man.'

'Other' masculinities and football and violence

The performance of masculinity in the football context arguably also links to being white, middle class and heterosexual. It is acknowledged by the AFL, for example, and through efforts of people such as Nicky Winmar, that racism is an issue within that sporting culture.²¹ The negative responses made by those in the rugby league community surrounding the 'coming out' of Ian Roberts revealed that that culture is also homophobic.²² Additionally, the commercialisation of football has taken the game away from blue collar workers so that it now reflects middle class values and sentiments.²³ Hegemonic masculinity benefits men, by upholding the power that men have over women, but it also benefits white, middle class, heterosexual men by upholding the power they have over other men.

A practical example of how hegemonic masculinity benefits white middle class men is evidenced within the debate on violence against women. Despite statistical data and reports indicating otherwise,²⁴ white and middle class men intentionally or unintentionally use their race and class privileges to position black and lower class men as inherently more violent. From here, violence against women is painted as being perpetrated only by 'some' men. In this way, football helps maintain dominant social relations and, as a reference point for masculinity, it allows white middle class men to distance themselves from acts of violence against women by 'other' men and to deny that it is an issue which ought concern them.²⁵

Normalisation and denial and the perpetuation of violence

Analysing the subworld of football as a game, culture and organisation shows how it creates violence-supportive community attitudes and behaviours by legitimising violence, normalising misogyny and exclusion, painting violence against women as a private matter or a woman's fault and constructing masculinity in a way that normalises violent behaviour and sees women as the 'other.' This allows men who perpetrate violence against women to justify their actions and those who witness such acts to dismiss them as a normal masculine behaviour. Such violence, then, is often denied to be a manifestation of a deeply rooted system of male dominance, but instead conceived as an issue for only black or lower class men. This normalisation and denial of the violence against women by men has created a generation of people who Katz terms as 'bystanders.'²⁶ Bystanders are not people who are directly involved in perpetuating violence, but who acquiesce through violence-supportive attitudes or behaviour or by denying violence is their issue.²⁷ A failure to challenge or question such violence is an indirect perpetuation of it.

The way forward

Changing the game, the organisation and the culture

Football as an organised game and culture needs to change if there is any hope of challenging the normalising effects of violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours. Football codes need to include more women in key organisational roles as well as facilitate more women's voices in the sports' media.²⁸ Football culture needs to change so that it is respectful of women and so footballers have an increased awareness about violence against women. This is already occurring through 'local context' education programs implemented under the 'Respect and Responsibility' policy in the AFL and equivalents in the NRL. Lastly, football as a violent game needs to eliminate aggressive body contact in order to escape the link between violence and masculinity.

Challenging the bystander

While violence against women by men is an issue for all men, for many reasons, including that such violence is normalised and often denied, men who do not perpetuate violence are often not effectively engaged in prevention strategies.²⁹ Paradoxically, the status of football in Australian society, a status that magnifies football's negative dimensions, can also make it a powerful tool for change. Footballers have a leadership platform from which they could raise the consciousness of the broader community (especially other men) to acknowledge, educate and de-normalise violence against women and to encourage others to stand up against it. However, for footballers to act as successful leaders in any violence against women campaign they must be credible.³⁰ Thus, a strategy of using footballers as leaders is largely contingent on prevention strategies targeted at the football world being successful.

Rejecting football: making a subworld a subculture

Ultimately, if football fails to change, society may need to re-conceive football. This re-conception would involve lessening its cultural acceptance and exaltation, and consequently make it less likely that football will inform attitudes to violence or be a reference point for masculinity.

If there is any hope of dramatically reducing the high levels of male violence to which we have become accustomed, we are going to have to find ways to look beyond individual perpetrators and their problems, to the culture that produces them. This requires looking at how influential social institutions, such as football, create and perpetuate violence-supportive attitudes and behaviour. Once this is done, strategies can be put in place to deal with these dynamics. On a broad level, the success of strategies to prevent violence against women will depend on whether or not men acknowledge and challenge their own dominant understandings and change their behaviour accordingly.

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20. Mills, above n 11, 14.

21. Waterhouse-Watson, above n 7, 162.

22. Hutchins, above n 4, 257.

23. Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner, *Up Where Cazaly: The Great Australian Game* (1981), 32.

24. For one example see Australian Institute of Criminology, *Women's Experiences of Male Violence Report* No 56 (2004).

25. Katz, above n 15, 139.

26. *Ibid* 113-131.

27. *Ibid* 127.

28. Kim Toffoletti, 'Who Speaks on Footballers and Sexual Assault? A Gender Analysis of Sports Reporting' (Paper delivered at TASA Conference Proceedings, Tasmania, 6-8 December 2005).

29. Katz, above n 15, 253-271.

30. ABC Television, 'Regional rugby league team winning respect off the field', *The 7.30 Report*, 28 October 2008, <abc.net.au/7.30/content/2008/s2403739.htm> at 17 February 2009.