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SPORT AND THE LAW
Gender relations in football
Female football fans discuss player misconduct

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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 relations 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.

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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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.