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## Voices from the margins?: Women at the footy

Peter Mewett and Kim Toffoletti

### Peter Mewett

Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Gender Studies, School of History, Heritage and Society, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia

Email: [peter.mewett@deakin.edu.au](mailto:peter.mewett@deakin.edu.au)

### Kim Toffoletti

Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Gender Studies, School of History, Heritage and Society, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia

Email: [kim.toffoletti@deakin.edu.au](mailto:kim.toffoletti@deakin.edu.au)

In line with Gosling's (2007, p.250) call for research on the "everyday experiences and identities of female sport fans" and Free and Hughson's (2003) observation that studies of sports fans have largely ignored the issue of gender, this paper explores the supporting practices of women fans of Australian rules football – commonly known as AFL after the Australian Football League (the sport's premier competition). Although the sport is played, managed and mostly administered by men, it is different from other football codes because its support base is evenly divided between men and women. About a half of the at-ground spectators are women and the passion of their support flows beyond the confines of the stadia into club memberships, tipping competitions, watching games and dedicated football programmes on television, listening to radio broadcasts, reading press reports, participating in the sport's chat rooms, blogs and other Internet sources, following games through mobile telephone technology, and participating in avid, passionate discussions about the sport. Football provides for these women a space that they believe separates them from the humdrum of day-to-day life, while also allowing the opportunity for family togetherness and a time for sociality with relatives and friends. There has been a long, continuous, but largely unrecognised involvement of women as supporters of Australian football (Hess 1996). Although AFL is a sport characterised by hegemonic masculinity, women have, since an early time in the sport's history, acquired spaces within it.

Women have appropriated geographical, temporal and conceptual space within the leisure practice of watching and following football since the nineteenth century (Hess 1996). For many women supporters, the 'footy' comprises an important aspect of their lives, as we demonstrate in this discussion of football as a social domain occupied by women as much as by men. Although numerically equal with men as at-ground supporters, the construction of football as a male field of sporting activity means that the social visibility of women as fans remains relatively restricted. Accordingly, football *support* has the *appearance* of being genderless. In contrast, we argue that football fandom is gendered and that this takes place through the ways that women construct their ways of supporting. In this paper we focus on women's appropriations of space, time and knowledge within leisure pursuits. These acquisitions occur through women's agentic actions in

specific social spaces created through sports, specifically football appreciation. Sports are constituted as social fields; areas of social activities that, while having a degree of autonomy are nevertheless subject to the processes of the wider society both in their mode of constitution and in the habituses brought to them by their occupants (Bourdieu 1984).

## **Method**

The data has been generated from semi-structured single person and focus group interviews with 68 women who are self-designating AFL fans. They range in age from their late teens to their early 80s. Respondents have been recruited through word-of-mouth, snowball sampling, the assistance of an AFL club and through local newspaper advertising. The respondents come from Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. All of the interviews have been audio-recorded, transcribed and coded for analysis.

## **Women make time for football**

A significant indicator of the importance of football to women lies in their organisation of time to facilitate attendance at games and in their following of the sport more generally. For many fans, football governs their social calendars during the season. Other things are organised according to when and where games are scheduled. Almost to a person, our respondents impressed on us that family and friends were aware of the need to organise events and functions with regard to the football season. Tourmaline<sup>1</sup> seemingly placed an even higher premium on her football attendance than some of our other respondents, because if someone in the family arranged a wedding during the football season, “We would say re-arrange it, we love our footy!” Peridot’s daughter, also a football fan and about to get married, scheduled her wedding outside of the football season. Beryl noted that a weekend spent with “some old friends” had to be scheduled when her team was not playing. Emerald, a younger woman, was equally adamant about having “to go to the footy game” instead of a birthday celebration, though she would try to get to the party after the game. When Diamond misses a game “under sufferance” because of a social obligation she keeps up with the score by having friends at the game send text messages to her. Major events – family birthdays and weddings, for instance – can cause women to miss regular season games, but Garnet stated that September, the month of the finals, is “different” and “not a time to start organising things”. Similarly, Diamond told us that during September “they [family and friends] know not to have anything on just in case” her team is playing in the finals.

Women fans frequently claim that it is they who make the household decision to attend games and organise other aspects of their social lives around the football season. Many keep the fixtures list to hand so that they can rapidly check their availability for other events. Peridot said “Yes, absolutely. I write it in my diary. Every round is in my diary”. Both work and social activities are organised around football. Women take time off work to travel for finals series and Diamond told us how she once organised her work schedules to get to games. When the team is playing too far away from home to attend in person, fans follow the game on television or radio broadcasts.

These women fans demonstrate the point clearly stated by our respondents as a whole – that they organise their time and their social activities to accommodate football. In some cases they have partners as passionate and committed about the game as they are, but when this is not the case then the partners have to come to terms with this consumption of leisure time. Through their self-empowerment as fans, women appropriate time from *themselves* – that is, from the other demands on their time – to support football. The field encompassing football spectators is in part constructed by female fans, providing a social space within the interstices of wider gender inequalities where women's agency can be, and is, exercised.

### **Football as quality time**

Although reports of threatening experiences at games are almost non-existent and some women do attend games by themselves, our informants rarely attended games alone. The reason for going with others is the sociality it affords. It is an appropriation of time that, while focussed on the leisure pursuit of 'barracking'<sup>2</sup> for their team, is spent with family and/or friends and excludes the other pressures and issues in their lives. Put simply, it is 'time-out' from the humdrum of everyday living. But it is a special time-out because it is a bracketed period in which the focus on football facilitates a re-affirmation of social relationships. This is not so much a liminal time that Victor Turner (1995) suggested was a period during which social configurations are conceptually soluble, presenting the possibility of re-organisation, but rather an instance of what he called 'communitas', when the bonds of sociality and their cohering properties are affirmed and displayed. In short, it is a way in which women football fans consolidate portions of their inner social networks and perhaps, as Gosling (2007, p.252) suggests, extend their range of contacts.

Our respondents mostly have reserved seats at the position in the stands. Peridot and her group had moved around the stadium before finding the seats that are ideal for them, "I wanted to be exactly where we are". She attends with her husband and her daughter, but she also has a second membership so that she can take a visitor "and then my neighbour has got two tickets and then another friend of ours has got two tickets and another friend has got two and then we sit in the O'Reilly Stand in a section known as the royal box" (Peridot). The prominence of friends in Peridot's group is because she originates from another city and she does not have wider family members where she now lives.

Clearly attendance groups depend on fans having family members and/or friends living nearby who also are football fans. Diamond goes to the football with her sister, two women friends and her niece. For them "it is a social event, ... [before] the SCG night matches we usually eat at Paddington and walk down" (Diamond), providing an opportunity for quality time together. Moreover, Diamond's group meets with other friends at the football ground. Emerald comes from a country town where she had attended her local league games from a young age with her family, "you would meet up there with friends ... it would be more like a social get together, more like the fabric of the community. It is just something that everybody does".

Reserved seats facilitate the sociality of match days for attendance groups and the interactions they have with others occupying seats in the same area. Many women told us how they had shifted positions before finding the one that they best liked. Reserving the same seats from season to season ensures the availability of seating and, hopefully, of being with compatible people. Onyx, who attends games with her husband, does not have reserved seats and at times has to contend with obnoxious spectators.

An aspect of AFL said to make it appealing to women is that it provides a safe environment for spending quality time with their children and other members of the family – in some cases, three generations of a family attend together. The family dimension of football attendance means that for many, quality time can be tarnished by the bad language of other spectators. It has been reported for English soccer that the small female attendance declines further in times of bad crowd behaviour (Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research 2002). In contrast, this does not seem to have occurred in the AFL, because the long presence of significant numbers of women spectators has influenced crowd behaviour, we argue, so that this sport has not witnessed the cyclical female attendance pattern of English soccer. Moreover, as detailed below, our respondents reported that they intervened to moderate the behaviour of other spectators when it could no longer be tolerated. In contrast women fans of English soccer are said to be “cautious about, or in some cases even hostile towards, changes that threatened to ‘feminise’ the game ... concerned about drawing further accusations from male supporters about their status as ‘real’ fans” (Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research 2002, p.7).

Many of our respondents abhorred bad language, especially if children were in the vicinity. Beryl noted that little swearing occurred in the part of the ground that her group occupied: “Not a lot around us, there are lots of families ... there are not a lot of four letter words and anything like that”. Our respondents reported that offenders often would apologise and stop swearing when it was pointed out that children were present. Diamond recounted that at her home stadium persistent offenders could be reported to stewards, who would move them away. Even reserved seating does not guarantee that close-by spectators will not swear, because fans unable to attend a game can sell-on their tickets. The purchasers, possibly supporters of the opposing team, can bring swearing into an area where it is otherwise rarely heard. Stewards may intervene, but Diamond noted that crowd behaviour in her part of the stands is usually controlled by the regular patrons observing an unwritten but mutually accepted code of behaviour. “There are a couple of guys that sit near us and every now and then they drop the bad language and they go, ‘Oh, oh, sorry ladies, sorry ladies’ or whatever, but it is not a common occurrence” (Diamond). Moreover, the men will control others “if some of the supporters, and it is an interstate team, and their language is getting pretty rough ... usually the guys will say to them, ‘Look, we don’t use that type of language around here’” (Diamond). Shifting seating positions enabled Peridot’s group to find their ideal spot in the stadium and also avoid the aural onslaught of vulgar language, “we have quite a lot of vocal people around us but there is no [swearing] – I guess that’s one of the nice things about it – there are nice people sitting around us. It is nice, there are some young families”.

Going to the footy together provides an opportunity for family bonding and for re-affirming friendships. For some it is perhaps the only time of the week when they can assemble with family and friends outside the demands and distractions of their day-to-day lives. But for this to be quality time, certain conditions should be met; a suitable position in the ground is desirable, family and friends should be in contiguous seats, and acceptable standards of public behaviour should be evidenced. The collective focus can then be on the game and on experiencing the *communitas* that defines their bundle of social relationships. Women's appropriation of football as quality time – and the importance of this to them in their close social relationships – means that the effect they have on shaping the field contributes to and sculpts supporting practices of men and women alike.

### **Knowing the game**

Some women admitted to a poor technical knowledge of football, not knowing the rules at all well and the reasons for umpiring decisions. But these are atypical examples. Most of the fans that we have spoken with have a thorough and deep knowledge of football. AFL, like the other football codes, is characterised by hegemonic masculinity. Men play the sport and it is men who are supposed to know about it. Gosling (2007, p.256) comments that women are thought to have less commitment than male fans who question women's authenticity as 'real fans'. She adds that women also are accused of fantasising about the players rather than following the game. When discussing our research in several fora, we have found that this comment often is also made about women AFL fans, but the women we interviewed undoubtedly attended games from their appreciation of the sport. Many respondents clearly enjoyed the appeal of the players' bodies, but as Platinum said, this is "a bonus".<sup>3</sup> Our respondents overwhelmingly went to games to watch the football, perhaps because, as Iridium tellingly noted, "who can perve for three hours?" Jones (2008, p.520) also notes for English soccer that, "women perform fandom with knowledge that, to some fans, their gender makes them inauthentic", some even consenting "to objectionable masculinity practices ... [because they] ... were fundamental to football" (p.530). Although Jones (2008, p.522) also reports that some women fans adopted a "resistant femininity practice" to actively confront and object to misogynist and homophobic behaviour. So when women acquire the ability to engage in deep technical discussions with men about football it is because they have appropriated what is supposed to be men's knowledge. The overt discourses and practices of football occur in male social space – the sport 'football' is masculine. This is why the numerically significant presence of women as spectators and supporters of AFL goes largely unrecognised. To give due recognition to women's presence would undermine masculine hegemony. Hence encompassing women's supporting practices in the field allows women to appropriate football fandom for themselves, while giving the appearance of contributing to a seemingly genderless spectatorship. Women's empowerment in the sport – essential to their appropriation of spaces with it – become doxic (Bourdieu 2001) actions underpinning the reproduction and continuation of the sport as an apparently male space.

Other than playing the game,<sup>4</sup> arguably the greatest challenge to men's hold on football is

women claiming knowledge over what goes on in play and the application of the rules. Similarly, both Crolley and Long (2001) and Woodhouse and Williams (1999) report that many male English soccer fans resist increases in female spectatorship in case it feminises the sport. Women have learned about football in a number of ways. Attending games from a young age with their families provided a number of women with a good grounding in the technical details of football. Men, especially fathers, figure in many of our informants' accounts of how they learned about football, but several learned through female relatives and through other means. The media also provides an important way of learning the game. Garnet developed her knowledge mostly from watching television, "because you pick up a lot from commentators, what they are saying". Agate – who is from a migrant, soccer-playing background – makes considerable use of the radio and got to know the game "from going regularly and listening to it on the radio, listening to what the commentators had to say".

Technical knowledge is the issue providing the greatest potential for women to invade men's discursive space. But neither Garnet or Peridot found this to be too great an issue. The people around Peridot know her to be "a bit nutty about it [football]" and do not down-play her technical knowledge on the basis of her gender. At work Garnet "manage[s] a team of mainly guys" who know how involved she is with sports. Despite her managerial position empowering Garnet, men she meets in social contexts can have "preconceived notions" about how much she, as a woman, could possibly know about football. However, as some of our other informants have noted, once the men realise these women's level of knowledge, the discussion shifts away from assumptions based on gender relations and to the sport. Garnet noted that men "catch on pretty quickly that you know what you are talking about".

In contrast, Tanzanite informed us that a friend of her husband told her that she could not possibly know as much about football as him because she has never played it. Tanzanite's experience is not unique, other women communicated similar 'put-downs'. These experiences constitute men resisting women's appropriation of what is to them privileged men's business. Women use the empowerment they procure from their numerical presence, occupation of supporting spaces and undeniable knowledge of the sport to accumulate 'footballing capital' enabling them to confront male hegemony and so appropriate some of the male discursive space without displacing men from it. Football support is not the genderless phenomenon that it may appear to be; rather it is a contested terrain in which women's nuancing of the field, while often accepted by men, nevertheless can be resisted.

Diamond told the story about how she and "a couple of friends" were prompted into a technical discussion about football by a man "because we are girls and we don't know [about the sport]". After he had lost the argument with the women, the man's friend queried why he had not found out whether they followed football before he had entered the discussion. She continued that men are surprised when they discover the depth of her knowledge; "I say, why are you surprised. We have fathers and brothers and nephews and nieces, cousins and we have males in the family.

Why do you think it is exclusively a male dominated sport anyway?"

'Fifties-something' Diamond has challenged perceptions about the boundaries of gender, staking a claim in an area of football support commonly thought to be dominated by men. But it is important to note that her appropriation of this space occurs in the "comfortable environment" of being with people, men and women, who recognise and accept her technical knowledge. Thirty years Diamond's junior, Emerald suggests that women are gradually gaining recognition in the male space of football. Despite witnessing women being put-down by men – "one person thinks they know better specifically because they are male" – she also suggests that the increasing involvement of women in football, such as the female press and television journalists reporting on the sport, provides clear and open evidence of the extent and depth of women's knowledge about the sport.

### **Of football and fields**

Conceptualising AFL support as a relatively homogenous field provides a significant problem because of the presence of women as active agents in a domain of hegemonic masculinity. Apart from their numerical significance, women's appropriation of space, time and knowledge as football fans affects collective behaviour. Women are influential in the composition of spectating groups, their positions in the stadium and their control over behaviour to make spectating a quality time for them. Some aspects of these appropriations may be attributed to gendered behaviours that women bring with them to football fandom. An example of this is the pressure to restrict swearing in front of children and family groups. While often successful in that men will acquiesce to the female pressure and even become agents in the policing of this female-defined appropriate behaviour, these ways are constructed in congruence with the stereotypically feminine actions of caring and nurturing. So a paradox is breached: that in their appropriation of spectating practices, women simultaneously contest and reaffirm wider gender relations. As a field, football is male; it does not readily allow for women's input. So how have women been able to appropriate spaces and practices in it? We argue that this occurs because women's supporting practices constitute doxa deriving from and reproducing the wider social order. Thus women fans participate in football support without threatening male dominance. It is impossible to conceptualise female supporting practices independently of the men who play, control and in many ways dominate the sport – football oozes masculinity to the extent that it is necessary to go behind its public face to understand women's influence on it. Women construct their football fandom through their appropriation of space, time and knowledge in constructing this sporting leisure pursuit. Women's gendered actions in the field empowers them to engage in the agentic actions that carve out a female supporting space, knocks the rough edges from some of the male practices while, paradoxically, preserving football as a domain of hegemonic masculinity.

### **Footnotes**

1. All respondents' names are pseudonyms.

2. 'Barracking' is an Australian term used to express the action of supporting a sports team or person.
3. There are lesbians who are avid AFL fans. Clearly they do not follow the sport from the appeal of men's bodies.
4. Women do play AFL, but their presence as players is very marginal.

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