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INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed a growing focus on the study of women sports fans within the social sciences and related disciplines (Cere 2003; Crawford and Gosling 2004; James and Ridinger 2002; Jones 2008; Mewett and Toffoletti 2011; Pope 2011). Emerging from and responding to the historical marginalization of women in sport and the bias towards the male fan in literature on sports spectatorship, critical research on women spectators serves the valuable function of illuminating "women's everyday experiences of being a sports fan" (Gosling 2007: 250). This chapter considers one aspect of women's participation as followers of male sports, namely, the extent to which female fans partake in the sexual objectification of sportsmen. We aim to assess how looking at male athletes in sexually desiring ways impacts on the individual and collective construction of women's gender and sports fan identities.

Despite the inroads being made into documenting and theorizing the various dimensions of female sports fan experience, and the considerable literature on the operations of the male gaze in sport, what appears to be lacking from existing research on sports spectatorship is a nuanced examination of how women look at the athletic male body in sexually desiring ways. We accomplish this by analyzing how female fans of the Australian Football League (AFL) discuss male footballers' bodies as part of the experience of watching live sport. We speculate on the implications for women fans who sexually objectify sportsmen and consider the extent to which visual pleasure contributes to the maintenance and/or disruption of normative constructions of gender and sexuality in the Australian sporting context. While women who look voyeuristically at male athletes disturb the notion of the 'authentic' sport spectator who is understood to be male (Gosling 2007; Woodhouse and Williams 1999), we argue that the sexual objectification of sportsmen does not diminish traditional masculine authority in football, on or off the field. Moreover, women's role as active lookers does not translate into improved fan status but can jeopardize the legitimacy of women's sports fandom.
This chapter advances existing sport scholarship on the sexual objectification of sporting bodies (Wedgwood 2008), which, apart from a few studies of the visual consumption of male athletes (Mason 1992; Miller 1998; Morse 1983; Trujillo 1995), has largely focused on the institutional gaze as a mechanism regulating women’s bodies in sports media contexts (Bernstein 2002; Brandt and Carstens 2005; Buysse and Sheridan Embser-Herbert 2004; Duncan 1990; Duncan and Messner 1998; Kane and Green-dorfer 1994; Lenskyj 1998; Messner, Duncan and Cooky 2003). In contrast to literature concerning sexualized images of athletes, our research attends to the experiences of women who participate as at-ground spectators of live football matches. Accordingly, we explore dimensions of specular pleasure experienced by female fans, the meanings they derive from looking at the male sporting body, and the gendered implications of ‘looking’ on the construction of the female sports fan. In order to do so, we mobilize feminist theories of spectatorship and the gaze to consider the gendered dimensions of looking (Mulvey 1989/1975; Stacey 1994). While feminist film criticism reveals the social power historically accorded to the male gaze, it also illuminates the role women play as spectators (Dolan 1988; Sturken and Cartwright 2001). This framework is supplemented by feminist critiques of sport and sports fandom as a masculine preserve (Bryson 1990; Crawford and Gosling 2004; Disch and Kane 1996; Jones 2008; Morse 1983). In keeping with anti-essentialist approaches to theorizing identities and subjectivities, gender is understood to be a social construct and process, rather than a biological given (Connell 2002). When taken together, these interdisciplinary fields enable a mapping of the complex relations of power associated with gendered bodies and gendered looking in the sporting context.

BACKGROUND AND METHOD

Australian rules football (also called AFL after its governing body, the Australian Football League) is a uniquely Australian invention and the country’s most attended sport (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009–10). Statistics from 2009–10 show that 1.2 million women went to AFL games, making it the most watched live sport by women nationally. These attendance rates demonstrate women’s significant commitment as fans to Australian rules football, relative to male AFL crowds (1.7 million), and other sports (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009–10). When taking into account female television audiences and club memberships, women make up a sizable proportion of AFL followers, yet the sport is male-dominated in almost every other respect. Australian rules football, at the elite level, is played and coached by men and its administration is overwhelmingly male, with only a handful of women occupying senior positions. For all intents and purposes it is a sport that is deeply ingrained with ideals of Australian masculinity, both historically and in contemporary times, despite efforts by the code’s
current administration to provide “information and pathways for women and girls to be involved in Australian Football” (AFL n.d). It is within this context that we situate our study.

This chapter emerges from a larger research project involving 69 women who self-designated as AFL fans. These fans were interviewed either singly or in focus groups and were recruited through word-of-mouth, snowball sampling, the assistance of AFL clubs and local newspaper advertising. Our respondents came from metropolitan areas (Melbourne, Sydney, Perth) and a regional city (Geelong) in Australia. AFL clubs are based in each of these cities, with Melbourne, Perth and Geelong having an established history of Australian rules competition. In contrast, the dominant football code in Sydney is rugby league, with AFL a relative newcomer to this part of Australia. Demographically our interviewees ranged from 18 to 80 years old. They were mostly of Anglo-Australian middle-class origin, living in the more affluent suburbs and working in white-collar jobs. Most had completed secondary school and many held tertiary educational qualifications. Clearly, the range of our participants is narrow, with an under-representation of migrant, Indigenous and working-class women, which is likely a result of the self-selection recruitment process. At no stage during the recruitment process or in interviews did a woman identify herself as lesbian or bi-sexual explicitly (by stating this in an interview) or implicitly (by responding to questions in ways that would infer homo- or bi-sexual orientation). We are aware, however, of lesbians who are keen fans of AFL.

All of the interviews were of semi-structured format guided by a list of topics including participants’ reasons for being football fans; how they came to support football; their practices, modes and rituals of support; views on sexual assault allegations made against footballers; and enjoyable and negative aspects of supporting. But the focus of this chapter derives from us asking respondents about the pleasure they experience from looking at players’ bodies as a part of watching football. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with participants given pseudonyms. The transcripts were read and coded to discern the common themes that developed in response to our pre-established topics and from the ‘unscripted’ discussions that emerged from the relative freedom afforded by the semi-structured interview format. These persistent threads provided the bases for our analyses, with our coding technique enabling cross-checking and the extraction of relevant pieces of data to support our argument.

THE UNSETTLING GAZE—LOOKING AT THE ATHLETIC MALE BODY

As Bordo (1999: 18) has observed, consumer practices and a Western climate of sexual freedom and display during the closing decades of the twentieth century converged to bring male bodies into focus as objects of desire.
In accordance with the increased social and cultural positioning of the male body as sexualized and objectified, a number of the female football fans we interviewed viewed sportsmen as objects of erotic pleasure. Middle-aged Beryl is candid about her attraction to players' looks, asserting that “there are a lot of lovely young bodies going around, yeah, their faces aren't too bad to look at either. They are certainly better looking than rugby league players. Though they are not as cute as some of those Socceroos” (referring to Australia’s national soccer team). When discussing one of her favorite players, 45-year-old Sage enthuses “oh yes, he is hot.” And Lily, 32 years old, comments as follows:

Lily: Oh, I love the boys <laughter from group> I love the boys.
Interviewer: Is this the ‘eye candy’ factor?
Lily: Yeah absolutely, it's sort of half and half for me, like I love the skill and all that sort of stuff but also I just love the boys.

The narratives of the respondents presented here disrupt the visual convention that “men act and women appear” (Berger 1972: 47). Women fans of AFL both ‘appear’ as football supporters at live games and ‘act’ in the role of match spectators and, for some, as voyeuristic observers of the men who play it.

The sexual objectification of footballers' bodies by women fans can be considered a transgressive act when viewed in light of feminist film theory that explores how looking has functioned in relations of domination and subordination to position and address gendered subjects (Doane, Mellencamp and Williams 1984; Kuhn 1985; Mulvey 1989/1975). As Jackie Stacey has noted in relation to Hollywood film and technologies of visualization in the West:

Who looks and who is looked at are not neutral phenomena, but rather are cultural practices involving power relations. It has long been recognised that men and women in this culture have a different relationship to the division of looking and being looked at (Stacey 1994: 7).

Arguably the most influential exploration of the patriarchal underpinnings of specular pleasure is offered by Laura Mulvey, who takes a psychoanalytic approach in arguing that filmic processes and conventions locate women as passive objects to be looked at by the male spectator, who derives pleasure from visually possessing the represented female object of desire (Mulvey 1975/1989: 19). This desire commonly takes the form of voyeuristic pleasure, whereby the spectator's power resides in his ability to visually possess the feminine object/other from the dark recesses of the cinema (Mulvey 1975/1989: 20–21). Accordingly, the spectator position is constructed as masculine by a patriarchal viewing economy, which is based on the sexual differential of male as active/subject/looker, and female as passive/object-to-be-looked-at (Mulvey 1975/1989: 19).
In speaking about footballers as objects of sexual desire, the sports fans cited here problematize Mulvey’s assessment, which does not recognize women as active spectators or men as erotic objects of the female gaze. This observation is in keeping with feminist post-structural critiques of the gaze that claim it is too simplistic to posit sexual difference as the basis for the division between the active male ‘looker’ and the ‘looked-at’ passive female (Dolan 1988; Stacey 1994). By occupying the role of active lookers who are unapologetic about the enjoyment and pleasure they derive from “good looking” and “hot” “boys,” female football fans unsettle gendered viewing conventions and resist being positioned as objects of the gaze. The respondents’ constructions of players as objects of erotic contemplation indicates shifts in the discourses of female sexual and social identities away from expectations of passivity and submissiveness and towards a wider social acceptance of expressions of women’s sexuality and sexual desire.

The inversion of the male subject/female object dichotomy is significant in the light of Margaret Morse’s observation that women who look at the male sporting body risk exclusion from “the inner sanctum of sport” because an “erotically charged” female gaze potentially threatens to undermine male primacy in the sporting arena (Morse 1983: 58). While Morse believes this threat is deflected by restricting women’s access to acquiring knowledge about “what is happening on the field” (Morse 1983: 58), this does not appear to hold true for our respondents. As noted previously, with its high numbers of at-ground women supporters AFL is an anomaly amongst football codes because many women, while denied access to many parts of the sport, do acquire a detailed knowledge of it and a deep appreciation of the technical aspects of play. As committed and active spectators, our respondents are not excluded from football knowledge in the way Morse describes. Nonetheless, as we discuss later in this chapter, participants deploy various strategies to diminish the potential threat to masculine sporting authority posed by their sexual objectification of male players.

WHAT’S SO FUNNY ABOUT LOOKING AT SPORTSMEN?

A notable aspect of focus group discussions about attractive male players is the amusement it generated among the fans interviewed. Aside from revealing the pleasure and enjoyment women experience when looking at footballers, the use of humor as a vehicle to articulate sexual attraction to sportsmen presents another potential way that female fans of AFL subtly displace masculine authority in football. The following statement by Poppy, a 26-year-old Sydney Swans supporter, elicited much laughter from the other participants in her focus group—“any sport that I go to I would check their bodies out. Any sport. I go to lots of sport and I always . . . like, even at the cricket with my binoculars I look at Michael Bevan’s [Australian cricketer] bum all the time.” In another group interview, on being asked
if they believe women have a different way of appreciating football than men, Silver, 53 years old, replied “we appreciate their bodies”—another remark that generated considerable laughter from the other women present. By making a joke of lusting after male players, women supporters enact what Duncan and Brummet (1993: 70) have identified as a “subversive fan subject position;” a strategy amongst women sports fans that involves the use of irony and laughter to undermine male dominance and privilege in the sporting realm. While we cannot definitively claim that these fans are making a conscious attempt to usurp male authority in football, the irreverence of their discussion suggests some awareness that they are challenging the status quo, in which women’s sporting participation and achievements are usually marginalized, trivialized or ignored as a means to maintain masculine superiority (Bryson 1990; Messner and Cooky 2010). By joking about men as ‘sex objects’ women turn the tables on sporting conventions whereby it is women athletes who are more likely to be sexualized, as witnessed in televised sport media (Messner and Cooky 2010).

The ludic responses of their focus groups to Poppy’s and Silver’s comments allows their sexual interest in sportsmen to be placed in a comedic frame, thereby permitting desire to be stated without casting the women as sexually permissive. Especially in the case of respondents in midlife and older (from 45 years of age upwards), their age seems to buffer them from potential accusations of being a ‘groupie’—a term used to describe women who show an excessive sexual interest in sportsmen. This is likely because, according to Gmelch and San Antonio (1998: 35), the typical groupie is considered to be a young female, thus enabling older sports fans to talk about the voyeuristic pleasure of looking at male athletes without appearing to pose a sexual ‘threat.’ Peridot, a 62-year-old supporter, is open about finding football players attractive. She states: “I like their looks, I have to say, you are attracted to some of them, a good body, absolutely.” Given the profound lack of cultural recognition of midlife women as sexually active, as evidenced in Hollywood cinema where older women’s sexual agency remains unacknowledged or is rendered pathological (Weitz 2010), laughing at older women fans’ sexual objectification of footballers can be interpreted as a dismissal of their comments as harmless. Indeed, interpreting older female fans’ expressions of desire as funny and/or benign could be attributed to the seeming implausibility of a young male football star ever possibly reciprocating the desire of an older woman supporter.

THE FUNCTION OF EROTIC LOOKING IN THE MAINTENANCE OF HETEROSEXUAL FEMININITY AND MASculINITY

Although female fans’ sexual objectification of footballers unsettles the primacy accorded to the male gaze and the privileged status of male sporting
endeavors, it also validates heterosexuality as the norm within sports that are heavily invested in hegemonic versions of masculinity. Writing about a locker room incident in the 1990s involving the female sports reporter Lisa Olson, Lisa Disch and Mary Jo Kane claim that female ‘looking’ at male athletes is a necessary element in the construction of an idealized version of heterosexual masculinity. This is because women provide the “adoring audience” that valorizes sportsmen’s actions, beliefs and performances “in such a way as to exaggerate his potency and overlook his inadequacies” (Disch and Kane 1996: 287).

In the process of sexually objectifying footballers, female AFL fans simultaneously affirm heterosexual masculinity and minimize their social marginalization in the context of a male-dominated sport by presenting themselves as feminine and heterosexual. When self-professed “sports fanatic” Garnet (30) proclaims that “they [the players] do provide quite a big appeal . . . from a female perspective the AFL players definitely have much better bodies than the rugby league players. Definitely from an aesthetic point of view,” she reaffirms a ‘hegemonic femininity’ that is reliant on heterosexual expressions of desire (Krane 2001). Within Butler’s (1996: 6) ‘heterosexual matrix,’ femininity is performed in a way that secures gender/sex norms whereby female attraction to men, and vice-versa, become culturally desirable formations and enactments of sexuality, in turn constructing heterosexual desire as natural and inevitable. Sexualities outside of the heterosexual matrix are thus positioned as non-normative, hence circumspect. Given that women who express an interest in sport risk being denigrated as overly masculine (Hargreaves 1994: 169) and accusations of lesbianism are a documented strategy to regulate women’s involvement in sport historically (see Lenskyj 1987), the sexual objectification of male athletes facilitates the performance of a heterosexual femininity that assuages any questioning of female fans’ sexual preferences. In effect, performing heterosexual femininity through opposite-sex attraction upholds masculine hegemony in the sporting sphere and potentially reinforces the notion that women only attend men’s sports to look at male bodies (Crawford and Gosling 2004: 486).

The sexual objectification of sportsmen by women supports masculine hegemony only to the extent that it reinforces “certainties about gender relations and sex differences that sport serves to guarantee” (Disch and Kane 1996: 282). Those women who gaze voyeuristically at football players’ bodies in a way that exceeds the acceptable limits of female looking (such as women who are labeled ‘groupies’) threaten a gender order that relies on unequal power relations between men and women—relations that, while socially constructed, are made to appear ‘natural’ and inevitable (Cranny-Francis et al. 2003: 2–3). Women followers of football who look excessively, and who are invested in constructing and maintaining a sports fan identity, confound the gender status quo in sport. By actively negotiating the gender expectations of being both a woman and a fan, the actions
of women AFL supporters who look at footballers in desiring ways expose the instability of seemingly ‘fixed’ gender attributes, while simultaneously reinforcing gender norms in sport.

HARD WORK AND ACTIVE BODIES

Sportsmen are often perceived by women fans according to their actions, rather than their looks, with their athletic capabilities rarely questioned. This contrasts to how female athletes are often portrayed in media accounts, which have been shown to sexualize sportswomen, hence diminish their legitimacy as athletes (Kane and Greendorfer 1994; Lenskyi 1998). Our interviews reveal that women supporters speak about men’s bodies and what they like about watching football in ways that uphold notions of sexual difference, positing men as active and powerful (not passive and objectified) subjects. Alongside the direct references to footballers as sex objects (discussed in the previous sections) were comments that alluded to the sporting skill of male athletes as a feature of their attractiveness. Commenting on watching physically attractive players, Iridium, 29 years old, said to the agreement of the other women in her focus group that, “I don’t know that you could sit there [at the football ground] for 3 hours if that [players’ bodies] is what you were only watching . . . that is a long time.” When asked whether she enjoyed the ‘eye candy’ factor of football spectating, another woman responded: “they [the players] are fit and they are athletes and um, it’s the skill of the play—that is what you appreciate.”

Some respondents expressed an admiration for what the male sporting body can do, rather than seeing it purely as a sex object. Middle-aged Onyx says, “I admire them, I don’t worship or idolize them, I think they are just people and I admire what they do . . . I appreciate the athleticism of the people that are playing. I love to see a fit person achieving, almost over-achieving on the football ground.” Along with athleticism and fitness, hardness and toughness are other tropes commonly used to describe the pleasurable aspects of watching Australian rules football. A woman who goes to games with a group of girlfriends recounts that she likes the “speed of play, toughness, skills.” She and her friends enjoy watching rugged play, the “nitty gritty, getting in there.” This descriptor of ‘hardness’ extends to the functionality of the footballer’s body, as witnessed here in an exchange between one of the interviewers and 40-year-old Aquamarine:

Aquamarine: They are very well physiqued, that’s another thing—you can see how hard they work, they have to work really hard to get to that physique, so they are obviously very fit.

Interviewer: So there is an appreciation of that?

Aquamarine: Oh yes, of course.
Tanzanite, 47 years old, equates hard work by sportsmen with the material results of an attractive ‘hard’ or ‘toned’ body. She opined, “they are athletes, they spend their whole lives toning themselves to play this, so how can they not be attractive?”

Characteristics such as ‘hard work,’ ‘toughness’ and ‘athleticism’ are identified by fans as pleasurable features of watching football and the players. In these accounts, the abilities and qualities of the male sporting body, notably physical exertion and commitment, not only result in a hard body, but contribute to the ‘hardness’ of the game in terms of bodily collisions, tackles and other maneuvers that require strength and fitness. In these instances, the positioning of players’ bodies as voyeuristic objects of a desiring female gaze is countered by reference to sporting skill, power and physicality, which upholds the myth of male athletic superiority and functions to “reinforce an ideology of hegemonic masculinity” (Trujillo 1995: 405). In writing about the representation of American footballers in ABC’s Monday Night Football coverage Trujillo observes that, despite being an object of the television spectator’s gaze, the footballer’s body is configured as either a functional instrument of work and warfare or a commodity to be bought, sold and traded. The only televised instance of footballers being explicitly represented as sex objects occurred in a pre-match video clip, where female rap artists sexually objectified the male footballer’s body. Notably, however, “it was sexualized in a traditional (and hence ‘safe’) heterosexual context” (Trujillo 1995: 417), resulting in the containment of homoerotic tendencies and the simultaneous reinforcing of heterosexual desire.

Sturken and Cartwright (2001: 88) argue that the gaze is never truly reversed when men continue to be shown and perceived as dominant, strong and powerful. Footballers on the field of play do not pose passively in a way that invites the female gaze to linger on their bodies. Additionally, the power of the female gaze is diminished when the objects being looked at (in this case, male footballers), do not respond to “the power of the gaze upon them” (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 88). Footballers are constantly moving around the large, oval AFL playing fields. AFL is a fast-paced game, with players running to and from all parts of the ground. Players will be aware of the women spectators but they may or may not see particular female fans, depending on their locations in large crowds. However, the speed of play severely restricts ocular discourse between players and spectators. The footballer’s body is thus not a static and passive body but a body in motion that averts being penetrated by the female gaze.

Women spectators of Australian rules football complicate the positioning of male and female subjects in a specular economy of desire and difference, as active spectators and passive objects of the gaze respectively. But it is clear from our analysis that simply inverting the binary so that women are made active subjects in the process of looking does not automatically position men as sexualized, degraded objects of female voyeuristic pleasure.
Female fans reinforce the superiority of the sportsman's body through reference to his athletic capabilities, which, in our view, renders problematic the notion that the sexual objectification of male athletes by female spectators constitutes a form of 'reverse' sexism.

THE DESIRING GAZE OF THE FEMALE FOOTBALL FAN: SOME CONSEQUENCES

Despite some respondents candidly objectifying athletic male bodies, others demonstrated an awareness of the potential negative connotations and consequences of doing so. In a focus group of women aged between 18 and 35 years of age, respondents were acutely conscious of being stereotyped as less-serious supporters than their male counterparts if they expressed pleasure in looking at the players:

Respondent: Going back to the 'eye candy' thing . . .
Focus group: <Laughter from group>
Respondent: I actually find it really annoying that people will think that that's the only reason why I'm there . . .
Focus group: <Musings of affirmation>
Respondent: You say you are an AFL supporter and they say that you just go to watch the guys . . .
Focus group: <General agreement>
Respondent: Sure that is part of it but you have got to have the whole package.

This exchange highlights that women fans recognize and contest the assumption that they are only at the match to watch sexually attractive sportsmen. While a visual appreciation of players' bodies adds to some women's enjoyment of football, it is mainly couched as a 'bonus' and not as their main reason for attending games. Jade, in her 50s, agrees that:

... they have really got good bodies. I know women who initially came to the Swans games just to check out the blokes . . . I had a friend who could tell me each week what colour Warwick Capper's [former Sydney Swans player] undies were, and I would say, 'I only go for the game.' I mean, I could have sat there each week just to perve [ogle] at the blokes but I really like the game, it is fast, the game comes first and if there is something good to look at, you just think—well!

Crawford and Gosling (2004: 486) in their study of both male and female ice hockey fans in Britain noted that "the assumption of many (male) interviewees appears to be that, not only are women inauthentic and not dedicated enough in their support, but moreover, they are there to lust after
the young attractive male sporting stars on show." The AFL fans we interviewed were aware that they could be negatively typecast for looking at players' bodies and actively contested such accusations by stressing their considerable knowledge of, and commitment to, the game over and above any voyeuristic pleasure they might experience.

For 20-year-old Topaz, this stereotyping of the female fan appears to be tied to men's perceived superiority as football supporters. She speculates that:

When you are there at the games, guys probably think you are only there to look at the footy players, like to have a perve or whatever . . . but outside the game and just talking to guy friends I know, they do respect my knowledge about footy, but they probably think themselves superior . . . they probably just think it's their area, I suppose.

Women's insistence that the game is their main reason for attending matches debunks the myth that women only go to the football to watch 'hot' male bodies, but respondents' narratives suggest that the enjoyment they derive from looking at footballers is part of performing a socially sanctioned model of normative femininity in the sporting sphere. Presenting oneself as a 'legitimate' female fan, when "football fandom is defined in male terms" (Jones 2008: 518), involves articulating an interest in the opposite sex, but tempering this so that it does not threaten, diminish or degrade the status of the sporting male—as player or fan. These narratives also imply that to acquire 'legitimacy' in the AFL calls for women to align with the classic ideal of the male spectator, which involves curtailing expressions of sexual interest in the male body as a means of upholding ideals of heteronormative masculinity in the sporting sphere. By simultaneously expressing and downplaying the visual pleasure experienced from looking at male athletes, women fans also distance themselves from the perceived 'loose' women in AFL football—those labeled as groupies and predators who are deemed to idolize players for the wrong reasons, that is, in overtly sexual ways (Mewett and Toffoletti 2008: 169–70).

AUTHENTIC SPORTS FANDOM

In rejecting the notion that looking at players is an enjoyable part of watching football some women asserted 'authentic' fan identities. While Giulianotti (2002), in his germinal typology of football spectator identities, observes that there is no privileged mode of being a football fan, we can nonetheless gauge from his writings that authentic sports fan identities are commonly aligned with more traditional attributes such as deep personal and social ties to the club community and long-term dedication to a team that goes beyond market trends and consumer fads, which includes eschewing the idolization of sporting celebrities (Giulianotti 2002: 37–38). Olive,
67 years old, wanted to make it clear from the outset of her interview that she is the type of fan who focuses on the game rather than ogling the players. When introducing herself she stated: “I don’t go for legs, or the bottoms or the short shorts or anything like that.” In her eighties, Tourmaline recounted that as a young woman “we went to watch the game . . . you sort of didn’t rave over them [the players] . . . they weren’t too glamorous. It’s the idol status that has changed it a lot.” Tourmaline’s comment hints at the shift toward the commodification of players along with changing gender norms that open up a space for women to express themselves as sexually desiring subjects. Yet there were some younger fans who, presumably with a greater awareness and acceptance of the commodification and sexualization of the male sporting body, explicitly dissociated themselves from the type of female fan who enjoyed watching male bodies. Emerald, a 22-year-old, agreed that Australian rules football players “are all good looking, but you don’t go for that reason, no I don’t anyway, some other women might.” Supporting Emerald’s argument, 35-year-old Amber observes that “some women go for players’ looks, I know this is a generalization, but I still think it exists.”

Responses to discussions about the voyeuristic pleasures of watching male athletes demonstrate how some women, in their rejection of the sexual objectification of sportsmen, construct themselves as ‘authentic’ fans. This strategy bears similarities to Jones’ (2008) study of English women soccer fans in which she notes that women fans perceive certain conduct at games as improper. Her respondents opined that the ‘wrong’ fanship involves emphasized femininity: feminine dress and makeup, displays of ignorance about sport, disregarding on-field play and expressing a sexual interest in players (Jones 2008: 528). She concludes that “their rejection of these ways of doing fandom suggests that the interviewees thought these women were not proper fans; rather, they felt these women made all female fans look like ‘bimbos’ ” (Jones 2008: 529). While our interviewees do not go so far as to label other women fans “bimbos,” their refusal of any erotic or sexual interest in players is one way by which women fans can be seen as performing fandom ‘properly.’ By rejecting expressions of female heterosexual desire, these women claim authentic fanship and significant commitment to the sport in masculine, heterosexual terms. Accordingly, this tactic may offer a means for female football fans to enhance their status in the male-dominated domain of AFL.

Although of widely different ages, Tourmaline, Olive, Emerald and Amber all assign themselves as ‘authentic’ fans in the male sense of authenticity. These self-styled authentic women fans, in claiming that the sport outstrips any sexual allure of the players, situate themselves as the exception among female spectators. In contrast, respondents who show both a deep commitment to AFL and an interest in looking at footballers challenge the construction of the legitimate fan. As a result, their status as genuine fans may come under question.
CONCLUSION

Feminist sport scholar Pirkko Markula (2005: 5) refers to the need to get past the "falsifying lens" of reality as constructed through men's eyes and, instead, nominates women's experiences as constitutive of a different verstehen. To this end, our consideration of women's experiences of looking at male players reveals the construction of gender and sports fan identity to be a dynamic process whereby women negotiate the act of looking at sportsmen's bodies relative to male-defined notions of 'authentic' sports fandom. Our study shows that female fans, within a heterosexual paradigm of women looking at men, reverse the more usually stated practice of men gazing at and fantasizing about women in sporting and non-sporting contexts. In doing so our respondents resist being located as objects of the male gaze—a position commonly accorded to women in sport—and affirm their status as active participants in the sport-spectating experience. Focus group discussions about footballers as sexually desirable reveal the pleasure and enjoyment experienced by many women fans when watching and talking about 'hot' male athletes. In the group context, women fans' discussions of footballers as 'sex objects' is almost always accompanied by shared laughter, which has the potential to undermine male sporting superiority by making light of sport as a serious leisure pursuit.

Yet we argue that situating women fans as active 'lookers' does not simply invert gender inequalities to sexually objectify sportsmen in the same way and to the same degree as sportswomen. Nor does the act of objectifying the male sporting body through looking accord the female sport spectator a power equivalent to, or greater than, the male gaze to discipline the actions and appearance of gendered athletic bodies. Rather, women's narratives that objectify the male body do so in a way that validates heterosexual femininity and masculinity as culturally desirable expressions of gender and sexuality within the context of sport. Moreover, by referring to footballers as hard, tough and skilful, players are constructed as active, powerful and directed to competing rather than passive 'to-be-looked-at' objects. In sum, the sexual objectification of male footballers by female sports fans does not appear to diminish the privilege accorded to masculine behaviors, actions and values in the sporting realm.

Taking into account the historical, social and cultural conditions in which fans watch football, it appears that women who actively look at male athletes in desiring ways risk jeopardizing their status as 'legitimate' sports fans. Voyeuristic looking is perceived by some respondents to be inconsistent with 'authentic' fandom. Fans that hold this view outright reject the possibility of finding football players sexually attractive, and in the process, construct themselves as more authentic followers of the game than women who enjoy looking at players' bodies. Even for those fans who candidly acknowledge the pleasure they gain from sexually objectifying footballers, the dominant view is that a love for and of the game must always
come before the perceived ‘inauthentic’ behavior of voyeuristic looking. For these respondents, any potential pleasure derived from the female gaze is subsumed under the shroud of the serious supporter.

NOTES

1. The aim of the broader study is to document the experiences of being a female fan of this male-dominated sport as a means of redressing the lack of critical investigation into women's sport-spectating practices.

2. Because of several people speaking at the same time some parts of the focus group interviews have been impossible to transcribe and we have been unable to attribute certain comments in the focus group discussion to any one respondent.

3. Within sport studies, theories of cinema spectatorship have been mobilized to assess the pleasure derived from viewing televised sports (Duncan and Brummet 1989). Like feminist analysis of cinema spectatorship, this research draws our attention to the various mechanisms by which viewers derive enjoyment from looking, and identifies voyeurism, narcissism and fetishism as key aspects of the sport-spectating experience. Yet it does not consider the extent to which modes of viewing are influenced by prevailing expectations of gender behavior and how women might resist the universalizing assumptions of men’s experiences to derive their own meanings from spectating, which remain influenced by women’s interpretations about how they are supposed to look at men.

REFERENCES


