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5 A League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Groupies and Gang Bangs in the NRL

Peter Lorentzen

Background

May 11, 2009 was the equivalent of D-Day for the National Rugby League (NRL) competition, but unlike the Nazi forces of World War II, rugby league headquarters in inner city Sydney knew exactly when and where they were going to be attacked. An Australian Broadcasting Corporation edition of its flagship investigative reporting program, *Four Corners*, was on the verge of exposing the ingrained and festering culture of sexual predatory behaviour among rugby league players. The NRL was accustomed to this kind of attack after years of dealing with a long line of similar exposés, but this was to become the program that brought the problem to an audience wider than just the NRL faithful. Rugby league legend Phil Gould on Channel 9’s *The Footy Show* labelled this “a sledgehammer blow to the NRL” (*The Footy Show*).

One of rugby league’s most highly regarded ex-players and then co-host of *The Footy Show* was Matthew Johns. Johns was at the centre of the attention and initially copped the worst of the backlash as he was named on the *Four Corners* program, ‘Code of Silence’ (Ferguson, 2009) as the instigator of an incident that had taken place in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2002. Here, Johns and teammate Brett Firman and a subsequent conga line of fellow Cronulla Sharks players, literally crawled through a motel bathroom window to participate in a team sex activity with a 19-year-old waitress. The young woman, given the pseudonym, ‘Clare’, in the broadcast, was made anonymous by *Four Corners* but her distress remained starkly obvious. The account of her post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal tendencies after her meeting with the high-profile-playing group left no one untouched. But Clare’s suffering didn’t seem to be at the forefront of the NRL community’s mind given that damage control had well and truly kicked in at headquarters - and when it comes to damage control, the NRL can rely on its media partners to provide almost unlimited support.

Matthew Johns made a pre-emptive apology on *The Footy Show* before the broadcast of *Code of Silence*. He had previously been contacted by ABC reporter Sarah Ferguson for his comments on the allegations made against him, but had declined the opportunity to participate on camera. In his response on Channel 9’s popular NRL program, he explained how sorry he was for the hurt he had caused his family, but no mention of ‘Clare’ was made. Following his remarks, he received a pat on the shoulder from his co-host Paul Vautin with the words “Alright mate, well said. Alright, let’s get on with the show”. With that lumbering roundup, Vautin had attempted to put the pending scandal behind them before it had even erupted. Interestingly enough, in this instance, ‘getting on with the
show’ meant moving to a sketch where Matthew Johns acted as his own ashamed fictional brother who is ‘faulty’ because he is gay (Matabele, 2009). But no amount of ridiculing of sexual minorities could this time close the gates on the biggest sex scandal the NRL had faced. Australia’s media was all over the story, not only for its salacious news value but also because of the bigger historical picture it painted of a sporting culture that condoned the objectification of women as a sort of rite of passage.17

It is a culture where a sexy athlete like the former tennis player Anna Kournikova received more attention and made more money than far more talented players of her generation. A culture where Sports Illustrated’s annual swimsuit edition is the most eagerly anticipated of the year and a nude calendar is a common tool in raising awareness and financial support for female athletes and teams. Women are also pressured into wearing skimpy outfits by their own sporting organisations because of the appeal to a wider, male, audience. Lingerie has even become a uniform in the Lingerie Football League in another, and very successful, attempt to generate attention.

**Gender Dimensions of the Footy Culture**

*Code of Silence* didn’t just reveal the then seven year old case from New Zealand; it described an entire culture within the NRL: a culture where group sex rituals are rife among players, where cover ups of players’ sexual indiscretions are undertaken by clubs, where female groupies are routinely exploited. The program also gave some insight into the traumatic impact the player behaviour has on the female victims. All of these issues had been reported previously to an extent, but every time a new case popped up it seemed that no one was able to connect the dots to show a picture of NRL players displaying a shocking attitude towards women that owed more to misogynistic assumptions about male entitlement than an awareness of appropriate behaviour off the football field.

In a world where sports journalism studies such as the to date most comprehensive of the kind, the International Sports Press Survey 2011 (Horky & Nieland, 2011) show that sports journalism is primarily created by men, about men, and for men, it is no wonder that the stories of sexual misconduct are looked upon with male eyes, with an underlying sense that the idea the victims ‘may have been up for it’ never being far below the surface. It’s a world where the journalists themselves are guilty, as outlined above in reference to Anna Kournikova, Sports Illustrated, nude calendars, skimpy outfits and the Lingerie Football League, of being obsessed with female athletes as sexual objects. The coverage coalesces with the stories that football players have been raised reading, as they dream of becoming the next league great, as John Henningham’s findings from the 1995 survey “A profile of Australian sports journalists” also reflect. Henningham found that sports

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17 c.f. Ben Wadham’s essay at Chapter 2 on a similar culture existing within Australia’s military and by extension in its dealings with the media.
journalists are overwhelmingly male, less educated than other journalists but more conservative in their political values. They are also more supportive of traditional objective journalism but less supportive of investigative roles for the media. The prevalent and continuous narrative about football players is one that hails them as studs while the women who might respond to, or find themselves caught up in the football limelight are ‘up for it’ and deserving of what they get. If this is not penned out specifically in the actual articles then the accompanying reader comment threads do the rest of the work in connecting the dots.

**Consent and Power: Institutions and Gender Bias**

In the aftermath of *Code of Silence*, the media coverage of the program seemed to focus primarily on the notion of sexual consent. No real attention was given to the imbalance of power between the established and wealthy football clubs with their unlimited resources -- not the least easy media access -- versus the account of a young, lone victim.

The distinguishing factor in the *Four Corners* story was that it included an interview with Charmyne Palavi, a self-confessed NRL groupie. She openly discusses her numerous consensual sexual encounters with players and the attraction with these, and how she took part in setting up players with other women. She also reveals that she was raped by a player but did not have the courage to step forward with the story because she would be up against the might of the NRL as well as against the public wrath of a loyal club and player following. But her main role in the program was as a witness to the sexual conduct of a large number of NRL players. After ‘Code of Silence’ had aired on the ABC Charmyne Palavi did indeed get to feel what it is like to be in the middle of a media storm, and what it is like to be scorned in public; so much so that she had to try to explain herself, which she did a week later in a column in the Sydney tabloid the *Daily Telegraph* (Palavi, 2009). She wanted to get the message across that her actions were of her own choice (not including the rape incident), even the bad ones. She wrote:

> ‘Unfortunately, we live in a society where women will always be shut down for the very characteristics men are revered for - being strong, opinionated, fearless and open about their sexuality.
> People seem to be ignoring the bigger issue here while they look for someone to blame. That is - the disrespect for women inherent in the clubs.
> The key to fixing that problem is education. I thought my contribution was a valuable insight into a world so few know exist. Regardless of the poor lifestyle choices I have made in the past I hope to continue speaking up, so those women too afraid to speak out gain some self respect and learn they deserve better.

Her attempt to cast herself as a role model for the empowerment of women was, to the majority of readers, like waving a red rag to a bull. Two hundred and thirty-five comments later they had

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18 This belief is reflected by at least some players in the Four Corners program, when they respond to questions from a facilitator of a training program for young players about appropriate socializing with women.
overwhelmingly decided that she must embarrass her parents and that her parenting skills (Charmyne Palavi is a mother of three) are inadequate; a conclusion that is, in itself, irrational, but in the context of Australia’s historical patterns of demonizing women portrayed in the media as not behaving correctly, makes consistent sense. Under the cape of the anonymity that the Internet and newspaper websites provide, Charmayne Palavi was then ridiculed for not only her behaviour but also her looks. The comments were again reminiscent of the Lindy Chamberlain and Dianne Brimble cases described in Chapter 5, and were in the tone of the following: -

- Shampoo brains! What is your point? Are you the future of our gene pool?
- Let’s play a quiz. Four-letter word, starting with ‘s’, ending with ‘t’, contains letters ‘lu’ in the middle of it. You are an absolute disgrace to humanity; you demean women as well as men...
- What is going on here? Are we now being told that trollops should be treated with respect?? If you act like a tart you’ll be treated like one and that’s how it’s always been and always will be, so what’s the big deal?
- Oh dear, NRL players must be desperate - what a tacky, slutty looking bogan...real classy...
- See what happens when women are given rights!

There were supportive comments to be found as well but only as a minority that drowned in the outpouring of hatred and vitriol where, by comparison, the men at the centre of the ‘Code of Silence’ story that sparked the controversy were apparently of little consequence to at least the blogosphere.

**Cowboys and ‘Cougars’: Media Representations of Women as ‘Groupies’ and Players as Vulnerable**

Charmyne Palavi’s status as a willing groupie was well established by the media before she participated in ‘Code of Silence’. On February 7, 2008 the Daily Telegraph (Christie, J & Harris, A) revealed a liaison with the star player of the North Queensland Cowboys, Jonathan Thurston. Charmyne Palavi was on the basis of her own updates on her Facebook site labelled a “cyber squeeze” and the “Cougar from Coogee”. It was also stated that she had “hooked her claws into the Dally M winner” (an award that every year is given to the best player in the NRL competition) even though it apparently was Thurston who had pursued her for weeks through her MySpace site. When Jonathan Thurston’s manager was asked about the relationship he, according to the writer of the Telegraph column, *Sydney Confidential*, Annette Sharp, laughed off Thurston’s antics with the quip, “There was no curfew and he’s a single man who’s entitled to do what he wants.” The double standards were obvious, as the article did not in any way label Jonathon Thurston’s behaviour promiscuous or concern itself with whether a single woman had the same kind of entitlements.
This was the precise point that Charmayne Palavi later would make in her appeal in the *Daily Telegraph*.

On November 4, 2008 Palavi once again hit the gossip pages, first in England and afterwards back home in Australia, this time thanks to a sexual encounter with the English player Keith Senior. The English version of the story published by the *Sun* centred on the English national player in the headline, *Cheating Senior is a rug rat* (West, A & Thorne, F 2008). Charmyne Palavi was interviewed but her role was to confirm that Senior had indeed cheated on his girlfriend back home while playing in the World Cup in Australia. According to the article, this wasn’t the first time Keith Senior had cheated on a girlfriend. When the story hit Australia in Josh Massoud’s *Daily Telegraph* article, ‘The NRL Cougar Taking Web By Storm’ (2008), it was the antics of the NRL groupie that were the focus of the story (Massoud, 2008, Nov 8). She was described as “our cougar” and, under a picture where Charmyne Palavi posed in a tight top holding two cans of beer; a sexist pun was made in reference to her breasts. It was stated that NRL players were “painfully aware of her existence” and that she was the face of what “NRL stars contend with when they hit the tiles”. She was described as “blonde, busty and (fake) tanned”. And again the reporter wrote that Palavi had gotten “her claws into Senior” as a non-verifiable fact, even though the player apparently made first contact with her via her Facebook page. The story berated her for blabbing about the encounter and speculated that rugby league players were now feeling queasy in the wake of both Thurston and Senior getting burned and their relationships with Ms. Palavi becoming public.

Obviously the queasy feeling didn’t last for long for the cohort of NRL players willing to continue engaging with Palavi. A picture gallery, still available on a range of News Ltd websites like couriermail.com.au (2010) shows her with a who’s who of both present and former NRL footballers. Superstars like Greg Inglis, Darren Lockyer, Scott Prince, Israel Folau, Darius Boyd, John Cartwright and Allan Langer are snuggling up to her, as is Joel Monaghan of the Canberra Raiders. Monaghan is in the picture gallery only described as ‘an unknown man’.

**Sexualised Women as ‘Sluts’: The Court Actions**

The repeated use of the word, ‘slut’, by Australia’s biggest circulating newspapers (at least in their online reader comments pages) finally became too much for Charmyne Palavi. She made two legal attempts to halt the offensive references to her in the media, both relating to her sexual activities and her liaisons with rugby league players. The first action came in the wake of a segment on the Steve Price show on radio 2UE on May 14, 2009, in which the Matthew Johns group sex case was discussed. According to court documents held by the New South Wales District Court, she alleged that the segment implied that she was a ‘slut’, and ‘a madam’ that ‘ran a brothel’. She also alleged that she was defamed by the accusation ‘that she puts NRL players and underage girls together for sex and condones NRL players having sex with underage girls in a very organised fashion. The
second legal action was instigated after a reader comment thread to an article in Brisbane’s 
*Courier Mail* on April 16, 2010, suggested, among other insults, that Charmyne Palavi was a ‘slut’ 
and that she engages in disgraceful sexual promiscuous conduct. Ms. Palavi sued the Courier Mail 
in the NSW Supreme Court for the hurt she had felt by the false accusations.

Charmyne Palavi failed in both quests to clear her name (Charmyne Palavi 2011, Apr 12 & May 31). 
On both accounts the judges found that she had removed evidence from her mobile phones, both 
by deleting images from one and withholding another phone from the courts (Kennedy, L). The 
*Courier Mail* and radio 2UE on the other hand did not have to provide any evidence for Ms. Palavi’s 
promiscuity: the media outlets did not have to explain the relevance of Ms. Palavi’s sex life to its 
readers and listeners nor were they in any way held to account for anonymous comments on their 
website. No questions at all were being asked about the importance of demeaning Ms. Palavi; it all 
came down to the missing proof from her own mobile phones, which the courts, the newspaper 
and its readers clearly thought would prove Charmyne Palavi’s ‘slutty’ character. The defamation 
action against the *Courier-Mail* was struck out in April 2011, on the back of another court’s 
dismissal of the defamation action against 2UE after the telephone evidence was not produced. 
When Charmayne Palavi’s legal team appealed both cases, they were again struck out in March 
and June 2012. Disappointingly for a scholarly journal, even the *Gazette of Law and Journalism*’s 
report of the legal outcomes referred to the hapless Palavi as a ‘cougar’.19

**The Sexual Assault Scandals**

NRL players have a long history of getting involved in sexual scandals. The first time a case had a 
huge public impact was in the 2004 pre-season when six players from the Canterbury Bulldogs 
were accused of gang-raping a 20 year old woman at a resort in Coffs Harbour, New South Wales. 
Despite the woman’s allegations, obvious distress and that she had been found the following 
morning bleeding and taken in an ambulance to hospital, no charges were laid against any 
Canterbury players because of a lack of evidence. In parts of the media, police statements about 
“being adamant an attack had taken pace” were interpreted as the police knowing something 
sinister had taken place but lacking the evidence to prove it. This was, for instance, the case in the 
entry, *No rape charges against Canterbury Bulldogs*, by Anne Summers (2005), on her eponymous 
website, but overwhelmingly the sports pages reported that the Bulldog players had been cleared 
of any wrongdoing.

The incident in Coffs Harbour followed a similar case the previous year where a 46-year-old 
woman had accused one Bulldog player of raping her while another was looking on waiting to do 
the same. But after the 2004 case, the broader public learned about the sexual bonding sessions

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19 *Gazette of Law & Journalism*. (2012, June 25) Cougar Loses Appeal Over Strikeout. NSW Court of Appeal, NSWCA 182, 
Beazley JA, Basten JA & Tobias JA.
that apparently were rife among the players. Jacqueline Magnay in *The Age* (2004, Feb 29) quoted an anonymous Bulldogs player:

“Some of the boys love a ‘bun’,” said one. “Gang banging is nothing new for our club or the rugby league.”

And after that it wasn’t unknown to the Australian public either. After the Bulldogs scandal, there was a common defence of what had taken place as having been consensual and just a typical night out for rugby league players. Despite no charges being laid, the Bulldogs still chose to sack the club’s football manager; and the club’s chief executive subsequently resigned. In the wake of the media storm, the club was fined $150,000 by the NRL for not protecting the game’s image. Other incidents reported in various media have included the two 2008 rape cases against New Zealand Warriors’ Michael Crockett (Kay, 2008) and Gold Coast Titans’ Anthony Lafranchi (Davies, 2008); and the rape, drug, and illegal filming of sex in a toilet cubicle case against Brisbane Broncos players Karmichael Hunt, Sam Thaiday and Darius Boyd (AAP, 2009, May 17). These cases all ended up being dismissed on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

Numerous more scandals have been covered. According to Deb Waterhouse-Watson in *(Un)reasonable Doubt: A ‘Narrative Immunity’ for Footballers against Sexual Assault Allegations* (2011), more than 20 cases have been reported in the media (with players from both the NRL and the Australian Football League (AFL) involving at least 56 players and officials, but none have ended with a conviction. Just making it to a trial in front of jurors, as did the poster boy for both the Manly Sea Eagles and the whole of the NRL, Brett Stewart, in 2010, is an uncommon occurrence. In September of that year, Stewart was cleared of sexually assaulting a 17-year-old girl the year before (Arlington, 2010), and no court case has ever been made against multiple players. Normally however, cases do not go any further than the historically more forgiving – of behaviour constructed as ‘natural’ and acceptable for men – process of trial-by-media. This is where public opinion, as seen in the comment threads accompanying newspaper articles and by callers to talk back radio stations, and journalists in overly familiar contact with clubs and players, jointly create a picture of famous players being unfairly targeted by unscrupulous groupies; ergo by ‘bad women’. According to prominent media studies analyst Professor Catharine Lumby, who has written about media representations of ‘bad girls’ and also about Australia’s chauvinistic football culture, it was up to the media to take the sexual exploitation issue seriously. Lumby writes:

> The *Four Corners* program on Rugby League that sparked *so much commentary* about what some footballers do to women quite rightly provoked a horrified reaction. Sarah Ferguson, the journalist responsible, certainly deserves a Walkley for her ability to get women who’ve been through trauma to talk so openly.

> As someone who’s been part of a pro-bono team working on exactly the issues the program shone a light onto - men team bonding over women or even assaulting them - I’m left waiting for a lot of the media who followed her story to ask the most

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important question. What is being done, and what can we do to prevent this kind of
behaviour wherever we find it?

In his 2006 *Tom Brock Lecture* (Rowe, 2006) hosted by the Australian Society for Sports History
David Rowe pointed to a deep running larrikinism inside the rugby league environment that
rejected all talk about issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia. He said that willing sports
journalists had gladly helped the NRL community in this endeavour:

In this denial they have been aided and abetted by most sports journalists, whose
visceral loathing of social critics of sport is matched only by their passionate
identification (sometimes to the point of idolatry) with the objects of their gaze.

Raymond Boyle has also famously described the issue in the book *Sports Journalism: Context and
Issues* (2006). Boyle notes that sports journalists prefers to stay on good terms with their sources,
the clubs, and players, and to ensure that they would retain access to stories and exclusives and
not endanger the relationship with a one off front-page story.

An example of this journalistic boys’ club could be found in an article that appeared in the *Sun-
Herald* on May 10, 2009 (Wiedler, 2009b), the day before *Code of Silence* went to air. Channel 9’s
rugby league reporter Danny Wiedler wrote a column where he admitted to having known about
the incident in New Zealand for years but had kept quiet out of respect for Johns. He did not try to
defend Johns’ actions but he did his best to put them in the best possible light by explaining that
‘Clare’, in the crudest of terms, begged Johns for more sex. Wiedler also quoted Johns’ lawyer who
called the young woman’s case ‘flimsy’, and repeatedly stressed that all the Cronulla Sharks
players involved were cleared of any criminal wrongdoing (even though they had not been cleared,
as charges were never laid). Danny Wiedler had opened his story by establishing that he was both
a colleague and friend of Johns. How, under those circumstances, he would be able to report
objectively on the story is a matter probably best left to his own ethical compass. A week later in
his next column (Wiedler, 2009a), Wiedler kept up the defence of Johns by attacking the *Four
Corners* program for being full of holes and flimsy journalism (he *did* re-use Johns’ lawyer’s word
*flimsy*). His article also dubbed the sexual assault case an ‘afternoon-romp’.

It is a common theme in the articles relevant to the cases discussed in this chapter that sports
journalists prefer to use the least loaded words when they cannot avoid reporting on the sexual
bonding sessions between NRL players. *Group sex* is a widespread way of referring to what is
taking place; *gangbang* is not. This is the case even though their actions seem more similar to a
pack of wolves on the hunt ganging up on its victim than a group that is willing to include a
stranger, a woman, in its fellowship. This was made clear by ‘Clare’s’ account in the *Four Corners*
program. The unwillingness to report on negative stories about sports stars had puzzled the
reporter on Code of Silence, Sarah Ferguson, in her research. In an interview in the Australian (Kogoy, 2009) she said: -

There wasn't one person at Cronulla who did not know about the incident - the entire team and football staff - but it managed to get very little airing at the time. Forty members of the Cronulla team and its staff were interviewed by (New Zealand) police and apart from one or two brief news stories at the time, because there was no police charges laid, nothing was done whatsoever.

Initially, the sympathy outpouring to Matthew Johns' way did not prevent him from losing his job with Channel 9, or his role as assistant coach with the NRL club Melbourne Storm. But Johns' misfortune didn't last. In the numerous articles that were written about his role in the Christchurch motel room, how he was subsequently portrayed in the Four Corners program, and in an interview together with his wife Trish conducted by Nine TV network's Tracy Grimshaw on the commercial tabloid program, A Current Affair (2009), a large part of public opinion took his side and argued he was being treated unfairly. Comments attached were similar to the ones that accompanied the article, ‘Matthew Johns Guilty of Stupidity, Not Abuse’ in the Newcastle Herald (Magnay, 2009) shortly after Code of Silence had reignited the controversy: -

- Usually i'm very critical of league players and supporters but i think Matthew has taken too much flak in this case. All concerned should pay a fine towards rebuilding the damage they have done.

- Enough!!! iIam sick of hearing about this. It was consensual group sex 7 years ago. So now the girl has changed her mind and decided she regrets what she did. Group sex – wife swapping, swingers or whatever they used to be called – is not illegal, just distasteful to some of us.

- I think mat should sue channel 9 and the storm for false dismissal.

- What a disgrace. 7 years later and after the police found no crime had been comitted, [sic] a mans life is destroyed by some vindictive woman. Money involved???? Of course. (...) We all know these groupies hurl themselves at big named players etc. Matt and Trish, say nothing more, it's a matter between the 2 of you. You will only get stitched up by the media. Good luck to you both and your family.

However, the vindication of Johns would not be sustained. Several support groups quickly appeared on Facebook, the main one, Support Matthew Johns, still has almost 200,000 members. This can be seen in contrast with the biggest anti-Matthew Johns group that has 545 members, while there are no support groups available for people wanting to help 'Clare'. The public backing was there and Channel 9 did not take long to notice. It was reported in the Daily Telegraph in September 2009 that Johns had been approached to return to the network but had rejected the offer. Instead, the following year Matthew Johns went to rival television Channel 7 where he fronted a new rugby league-based variety program called The Matty Johns Show.

The program was taken off the air after one season and Matthew Johns instead went to work for radio station Triple M on the breakfast show The Grill Team. For ‘Clare’, being vilified by media commentators and in comments from readers and listeners was not the experience she had hoped for. She felt inclined to contact Four Corners to plead for help in getting the media to leave her in
peace. In an update (Spencer & Ferguson, 2009) to the program published on the ABC’s website, the program allowed ‘Clare’ the last word on the saga: -

I am being harassed in the most awful ways and what is being reported by journalists is horrible and untrue. They have got people speaking of me that are not my friends or people I have never met. It feels like I am living in a nightmare. All I wanted to do was to make people aware of the culture and stop it happening to other girls.

People are aware of the culture, but that does not mean that her experience will not be re-lived by more young women, not as long as the Australian media continues to see ‘sluts’ and male role models as a match made in sporting heaven.
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