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And so, we’re off! Last night the Australian Football League (AFL) season began. It’s a time for reclaiming footy scarves from the back of the wardrobe, scheduling home games into the calendar and entering the work footy-tipping competition.

Research has demonstrated that male sport fans think women are less dedicated and serious about following sport. Below is a list of four different fan types that we identified from our research talking to female AFL fans around the country – the largest study of its kind undertaken in Australia.

We found the 68 women we interviewed are obsessive about Aussie Rules and every bit as committed
as their male counterparts. These self-identified fans agreed to take part in our study after hearing about it through their club, via friends or through advertisements placed in newspapers and online.

We also discovered the process by which women become fans is more complicated and interesting than most people previously imagined.

From our results, we developed the following four types:

**In the bloods**

You were born into footy. You cannot remember a time when you didn’t go to games on the weekend. Our childhood heroes wore a number on their back.

In the bloods:

- have parent(s) who are/were keen fans; may also have other relatives closely associated with the sport
- started to attend games with parents and were socialised into football fandom from an early age
- are from a state where Aussie Rules is the major football code (Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia), or their parents are
- consider fandom, including an unbreakable connection with a particular team, to be an important aspect of their identity
- are among 62% of fans from our sample group
Learners

Footy hasn’t always been your passion but you’ve never hated it, either. Watching the occasional game on TV and going to a few matches with mates was enough to pique your interest. On the Couch is now essential viewing. You wonder how you ever lived without footy.

Learners:

- developed an appreciation of Aussie Rules progressively from attending games with others and/or watching football on television
- attend more games as knowledge and enjoyment of the sport grows
- eventually become ardent fans
- are among 24% of the female fans we spoke to
Converts

Becoming a fan was a revelation. Something switched in your brain the moment the siren sounded, the crowd cheered and the ball was bounced. You hardly recognise your life before football.

Typically, converts:

• change abruptly from being indifferent or even opposed to football to becoming “instant” fans
• attend a game, often their first, and are “transformed” by it into fervent, committed fans
• experience something akin to religious conversion, where people become suddenly devout following what they claim to be a divine revelation
• are among a small minority of fans in our sample – just 10%

Sexually transmitted fandom (STF)

You've swapped drinks with the girls for weekends at the ‘G. The boyfriend is long gone, but your love of football remains.

STFs are a rare (4% of participants in our study) type of fan who:
was introduced to football by a partner

knew little or nothing about football and had no interest in it before meeting their partner

initially attended games at the insistence of a partner, but became knowledgeable about football in their own right and an avid supporter

The AFL boasts high numbers of female spectators http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4174.0Main%20Features%202009-10?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4174.0&issue=2009-10&num=&view=, and AFL clubs do well in attracting and retaining women members – but no-one has thought to ask how women supporters come to football.

Knowing how women are socialised into fandom is valuable information from a sports marketing and promotion perspective. In a rapidly changing, globalised sporting arena driven by the commercial concerns of media broadcasting, corporate sponsorship and sports betting, women are a lucrative consumer cohort.

Our findings show that parents, friends, partners and the media are all avenues to recruit women to football spectating.

But the scenarios presented here go beyond catering to corporate strategies to sell more club memberships, merchandise or media. Greater knowledge about how women become fans may precipitate changes in how sporting associations, sports media, and wider society value women’s relationships to sport.

**Busting the stereotypes of female fandom**

Our research debunks a couple of persistent myths about women sport fans. These myths concern women’s motivation for attending football, which is commonly explained in terms of their duties as mothers (women support football because it is a “family” game), or dismissed as something that women do mainly because the men in their life are into footy.

These assumptions about why women follow football reinforce some particularly stubborn gender stereotypes. These stereotypes include the belief that men are authentic and more devoted sport fans whose knowledge and understanding of sport is better than women’s. The other related idea is that women only go to the football to stare at guys in tight shorts.

Of all the fans we interviewed, this is the least likely way that women become supporters.

Our study also reveals that while family features significantly in the way women become fans – overwhelmingly women are socialised into following a team through their parents – they develop a connection with and enjoyment of AFL that prevails independently of family.
And while some of the women we talked to were unashamed to say that they appreciate hot bodies, many more rejected this stance. Female fans unanimously agree that they watch football for the skill, athleticism, competition and atmosphere.