

# TV Made it All a New Game : Not Again! - Rugby League and the Case of the ‘Superleague’<sup>1</sup>

*Mark Falcous*  
School of Physical and Health Education  
Queen’s University  
Kingston, Ontario  
Canada

## Abstract

On 8 April, 1995, the English Rugby Football League (RFL) in association with media magnate Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation launched the ‘European Superleague’. The venture that incorporated the amalgamation of established clubs, the creation of new, market oriented franchises and a switch from a traditional winter game to a summer playing season marked a profound change from the 100-year history of rugby league. This paper examines the effects of this pay-per-view television-inspired intervention on the cultural attachments to the sport of rugby league. It is argued that the market driven Superleague has led to a rearticulation of cultural consumption patterns. Specifically there has been a dissolution of parochial community attachments and fragmentation of live spectating rituals. Further, the commercially driven priorities of the Superleague are implicated in the creation of new cultural attachments such as the emergence of corporate support, and the creation of a television fandom. This transformation is the result of the appropriation of rugby league within the eclectic dynamics of the global capitalist marketplace. Examples of indigenous reinterpretations of global cultural products are outlined. This renegotiation at the local level is viewed as a *global relocalisation*, whereby parochial concerns and traditions are renegotiated in the face of global flows yet retain a degree of localised distinctiveness. Discussion also locates the case of the Superleague within the globalisation of culture debate, specifically the local-global nexus and its implications for local cultures. The need for further work into the impacts of the globalisation of sport is highlighted, particularly with reference to the complexity of the local in its reactions to the global, and the frames of reference within which local distinctiveness may be formulated.

The so-called Superleague, announced in April 1995, marked a significant departure from the playing structure of British Rugby League and raised much consternation among fans. The implications, however, extended beyond the reorganisation of the game’s playing dimensions. The new Rupert Murdoch-backed competition marked the culmination of a number of forces exerted upon rugby league and threatened radical changes for the cultural attachments to the game. Reactions to it highlighted the conflicts that these forces created at the cultural level. The two sides of this conflict are demonstrated below; with the strength of the ties to the game demonstrated by the perceived magnitude of the threat of the Superleague at the local level, which many observers compared with

the decline of the coal mining industry in Northern England. This stood in stark contrast to the official 'view' of the Superleague espoused by the rugby league authorities:

The Sell-off of Rugby League is as destructive a blow to the northern communities as the pit closures ever were and it could be the coup de grace (Clayton et al., 1995, p. 46).

Round here men were thrown out of work when the pits shut. They lost their identity, their self respect, their standard of living and a way of life. The one thing that bonded them was the Rugby Club. It gave them pride in their town, something to identify with, a focus for the community. Now this is being taken away from them and all in the name of greed. (Clayton et al., 1995, p. 55).

Times are changing. For History, passion and tradition now read profit margin, advertising revenue and viewing figures. Television is king. Is King Rupert really interested in the social history of the West Riding? Does he know where or what the West Riding is? (Clayton et al, 1995, p. 51).

The advent of Super League in British Rugby League's Centenary season is the most exciting thing to happen to the game in its long and distinguished history. Superleague will enable the sport in this country to expand dramatically beyond its traditional boundaries. It will maximise the potential of the game which is already recognised as one of the most breathtaking, skilful and athletic spectacles in sport. At the same time the international scene will open up dramatically for further expansion in Europe, the Americans and Asia. The opportunities now on offer within rugby League are phenomenal. (Superleague...The opportunities. RFL Publication, 1995)

This paper examines the clash between the parochial community attachments, graphically illustrated above, that had characterised the game of rugby league throughout its 100-year long history, and the 'global vision' of the television inspired 'Superleague' that threatened a radical change for these cultural attachments and the traditional patterns of spectatorship. In order to accomplish this task, it is necessary to place the effects of the Superleague within the context of the historical development of rugby league and its associated cultural affiliations. A substantive account of the game of rugby league, the

implementation of the Superleague and the nature of the tensions that it encompassed follows. Finally, an attempt is made to locate the nature of changing spectating/consumption patterns and attachments within the globalisation of culture debate.

### **Broken-Time, Acrimony and Identity: Rugby League to Superleague**

Rugby league was borne of a number of conflicts of class, power and ideology that led to the bifurcation of rugby into two codes toward the end of the Nineteenth Century (Martens, 1996). The result was the emergence of two independent games, governed by separate bodies and ultimately encapsulating different playing rules. First, rugby union, governed by the Rugby Football Union (RFU) and second, rugby league that emerged as a reaction to the strict amateurism of the Union game. It was founded on the principle of allowing 'broken-time' payments to compensate players for lost time from work on 29 August 1895, at the George Hotel, Huddersfield, twenty-one clubs formed a Northern RFU known since 1922 as the Rugby Football League (RFL). Such payments had become a necessity amongst the working classes, to whom the game had filtered down from its Public School origins. Ultimately the breakaway code has progressed to full professionalism at the top echelons, as well as incorporating an extensive amateur structure. Such is the strength of the class ties associated with the two codes, it has been proposed:

There is little doubt that even allowing for a little blurring of the parameters in modern times Rugby League is still regarded as a game for the masses (lower order) and Rugby Union for the classes (upper) (Gate, 1989, p. 14).

Whilst this may be a crude and rather simplistic statement, in essence it remains applicable. Even allowing for anomalous concepts of class, the cultural ties of the two games, particularly amongst spectators remains distinct. From these early roots in the working classes, rugby league has remained confined to its original base in the industrial towns of Northern England. The game is characterised by teams in closely grouped towns with fierce local rivalries enhancing the sense of localism and parochial concerns that the game encapsulated.

For those communities that surround the clubs, the game emerged as an important component of cultural life. Metaphorically for many, literally for a few, the sport was an escape from the 'social' discipline of Northern industrial towns based around the coal and textiles industries. Central to the feelings of community identity associated with rugby league was the ritual of spectatorship. Live attendance came to offer a collective experience, which made possible a sense of belonging for supporters. The ritualised involvement that emerged was

symbolised by teams colours, songs and folk heroes that provided a sense of sameness through generations.

Due to the specific geographical and cultural attachments of clubs, they were not generally run as conventional businesses. This air that surrounded clubs, not as commercial ventures but as community representatives, was perpetuated by the motives of those that ran the clubs. Club owners, under such circumstances, Whannel suggests 'were more interested in power and prestige in the community. . . (sport) was a way of becoming known and sustaining business contacts' (1983, p. 57). The reasons for involvement in many cases were not, in a direct sense, motivated by profit. The small 'markets' that arose from the regionalisation of the game, however, meant that clubs often teetered on the financial brink. The insular nature of the game ensured that it remained largely within its Northern stronghold with the level of associated economic activity remaining at a low level.

### **Background to the Superleague**

The implementation of the European Superleague was the result of a struggle to secure dominance of the pay-per-view TV market in Australia between media moguls Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer, who became embroiled in a struggle to broadcast rugby league in Australia. Due to the game's wide popular appeal in Australia it would have been very difficult for either to achieve significant enough subscriptions for a pay-TV network to survive without it. A player bidding battle resulted as Murdoch signed players to set up his own Australian 'Superleague' competition to give him the TV product his Foxtel network needed. Packer alternatively backed the traditional body, the Australian Rugby League (ARL) trying to secure his existing Pay-TV interests.

In an attempt to win this struggle, Murdoch's parent organisation, News Corporation, turned its attention to Great Britain. In April of 1995, in an £89 million five year deal it agreed with the RFL to establish a 'European Superleague' of fourteen teams. The plan included proposals to merge teams based on geographical proximity incorporating only those with the best 'markets', and also a switch from the traditional winter playing season to a summer one. This League conveniently coincided with News Corporation's existing satellite TV concerns in the UK- SKY TV, upon which the new competition was to be broadcast. The proposed Superleague was to include established clubs and new teams created by merging existing ones and additionally two new French sides. The remaining domestic clubs were to play in an English feeder division. The climax of this new structure was to be a knock-out tournament between the top European and Australian sides. Such matches were now a possibility with the switch to a summer season and subsequent alignment of the two playing seasons. In this manner News Corporation hoped to ensure that it would give credibility to

its fledgling Australian Superleague by adding an international dimension, and thus win the struggle for a pay-TV product in Australia. To ensure this the Murdoch organisation additionally signed up en-bloc the elite competitions in France, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. British Rugby League had been used as a tool in a broader global struggle. The plans for the game in Britain were, however, beset with problems. What had made sense in marketing terms to those with a global outlook, was full of cultural contradictions at the local level within the historical legacy of parochialism that surrounded rugby league.

### **Supporter Backlash to the Superleague**

Whilst reactions amongst followers of the game, in some quarters, was divided, supporters of British clubs that would lose their identity to the proposed mergers were outraged. At the first games, the day following the announcements of the Superleague proposals, there were many peaceful yet impassioned fan protests against the plans. Keighley, a club that by right had won promotion to the first division, but was to be excluded from the Superleague that replaced it, announced it planned to claim damages in the High Court. Keighley fans marched on RFL headquarters at Chapletown Road, Leeds to protest. The Professional Players Association also voiced reservations about the loss of jobs that would inevitably result from the mergers. A Labour-backed parliamentary petition called for government action on the Superleague proposals. Additionally Members of Parliament investigated legal challenges to the Superleague, including a possible reference to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, and called for the National Heritage Select Committee to investigate the Superleague plans. The passions aroused were perhaps best illustrated in West Yorkshire where a book opposing the Superleague entitled *Merging on the Ridiculous* was written and published within one week of the announcement of the plans. The amount of media attention that the proposed Superleague attracted meant that resistance to the plans received maximum exposure and resulted in a great deal of unwanted negative publicity for News Corporation. Underlying much of the protests were fears of its control over the game.

Subsequently, on 30 April 1995, less than one month after the original plans were announced, the structure of the Superleague was re-assessed. The game was reorganised into a three tier competition including a Superleague and two feeder Leagues. In the final outcome no clubs were merged and none were lost. The game in Britain received a vast amount of money to retain what was essentially a similar structure to that under which it had previously worked. Local interests had seemingly successfully fought off the market driven globalising tendencies of a media magnate. Subsequently, however, events suggest that this 'victory' was considerably more superficial than it seemed. Several developments have heightened fears of control of the sport by a media organisation.

## **Global Victory over Local Fans**

The issue that raised the most consternation was that of the proposed mergers between clubs, which marked a direct threat to the parochial attachments of fans and spectators for whom clubs played an important role in cultural identity. These concerns were in contrast to RFL desires for a financially sound and expanded game, and News Corporation's wish for an attractive television product with a broad appeal, beyond the traditional Rugby League strongholds. Although the mergers were successfully fought off at the time and subsequently 'shelved' - the resolution to create a more market oriented League was undiminished. In the revised version of the Superleague only one team from the proposed merger areas was admitted. Teams whose playing record had previously seen them in the top flight were relegated to the lower 'feeder' divisions. The goals of the RFL and Superleague, in terms of consolidating spectator and television markets were therefore still achieved. Clubs faced the dilemma of either losing their identity forged through 100 years of community representation, or alternatively forgoing the right to compete at the elite level of the Superleague. Although mergers were avoided, this came at the cost of *changing* identity. Those communities excluded, whilst maintaining their individual identities had been condemned to a lower playing level. Additionally the greater revenue channelled to the Superleague clubs meant that the excluded clubs would find it harder to compete with the top clubs in playing terms; therefore the pressure to attract greater revenue by merging and combining markets is still present as a threat to local identities. This pressure was reinforced by the RFL mechanism of 'fast-tracking' that allowed teams to be artificially promoted to the Superleague if they fulfilled certain, largely market based, criteria. Thus clubs are presented with the incentive to sever local attachments in favour of the financial incentives of the Superleague.

Since the revised Superleague was accepted, several developments have heightened fears of the dominance of the media interests of the sports-TV symbiosis, of which the Superleague is the embodiment. Rule changes were implemented prior to the start of the opening of the first summer Superleague season in March 1996, arousing fears for the autonomy of the game. What was particularly significant about these changes was that they were implemented midway through the shortened Centenary season, an interim competition to allow the transition to the summer Superleague. Although the rule changes were of a relatively minor nature there was additional speculation of other more far reaching changes such as the possibility of dividing the game into four quarters, stopping the clock for goal kicks and unlimited substitutions, all of which would distance the game further from its historical roots. Even more startling plans from Australia emerged as the Superleague there, it was reported, had a contingency plan if it lost its court case with the ARL, with whom it was still embroiled in a

bitter struggle. This so called 'doomsday option', which included 11-a-side teams, forward passes and the abolition of scrums, was designed to make the game unrecognisable from its original form

Finally the revelation of the 'loyalty' clause in player contracts (*The Independent*, 'Television Threatens Tyranny', 20 Dec. 1995) led to consternation over the degree to which News Corporation now controlled the game. This clause, 'You will not modify, amend or terminate your contract without News' prior consent', seemed to offer a degree of control to News Corporation over which club signed players would play for. Despite rigorous denials of the implications of this clause, it threatened to fulfil a similar function as a 'draft' system, as is commonly seen in North America. The above examples are illustrative of the appropriation of the game by the forces of Murdoch's News Corporation empire. The levels of control exerted by these commercial interests demonstrate the thorough acquisition of the game at the structural level, irrespective of teams not merging and maintaining their identities. In the final outcome, the global influence over the local was pervasive in re-orienting the game along commercial lines irrespective of initial supporter resistance.

### **Changing Consumption Patterns: Fragmenting the Local**

One of the most evident influences of the Superleague has been the varying scheduling and playing of matches, which has implications for live spectating rituals at the local level. Television protocols have resulted in the manipulation of start times to concur with broadcasting schedules, most often to maximise advertising revenue by coinciding with peak viewing times. Whereas a Sunday afternoon kick off used to be standard, the demands of TV now dictate that games are spread out throughout the week. Such alterations contribute to the disruption of habit and the loss of routine of live attendance. An example of the disaffection caused by TV-scheduling was given by Greg Wood in the *Independent On Sunday* ('Cold Blows the Winds of Change', 9 Jan 1996) who noted that at a Castleford match when it was announced that the forthcoming game, previously scheduled for the next Sunday had been moved back to Friday night 'A low groan emerged from the terraces [sic] "Bloody Television", one woman muttered'. This threat to live spectating rituals through the disruption of habit further implicates the Superleague in the fragmentation of local community identity through rugby league. The widely expected rise in admission prices as a result of the Superleague also threatens to place the game outside the financial means of many fans. The advent of the Premier League in soccer - a similar satellite-TV inspired league absent from the levels of controversy that the Superleague provoked - led to a sharp rise in admission prices. Similar moves in rugby league stand to further diminish live spectating rituals, where industrial decline and high unemployment levels have perpetuated the austerity of the people of the north.

The Superleague also accelerated the propensity of historic teams to adopt commercially motivated nicknames. The adoption of nicknames in preference to locally known appendages is further implicated in severing the links with localised communities. Old team names typically made reference to local industry, places, land marks and historic team colours. Based firmly in the locality, these names have been replaced by anonymous, 'placeless' titles. Thus the Barrow club, formerly known as the Shipbuilders have become the 'Braves', Whitehaven Colliers the 'Warriors' and Castleford Glassblowers the 'Tigers' and so on. Additionally, the traditional club crests, typically based upon the towns coat of arms have been replaced by more marketable logos that lack local connections.

Further innovations have included pre-match entertainment and the introduction of mascots. Such marketing strategies are illustrative of financial imperatives that are modelled along the lines of a global consumer culture in attempts to 'sell' the game. In the localised context of rugby league, however, not all the strategies have been successful, Kelner points out that the mascot although 'designed to increase the games appeal leads to have the reverse effect on those who have already pledged their allegiance' (1996, p. 9). Financially motivated commercial imperatives are in direct conflict with the existing cultural attachments embedded in notions of place pride and the wider social forces that have shaped attachments to the game. Central to many of the criticisms of the imposed 'razza-matazz' was the manner in which it disrupted the traditions of live spectating and the 'terrace community' that was at the heart of that tradition. The fan comments below illustrate this conflict:

I find entertainment unnecessary. I like to savour the atmosphere and excitement of looking forward to a good contest. I like to listen to the banter, talk to the regulars who stand nearby.

Pre-match entertainment is pointless to me, people go to watch rugby and be entertained on the field, not off it. People just go early to have a pint or something to eat and maybe watch a curtain raiser . . . on the terrace and talk rugby which is what the day is all about.

The manifestations of the Superleague are transforming existing cultural attachments of rugby league, including the fragmentation of live spectating rituals at the local level, the dissolution of community attachments through the predominance of TV priorities, and overt commercialism. Equally as important, the Superleague is implicated in the creation of new global attachments to the game.

To replace the live parochial fan, the Superleague has targeted a new audience for rugby league - that of the viewer/consumer. The greater TV exposure given to the game on the SKY network is implicated in the creation of a new TV-fandom. Attempts at winning over this new fandom were evident during SKY television broadcasts of the inaugural Superleague season. They were aimed at attracting a new fan base with vivid images of spectacular match action, but also through educating the uninitiated viewer. Fan education was fulfilled with sections of programming that explained rules and terminology with the use of graphics. Whilst fulfilling a function in 'converting' new spectators, such inclusions were more likely to stand as anathema to existing fans.

The intensive TV coverage and promotion are not in contraposition to the live gate. SKY TV is also actively involved in promoting live attendance at Superleague games, Commentator Eddie Hemmings urges the non-fan (particularly the new spectator) 'Don't forget . . . There's nothing like being there at Superleague, if you haven't tried it before why not pay a visit to your local ground this weekend' (Boots 'N' All, *Sky Sports*, 9 May 1996). The motivations behind this policy are not in contradiction to TV coverage, but related to it. Thus Vic Wakeling, head of SKY Sports candidly states 'if you haven't got bums on seats in the stadiums, we haven't got a good atmosphere. and sport without atmosphere is a loser for everyone' (cited in Kelner, 1996, p. 154). This kind of 'plugging' and promotion through pre-match entertainment is implicated in attracting a qualitatively different live fan from those traditional local fans to whom the new-found razzamatazz, mascots and nicknames may not be attractive.

Finally, the Superleague has augmented the trend toward attracting 'corporate' support that had arisen along with the acceleration of commercial imperatives. The lucrative nature of corporate hospitality packages was virtually unheard of at rugby league grounds as little as a decade ago. However the commercial concerns of the Superleague have accelerated the moves toward attracting this form of spectator or more appropriately 'consumer'. The qualitatively different kinds of live attendant therefore that are now being sought also signal a shift away from parochial localism. This shift has seen a change in recent times in terms of spectator provision, with an increase in the amount of covered seating areas and corporate hospitality 'boxes' in new stadium developments. Such moves are in contrast to the provision for the traditional fan who has enjoyed the experience of collectivity and ritualistic involvement in a larger group than the concrete standing terrace offered.

The opening up of such new markets through the far-reaching Murdoch empire was a driving force behind the establishment of the Superleague; for example the comment of John Ribot, initial Chief Executive of the Australian Super League, leaves little doubt as to the pre-eminence of commercial concerns of those involved in establishing the Superleague:

Do you know what's going to be great about Superleague? We're going to take the product to the world. So when Manfred from Germany is watching Canberra versus London on pay-TV, he'll be able to pick up his phone and order Ricky Stuart's number seven jumper there and then (*Open Rugby* magazine, Jan. 1996).

Central to Ribot's vision in the above case are the global nature of the marketing opportunities opened up by the Superleague. Pivotal to this so called 'global vision', which proposed to transform rugby league from a regionalised game struggling financially into a rich sport with world-wide appeal, was Rupert Murdoch's TV empire. It was estimated that by the turn of the century the signals of his various concerns would reach two-thirds of the world's population - presenting incredibly large new market opportunities. Examples of merchandising priorities quickly manifested themselves with the switch from the 1 to 13 player numbering system, to the adoption of player specific numbers irrespective of position. This move was directly aimed at increasing replica jersey merchandising sales, by increasing player identification. Clearly identifiable are the predominance of market forces and the manner in which these have affected changing attachments to rugby league often coming into conflict with parochial ties.

The inclusion of teams in London and Paris and the desire to merge teams to consolidate their 'markets' is also indicative of the search for more lucrative markets and greater profitability that place a premium on demographic patterns rather than parochial attachments. The selection of such markets irrespective of sporting attachments is indicative of the increasingly tenuous link between clubs and communities. The threat of team relocations is further example of the potential for commercial concerns to sever historic attachments. This new market orientation is also in the interests of the franchiser, in this case the RFL, as franchises placed in profitable markets/locations theoretically ensure a degree of competitive parity thereby helping to prevent the dominance of only a few teams. Finally, the expansion of the game to larger markets in this manner is concurrent with the interests of advertising and sponsorship concerns that also seek access to broader markets for the sale of their products. The pervasiveness of the adopted market driven ethos seems consummate.

Moves towards the newer patterns of consumption heralded by the Superleague represents the trend towards the dissolution of parochial community attachments to rugby league, as well as the fragmentation of live spectating rituals at the local level highlighted previously. The commodification of rugby league that the Superleague represents promises the forging of qualitatively different attachments to the game. Those communities that once considered themselves to have *produced* the teams are now targeted to *consume* the teams. As Wilson

(1990) has observed clubs in effect no longer exist primarily for the game but have become the public relations arm of commercial sponsors. In the case of the Superleague this has been taken a step further, as not only were clubs subject to such alterations, but the entire game had become a component of the broader Murdoch empire.

Several events of the inaugural Superleague season have demonstrated the role of the sport of rugby league within those broader commercial concerns of News Corporation. For example, as part of the entertainment at the London Broncos versus Paris game (03/04/96) a figure in a Bart Simpson costume appeared on the sidelines. Significantly *The Simpsons* cartoon appears on one of SKY TV's channels. In this manner a matrix is formed whereby the promotion and event of a Superleague game, in turn, becomes a promotional tool for other components of the Murdoch Empire. Similarly in a staged event designed to add prestige to the Sheffield Eagles v Castleford Tigers game (03/05/96), the hometown boxer 'Prince Naseem' entered in a limousine to present the match ball. Again illustrating the reciprocity between the promotion of one event (the Superleague game) and other interests, Naseem went on to mention his forthcoming bout - to be televised exclusively on SKY TV. The final example comes with the appearance of *The Times* newspaper, a Murdoch-owned interest, as 'official sponsor of SKY Superleague coverage'. This illustrates how dual purposes are served in that, whilst the newspaper receives exposure, the Superleague also attains prestige (and presumably finance) from that interest, as well as favourable coverage. These examples illustrate how the Superleague has become a component of the broader network of the Murdoch empire, the various interests of which become self sustaining as they promote each other symbiotically. Maguire (1993) has identified this as a strong component of the media sport production process whereby the overlaps between a company's different interests are exploited.

### **The Superleague - Sign of a Global Sports Age**

Pivotal to the development of the Superleague was the medium of non-terrestrial television, specifically pay-per-view, which precipitated the original Australian Super League and thus ultimately the European Superleague. The pervasive influence that subscription TV services have wielded over sport stems from their need to attract subscriptions by providing exclusive materials unavailable to other channels. The relative cheapness of broadcasting sport and its wide popular appeal made it perfect for satellite channels seeking to establish themselves by obtaining sufficient subscriptions to attract lucrative advertising revenue. The subsequent 'stampede', in the early 1990s, to secure live and exclusive rights to the major sporting events in the UK had fundamental implications in terms of access to viewing sports. Those events that had

previously been universally available to viewers on terrestrial broadcast TV were suddenly restricted, fundamentally to those who could afford to buy the receiver dish and cost of channel rental. The Superleague, a TV-inspired competition, is indicative of these moves. The selection of market-oriented teams, proposed mergers and disregard for historical continuity are illustrative of this. The proposed mergers are an example of the threat of this emergent medium not only to alter connections between teams and community but to completely sever it. Finally, the artificial promotion and creation of certain market-oriented teams in London and Paris, which denied historically rooted teams from competing at the top level of competition, represented the eclecticism of satellite television, threatening localised identities. In essence it condemned some towns to 'second class status' thereby diminishing parochial identification associated with rugby league.

The emergence of the Superleague was the result of the culmination of a number of forces and interrelated trends at a global level that were to have profound influences at the local level. The changing forms of attachment to sports that are the focus of this paper have been located by Williams (1994) within the broader process of globalisation, whereby the world media and international sports system have combined to facilitate a global sporting system, driven by transnational market forces. The Superleague is a good example of the results of these processes manifesting themselves in the fragmentation of localised sporting rituals via the global concerns of News Corporation.

The effects of globalisation processes and the capacity of recipient cultures to reinterpret imposed global cultural flows, although receiving a small amount of attention, awaits further elucidation. Scholars have acknowledged a degree of resistance to globalising processes; nevertheless, research into the effects of global flows on local cultures and their reactions and interpretations lacks definitive results. Harvey (1993), for example, has suggested the results of global forces on the local are not uniform, they may sometimes be weakened, sometimes reinforced by the forces of globalisation. Houlihan (1994) urges research that will establish whether the capacity or desire of recipient cultures to resist imported culture is weak, or whether globalisation is a participative process where negotiation and accommodation are possible. Maguire (1994) argues that to overemphasize the power of established groups is folly, as indigenous peoples have a range of negotiating and accommodating mechanisms available. As such analyses must pay close attention to issues of interpretation, resistance and 'recycling'. In his study of baseball in the Caribbean, Klein (1991) has noted several indices of resistance, which await further application to other cultural formations. What these scholars have in common is a clarion call for more research into the impact of and reactions to globalisation. The following section outlines some of the local reactions to the changes that the global forces the

Superleague represented for the rugby league communities of Northern England, and the significance of differing levels of interaction between the local and the global.

### **Reactions to The Superleague: The Local Fights Back?**

Interpretation of the effects of the global forces that the Superleague has exerted on localised communities in North England are far from simplistic. Unlike Maguire's (1990) documentation of the spread of US Football to the UK, whereby a culturally 'alien' product was imposed, the Superleague developments involved an established game with firm cultural attachments being altered by global influences. As opposed to globalising forces creating *new* attachments, the Superleague is indicative of a forced re-orientation of popular attachments. As a result I have employed the term *global relocalisation* to encapsulate the renegotiation at a local level in the face of global influences whereby, critically, interpretations and reactions to global flows are subject to localised interpretations. This supports those suggestions previously forwarded that global products do not necessarily hold the same meanings when placed in an existing local context that they do at their point of origin.

The first example illustrating this point concerns the introduction of mascots at rugby league games. Such figures have emerged as a component of marketing-led sport - symbolically linking fans cheering to the spectacle on the field, fulfilling fans desires to 'participate' in the event and the efforts of 'their' team. Such figures often becoming a focus for the crowd's entertainment, have long been seen as part of the 'entertainment' package of the marketing led sporting event, most visible in the USA. As Maguire (1993) points out, lesser sports in order to compete in the marketplace that includes dominant American images are compelled to conform to the style and forms of presentation and adopt similar marketing strategies. Their appearance at British Rugby League grounds was therefore not unexpected. The reaction of the British Rugby League crowd was considerably different to that intended. The following example illustrates the varying reactions to this 'cultural invasion'.

Hull, doing their bit to lighten up match days at the Boulevard, now have a lovely cuddly black and white mascot who goes by the name of Manda the Panda...everything was sweet and nice until the Threepenny Stand crowd started singing to Manda: "You fat bastad . . . you fat bastad . . . [sic] (*Open Rugby* magazine, Oct. 1995)

This is evidence of a globally inspired product being interpreted in a different manner from its source. Contrary to its intent, this example demonstrates such a cultural imposition as being seen more as anathema to those fans rather than an

incentive for them to attend by adding to the appeal of the 'event'. This was again illustrated by the crowd's reaction to the bear mascot that appeared at Oldham, where the mascot's meaning was recycled as it was used by the crowd as entertainment within their own parameters:

He had been on fine form during the first half, cavorting along the touchline to good effect . . . during the half time interval . . . it began badly, a gentleman of an age to know better, sneaked onto the pitch on his blind-side and floored him with a vicious tackle. (*Open Rugby* magazine, March 1996)

Additionally Andrew Baker's (*Independent on Sunday*, 'Cold Blows the Winds of Change', 9 Jan. 1996) description of the appearance of a Bart Simpson figure at a game as a 'berk in a Bart Simpson costume there to remind anyone that might have forgotten who was bankrolling the evenings entertainment, is illustrative of the indifference towards the intended function of such figures and cynical view of their presence, and indicative of a resistance to the perceived control of Murdoch over the game. These illustrative incidents, represent the potential for local interpretations and variations in the cultural 'reading' of global products.

Similarly the innovation of playing music after tries were scored at Wigan 'got a lukewarm reception to say the least, probably because we don't tend to go in for that sort of thing here in Wigan. I'm not sure why - I would put it down to the gritty Northern temperament' (Rogers, 1996, pers. comm.). This comment signals a differing interpretation of the marketing-led presentation of sports with regional characteristics held to be responsible. The new styles of presentation are not necessarily being adopted in the same manner as at source, but nevertheless are still affecting attachments at the local level. Whilst these global influences become a part of the game of rugby league in Northern England, the potential exists for them to be given their own distinctive meanings. For example the mascots are not accepted as part of the game by traditional fans and spectators but serve as a focus for the rejection of marketing led practices. Despite this, such gimmicks as cheerleaders, mascots and pre-match entertainment have become an imposed component of the game as have the appearance of figures and symbols that represent the marketing matrix of News Corporation such as Bart Simpson characters or other Murdoch linked figures.

The above examples of reactions to the innovations precipitated by the Superleague demonstrate that local peoples are in a position to make their own interpretations of global cultural impositions at certain levels. In this manner indigenous cultures can impose their own meanings, values and interpretations, thus retaining strong notions of distinctiveness and local identity at that level. This

observation is in support of those made by Maguire (1993, 1994) and Cantelon and Murray (1993) who have pointed to the particularities of local interpretations of global cultural trends. Notions of socio-cultural inferiority, Klein (1991) suggests may increase the propensity of marginalised groups to resist outside influences, resulting in greater levels of resistance towards such sources. Resistance to changes associated with the game of rugby league in this respect may be expected to be strong due to the specific working class background of the game. Having acknowledged these examples of localised reactions to global culture, I am conscious to avoid the criticism of Houlihan (1994) regarding 'sweeping conclusions based on little more than eclectic accumulation(s) of anecdotes' (p. 360). It should be noted that there are also examples of the localised culture in rugby league being receptive to global influences. Clubs for example may be active in promoting mascots at a local level. Crucially this localised acceptance occurs at slightly differing indices to that of supporter interpretation of global innovations.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

As has been illustrated, initial resistance to the Superleague plans was less significant in terms of representing a negotiation between localised outlooks and global interests at a structural level. Although it may initially have seemed significant that the format of the Superleague was altered under the weight of public protests - seemingly a victory for the local over the global, subsequent evidence suggests that global concerns were ultimately successful in their desires for the commodification of the game. The League still came to be remodelled along the commercial lines of the global influences that were pivotal to its establishment.

The persuasiveness of these global concerns is now being demonstrated as clubs excluded from the financial 'bonanza' of the RFL's uneven distribution of Superleague funds within the game at the top level desperately try to gain admittance to the elite level. The commercially-based stipulations now laid down by the RFL mean that for many the only option if they wish to play at the top level is to consider merging, with several proposals being forwarded. Hence the wishes for a more market-oriented League have been achieved. The public outcry this time is noticeably lacking as proposals are not linked with the outside interests of a media conglomerate but with 'the best interests' of the clubs themselves.

Later examples such as reactions towards mascots, are perhaps more indicative of the negotiation between the local and the global. The term *global relocation* describes this process whereby a level of negotiation is being undertaken between recipient cultures and the forces of globalisation, resulting in global features despite rearticulating indigenous cultural features, being subject to local interpretation. In this manner the locality undergoes change in the face of the

forces of globalisation but maintains the capacity for distinct local meanings and reference points. At this stage it should be acknowledged that localised interpretations of global products are not necessarily indicative of resistance. The example of the crowd's reaction to the Bear mascot in the present case-study may be more appropriately viewed as a form of acceptance in the 'recycling' of a global product. The degrees of receptivity of indigenous peoples is in need of further investigation.

The observations presented within this particular case-study point to the fact that 'negotiations' between the global and the local take place at the point at which direct interaction between the two takes place, as opposed to the structural level where resistance is simply bypassed by global forces. Fans' reactions have not been to interpret certain global cultural products as at source, but to maintain their own local interpretation of global products. A degree of similarity is evident with those findings of Klein's (1991) study into American influences in Dominican baseball, where resistance although not evident towards structural domination, was apparent at more subtle indicators. For example, Klein (1991) identified resistance in forms such as the media, fans' preferences for symbols and also in examples of what he termed 'concrete behaviour'. What Klein's work and the case of reactions to the Superleague hold in common are that the structures imposed by the dominant agent (despite illusions to the contrary with the revisions to the Superleague) are largely impervious to local influences, however resistance and local re-interpretations manifest themselves at a lower level - at the site of direct interaction between indigenous culture and cultural imposition such as team mascots.

Despite this important proviso in the appropriation of rugby league by global commercial forces, the strength of the shifts in the balance of power in rugby league should not be underestimated. Whilst levels of local interpretation and resistance are possible along certain indices, the game has changed irrevocably, thoroughly embracing the commercial realm and its priorities that stand in juxtaposition to the previous community-based clubs. Indeed the newer patterns of consumption heralded by the moves that the Superleague represents have been shown to hold a large number of implications for spectating patterns at the local level. The creation of a new live fandom to whom the new marketing gimmicks of mascots, cheerleaders and music after tries are attractive, as they are to traditional fans, as well as corporate and business interests attending, promise to alter the traditional atmosphere at grounds. Vociferous parochialism promises to be replaced by a more passive wish for entertainment irrespective of the outcome. In this context, rugby league supporters reactions, in rejecting certain globalised meanings of products, whilst defining local uniqueness at one level are taking place within an overarching structural framework, which is uniform with global economic relations. Hence local diversity is increasingly expressed and defined

within global reference points. This pattern of interaction between the global forces of the Superleague and the local recipient culture is concurrent with the observations of Houlihan (1994, p. 363) regarding the impact of globalisation, that 'Whilst the superficial products of globalisation may be malleable by local communities, the context of interaction between the local and global cultures is set by deeper ideological forces more attuned to the prevailing pattern of economic power distribution'. That the rejection of such superficial 'cultural products' as mascots, cheerleaders and music after tries, although seemingly betraying the negotiation of localised distinctiveness takes place within the broader parameters 'set by deeper ideological forces' demonstrates the dominance of global forces.

In using the example of World Series Cricket - Kerry Packer's 'cricket circus' of the late 1970s, which was to have a profound effect on cultural power relationships related to sport - Houlihan (1994) argues that cultural adaptation only holds a degree of significance if it leads to a change in substance or structure. This is in contrast to changes at more ephemeral or insubstantial layers of a community's culture, which are insufficient to claim an involvement in the process of globalisation. The retention of localised distinctiveness amidst a standardised frame of reference remains pervasive. The case of reactions to the Superleague has shown how indigenous populations possess methods to maintain localised meanings and interpretations at certain indices, irrespective of the imposition of global influences. Additionally the present case-study has concerned itself with the documentation of reactions to the penetration of global influences at their most obvious level - the elite competition. Questions remain concerning the depth of penetration of global influences as the lower level of sport not yet subject to the economic forces upon which much of the effects of globalisation derive its domineering influence. Amateur leagues and competitions in Northern England remain relatively untouched by global commercial influences and, at this level, points of resistance may be at their most abundant. Whilst speculation of a 'trickle down' effect of globalisation can be made, the depth of penetration and reactions to this awaits further investigation.

Whilst it has not been my intention to embark upon a thorough analysis of globalisation theory, it is clear that the complexity and variety of patterns that complicate the manifestations of the process are in need of further elucidation. Indeed, whilst consensus points to organisational patterns rarely as points of conflict, the case-study has shown this not to have been the case in the initial Superleague plans - how global forces deal with structural resistance awaits further investigation. Additionally, further research is required into the depth of penetration of global culture as the levels of penetration may be limited and subject to greater levels of resistance at indices where greater leverage is available to local cultures in resisting global cultures.

## REFERENCES:

- Cantelon, H. & Murray, S. (1993). Globalization and Sport, Structure and Agency: The Need For Greater Clarity. *Loisir Et Société/Society and leisure*. 16(1), 271-93.
- Clayton, I., Daley, I., & Lewis, B. (Eds.) (1995). *Merging on the Ridiculous: The Fans Response Vol 1*. Castleford, UK: Castle Printers.
- Gate, R (1989). *Rugby League : An Illustrated History*. London: Weidenfeld.
- Harvey, J. (1993). Introduction To New Trends in Sport: Between the Global and the Local. *Loisir Et Société/Society and leisure*. 16(1).
- Houlihan, B. (1994). Homogenization, Americanization, and Creolization of Sport: Varieties of Globalization. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 11, 356-75.
- Kelner, S. (1996). *To Jerusalem and Back*. London: Macmillan.
- Klein, A. (1991). Sport and culture as contested terrain: Americanization in the Caribbean. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 8, 178-84.
- Maguire, J. (1990). More than a Sporting Touchdown: The Making of American Football in England. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 7, 213-37.
- Maguire, J. (1993). Globalization, Sport Development, and the Media/Sport Production Complex. *Sport Science Review*. 2(1), 29-47.
- Maguire, J. (1994). Sport, Identity Politics, and Globalization: Diminishing Contrasts and Increasing Varieties. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 11, 398-427.
- Rugby Football League Publication. (1995). *Superleague...The Opportunities*. Leeds, UK: Shadwell House, Red Hall.
- Whannel, G. (1983). *Blowing The Whistle: The Politics of Sport*. London: Pluto Press.
- Williams, J. (I 994). The Local and the Global in English Soccer and the Rise of Satellite Television. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 11, 376-97.
- Wilson, B. (1990). Pumping up the Footy - The Commercial Expansion of Professional Football in Australia. In D. Rowe & G. Lawrence (1990) *Sport and Leisure: Trends in American Popular Culture*. Sydney: HBJ Publishers.

## Note:

1 This paper was originally presented at the 1996 North American Society for the Sociology of Sport Conference, Birmingham, Alabama.