

Viewpoint

What is a Football Community?

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In his notorious plea for economic rationalism in Australian sport, Shayne Quick, a lecturer in sports marketing, complained that ‘rational debate has been derailed by rabid adherents to tribalism, community affiliation, history and tradition’.¹ Replying to Quick, Daryl Pitman said he ‘saw no merit in allowing this part of community life to be derailed by . . . corporate cowboys’.²

Damien Wright, in a thesis on the relocation of South Melbourne Football Club to Sydney in the early 1980s, describes the relocation as the defeat of community football,³ while Phil Cleary in a speech to Federal parliament in which he also attacked ‘football globalisation’ described the rescue of Coburg Football Club from removal from the VFA as a victory for local community.⁴

At the rally to save Footscray Football Club from merger in 1989 many of the speakers referred to the local community. The comments of Footscray mayor Jeff King were typical: ‘We are not just fighting for a football club. We are fighting for a community asset and a way of life’.⁵

In the week that Fitzroy’s fate was sealed Martin Flanagan wrote an article that Dr Quick would have loathed, recording the fans’ distress and mourning the imminent loss of the Fitzroy Club. He wrote:

What happened to Fitzroy Football Club has been happening, with far less justification, to communities and working people all over this country for the past decade, possibly longer, as their livelihoods have been sacrificed on the alter of ‘economic efficiency’. Sport is one of the few areas of public life where people have enough information to have some idea of what’s actually going on.⁶

Clearly, journalists, politicians, academics and even on occasions sports administrators see an important connection between football and community. So do fans and players although they may not articulate the connection as explicitly. The role of the football club in the community is raised rhetorically by coaches and club presidents and nostalgically by writers. One of the questions that I hope to answer in this paper is what do all these people mean when they talk about football and community and alternatively community football.

In the last few years most of the Melbourne-based Australian Football League (AFL) clubs have at some stage been threatened with merger or bankruptcy. Many of them have engaged in major fund-raising campaigns including rallies addressed by former players and prominent club supporters and (sometimes) local politicians. The differing appeals and differing responses illustrate the problems of describing a football community.

The Footscray Fightback was the archetypal community campaign. Footscray historian John Lack wrote that it was said to have revived the sense of community in Footscray and the Western Suburbs.⁷ For Footscray's campaign the football community was the western suburbs of Melbourne. By contrast, St Kilda's campaign six years later, attracted less than a third of the number who had turned out for the Footscray or Richmond rallies. Speakers at the rally called for the return of zoning and referred to the divisions caused by the move from Moorabbin to Waverley.⁸

Although the Save Our Saints campaign did raise enough money to keep the team on the field and helped persuade leading players and League stars Robert Harvey, Stewart Loewe and Nathan Burke to re-sign with the Saints, the call for reintroduction of zoning highlighted the problems of community. St Kilda had not played at the Junction Oval in the suburb of St Kilda since 1965, however the Moorabbin Oval was at the centre of St Kilda's recruiting zone which covered the Southern bayside suburbs. St Kilda had represented the Southern suburbs of Melbourne (although an attempt in the late 1980s to repackage itself as the Southern Saints had not brought the club any noticeable benefit) The end of zoning and the abandonment of home games at Moorabbin loosened St Kilda's ties with the area. On the other hand the poor attendance at the Save Our Saints rally may be evidence that the Southern suburbs of Melbourne do not constitute a single community in the manner that Lack attributes to the Western suburbs.

Richmond's Save Our Skins rally and associated campaign in 1990 was a major success. While it appealed to sentiment related to the once hard core working class suburb of Richmond, its main appeal was based on the club's long and glorious history (an option not open to Footscray or St Kilda). Geographical community of interest was not an option for Richmond as their zone had been patchworked all over the Eastern and Outer Eastern suburbs.

Fitzroy's various rallies were held in Fitzroy where few of their supporters lived. Part of Fitzroy's problems were that relatively few football supporters in their former recruiting zones barracked for Fitzroy. While there was a solid but small base of Fitzroy supporters, mostly based on people whose families had lived in Fitzroy or Northcote prior to 1965, it is not clear what community Flanagan was referring to in his obituary for Fitzroy that I quoted earlier.

While geographical areas of support can be assigned to both Carlton and Collingwood it is worth remarking that Carlton Football Club has been at war

with neighbouring residents surrounding their North Carlton home ground for over two decades. Collingwood also had some problems over Victoria Park although there is considerable evidence to suggest that the club had more local support than the anti-Football majority on the local council.⁹ I will examine further the extent to which suburban zoning establishes support for football clubs and whether that support constitutes a football community, but at this point it is clear that we cannot simply look at the old inner suburban homes of teams to establish a community basis of support.

Part of the challenge to suburban football is posed by the AFL expansion since the early 1980s. While Brisbane and Sydney are establishing their own bases of support in what have been traditional rugby areas, the West Coast Eagles and the Adelaide Crows are citywide teams created in cities where a major league comprising suburban teams already exists. In the AFL, teams representing cities are competing against teams representing suburbs. A similar situation developed in the ARL when Canberra and Brisbane were added to a league composed of teams representing Sydney suburbs. Do the Adelaide Crows and the West Coast Eagles represent communities, that is do we treat the entire city as a community?

If we do, how do we then explain the support for these clubs when the equally well supported Fremantle Dockers and Port Adelaide Power are admitted to the AFL. Does this mean that the Eagles and the Crows only represented part of the citywide community from the beginning? And what conclusion do we draw from the fact that the AFL's second city teams are both based on clubs that represent clearly defined historical communities?

Major football leagues confined to one city and adjacent provincial centres are an almost unique Australian phenomenon. British and European soccer competitions have been nationwide almost from their inception. Most football clubs represent cities, the large cities have two major clubs and only metropolises such as London or Rome are represented by more than two teams. A similar situation applies in both football and baseball in North America, although in the days before relatively cheap air travel it meant that the major competitions were confined to the North East. Only in South America were some leagues based on cities. Brazil's competition is based on separate Leagues in Rio De Janeiro and Sao Paulo and a national competition only developed in the 1970s.¹⁰ The Argentine major league admitted its first team from outside Buenos Aires in 1939.¹¹ Brazil and Argentina share Australia's problem of distance between major cities although there are other factors as well in the development of South American football. The South American examples are of limited assistance in defining football communities because the teams appear to be based as much on class and ethnicity as geographical community.¹²

While most of this paper is about various sorts of geographical communities, we should consider other kinds of community. Religious and ethnic communities

are also involved in sponsoring football teams. Many churches have had teams in suburban competitions and the YCW (Young Catholic Workers) had a competition of their own. Fitzroy Stars are the best known of several Aboriginal Australian Football teams, Ajax are a Jewish team of long standing in the Victorian Amateur Football Association and for a few years in the early nineties a team composed of descendants of immigrants from the Creek village of Kontias used to play in the 'G' division of the same competition.

The clearest examples of regional football communities are in small country towns. Thirty years ago most Australian country towns had a school, a general store, at least one church, a pub and a football team. All five institutions were essential to the community spirit and the identity of the town. Now with the major social and economic changes in rural Australia many towns have lost all five. Often the football team outlived the school or the church. Some towns have kept their football teams alive with former residents now living in provincial centres or the capital cities returning home each weekend to play. Even in the early eighties Warrnambool District League held its tribunal hearings on Friday night because too few players were in town during the week. Other country towns have had to merge their teams with former rival communities. Most rural leagues now include many teams with hyphenated names representing two, three or even four townships. The new football teams are still accurate representations of their communities because depopulation has also forced amalgamations of the churches and schools and centralisation of the pubs and general stores.

While the communities described in the AFL might be problematic, the old VFA (Victorian Football Association) was clearer. It had a rule that it would only admit one team per municipality. Because it drew most of its teams from the middle and outer suburbs and was less glamorous than the then VFL, most VFA supporters lived in the municipality of the team that they supported. Most of the players were also recruited from the municipality, although each club also included a few former VFL players who would not necessarily have been locals. Even if the VFA had not run into financial problems and been taken over by the AFL it would no longer be as clearly community based. Apart from any other factors Kennett's municipal restructuring has created much larger local government areas that would make the one team per municipality rule unworkable.

Wild, in a fairly detailed survey of theories of community, refers to a 1955 work by G.A. Hillery in which he compared ninety-four different definitions of community.¹³ In the same context Wild also points out that some sociologists refuse to use the term because there is so little agreement as to its meaning. Apart from sociological meanings, others have also attempted to define community. Philosophers and Linguists, such as the Miami Theory Collective have attempted to deconstruct the concept of community using the work of various French

theorists.¹⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, I found them as little help in relating community to football as I found those thinkers who tried to explain community in religious terms such as Frank Kirkpatrick.¹⁵

Wild's survey highlights some of the dichotomies involved in theories of community. Some sociologists from Ferdinand Tonnies onwards have seen community as an alternative social mode to society. Others have seen community as a rural phenomenon with little application for modern cities. Still others have attempted to avoid geographical concepts altogether. Joseph Gusfield describes the concept of community as existing in three dimensions. In one dimension it points to and describes a specific form of human organisation. In another it is part of a theory of change through social evolution and in a third, it is part of an ideological debate over the value of the present as compared to the past and to possible alternative futures.¹⁶ Perhaps more helpful is Wild's explanation of Weber's definition that community is based on a subjective feeling of the parties ...that they belong together; Wild wrote 'The essence of community - belonging together - implies that members share a common Set of interests, values and attitudes, and these in turn define the boundaries of social interaction'.¹⁷

Finally, in my quest for a useful explanation of football communities I retreated from the world of sociology to the (for me) more familiar world of political theory. In his classic work on nationalism, Benedict Anderson developed the concept of the 'imagined community'. He defines the nation as 'an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.¹⁸ Anderson's argument is about nations rather than local communities but the concept is applicable to both as Anderson himself implies 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'.¹⁹

Anderson's argument that nationalism is developed on myths about the region and the culture that may have no basis in history but have a basis rather in the rise of capitalism and the effects of print technology may appear to have little to do with football and community but the concept of developing community self-awareness around a series of imaginings has some relevance. Anderson may not have mentioned football but Eric Hobsbawm, arguing related points in *The Invention of Tradition*, mentioned British football. He sees the rise of professional football and its supporters' culture as 'an unpolitical aspect . . . of working-class consciousness'.²⁰ For our purposes the important word is culture. The rise of soccer was part of inventing new traditions.

To examine whether the concept of imagined communities is helpful in explaining football communities I shall begin by examining the reality around which the myths might be constructed. With the exception of Melbourne, Geelong and to some extent Essendon, the twelve Victorian clubs that constituted

the VFL between 1925 and 1982 were based on older mostly inner suburbs of Melbourne. While in the early years most of the players were recruited locally, even before the VFL was formed some players were from outside the suburb (often they had been poached from other clubs or recruited from the country).²¹ Supporters lived in the suburb or in adjacent areas and the club's home grounds were also within the suburb or at least the municipality. Geelong represented a provincial city but the same factors apply as to the suburban clubs. Essendon was somewhat different, between 1882 and 1921 it played on the East Melbourne ground about ten kilometres away from the suburb of Essendon. During this period elite private school graduates would probably have outnumbered Essendon residents both amongst players and supporters. Melbourne, based on the Melbourne Cricket Club, was defined by class rather than geography.

Zoning, which more or less related to the geographical hinterlands of the clubs, was introduced in 1915.²² This increased the areas which could be considered local to the clubs. Support areas for individual clubs was not identical with their zones particularly after the post-war expansion of Melbourne suburbs. The majority of the old suburban clubs are North or West of the city while Melbourne's post-war expansion was predominantly South and East. However, much of the areas of outer suburban zoning did relate geographically and in supporter terms to the home suburbs. For example Collingwood's zone and its largest supporter base were in the North Eastern Suburbs from Fairfield to Reservoir, Heidelberg and the Diamond Valley. Both the railway line and the arterial roads to these suburbs pass through Collingwood. Many of the residents have links to Collingwood either through relocation to the Housing Commission estates or because they bought in the new suburbs within easy reach of parents in Collingwood. Similar links can be demonstrated between Footscray and Sunshine or Altona and between North Melbourne and Broadmeadows.

Zoning and suburban expansion also recruited post-war immigrants and their children to inner-suburban clubs. Children lacking family identification with the old inner suburbs barracked for clubs which recruited from the suburb in which their parents had settled. I can state from personal experience that a child growing up in the North Eastern Suburbs of Melbourne was given the option of barracking for Collingwood or Fitzroy.

In the last thirty years most of the old inner suburbs have either gentrified or substantially changed their ethnic composition. Some have done both. As I suggested earlier this has led to a situation where there are relatively few Carlton barrackers living in Carlton, St Kilda barrackers living in St Kilda and Fitzroy barrackers (when there was a Fitzroy) living in Fitzroy. The development of the National League has led to the formation of new citywide teams in Perth and Adelaide. The reality of these teams is that they have been created from the South Australian National Football League (SANFL) and Western Australian Football

League (WAFL) clubs and often at their expense. The reality in Perth is that in 1996 there were more players connected with South Fremantle and East Fremantle on the West Coast Eagles list than there were on the Fremantle Dockers list.²³ We shall look at the myths shortly.

In a paper on football cultures at a Victoria University of Technology Football Fest last year, Aaron Smith asked his audience to identify two AFL clubs from a few general statements. One was something like ‘working class, close knit, chip on its shoulder, plays a hard game, us and them mentality’, the other was ‘highflyers, business oriented, ruthless devotion to success’. Most present identified Collingwood and Carlton respectively.

The myth for Collingwood is that it is Irish Catholic, working class, larrikin, tough, hostile to the rest of the football community and cheeky like a Magpie. Collingwood represents the suburb that began as a slum and for years was looked down on by the rest of Melbourne. Central also to the myth prior to the emergence of the post 1958 Colliwobbles was the image of invincibility. Stremski has shown that, John Wren and Jock McHale notwithstanding, the club was not particularly Catholic. The suburb, and perhaps a majority of the supporters were, but the committee and the players were not, indeed several prominent committeemen were Freemasons.²⁴ If one examines the two key symbols of Collingwood from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s Club President Allan McAlister and Captain and now Coach Tony Shaw both appear to fit the myth perfectly. In Shaw’s case the myth is reality, he grew up in Reservoir, went to Marist Brothers school²⁵ is a reformed larrikin who always played both tough and cheeky. On the other hand, McAlister grew up in a middle class family in Hawthorn, worked as an executive and later a hotelier,²⁶ however, even his background was closer to the Collingwood myth than his predecessor, Syme family heir Ranald McDonald.

Carlton’s myth is both that of the establishment (The two longest serving Liberal Prime Ministers, Menzies and Fraser both held number one membership) and the entrepreneur (Current President John Elliott and his predecessors Ian Rice and George Harris). Carlton is seen as club that will always buy the best players regardless of salary caps (and before the salary cap, the Coulter Laws) aimed at preventing purchasing of premierships. Carlton is seen as ruthlessly sacking coaches who do not produce instant premierships. Because of its connection with Melbourne University it is seen as an intellectuals club, and because of the Italian presence in Carlton post-War and the Jewish presence pre-War, it is seen as having a strong ethnic component. Much of the myth is based on reality but it does not explain the strong working class following the club derives from its former zone of Brunswick and Coburg or the fact that the club of Liberal Prime Ministers currently includes the most militant President the Players Association has had so far.

One could unpack the myths of some of the other clubs, such as Footscray, representing the least changed working class area, which has currently appointed a President whose connection with the region is that his family have owned meatworks there for decades. Or the Melbourne Football Club who have just been saved from merger by a Chassidic Jewish Rabbi and businessmen who would not be eligible to join the clubs that shape Melbourne's image.

The myths that create the sense of community for the West Coast Eagles and [he Adelaide Crows are a sense of grievance against Victorians (all Victorians; [he clubs, the supporters, the VFL and Victorian Commissioners of the AFL). This is initially based on years of Victorian clubs recruiting star interstate players (and prior to State of Origin, playing them as Victorian representatives against [heir home states) It is also based on some real and some imagined grievances relating to the way the national league was established. The process which allowed the Eagles and the Crows to unite fans of suburban clubs in the WAFL and SANFL behind the imagined community of the citywide team (at the expense of the suburban competitions which have declined) is really quite similar to the processes which Anderson describes in the development of nationalism. Whether the unity behind the Crows will survive the arrival of Port Power who have their own sense of grievance *directed against the Crows* remains to be seen.

In summary, the communities that support AFL football clubs, the football communities, may be based on reality but they do not reflect reality. They are in fact imagined communities loosely based on geography but bounded by myth and history. For the purposes of barracking it does not matter if most Collingwood supporters are no longer working class heroes from downtrodden Carringbush if [hat is how they perceive themselves, just as for the purposes of stirring up Swiss nationalism it does not matter that most elements of Swiss nationhood date from 1798 if [he Swiss have convinced themselves that their republic began in 1291.

If we see football communities as imagined communities then it is possible to have a team representing the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Hawthorn, playing a team that represents the entire city of Adelaide in the same competition. Furthermore, the fact that Hawthorn have never managed to win a large supporter base in the Eastern suburbs, like the fact that the Crows do not appear to have support from the Port Adelaide region does not change the nature of the contest between communities.

The contradiction is not as I had originally posed it between suburban communities and citywide communities. It is between football as a sport of barrackers and football as part of the entertainment business orienting to 'theatre-goers'. Community football, however one imagines it, is not threatened per se by a National League, it is threatened by what I described in my own reply to Shayne Quick's article as 'artificially manufactured teams, changing their names every time the franchise is sold, with fans treated as consumers'.²⁷

NOTES:

- 1 Shayne Quick, 'Paying to Win : the Business of AFL', *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, No. 9, December 1996, p. 1. The debate started by Quick sparked much controversy in Australia, see the *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, produced at Victoria University of Technology, numbers 9-11 for discussion. Quick also appeared with others on the 'Today' show in Australia on Channel Nine.
- 2 Daryl Pitman, 'Corporate Cowboys and the Future of Football', *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, No. 10, March 1997, p. 11
- 3 Damien Wright, 'Rationalising the Unlevel Playing Field.: Culture, Ideology and the Relocation of the South Melbourne Football Club'. Unpublished thesis, Melbourne University, 1991, p. 19.
- 4 *Hansard*, 17 October 1994, p. 2130.
- 5 Kerrie Gordon and Alan Dalton, *Too Tough to Die* (Footscray: Footscray Football Club, 1990). p. 56.
- 6 Marlin Flanagan, 'Defiant to the end', *The Age* 1 July 1996. p. 13.
- 7 John Lack, *A History of Footscray* (North Melbourne: Hargreen Publishing Company in conjunction with the City of Footscray, 1991), p. 405.
- 8 *The Age* 3 July 1995, pp. 35-6.
- 9 *Melbourne Times* 9 October 1991, p. 3.
- 10 Bill Murray, *Football: A History of the World Game* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1994). p. 120.
- 11 Tony Mason, *Passion of the People? Football in South America* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 97.
- 12 See Mason, *Passion of the People*, Murray *Football* and also Janet Lever, *Soccer Madness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- 13 R. A. Wild, *Australian Community Studies and Beyond* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981). p. 17.
- 14 Miami Theory Collective (eds), *Community at Loose Ends* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
- 15 Frank G. Kirkpatrick, *Community: A Trinity of Models* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1986).
- 16 Joseph Gusfield, *Community: A Critical Response* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975). p. 21,
- 17 Wild, *Australian Community Studies*, p. 35.

- 18 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 15.
- 19 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 15
- 20 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger (eds) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1983). p. 290.
- 21 Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner, *Up Where Cazaly?: The Great: Australian Game* (Sydney: Granada, 1981), p. 47.
- 22 Robert Pascoe, *The Winter Game: The complete history of Australian football* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1995), p. 76.
- 23 Georf Slattery and Corrie Perkin (eds) *AFL '96: The official guide to Australia's greatest game*, (Port Melbourne: Hamlyn, 1996).
- 24 Richard Stremski, *Kill for Collingwood* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986). p. 207.
- 25 Tony Shaw with Daryl Timms, *A Shaw Thing* (Melbourne: the Authors, 1990), p. 23.
- 26 Jim Main, *Big Al: Collingwood The Untold Story* (Melbourne: Wilkinson, 1996).
- 27 Dave Nadel, 'No Football Without Fans', *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, No. 10, March, 1997. p. 9.