

Essay

Making Our Mark: Women Playing Australian Rules Football in Melbourne

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyse and understand what motivates some women in Melbourne, Victoria to play Australian Rules football (referred to as 'football') and what prevents others from playing. It is based on the experience of playing and is motivated by the passion that drives Victorians in winter. The paper begins by examining the factors which generally affect women and sport. It then examines the role of Australian Rules football within Victoria, and the role of women within this male dominated sport. It goes on to look beyond women as spectators and examine the factors affecting women as participants – as football players. The cultural differences of women's football, and the history and present position of the Victorian Women's Football League to 1997, concludes the paper.

Women and Sport

Much has been written about the overwhelming lack of support and attention that women's sport receives compared to the enormous amounts of money, energy and focus dedicated to men's sport. This essay accepts the well-demonstrated premise that women are under-funded, under-reported and under-supported in sport. The position of women within the sporting world is part of the male dominated world that exists in all facets of society and the general lack of status and value accorded to women for what they do and are capable of doing. It evidences a patriarchal society where men dominate the public domain of sport – where men define, participate in, develop and control the ruling culture. Unfortunately, it appears this situation will not change very quickly or easily. Too often the goal posts are shifted, ensuring that if enough women move into a male dominated area, the area by definition becomes less valued. The very fact that women are doing it means it must be less important.

The effects flowing from the relegated status of women's sport are many and varied, ranging from fewer girls playing sport, to the subtle, yet loud and clear message that what women do with their bodies is not nearly so important as what their bodies look like. It reduces women's interest in sport because there is very little for them to relate to. Role models are rare and certainly not as prestigious as their male counterparts. Women's non-participation in sport creates and reinforces the roles of women as passive watchers and supporters, and men as active participants central to the life experience of sport.

An interesting anomaly to the above is the Olympic Games. The Olympic Games is one of the few times that women's sporting achievements approach men's. It is the one time, every four years, that women's participation is given almost the same status as men. This appears to be due entirely to the fact that a medal achievement by a woman goes onto the national medal tally and therefore boosts patriotic sentiment, as much as a medal by a man. The Olympics however still enshrines women's lesser sporting status because:

1. There are fewer events for women than for men;
2. There are fewer women representing Australia than men;
3. Even when women do win and their medal is proudly added to the tally, the level of public attention for women is not as high as for men – it may seem like it is but this is relative to almost no attention during the intervening four years. It is such a shock to see women athletes glorified as heroes in our living rooms, that all seems right in the sporting world.

Australian Rules Football in Victoria

Football of all codes has traditionally been an exclusively male domain. Maleness is a hallmark of football. From the commentators and journalists, to the images of the footballer, football is the glorification of masculinity, in much the same way as war. This is more obvious in football than in any other sport. Other sports have either traditionally been played by both men and women, such as tennis, or women have been able to break through the male barrier more successfully than in football, for example, cricket.

In Victoria, Australian Rules football holds a vice-like grip on the State's popular culture. Games are attended by crowds so large and consistent. Roman gladiators would have died for them. It is talked about in place of, and more frequently than, the weather. It invades and alters normal life yet nothing is more normal than football. It creates obsessions and addictions which would normally require a network of crisis counselling centres. While levels of devotion vary enormously from a passing interest to religious fanaticism, it is not easily ignored. Yet, women are peripheral to football. They play no part in the mundane or dramatic aspects of the game. Women are entirely gratuitous to the sport which dominates Victoria.

This definition of football as male, in turn then defines women as 'not football' and affects women's perception of themselves and society's perception of women. The exclusion of women from football is outside the reach of equal opportunity laws. It is the most stark lesson in the reality of women's status in society as not being equal to men. This is internalised by women and girls, who

adjust their self esteem accordingly. Football, because of its title as ‘the people’s game’ – the great social leveller in Australian society, combined with its acceptance as an exclusive masculine world leads to the logical conclusion that women are not ‘people’ and do not register on the social scale.

Women and Australian Rules Football in Victoria

Yet despite this, or perhaps because of it, women are some of the game’s most passionate supporters. They make up over forty per cent of spectators attending AFL games. Women are certainly not backward in coming forward about their support for Aussie rules, be it one-eyed or broadly encompassing the excitement of the game. They are vocal and opinionated about their team, their favourite player and the general state of the game. Years of watching and listening has given thousands of women a depth of understanding about Aussie Rules for which they are rarely given credit.

It is argued here that women are often more passionate about Aussie Rules than men, and the reason is they have never been able to play. While girls often play kick to kick in the backyard with their brothers, true participation in the game equated with religion is completely denied – even when they know they are better than their brothers. But passion is not denied, neither is judging players on their performance, bodies and looks. It is an exciting game and you do not need to play to appreciate a good mark or a close game. So participation in football discussions and barracking, become the only means by which women and girls have traditionally been able to participate in football.

Dynamics in a family can become galvanised around issues of football. It can be divider or a unifier. Football is the sport that gets men’s attention. At home brothers are automatically members of the club. Dad is the authority on the game and the game on television is the focus of the home. Sons are instructed in the finer points of the full forward, the coach and the team’s performance that day. Then there is the inevitable discussions about the boys’ performance in the local team As it is the one sure way to get Dad’s attention, girls can go to extraordinary lengths to show their loyalty and enthusiasm for football, with the hope of winning Dad’s approval (true approval always being denied). Alternatively, it can be a divider, with women, in particular Mum, who usually results in the daughters as well, being excluded, deliberately or by default. Women may not only be excluded, but football actively prevents other things occurring which women may want to do such as watching something else on television or go out somewhere. Football then becomes boring, or worse still, something to loathe and ridicule.

In an examination of the local football club, women do not fair any better. Not even non-playing roles, such as goal or boundary umpire,¹ runner or trainer, let alone coach or field umpire, are open to women. While some women are now

filling these roles. they are few and far between. The most popular role for women to fill is that of canteen and function organiser. The active discrimination levelled at women within the context of football has been taken to some truly offensive and abhorrent extremes. The examples that follow are just the tip of the iceberg and while things have changed somewhat, these experiences are part of the history which continues to define men and women in relation to football. But they are not just history, they continue every season, in football clubs all over Australia.

Jane grew up on a farm in country Victoria, the only girl with two brothers. Jane, of course, was never able to play more than kick to kick in the paddocks. but both her brothers played football for the local team. Jane, along with the rest of the family, supported the team through many very average seasons. Finally the team had a good season, so good that the unthinkable happened, they made the grand final and they won. The celebrations were set to be huge. That was until it was made clear that women were to be excluded from the celebrations, except for the women to serve the food. So the women who had supported husbands, boyfriends, brothers and sons, through all the hard years of defeat, who had fed them and nursed them when they were injured, did not share in the victory celebrations. Jane moved to Melbourne and went on to play football in her own team and recently won a grand final in her own right.

Vicki grew up in Geelong. She had a passion for the local cult, Aussie Rules. from a very early age. When she was about ten she entered a kids kicking competition because the prize was a Geelong football jumper and a pair of football boots, both of which she wanted desperately. So Vicki kicked her little heart out and won the competition. But when she responded to the compere's 'Come up here sonny', and he discovered she wasn't a 'sonny' at all, but a girl, he eliminated her and she didn't get the prize. Lucky we now have an Equal Opportunity Act – up to the age of twelve anyway! Vicki went onto play football in Melbourne many years after she was cruelly taught that football was for boys not girls.

Women Football Players

Women love playing football. The excitement and passion they feel for the game when they discover there is a place they can play is extraordinary. Other sports pale into insignificance to the point of women leaving State level in other sports to play footy. They become obsessed with developing their skills beyond a good kick. As one women described it 'it was like being let out of a cage'. Training is never missed, weekends become ritualised in the build up to the game on Sunday afternoon and there are all the heartfelt agonies of playing, personally and as a team. Socialising inevitably revolves more and more around the club and their team mates. Initially there is the excitement of choosing a number, buying

boots, getting something right in a training drill. And then on the field, kicking a goal, bringing her down in a tackle. taking a mark, having a bounce and feeling proud of the other twenty or so women on the team It becomes a way of life, but one where women are actively participating rather than watching and listening to men.

Women's football adopts all the rituals of men's football not present in other sports. Change rooms have been purpose built for football and now women have the legitimate chance to use these facilities for their intended purpose. There are strappings, rub downs, arms oiled, laughter, footballs flying around, stretches and team warm-ups. The pre-match coach's address, the Wil-grip and the run out of the change rooms as a numbered team.

Before the first game of the season or any vital match, players can't sleep and when they do they dream about goals and tackles. They are so nervous and excited they force themselves to eat because they know they need the energy. Obviously the more years a woman plays the less she experiences these things, but it is still such a passion that if she becomes injured and can't play, depression and frustration inevitably follow.

There are endless discussions and analysis of the team the coach and your own personal performance. Watching Australian Football League (AFL) games has a whole new meaning as the understanding of team dynamics develops, and there is the ability to make comparisons with skills being displayed. It also leads to resentment at the obvious way that women's football is ignored. This can be particularly so for women who have male relatives playing top level football.

While it is accepted that the standard of women's football is not as high as AFL football, women's football is highly skilled and exciting, yet a women's football match has never been shown on mainstream television. The games are attended by a very dedicated following of family, friends, ex-players and club supporters. The League's Grand Final has at least 600 spectators. Victoria and South Australia have been playing an interstate match for the last six years and Victoria has won every match. Women's football in Victoria is so highly skilled it has become an elitist sport where women wanting to start playing are not able to compete with those currently playing – a problem the League is attempting to address.

Barriers to Women Playing Australian Rules Football

The greatest barrier to women playing Aussie Rules comes from the traditional mores that define and limit what women should do. This translates into societal disapproval and rejection when a woman steps outside the confines of traditional femininity. There is a stigma attached to women whenever they break traditional male barriers. This is particularly so in football because of its identity with masculinity. It is easily described as the last bastion of male exclusivity.

When women say they play football reactions range from disbelief or laughter through to downright derision. Disbelief is the most common reaction, which indicates that the simple concept of women playing breaks peoples fixed perceptions of how the world operates, that is women don't play football. The other common response is that watching a game would be 'good for a laugh'.

Women often feel they would compromise their femininity if they played football. This is reinforced by fathers, brothers and boyfriends discouraging them from playing football. It is more than simply because a woman is breaking tradition, it is because when she does this with football, she threatens to undermine a core value of masculinity. She then becomes tainted with masculinity and is therefore less feminine and less attractive. It has been the same whenever women pioneer to break a construct which restricts them.

Unfortunately these barriers not only prevent women from playing football, but they can have dire consequences for women who do play. Families are often opposed to their daughters playing football, because of the stigma, and also because of the risk of injury. Consequently there are a number of Victorian women playing football in secret. For one young women this meant she wasn't able to get a mouth guard. Her parents found out that she played football when she had her front teeth knocked out. Others develop elaborate cover up stories, in collusion with their friends, to deceive their parents about their activities on Wednesday and Friday nights and Sunday afternoons.

The Culture of Women's Football

Much of the culture around women's football is adopted from the culture of men's football. Generally this is because of the nature of the game, the size, of the team the fact that most teams are part of men's clubs and the public accessibility and participation in football culture. This inevitably means that we do things the way they have always been done – including drinking beer. Also women have been playing football for a relatively short period of time and so we are still finding our own expressions within the game.

The fact that there are a number of barriers that women must overcome in order to approach the idea of playing Australian Rules, means that the women who do play are able to break through those barriers more easily than other women. However despite this, women's football carries the characteristics generally attributed to women's team sports, namely great support and cooperation. communication and generally dealing with issues as they arise rather than letting them fester and blow out.

There is a community atmosphere within teams and there is the bonding inevitable when 25 or so women all work towards the same goal of playing their best as a team. This community spirit is enhanced by boyfriends, husbands, girlfriends, friends and family supporting teams and taking on non-playing roles

such as boundary and goal umpire, trainer and water runner.

There is also the aspect of sexuality. As some women footballers are lesbian, there can be an added intensity and intimacy to team dynamics, often not found in men's teams. This also ensures the team develops acceptance and understanding of individual differences and so gives depth to the team bond. Football becomes a way of life with friendships, relationships and enemies are all centred around the team. It can be a heady cocktail of football passion, sporting courage and the politics of gossip.

The Victorian Women's Football League

The Victorian Women's Football League has been in existence since 1981 and has developed in fits and starts. For many years it was a League of four teams. Then in 1991 it jumped to eight teams with one folding during the season and the number settling at seven until 1997 when we again welcome the team that folded in 1991, Melbourne University. However, the static seven teams has not been the same seven teams. Two years in a row, 1995 and 1996, the ruling premierships team folded before the start of the next season. Players were absorbed by other teams but the ease with which successful teams come and go has been a cause for concern.

The administration of the League has a similarly chequered past with a new guard every few years, bringing enthusiasm ideas and most importantly action, to try to promote the League. In the interim however, it has at times been insular and reactionary. Recently it has been holding itself together, rather than proactively moving forward, The result has been criticism and lack of involvement from the club level.

The start of a change in structure and administration appeared in 1997. Positions on the executive have been expanded and responsibilities clarified. There has been an opening up of the League with increasing accessibility and hopefully more commitment from enthusiasts in the clubs. I believe our biggest step in 1997 was the commitment of the League to a second level of competition, a Reserves division. This has allowed women and girls who are learning and those who do not aspire to such a high level of competition, to enjoy playing at a level appropriate to their skill and commitment.

Other recent achievements include developing a relationship with the AFL around junior development and the production last year of a Yearbook for the first time. A regular League newsletter began in 1997, and the constitution was re-drafted to allow non-playing membership. In addition, the constitution addressed the vital question of money, both sponsorships or one-off funding for individual events. We are fortunate to have the support of the North Melbourne Football Club and while there have been tensions with this relationship in the past, this year they have made a commitment to resourcing us with postage.

photocopying and computers.

It is an exciting time for the League, experimental in many ways but ultimately we hope to build on the past and lay the foundations for a dynamic, expanding and vital women's football League in Victoria.

Editor's note: This paper was written at the start of the 1997 season and was originally presented at the Football and Identities Conference at the University of Queensland in February 1997. It provides an excellent example of an insider's account of the experiences of women playing a football code that had been defined as being for men only. As such, it compliments Marschik's article that deals with the problems women face in Austrian soccer. The author has been a driving force in the development and success of the Victorian Women's Australian Football League.

NOTE:

1. In 1998, the Australian Football League introduced female goal umpires for the first time.