

# ‘More Than a Game’: *The Footy Show*, Fandom and the Construction of Football Celebrities.<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article investigates the blurring of national, social and identificatory boundaries that the persona of Sam Newman engenders in the Australian television show about Australian Rules football, *The Footy Show*. The process of feminisation and the incorporation of masculinity in *The Footy Show* is explored in order to demonstrate how the bricolage of genres and refusal to accept closure attracts and maintains a distinct audience for both the lead characters and the show. Football becomes secondary and even periphery to the primary objective of entertainment and the capturing of fans both old (football) and new (non-football). The narrative trajectories of the show suggests a new means of presenting the pleasure of masculine spectacle that includes female textual forms establishing a new multi-media text and fan base creating the illusion of sport and a new participatory culture.

More previews of the weekend’s games followed... and the week’s show was over, destined to be remembered for everything but its football (Graubard, 1999).

In March 1994, television station Channel Nine in Melbourne, Australia, launched an Australian Rules football program ingeniously entitled *The Footy Show*<sup>2</sup> that developed into one of Melbourne’s top-rating television programs (Silver, 1997: 12). The announcement that rival network and official Australian Football League (AFL) television broadcaster, Channel Seven, banned Channel Nine from using any of its AFL footage just ten days before the show was due to go to air forced a rapid re-thinking of the program’s format. Harvey Silver, then executive producer of the show, writes that:

It [the ban on footage] forced us to come up with new segments, more entertainment and to place more emphasis on the periphery of the football world, rather than just the game itself. On reflection, Channel Seven had done us an enormous favour (Silver, 1997: 12).

According to a number of commentators, the new and enforced formula proved to be enormously successful (Graubard, 1999; Lindley, 1995; Pegler, 1999; Silver, 1997), attracting what one journalist described as ‘killer ratings’ (Stapleton, 1995: 135). The program was initially marketed as a ‘sports’ show

and appeared to offer a uniquely masculine experience of spectatorship (Rose & Friedman, 1997: 3), thus reproducing the pleasures of viewing sporting competition. Five years later, however, the discursive strategies of the program and its reception suggested a feminised pattern of production and consumption. Not only do women form a large proportion of the audience (Lindley, 1995; Porter, 1997), but this 'sports' program has become one of the highest rating *comedy* programs in Australia (McFadyen, 1995). By itself, this comedic tenor is not exceptional, the melodramatic and soap operatic nature of much of television sports coverage has been commented on previously (cf. Jenkins, 1997; Rose & Friedman, 1997; Rowe & McKay, 1999; Vande Berg, 1998). The effects on male patterns of sporting consumption, which have become increasingly contradictory and distracted, has also been observed (Rose & Friedman, 1997: 1-7). *The Footy Show* takes us beyond these interpretations since it does not rely on the conventions of soap opera or melodrama alone to establish itself as an unorthodox and even subversive sporting text. The program draws on multiple televisual styles from other media to develop a structure that *depends* on distraction and fragmentation in order to subordinate and pleasure its audience. The peculiar bricolage of television genres that *The Footy Show* includes suggests a way of accessing the show and its characters so that the boundaries between sporting and non-sporting entertainment (and the multiple borders and boundaries therein), male and female identificatory structures and modes of consumption are all blurred.

In declaring itself to be about 'footy' and then disavowing the exclusivity of this category, the program seeks to appeal to a collective social identity (Rose & Friedman, 1997: 6) that transcends traditional and privileged masculinised structures usually associated with football. This is further accomplished by the production of a popular magazine, *The Footy Show Magazine* (TFSM), available for purchase in numerous retail outlets, and the establishment of an interactive internet site both of which function to delimit access and modes of viewing and responses to the program. Instead of the football game as an event being the focus, audience pleasure, through the various media, arises from perceiving how the characters on *The Footy Show* and their invited guests behave and feel as they *respond* to events (cf. Fiske, 1987: 182). For the audience, the primary locus of desire is displaced from the centre to the periphery – to the 'outer' as event, entertainment and spectacle. The homogenising of *The Footy Show* cast, guests and audience in the 'outer',<sup>3</sup> however, is an illusion.

The regular cast of *The Footy Show* includes host Eddie Maguire, comedian Trevor Marmalade and raconteur and former football 'great' John 'Sam' Newman. Along with invited guests, the cast and a panel of current football playing 'experts' maintain the mystique and allure associated with celebrity figures. The show establishes itself as a bridge between 'us' (the

audience) and 'them' (*The Footy Show* luminaries) while concurrently reinforcing the distance. Gossip, public participation, parody, satire and the revelation of 'inside information' function to shift the audiences' expectations of sporting spectacle from observer/fan to membership of an elaborate and privileged team thus creating a new text – the counter-football (Lindley, 1995) game.

The stars of *The Footy Show* are configured as a team beyond that of their own club allegiances, operating within a psychosocial and virtual competition around which particular pleasures and desires accumulate within their own cultural economy. This way of conceiving the cast, show and, by association, the audience, creates a polysemic and fluid text (Fiske, 1987: 182-4) that disturbs the usual boundaries established between a masculine and feminine text and viewer responses to a live or televised sport performance. The audience focus is continually shifted from the artificially constructed and temporary 'team' towards individual performance and back again. This is achieved through the spatiality of the set, which includes two long counters and a bar, the relationship of the three primary cast members to each other, and the multiple cameras that work to elide the distance and involve the audience/fans as part of the team while simultaneously reminding them who occupies 'centre-stage'. This contrapuntal positioning creates not only a cult of celebrity, for which the locus of desire is a specific individual, but a broader and more complex fan-base that relates to the 'team', the media and the social 'game' of which this show is merely a part.

The theme song of *The Footy Show*, 'More Than A Game', foregrounds the dynamic of this program and the complex layers through which it can be read. The Captain Blood<sup>4</sup> logo that advertises the show and associated paraphernalia also historicises and validates the program as part of an ongoing tradition. Furthermore, the contemporary stylisation of the emblem suggests the fragmentation and challenge the show offers to football and to media structures.

While the show is undeniably a 'game' with rules and boundaries that iterate those established by the wider social milieu, it is also a popular cultural text that seeks to rupture a range of psychosocial practices and codes associated with football and conventional gendered and sexualised behaviour within the community as a whole. It is through the figure of 'Sam' Newman, a permanent cast member and former Captain of the Geelong football club (he played over 300 games), radio commentator on 3AW and media celebrity, that the hegemonic struggle between the 'game' and social attitudes most obviously unfolds. The construction and presentation of Sam Newman allows the program and its additional texts to open a liminal space from which they can offer *more* than the pleasure and excitement of sporting competition, thus creating teams and fans whose identities and allegiances are obfuscated and interchangeable.

The remainder of the article investigates the blurring of boundaries both social and identificatory that the persona of Sam Newman engenders. The

process of feminisation and the incorporation of masculinity in *The Footy Show* is also explored in order to demonstrate how the bricolage of televisual genres and the positioning of the viewers as particular types of 'footy' fans, maintains a distinct body of viewers for the primary character and the show. Football becomes secondary and even antiphonal to the major objective of diversion and the capturing of fans both old (football) and new (non-football/'theatre-goers'). The narrative trajectories of the show suggest a means of presenting the pleasure of masculine spectacle that includes feminine textual forms establishing a new multi-media text and fan base creating the illusion of *The Footy Show* as participatory culture.

### **John and Sam, The Post-Fordist New-man<sup>5</sup>**

Even though Eddie Maguire is a respected former television sporting journalist who moved from Channel Ten specifically to become the 'host' of *The Footy Show*, Sam Newman has captured the star role. He is described as stealing the show (Stapleton, 1995: 135), as being the 'most talked-about person in Melbourne' (Brereton, 1998), and as being the one person in the Western world with the greatest capacity to provoke public outrage (Sheahan, 1999). He has also been described as a 'carbuncle on the arse-end of humanity' (Lindley, 1995) and even as a 'Monty Python prophet' (Hanger, 1999: 32). Some school principals have banned talk of Sam Newman from their playgrounds (Tell, 1999). Sam has been accused of misogyny, such as when referring to women as 'dogs', and racism.<sup>6</sup> His sexual exploits and penchant for young women are also glorified and parodied on the show and in newspapers around the country, blurring the 'real' Sam and the media/football show persona. But how much of this subversive image is a construct, a part of the persona of 'Sam' Newman?<sup>7</sup> Margaret Lindley (1995) observes that, Newman '[s]kat[es] along the line of rude/funny, offensive/amusing [as] he performs or threatens a kind of ethical striptease'. Newman operates along a socio-cultural limen, seducing his fans by threatening to 'go all the way', thus inviting *more* than the gaze, he solicits a cerebral response as well. Sam, we are continually reminded, does not suffer fools gladly (cf. Hanger, 1999; Lindley, 1995; Silver, 1997), neither does he tolerate restrictions to his and the general public's right to 'free speech' regardless of the consequences of fulfilling that right. His function is that of:

[T]he anti-voice working against the burgeoning tide of what he views as prohibitive political correctness... through his roles on *The Footy Show* and 3AW [a radio station on which he co-hosts a popular football segment with Melbourne personality Rex Hunt] he provides a voice to those who believe society has gone too far by censoring our individual right to express an opinion for fear of upsetting a minority. He has made a career out of satire, stricture and sarcasm, and

possesses unquestionable charisma. Marry that with his intellect and wit, and you have a man who can unlock the silent voice of many who believe that old fashioned frivolity and fun has dried up in the world (TFSM, 1999: 32).

The construction of supra-star John 'Sam' Newman is configured on a specific masculine and heroic corporeality, which, regardless of his media transformation, resides in the mythic allure of being a former football 'great'. Arguably, Newman's status on *The Footy Show* recovered and reinvented him as a football legend by introducing him to a new generation of football supporters for whom Newman's success was merely a nostalgic moment in football history.<sup>8</sup> The controversy that dogged his career, however, is often played against the discord that continues to interrupt his life and is read as part of a continuing soap opera narrative.

### **The Days of Sam's Lives**

By focussing on the antics of Sam Newman both public and private, *The Footy Show* presents his life as a soap opera, 'on-going, continuous, and always to be continued' (Rose & Friedman, 1997: 6). Newman's existence, however, is more than simply 'a form of serial fiction for men' (Jenkins, 1997: 50). The homoerotic nature of his exploits are emphasised and the repercussions of his activities are reported, parodied, and constructed as heroic (Silver, 1997). The events in Sam's life are configured as part of his overall desirability, too often the violence of the outcomes are elided in favour of humour and satire, comedy being used 'as a technique of neutralization to make intolerance seem more palatable' (Gillet, White & Young, 1996: 70).

In 1996/7, for example, Sam's nose was broken (in a dispute over a woman), he was evicted from a prominent Melbourne casino, booked for drunk driving, and he was reported to have been repeatedly struck with a car by his then girlfriend, shattering his leg and requiring eight operations (cf. Graubard, 1999).<sup>9</sup> Harvey Silver, the executive producer of the show in its early years, referred to these events as 'Sam's troubles' (1997: 77), conflating girlfriends and trouble in a misogynistic metonym reminiscent of the colloquial phrase 'trouble and strife' for wife. By referring to the women as 'trouble', Sam, and his behaviour, are recovered as part of a homosocial discourse that redefines sexual boundaries and privileges a specific type of hegemonic masculinity, defined by Nick Trujillo as:

[T]he social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that, operating on the terrain of 'common sense' and conventional morality, defines 'what it means to be a man' (1995: 405).

Concomitant with Trujillo's description is Bob Connell's definition that refers to hegemonic masculinity as the 'culturally idealized form of masculine character which stresses the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness, the subordination of women, and the marginalization of gay men' (cited in McKay & Olgivie, 1998: 19-20). Both Silver and Maguire, when questioned about Sam and his 'troubles', stressed their concern for Sam, focussing on mateship while admitting that what had occurred did not harm the show's popularity (Silver, 1997: 77; cf. Wilson, 1998), revealing that Sam, as a 'mate' and a celebrity is invested with a cultural capital that is inseparable from the program. Furthermore, the positioning of women in this manner (as object, 'trouble') works in two ways. Firstly, it serves to disguise any (dangerous) homosexual or homoerotic interaction between the men – concern for a 'mate' also transforms the emotion and defence into characteristic homosocial behaviour – mateship (Looker, 1995: 217). And, secondly, it emphasises male bonding by creating 'an ideological bulwark to the perceived threat of feminization and accentuates the differences between men and women' (McKay & Olgivie, 1998: 28). Thus, *The Footy Show* and Sam Newman are complicit in sustaining an ongoing discourse of hegemonic and essentialised masculinity. In this instance Sam, as 'superstud' and larrikin, is projected as a powerful symbol of male dominance (Rowe & McKay, 1998: 116) within the sporting domain and the wider cultural field of which, as a celebrity, he is a significant part.

### **Frankly, Sam, I Don't Give a Damn...**

Recuperating Sam's exploits as part of hegemonic masculinity satisfies male fans, but how does this display of masculinity account for his popularity with female fans? Through a range of televisual techniques, scripting and editing, Sam is fetishised throughout the show. The camera treats him as an object; extreme close-ups dwelling on his idiosyncratic expressions and mannerisms:

The appraising narrow-eyed glance at the camera; the sideways and backward tilt of the chair; the stagey scrawl on the notepad and, of course, the habitual misplacement of the viewer's letter (Porter, 1997).

When the opportunity arises, Sam does not hesitate to reveal his body – partially clothed, and naked (Silver, 1997: 53-5). Through his actions, Sam entices male and female viewers to indulge in scopophilia, and presents himself as the object of their admiring and/or critical, gaze. Forget the game of football, Sam is the spectacle, the 'object of frank, even invited, viewing pleasure' (cited in Trujillo, 1995: 414). His various escapades and the way in which they are viewed by the audience become mini-climaxes that, like soap opera texts,

further complicate the persona of Sam, so making reading and understanding him a challenge or game which the fan desires to play.

Within soap opera, there is a definitive emphasis on talk and facial expressions as a means of allowing the audience time to 'not just experience the emotion of the character, but to imagine what constitutes that emotion' (Fiske, 1987: 183). Close-ups have a further function that, in soap opera, is to implicate the predominantly female audience in the lives of the characters on the screen (Fiske, 1987: 184). As John Fiske suggests, sexuality in soap opera is very much constructed with the female audience and their pleasures in mind. Climax and release are neglected in favour of seduction and emotion (Fiske, 1987: 184). Sam Newman is constructed as a 'hunk', an anti-hero and as a 'metrosexual' figure (cf. Galilee, 1997: 497-9); someone who incorporates notions of heterosexuality, urban culture, consumption and masculine identity. He is someone whose sexuality is not simply corporeal, but is placed in the context of his relationships with his fans, with *The Footy Show* cast, and in his interpersonal relationships (cf. Fiske, 1987: 183-6). Sam uses the camera, his exploits, and his personal style to conduct an attenuated affair with his fans – literally 'winning' them over.

Sam is the archetypal soap star whose misadventures are *serialised* for audience consumption on a weekly basis, thereby deferring the masculine release of climax and finale. His triumphs as a football star are secondary to his soap status and the ongoing romance that he conducts with both male and female viewers. The idea of romance is foregrounded in various descriptions of Sam. He has been described as 'Rhett Butler in a good mood: the wilful buccaneer and charming rogue before Scarlett got under his skin' (Lindley, 1995). In August 1995, in an interview with *Inside Sport*, he posed as James Bond, the opening lines of the article stating, 'The name's Newman, Sam Newman' (Stapleton, 1995: 134-43). In the pictorial accompaniments, he is posed with a gun and women and located in a casino. While these pictures suggest the enactment of a phallogentric stereotypical masculine fantasy, they also have a series of intratextual references of which most of Sam's fans would be aware. In one sense he is Bond, but in another, he is a pastiche of hetero-masculinity, a parody of maleness who can perform masculinity for his fan's consumption. Sam is also *more* than the fictive persona of 007 could ever be. Not only is he a football great – a *fact* the counterposed photographs in the magazine make clear – and, therefore, literally a good s(p)ort, he is a public figure who carries an air of romantic possibility with him. Newman, when asked about his three *failed* marriages, recuperated the notion of failure by placing it within a romantic discourse of success in love. He said:

Now, you can be criticised for failing three times, but you can also be congratulated or admired for trying three times. At least I can

say I've been in love three times. But beside all that, I don't think I'll probably do it again, although I might... You should never say never (Stapleton, 1995: 138).

Newman clearly positions himself as 'hero' in the continuing romance of his life, signalling his availability to be cast, once more, in the role of romantic lead by responding to the idea of remarriage with the words, 'never say never' (Stapleton, 1995: 138; Hanger, 1999: 35). This is also associated with the Bond film series, a genre known for its adventure sequences and sexual exploitation of women by a protagonist who always *promises* romance and love but never successfully remains committed.

Typically, romantic fiction objectifies male characters, transforming them into erotic objects through which female desire can be accessed and expressed (cf. Cranny-Francis, 1990: 191). Sam's 'romance' and romantic construction, however, is for the benefit of viewers of both sexes, subverting the usual patriarchal paradigms and 'queering' his relationship with his fans. Chris Berry describes 'queer' as being:

about breaking certain taboos . . . about the definition of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. It is all about renegotiating and redrawing lines. It's dynamic, it's in movement, it's a force more than an identity or an agenda (cited in Stoney, 1994: 37).

Sam returns the gaze of the audience but, in a sensuously staged gesture, maintains the distance between himself and his fans (Lindley, 1995). So, while his 'romance' has the potential to break 'certain taboos', it functions to re-draw the boundaries by continually foregrounding Sam's (hetero)sexuality and his seduction of the viewers as mere performance and play.

### **Drag Racing**

Despite the fabricated nature of his hyper-masculine appearance, Sam regularly appears in drag and looks for excuses to remove his clothes, to (strip)tease the audience, and to create an aura of ambivalence around his masculinity (Silver, 1997: 53-5, 70-5). Sam has appeared in a tutu, as pop singer Kylie Minogue and as a flower (using a floral metaphor to problematise his sexuality). Rather than subverting his masculinity, however, cross-dressing functions to (re)construct and reassert it through a complicated performance of denial – he is obviously not-a-woman (Brook, 1997: 8). Parading through the streets of Melbourne dressed in drag, Newman reavows his position as the man on the street – the street walker and flaneur – whose uncontested presence gives testimony to his male superiority.

While women appear on the periphery of the show, as guests, ornaments or interviewees, reproducing the subordinate role of women in sport and society, in drag Sam repositions himself as a New/man who can operate successfully in centre-field. In doing so, Newman exposes the radical ambiguity at the heart of Australian masculinity, an admix of heterosexual desire and misogyny, homosocial desire and homophobia (Buchbinder, 1998: 128).

Where Newman succeeds in blurring the boundaries between male and female fans and the construction of 'teams', however, is through his interactions with the openly homosexual Roland Roccheccioli, which suggest that Newman does not adhere strictly to the codes that define homosociality. Roland is known as the 'show's unofficial mascot' (Silver, 1997: 70) and he is a regular participant in the antics of the show. He is a sexually liminal figure (as a man who loves men) who obfuscates sexual and gender borders through his presence. Sam often 'performs' with Roland, in a rickshaw, in a bed, dancing, and while the jokes abound they are often at Sam's (and his sexuality's) expense. While this sexual performativity can be read as another way of reaffirming Sam's masculinity, through the conflation of femininity and homosexuality (the derision of one being applied to the other [cf. Brook, 1997: 8]), it can also be read as challenging hegemonic codes of masculinity. Heterosexual masculinity relies on homosocial interaction between men. Homosociality, however, demands the exclusion of homosexuals through the practice of homophobia. By including Roland in a number of sketches and as a regular on *The Footy Show*, homophobia is displaced to the margins and homosexuality is *included*, thus disturbing the codes that structure homosociality and conventional patterns of (hetero)masculine behaviour (Brooks, 1999: 88).

There is a tendency within academia to recognise the homosocial nature of football and link it unproblematically to masculinity. *The Footy Show*, and Sam Newman can be read positively as underlining this inclination by attempting to expose the different layers of masculinity that operate within football and society as a whole. By demonstrating the performative and camp nature of football masculinity, Newman and his associates reveal that football (and, arguably, sport generally) does not operate in an enclosed hyper-masculine space, but is an open and fluid text contingent on wider social attitudes. The boundaries that demarcate social constructions of masculinity and sexuality are trifled with, but whether they are actively challenged or disturbed is questionable. By commencing a flirtation with these structures, Newman appears to be feminised and consumed as a hero that can satisfy, in multiple ways, both his male and female fans regardless of their sexuality. Notwithstanding, Sam, through a relapse into a 'more familiar style of mockery of homosexuality' (Rowe & McKay, 1998: 122) continues to make it clear to his fans that he is unlikely, in the sexual stakes, to change 'teams' (cf. Stapleton, 1995: 136).

The idea of 'teams' is significant in the overall construction of *The Footy Show*. Newman was employed as part of a triadic configuration that included the host Eddie Maguire and resident comedian Trevor Marmalade both of whom had never played professional football.<sup>10</sup> As each show commences, this team of three primary players is introduced who all operate within a distinct hierarchy. It is clear, however, that Newman destabilises the positions of the other players, including the 'superior' rank of Maguire. Whereas John Newman was a football hero – 'someone who created himself' (cited in Vande Berg, 1998: 136), and is still clearly a part of the Geelong team – Sam Newman is a television super-celebrity and the 'star' of the show. Harvey Silver describes Newman as 'the biggest thing since sliced bread' and the 'lynchpin of the show' (Silver, 1997: 16). Alan Graubard acknowledges the uniqueness of *The Footy Show* and yet writes that the success of the show is due entirely to Sam Newman's presence (Graubard, 1999), while others suggest that his charisma has spawned a condition called 'Newmania' (Stapleton, 1995: 1). Madeleine Hanger (1999: 30) writes that, 'Sam, afterall, . . . has proved the biggest magnet for *The Footy Show* and kept its ratings robust for the last six years'.

### **We Don't Need Another Hero**

Despite his hero status, Newman is able to be reclaimed as part of *The Footy Show* when necessary. Both Maguire and Marmalade, as team-mates, are also presented as heroes. They are of a different calibre, yet still embody culturally recognisable aspects of heroic Australian masculinity, Maguire is not only a responsible host, but is the power-broker within *The Footy Show* game. His influence and control beyond the boundaries of the program are exemplified in his role as President of the Collingwood Football Club and in his recent listing as the fifth most powerful man in Australian Rules Football (*TFSM*, 1999: 39). Maguire can, when necessary, be embraced as part of working-class culture as a 'Broadmeadows'<sup>11</sup> boy, therefore, as someone who can identify with the audience. His status as a Toorak<sup>12</sup> millionaire, however, problematises this identification and re-establishes boundaries between himself and the fans of the show. Marmalade represents a brand of Australian (masculine) humour that is respected and emulated, even if the humour is constructed around an 'us' and 'them' opposition. Together, the three major 'players' function as a 'hero team' where each is dependent on the other for performance and credibility. According to John Fiske:

The hero team hides the insecurity of the individual without threatening his independence . . . the hero team is not only about male bonding . . . it is also provides the viewers with multiple points of entry for their identification with the hero (1987: 213).

The interactions of the three main characters and their presentation as a trio of 'heroes' can be read through the conventions of other televisual genres as well. *The Footy Show* was originally developed in order to provide a mixture of football discussion, previews and entertainment (Silver, 1997: 12), a nineties 'footbotainment' show (Porter, 1997). Whilst the show draws on many of the conventions of the situation comedy, its humour appears to be typical of the reportage historically accorded to Australian Rules football that 'was reconstructed through quite a different language than that which explained cricket, horse racing, rugby or other sports' (McConville, 1997: 16). This established way of understanding Australian Rules football, or 'Aussie Rules', celebrated the Aussie 'battler' and a distinctive tribal or shared humour (McConville, 1997: 16-17). A new television genre was thus conceived. It is a peculiar admixture of variety-club style<sup>13</sup> situation comedy, soap opera, documentary, news and public contributions, which appeals to sporting fans and attracts a different audience as well. Chris McConville, writing on the humour generated by AFL sporting commentary in written and visual form, argues that the kinds of comedy employed by *The Footy Show* is designed to be delivered and consumed in ensemble form precisely because the game's humour originates in the crowd. He writes that the success of the show is due to the fact that in its presentation 'it resonated perhaps unwittingly with some very deeply set characteristics of football humour' (McConville, 1997: 17).

There is no doubt that *The Footy Show* relies on humour to drive the show. This is signified by the role played by Marmalade, one of the principal performers, as a *resident* comedian, and the laughter of the live audience is used as a comedic barometer through which to gauge the success and social appropriateness of the humour. In keeping with the generic conventions of situation comedy, the set is reminiscent of a domestic or hotel setting, recreating the main and familiar environments in which football is watched on television. Unlike heroes in other television genres, such as drama or westerns, the hero of the situation comedy works to maintain, as opposed to challenge, the status quo (cf. Marc, 1997: 187-204). Often, through the injection of humour, comedy can elide deeply ingrained prejudices and remove or displace conflict. Newman, Maguire and Marmalade all make explicit and implicit statements about gender and sexual roles, the sense of nation and cultural identity (cf. Whannel, 1992: 2) and, in doing so, reaffirm mainstream attitudes. A recent example of how and in what ways the 'heroes' of *The Footy Show* operate to preserve endorsed values and codes of behaviour can be seen in Sam Newman's impersonation of Aboriginal player, Nicky Winmar.<sup>14</sup>

### **In Ya' Face: The Incident Prone Sam Newman**

During a show in early 1999, Newman painted his face black and deliberately mimicked Aboriginal Western Bulldogs player, Nicky Winmar, who, according

to *The Footy Show*, failed to arrive for a programmed appearance. Newman was accused of breaching the AFL's racial vilification laws and was called to account and apologise for his actions (Coffey & Harvey, 1999; Egan, 1999; Pegler, Davis & Ramsey, 1999; Timms & Stevens, 1999). Yet, despite the obvious inappropriateness of his behaviour, Newman continued to insist that no disrespect had been intended. Newman's defence has to be read in the historical context of *The Footy Show*, which has prided itself on its attempts to represent indigenous and ethnic sporting personalities and fans (Silver, 1997). Arguably, these efforts have been more about the show and its popularity with 'other' (socially, culturally and sexually marginal) fans. Newman, however, was supported in his claims by his supervising producer, Steve Perkin, who declared that 'There is no way the show needs to defend itself on racial grounds' (Pegler et. al, 1999). By denying the racism evidenced in Newman's actions, he is recuperated back into the team – Newman is simply the misunderstood team member and does not have to account for his actions. Instead, what occurred is reconstructed as part of the overall premise of the *show* which is primarily about 'levity' (cited in Coffey & Harvey, 1999). Maguire also defended Newman by stating that it was not a question of racism, but of taste. He argued:

Our show is not about vilification [thus deflecting calls for legal action to be taken against the show and Newman] or political statements. It is about breaking football stories and having some fun, and, yes, often at others' expense (cited in Hodge & Davis, 1999).

Channel Nine chief, Ian Johnson, also declared that 'there is a minority of the community that may not see the funny side of these things' (Timms, Coffey & Baskett, 1999). Melbourne's most widely read newspaper, *The Herald Sun* conducted a Vote Line Poll to determine whether or not readers felt that Newman owed Winmar an apology. Of the voters, 1445 people did not believe Newman need apologise and 465 believed that he should (Timms et al, 1999). It appears that, in this instance, the boundaries of the celluloid temporary 'team' have expanded to include those who sided with Newman and *The Footy Show*. Once again, the marginal status of indigenous people in Australian society was reaffirmed. The incident became important not because it demonstrated that racial vilification still occurs on and off the field, but that it is sanctioned in media outlets. Newman may accuse various commentators of 'hijack[ing] things we do into meaning something else' (Hanger, 1999: 32) or call the incident 'light-hearted satire' (Sheahan, 1999), but it is satire at the expense of Aboriginal people, thus asserting racial boundaries and a team identification that is literally drawn along the lines of black and white. In this example, the designation 'team' can be understood as representing a particular *habitus* that

reaffirms the status quo. John Fiske (1992: 32), drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, explains the term *habitus* as: 'Includ[ing] the notion of a habitat, the habitants and the processes of inhabiting it, and the habituated ways of thinking that go with it'. *Habitus* also reveals dispositions of mind and associated cultural tastes and ways of thinking and feeling, reformulating the psychosocial relationship between domination and subjectivity (Fiske, 1992: 32-3). Fans of *The Footy Show* and of Sam Newman in particular, share forms of *habitus*, yet Newman, as a celebrity, has more cultural capital allowing him to sit outside the circuits of cultural and economic exchange. By supporting Sam in his racial comments and behaviour as well as in his misogyny, the distinctions between fan, performer and team are minimised and a productive community (Fiske, 1992: 40) with agreed standards and rules is (re)established. The game thus goes on.

### Consuming Sam

The notion that Newman's private and public exploits and comments contribute to the overall success of the show demonstrate how, as a construct, he is fundamentally a 'series of iconic surfaces and stock attitudes' (Jenkins, 1997: 63) that reflects mainstream values. 'Sam', the image, has overtaken the referent, John Newman, in terms of how and where meaning accrues around his actions and his words. 'Sam' Newman is, fundamentally, a *simulacrum*. As Jean Baudrillard explains, a simulacrum is when the image and referent implode until they are comprehended as a single concept. The danger in the conflation rests in the potential referential and ideological meanings that can be attributed to the concept/individual. While Baudrillard argues that the 'masses' 'can consume images without consuming their meanings' (cited in Fiske, 1996: 59), he does not, as Fiske (1996) points out, account for differences in the masses. Sam Newman is a star, he is tangible evidence of what the community, his fans, want. Therefore, the game he plays with the audience and his team is for serious ideological stakes. Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998: 125) argue that 'meaning is produced through close attention to the nuances of the text and through social interaction with the everyday life of the fans'. The exchange of knowledge and affirmation or denigration of certain behaviours is significant in the construction of the identities of the fans and their relation to the object of their fandom. Ava Rose and James Friedman (1997: 6) argue that the sport fans, through their relationship with the 'game', engage in a range of discourses and practices that indicate 'maleness', and that together 'the commentators model the ideal spectator... present[ing] sports reception as participation'.

In supporting *The Footy Show* and Sam Newman, the fans, male and female, adopt specific ideological stances. Gazing at the television is kinetic; it is participation. But television, as many commentators have observed, demands a complex level of psychosocial interaction from its viewers (Abercrombie,

1996; Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Ang, 1996; Fiske, 1987, 1992). Newman is watched and devoured, and he is both voyeur and exhibitionist who eagerly consumes his fans whilst being consumed. This cannibalistic circuit of exchange relies on reciprocity creating a (false) impression of participation and removing the complex economic considerations that always operate within this space, and reveal the capitalistic imperative that drives the construction of 'Sam' and *The Footy Show*.

### Fan/ing Outwards

The 'official culture' is that established within the cultural field of *The Footy Show* and its codes and conventions clearly instate Sam Newman as a star/celebrity figure. For approximately ninety minutes every week, the audience both real and virtual, participate as team members in the game played by the cast. The game is derivative of the official culture in that it mimics privileged forms of address (white, middle-class establishment male) and hierarchy (host, co-hosts, panel, guests, audience) and shares attributes and rules with the wider culture of which it is a part. Its spectators/fans are interpellated partly through the mode of direct address employed by the cast (Rose & Friedman, 1997: 3) and the deployment of camera techniques, as well as by its structure as a team within a broader social game. The 'team' spirit is evoked through the weekly scheduling of the program and the sharing of the viewing by fans despite different locales.<sup>15</sup> Like sports, *The Footy Show*, with its emphasis on games and sporting identities, offers 'a shared emotional experience... which reasserts the desirability of belonging to a community' (Jenkins, 1997: 52). This fan collectivity is further enhanced through advertisements for the show and the distribution of *The Footy Show Magazine* that offers membership to its readers and the program. By disseminating its content through a range of different media, *The Footy Show* returns the game to the people. As Pierre Bourdieu (1999: 433) argues, 'sport, born of truly popular games, i.e., games produced by the people, returns to the people, like "folk music", in the form of spectacles produced for the people'.

The variety of media *The Footy Show* employs to capture its audience encourages the circulation of what Fiske describes as 'fan talk', that is, 'the generation and circulation of certain meanings of the object of fandom within a local community' (1992: 38). Enunciation is one way of expressing fandom and, in this instance, membership of the 'team'. In this manner, fans are able to share in the glories and failures of their 'players'. Thus, to champion *The Footy Show*, a sports production, is to define oneself as a particular type of football fan and to champion the self. As Todd Boyd suggests:

Sport occupies a special place in our society. It is like a reserved space, knowingly off limits to most but vicariously participated in

by many. When the sport's participants win, this is shared with many people who have nothing to do with the actual sport itself but who use this success as a form of cultural identity (1997: viii).

As a media *show* about sport, *direct* participation and knowledge of *The Footy Show* is doubly denied to its fans, except vicariously through viewing and watching and the active reproduction of the attributes of fandom that the show denotes as positive and desirable. 'Winning', through ratings and popularity and success of particular cast members, becomes increasingly significant because it can be equated with victory in *multiple* spheres of the fans' lives. *The Footy Show* literally embraces the philosophy of winning by creating competitions in which the fans enter. Not only does the competition mimic the structures and play of football, but it recreates the same ideological playing field as well. Further, the competitions function to contribute directly to the text of the show and allow fans to blur the boundary between player and spectator.

There are three segments in particular that enable fans to compete as team members and inscribe the text of the show with popular meanings. One such segment is 'Street Talk', where Newman is constructed as the hero who embarks on a regular quest to discover the community's thoughts on various subjects. In the opening monologue of *his* first *Street Talk* segment, Sam demonstrated the attitude he would bring to his interviews by stating: 'let's see what the public thinks, if in fact they' are thinking at all' (Silver, 1997: 35). He has also recently described members of the general community, aware that many are from his audience, as 'that milling, mindless, aimless crowd who drift out from the hills in an attempt to sustain a reasonable sort of life -boring and mundane' (Hanger, 1999: 30). Through 'Street Talk', Newman is constructed as supplying access to the members of the public he approaches in shopping malls and streets, as empowering them by giving them the opportunity to voice their convictions and, sometimes, team allegiances. Newman encourages the people he encounters to engage with the show, whether it is because they are willing supporters or as provoked and unwilling accomplices, 'dispensing wayward advice and derogatory tonics that seem to be their [the general public's] salve' (Hanger, 1999: 32). With his microphone in hand, he wields this phallic instrument of male power as a reminder of his privileged speaking and subject positions. The segment appears unaffected, any signs of its construction are elided through awkward camera movements, angles and natural lighting. Yet the vignettes shown are carefully edited and screened to further elaborate the persona of 'Sam'. Many of the people approached refer to Newman's exploits, deriding him or sympathising with him for his latest 'mishap' thus reinstating his celebrity and notoriety and restoring any borders that his venture into and with the public might have disturbed.

Another segment that appears to provide the public with an opportunity to 'comment' on the show is 'Sam's Mailbag'. In this section, Newman reads letters that have been sent to him by the audience/fans. He does not appear to hesitate to read confrontational or abusive mail. These, however, further work to construct an image of 'Sam' and give him many opportunities to utter his catch cry 'you idiot'. The correspondence between Newman and his fans is continued in the magazine and on the internet, where readers are invited to respond both to the show and to Newman, expanding the parameters of the program. Through these segments, in particular, the public are revealed as essential to the promotion of Sam Newman as a celebrity. While the separateness of his identities as football hero and media celebrity are continually asserted, it is during these parts of the program that they are rendered indistinct.

The lack of AFL footage from Channel Seven allows fans further opportunities to embellish the text of 'their' show. In the section entitled 'Almost Footy Legends' (the bumbling amateurs' AFL), viewers and players in local leagues are invited to send in clips of non-professional matches, thus inscribing their own presence onto the show and, in the process, gaining their 'fifteen minutes of fame'.

At this stage, I have offered a reading of the three segments that incorporates each as part of an inclusive fan/team narrative. I would also like to present an alternative interpretation that locates these 'democratic' parts within a specifically heroic masculine paradigm. Together, 'Street Talk', 'Sam's Mailbag' and 'Almost Footy Legends' position the members of the hero team as hunters and the viewing public, as the hunted. In 'Street Talk', for example, Newman embarks on what can be described as an 'idiot hunt', locating and later screening subjects that confirm his superior intellect and social skills and his (staged?) low opinion of the general community.<sup>16</sup> 'Sam's Mailbag', it can be argued, functions as a lure to entice viewers to respond to the show. The correspondence is read on air, and its context deliberately altered, 'trapping' the victim/'idiot' and (re)positioning Newman as a successful hunter. Finally, 'Almost Footy Legends' is paraded like a series of trophies, further distinguishing the differences between professional and non-professional footballers. Admittedly, there are occasions when the amateur's skills are valorised, but this outcome is accomplished through the verbal approval of those 'in the know'.

The siting of Newman as hunter within an expansive social game park is further confirmed if the metaphor is extended to include Maguire and Marmalade. Maguire is akin to the rich, white expedition organiser who, while remaining in the background, gains reflected glory from the triumphs of his team. Marmalade is the 'side-kick', the less powerful pursuer, carrying additional weaponry and, whilst sometimes 'in on the kill' with a good shot, generally emphasises the accuracy of his partner's abilities.

While this interpretation problematises the democratic spirit of the inclusion of fans and fan material in the text of the show, it does not diminish the pleasures of their incorporation. Hunting is another sport, strongly linked to stereotypical masculine traits, success and power. As other popular cultural texts and cult figures such as Mick 'Crocodile' Dundee, Indiana Jones, Captain Kirk and the writer and sports fan Ernest Hemingway, have demonstrated, the victorious hunter, for a range of heterogeneous psychosocial reasons, is a much-loved identity.

These three segments are, arguably, the most popular on the show, indicating that the identificatory boundaries between celebrity and non-celebrity should be flexible in order to allow fans to write, or at least manufacture, texts in their own image. As Fiske suggests:

Fan texts, then, have to be producerly . . . in that they have to be open, to contain gaps, irresolutions, contradictions, which both allow and invite fan productivity. They are insufficient texts that are inadequate to their cultural function of circulating meanings and pleasures until they are worked upon and activated by their fans, who by such activity, produce their own cultural capital (1992: 42).

The inclusion of fans and their material/activities in the master narrative of the show has turned *The Footy Show* into 'one of the anomalies of Australian television' (Graubard, 1999) and is partly responsible for what has been described as 'the mass seduction and scepticism of the Australian public' (Hanger, 1999: 30).

### **More Than a Game**

*The Footy Show* is foregrounded as 'More Than a Game', and in its reception, production and consumption, it has proved that it offers more than the spectacle and pleasures associated with sporting competition. The show enables fans of both sexes to vicariously participate, in different modes and media, in a game of social and cultural proportions. Competition is removed from the sporting ground and recreated primarily in an audio-visual medium. *The Footy Show* places emphasis on the *process* of the game and the personalities and lives of the players, instead of the football game as a final and climactic product. This combination of masculine resolution with feminine deferment and characterisation produces a range of emotional and cultural rewards for the fans, including the illusion of being a part of a team. When the focus of fan attention is both a sports 'legend' and a current media celebrity, the identificatory structures invoked are quite complex. Sam Newman continually shifts and blurs the boundaries that construct him as a specific and reductive type of masculine

football and media celebrity. Sometimes the diffusion of meaning is achieved through a direct challenge to establishment norms, other times by upholding a range of traditional values and practices that appear to conflict with what fans recognise as shaping their 'game'.

Sam Newman, whether adored or reviled, has drawn attention to the ambivalence of conventional understandings of masculinity within football, as well as forcing his audience to question those borders that work to categorise and define on the basis of class, age, sex or gender. Ironically, while disturbing many of these boundaries, Newman's efforts also reassert them separating him and the entire *Footy Show* team from its fan base. This is also due to the cult of celebrity that continues to manifest in contemporary culture and creates an enormous chasm between the famous and the masses. Newman, whatever the public's response, is not an easy person to ignore. As long as *The Footy Show* continues to be self-consciously critical in its appraisal of the 'game', in all its guises, and point to and parody the artificiality of the various constructions in society – including Sam Newman – it will attract fans who are eager to participate in more than a game.

## NOTES:

1. I would like to thank Steve Brogan for his time, invaluable comments and the research he did for this article; a labour of love (of the game). I would also like to thank Tara Magdalinski, Malcolm McLean, Jim McKay and Chris McConville for allowing me to share my ideas with them and their feedback as well as for their generosity in lending me tapes and articles.
2. There are two programs on Australian television that possess the title *The Footy Show* and both are shown on the same network (Channel Nine) throughout the football season. The Australian Rules, *The Footy Show* needs to be distinguished from the Rugby League show of the same name that stars Paul 'Fatty' Vautin, Steve 'Blocker' Roach (who was sacked from the show for the 2000 season) and Peter 'Sterlo' Sterling. This program is produced in Sydney for the duration of the league season, but is most successful in New South Wales and Queensland. *The (AFL) Footy Show* is shown in most states in Australia and its ratings are consistently high, but is most popular in Victoria. However, it is interesting to note that in Queensland, the 'home' of rugby league, *The (AFL) Footy Show* wins its timeslot each week.
3. The 'outer' refers to non-members areas in Australian sports grounds.
4. Captain Blood was the nickname for the football player Jack Dyer who was captain/coach of the Richmond Tigers Football Club from 1941-49.
5. Sam Newman was the face behind Ford cars until they sacked him after the 'Nicky Winmar incident'. This is dealt with in some detail later in the article.

6. After hearing about this paper Newman referred to this author as 'a six foot two transvestite Sheila'. It should be pointed out that this comment was made after Sam was caught on camera 'accidentally' kissing former AFL player, and *Footy Show* regular, Dermot Brereton. Apart from the obvious problematics surrounding the term 'transvestite Sheila', there is also a distinct misogyny underlying his comment. It was an extreme and extraordinary reaction to what was perceived as an attempt on my part (read academics, 'non-sporty' types) to colonise and feminise, not just Sam Newman, but the entire *Footy Show* and, by association, AFL football. His response re-masculinises Sam and the game by situating women and the intelligentsia together in a binary relationship with Sam; one where he clearly occupies the privileged position.
7. Sam Newman can also be likened to the Canadian media celebrity and former hockey (NHL) coach, Don Cherry. Cherry has become infamous for his broadcasting style and associated media activities (especially the reproduction of violent hockey moments as a commercial video). He is described as 'the most outrageous act on Canadian television' (Roy MacGregor qf. Gillet et.al. 1996, p. 61) and as being 'hyper-flamboyant and self-promotingly controversial' (p. 61). He is known for making 'politically incorrect' and inappropriate statements that are misogynistic, racist and ethnocentric. Despite the theatricality of both Cherry and Newman, and the similar audience responses to the men that range from loathing to adoration, Cherry is unapologetically working class and seeks to appeal to that demographic amongst his audience. Newman, on the other hand, works hard to separate himself from association or comparisons with blue-collar members of his audience, preferring instead to engender a mystique of upward mobility, discerning intellect and affluence.
8. Conversely, there is large proportion of the audience who would have no knowledge of his sporting career, to them his fame and their awareness of him is media-produced.
9. Furthermore, in 1999 Newman was embroiled in a controversial debate over his comments about Aboriginal player Nicky Winmar and was removed from his position as the public face of Ford. In September 1999, he was evicted from Burswood Casino in Perth for drunken and disorderly behaviour (cf. Brown, 1999, p. 3).
10. This triangular structure recalled an earlier football show, *League Teams*, that was popular in the 1970s and starred the football 'greats' Bobby Davis, Lou Richards and Jack Dyer 'parading as three wise monkeys' (McConville, 1997, p. 17). The program *League Teams* followed a movie review type program entitled, *Two in the Aisle*. This show targeted a particular class of audience, educated and discerning. In a parodic gesture, Richards, Dyer and Davis, referred to themselves as 'Three in the Outer' reappropriating the content of the earlier show and privileging their sport as entertainment focus.
11. A less affluent suburb of Melbourne.
12. Recognised as one of Melbourne's wealthiest suburbs.
13. It is also reminiscent of an earlier successful Australian variety show, *IMT - In Melbourne Tonight*.

14. I think it is interesting that this particular event is most often referred to as the 'Nicky Winmar incident', thus displacing Sam's central role in the affair.
15. *The Footy Show* is often televised in public bars around Victoria and consumers of the show (and regulars at the bar) are invited to watch the program together, like a pseudo-family, as a means of expressing their allegiance, not just to their individual teams, but to the show as well.
16. Newman's interview style can be contrasted with that of Andrew Urban in the SBS show *Upfront*. Urban's method is to make the interviewee central to the show – Sam on the other hand, makes himself central.

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