

# Power Relations in a Professional Sports Franchise

*Allan Edwards*  
Griffith University  
Gold Coast, Australia  
&  
*James Skinner*  
Southern Cross University  
Lismore, Australia

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to employ the theoretical lens provided by Foucault's (1977) account of power in investigating the function of power in a professional sport franchise. Some commentators have criticised Foucault's pervasive conception of power worried that, if power is everywhere it cannot be identified or pinpointed. In this study it will be argued that if power relations operate at the level of the body, and exist in action, then they should be observable in the microlevel practices of sport organisations. Hence, not only is the study concerned on the possibility of observing power relations but it is premised on actual observations gained through workplace experience in a sport franchise.

## Introduction

This paper analyses the power relations that exist in a professional sport franchise. The organisation that was studied was a professional rugby league franchise that entered the National Rugby League (NRL) competition in 1995. At the time the club entered the competition, the national governing body, the New South Wales Rugby League, was undergoing a rapid expansion policy. In addition, throughout the 1990s the game of rugby league was experiencing a rapid increase in spectator popularity created by innovative and appealing marketing strategies. This was demonstrated by the fact that:

For the second successive year attendances had gone over the two million mark by the time the Winfield Cup final series has arrived. The rise on last year's record figures was 9.2% – 2,000,393. On twelve occasions this year Winfield Cup rounds drew total crowds of more 100,000 (NSWRL 1991: 6).

The teams involved in the NRL competition in the early 1990s stemmed from Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane, the Gold Coast and two regional centres in New South Wales. In 1995 a team from Perth, two additional teams from Queensland, and one team from Auckland, New Zealand entered the competition. This brought the total number of teams in the competition to twenty. This expansion policy however, made some markets more competitive, and consequently the survival of each franchise was eventually based on the club's ability to attract sponsorship and spectator support, The NRL club in this

study was based in Queensland, a state that in 1995 comprised three teams, two of which were located in the capital city of Brisbane and one in the northern regional centre of Townsville. Consequently, competition for sponsors and spectators in this particular marketplace had increased twofold and created a degree of intra-organisational tension and conflict. The original franchise, the Brisbane Broncos previously had a statewide monopoly and marketing the club as a team for all of Queensland.

### **Foucault and Power Relations**

For this study, Foucault's linking of 'modern disciplinary power' or 'bio-power' with modern institutions is particularly salient. Unlike the sovereign power of earlier historical periods, Foucault (1980) elaborated the invisibility and pervasiveness of power in the modern society. For Foucault (1979: 93):

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere.

Foucault's (1979) notion of power equalises instead of creating hierarchies. Power is everywhere; it is equal circulating, multiple, constituting discourses, fomenting micro-struggles. The key factors of this form of power are: (1) power is productive and not solely repressive; (2) power circulates rather than being possessed; (3) power exists in action; (4) power functions at the level of the body; (5) power operates through technologies of self; and (6) power limits and produces knowledge. This conception of power suggests a different level of analysis than is evident in other approaches to power.

According to Foucault (1977), 'disciplinary power' emerged with the advent of modern institutions. Foucault described three disciplinary mechanisms used by organisations to maintain power: examination, normalising judgement and hierarchical observations. He illustrated this argument within Bentham's Panopticon. By causing those in power to develop in themselves the means by which such power operates, the panopticon is thus a superbly efficient mechanism for social control:

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze, an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself (Foucault 1980: 155).

Although Bentham's design for a prison was intended to be taken literally, the panopticon can be interpreted as a powerful metaphor for control by scrutiny and for the internalisation and normalisation of control mechanisms. More important than surveillance by the supervisor, however, is the development of self-surveillance by the prisoners themselves, and the acceptance of the naturalness of the self-surveillance. Ultimately, the external application of surveillance becomes unnecessary as the individual 'inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles, he becomes the principal of his own subjection' (Foucault 1977: 202). Surveillance thus becomes a technique for self-control or self-discipline. When this aspect of Foucault's work is applied to a sport environment, the panoptic quality of sport management becomes obvious. It is possible for the organisational members of the sport franchise to be effectively managed through policies that require self-surveillance for their operation.

As a technology of power, management operates like the panopticon both providing techniques for surveillance and requiring the internalisation and naturalisation of truths. Furthermore, according to Ball (1990: 158), it offers 'a system of normalisation, whereby a resister is normalised through coercive or therapeutic means'. This form of regulatory control is therefore not just imposed from the outside but is threaded through the organisation in the everyday work that organisational members do. This is what Foucault (1980: 39) describes as a capillary form of power, 'which reaches into the very grain of individuals' synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body, rather than from above it'.

Given this, the aim of this study is to employ the theoretical lens provided by Foucault's account of power by investigating the functioning of power through various sport practices. If power relations operate at the level of the body, and can exist in action, then power relations should be observable in the micro-level practices of a sport franchise. As Foucault (1977: 24) said of the body: 'power relations have an immediate hold upon it, they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks to perform ceremonies, to emit "signs"'. Hence, not only is this study conceived on the possibility of observing power relations, but it is premised on actual participation in these power relations by the researchers.

### **Research Design**

This research utilised an ethnographic case study approach of an NRL club. To understand the power relations that existed within the club it was necessary to understand the context in which the club functioned. This research is based on the researchers' experiences as either a senior executive within the club, or alternatively, a consultant employed by the club. In these roles the researchers engaged in the interactional dynamics of the context as necessary and committed agents for long and continuous periods.

In addition, for an in-depth analysis of power relations in a professional sport franchise to be appropriately conducted, the research needed to account for temporal questions of validity. This meant that the research needed to be of an adequate duration, to account for the inferences drawn from it, and that valid inferences required generalisation. To account for this, the research was conducted over a two-year period.

Finally, the research used specific major incidents and instances to develop generalisations about the power relations that took place within the club. These generalisations are however, treated cautiously since Chalmers (1982) and Woolgar (1988) noted the importance of sufficiency when making generalisations, which they defined as the problem of induction. They suggested that generalisation requires that sufficient major occurrences of specific instances are experienced, such that generalisation is valid for the purpose of inference. The conclusions drawn from this research are therefore reflective generalisations of specific major instances that reflect the nature of the power relations that existed in the club and their subsequent impact throughout the organisation and on organisational members.

## **Results and Discussion**

In the following section an analysis of some 'Specific Major Incidents' in the sport franchise context will be undertaken to reveal where power is 'most invisible and insidious' (Foucault, 1970: 60).

### **1. First Coaching Session**

During the first coaching session of the season, the new coach established his way of 'doing things'. He co-ordinated the activities of his players and coaching staff with military-like precision. His emotions during the session ranged from quiet reflection, cheerfulness through to anger. He cajoled, encouraged, pleaded and yelled at players and staff to get what he wanted. Punishments in the form of intense physical activity were assigned to players who made mistakes or 'slacked off. At one point, he exclaimed to his players 'If you don't give me what I want we will keep on doing it until we get it right'.

### ***Reflective Analysis***

Players are accorded favours, good pay and certain privileges in return for their physical skills and risks to self. They are treated as soldiers on duty, punishable for the slightest slip, breach of discipline or prank. The team discipline is certainly modelled on military discipline, with attendance, physical examinations, club uniforms, punishments, deference to club superiors, obedience and respect to the coach. The playing life of the players is a story of the pain barrier, of going to the limits of endurance, of being totally fatigued and of career threatening injuries. The outstanding player devotes himself body and soul to the accomplishment of his 'physical duty', demanding self-denial

and sacrifice. Of primary importance to the coach therefore is the obedience of 'docile bodies' to authority.

Foucault (1974) contended that discipline is an important force in maintaining power. He spoke of 'disciplinary technologies', that is procedures or operations that could be used to manipulate and control. He described the aim of 'disciplining technology', as that of forging a 'docile body' that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. Foucault (1977) saw the system of disciplinary power as productive and integrated. He argued that such power cannot rely exclusively or predominantly on punitive measures, essential though these are. For power to be self-sustaining, it must produce and reproduce definitions of reality, which the objects of this power come to see as normal. Thus, production of power, 'Discipline', Foucault (1997: 170) argued 'makes individuals: it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise'.

In the context of the team this 'exercise' is designed to be continuous and relentless. Surveillance is the key technique. Foucault (1977: 215) suggested:

Discipline may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by 'specialised' institutions . . . or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end . . . or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganising their internal mechanisms of power.

## **2. Player Recruitment**

The coach, chief executive (CE) and recruitment manager (RM) were discussing possible recruits for the upcoming season.

*Coach:* We need a quicker fullback who is safer in defence. Who's available off contract?

*RM:* We've got Willis, Davis, Hendry, who are proven performers. All are coming off contract.

*Coach:* Hell, what are you trying to do? That Willis is uncoachable.

*RM:* He's a real talent.

*Coach:* And a real troublemaker. I don't care how good he is. I'm not having someone come in here with a poor attitude . . . He's more trouble than what he's worth.

*RM:* Do we take him off the list?

*Coach:* Yeah! Move on – I like this Hendry guy. How much can we get him for?

*RM:* About \$300,000.

*Coach:* \$200,000 tops. If he baulks back off because although he's worth it, most of the other clubs have settled on their fullback and I don't see too many chasing him.

*CE:* So you want me to contact his manager?

*Coach:* Okay.

*CE:* Coach, You realise that this guy is going to take a big bite out of your budget.

*Coach:* Yeah. Contact the managers of Willis and Davis too. Put the word around that we don't care which one we get. If we put the word around Hendry will soon drop his asking price.

### ***Reflective Analysis***

Foucault (1974) described three disciplinary mechanisms used by organisations to maintain power: examination, normalising, judgement and hierarchical observations. Furthermore, Foucault (1977) analysed the examination in terms of it being a highly structured and ritualised use of power in which individuals are identified, classified, categorised and subjected to surveillance in the guise of monitoring, screening and diagnosis. Foucault's (1977) analysis of the examination provides insights into the sport selection process. For the representatives of the sporting franchise, potential players are seen as recruits and are judged and ranked in terms of some idealised image of what is required. The importance of the player's role will typically shape the range and depths of the examination of potential recruits. The individual player as the 'case' can be categorised, identified and compared with others. Such evaluation by 'experts' is often premised on signing the 'ideal docile body'.

### **3. Team Selections**

Following each game the coach would meet with the club selectors to select a team for the following game. The coach had a policy of meeting 'face to face' with players who had lost their position in the starting line up.

*Coach:* Brett, I've called you to this meeting to say, I'm giving someone else a start this week in your place. I must admit I haven't been happy with your game intensity (pause). You've got to realise this is not a personal thing. It's a professional thing that I have to do as coach. . . (pause). I'm sorry that its come **to** this.

*Brett:* I'm shocked, Coach. I believe that I am playing as well as anyone else in the team, but the chances are not coming my way.

*Coach:* I understand your disappointment Brett, but I want more from you.

*Brett:* What do I have to do coach? I want to get back in the top team. (pause) I'm not a 'spent force'. I want back in. I'll do whatever you want.

*Coach:* It's not really the time to talk about it now. We will talk later and come up with a plan. Okay.

### ***Reflective Analysis***

Players are often viewed and treated as replaceable components of the 'system'. The selection system becomes figural, relegating individual identities, personal biographies and human needs to the background.

Team selections operate as a form of panopticon with its continuous surveillance. Although operating through visibility as a technology of power, its effects remain largely invisible. For Foucault (1979: 187), disciplinary power arises from mechanisms, which disrupt this dialectic:

Disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those it subjects a compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection.

For those who inevitably fail to satisfy the coach's expectations there is the problem of accepting or rationalising away the image of self as failure that is offered by the experience. Success superficially carries with it the symbolism of recognition and acceptance. Paradoxically, however, the desire for recognition carries one further and further onto the ground of others' expectations. A player is accepted not for their uniqueness but for approximating most closely to the club coaches idealised image of what is required. Thus player performance is 'normalised' (Foucault, 1977) by the management imposed power network. Players must conform to competitive performativity requirements or be excluded.

### **4. Cutting The Player**

Dialogue: A group of players stopped a senior executive as he walked to the club office.

*Jones:* Hey, Allan, did you hear that 'Horse' has been cut?

*Allan:* What do you mean cut?

*Dave:* The coach called him in and said he wasn't 'playing well and didn't fit the club's plans. Coach told him he wouldn't be resigned for next season (pause). I feel sorry for him, he's a great guy . . . (pause). It's sent a bit of a scare through the camp to see

‘Horse’ released because he’s been a great player for the club . . .  
(pause). From now on I’ll really be putting in.

### ***Reflective Analysis***

Foucault (1977: 74) talks of discipline’s effects in terms of the way it ‘compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes’. Exclusion is perhaps by definition an unusual element of panoptic power. Its real power is not so much around the individual who is excluded – for here power dissolves itself in its very use – but in its impact on those who witness the exclusion. For them, it is an example of what might happen. It traces out a possible future and thereby reinforces the weight of the standards by which they are judged. It reminds them of the conditional nature of their club membership. It reminds them that their security depends upon their utility.

The fear of exclusion leads to a sort something of a self-absorption; it forces players to a concern with their own singular survival, which depends upon meeting the playing standards that are set. To secure self, players must see themselves and what they do in the terms in which they are judged. In Foucault’s (1979: 202-3) words:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power, he makes them play upon himself. He inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles.

Here is the moment, the mental stance, in which power can be seen to individualise; an absorption with self, with how they will be seen, which leads constantly to attempts to stand as if outside themselves in order to anticipate the expectations of others. In adopting this stance, the standards and values of playing are internalised; the self is discovered as solitary and singular.

### **5. ‘Stats’ Sheets**

In an endeavour to overcome a losing sequence of games the coach decided to post the weekly ‘stats sheet’ of player performance in the club locker room. The coach announced to the team that he hoped that by posting the ‘stats sheet’ other players in the team would be aware of those players ‘not performing up to expectations’ during games.

### ***Reflective Analysis***

Players in the sport franchise are seen as ‘workers’ engaged, not in a creative skill environment but simply in a production system in which their efforts are counted, controlled and manipulated by their supervisor (the coach). In the use of ‘stats sheets’ game elements, such as tackles, errors, kicks, are traceable to their source, a fact, which in large part enables the concept of ‘statistical quality

control' to overview the output from each player. The posting of the 'stats sheet' in the locker room is also a further mechanism of panoptic observation and control, as players' mistakes as well as their work rate are made evident to team members and management. The stats sheets' imperative of performativity necessitates that players form and transform themselves into a highly performing self disciplined unit of the production system.

## **6. Suggestion System**

The coach was concerned about the level of intensity and concentration of players during a practice session. He decided to adopt a 'suggestion system' in which players were invited to offer their personal suggestions about training and what could be done to improve commitment.

Following the training session the coach called players to a team meeting. The players were invited to comment on how sessions could be improved. The players came up with a number of suggestions such as a need for increased variety in sessions and ideas on increasing efficiency at training.

### ***Reflective Analysis***

Suggestion systems cultivate a figural sense of self-determination in players and thus eliminate their resistance to training sessions and tasks, which are being imposed by the coach. As Foucault (1979: 95) notes: 'where there is power, there is resistance'. By eliminating the perceived power of management to impose control from above, and by deluding players into thinking that this power now emanates from their own actions, the suggestion system succeeds in eliminating much of the resistance to the coaches' power.

The notion of power as hidden and best exercised when people are not aware that it exists is important. Paul Brickley (1994: 18) remarks:

In fact as in Nietzsche's critique of morality, he (Foucault) would say that the mere pretence to operate on a realm free of power relations is perhaps the most cunning and sinister play of power there could be, which masks itself behind a benign facade of liberal (Christian) generosity, a mode of domination specific to the period of modernity.

## **7. Player Power**

Following a series of ten defeats the players held a meeting to see how they could improve their game performance. At the meeting some players were critical of their own team mates for partying before games, not training hard enough and failing to perform in the games. Following a hostile meeting the players decided that team unity was important for success. The players passed a resolution that any players who 'didn't pull their weight' in the games were to be 'frozen out' by their team members until they came 'back into line'.

### ***Reflective Analysis***

It is suggested that the demands for consensus and conformity among one's peers provide a more compelling method of player control than coercion from the coach. The success of the team, in fact, is highly dependent on a social organisation where players are made to feel a sense of obligation to their team members and thus to the club as a whole. This peer pressure means that panoptic power and influence (Foucault, 1979) are executed by one's fellow team members, rather than only by the coach and management. For Foucault (1984: 208) power is internally contradictory; it oppresses and enables;

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply that fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasures, forms, knowledge, it produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network, which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repressive.

### **8. Total Quality Management**

In a further endeavour to lift the team out of a long losing streak the coach introduced principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) used by the Australian Olympic gold medal winning women's field hockey team. The coach made a copy of the principles used by the hockey team and gave a copy to each member of his team. It stated the following:

I will be the best I can by:

1. Continually challenging myself to go beyond my comfort zone.
2. Making necessary sacrifices.
3. Believing in my ability and the strength of my purpose.
4. Valuing excellence, determination and dedication in both training and match play.
5. Having faith and confidence in, and being supportive of, my team-mates.
6. Not making excuses but taking responsibility for my development, performances and for my lifestyle.
7. Seeking feedback and making contributions to the program.
8. Being tolerant of differences in others and respecting them for who they are and what they have to offer.
9. Accepting disappointments and frustrations and overcoming them by working together.

10. Having faith in the course of action chosen for the team and being committed to it knowing that it may not always be my preference.

### ***Reflective Analysis***

These sporting commandments are an example of one major device employed under the banner of TQM and are a known continuous process improvement, or *Kaizen*. Typically these methods have been praised for their ability to allow workers greater freedom in influencing the conditions under which they work,

Because the *Kaizen* system of 'continual improvement' requires a program of standards, which are measurable and reproducible, work tasks become meticulously regulated and enforced in a manner, which is indistinguishable from scientific management. The *Kaizen* system represents a fanatical dedication to the meticulous execution of tasks in exactly the manner prescribed by management.

TQM does not exist as a conspiracy to de-humanise the players but merely as a program where the interests of the players are subjugated or trivialised in relation to 'performativity' requirements of the team. TQM seeks to perfect control systems, which produce and enforce uniformity. The problem is that a majority of this control is directed towards players, bodies, souls and spirits (Foucault, 1979). The type of change provides a narrative not of emancipation and promotion of individual excellence, but of conformity.

### **9. Financial Power**

Speculation existed that the club was having some financial difficulties. In response to player concerns, a team meeting was called and the Chief Executive read a prepared statement:

CE: I have called you here to advise you that rumours of our club's financial difficulties are correct. We have had a difficult year. The team is not playing well, and we have won only two games this season. Sponsors are not signing on, corporate boxes are not being sold and crowds are forty per cent down on last season (pause). I think we can all accept some responsibility for this situation. However, the bottom line is that if we don't get the money in, we can't pay out. I have to advise you that the club can no longer afford to pay bonus payments, medical insurance and accommodation supplements. Furthermore, in order to prevent bankruptcy, all players will have to accept a pay cut of twenty per cent.

(The statement was interrupted and a series of hostile questions directed at the CE. This continued for an hour. The team captain then addressed the meeting).

Captain: I'm as mad as hell about the pay cuts and our current financial situation. I don't like it but from what's being said, if we don't accept the cuts, the club will be bankrupt and we won't get anything (pause). I guess we need to lift our game and win a few games to get the sponsors and crowds back. We all have to accept responsibility. We carry much of the blame.

### ***Reflective Analysis***

At one level, the announcement of pay cuts merely confirmed to the players the sense or experience of their own disposability within the structure of the sport organisation. On another level, however, their impotence to resist the pay cuts was not surprising, for in addition to the technical intimidation and 'cultural respect' for the clear-cut assertiveness of the financial accounts, the players were inclined to blame not only management but also themselves for the tragedy. Players, for example, felt responsible for failing to have prevented management 'setting them up' for the subsequent cuts. In addition, the players were unwilling to discount their own participation in the financial situation. As Foucault (1979) suggests the individualising of modern populations is a complex outcome of life-administering technologies of power extending well beyond the sport franchise. In this sense power is not repressive so much as directional, leading the players to become 'politically docile'.

### **Conclusion**

This paper intended 'to reveal power where it is most invisible and insidious' (Foucault, 1970: 119). Analysis of 'Specific Major Incidents' can be seen to re-problematize aspects of power. As Foucault argues:

The work of an intellectual is not to mould the political will of others; it is, to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions and starting from this re-problematization . . . to participate in the formation of a political will (Lotringer, 1989: 34).

Through Foucault's analysis of power this paper has provided social and political insights into the way that professional sport practice has been constructed. In addition, Foucault's discourse provides a useful starting point to deconstruct the taken for granted nature of reality that remains hegemonic in contemporary sport management practice.

## REFERENCES

- Ball, S. (1990). Management as moral technology: A Luddite analysis. In S. Ball (Ed.), *Foucault and education: Disciplines and knowledge* (pp. 153-166). London: Routledge.
- Brickley, P. (1994). Teaching post-modern history: A rational proposition for the classroom? *Teaching History*, 74, 17-22.
- Chalmers, A. (1982). *What is thing called science?: An assessment on the nature and status of science and its methods*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things*. London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, M. (1974). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. New York: Vintage/Random House.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish* London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, M. (1979) *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Vintage/Random House. (Original work published, 1977).
- Foucault, M. (1980). *The history of sexuality. Volume one: An introduction*. (R. Hurley, Trans). New York: Vintage/Random House. (Original work published 1980).
- Foucault, M. (1984). The subject and power. Afterword in H.L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (pp.208-226). Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Lotringer, S. (Ed.). (1989). *Foucault live: Interviews 1966-84*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) (1991). *Annual Report*. Sydney: New South Wales Rugby League.
- Woolgar, S. (1988). *Science: The very idea*. Chichester: Tavistock.