

# Sports Fan Movements to Save Suburban-based Football Teams Threatened with Amalgamation in Different Football Codes in Australia'

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## Abstract

During the late 1980s and 1990s there has been an international acceleration in the rationalisation and relocation of professional sporting teams and competitions. While this process has had a long history in the United States, it has occurred much more rapidly in other societies. In Australia, there has been a dual process of national expansion of professional sporting competitions and pressures placed on historic suburban-based clubs. In addition, there has been a massive infusion of international capital in the form of television interest in Australian professional sports. In rugby league this caused a temporary split in the national competition. In rugby union it has led to open professionalism and greater integration with South Africa and New Zealand. And, in Australian Rules football, the governing body has worked to protect itself against an outside takeover such as has plagued rugby league. At the same time, both the Australian Football League (AFL) and the National Rugby League (NRL) and their predecessors have worked to rationalise the number of suburban Melbourne and Sydney-based clubs respectively while promoting a policy of national expansion and for rugby league even international expansion to Auckland, New Zealand. We examine fan responses to these changes particularly when their club is threatened with merging with other clubs. We discuss the dynamics of this process that are unique to the Australian context in our analysis of global capital and local audiences and suggest how this connects with a theoretical understanding of such processes more generally and comparisons that can be made between Australia and other countries.

Sport has been labeled by many as being a central cultural element in Australian society. Foreign observers have commented on the Australian propensity for sports participation and spectating since the nineteenth century. The title of a recent book, and thus far the best survey of Australian sports history, *Paradise of Sport* (1995) by Richard Cashman, captures this notion. Whether Australia is or is not a 'paradise' of sport has been a source of recent contention and remains to be tested in any significant or comparative way (Adair & Vamplew, 1997). Nevertheless, it is clear that many Australians feel a strong attachment to sport and to their professional sporting teams. In the 1980s and 1990s there have been numerous threats to professional teams in rugby league and Australian Rules football in Sydney and Melbourne as previously local/regional competitions in those cities have expanded into national competitions. Both developed suburban-based club competitions that were viewed as the best in the country as they were able to attract the largest support and pay players more than they could earn in competitions in other Australian cities. Australia is dominated by large capital cities located hundreds of kilometers apart. As a result, each capital city developed its own competition. Due to the long distances involved and small populations between the large cities, national competitions were slow to develop only appearing during the 1980s and 1990s. The development of national competitions was facilitated by technological advances that

enabled nationally televised games to be presented and increased marketing, merchandising and sponsorship opportunities emerged as a result (Phillips & Hutchins, 1998). Part of the process of national expansion has been for both the major competitions to try and decrease the number of suburban clubs in their home city while establishing new ones elsewhere.

The threatened loss of traditional clubs has created considerable public unrest and led to large-scale protest in both Melbourne and Sydney. We investigate how these protests have played out and the issues at work with particular examples from Australian Rules football in 1989 and 1996, and Rugby League in 1995 and 1996. In particular, this paper looks at the forms of resistance that have occurred in the Australian context against the backdrop of resistance that has been noted in sport more generally (Bale & Sang, 1996; Booth, 1998; James, 1963; Klein, 1991; Nauright, 1997; Stoddart & Beckles, 1995). Moreover, resistance movements in Australian Rules football and rugby league are examined through the lenses of the theoretical concepts of affect (Grossberg, 1992) and nostalgia (Davis, 1979; Nauright, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Nauright & Phillips, 1996; Nauright & White, 1996). These theoretical frameworks are viewed as preliminary steps for developing an understanding of reactions by sports followers when the existence of their teams are under threat.

As Charles Page has suggested, what makes sport especially intriguing for history and sociology 'is its remarkably contradictory character as a cultural form in social life – its persisting aura of unreality in the face of an obvious relationship to social structural changes'. Sport also has the capacity to 'dramatize mythologically the liberating character of play while often remaining an area of constraint, and its seriousness that is often framed by the complete and utter absence of utility' (qf. Gruneau, 1983, p. 17). How then can we best theorise and explain the place of sport in society and in the shaping of individual and collective identities? First, we must situate sport within the realm of culture and cultural activity. Following the work of Raymond Williams, we can view culture as a whole way of life and living or the everyday expression of life as it is lived. Culture then is a system of signification defined through the production and interpretation of lived experiences as 'texts' producing ideological beliefs that become 'common sense' and central to identity. Richard Gruneau reminds us that culture should be understood 'as an *irreducible* system of signification that produces consciousness and intention through the logic of its codes and categories' (Gruneau, 1988, p. 20). Paul Connerton (1989) suggests that such consciousness, identity and collective memory are generated through commemorative ceremonies and in bodily practices. Through such practices, images of the past emerge that commonly legitimate a present social order. Sport and major sporting events certainly form one of the most common collective practices in late twentieth century advanced capitalist societies. The largest single annual public gathering in Australian society, for example, is the AFL Grand Final each September that regularly attracts nearly 100,000 to the Melbourne Cricket Ground. In the Melbourne and Sydney contexts, however, the bodily practices that become part of ritualised experiences have been disrupted since the onset of national competitions as many of the matches each season are played hundreds or thousands of kilometers away rather than across town or down the road. As a result, many Melbourne and Sydney supporters of historic suburban-based clubs have developed

a sense of nostalgia for the good old days of local competitions. In Melbourne particularly the resonance between sport and identity has been powerful. In numerous open-ended interviews with supporters of various clubs we have found common acknowledgment of social need for most people to support a local Australian football club and to support the same club for life. Many choose to take their identification further by purchasing memberships and thus becoming direct parts of their clubs. Thus a sense of belonging is developed. As several authors have pointed out (Lovell, 1998; Schama 1995; Tilley 1994), belonging is defined through experience that can be shared with others and thus remembered (Connerton 1989). Indeed, the social practice of remembering based on the notion of belonging 'also evokes emotions, sentiments of longing to be in a particular location, be it real or fictive' (Lovell 1998, p. 1).

In seeking to understand the strength of feeling amongst activist supporters who fight to save 'their' sporting teams and preserve their spectating culture, nostalgia is as useful as an explanatory tool. Nostalgia, or the longing for a happier and simpler past, provides people with a coping mechanism to face the rapidly changing world, or, as Jameson argues, nostalgia has become an expression of postmodern life (Jameson, 1994). As the world becomes more integrated and cultural globalisation continues apace, the resurgence of local, regional and even national cultures has also gained strength. Nostalgic remembering has played an important role in the preservation of local cultures in the face of globalisation.

The ways we remember the past are integral to our experiences in the present. While the past itself may indeed be 'a foreign country' (Lowenthal, 1985), our conceptions of it pervade our everyday lives. We engage with the past to give us a sense of security in the present or to guide us in shaping our future. Increasingly, the past has been used in a nostalgic sense to provide us with a sense of who 'we' are as individuals and as members of society. Nostalgia confronts us every day from our longings for the 'good old days' to our sense of insecurity in a world changing faster than many of us can comprehend. In such times of rapid social, cultural and political shifts, people frequently draw on elements of their past cultural identity in order to cope with societal changes. They often retreat into nostalgic recollections and reconstructions of a happier past time when their world was more stable and organised (Davis, 1979) and when they had more individual or collective power. As DaSilva and Faught (1982, p. 49) argue, 'Nostalgia requires a collective emotional reaction toward, if not an identification with, a symbolization of the past'. Nostalgia also helps link group with individual identity as remembering past events operates at both individual and societal level. Historical geographer David Lowenthal (1989, p. 8) argues that nostalgia 'can also shore up self-esteem, reminding us that however sad our present lot we were once happy and worthwhile. . . . nostalgia is memory with the pain removed. The pain is today'.

Nostalgia can also be used by dominant power groups to legitimate their position through promoting a sense of cultural security through cultural practices common to many members of society. People also utilise nostalgia to challenge new ways of thinking promoted by political and cultural elites, if we see nostalgia (and indeed memory itself) as a contested cultural terrain and try to understand its uses in specific historical moments, we will be better equipped to understand how people make sense of their world in cultural terms. In the conclusion we draw in broader

work on fandom and popular culture with particular reference to the notion of affect to try and make fuller sense of the links between the suburban-based club and its supporters in Australia. First, we explore specific case studies of fan movements to save their sporting clubs from amalgamation and the particularities of such movements within Australian society.

### **Fightback: the Fans Against the Australian Football League**

Among advanced capitalist countries, Australia was unique in the 1980s as the only place where the major football competitions were still dominated by suburban-based clubs from the two largest cities of Melbourne and Sydney. The Victorian Football League (VFL) was the premier competition in Australian Rules football, with most of its clubs in Melbourne, and the New South Wales Rugby League was in the same position in rugby league with most of its teams in Sydney. During the 1980s, both leagues began to expand nationally primarily because sporting administrators from these competitions were keen to pursue the financial advantages of nationally televised games that included increased marketing, merchandising and sponsorship opportunities. As a result, some of the historic suburban clubs had to be merged or closed down to allow teams from Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide into new national competitions. The VFL began in 1981 by relocating South Melbourne's home matches to Sydney for the 1982 season. South Melbourne supporters fought an unsuccessful three and a half month court case to stop the move. In 1985 the VFL produced a plan that stated that some of the eleven Melbourne clubs would have to merge or be eliminated as no city could continue to afford to have so many professional clubs (Linnell, 1995). In addition, the VFL leaders thought that a truly national competition required fewer Melbourne teams. In the late 1980s, the VFL tried to get some of its other Melbourne clubs to merge through offering to eliminate the debts of any clubs who agreed to amalgamate. Thus, official VFL and later AFL policy has been pro-merger and the league has actively supported merger proposals when they have arisen.

On 3 October 1989, the Footscray Football Club's Board announced that the club was to merge with Fitzroy. Both clubs had substantial debts that the VFL agreed to cover once the clubs merged. Some board members and Footscray's supporters rejected the merger and formed a 'Save the Bulldogs Committee'. Public rallies were held in October and collections taken from all over the country. After a three-week campaign, enough money was raised for the VFL to allow Footscray to remain in the competition without merging. In both the cases of South Melbourne and Footscray, the mobilisation of fan support was crucial in attempts to stop relocation or merger of the clubs even though neither team could boast a good attendance record in the seasons when changes were announced. The Footscray crowd soon enveloped the whole of Melbourne's western suburbs. What appeared to be at issue was not just the football club but, as Lynn Kosky, former mayor of Footscray, put it, it was another example of 'big business making decisions for the people of the West'. Peter Gordon, who chaired the Save the Bulldogs Committee quoted the movie *Network*: 'We're mad as hell and we're not going to take it any more' (Gordon and Dalton, 1990, p. 10). Indeed, nearly ten years after the merger issue, workers at the Bulldogs Shop in Footscray reported that the best-selling item in the shop were bumper stickers attacking the then head of the VFL, Ross Oakley. The stickers say

'Up yours Oakley' (discussion with one of the authors at the shop, 1997). Another popular sticker read 'Merge Oakley into Outer Space'.

A sense of nostalgia pervaded the minds of protesters, many of whom had not seen Footscray play for years, but who recalled Footscray's sole premiership win in 1954. David Lumsden recalled how in 1954 he went to the Western Oval for the celebrations. The Oval was full of a sense of community. He wrote a poem recalling the event 'Like VE Day, my father said... The West had risen and was victorious' (Gordon and Dalton, 1990, p. 11). But is nostalgia enough of a motivation for action? This case, and the one that follows from rugby league, suggests that it is a strong motivating factor for saving clubs. Other studies have suggested that nostalgia pervades popular protests by sporting crowds whether inside the arena (Nauright, 1996b) or outside when fighting to save a team (Clayton et. al 1995; Nauright & White, 1995; 1996).

Similar movements such as the Save the Bulldogs also appeared amongst supporters of Richmond, St. Kilda and Fitzroy in 1989 and after. The 'Save Our Saints' movement at St. Kilda continued to work hard in 1996 to raise enough money and memberships to keep the team afloat. All of the movements have involved assistance from fans of other threatened clubs who have seen the battle as a broader one against the establishment and as one upholding a 'fair go' for the Melbourne fans of Aussie Rules.

Apparently the VFL/AFL did not learn a lesson from 1989 as it continued to encourage mergers. The League offered clubs financial inducements that peaked in 1995 at six million dollars for the first successful merger involving a Melbourne club. The boards of two clubs in Melbourne with League support voted to merge in 1997. The boards of Melbourne Football Club, possibly the oldest in the world dating from the late 1850s and Hawthorn, the dominant club of the late 1980s agreed to merge. Unlike professional sport in many other places and under different ownership models, however, the members of both clubs had to vote to approve the merger. Within both clubs large supporters movements developed to oppose the merger. Many supporters of both clubs expressed sentiments such as the following by a Melbourne supporter explaining how the anti-merger group at the club was formed:

I think initially for people it was just loyalty and passion, tradition, just supporting your team and not wanting any other to support. One of the people who was there was a South Melbourne supporter initially, and she was saying . . . and I consider her a sensible and intelligent person, that she was devastated when they went out of existence. Her week didn't have any focus anymore . . . There were other people who were just incensed that it was an AFL orchestrated venture with no, absolutely no consultation with the members. For most it was . . . the emotional thing of the passion with which people follow their football team, not wanting to let go of their football team (Coleman interview, 1997).

For many the thought of losing the oldest football club in the world and one they remembered as being highly successful in the 1950s and early 1960s and again, though less so, in the 1980s was too much to bear. Hawthorn had been one of the

most unsuccessful clubs until the second half of the 1970s and 1980s when they won several premierships. Thus Hawthorn successes lay in the direct memories of most of their supporters.

Anti-merger groups attracted high profile former players to front their campaigns and attempted to distribute information supposing their case at matches but were moved away from grounds by AFL officials. Echoing the Footscray movement of 1989, mass rallies were held with the end result at public member meetings of Melbourne supporters narrowly voting for the merger (though up to 1500 members were turned away from the meeting due to lack of space) and Hawthorn fans rejecting it. Both members' meetings were hostile events that were reported on national television much in the manner of federal elections. Though those from Hawthorn supporting a merger argued that the club would die if it did not merge, opponents argued that was preferable to losing the club's name and colours. The following year Hawthorn's membership surged from 12,000 to over 27,000 going from one of the smallest memberships to one of the largest in Melbourne.

These cases together suggest that the ties to clubs are indeed strong in Melbourne. In the Footscray case, while many of the activists were residents of Footscray or the surrounding suburbs, much of the financial backing came from supporters of other clubs who lived in other parts of Melbourne and beyond. In the case of Melbourne and Hawthorn supporter movements were much more geographically widespread reflecting changes in the demographics of club supporters demonstrated by Ian Andrews (1999). After analysing a similarly broad based movement from rugby league, we draw some conclusions from the various supporter-based movements and suggest ways forward in our conceptualisation of these and other supporter movements.

### **Super League and the 'Save Our Saints' Movement**

In July 1995 the committee of the St. George Football Club entered into formal discussions with Sydney City Roosters (formerly Eastern Districts Rugby League Football Club) about merging. This situation was a reaction to the turmoil that rugby league was placed in with the introduction of pay television into Australia (McKay & Rowe, 1997; Nauright & Phillips, 1997; Phillips, 1998; Phillips & Hutchins, 1998; Rowe, 1997; Stoddart, 1997). Rugby league was a crucial commodity in attracting subscribers to either of the rival pay television consortiums from Foxtel and Optus Vision. Optus Vision through its alliance with Kerry Packer had the exclusive rights to rugby league, and in order to secure the sport on their service, Foxtel, which is partly owned by Rupert Murdoch, launched what the Australian Rugby League's (ARL) General Manager, Ken Arthurson, called 'the Pearl Harbour Raid' on 1 April 1995. With all the traits of a corporate raid, players were offered massive salaries and sign-on fees that were unheralded in Australian sport. Over one weekend many of the leading players had signed contracts with the new organisation called 'Super League'. The traditional administrators of the game, ARL, and Optus Vision countered by offering salaries similar to those from 'Super League'. In essence, playing salaries roughly tripled within a week and while the players benefited, it placed the clubs in a very difficult financial situation (Colman, 1996). Geoff Carr, the chief executive of St. George, estimated that the 1995 budget of \$3 million would be \$7 million the following year, and added: 'That's the reality of a Super League world

where player payments have gone through the roof. In addition, it was added that the major sponsor was not going to continue its association with the club (Koslowski 1995). The solution actively pursued by the St. George committee was to amalgamate with Sydney City Roosters which would enable double leagues club grants, a greater distribution of funds from the ARL and the potential for bigger crowds (Forrest, 1995)

The 'Save Our Saints' (SOS) movement started shortly after amalgamation talks were made public. Initially outraged by the lack of consultation with club supporters and members, an advertisement was placed in largest circulation daily Sydney newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, on 14 July 1995 that asked people to register their protests against the proposed amalgamation. Spurred on by considerable support via faxes and letters, SOS organised meetings after home games to discuss the plight of the club. After a game against their historic rival South Sydney, St. George fans were asked to gather and to wear black to signify that 'they won't stand for any merger which sees the passing of the club's great name from rugby league' (SOS, 1995). In addition to wearing black, the loyal fans carried a mock coffin which was draped in the red and white club colours and an SOS banner (Koslowski, 1995). At the meeting, the resolution that 'the St. George's Club be given an undertaking not to proceed with any further merger talks with Easts until a public meeting can be held' was put to the 800 strong crowd on the grounds that 'the history and heritage of the most famous football team in history is too precious to be auctioned off in the name of political expediency' (SOS, 1995). The gathering voiced their approval to the proposal.

From this meeting and the associated publicity, the SOS movement continued to gain momentum and the figurehead of the organisation, Elizabeth Kingston, challenged the committee that if merger talks continued there would be an extraordinary meeting called and a motion of no confidence voted on (Kingston, 1995). The St. George President, Warren Lockwood, subsequently acknowledged that pressure from the fans and the uncertain nature of the game resulted in the cessation of discussions about merging with Sydney City Roosters (*Illawarra Mercury*, 4 August 1995, p. 64). Similarly the Chief Executive of the ARL, John Quayle, in a letter to Elizabeth Kingston discussing the cessation of merger discussions commented: 'I feel that the efforts of the Save Our Saints greatly contributed to this decision' (Quayle, 1995).

SOS did not fade away at this point as there was still speculation about the future of the club particularly about maintaining its identity under the pressures that the conflict between ARL and 'Super League' had placed on the club. An SOS discussion night was held and a host of high profile politicians, prominent past and present players, SOS representatives and media addressed the fans (Video, 'SOS Information Night', 22 August 1995). From this meeting, a committee of SOS representatives, including the former Federal Liberal Leader John Hewson, unsuccessfully tried to reconstitute the football board, that had been dissolved in 1987, to work in conjunction with the St. George Club committee to improve the financial situation (Masters, 1995). Instability continued as St. George was rumoured as considering turning their backs on the ARL and joining 'Super League' to make up the desired number of franchises which, to that date, had not been filled (Frilingos, 1995). The SOS view of this highly controversial strategy was that they would

support any competition that enabled 'St. George to keep playing as St. George' (Heads, 1995, p. 63). A public function confirmed this view that as long as St. George could maintain its identity, SOS would support either competition on offer (Kingston, 1996). In the end, St. George did not join the rebel competition.

As much as the political machinations of the St. George Club are fascinating, it is the response of the supporters from the time that the initial merger talks were made public that offers some insights into understanding how fans respond when their clubs are threatened. Asked how many faxes, letters and signatures on petitions were received by SOS, Elizabeth Kingston estimated that there were between 10,000 and 12,000 (Kingston, 1996). They ranged from faxes by children like the 5 year old from Woonona who drew a fire-breathing dragon with a big V tattooed on its shin and the caption: 'Don't Make Us Extinct', to the humorous response from one opponent of the merger: 'Imagine a dragon [icon of St. George] mating with a bloody chook [icon of Sydney City]' (Anonymous Fax, 14 July 1995). One notable feature was that the support for SOS was not limited to the club's traditional geographical area in the South East of Sydney but stretched to country areas of NSW to the Northern Territory and even as far a field as an expatriate in the Philippines (Kingston, 1996). In rural NSW, four supporters held their own SOS vigil to protest and the *Mudgee Guardian* commented that in 'the country protests such as the one held in Mudgee also added weight to the anti-merger argument and made the St. George management realise that country support for their club runs deep' (*Mudgee Guardian*, 8 August, 1995, p. 55). As much as anything, the responses showed that the club has a following from different generations of supporters throughout urban and rural New South Wales.

The St. George case demonstrates further that people relate very closely to their team and that these clubs are very important to identity formation. Three examples provide insights into the relationship:

One fan stated:

If an amalgamation between the mighty dragons and the Sydney City Roosters ever comes to fruition, I would no longer be able to give my support to the championship club that I have supported for 27 years. The amalgamation would take away 27 years of love for the game that I have grown up with, rugby league football. I also played the mighty game for 13 years. I eat, sleep, walk, talk and think St. George just ask my family (Coward, 1995).

One supporter of the SOS movement explained with similar recollections:

St. George is in our blood, and we are not prepared to let the Saints go down without a fight. If Saints amalgamate, their and our identity will be lost forever. All the tradition and the memories that have made St. George such a great club will slowly disappear so that when my child is born, the name St. George will only be a name of the past with no real significance (Anon, Fax, 24 July 1995).

Perhaps one of the most telling letters, that epitomised the relationship that some people have with their football clubs, was sent to Roy Masters, a prominent rugby league columnist with the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

We are fans of our respective teams more than we are fans of league. We want our teams to win, but if they happen to be winning that is not the reason we support them. Many of us are second or third generation fans, bought to the game as toddlers in the tricolours or red and white. All of us have passed through formative life experiences with our team providing a constant reference point. (That sounds a wank, Roy, but if you lose your job, if your girl friend leaves you, if someone you love dies, a football team is something to cling to. I know that Saints have been a rock for me on countless occasions over the past two decades). All of us feel completely at home among our fellow supporters. Some of us even feel as though we have little else in our lives but our team...My allegiance is tied to the red and white jersey, the V, the eleven premierships, 1977 and 1979. All of the personal stuff. All of the times when I needed to feel there was an anchor in my life and Saints were there for me (Berridge, 1995).

This last view highlights the importance of nostalgia in the SOS campaign as the clubs extremely successful, yet idealised past was a common reference point. St. George was formed in late 1920 and entered the NSWRL competition in the following year. The club won first grade premierships in 1941 and 1949, but it was in the following two decades from 1956 that it won eleven successive premierships which is claimed to be 'a record in any code of football at first-division level any where in the world' (Vamplew et al, 1994, p. 404). Since then two more premierships, in 1977 and 1979, have been added to the impressive list. Like the Australian football examples, the SOS movement pointed to the importance of nostalgia – an idealised secure past – in the reactions of supporters to the threatened loss of their teams.

### **The 'Fair Go' and Fan Movements in Australia**

Nostalgia for sporting glories of the past seem to pervade all fan movements to save their sporting teams or to keep them playing at their historic grounds. In addition, Australian fan movements have had the unique power of nearly always having had an ownership stake in their team. All AFL clubs and most rugby league clubs are either membership based or have small shareholders like the Green Bay Packers of the National Football League in the USA (Nauright & Phillips, 1996). As a result, team amalgamations must be put to a vote of team membership or stockholders. When executive boards attempt to undertake amalgamations, as in the Footscray and St. George cases, without approval of the membership, supporters see this as a violation of the 'fair go' (Thompson, 1994). The fair go is a uniquely Australian principle that basically works to the maintenance of social order, but through a due process of being up-front and above board, in other words informing people honestly and 'straight' about what is going to happen to them. When the fair go is violated, social protest emerges which in many cases, such as cases of team amalgamations,

works to the advantage of those being victimised by unfair practices. Dominant social practices are rarely challenged, but small concessions can be won temporarily at least. Thus, through a combination of genuine fan ownership of most clubs in the dominant sport and principles of social justice such as the fair go, Australian sporting fans are more likely to slow the process of full corporatisation and 'musical franchises' (Nauright & White, 1995) that plague North American professional sport. Some clubs too far in debt, however, cannot be saved even by fan movements as Fitzroy merged with Brisbane in the AFL for the 1997 season ending over a century of football for the Fitzroy Lions and their supporters. Many rugby league supporters rallied against a compromise deal between the ARL and Super League that has meant clubs in the rugby league competition reduce to fourteen for the 2000 season. New joint venture plans between clubs, however, were initially better supported by fans with the first one beginning in the 1999 season. Joint ventures allow both clubs involved to remain and field teams in a variety of competitions while the senior team in the NRL competition is an amalgamation. Competition rationalisation was heavily attacked in late 1999 as historic clubs, South Sydney, Balmain and North Sydney were forced into mergers or eliminated from the competition controlled by an international media organisation. The attack on these clubs with ninety years of history behind them was clearly a violation of 'fair go' principles. On the rare occasions when fair go principles have appeared to be followed in sport and a semblance of above board discussions held, supporter resistance has been greatly reduced, such as in the successful merger of West Torrens and Woodville clubs in the South Australian National Football League. This lesson has not been heeded by NRL and AFL officials, however.

### **Conclusion: Fan Fightbacks, Affect and Globalising Capital**

One way of interpreting the reactions of local supporters in Australia is in the context of the theories related to fans and fandom. There is a growing body of literature that has examined sports fans in relation to social control, to national identity, to myth and ritual, to masculinity, to mass mediation and to postmodernity (Brown 1998; Haynes 1995; Redhead 1993). Following on from these analyses, in particular Haynes' (1995) work on the affective component of fandom, we invoke, albeit very briefly, Lawrence Grossberg's work on fans. Grossberg argues that fans, as opposed to non-fans, have an emotional investment in cultural texts whether the texts are punk music, football or television programs. It is this investment that differentiates fans from others, something Grossberg propounds non-fans can not comprehend. 'It is in their affective lives that fans constantly struggle to care about something, and to find the energy to survive, to find the passion necessary to imagine their own projects and possibilities' (Grossberg 1992, p. 59).

Affect invokes passion in football as exemplified in Haynes' (1995) analysis of football fanzines and also in our examples from Australian rules and rugby league football clubs. But it is the extension of affect into 'mattering maps' that add another dimension to our conceptualising of fandom: '. . . affect is also organised; it operates within and, at the same time, produces maps which direct our investments in and into the world; these maps tell us where and how we can become absorbed – not into the self but into the world – as potential locations for our self-identifications, and with what intonities' (Grossberg, 1992, p. 57). 'Mattering maps' not only provide a

rational for fans opposing mergers or the loss of their teams or clubs, but also the flexibility of these maps – the ability of people to reconstruct their mattering maps – that may point to possibility of shifting allegiances of fans. Grossberg's mattering maps bear some similarities to Frederick Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping. Jameson argues that postmodern society provides a new spatial disorientation not experienced in previous stages of capitalism. Individuals develop cognitive maps to orientate themselves in an increasingly fragmented and disjointed existence (Jameson, 1988). Whether we adopt the affective component of Grossberg's work or Jameson's emphasis on postmodernism, both authors point to the need for individuals to develop a conceptual framework for their existence and supporting football clubs and teams may achieve these ends.

If we add Connerton's (1989) concept of the role of bodily performance in the development of ritualised practice and behaviour, we can begin to see how nostalgic gazes to the past and repetitive practices in the present combine to evoke a powerful sense of affective belonging. Drawing on Connerton and others, Neil Jarman, in his study of parades in Northern Ireland, argues that people also continually reshape their interpretations of history to help them explain how things have come to be the way they are and how collective groups have come to be in their current position (Jarman, 1997). In Australia this belonging by a group of fans or supporters goes further for many who also belong quite literally to their club as members. They thus become a formal part of the lived and living experiences of their club, which for them is a community, something they 'belong' to and that 'belongs' to them.

Affect may be realised in a number of ways, but a common dimension of our examples of Australian football and rugby league was the invocation of nostalgia. In several papers, we have explored the role of nostalgia in sport in relating the past to the present for certain political objectives (Nauright 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Nauright & Phillips, 1996; Nauright & White, 1996). Nostalgia is also important in explaining sporting fans' attachment to their teams and to the arenas, or parts of them, where their team plays. Additionally, the professional sporting team becomes closely identified with specific places or spaces such as a specific city or a certain part of a city. John Bale has explored the relationship between sport, people and place in several publications. In particular, his *Landscapes of Modern Sport* (1994) analyses sportscapes and a sense of place among other topics related to the social geography of sport.

In examining fan responses to threatened or actual relocation of 'their' teams by club owners or directors, the relationship between past experiences and a nostalgic idealisation of these experiences in the present manifests itself in public protest when teams threaten to relocate, amalgamate or fold. Those groups who form to defend the team against relocation, merger or elimination rely heavily on nostalgic representation to mobilise public support for their cause. The relative success of many of these 'save our team' movements suggests the powerful symbolic meaning professional sporting teams hold for a particular region, city or suburb. Where fans have had direct stakes in clubs, it has been possible to prevent the loss of teams in some cases, such as the ones we have examined. Nevertheless, nostalgic clinging to teams by fans is a residual cultural force compared with the dominant forces of globalising capital and media and gains by fans are often short-lived. Our case studies of Footscray and St. George evidence this very well for

Footscray is now the Western Bulldogs and St. George's senior team is a joint venture with Illawarra, a club from a different town (Wollongong) altogether.

Globalising forces now include professional sporting leagues in Australia as they do elsewhere, meaning that 'traditional' ties are trampled underfoot as competitions move to national and international audiences and teams and leagues move to private ownership. While the fans, and even residents of areas that claim teams as their own, feel that they have some moral hold or ownership of the team, the privatised ownership model of North American sport means that fans have little rights to the geographical location of 'their' teams. As Australian professional sport moves toward this privatised model, what is to stop any team in future from relocating to a more lucrative market? While there are far fewer markets than in North America, it may be possible for a Melbourne-based AFL team, to relocate to Hobart or Darwin or for a rugby league team from one area of Sydney to move to New Zealand or even to Hong Kong or Singapore.

In 1998 Super League and the old establishment ARL came to an agreement that will eliminate several historic clubs in Sydney from the elite rugby league competition. Ironically, St. George entered into the first joint venture arrangement with the Illawarra Rugby League Club but the senior team keeps the St. George colours and nickname 'Dragons'. Both clubs still exist but the senior teams play as the St. George – Illawarra Dragons. Similarly, two other rugby league clubs, Balmain and Wests, created a joint venture arrangement in late 1999. Whether other clubs follow and are successful in surviving the determined restructuring driven by News Limited remains to be seen. Indeed in October 1999 when supporters of rugby league's most successful club, South Sydney, were told that the only way the NRL would allow them to play in the 2000 competition was for them to form a joint venture or merge, the supporters reacted in strong opposition. Once again an historic club's fans felt that larger forces were operating against them.

These case studies from Australia are not unique, fans of many professional sports teams in North America and Europe in particular have been faced recently with the relocation of their team to a new stadium or city, The Australian cases are different in the structures of ownership (public owned membership based teams) and in the identification of many older teams with specific suburbs. While the demographics of team supporter bases are changing, the membership model has been remarkably resilient. In a recent article, White, Donnelly and Nauright (1997) suggest that the membership model (Nauright & Phillips, 1997) might work in saving the Canadian Football League from either extinction or becoming a 'minor league' supplier to the National Football League in the USA.

In the USA, owners of some new minor league teams have attempted to bring baseball back to the fans – though on a private ownership model (Fatsis, 1995). These teams are independent from the structures of major league baseball and may provide an alternative to minor league teams in smaller cities attached to the dictates of major league teams located elsewhere. Public ownership, either by fans (membership model), small shareholders (like the Green Bay Packers) or municipalities, may provide solutions to the insecurities felt by fans at the movements of their sporting teams. Large sports fans groups have formed in the United States in an effort to influence decisions made by professional leagues and teams. In public ownership models, fans have democratic power to determine the future of their

sporting teams rather than the anti-democratic model of private ownership where individuals or corporations, supported by civic boosters, use sport as part of their profit maximisation strategies. Further research is needed on the efficacy of different models of ownership, the real impact of public money spent on luring sports teams and major events, and how fans are effected by the continual shuffling of teams and players between cities. Kim Schimmel (1993, 1994, 1995) and others have begun to provide a much clearer understanding of the interrelationships between boosterist policies and their impact within localities in the United States. Contributors to Bale and Moen's (1995) collection on the stadium and the city have provided additional examples from Europe. Much work remains to be done, however, as we try to unpack the impact of urban growth policies on the residents of contemporary cities.

Civic boosterist policies have recently had a strong impact in Australia as new stadium projects are in process or completed in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Mangers and marketing specialists running the major football competitions have worked to position themselves and their sport as the biggest and best, playing in world-class facilities. In rugby league changes have come swift and fast since 1995 and in 2000 a competition of fourteen teams is planned with many of the pre-1985 Sydney teams in joint ventures or eliminated from the competition. Indeed, it appears in both major football competitions that those running the game are seeking to completely reposition their league as a new spectacularised competition ignoring a century of Australian football supporter cultures. As Jarman (1997, p. 5) argues, however, 'The importance that a sense of the past has in people's daily lives, in providing continuity in the face of change, makes it almost impossible to wipe the slate clean and begin again'. This notion lies at the heart of the 'fair go' concept in Australia even though sports administrators seem to have forgotten this *en masse* in their search for ever expanding markets. As Rick Burton (1999) shows for the National Football League in the United States, when professional sporting competitions adopt full-blown business practices, the search for ever increasing profits drives league organisations to seek new markets and outlets for their 'product'. This often runs against the interests of loyal and traditional fans particularly if they become a static or declining 'market'.

Since the late 1980s in Australia, the odds have been stacked against the likes of Footscray, St. George and South Sydney supporters amongst others. When South Sydney supporters held a mass rally in October 1999, attended by over 20,000, including many celebrity supporters, none of Rupert Murdoch's many Australian newspapers gave it prominent coverage, including the *Daily Telegraph*, the self-proclaimed newspaper for rugby league fans. Matters may be getting worse in the short term as fans progressively lose their voice in a highly centralised multinational corporate owned mainstream media.

## Note

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