

*Early Saturday Mornings
Not a Great Morning for Football:
Critiquing Australian Football
Coverage in Queensland and the
Marketing of the
Australian Football League*

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Watching Australian Football in a 'Foreign' Land?

I used to get up at two in the morning to watch the weekly highlights package of Australian football when I lived in the United States and Canada. Little did I know that when I moved to Australia I would have to disrupt my sleeping patterns in a similar way in order to watch Australian football. While there is now good coverage of the Brisbane Bears cum Lions and the weekly afternoon match on Saturday, Football fans in Queensland must endure virtually anything other than football until the wee hours of the morning when Channel 7 cannot seem to find anything else to put on air. Footy fans must wait up patiently while the network shows one-and-a-half star films, infomercials or cheap American 'real life' cop shows. Instead of the first-ever match between Adelaide and Port Adelaide, Queensland footy fans were treated to drag racing from Ipswich, while the rest of the country apparently got to watch an historic football match played in front of a capacity crowd where Port was able to get their own back against the SANFL and the Crows. While such dearth of football coverage in Queensland may be justified by the network in terms of their projection of ratings, it shows little foresight and planning by Channel 7 and the AFL for allowing such weak coverage at a time when the sports television market is ripe for the picking.

If the marketeers got on with the job that Shayne Quick suggests they should,¹ then someone should have the vision to see that rugby league attendances are down in both Super League and the ARL and as long as a Brisbane team is successful in the AFL, then the potential for developing the football market in Queensland is immense. Raiders should remember that Queensland is not the same 'barren' territory for Aussie Rules that New South Wales is north of the Riverina.² Brisbane has one of the oldest Australian Rules competitions and has always had a core of support for the game. In addition, the great migration northward of 'Victorians on the Move' and others has increased the audience for the game in recent years. Surely the time has come for someone involved in the marketing of the AFL to realise the opportunity going missing for the League, sponsors and Channel 7 to increase their position in the Brisbane marketplace.

Attendances at Brisbane Lions matches are now larger than all other Brisbane professional sporting teams other than the Brisbane Broncos, and the possibility of larger attendances is only limited by the current size of the Gabba, soon to be expanded again to a capacity of about 35 000. While the AFL hierarchy had the foresight to assist the then Bears to survive in the interests of a national competition, the moment should be seized while the now merged Lions remain [potentially Ed.] one of the strongest teams in the competition.

American Monday Night Football Hits the AFL

In addition to having to watch much of my AFL in the small hours of the morning, I occasionally get confused by the lead-in to 1997 broadcasts which are straight out of Monday Night Football on the American ABC network for their telecasts of the National Football League complete with the Hank Williams Jr sound and the Monday Night Football logo. (I hope Channel 7 has paid for the rights to use such an identical copy). While this should perhaps not be surprising given that the commercial networks use theme music from American news broadcasts (and some stories) for their own productions (Channel 7 ironically has their connection with NBC not ABC), does the AFL and Channel 7, with such a historically successful product, need to present an Americanised product to Australian audiences? A sporting broadcast in Australia without resorting to Americanised packaging — I'd like to see that! Surely the Australian sporting television product does not need to look 'American' to attract

the audience, or is the level of televisual production genius in this country so lacking in ideas that they cannot come up with something Australian or different? Are we so enamoured with the United States and American culture that we have to use American sporting heroes and musicians to market Australian sports? With the marketing of Australian sport so reliant on Americans, is it any wonder that Michael Jordan is the most popular sporting hero amongst Australia's youth?

Many of these problems result from the national expansion of the competitions from Victoria and New South Wales in Australian football and rugby league respectively coming at a time when international media and marketing influences also began to appear. While the national leagues have eroded attendances in the other states, the overall attendances at AFL matches are at all time highs as a result of expansion.³

While this is very much a polemic against the coverage of Australian football, it suggests that sporting marketeers involved in Australian professional leagues and free-to-air television companies need to think long and hard about production and promotion strategies lest we all end up watching American football, basketball and baseball, English soccer and other professional sporting competitions with international marketing power, global media distribution and the financial backing of media empires, shoe companies and other multinational corporations. Australian youth are already more likely to be wearing clothes with team logos from the NBA or even the National Hockey League, such as the San Jose Sharks or Anaheim Mighty Ducks than those with Australian team logos.⁴ If Australian sport becomes ever more like American sport in format, style and presentation what is to stop future generations of Australians switching allegiances to American sports themselves? While this may not necessarily be a bad thing, it does mean a fundamental shift in Australian sporting culture and one that could be avoided with planning and initiative. Sports historians can play a role in this process through analysis of the changing dynamics of Australian sport since the 1950s. For while Australian-based sociologists of sport have been active in identifying structural shifts in Australian sport in recent years, most historians have not turned their attention to recent sporting history in Australia. The recent synthetic Australian sports history texts attempt to engage with recent developments, but their focus is more on earlier periods of Australian history.⁵

[The Editor of the journal, a subscriber to Optus Vision and their AFL

package, is able to watch many AFL games live, including the historic match between Adelaide and Port Adelaide].

Notes:

- 1 Shayne Quick, 'Playing to Win: The Business of the AFL', *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, no. 9, 1996, pp. 1-2.
- 2 For the most recent conflation of Queensland with New South Wales as foreign territory for Aussie Rules, see Daryl Adair, 'A National Game at Last? Australian Rules Football in the 1990s', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1996, p. 129.
- 3 John Nauright and Murray Phillips, 'Us and Them: Australian Professional Sport and Resistance to North American Ownership and Marketing Models', *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1997, pp. 33-9.
- 4 Nauright and Phillips, 'Us and Them', p. 36; Jim McKay, Toby Miller and David Rowe, *Americanisation, Globalisation and Rugby League*, in David Headon and Lex Marinos, eds., *League of a Nation*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1996, pp. 215-21.
- 5 Richard Cashman, *Paradise of Sport: The Rise of Organised Sport in Australia*, OUP, Melbourne, 1995; Daryl Adair and Wray Vamplew, *Sport in Australian History*, OUP, Melbourne, 1997; for a more integrative approach aimed at an undergraduate audience, see the history and sociology sections in David Kirk, John Nauright, Stephanie Hanrahan, Doune Macdonald and Ian Jobling, *Sociocultural Foundations of Human Movement*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1996.