The Strength of Strong Ties: How Women Become Supporters of Australian Rules Football

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Abstract:

Two glaring omissions in the research on sports fans are on women fans and on how people become fans. In this paper we begin to address both of these issues by examining how women become fans of Australian rules football (AFL). From data generated in single-person and focus group interviews with women AFL supporters conducted in Victoria and NSW, we use their accounts to map-out four ways in which they became fans. We show that at the heart of each of these paths to fandom are the close ties that the women formed in their social networks – either as children through their kin, or later in life through others that entered their networks. Women become fans, we argue, because of the strong social ties that they have with people who are existing fans.
Other than in New South Wales and Queensland, where both forms of rugby predominate, Australian rules football, or ‘AFL’ (after the Australian Football League), is the nation’s leading football code. Notably AFL support includes a large number of women who follow the sport and regularly attend games. Approximately a half of the at-ground AFL spectators are women, which is significantly more than in other football codes. According to Cere (2002) South American soccer also attracts many women and Italian soccer is said to be attracting more female spectators (Mean 2001, p.790), but women account for only 14 percent of English soccer’s premier league spectators (Crawford 2004; Nash 2000). Crawford (2004) suggests that recently ‘grown’ sports – those without a long history and an established gendered following such as British ice hockey and American soccer – are more likely to attract women, especially if these ‘new’ sports are marketed as being safe and family-centered. Wann et al (Wann 2001) add that women are motivated to attend sports when they provide opportunities to spend time with their families. Sandvoss (2005, p.16) draws from several studies to “confirm the overwhelmingly male fan base of spectator sports” that derives from the historical gendering of leisure pursuits in which women’s recreations are home-based.

AFL is an anomaly, therefore. It stands out among sports because of its historically high proportion of female spectators, but as with other sports, women have been “largely ignored in a large number of discussions of fan cultures” (Crawford 2004, p.33). Crawford (2004, p.47) suggests that “devoted” fans are mostly men, because, he reasons, women have the authenticity of their support questioned by men. Moreover, he continues that men act as gatekeepers making it difficult for women to progress to the highest levels of fanship. This may well be the case for sports such as English soccer, with its small proportion of women game-goers, but the historically high attendance of women at AFL games, the interactions many have with male fans and the knowledge they acquire of the sport means that our respondents remarked that they can be accepted by men as legitimate, informed observers of the game. While AFL, like most sports, remains very much a masculine site in which women are constructed as a collective ‘other’ (Mean 2001), in its history and its position within the social, cultural and power dynamics of Australia’s sporting panoply, we witness a construction of female fandom that seemingly differs from that found in other sports and in other societies. Many issues flow from this that will be dealt with in future publications – in this paper we start at the very beginning by asking the question: How do women become fans?

**Becoming sports fans**
Existing studies tell us little about how people become fans, irrespective of gender and sport. While some of the North American research has compared the characteristics and motivations of male and female supporters (James and Ridinger 2002), Free and Hughson (2003, p.152) in a critical examination of several major British studies of soccer supporters, have commented on the “startling” absence of women’s voices, which they hope “will be heard in future studies”. In one of the very few publications to address the female fans of a male sport – ice hockey – Crawford and Gosling (2004) note that the lack of research on women fans is a further indicator of their marginalisation in sports. As with Giulianotti’s (2002) important typology of British soccer fans, Crawford’s (2004) work mostly concerns male fans and both of these researchers concentrate on the
typologising of spectator behaviours once people have become fans, rather than on how they enter the state of becoming fans.

The issue of how fans, irrespective of gender, become fans has been glossed over in earlier studies of sports supporters. In examining how women become fans, we shift away from the male-centric focus of sports fan research. Our data suggests that the cohering theme characterising how women become fans are the strong ties formed with significant others in their social networks. Neither Granovetter’s (1973) observations about the significance of weak network ties, nor the ‘bridging’ role of social capital brought to our attention by Putnam (2000) are pertinent here. Instead, we refer to the significance of robust, close ties with people from within the central ‘zones’ of women’s social networks that, subject to the qualifications stated later in this paragraph, fall into Putnam’s category of ‘bonding’ social relationships found in dense networks. While the significant others involved in bringing women into football supporting are in bonding relationships with them, they come from an inner circle of ‘bonded’ people, as it were. Putnam’s bonding category – which may prove useful in furthering our understandings of supporting behaviour – includes a wider, but still close, group of people beyond the family, intimate partner or very close friend that feature in our respondents’ accounts of how they became fans.

Our research

Our methodology involved the recruitment of women who self-designated as fans. The data comes from four focus groups and 16 single-person interviews that together have provided information on how 43 women became AFL fans. All of the interviews were audio-recorded. The same list of topics was used to guide the focus group and the single-person interviews, facilitating the comparability of data from the two techniques. The interviews have been conducted in Melbourne, Geelong and Sydney. The different areas have provided insights into the influence of geographical location. Respondents have been recruited through word-of-mouth and from a club’s membership list. It is not a representative sample: the demographics of our respondents suggests a skew towards relatively affluent, white Australian, educated women. All respondents are adult women ranging in age from late teens to early eighties.

Categories of ‘becoming’ fans

We started by asking our respondents how they ‘got into’ football. Making use of a grounded approach, we have identified from their accounts four distinctive ways in which they became AFL fans. We have named these categories ‘in-the-blood’ (n=23), ‘learner’ (n=11), ‘convert’ (n=6) and ‘STF’ (for ‘sexually transmitted fandom’; n=3): terms evocative of interviewees’ paths to fandom.

In-the-bloods

This group characterises the fans whose following of football comes through their family. Typically, in-the-blood fans had parents who were keen supporters and they started to attend games with them from an early age. The in-the-blood category is redolent of Geertz’s (1973) concept of ‘primordial sentiment’ as he applied it to ethnicity: namely that people are socialised from such a young age into cultural practices that it appears ‘as
if these ways of doing things are part of their genetic make-ups. For some, sports fandom is one such learned cultural practice and with it comes an overwhelmingly powerful attachment to a team: an affection that also constitutes an important part of the person’s identity.

Tourmeline¹, now in her 80s, illustrates how football, team allegiance and an in-the-blood coming to football fandom is firmly embedded in family relationships. She told us: “I was born a South Melbourne supporter … I saw my first match in 1928. I can’t remember it, but Mum and Dad took me.” Ruby was born and grew up in Geelong. A mother of two young children, she has already taken her older child to his first AFL game, just as her grandfather had taken her as a child. Additionally, she and her family have a close involvement with a local league club. For Ruby’s family, football has “always been a part of what we do”. However, her younger sister does not like football at all. Several of our respondents have told us about siblings who are not interested in the sport. Sapphire’s older sister is not a football follower either, despite their father’s and brother’s involvement at elite levels. Sapphire, a Melbourne woman, was taken to games by her father from when she was a young child: “I was the one in the family who was really into footy … born into it … not really a choice I had”. But the fact that her sister did not attend these games suggests that Sapphire chose to go. Whereas socialisation is significant for their entry into football fandom, it is clear that we must avoid an ‘over-socialised’ image of in-the-bloods and recognise that children do exercise agency. Ruby chose to follow football, a choice certainly available to her through her familial socialisation. Football is “definitely a cycle”, Ruby avers, in which one generation inducts the next into the game.

In-the-bloods come from all of the AFL states. While Sapphire and Ruby originate from the code’s heartland, in-the-bloods also come from the other AFL states. Peridot is a South Australian and grew up in a football family. Another South Australian woman, Willow, commented: “It’s amazing, isn’t it, if you are born in the southern states and Western Australia, then it’s something you do regardless of your gender”. Similarly Karri, who grew up in Western Australia with its strong local football competition, observed that “[i]t was just what absolutely everybody did, was go and watch the local league”. And Myrtle, from Tasmania, told us that: “As little children we were taken to the local matches all the time. We just accepted that was what we did on Saturdays. My brothers played, my uncles played.”

**Learners**

Our ‘learners’ category, which accounts for about a quarter of our respondents, refers to the fans whose appreciations of the sport developed progressively. As their knowledge and enjoyment of the sport grew incrementally, sometimes over several years, they increasingly factored game attendance into their lives, eventually becoming ardent fans. AFL was not embedded in learners’ familial relationships and they came to the sport through gradual exposure to it. Two main avenues of exposure, often in combination, are apparent: one is through television and the other is from being introduced to the sport by another person.

¹ All respondents’ names are pseudonyms.
The influence of friends

Rosella’s first exposure to AFL came when she attended some games when working in Melbourne, but dropped the sport after her return to Sydney until a female work colleague, already a fan, invited her to a game. Since then Rosella has become a fan and a club member. Garnet attended university in Sydney, where she started to attend AFL games with a group of friends and found it to be an exciting sport. Like Garnet, Agate’s (the single learner from an AFL state, comes from a non-AFL migrant background) friends also were significant in her making the transition from being someone who loosely followed AFL to becoming a fan. As is probably the case for every child growing up in Melbourne, AFL team support provides an aspect of identity even in primary schools. So Agate developed a team affiliation as a child but in a quite different way from the in-the-bloods. Even so, she did not attend AFL matches until she was in her early 20s because “my Dad was really involved in soccer”. Although Agate had followed the sport intermittently on radio and television, it was her friends who persuaded her into attending live games: “I went along and I loved that, the atmosphere and all that … I just got the bug from then”.

Sydney-sider Jade did not start to follow AFL until she went to college. There she became friends with “a couple of girls who were from down Deniliquen way”. These friends watched AFL on television and she became increasingly involved in the sport. Jade was “aware” of AFL through her Melbourne-born mother, but it took her college-based friendships to prompt an interest in the code. Networks were significant to Jade becoming a fan, but it her case it was through friends – she started to follow the sport with her mother only after friends had ignited her interest.

Beryl’s sister triggered her fandom, but friendships lay behind this. In the mid 1990s Beryl was press-ganged into going to some games by her sister. Significantly, Beryl’s sister had become a fan through a friend who “was already a very big [fan] … Because I think her parents came from Melbourne”. Although Beryl’s fandom was acquired from a learning process she underwent as an adult woman, that her sister introduced her to the sport and her sister’s association with people originally from Melbourne points to the importance of family and friend relationships, especially when these networks involve people from an AFL state.

Tempted by television

Jacaranda’s introduction to AFL came from television. Sandvoss (2005, p.16) observes that the televising of sports has made them increasingly available in the domestic sphere. While television may bring women to sports, it does not account for how they make the transition from being a home-based fan to attending live games, especially for Jacaranda who came to the sport from a non-AFL state lacking informal channels supporting women’s attendance. Going through a difficult pregnancy, Jacaranda watched televised games and, following her child’s birth, she started to attend live games. Wren, a migrant who has lived in Australia for 35 years, was not interested in any football code until “I became fascinated just by watching it [AFL] on television and started to go to games from there”.

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Converts and STFs

Six of our respondents are ‘converts’, which refers to those who underwent a sudden switch from being indifferent or even opposed to football to become ‘instant’ fans after attending a game, often their first. Football suddenly becomes a very important element of their lives and they transform their leisure time activities to accommodate this new, overpowering interest.

Pearl, in her mid 50s, was curious about what AFL was like and “just wanted to go to a game”. So she “talked a friend” into taking her and since then she has “never voluntarily missed more than three games”. Pearl was captured by the sport from that first game she attended, becoming an instant fan. But her actual entry to AFL was facilitated through a contact in her social network. Once again, becoming a fan was influenced by a person’s social relationships.

For some, it takes a particular game for the conversion ‘revelation’ to occur. Lily had been to several games but was not really interested in AFL until she went to a game with her then boyfriend, which completely changed her perspective on the sport. She clearly remembers the actual game at which her ‘conversion’ took place, stating that she left it on an “incredible high”. Subsequently, she learned all that she could about the sport. The conversion experience of Dove also involved another person acting as a facilitator. She grew up in a rugby league household in New South Wales and was not interested in AFL until she attended a game with a work colleague in the late 1990s: “I thought ‘this isn’t too bad, I’ll come again’ and come again, and I just kept on coming”.

The smallest category, in which just three of our respondents are included, is ‘STF’, which accounts for the fans who were introduced to AFL by their partners. Typically these fans knew little or nothing about football and had no interest in the sport before meeting their partners. Through their partners, these fans attended games and developed a knowledge of football and sometimes quickly (as with “converts”) or more gradually (as with “learners”) became avid supporters. Boronia’s husband is from the AFL state of Western Australia and he was responsible for her entry into football fandom. She was not in the least interested in AFL until “I sat down and he explained the rules to me, I was absolutely hooked”. Lorikeet is an in-the-blood rugby league supporter, having attended games from the age of two, but got into AFL through her former husband who “dragged me to a game for our first date, to the Swans, and I was gob-smacked the first time”.

A ‘discursion’

Wann et al (2001) note that much is still to be learned about how people are socialised into sports fandom, and that this has been a neglected area in the investigation of fans. It would be presumptuous for us to claim that we have resolved this issue, but we do believe that we have initiated discussion on how women become sports fans. We have identified four paths to fandom that are grounded in the accounts of our respondents. Our data points to childhood socialisation as being the single most important path to sports fandom, but it is not the only way in which women become avid fans. There is nothing ‘determinative’ about a woman becoming a football fan, however. Some respondents
from footballing ‘backgrounds’ told us of sisters who never showed an interest in the sport. Why one sibling and not another? Clearly we cannot answer this question but it does point to the agency of our respondents, who factored football support into their lives as a deliberate and conscious action. Our data suggests that women’s support of this very much male-dominated sport derives from their ‘core’ social relationships at the time their interest in the sport was triggered. But does it become a habituated action, a doxa in Bourdieu’s (2001) terms, which serves to reproduce football as a gendered sport? If so, then perhaps we can point to the many doxic actions that we all engage in as embedded in the everyday sociality of our core social relations.

References


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