Cevapi Please: Serbian Solidarity at the Football Ground

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Abstract:
While men’s soccer was among the first sports in Australia to “nationalise”, it has not achieved the prominence and commercial success garnered by other codes. Such an outcome has been commonly attributed to the sport being directly connected to non-Anglo identification and, as a consequence, less- or un-appealing to “mainstream Australia.” The Establishment of the new corporate managerial Hyundai Soccer League has obliterated all formal links to “ethnic” clubs. In the face of this context, this paper studies the identity politics and strategies of Serbian club supporters against the backdrop of the new League. The findings identify different types of supporters and dynamic strategies as they maintain Serbian roots.

Commentators sympathetic to soccer have long suggested that the ‘world’ game is a dormant giant in Australia, a story of unfulfilled promise. Critics contend that soccer at the club level has failed the test of ‘Australian-ness’. It has been generally derided as un-Australian – or less Australian than other sports – because many teams and clubs were founded by and remain organisationally linked to non-Anglo ethnic communities (Hallinan & Krotee, 1993; Hughson, 1992; Miller, 1992; Mosely, 1994). Against the backdrop of the recent highly publicised and celebrated World Cup qualification, the re-naming of the sport from soccer to football, and the re-construction of the national club competition around a decidedly corporate managerial
structure with big city names, clubs in the lower divisions in each state show a certain cultural defiance by persisting with ‘ethnic’ nicknames.

The Springvale White Eagles are based in south eastern Melbourne. They are one of several Serbian based clubs in the Melbourne metropolitan area. While the supporters of this club manage to keep the link between soccer and ethnic identity they do so against the odds and in defiance of an agenda which seeks the complete removal of ‘non-Australian’ expressions of allegiance from the nation’s sporting culture. As an entity, along with other so-called ethnic based clubs, they represent the antithesis of the spirit, values, and objectives of the Hyundai A-League.

It is difficult to be precise about the presence of Serbians in Australia – particularly before the establishment of Serbia-Herzegovina. Many Serbs in Australia trace their home to what is now Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. As such they tend to refer to themselves as Yugoslavs. However, it is estimated that approximately 60,000 Serbs now live in Australia and that they generally arrived in three waves and in two of those instances primarily as refugees. Those that arrived in Melbourne were absorbed into one of the two established Serbian communities. The northwest community is based around St. Albans and a second larger community is based around Dandenong/Noble Park/Keysborough in the southeast. According to an informant, “Soccer and church are the easiest ways for us to get together. First thing that happens when they get here is to get introduced to the church by the Migrant Centre in Dandenong so they’ve got somewhere to socialise and then the schools. Then they all know each other, then word travels fast ‘come to soccer’.”

The White Eagles average 1,500 spectators per game where as most other clubs average 200 – except when the White Eagles visit. The White Eagles ethnic affiliation is not necessarily welcomed although as one president of a rival club told us “they’re not too bad – the Croats are nuttier”. The White Eagles were clearly welcomed for gate revenue and beverage sales. The club was also envied for its capacity to seriously outbid rival clubs when signing players.

**Method**

Our approach employs descriptive methods such as observation and interview, allowing rich data to be collected. According to Hughson & Hallinan (2001), ethnographic – based fieldwork projects “offer the most accessible means of getting to
the heart of the questions about why and how groups of people do what they do in particular social contexts and settings.” (p.3). Approximately 30 hours of observation were undertaken during the 2005 season and directly involved most home games and two away games. While this occasionally involved conversation, in-depth interviews with selected participants were not undertaken until season’s end. We were given friendly access by a relevant section of Melbourne’s Serbian community, an important dimension to any ethnographic work on groups that are likely to be suspicious of outside observers.

Despite the welcome, it became immediately obvious that being an inconspicuous observer at the ground was unlikely. Initially, there were attempts to make notes whilst the matches were in progress. Only 2 or 3 people from the club knew about the researcher presence and our reason for being there. Many others deduced, that being ‘outsiders’ and co-incidentally wearing dark green jackets (on very chilly nights) that we were present as monitors: “He’s from the Federation” (governing body). In both the formative and conclusive stages of the project, we were mindful of the need for credibility and thus shared our work with supporters, academics, and in the case of the White Eagles, with non-affiliated Serbians.

**At the Ground**

The White Eagles’ ground is on the fringe of an outer suburban area. The most obvious aspect when arriving at the ground for the first time is its relative remoteness. Like all other spectators it was necessary to obtain private motor vehicle transport as there was no public transport and the ground was situated several kilometres from the nearest housing estate, and well out of walking distance from any bus stop. The entire space including clubhouse, parking areas, playing field, and practice field is owned by the club. “The site was selected years ago – I was just a young kid then. It was bought under the regime of Yugoslavia and everyone was there. Then when the war broke out, the Serbs took it over (in 1994 the club changed from Springvale United to White Eagles) and the Croatians left.”

The soccer club has continued to serve as the social focal point for Serbian émigré in the Keysborough and surrounding area. The clubhouse and its surrounds have undergone some renovation and, although somewhat basic compared to the facilities of fully corporate sports clubs, are a source of pride for the community. Attendance of
the club – for an outsider – provides a unique sense of stepping into a Serbian domain in the Australian suburbs. The most obvious aspects of the sensual experience are the smells and tastes of Serbian cuisine, cevapi rolls being the centrepiece of the menu.

Supporter Groups: The Ultradox

This is the self-chosen name for a group of approximately 200 mostly young adult males who congregate for home and away matches. For home games, the Ultradox occupy the upper right hand side of the stand. Whilst members do not arrive en masse, they do not arrive alone either. Each group with drums begins banging from arrival in the car park until departure. The Ultradox are endorsed by the club who paid for the drums and supplied T-shirts (white with red ULTRADOX on the front with a large same red coloured Adidas logo on the back). The Ultradox name was a thoughtful creation in so much as it was carefully chosen to replace the ‘ethnic’ nickname banned by the governing body. “It’s a new word that they’ve created to stop people from thinking that they’re ethnically based - which we are not allowed to be. But it’s basically Orthodox (reference to the traditional Serbian Church).” The very name of the club is also potentially provocative given that the double-headed white eagle is the distinguishing feature of the Serbian coat of arms.

Ultradox is not perceived as an ‘ethnic’ derivative by the soccer authorities and is therefore a surreptitious means of symbolic ethnic identification, a blend of key Serbian cultural markers – the Ultra supporters group of FC Red Star Belgrade and the Serbian Orthodox Church. This is reminiscent of similar symbolic creativity exhibited by the young Australian Croatian soccer supporters in the mid-1990s, discussed by Hughson (1997) as keeping ethnicity in on the sly. At each game, the Ultradox banner is displayed above the group high on the back wall of the grandstand. Whilst the Ultradox group is, in general, glad to be regarded as a valuable asset by the club management and many of the players, a number of group members express frustration at the passiveness of the other supporters of the White Eagles. They speak enviously of the atmosphere they witnessed first hand when attending games in Serbia. They desired a more intimidating atmosphere at the White Eagles. One provided us with a photocopy of an article from English-based football magazine which was titled “Get Down on Your Knees before the Serbs.” The roving English reporter had concluded that the Belgrade supporters were to be the most feared in Europe. Several of the Ultradox expressed frustration that, despite their efforts the
overall atmosphere at White Eagles games was tranquil compared to those in Belgrade. A lust for such missed excitement flamed their desire to travel to Serbia and, in the meantime, to live out a long distance nationalistic soccer support on the local terrace (Hughson 1997).

**Supporter Groups: The Regulars**

According to a club committee member, “The Ultradox organised themselves to support some of the players who were their friends. The rest are just general supporters. We’ve had Macedonian and Turkish clubs in the area come to the ground. We let anyone through the gate – no matter who it is.” The ‘regulars’ comprise those who attend most if not all matches - “My dad is 75 and he goes to all the games in the area he can - Krajina, White Eagles, all the away games. His pensioner group amaze me how they organise themselves – where is it, we’ll go. The old people still manage to get around each Saturday without fail.” According to another supporter, “I went to every single away game last year, and we had more of our people than the local people. We went to Eastern Lions and there were signs everywhere saying “Cevapi For Sale Today” and their President said ‘we love it when you guys come – the only day of the year when we make money.’”

**Supporter Behaviour**

Whereas the club supporters could readily be sorted into 2 distinct categories, the fan behaviour was influenced slightly by position on the ladder/table but more so by the affiliation of the opposition. There were three very different responses: matches against the Croatians, the other Serbian team, and the remaining teams.

According to a committee member, “(The Croatians) brought flags that were confiscated. They also had a photo of one of their ex-political leaders which they put up in the clubroom – the change room. It got taken down pretty quickly. We did that (removal/confiscation) – when it’s at our ground. There are representatives of the soccer federation present but they’re incognito. We don’t know who they are. It’s our responsibility to make sure our ground is all quiet and smooth.”

Club committee members insisted that the residual tension with Croatian supporters is not highly problematic. A typical response in this regard: “We deal with them as professionals – like we do with everyone else. You don’t have choices. It’s not their fault. It’s not my fault. Supporters! You’ll never get them to mix. Our very first game
of the season was at Chelsea (Croatian) and we’d organised a bus for our people. I didn’t actually go. I don’t like to go if there’s the possibility of violence or to witness. The president’s gone with a couple of committee members and when they got there, Chelsea hasn’t got any security – no fencing, no gates. There were more of our supporters there but they [the Croatians] were more verbal and abusive. Look they were really no trouble here. Everyone left the ground without incident. Once you get them into the car-park, no-one knows who’s who, anyway.” Said another, “I was involved a couple of years ago with Fitzroy Serbia when we played St Albans (Croatian). I think it’s cooled down some, but they are always going to hate each other, I think. More in young males who get taught by their parents but look, the war is still too fresh. A lot of people lost a lot of family members and, in the end, it was all for nothing.”

The match against the other Serbian team somewhat resembled a family gathering or re-union. Very apparent was the number of people engaged in friendly conversation whilst the game was in progress. This continued throughout and the queues for food and drinks were noticeably busy. However, towards the end of the match, the mood turned rapidly sour. The scores had been tied throughout but the White Eagles scored an apparently lucky late goal. The Fitzroy club was deep in the relegation zone. A drawn result or win was vital. The tension was palpable. Fitzroy were decidedly agitated by the outcome. Being unsure of the heated language exchanges, we were informed later by a White Eagles club official that “they were upset with us because we didn’t throw the game – let them win so that could avoid relegation.” This match also illuminated some of the tensions within the Serbian supporters as a whole. Whatever the catalyst, comments ensued which highlighted the apparent hierarchal demarcation within the Serbs. Our follow up conversations were instigated by a comment that they (Fitzroy) were “not real Serbs, anyway.” We sought clarification on this contention. In essence, it was put to us that Bosnian Serbs and Krajina Serbs were not as ‘true’ as Serbs from Serbia. We were told (by a Serbian Serb), “Krajina? Even though they call themselves Serbs, I would not classify them as real Serbs. For example, I would never classify those who come from Croatia as real Serbs. They are of Serbian background but not true Serbs. Also, the people from Krajina don’t actually speak Serb. They speak a dialect.” This was strongly refuted by a club official, “My
husband’s from Krajina - a region around Dalmatia. They are all still Serbs. Serbs are
defined by religion so whatever information she gave you is incorrect. Most people go
to both churches even though they are from different sides.”

We also determined that several of the younger supporters were very cautious and
hesitant about assisting as informants. We sensed that they had some divergent views
about Serb identity. “I’d really like to help but I’m worried that I might get offside
and get in trouble with my Dad. I can’t afford to be associated with anything critical
(of Serbs).” A couple of our informants indicated that they preferred to keep ‘a low
profile’ and not mention their identity because of the negative associations assigned to
Yugoslavia and Serbia primarily linked to the reported actions of Slobodan Milosevic.

Sekulic (1998, 1999) has discussed the consequences to Serbs about the West’s
opinion of Serbs in so much as they have been vilified as the enemy and the culprits
for the war.

Conclusion – One Australia / One League

Over time, conservative commentators maintained a strongly negative view of the
persistent ‘ethnic’ affiliations within the sport. By the 1990s this rhetoric went largely
against the political mainstream, in which multiculturalism generally enjoyed bi-
partisan support, maverick voices such as Howard’s notwithstanding. However, it is
an interesting coincidence that in the current day when Australia has a Prime Minister
and Deputy Party Leader who have both spoken publicly against multiculturalism and
its underpinning philosophy of cultural diversity, that a ‘de-ethnicised’ national soccer
league has finally emerged. The constitution of the Hyundai A-League articulates
with Howard’s formerly mooted ‘One Australia’ policy – in the Prime Minister the
league should find its leading patron.

A different story continues on the suburban margins of Melbourne and other
Australian cities. Our case study has looked at the example of how a particular
collective Serbian Australian identity is maintained through a social network with
soccer in pivotal place. Soccer has long been a key dimension of the social experience
of certain migrant groups in Australia and an undoubtedly thorny issue within the
contested terrain of multiculturalism. Should the corporate driven A-League succeed –
given the responses of followers and attendance rates at matches the indicators are
positive in this regard – it is unlikely that ethnic affiliations will re-emerge at the
national level of soccer competition in Australia. However, as long as soccer is played out in the suburban backblocks it is equally unlikely that the ethnic roots will be severed. While the expression of Serbian cultural identity is maintained in a relatively subdued public display, the link between soccer and migrant settlement is an important part of Australian cultural history, a fact disregarded by those who maintain that there is no place for ‘un-Australianness’ in Australian sport.

References


