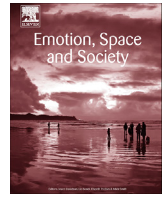
Emotion, Space and Society 12 (2014) 24–31

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa



“My natural environment has provided me with about fifty different ways of expressing frustration”: Mining the visceral angst of Australian Rules football followers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 17 December 2012
Received in revised form
19 June 2013
Accepted 15 August 2013

Keywords:
Sport
Australian Rules football
Frustration
Bodies
Emotions
Fans

ABSTRACT

Modern spectator sports provoke intense bodily passions in fans as well as athletes yet the embodied emotions of sports fans are understudied. This paper explores the frustrations of Australian Rules football supporters. Drawing on psychoanalysis and religious studies it traces the expressions and possible causes of their frustration by mining material from a set of interviews with fans along with the comments of Australian Rules football followers in books, articles and internet forums. An underlying question is how the frustrations of these football supporters might reveal something of the intersections of emotion, bodies and sport that spectator sports provoke.

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> We were only ten when we went to see the Hawks play Carlton at Princes Park and Hawthorn lost by five points. I can remember as clear as day Laurie saying after the game, “Sis, I’m going to get the umpire”, and leaping over the fence in her tartan skirt. She went straight for him and said, “you bloody mongrel”, which was pretty fierce coming from a St Michael’s girl. The umpire just patted her on the head and said, “run along little girl.” She was incensed but she had no choice; a policeman was heading our way.
>
> Lyndie Cardell[1]

1. Introduction

Daniel was shocked. His dad was an extremely conservative man. Daniel had never even heard him swear before, but the mild mannered public servant had just yelled out, “For fucks sake Salmon, get back in your can!”[2] It was the early 1970s, yet to Daniel it still seems like yesterday. His father had taken him to watch Footscray play in the Victorian Football League – an elite, then semi-professional Australian Rules football competition – at their home ground, the Western Oval. Young Daniel was standing proudly beside him, perched atop beer cans balanced on an “Esky” (ice-box) so that he could see. Then Ian Salmon, one of the Bulldogs more exasperating players, made another mistake. And his father burst forth, shocking Daniel to the core.

Excited and intrigued by this rare moment of fervour, Daniel quickly adopted Footscray as his club. Soon he was immersed in the passions of Australian Rules football, or “footy” as it is often termed.[3] Ian Salmon – the subject of his father’s rage – became Daniel’s first hero. Every season brought with it fresh hopes that the Bulldogs would be a force to be reckoned with; hopes that were then fed and dashed in weekly rhythms of pleasure and pain, agony and ecstasy. And at the centre of it all were matches filled with such drama and tension that Daniel frequently felt driven to bellow forth himself.

Such behaviour is not new. The shouting and yelling of the early Australian Rules football followers in the city of Melbourne was so

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[1] Clohesy (2007): 18.

[2] All quotes and details pertaining to Daniel are drawn from my interviews with him in September 2006.

[3] Australian Rules football, is generally referred to as football, footy and Aussie Rules by those who follow the game. I employ these terms throughout this paper.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2013.08.005

– “barrackers” – likely came from the English term used to denote shouting out in a jeering or offensive manner: “barracking”.[4] It was a negative term and barrackers were generally frowned upon. They had lost control in a manner that was, at best, uncivilised, at worst, terrifying. When the term was applied to footy followers it pointed to the scandalous conduct of footy crowds, of men and women regularly roaring abuse at the players and umpires, as if baying for blood. Around the world concern was rising with the mass crowds the working-class tended to form in their leisure-hours.[5] And many in the Melbourne establishment were worried and appalled by the way footy drove large groups of people to barrack with such intensity.[6]

The concern was not merely with the barbaric language, but with the violence that seemed bound to follow. Yet, though there were some acts of violence and hostility – men brawling, women sticking their hatpins into umpires and wielding umbrellas – extreme brutality was rare.[7] Perhaps it was this relative lack of violence that led the meaning of barracker to change. From the 1920s, as concerns over the behaviour of footy crowds diminished, barrackers came to be celebrated, not derided, and the term came to denote supporting a team, rather than shouting out in abuse because of them.[8]

Yet the coarse barracking of football followers continued to shock and often entice or appall newcomers. Another child of the 60s, Helena vividly recalls the fantastic shock when her mother and grandmother let fly at the umpires.[9] Both women prided themselves on their politeness but put them down for long enough at the Lakeside Oval, watching their beloved South Melbourne battle through another game, and some earthy language would break out from behind their mannered veneer. It might not be so surprising then that “strong” language has long been a rite-of-passage into the mysterious passions of “Aussie Rules” football and young barrackers continue to learn that there are things you can say at the footy that you can’t get away with elsewhere.[10] The Australian poet Bruce Dawe captured the effects of such language in his wonderful Australian Rules football poem, “Life-Cycle”.[11] “Hoisted shoulder-high at their first League game” the innocent child’s fate is determined when:

> In the pure flood of sound, they are scarfed with light, a voice
>
> Like the voice of God booms from the stands
>
> Ooohh you bludger and the covenant is sealed.

But, what kind of covenant – binding agreement or promise – engenders passions that can render deeply conservative mild-mannered men, and very polite, shy, modest women, “unmannered”, wild and radical, if just for a moment? To swear is to break a taboo, to act in a profane manner, and marks a loss of self-control.[12] It is most commonly associated with anger, and a very particular anger at that: frustration.

This paper takes the frustration of Australian Rules football barrackers, and the covenant that might underlie such frustration, as its starting points. One reason for attending to this lies in the peculiar place frustration has had in previous scholarly studies of sports fans – a place at once fore-grounded and taken for granted. Tales of the visceral distress caused by spectator sports – hopes dashed, dreams derailed, glorious victory torn away at the last moment – are a central theme of popular accounts of sport fans. Indeed, despite important cultural differences, celebrated stories of (Association) football in England and Italy; baseball (America) football and basketball in the United States; and Australian Rules football in Melbourne, all return to the intense frustration experienced by fans attending games, and ask why they continually return to something that causes them such anguish.[13] The scholarly literature on sports fans has largely focussed on exploring and debating two (at times related) answers. Firstly that such frustration provides an excuse, and/or perhaps facilitates, incidents and cultures of fan violence and anti-social excess more generally (including verbal as well as physical abuse).[14] Secondly, that this frustration is a “useful” outlet for accumulated tension, and thus enables a so-called “catharis” whereby somehow fans purge themselves of angst by yelling out in anger at a sports stadium.[15] Yet both areas of scholarship leave to the side the issue of just what it is about modern spectator sports that can produce such intense frustration for their fans. Indeed, often it seems like scholars assumed that such frustration is a “natural” effect of spectator sports.

This paper seeks to step back from questions of the broader effects and psycho-social utility of the frustration of sports fans to instead ask why one set of fans tends to become so highly frustrated. My interest lies not with explaining this frustration as a fait accompli that is somehow set in stone, but rather in exploring the cultural relationship to sports like Australian Rules football which helps facilitate intense angst for fans. I am also interested in the way this angst is shaped and mediated both bodily and spatially, for the frustration of sport fans is often markedly visceral – in popular accounts fans typically howl – and also emblematic of sports stadiums and the particular cultural space they create. The question is how to approach this culture of frustration.

Much of the literature on sports fans is informed by cognitive psychology and thus positions them as self-centred, rational actors. Yet it is not clear why a rational observer would become so upset over a mistake that occurs in a sporting contest that they stand up and yell out abuse. The difficulty of rationally explaining such behaviour is exemplified by Daniel Wann and colleagues in their otherwise impressive book, *Sports Fans*. After showing that sport fans are more rather than less agitated after games – contra the popular understandings of catharsis – they then invoke notions of classical Greek theatre (where notions of catharis are drawn from) to argue for what is basically only a slightly diminished version of catharis:

> The pleasant emotional stress that spectator sports offer provides welcome relief from the otherwise routine, dull life patterns that many spectators and fans are forced to endure. The point is that although frustration and anger may not be eliminated at the ball-park, other emotions can and do get a vigorous workout. To the extent sport fans choose to express their emotions, freely an openly, they and society are the better for it.[16]

[4] For more on the use and etymology of barracker see Klugman (2011), Senyard (1999).

[5] For a historical analysis of this fear of crowds see Moscovici (1985).

[6] For an example see the comments of James (1876): 9 (writing as ‘A Vagabond’).

[7] For an analysis of the comparative lack of crowd violence associated with Australian football see Warren (2003).

[8] The Collingwood club song adopted around this time for instance refers to all the barrackers shouting as all barrackers should. For a brief history of the song see Grow (2006).

[9] All quotes and details pertaining to Helena are drawn from my interviews with her in October 2005, and April 2007.

[10] For further examples see Hardy (2011): 79–80, Klugman (2011).

[11] Dawe (1968).

[12] See Wajnryb (2004) as well as Freud (1955) and Hughes (1991).

[13] See for example Hardy (1999), Hornby (1992), Parks (2002), Pippos (2006), Queenan (2003), St John (2005), Strevens (2005).

[14] See for example Roberts and Benjamin (2004).

[15] See for example Wann et al. (1999).

[16] Wann et al. (2001): 198.

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