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How the AFLW fan space has created new fan narratives in alternative storytelling

Abstract:

During the third season of the national Australian Rules women's competition (AFLW) in 2019, journalist and academic Kate O'Halloran hosted an AFLW themed radio show, *Kick Like a Girl*, on Melbourne's independent radio station, Triple R. The show included a segment titled, *Voices from the Stands*, which was presented by writer and award-winning documentary maker, Kirby Fenwick. Fenwick interviewed fans at various AFLW matches during the season, asking what it was about the AFLW competition and women's football that they loved. Recurring themes of fans highlighting feelings of now being considered welcome or safe at the game as well as sharing stories of having "come back" to football after being disillusioned or excluded by the culture of the men's competition were common. These fan narratives highlight an emerging fan space in professional, women's Australian Rules football that is counter to the men's game. This paper seeks to analyse the narratives collected by Fenwick as well as additional fan writing that has emerged since the inception of the AFLW that challenges the portrayals of fandom and concepts of what and who a "real fan" is.

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The author declares her position as co-founder of Siren: A Women in Sport Collective, alongside O'Halloran and Fenwick. However, data was sourced from publicly available broadcast. Thus, no conflicts of interest are applicable to the content of this paper.

Introduction

Nuanced, complicated, and layered depictions of fandom are seldom portrayed in sports media and literature, and when they are, they tend to be stereotypical representations or reflect a singular fan experience (Cohan, 2019). These examples are built on the concept that there is generally only one way to be a “real fan” and that is to support your team and/or sport no matter what. Should you question, deviate, or challenge this concept in any way, your fandom, and sometimes your very identity, is challenged.

In perhaps the most famous example of sports fan writing, *Fever Pitch* (1992), author Nick Hornby points to an interesting idea of a “contract” into which all fans enter when they choose or are chosen by their team. Hornby, a fevered Arsenal supporter, charts his ongoing relationship with his football (soccer) team in *Fever Pitch*. The highs, the lows, the spiritual draw of the team’s home ground at Highbury, and the profound and unrivalled meaning that supporting the club gives his life are all explored with deep consideration. But it is the “lows” that point to the most interesting experiences of fans in the navigation one must perform to justify their support and allegiance to, not only their team, but the inherent identity being a fan gives an individual. Hornby writes:

There have been many times over the last twenty-three years when I have pored over the small print of my contract looking for a way out, but there isn’t one. Each humiliating defeat (Swindon, Tranmere, York, Walsall, Rotherham, Wrexham) must be borne with patience, fortitude and forbearance; there is simply nothing that can be done, and that is a realisation that can make you simply squirm with frustration. (Hornby, 1992, pp. 28-30)

It is in identifying this central frustration that essentially connected with so many sports fans and made *Fever Pitch* such a success. Fans needed their complicated position articulated, their passion validated, and their story shared to have this universal feeling of loving and loathing something at the same time acknowledged. In its centring of the passionate and unrelenting fan narrative, Hornby’s expression of his football fan identity is regarded as pivotal in our understanding of football fan culture, and broader sport culture, so much so the book’s success led to film adaptations that spanned sporting codes, a football film with the same title in 1997 (Evans, 1997), and a re-imagined baseball film, also called *Fever Pitch* (Farrelly & Farrelly, 2005), in the US and Canada.

But what about those fans who look closely at their contract, as Hornby calls it, and decide that there are parts of the fan experience that they have not signed up for that go beyond supporting a side that is under-performing on the pitch? What about the fans that tear up their contract and walk away from the game they love because it might not love them back? (Luther & Davidson, 2020).

Rather than continue to discount these fans as not being “real fans” for exhibiting behaviours that we would traditionally believe discounts their fandom, this article begins to explore some counter fan narratives. These narratives are becoming more and more visible through the fan

space of women's sport, and this paper will focus on examples from the emerging Australian rules football women's competition (AFLW) fan space. By collecting preliminary data from the AFLW themed radio show *Kick Like a Girl* (2018-2019) and the fan writing platform, The Footy Almanac, this article investigates how alternative fan voices and narratives are being expressed through alternative sports media platforms (Sherwood, 2019). These voices continue to express the fundamentals of fandom by displaying passion and love for their team/sport (Klugman, 2009) but also present a renegotiation of what the "contract" can be when being a fan. The examples from the AFLW fan space are explored alongside previous sociological work on sports fandom and depictions of fandom in sports media and popular culture to further demonstrate our perceptions of fandom, and how these fans challenge them.

The sentiments expressed from the collected AFLW fan narratives show what would be considered as non-fan behaviour, such as turning their back on the sport or team they love. But what challenges this is that they come back in a way that serves their fandom in a more fulfilling way. From finding these fan stories in the voices from the stands in the AFLW space, we can begin to find more fan stories that can reflect more nuanced, diverse, and representative fan narratives that re-position the concept of what a "real fan" is.

"Go where?": The existential dilemma of fans

The idea of the "fan contract", as Hornby describes, is replicated throughout fan narratives as the code that fans must follow, mostly when teams are not performing and have disappointed their fans through defeat. It provides a framework for the limited mainstream media depictions of fans to guide them back to their "real fan" identity should they stray. This is evident in the two aforementioned *Fever Pitch* films through the use of female romantic interests in a gendered way to distract the male characters from their fandom and ultimately guide them back.

In a sketch posted on the social media platform Facebook, on 12 November 2019, by US sports broadcaster ESPN, they too explored the "fan contract". Presenter Katie Nolan and analyst and commentator Stephen A. Smith portrayed a psychiatrist and patient routine after Smith had gone on an on-air tirade slamming the performance of his NBA team, the New York Knicks. The broadcaster took the opportunity to make light of Smith's not uncharacteristic vitriol towards his perpetually underperforming team by producing this sketch where Nolan, playing the psychiatrist in a humorous way, tries to understand his passion for a team that continues to frustrate and devastate him. Nolan, playing the role perfectly, ponders why Smith is allowing this frustration to overwhelm him. She asks, "It sounds like this relationship is no longer beneficial for you?". Smith responds, "It's not beneficial for me. But, I'm not going anywhere". Nolan asks, "And now why is that?". What Smith delivers is a soliloquy that summarises the binding "fan contract" that he has entered:

Because it's what I know, I'm like that spurned lover that can't get enough of the person I love no matter how trifling they are, no matter how disgusting they are, no matter how

many times they repeatedly disappoint me. Because they are what I know, and as a result, anybody else that I know, it doesn't matter. I can sit there and concede that other people are better, other teams are better, they'll take me further, but the level of enjoyment and ecstasy I get from them winning will never compare to what I would feel if the Knicks won. And that's why I stay, because "go where?" (ESPN, 2019)

While this sketch is one in jest and good humour, it points to the epitome of the sports fan narrative that is propagated through popular culture, media, and literature when it comes to depictions of sports fans. It is the narrative that "real fans" are loyal. That "real fans" stay, no matter what. It is what Hornby describes in anger when he knows he cannot do anything when his team lets him down on the field. It is part of the deal of being a fan as there is no alternative. Go where?

The concept of the "real fan" has been identified in numerous research pertaining to sports fans in different codes from around the world (Dohrmann, 2018). The existing research also points to the problematic nature of the "real fan" as it often pertains to the dominant group at sporting events and in broader sports culture, which has traditionally been white, heterosexual men, and which has excluded others based on gender, sexuality, and race (Light & Wedgwood, 2012). The creation and universal application of the "real fan" identity subsequently demands performances or crafted fan identities by those from marginalised groups for them to be seen as "real" by the existing "real" fans, which for women in particular continues to perpetuate gendered behaviours (Osborne & Sarver Coombs, 2013). This performance of fan identity is especially problematic for women as they adjust themselves, both consciously and unconsciously, to perform acceptable fan identities in traditionally hyper-masculine spaces (Palmer & Toffoletti, 2019; Pope, 2013; Richards, 2018; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016).

From his research through interviewing English football (soccer) fans, Kevin Dixon illuminates the problematic nature of the performances for female fans and states:

To be a "real fan", participants suggest that one must embrace characteristics and "banter" that has history and authenticity. This illustrates the unintended consequence for females in the system of structuration as transcendence or evolution for dominant practice, and thus, equity for female fans can be painfully slow. After all, "fitting in" with masculine culture does not necessarily contribute to the equality of practice that those participants in the current sample desire. (Dixon, 2015, p. 648)

It can additionally be "painfully slow" in that even when women have some consciousness and agency over their presentation of their fandom, their choice might still be to stay complicit in these behaviours. In a pioneering study of male hegemony in sport, Lois Bryson describes sport as "a crucial arena in which masculine hegemony is constructed and reconstructed" (1987, p. 349). In a summary of Bryson's work more than two decades later, Richard Light and Nikki Wedgwood explain that:

Sport, she said [Bryson], celebrates the dominant form of masculinity and it is this monopolization process which either excludes women from the terrain completely, or

if they do manage to pass through the barriers, effectively minimises their achievements. (Light & Wedgwood, 2012, p. 181)

Light and Wedgwood add that “success for women in sport still necessarily involves the negotiation of a field dominated by men and masculine values” (2012, p. 181). This understanding of the gendered negotiations and performances around sport are not new concepts; however, their complexities remain under-explored, particularly when we think about women’s experiences in the fan culture of elite male sports and their representation in sporting narratives. In the US, Jeffrey Montez de Oca and Molly Conter found that female fans of the National Football League (NFL) also have to wrestle with questions over the authenticity of their fandom despite the code having a close to 50/50 gender split of fans, similar to men’s Australian rules football:

Still, the literature finds that the growth of women fans does not change the fact that they must negotiate a gendered terrain overdetermined by the masculine norms hostile to them that generates exclusionary questions about “true” or “authentic” (i.e., male) fanship. (2018, p. 113)

In 2008, Wolfram Manzenreiter noted when looking at football fandom in Japan, that:

as feminist interventions have shown, the consumption and experience of football continue to provide one of the last reserves of patriarchy in late modernity, notwithstanding broader economic, political, legal, and social developments in society. (p. 244)

Over a decade later, this still appears to be true, despite the growth of women’s leagues in many sporting codes and the advancement of women in sport off the field. The slow and gradual progress (Dixon, 2015) of women in sport thus also allows for slow progress in diverse fan narratives that explore the position of diverse women as fans in sport.

It is interesting to examine these concepts through the work of Katharine Jones whose research into female English soccer fans highlights that despite these ongoing gendered performances that are demanded of female fans, a sense of belonging to their team is generally not considered an issue for female sports fans. As Jones notes:

it is significant that in some cases they prioritise their fan identities over their gender identities. Although my data suggests that though women might have to downplay emphasised femininity to be considered real fans, many women at football matches feel that they belong, despite being women. (2008, p. 532)

Belonging is a significant part of team sports for fans, and it is interesting that for some women who perhaps feel that they are being deemed “inauthentic” (Jones, 2008) and that they must play a role to gain the status of a “real fan”, they still feel like they intrinsically belong at the game. There is a personal relationship between fan and team; in a way, fans are “in love” with their team. Performer Carrie Brownstein in her memoir, *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl* (2015), says, “[t]o be a fan is to know that loving trumps being beloved” (p. 3). The love of the

game for some women can drive them to be a part of it so much that they subconsciously change themselves to fit in to its fan culture, understanding that the love they give might not be reciprocated, but the sense of belonging is enough.

Australian Rules football fandom

In bringing the discussion back to Australian rules football, these “real fan” narratives have become evident in the existing research on how fans express their connection to the game. However, they are seldom explored in Australian literature. As Wright notes, “for something so culturally unique, Aussie rules football is under-represented in our literature, especially given the obsession with the game of our UNESCO City of Literature, Melbourne” (Wright, 2014, p. x). A lack of literature in this genre has led to a lack of varied representations of the many experiences fans can have in the Australian rules football fan environment, especially for women. For women, this results in the further perpetuation of narratives that either neglect the female fan or fantasise her. It also maintains the male fan narrative as the central and most authentic experience, continuing a culture of complicity in the fan space and maintaining a rigid interpretation of how fans must comply with the existing culture.

In the research pertaining to fans of Australian Rules football, the game’s fans are enamoured with it, and as Matthew Klugman notes, are frequently celebrated as “mad, fevered, obsessed, fanatical, and addicted” (2009, p. 67). Klugman argues that the seemingly pathological, though feted, devotion of fans is grounded in the love of their team, as well as the specific love of certain players, and a more general love of the game. Klugman goes on to say that:

Adoration like this can blind the conscience, and it’s little wonder that passionate fans are often referred to as blind or at least “one-eyed” for, no matter what the club does, these barrackers will maintain their love. (2009, p. 13)

How we interpret the “maintaining of love” when it comes to fans who have not always felt like they can uphold the “contract” can provide us with a new way of writing fan narratives. Exploring these stories that acknowledge the complications that fandom has beyond the ball game can not only give voice to more diverse fan experiences, but bring a whole community of fans back into our sports narratives.

“The AFLW has given me back something I thought I’d lost”

2019 marked the third season of the national Australian Rules women’s competition (AFLW). During the 2019 season, journalist Kate O’Halloran hosted a one-hour AFLW themed radio show, *Kick Like a Girl*, on Melbourne’s independent radio station, Triple R. The show included a segment titled, *Voices from the Stands*, which was presented by writer and award-winning documentary maker, Kirby Fenwick. Fenwick interviewed fans at various AFLW matches during the season, asking what it was about the new AFLW competition (the national

Australian rules women's league was formed only two years prior in 2017) and women's football in general that they loved. The answers provided by a number of fans at the games gave interesting insights not just to how the game was perceived by fans, but pointed to intriguing ideas of fandom in the elite sports fan space that challenge the existing research on sports fandom. Recurring themes of fans expressing feelings of now being considered welcome or safe at the game were prevalent, as has become common with emerging women's sports spaces. However, what was most illuminating were new narratives in sports fan culture, fans who shared stories of having "come back" to football.

Reflecting on the previous research of sports fans – of the experience of female sports fans in particular – the research points to how women must often negotiate their fandom in times of moral dilemma to prioritise their fan identities and maintain their "fan contract". We do not see or further explore the fan journeys of those who walk away; thus, these stories are especially interesting. In thinking about Hornby's seemingly unbreakable contract and the Nolan and Smith ESPN sketch where Smith laments having nowhere else to go, if these AFLW fans were coming back, where did they go?

The AFLW fans interviewed for the *Voices from the Stands* segment spoke of experiences of being disillusioned or excluded by the culture of the men's Australian rules football competition. They did not feel welcome, accepted or sometimes even tolerated. Their teams had been involved in scandals. The league had not taken a harder stance on social issues that they believed in. Their favourite player had been involved in alleged violence against women. In transcribing Fenwick's interviews for thematic analysis, "coming back" or "re-connection", "community", and "support" emerged as key themes across multiple interviews. The quotes provided below point to a more personal identification with the women's league, women's teams and players, as well as the at-game experience in comparison to the men's competition:

"I emotionally connect to these players so much more than I have any men's footy player. And knowing how hard they've worked to get here is so fulfilling."

"It feels like I have a team I can actually support. In the last couple of seasons, I would watch the [men's] games but not really know who to go for but now I have a definite team that I know I can back and get behind."

"I really like the community vibe that is here. I'm looking around and seeing a lot more families and a lot more inclusiveness here, and I'm really enjoying that compared to the rowdiness of the men's game."

"[There are] less dickheads at the games. You go to the AFL (men's) games and it's so sterile and clinical and expensive, and it's guys getting drunk being agro and you don't get that environment here because it's more of a family game, people come here because they want to be here, it's more supportive, it's just a better vibe." (From recordings in O'Halloran, 2019)

The comments below speak to the complete disassociation of fandom and the disconnection of fan identities of the men's competition, as well as the return to the game via the new women's league, which points to an intriguing re-negotiation of the "fan contract".

"I only came out to support them because it's the women's league."

"[I love] The fact that's brought my daughter back to football so I can go to football with my daughter."

"I used to watch a bit (of men's footy) but lost interest but AFLW has revitalised my interest in the game."

"The AFLW has given me back something I thought I'd lost, which is the sport I love. I became alienated from the AFL (men's), I'm a North Melbourne fan, and I don't want to talk about particular players there that put me off, but the violence against women, the misogyny, the endless crap that was coming out of the club just drove me away and it's wonderful to come back to the sport I love." (From recordings in O'Halloran, 2019)

These counter narratives have also emerged through other platforms that give voices to fans and diverse experiences outside of traditional media. It is important to note the role of the rise of digital media and alternative sports media that are often driven by fans to redress what they believe to be a lack of representation of their sport and/or diversity in how their sport is covered by mainstream media (Sherwood, 2019).

The fan-driven sports writing site, *The Footy Almanac*, also offers a welcoming platform for fans to share their different experiences of the game and has attracted several contributors who post their own writing about their AFLW fan experiences. One example of a piece that detailed a conflicting fan experience was written by Melbourne-based comedian and fan, Bobby Macumber. Macumber abandoned the (men's) football club that she had loved her whole life due to the position they took regarding the same-sex marriage plebiscite that occurred in Australia in 2017. As a proud gay woman, Macumber felt betrayed by her football club who she believed no longer represented her. She then chose another team who she felt had been proactive in the space of inclusion and had a women's team as part of the national league: "I now support a team who proudly supports marriage equality and all LGBTIQ+ people" (Macumber, 2018, p. 72).

Similarly, Deb Waterhouse-Watson (2019), an academic who has undertaken significant research on victim blame culture and the representation of professional athletes accused of sexual assault in the media, also wrote of the end of her fan relationship with men's football. Waterhouse-Watson recalls that:

I was once a massive fan of AFL men's, but we went through a bad breakup in 2008, when I found out about a sexual assault case involving my team and I avoided pretty much anything to do with sport of any kind. (2018, p. 187)

One can only imagine the toll of her extensive research into sexual assault allegations at the hands of elite footballers, which (among many other things) might have led her to maintain her separation from the game. Yet Waterhouse-Watson notes that it was the advent of the national women's competition (AFLW) that *brought her back* to football.

I don't think I've ever enjoyed a game of football so purely and thoroughly as I did that game. I don't remember who took the marks and kicked the goals. Not one moment stands out for me, except the one where I found myself in tears, with an overwhelming sense of coming home, of joy that this, this was what I had been waiting my whole life for. (2018, p. 188)

What is interesting about these narratives collected by Fenwick and the personal fan writing accounts of Macumber and Waterhouse-Watson is they testify to the pleasures of sports fandom. While these fans saw different flaws within the sport they were originally emotionally connected with, and took bold steps to distance themselves from the parts of it that were in conflict with their values, all found a way to be part of the game again. They did this in a way that suited their fan identity and their own code of ethics by participating in the fan culture of the new women's league. They came back. This says so much about the complicated navigation some women, and others who feel marginalised by the dominant, heteronormative, masculinist enclaves that some men's professional sports can create, must do in order to enjoy the pleasure that sports fandom can provide.

It also speaks to another unique audience that engages with women's Australian rules football that we are yet to see considered in broader narratives around the competition and women's sport in general. Perhaps because they shine a light on the darker side of the sport's history. But the AFLW connects with a significantly more diverse audience than young girls who now have elite pathways to play the game and women who missed their chance who are thrilled to see women on the field.

Re-negotiating the fan contract

These voices from the stands highlight an emerging fan space in professional, women's Australian Rules football that is counter to the men's game. This is a space where those who may have felt previously marginalised by the traditional fan culture, now feel welcome, included, and even celebrated in this alternative space as these audio segments and fan writings suggest. These narratives act as a point of difference to the women currently represented in the research on female fans who comply to belong in the fan space of elite male sport. This, of course, is an important issue facing women and needs attention to continue to make all sport more inclusive, yet we need to understand that there are fans beyond those that Jones interviewed, for example. There are female fans who self-identify as "real fans" who feel they do not belong at the game because they actively choose not to comply with the culture that is in conflict with their personal beliefs, and their relationship with, and their sense of belonging to, their sport or team, which is a painfully conflicting experience. These fans want to tear up

their “contracts”; however, they want to tape them back together in ways that allow them to maintain their love of the game without having to love the off-field behaviour that they abhor.

This phenomenon also points to the need to collect, document, and share narratives of those present at AFLW games, and other women’s sporting codes, who do not identify as women. It is not only women who have been marginalised and victimised in these spaces. These narratives have the power to drive real change if they are harnessed and amplified in sports media, writing, and literature to represent more diverse fan voices. These stories can show fans that they do not need to accept the first offer on their fan contracts; there is no one way to be a fan and they can re-negotiate the contract.

The research presented here is limited to the examples provided from the emerging AFLW fan space on the platforms *Kick Like a Girl* and *The Footy Almanac*. The research used to contextualise the “real fan” experience alongside these examples has used a gender lens to demonstrate the complications of the fan space mostly for women. However, while some of the data collected for this paper can be confirmed as from the experience of women, I do not wish to assume the gender identity of the voices of these narratives. Thus, more narratives and stories should be collected and contextualised to empower alternative fan journeys and to celebrate the fan narratives that exist beyond our ideas of what and who a “real fan” is.

Conclusion

These fan narratives beg us to question the traditional notion of what a “real fan” is. The “real fan” who would never turn their back on their team, no matter the pain and disappointment they cause them, the fans like Stephen A. Smith, who will never walk away from his New York Knicks, no matter if he never sees another NBA title. And fans like Nick Hornby, who will pore over his contract when Arsenal lose, but clutch them to his heart the minute they win, they can still be considered “real fans”. But they should also be considered “real” in the same vein as fans who decide to take a stand and say “no” to their team when they are pushed to the brink, when their favourite player lets them down, when their league actively excludes them. A “real fan” also has the courage to walk away from the game they loved because it did not love them back (Luther & Davidson, 2020), and these fans deserve their fan experiences depicted in our sporting literature.

In his sketch, Stephen. A. Smith said to Katie Nolan that he would continue loving the New York Knicks despite decades of disappointment because he has nowhere else to go. These Aussie Rules football fans now have somewhere else to go. They have “maintained their love”, as Klugman notes, but in a different way. In a way that is no longer a one-way, broken relationship. These fan experiences mean something very different to how we have come to understand fan culture within the professional sporting landscape but also something that is very much the same. Despite the choices these fans have made, these fans maintain their love of the game, which is what should be the fundamental pre-requisite for being a “real fan”.

These narratives deserve their own representation in our sports literature and media to give those fans the visibility and space in sports writing they so truly deserve.

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