VIOLENCE IN SPORT: SOME THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

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The National Committee on Violence has indicated that illegitimate violence in sport is an issue of concern in Australian society (Australia 1990, p. 48). However few attempts have been made to systematically document the nature and extent of the phenomenon specifically in terms of Australian sporting, social and recreational culture. Data currently available on the issue suggests that the phenomenon has decreased over time in the major Australian team sports such as Rugby and Australian Rules (Wenn 1989). However the absence of a more systematic analysis which considers the relationship between the specific violent events and the broader cultural setting means that such evidence provides few insights into the trends, patterns, and changes in the nature of violence as a process in this recreational setting (Homel et al. 1993).

Further, the issues which relate to the control of violence in terms of prevention, detection, and dealing with the problem when it occurs are of broader criminological significance. As evidence from other studies on violence in recreational space suggest, these issues necessarily impinge on the roles of public and private law and enforcement agents, and how these mechanisms to regulate violent conduct in these settings (Victorian Community Council Against Violence 1990). These issues have been dealt with in relation to various "sub-cultural" forms of sporting culture, such as the Bathurst motorcycle races (Cunneen et al. 1989) However analysis of these questions in more mainstream areas of Australian sporting culture has yet to be explored.

Evidence from the United Kingdom and the United States suggests that there are several features of violence among both participants and spectators of particular sports which are common to both societies. In the United Kingdom for example, where spectator violence is more common, low social class and social deprivation, masculinity, and a strong cultural affinity with local communities which represent the major teams in British soccer are all seen to combine to generate a climate for collective conflict which is played out both during, and on the way to and from the event (Dunning et al. 1988). In the United States, much crowd disorder is explained specifically in terms of anger directed at violent events which occur on the field (Smith 1976). Much of the large scale disorder in sporting events in the United States is seen to be a reflection of class and masculinity, however these features are not mutually exclusive. Violence on the field of play appears to be an issue of greater social concern in the American context (Miedzian 1991), yet in global terms many of the characteristics and causes of this phenomenon remain speculative.

This paper will document some of the issues relating to violence among participants and spectators in mass sporting events in the Australian social context. Using Australian Rules Football as an example, this paper aims to provide a greater understanding of the nature of violence associated with professional sporting activities in mainstream Australian sporting culture through the examination of three key features:

1) The nature of any connections between incidents which occur on the field of play and disorder among spectators.

2) The trends and features of violence within sporting culture in light of the broader cultural considerations which have accompanied the development of the game throughout history.

3) The patterns of control which influence the occurrence of violence both on and off the field and in the community in general.
Using evidence derived from a variety of historical and contemporary sources, associations will be drawn between instances of violence which have occurred within the context of the game itself and the broader social features which have influenced the progress of the sport as a professional concern for participants and a leisure event for supporters. Evidence includes reports, analyses and case studies of specific incidents of on and off field disorder and their impact on the culture of the sport in light of broader social developments throughout time. Such evidence is valuable in outlining possible directions in the patterns and trends of violence in sport in the future. It must be stressed however that the nature of this research is continuing, hence the conclusions and hypotheses to be drawn from the evidence are not definitive at this stage. The aim however is to suggest ways in which the general patterns of violence observed within the sporting venue relate to the patterns of violence and its control in the broader community, and to posit issues relating to violence in sport in the Australian context which may arise as a result of these trends.

The evidence suggests that the actual frequency of violence associated with Australian Rules among spectators and participants may have declined in modern times. However the nature of the phenomenon has altered in light of specific cultural developments which have influenced the progress of the sport itself and the nature of modern spectatorship generally. These changes have a significant impact on the processes of control and prevention of violence associated with leisure activities in modern societies.

**Trends and Patterns in Australian Rules Football**

The material indicates that there have been several divergent trends in the characteristics of both crowd and participant violence in Australian Rules Football since its commencement as an organised recreational activity. These trends are presented in light of developments in society which have influenced the progress of and following of the game under four key time periods.

**1859 - 1896**

This period covers the time from the initial development of professional Australian Rules Football in the colonies of Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, and Tasmania, to the formation of the Victorian Football League (VFL) in 1896. At a broader social level, this period was characterised by the development of the colonies as separate and distinct economies, the establishment of industries which reflected class developments along British-colonial lines in the suburbs of major cities, and the formal control of the lower classes by state police.

In this period participant and spectator violence were common phenomena, and indeed appear to be closely linked. The initial rules of the game made it explicit that certain tactics such as "tripping, holding, and hacking" (Mullen 1959, p. 11) were not to be condoned, despite the fact that "roughness", which was equated with manliness, was seen as a virtue and attraction of the sport (Mullen p. 21). However the control of this behaviour on the field was often left to the respective captains of the teams, or umpires. It appears that uncertainty in applying the rules of the game meant that officials could exercise little control when "niggling" got out of hand and play became congested. This increased the likelihood of physical contact. Inconsistent rule applications often led to full scale brawling among players which had to be controlled by local police. This was despite the fact that the leagues maintained sole regulatory control over the detection and punishment of on field violence.

Of greater concern for control purposes was the violent activities of crowds which required regular police presence at these venues. This was necessitated by incidents which occurred either regularly at certain venues, or in response to specific events which occurred on the field. Most on field incidents involved the conduct of umpires and visiting players, such as the 1896 match between
North Melbourne and Collingwood in which 2,000 angry spectators, including men armed with sticks and iron bars, and women with hat pins, attempted to attack the umpire and some of the victorious Collingwood players (The Argus 27/7/1896). Similar incidents which specifically related to events on the field of play are also documented in other colonies where the game became popular (Atkinson 1985, p. 18).

Not all teams attracted spectators who were consistently predisposed to violent activity. However spectators in a number of working class suburbs such as North Melbourne and Port Melbourne caused much concern. The behaviour of "gangs of uncontrolled local barrackers" at these venues led to several umpires boycotting games in these areas "unless more police protection was made by the clubs concerned" (Mullen p. 87). However, spectator violence was not purely a class phenomenon. Several instances of crowd disorder during this period also involved:

"numbers of reputable citizens who would be ashamed under ordinary circumstances to exhibit such emotion, evidently under the influence of ungovernable excitement."
(Mullen p. 28)

Further, evidence suggests that in some working class environments, the clubs themselves instilled discipline in their supporters to maintain order at the grounds for the benefit of team cohesion (Stremski 1986). The game was also forming a distinct culture associated with its role in fostering community recreation in the suburbs of Melbourne during this period. Community rivalry between suburbs was an important feature in fostering the popularity of the sport. The football ground was becoming a central focus for the community where spectators could vent their hostilities and legitimately manifest inter-community competition through barracking for their team and abusing the opposition. These features were a central element of the culture the sport was trying to establish during colonial times. The recreational nature of the event was also forming through such features as the introduction of alcohol at football venues. In sum, accessibility to the event was open to all within the community, and teams acted as the representatives for the community under the neutral auspices of the sport.

1897 - 1939

This period marks the secession of 6 teams to form the VFL and extends to the beginning of World War II. During this period the two major football associations in Melbourne, the VFL and the Victorian Football Association (VFA) competed for attendances and pre-eminence as the dominant code in Melbourne. The game was also expanding into the outer suburbs of Melbourne to broaden the participant and spectator following of the game. At the same time Australian society experienced two major periods of economic prosperity and decline, involvement in one World War which disrupted and then regenerated domestic development including the progress of sport, and worldwide depression, in which the industrial working classes experienced mass social deprivation.

The game itself saw two major changes during this period. For the first time players were remunerated for their efforts and the game became professionalised on the formation of the VFL. This was linked to an increase in the stakes of the game which led to greater on field competitiveness. In light of these developments violence both on and off the field continued to present problems. However the nature of the phenomenon changed considerably.

Rough play on the field was still common and violence among participants increased in frequency in the early part of this period. Both major football organisations in Melbourne were concerned over the rising levels of rough play, illegal betting and bribery of players infiltrating the game. These features were however becoming distanced from the issue of crowd disorder. Indeed, public
acceptance of the levels of violence within the game declined, and appears to have mirrored a
general reduction in spectator violence during this period.

The few instances of spectator violence which did occur at this time were related more to the
environmental conditions around the ground than incidents which occurred on the field.
Specifically, problems began to arise in accommodating the number of spectators trying to attend
big matches. This is evidenced by the 1908 VFL Grand Final between Essendon and Carlton,
where police estimated that 10,000 fans entered the MCG without paying by breaking the fence at
the Railway end of the ground. As Mullen (1959) reported:

"(The) crowd were so dense inside that the iron picket fence surrounding the arena
broke down in four different places and thousands of people swarmed on to the ground
and saw the game from inside the fence. Crowds also climbed in to the roof of the large
public stand and invaded the Melbourne Cricket members' reserve." (p. 109)

There were however no major instances of violent spectator disorder reported at this game (The
Age 28/9/1908).

New controls relating to on field violence were being introduced in response to increasing public
criticism over the levels of violence on the field. However administrators and umpires faced
problems in implementing any new rules to curb open fighting amongst players. The Grand Final of
1910 for example was characterised by much open "tripping, fighting, elbowing and kicking"
(Mullen 1959, p. 115), and police and trainers were called upon to break up the fighting. Increased
suspensions were viewed by administrative bodies as one way of deterring such violence, and more
players began to receive longer sentences for their violent activity. However these sentences were
seldom served in full. This pattern appears to have continued in the VFL until the onset of the
depression towards the late 1920s.

The depression years however saw patterns of player and spectator violence continue in the second
major code in Melbourne, the VFA. The 1930 Grand Final between Oakleigh and Northcote was
one such instance where persistent fighting occurred on the field, and police were required to clear
the field from invading spectators who tried to join in. (The Age 29/9/1930). Similar incidents
occurred in a number of other Association games throughout the decade.

1940-1982

This period encompasses the period during World War II until the expansion of the VFL into a
national competition. A number of social and cultural developments which followed the War are
associated with the social prosperity which followed and had a major impact on the progress of the
game. New developments in domestic prosperity and leisure activities were taking place which
altered the nature of popular recreation in Australian society. Specifically, the consumerism which
developed as a result of cheaper technology, such as the introduction of television in the 1950s, led
to the development of a "privatised mentality" in relation to leisure pursuits which affected the
culture of recreation both in Australia and overseas (Waddington 1992, p. 134).

Football was profoundly influenced by these new technological developments after the War.
Games could now be televised, and this led to a new form of criticism of violent activity on the
field. Improvements in cameras meant that violent incidents could be detected with greater
frequency, and transgressors could thus face greater criticism by the viewing public. The concept of
spectatorship could expand into people's homes, giving the game a new "private" audience which
was more appealing than radio had previously been. Although crowds did not greatly diminish
during this period, the nature of their behaviour altered. Mass public disorder was no longer
directed against players, and greater emphasis was now placed on policing certain elements of the
crowd in order to eliminate the chance of large scale disorder. Prevention superseded tolerance of spectator violence.

Participant violence in Australian Rules persisted, but declined dramatically during this period. In the years during and after the War several games were characterised by recurring violence among players which led to minor intrusions onto the arena by spectators. However an increased and more systematic police presence at football venues meant that the nature of crowd disorder was mainly confined to minor incidents amongst the crowd itself.

The majority of on field instances were sporadic in nature and occurred with far less frequency than in previous times. Data collection is incomplete for this period, but it appears that of the 12,000 VFL and VFA games played during this time, only 10 were characterised by major participant and spectator disorder. Most of these occurred in a series of violent matches in 1945, where the VFL final series in particular saw a number of deliberate assaults being committed by players which "disgusted" members of the crowd (The Argus 1/10/1945).

1982-1993

This period covers the period since the expansion of the VFL interstate, first to Sydney, then Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, to become the Australian Football League (AFL) to the present. Socially, this period is characterised by high unemployment, particularly among traditionally working class occupations and young people. Areas of public entertainment, recreation, and social space have become subject to stricter regulation to protect private and property related interests (White 1990), and the mass transmission of sporting events into private homes through television is now a standard feature of modern sports spectatorship.

Australian Rules Football has changed dramatically during this period. The VFL has relocated one team interstate, and the expansion of the competition at national level has meant that the AFL has a monopoly over the development of the game Australia wide. There are several effects of this feature. Traditional local rivalries have been supplanted by new state based ones, and the game is increasingly becoming a spectator sport through television coverage which extends to the dissemination of entire games and highlights on most weekends. Further, professionalisation is increasing the demands being made by players for more money for their effort. This has resulted in a broader range of revenue raising options including extensive marketing, corporate sponsorship, media rights and increased gate prices. Cost effectiveness through ground rationalisation has also resulted.

At the same time this monopoly has led to an encroachment on the second major code in Melbourne, the VFA. In the last 10 years 13 teams have dissolved due to a combination of increased costs, the erosion and encroachment of traditional supporter bases by the AFL and other sports, changing suburban demographics and financial swindling. For many football followers living in these localities, a central element of social activity has been removed and supplanted with television coverage of elite standard games. The focus on national expansion has thus substantially altered the available options for many people in Melbourne to attend this form mass public entertainment.

The nature of spectatorship as a result has changed markedly in response to these new developments. As the AFL continues to expand into private space through television, there are fewer opportunities for people to actually attend mass sporting events. There are fewer elite class games played in Melbourne each week, which has lead to greater attendances since then but, when combined with the media popularity of the sport, is also leading to a greater popularity of the game at this level. The result is a number of recent instances where crowd disorder has been marked by the issue of exclusion.
In 1993 there have been two instances where crowds have been locked out of grounds. The first was between two local teams in the Grand Final of the pre season competition. The other occurred during the Easter long weekend period where only three games were scheduled for the Melbourne Metropolitan area on the Easter Monday. This follows a further incident at the 1992 grand final where a number of MCG members had their access to the ground delayed. It is estimated that around 14,000 people have been affected by these trends. Although no large scale violence has occurred in these settings, scenes have been characterised by large numbers of angry fans unable to get in (The Age 13/4/1993).

The nature of control of behaviour within the ground has also experienced major changes in recent years. Private security personnel now patrol all games alongside state police. The policy implications of this form of policing in terms of economic efficiency and accountability remain to be explored. However, it appears that the role in preventing public disorder, combined with questions as to the accountability of private organisations in relation to violence in other recreational settings, will provide similar problems of as to those commonly documented elsewhere (Victorian Community Council Against Violence 1990).

In the meantime the violence which is occurring on the field is facing greater public scrutiny. Increased media coverage has led to the introduction of trial by video, the new mechanism of policing on field disorder. Now that footballers are sportsmen by profession, the game's speed has increased dramatically since the expansion of the AFL. Players are increasing in size and ability and the game is becoming more physical and quicker. Video scrutiny enables the League administration to focus on particular instances of violence after the event has occurred, in order to catch up with what the umpires have missed at the time. Most of the events which are however brought under closer scrutiny are not related to fighting as such, but aggressive body contact which technically breaks the rules, such as unduly rough play. These forms of violence are not to be condoned, but represent a stark contrast to the open brawling of the early years of the game. The constant media focus and sensationalisation of these forms of violence exacerbates the broader condemnation of such illegitimate rule breaking, but also broadens the public audience over such incidents. This may be seen to give rise to a perception that on field violence is in fact increasing. Further, as experience in the United States suggest, this mechanism may lead to an increase in on field violence due to the unworkability of ex post facto, slow motion monitoring.

**Discussion and Interim Themes**

The material indicates that since the initial development of Australian Rules Football there have been several changes in the patterns of violence among both spectators and participants. In general, the links between the two appear to have been eroded as the game has become more professionalised and distanced from previous supporter bases in the suburbs of Melbourne. Controls on spectator disorder are greater, and the conduct of those who are disorderly is subject to greater scrutiny by official agents who are there specifically to prevent the occurrence of violence among spectators.

The nature of violence on the field has altered corresponding to the development of the game as a popular leisure activity in the private sphere since World War II. Television spectatorship is more prevalent and violent breaches of the rules face greater public exposure and scrutiny due to their wider and more graphic dissemination through the media. Fist fighting and open brawling characteristic of the early years of the game have been replaced by more "technical" forms of violence which are seen to require closer monitoring. This does not necessarily mean that there is less violence today than previously. It does however mean that the form of this violence has altered.

The nature of the game's development means that the opportunities for spectators to commit mass acts of violence associated with on field activity are considerably reduced. Players are now
distanced from the spectating public and professional concerns take greater precedence over maintaining community ties. This change of identity, combined with the family atmosphere fostered at most venues means that the opportunities for mass violence associated with the sport which occurred in initial years of the game are less likely to occur. This is consistent with assertions in other codes of sport in ancient Rome (Guttmann 1983, p. 14) and 19th Century England (Vamplew 1983, p. 22) that low levels of violence are associated with sport when money is a central feature of the game.

The developments in recent years suggest that the legacy of reduced violence among sporting crowds is that violence is likely to be redirected among classes of spectators who are unable to enter the venues. Entry may be impeded in a number of ways which include increased attendance costs, difficulties in obtaining transportation to venues or, as recent experience indicated, tardiness. However, more importantly, the increased and altered nature of controls within these venues and in other forms of leisure activity in the community have implications relating to patterns of violence in society at large.

The "privatisation" of many forms of community recreation means that through exclusion, those less likely to exhibit behavioural traits and appearance which reflects desired norms modern spectatorship deems appropriate are likely to be marginalised from these areas of legitimate public space. As fewer people have access to the game, more intrusive forms of policing will be required to "select" who will and who will not be able to attend these venues. This presents problems for public order control in itself. However the prevailing cultural mentality in relation to leisure activity given recent developments is to pursue recreational pleasures in private space, particularly the home (White et al. 1992). For those subject to violence in the home already, or who are forced to pursue recreation in public space for other reasons, increased control of violence by state agencies is likely to contribute to the overall levels of violence among these excluded, marginalised, and disadvantaged classes. This is despite a historical trend which deems these venues to be legally (Kelly 1987) and culturally public terrain.

Two preliminary hypotheses may be drawn from this examination:

1) The exclusion of spectators as a legacy of privatising the sporting venue is likely to redirect many legitimate forms of social aggression which can lead to violence into other areas which are more private in nature, such as the home, or into public areas where aggressive expression is not tolerated. The control of the people whose access is denied to attend major sporting events is thus likely to have significant implications for policing public space unless similar avenues of leisure are devised to replace sporting events as areas of legitimate public recreational activity.

2) The change in nature of on field violence and the development of more detailed scrutiny and policing of such activity is likely to lead to an increased prevalence of such violence due to unworkable rules and frustration among players for retrospective detection and punishment. The increase in media involvement in regulating and disseminating violent acts on sporting fields has implications for the social perception of the sport which requires further theoretical and empirical assessment.
Conclusion

The material suggest that the nature of violence in and associated with Australian Rules Football may not be increasing or decreasing as such. However the nature of disorder and violence associated with the sport is altering for both spectators and participants. In concluding, there are two trends which cross cultural experience in the United Kingdom and the United States suggests may influence the question of violence in sport.

In the United Kingdom, Soccer, a sport which exhibits low levels of on field violence, is the dominant local code. It is characterised by high levels of community spectatorship which have been maintained despite increasing degrees of professionalisation within the sport. However a wide range of social problems in Britain have led to soccer venues becoming a common site for violent collective disorder. Warfare between opposing spectators and police is a legacy of the social conflict which pervades British society, and in particular hegemonic, male, working class society. Yet overall rates of reported violent crime remain low by international standards.

In the United States evidence suggests that there are connections between class and masculinity expressed in the sporting arena. However the frequency of large scale collective disorder at sporting venues is comparatively low by international standards. In contrast, rates of violent street crime and homicide are the highest per capita in the Western world. Such levels are a legacy of class and racial marginalisation from the broader community, where recreational options for these marginalised groups are associated with drug use and other social ills which remain hidden from the rest of society.

It may be that the issues for future policy in reducing violence in Australian society are which path are we to take, and what role is the development of professional sport going to have in relation to the reduction and social intolerance of violence in the community at large.
References

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