

Football Culture in an Australian School Setting: The Construction of Masculine Identity

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ABSTRACT *This paper argues that teenage males draw variously on signifying contexts in football to construct their understandings of who they 'are'. As such, football is a widely revered human activity that is strongly implicated in the construction of masculine identity. By examining how football has evolved as a site of controlled masculinity, and how involvement in football is imbued with a dominant set of meanings about what constitutes a 'normal' male, this article will indicate how identity formation for young males is a precarious process. Furthermore, by drawing predominantly on the research of Burgess [(1992) *TGs, dags and normals: the construction of masculinity in a ruling-class school* (unpublished honours thesis, Griffith University, Brisbane); (1998) *Struggle and performance: the construction and identity for teenage males* (unpublished PhD thesis, Griffith University, Gold Coast)], in an Australian school setting, it will illustrate that for teenage males there is a seductive resonance in the narrative that violence and toughness in football is indicative of a natural predisposition in 'real' males. Contrary to popular belief though, performances of toughness and violence in sport are not evidence of a preexisting masculine condition but are the constituents of a reiterative process that equates sporting prowess with a particular typology of self. Consequently, involvement in sport is not a guarantee of an oppressive presentation of self, but sport's signifying logic makes such a presentation of self a realisable and accessible option.*

Introduction

Sport (as distinct from play) is not something that has evolved as a natural part of human life (McKay, 1991); rather, it is a social institution which reflects dominant social values and power relations (Messner, 1992b). Modern sport has been shown to have originated from deliberate attempts by ruling-class hegemonies in late-19th-century and early-20th-century Britain and America to control the character development of school-aged males (Kimmel, 1990; McKay, 1991; Messner, 1992b). One catalyst for these attempts was a 'crisis of masculinity' (Messner, 1992b), which was experienced amongst White, ruling-class males as changes to work conditions and social structures brought fears that society was becoming 'feminised'. No longer, for example, were large numbers of men distinguished as property owners, but were positioned as employees with no surety of income. Additionally, with fathers being away from the home during working hours, the task of raising sons had become the responsibility of women, who were becoming increasingly militant regarding their position in society. If boys were to 'one day administer the Empire' (Messner, 1992b, p. 10), it was theorised that they would need training and discipline in how to be a man, otherwise the emerging social fabric would render them effeminate.

Some of the games of the Middle Ages were thus reconstituted and new ones devised so that sport (or controlled masculinity) could be taught to schoolboys in an organised and systematic manner. These sports incorporated displays of strength, power and/or endurance, and usually involved physical violence between the participants, thereby reinforcing notions of male physical prowess. Not surprisingly, organisations such as the Boy Scouts, which too sought to discipline and mould boys, were set up during this period (Messner, 1992b), and contact sports such as soccer, rugby and boxing became widely used in military training (Coakley, 1994).

Hence, headmasters in privileged schools in Britain instigated sport not for the mere pleasure of physical exercise, but for the inculcation of ideological values. Through sport, unruly males were taught social control and deference to authority. Through sport nationalism and social class status were reinforced. Most significantly, through sport hegemonic definitions of what constituted an acceptable male were created. As these definitions filtered through British society, it became widely accepted that sport was a male institution. Since sport was devised to produce a particular kind of masculinity and to demonstrate the superiority of males over females, and because it was inherently violent, tough and strenuous, only boys and men were encouraged to participate. By necessity, the prevailing logic dictated, women were excluded.

In Britain and across the Atlantic, sport became heralded as character building, as instilling moral virtues into boys and turning them into men (Kimmel, 1990). Parents were counselled in advice, books suggested that sport was integral to a boy's appropriate development (Kimmel, 1990), and dire warnings became commonplace that without sport boys would become 'womanlike, delicate and degenerate' (Crosset, 1990, p. 53). Social sanctions against non-sporting boys emerged as well,—those boys who were considered weak or 'bookish' were commonly referred to as 'saps' or 'wankers' (Crosset, 1990, p. 53).

As modern sport ingrained itself in Australia via convicts and free settlers these values embedded themselves in Australian society (Vamplew, 1994a). Furthermore, Vamplew argued that although these immigrants came from a variety of countries and classes, it was the colonial English who possessed the most social power, and it was consequently English sporting activities which became predominant, as the wealthy and educated classes attempted to replicate the social life and social structures of England. As with the emergence of sport in Britain and the United States, sport in Australia was set up to maintain and control not only class, race and ethnic divisions, but to nurture the development of hegemonic definitions of 'manliness' in boys and men. The concept of 'muscular Christianity' was invoked to support the development of sports that were regarded as tough and character building for young men. Australian Rules football, for instance, was seen not 'simply as a form of recreation ... but as a training ground in character and morality' (Blainey, 1990, p. 58).

Sport as a Masculine Enterprise

Sport is now indelibly connected to 'hegemonic masculinity'. As Connell (1990) defined it, hegemonic masculinity is 'the culturally idealised form of masculine character' which emphasises 'the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness' as well as 'the subordination of women' and 'the marginalisation of gay men' (pp. 83–94). Connell (1990) argued that such an idealised form of masculinity becomes hegemonic when it is widely accepted in a culture and when that acceptance reinforces the dominant gender ideology of the culture.

Recognising the connection between sport and this hegemonic form of masculinity, Whitson (1990) observed that sport has become 'one of the central sites in the social production of masculinity' (p. 19). That is, sport is now one of the primary mechanisms through which boys and men are made aware of and engage with dominant conceptions of what it means to be male (Messner, 1992b). To this end, Leonard (1993) claimed that sport acts 'as a masculine rite of passage' (p. 253). Moreover, Hickey and Fitzclarence (1999) suggested that '... through their involvement in a sporting unit or team, it is expected that young males will learn how to practice and embrace dominant cultural understandings of masculinity' (p. 52). Significantly, the continuation of this ritualised cultural perception entails the maintaining of sport as a male enterprise—a policy that has been increasingly challenged over the years, yet still prevails within hegemonic ideology.

The history of exclusion of women from sport has now been well documented (Blue, 1987; Dyer, 1982). It is a history that indicates improving parity for females, but improvements that have generally been accommodated within the existing patriarchal framework. Wholesale changes involving the restructuring and redefining of sport along gender lines have not been so forthcoming.

This categorising agenda, which begins for males from an early age, has profound implications for boys and teenage males, who are endeavouring to construct an understanding of themselves in relation to powerful narratives about what constitutes a legitimate status. When Zane Grey once stated, 'All boys love baseball. If they don't they're not real boys' (quoted in Kimmel, 1990, p. 55), he was typifying public conceptions of sport in Western societies.

According to Messner (1992a), 'all boys are to a greater or lesser extent, judged according to their ability, or lack of ability in competitive sports' (p. 163). This is a problematic situation for those boys who do not possess the interest or ability to take up a position beside their more adept peers, particularly in sports requiring physically aggressive behaviour (Coakley, 1994). It is very common for these boys to be treated as abnormal, to be branded 'girls', 'sissies', 'sheilas', 'poofters', 'fags', 'gays', and 'queers' (Coakley, 1994; McKay, 1991; Messner, 1992b), especially by those males who are securely located in the sporting realm. Such social stigmatising is not only demeaning to the boys under attack, but also reinforces notions of females and homosexuals as inferior to heterosexual men.

What it also does is deflect attention away from the homosocial intimacy which is experienced by sporting males who shower, dress and play together (Messner, 1992b) and increasingly engage in 'bonding' behaviour as they get older. Hence, displays of anti-female and anti-homosexual sentiment become a necessary means of offsetting the inherent contradiction of sport as both a traditional domain of male-inclusiveness and a determiner of heterosexuality.

As White and Vagi (1990) pointed out in their analysis of rugby union teams, performances of male striptease enacted either solo or *en masse* have traditionally been accompanied by the ritualised singing of songs denouncing women and homosexuals. Furthermore, Hickey and Fitzclarence (1997) suggested that such behaviour is fundamental to participation in contact sports such as Australian Rules football. In recognition of such incidents and other inconsistencies in approaches to sexuality within sport, Clark (1993) described sport as 'one of the most homophobic institutions in our society' (p. 25), while Messner (1992b) noted: 'The extent of homophobia in the sportsworld is staggering' (p. 34).

Not surprisingly, along with the pathologising of women, homosexuals and those males who do not show aptitude or interest in sport, it has traditionally acted as an arena for the lionisation of other males who do display competence and athletic prowess (Coakley, 1994). These are the athletes who compete in sports involving displays of strength, power, force, skill, and aggression. In those sports where such qualities are less predominant and so-called 'feminine' aspects like grace and style are featured, competence in sport is not nearly so widely or enthusiastically celebrated. As Coakley (1994) noted: '... strong and aggressive men are lionised and made into heroes in sports, whereas nonaggressive men are marginalised and emasculated' (p. 232). In fact, male dancers, figure skaters, and so on are frequently the subject of ridicule and abuse rather than acclaim (McKay, 1991). Traditionally, it has not been 'aesthetic' sports but those sports hegemonically viewed as legitimate tests of manhood which have been the catalyst for idolisation, proving Connell's (1990) point about hegemonic masculinity, that 'to be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated as heroes' (p. 94). In Australia, such sports include rugby league, rugby union and Australian Rules football, while soccer players are generally regarded as soft.

So highly regarded are these sports within mainstream culture that praise of competitors can easily slide into genuflection. Gibson (1994a) for example, enthused about two teams of rugby league players: 'Just when you think it can't get any better, just when you think these amazing athletes can't possibly pull out anything more, out they come and thrill you with performances that are almost superhuman' (p. 10).

Similarly, in a report on a rugby league match entitled, 'A memorable clash of titans', Chesterton (1995) referred to the game as 'an indomitable display of courage under pressure' (p. 37). In the same vein, a four-page liftout in *The Australian newspaper* previewing the rugby league grand final was headed, 'A day for heroes' (Crowley, 1994).

There is evidence that right from the formative years of organised sport in Australia, competitors who displayed toughness and grit were publicly celebrated. For example, an account in Whimpress (1994) of a nineteenth-century Australian Rules football game stated: 'As the play went on, and men had heavy falls and rose limping or bleeding, the applause was immense' (p. 22).

Such a celebration of manhood was withheld if competitors failed to vanquish their opponents. Furthermore, men who did not perform up to expectations were often denigrated. In the early days of rugby union in Australia, it was customary for spectators to vent their anger and derision upon defeated players. As Heads (1992) put it: 'Losers would withdraw in haste to their bus, often in a hail of blue metal from the hometown fans' (p. 15).

Schooling the Bo(d)y

In practice, for those males who do participate, sport provides a 'proving ground' (Young *et al.*, 1994) for masculinity, an arena where the laicising out of masculine virility and power (Birke & Vines, 1987) enables participants to authenticate their masculine status. This is of particular significance for younger males who may not as yet possess other means of demonstrating masculine authority, such as through wage-earning, heterosexual relationships or fatherhood. For them, 'the development of body appearance and body language that are suggestive of force and skill [may be] experienced as an urgent task' (Whitson, 1990, p. 23). This is the case '... where images of physical strength and toughness are seen as imperative if they are to have an acceptable body image in terms of mainstream masculinity' (Prain, 1998, p. 55).

Sport, with its associated images of players ‘whipping’, ‘killing’ and ‘annihilating’ each other (Coakley, 1994), provides a ready context where this replication of strength and violence can occur. Since not all boys or young men engage equally with this metaphoric minefield, sport thus acts as a context for the promotion of hierarchical definitions of the self (Andrews, 1993; McKay, 1991). The extent to which boys embrace or reject hegemonic constructions of sport is indicative of a sifting process that has characterised most boys’ involvement with sport right from when it was first introduced to them at school.

S(p)orting the Men from the Boys

The experience of young males in sport then needs to be seen as a gendering process whereby dominant cultural definitions are learned of what it means to male (Messner, 1992b). For boys and young men, sport performs a constitutive function, serving to construct and prioritise a range of masculine selves. Boys soon become cognisant with the dominant logic of sport that naturalises performances of toughness and aggression as indicative of genuine masculinity. Whilst there have always been challenges to the misogynous and homophobic framing of sport (see McKay, 1991; Messner, 1992b; Tuma, 1994), these have so far failed to deconstruct dominant forms of knowledge linking sport to masculinity. As boys get older, they are increasingly coerced into understanding displays of toughness and aggression as normative. Thus, although the experience for most young men is not one of ongoing physical assault, their immersion within the masculinist arena of sport exposes them to institutionalised performances of toughness and violence (either manifested or implied) and to an understanding of how males are supposed to present themselves in relation to that violence lest they be branded as illegitimate.

During research conducted at a private boys school in Australia, Burgess (1992) discovered the enormous significance of what sport can assume in the process of identity-construction for young males. The school chosen for the research was initially selected for a study about educational assessment due to the proud academic record it boasted, which included the nurturing of 13 Rhodes Scholars. However, the focus of the research shifted dramatically when it was found that the high academic achievers were not the most revered students within the school culture and that for many students, everyday efforts to be seen as ‘normal’ were far more pressing than issues of assessment. In this school, sporting prowess not scholastic achievement emerged as the primary point of reverence, with by far the most adoration being aimed at those football players who had been selected for the school’s premier rugby union team, the First Fifteen.

As Burgess (1992) noted, official school recognition of the importance of football was highlighted in the school magazine, which devoted no less than 26 pages to rugby, commencing with a three-page spread on the First Fifteen. Included in this spread were photographs, tables listing the team’s results from the year’s matches, and a profile of each of the players. These player profiles contained the following statements:

- ‘A tough, inspiring front rower who was unmatched throughout the season.’
- ‘His heroic charges at the opposition won him great admiration. His gutsy runs and “bone-breaking” defence ...’
- ‘Big and strong and a fierce competitor. He was prepared to sacrifice his body for the team and would never give in.’
- ‘His powerful running and bone crunching defence ...’

- ‘He played bravely and will be remembered for time and time again dragging himself to his feet to yet again become involved in the play.’
- ‘A strong runner and punishing defender’ (Burgess, 1992, p. 86).

In line with this climate of reverence students outside the First Fifteen referred to the players in the top rugby team as ‘tough’ and ‘big’ and more pointedly, as ‘gods’. Similar descriptions are evident in the more recent work of Light and Kirk (2000) in their analysis of high school rugby and its role in the reproduction of masculine hegemony. Consequently, just as adult sporting heroes like former Australian cricket captain Allan Border are lionised in public life, these players were apparently regarded by many in the school (including teachers) as having reached the pinnacle of manhood due to the aggression, courage and strength they showed in violent sporting confrontations. Rather than acknowledging that the efforts of these students represented a particular form of achievement in just one aspect of school life, the students were glorified and constituted as fully-fledged individuals on the basis of their identity as members of the First Fifteen. Alternative readings of their performances, such as concerns for the risks they were taking with their health, were either ignored or reframed as masculinising experiences (see Nixon, 1993; Young, 1993; Young *et al.*, 1994). The association between aggressive performance in sport and confirmation of masculinity was thus clearly in evidence.

Yet, despite the accolades and glorification they received, the members of the First Fifteen did not have an unproblematic path to self-realisation. For them sport was a double-edged sword. It accorded them status and credibility, but it welded them as ‘tough uncompromising footballers’ to narratives that linked masculinity with displays of violence and aggression which were at odds with other expectations about self-presentation circulating within the school. Consequently, the signifying power of those narratives, whilst overwhelming, also had the potential to be unfulfilling. As such, these students, whose sense of self stemmed chiefly from their strong emotional attachment to football, were accorded identities that were both sharply defined and precarious.

A striking example of this was provided by one of the students who was dropped from the First Fifteen by his coach after a supposedly lacklustre performance. According to the student, when he was told of his demotion from the team he became so angry he went on a small rampage through the school pushing other students around, smashing furniture and eventually dangling a younger student out of a third-floor window threatening to drop him on to the bitumen below. Reflecting later on what had happened, the student stated:

I’d turned into almost an animal. I mean, I had growled, pushed, shoved ... to really try and show that I had just become something that didn’t have any brains. I was just walking around full of hatred for the fact that I’d been dropped. Eventually I realised that I looked back on it that night and I went, ‘Gee, what have I done?’ ... I, seriously at the moment, I’m scared I’m going to fall apart. (Burgess, 1992, p. 92)

This poignant final comment indicated that the student was struggling with a psychic conflict (Walkerdine, 1989), brought on by trying to reconcile one lot of discursive understandings about reasonable social conduct with his positioning in the school as a tough aggressive footballer. It also indicated that his reliance on sport as the primary marker of his identity was fraught with instability. Like athletes whose retirement precipitates a loss of identity (see Messner, 1992b), this student found his sense of self compromised as soon as his position in the First Fifteen was taken away. Although the student was finally able to question the appropriateness of his actions he was not readily

able to separate himself from the emotional investment he had placed in his identification as a revered football player. Three days after his rampage through the school, and his immersion in what he described as a 'grieving process', he was still visibly distressed, lamenting: 'Just the realisation that I wasn't there and I should be there, hurts, hurts, hurts' (quoted in Burgess, 1992, p. 87).

The emotional intensity of this disclosure mirrored the data of Curry (1991), who had interviewed male athletes involved in contact sports featured in a prominent American collegiate sports program. One of Curry's respondents recalled his emotional turmoil before a high school competition in the following way: 'I was so overcome that I lost control a week before the tournament. I was kicking and screaming and crying on the sofa ... since then I have never been the same' (p. 124).

In the case of the student dropped from the First Fifteen, his emotional attachment to football was all consuming. He spoke passionately about the sport. He had bulked himself up through weight training to the point where his physical presence matched the imposing stature of a player who thrived on physical contact. He had developed a range of mannerisms, movements and ways of speaking that were suggestive of toughness and machismo. His whole physicality seemed geared to making it clear to others that he had unambiguously attained manhood. Interestingly, he admitted that part of this tough presentation of self involved deliberate performance. He saw the remainder though as emanating from somewhere deep inside of him.

What he didn't realise was that the aspects of his self-presentation which he did unconsciously enact did not simply represent the expression of innate traits. For this student, as for many other young men, the powerful discursive knowledge associating sport with masculinity had seduced him into presenting a corporeal reality of 'the-real-man-as-sports-hero' through ongoing performances of toughness that he mistook as natural. Without the critical knowledge to see his construction of self within the school as a discursive one which he could challenge (Davies, 1989), the student experienced his emotional attachment to football as profound and self-forming. Not surprisingly then, when faced with the crisis of being dropped from the team, he could not easily detach himself from the constitutive aspects that went with 'being' a football player. He appropriated the fantasy of football players as men and men as wild primeval beings and lived it out. Although he could later adopt a different position, looking back less angrily at what had happened and expressing remorse for his violent behaviour, he was unable to acknowledge that the extreme performance which so unsettled him was indicative of the everyday displays of masculinity in which he was constantly engaged.

In other words, as an aspect of the repetitive practices which accorded the student a sense of identity and made him knowable to himself and those around him, the violent rampage did not constitute a transformation of the student into 'an animal', as he imagined, but a more extravagant version of the masculinising performances which he already enacted daily. In doing so, he colluded with hegemonic constructions of masculinity, thereby adding to the force of social sanctions against other individuals who were designated as 'male' but did not present themselves in comparably tough ways. Thus, in spite of the student's anguish over his violent behaviour, his actions helped to consolidate the myth that violence in sporting males (whether suggested or overtly expressed) is indicative of 'true' masculinity. The oppressive consequences of the student's location in those conventional narratives was ultimately never addressed and his sense of chagrin over the rampage incident was never fully resolved. Although post-rampage reflections proved unsettling for him in terms of one set of expectations about acceptable social behaviour, his display of 'animalism' had been

symptomatic of the types of performances for which he was lionised as a member of the First Fifteen, and which had served to establish his 'masculine' credentials.

His glorification as a footballer and his attachment to narratives constituting real men as animals were neither unique to his school or situation. There is evidence from autobiographical writings that tough and aggressive behaviour of high school and college students has not only been an expectation of sports performance but has been demanded by some coaches as proof of credibility (see Davies, 1989). By coupling force and aggression with the gauging of masculine and competitive worth a seductive chord has been struck with young men involved in sport, drawing them into reiterative displays of violence and toughness. For example, reflecting on his football career at high school and college, Sabo (1992) revealed:

I learned to be an animal. Coaches took notice of animals. Animals made first team. Being an animal meant being fanatically aggressive and ruthlessly competitive. If I saw an arm in front of me, I trampled it. Whenever blood was spilled I nodded approval. (p. 160)

A similar recollection was provided by another former high school footballer:

When people told me that I wasn't an animal and didn't have the killer instinct it really hurt. So I faked it as best I could and it usually worked. I growled and swore and did all those manly things, but my heart wasn't there, because I kept thinking, knowing, that I was acting! But when my father played football I knew he wasn't acting—he was a killer, an animal, a man. And I wasn't. (quoted in Messner, 1992b, p. 667; emphasis in original)

Statements like these are a telling indication of the enormous emotional investment which male youths may place in the conflation of performances of toughness and aggression in sport with a legitimate presentation of self. The distinction made by the latter speaker between contrived performance and preexisting ontology is indicative of the way in which the violence/sport couplet is naturalised so that those instances of performance which are not deliberate are not perceived as performances at all. The young man's assertion that his father was simultaneously a killer, an animal and a man only conjoined those possibilities in a symbiotic relationship.

Viaggro

In order to legitimise this oppressive hierarchy, toughness and aggression in football are often portrayed as naturally occurring (McKay, 1991). One way in which this has been realised, as Lyman (1992) disturbingly observed, has been through the tendency of dominant groups to pass off aggression as non-violent if it is seen as rule-governed. Specific confirmation of this position was provided, for example, in the following statement from Leonard (1993):

Would you recognise (let alone enjoy) boxing without punching; football without tackling; full-contact karate without kicking? Modern sport is not a free-for-all mayhem. Instead, it is the controlled, rule-bound, limited violence called 'aggro.' (p. 158)

Vindications like this of violence in sport typify the view that sport is a natural human activity that reflects innate human traits and qualities. Instead of examining the ways that sport constitutes aggressive participants as particularly masculine individuals (whilst simultaneously positioning less-aggressive participants or non-participants as inferior),

this view of sport allows for shows of violence by sporting males to become normalised and naturalised, so that responsibility is deferred and the consequences of violence are ignored or even celebrated. In line with this view one footballer told Young (1993): 'I don't mind that I'm going to break blood vessels in my forehead when I hit somebody ... I enjoy hearing guys wheeze and seeing the snot run down their faces. I like the rush of numbness that goes through my body' (p. 381).

When young males like this one are applauded for tackling their opponents with venom, for 'doing their job', their construction of self as public heroes, as tough and legitimate males is reaffirmed. Through the reiterative performance of violence and toughness these individuals are continually constituting their identity in a manner that has oppressive implications.

Significantly, these implications go well beyond the realm of high school or college football. Not surprisingly, the replication of toughness and aggression so endemic to traditional sporting contexts, and the homophobic and misogynous agenda that drives that violence, have been taken by footballers and other sporting males to contexts outside the sporting arena. For example, heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson is reported to have stated: 'I like to hurt women. I like to hear them scream with pain, to see them bleed. It gives me pleasure' (quoted in Sheridan, 1995, p. 113). Similarly, when police responded to an emergency call from O.J. Simpson's former wife and found her so badly beaten she had to be hospitalised, Simpson's response was one of unconcern: 'You're going to arrest me for this?' he bellowed indignantly. 'This is a family matter. Why do you want to make a big deal of it? We can handle it' (quoted in Miller, 1994, p. 15). Accordingly, Simpson's behaviour could be seen as an indirect consequence of football culture, a culture that justifies and normalises aggressive antisocial behaviour (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 1998).

Though the possibility is always there for these men to take up alternative positions, to question and even condemn such attitudes, their location within violent sporting realms, and their construction as revered figures of manhood due to their repetitive involvement in those realms, make it highly unlikely that they will do so. Their failure to make distinctions between the sports field and other contexts is reflective not so much of their own pathology, but of the way in which legitimised violence on the sports field is socially sanctioned as a determinant of masculine identity. When social commentators lay the blame for unsanctioned performances of violence solely on the perpetrators, as Gibson (1994b) did when bemoaning the high incidence of assault and domestic violence by prominent Australian rugby league players, the structural and constitutive role of violence in sport is ignored.

Football and All That

The importance of sport in the formation of masculine identity cannot be overlooked. Through sport, the corporeal realities of particular constructions of the masculine self are made available (as are other constructions pertaining to females, race, class and nationality). Definitions of 'tough guys' and 'real men' and 'pansies' are articulated and performatively enacted, along with narratives about what is 'normal' and 'legitimate' or 'effeminate' and 'illegitimate'. Through its largely unquestioned promotion in schools, its ubiquitous coverage in the media and its prevalent insertion in mainstream Western cultures, sport infiltrates the daily lives of boys and young men in insidious and powerful ways. Despite the insistence of conventional beliefs that sport is a neutral human activity in which the natural strength and aggression of males is afforded an appropriate outlet,

sport constitutes a signifying context where individual subjectivities are constructed and made knowable and where the oppression of those individuals who do not fit with dominant models of gender is accorded validation. Sport, as it is hegemonically framed and conducted, is a political process that involves inequitable power relations and the production and reproduction of meanings about individuals. In many ways sport has become:

... a site appropriate for defining a set of core characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity, namely physical strength and toughness, emotional neutrality, assertiveness, control and entitlement and entitlement, individuality, competitiveness and rationality. (Fitzclarence *et al.*, 1998, p. 2)

Such is the defining power of sport, that those boys or young men who avoid sport or refrain from involvement in it are not exempted from its constituting force, but are on the contrary constituted as particular selves by that non-involvement. This became apparent in another study undertaken by Burgess (1998) in which teenage males spoke about themselves and the formative aspects of identity that they considered most prominent. When asked how he would describe himself to an unknown pen pal, one youth replied:

Urn, well I'd tell them I'm not into, into all the, football and all that stuff. And that I'm in, I'd tell her, I wouldn't, I wouldn't lie about what I'm into, I wouldn't say, I wouldn't worry about if they're gonna think, 'Oh, no, he doesn't sound that, doesn't sound that manly', or anything. I'd just tell them what I'm into and if they don't well ... [nervous laughter]. (quoted in Burgess, 1998, p. 263)

When asked what he meant by 'football and all that', the youth responded:

... Urn ... oh, fishing, and going out and camping with the guys and, ah ... urn, just into ... like going out with the boys and going, instead of going to see like a, instead of going to an art gallery or a, to the movies or something, you could go out and have a, maybe have a, game of football or a, urn ... yeah, just some, it's all, I don't know why, it's all, I just keep mentioning sport but, I think that's the main sort of thing. I don't know why. Just the people, at our school always think that, sport is one of the main things that boys should do. [nervous laughter]. (quoted in Burgess, 1998, pp. 263–264)

In a prior conversation, this youth revealed that he had been teased and called a 'faggot' by the group of students he used to sit with during lunch breaks because he said he didn't want to play football with them at play times. He was forced by their harassment to move to a different part of the playground, where he sat on his own or with two girls he had befriended. Given that he had consciously dissociated himself from his male classmates, his slip into assuming that a hypothetical pen friend would be a female ('I'd tell her') was symbolic of his distancing from social contact with other males. By disengaging himself from participation in sport he was knowingly alienating himself from his peers since, as he admitted: 'sport is one of the main things that boys should do'. In fact, he intimated that he was not bothered by the implications of this, claiming that he would not be concerned if somebody wanted to know about his interests and activities ('I'd tell them I'm not into, into all the, football and all that stuff ... I wouldn't lie about what I'm into, I wouldn't say, I wouldn't worry about if they're gonna think, "Oh, no, he doesn't sound that, doesn't sound that manly"').

Yet this apparent show of confidence was short-lived. In the very next sentence, his words trailed off into uncertainty ('I'd just tell them what I'm into and if they don't well ...' [nervous laughter]). As he was well aware, his attempt to establish himself as a legitimate person was in opposition to powerful conceptions of masculinity. As much as he insisted that he would willingly acknowledge his non-involvement in sport, he was patently familiar with the role played by sport in defining who is and who is not a legitimate teenage male ('it's all, I don't know why, it's all, I just keep mentioning sport but, I think that's the main sort of thing'). This youth was thus caught in a struggle to resist the constitutive logic of popular knowledge and thereby maintain an understanding of himself as genuine and worthwhile. Unlike his football-playing peers, he did not have the legitimising context of the sports field to demonstrate his masculine credibility. His chances of being generally accepted by other teenage males and validated as 'normal' were therefore severely diminished. Despite his capacity to stand back from sport and view it with a critical gaze, this location outside mainstream ideology rendered him as an outsider, as *Other* to popular definitions of teenage masculinity. Thus, his conviction that he was a worthwhile person was unlikely to be reciprocated with anything like the intensity or ubiquity with which he was pathologised.

A further example of the defining power of sport was provided by another youth from a different state high school. This youth claimed that his peers who did not like sport were 'really wussy', excusing his own non-participation in sport with the unsolicited qualification: 'cause I'm not really big or anything'. For him, being a male meant 'hangin' around with your mates sorta thing, goin' out gettin' drunk sorta, watchin' a game on TV'. He thought that other youths in his school would consider being a male as 'doin' some sort of either sport or you know, some sort of physical activity'. When questioned why he did not suffer harassment over his non-participation in sport, he replied: 'Well I still like watchin' sport on TV' and 'Oh well, you know, I sort of hang 'round with people who play sport' (see Burgess, 1998, pp. 266–269).

Yet the same youth also condemned:

all the guys who are massively into sport ... [who] usually hang 'round, play sport out on the oval all the time, ... go 'round acting tough or trying to act tough ... sort of talkin' about sport all the time, and everything they talk about has got to do with sport. (Burgess, 1998, p. 268)

For this youth, who also noted that 'I'm not really all that different to anybody else', sport represented a powerful structuring framework which required negotiation in order to present and understand himself as a 'normal' teenage male.

The problem is that normality is not fixed. It is a socially-constructed state that has shifting borders. There is no security in locating oneself as normal, only the potential of continually being reassigned there through engagement in appropriate ongoing performances. In order to maintain a singular sense of a normal self, it becomes necessary to reposition oneself each time the borders of normality are redefined. The youth in this instance tried to locate himself between not liking sport (being 'really wussy') and being 'massively into sport' ('trying to act tough ... sort of talkin' about sport all the time'); thereby inferring that normality involved being tough but not too tough, liking sport rather than loving or disavowing it. This construction of normality accommodated the youth's usual presentation of self: not participating in sport but watching it with his friends.

However, this youth could not escape the power of dominant discourses about masculinity. Although he distanced himself from those peers who talked 'about sport all

the time', he was aware of the link between tough aggressive participation in sport and masculine credibility. Thus, instead of writing off the need for sports participation to prove that one was a normal teenage male, he augmented his own credentials of masculinity by noting that he hung 'round with people who play sport', claiming normality by association. Unlike the previous youth, whose cynicism and non-participation in sport contributed to his ostracism by his peers, this youth tried to negotiate a place for himself that allowed for his non-participation on the sports field but still saw him accepted as 'one of the boys'. He thus participated from the periphery, rationalising his own presentation of self as normal compared with that of the sporting 'beasts', but co-opting with rather than challenging the narratives that linked masculinity, toughness and sport. In the case of both youths, sport played an integral part in the formation of their identity and self worth.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this article that football is a widely revered human activity that is strongly implicated in the construction of masculine identity. For boys and men, and teenage males in particular (who are cognisant with social expectations that they should be establishing an 'authentic' masculine sense of self), there is a seductive resonance in the narrative that violence and toughness in sport is indicative of a natural predisposition in 'real' males. Contrary to popular belief though, performances of toughness and violence in sport are not evidence of a preexisting masculine condition but are the constituents of a reiterative process that equates sporting prowess with a particular typology of self.

Due to sport in Western societies being inaugurated to promote a desired type of masculinity emphasising strength, courage and power, it has become constitutive of 'true' maleness. Footballers are established as real men and made knowable as particular selves through their repetitive involvement in sporting confrontations. Even in sports where the display of violence is not so overtly manifested, participants are able to signify their masculine authenticity through performances that suggest the threat of violence. Thus, in traditionally masculinist sports which incorporate only limited opportunities for physical aggression, displays of toughness are reiterated through ways of walking, talking, moving and behaving: swearing, name-calling and spitting are combined with off-field activities which position the protagonists as undeniably male. At the same time, the authenticity of these performances of masculinity is validated by the treatment they are accorded in the media and through the collaboration of spectators and other non-participants who utilise such involvement to bolster their own masculine credentials.

By examining how sport has evolved as a site of controlled masculinity, and how involvement in sport is imbued with a dominant set of meanings about what constitutes a 'normal' male, this article has indicated how identity formation for young males is a precarious process intricately tied to public performances and personal struggles with competing forms of knowledge. As the data from Burgess (1992, 1998) have illustrated, not all males who watch or participate in traditional sports will inevitably engage in violent or aggressive behaviour (though they may inadvertently collude with oppressive practices in their own everyday performances of the self). Involvement in sport is not a guarantee of an oppressive presentation of self, but sport's signifying logic makes such a presentation of self a realisable and accessible option.

Of course, the possibility always exists for individuals to reject the signifying logic of hegemonic discourses about sport and re-present themselves in non-oppressive ways.

Indications of this are provided in the testimonies of those males who have admitted to consciously and deliberately engaging in performances of toughness and violence (both on and off the field). That these instances of oppressive behaviour are premeditated suggests that engagement in performances of violence is not innate or inevitable, and that the potential exists for tough and aggressive males to adopt alternative presentations of self. However, as the data from Burgess (1992, 1998) demonstrated, recognition of this possible disjuncture in the sport/masculinity couplet will not in itself effect emancipatory change because the framing of dominant constructions of sport and gender is so powerful, and the emotional investment which some males make with those constructions is so strong, that the supposed truth of masculinising performances is not easily overridden. When observers like Biddulph (1994, p. 173) proclaim that sport 'is one of the arenas in which we could still make boys into men', they may well have overlooked the costs and implications that such a process of men-making entails.

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Note

- [1] The connection between sport and war has been made by a number of writers (e.g. Coakley, 1994; Kimmel & Messner, 1992; McKay, 1991). During his tenure as US Attorney General, Robert Kennedy claimed: 'Except for war, there is nothing in American life—nothing—which trains a boy better for life than football' (quoted in Leonard, 1993, p. 252).

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