

**“I Love Him in an Absolutely Gay Way”: Heterodox Fragments of the Erotic Desires,
Pleasures and Masculinity of Male Sports Fans**

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Abstract

Elite male spectator sports have been problematized as sites that play a key role in moulding and regulating a gender order dominated by an aggressive hegemonic masculinity that is patterned on male sporting heroes. This paper explores instead the love, devotion and desires that some male fans feel for these male sporting heroes. Drawing on fragments from Australian and US online fan forums, together with interviews with Australian Rules Football supporters, and a film based on an American football fan, the paper examines the possibly heterodox aspects of these feelings, how they intersect with the aggressive, territorial masculinity of the sports their heroes play, and touches on the implications for social change. The love of male fans for male sporting heroes suggests that the hegemonic masculinity associated with elite male spectator sports is not as monolithic as previously thought, but the broader aggressive, heteronormative context of these sporting cultures also suggests some limits to notions of an emerging inclusive masculinity.

“I Love Him in an Absolutely Gay Way”: Heterodox Fragments of the Erotic Desires, Pleasures and Masculinity of Male Sports Fans

Linda: What were you thinking about while we were doing it?
Allan Felix: Willie Mays
Linda: You always think of baseball players when you make love?
Allan Felix: It keeps me going.
Linda: I couldn't figure out why you kept yelling “slide”.

(Allen, 1972)

Three weeks from Thursday, middle-aged men will gather in rooms with landline phones and spend hours talking about 18- to 24-year-old men. They'll discuss the physiques of the young men, as well as their other attributes, and then they'll decide who they'd ideally like to spend the next decade with. These decisions will be announced for a television audience of millions, and after each young man is selected he will parade across a stage while wearing a goofy hat. The TV viewers will then offer their opinions about the young men to anybody who will listen.

If that doesn't get you pumped up for the NBA draft later this month, then maybe my NBA Draft All-Star teams will.

(Titus, 2014)

Introduction – “I follow it with my heart, and my blood and my underpants”

When the now prominent Australian cartoonist with the “nom de web” of ‘firstdogonthemoon’ moved to Melbourne in the early 2000’s, he was “gobsmacked” by the passions Australian Rules football aroused in the city’s population (firstdogonthemoon 2006a).¹ The great fervour of Melbournians for this strange sport, and in particular their devotion to football clubs and adoration of football players, left him stunned. Soon he went along to a game and “just fucken loved it. It was so fast, looked so good, so athletic, fluid, there were all these women in the crowd” (firstdogonthemoon 2006a). Enraptured, firstdogonthemoon chose to follow his local Australian Rules football team, the Western Bulldogs, and quickly became a passionate fan.

Like most passionate fans of a sports club, *firstdogonthemoon*'s love of the club extended to certain players. In particular he became a vigorous supporter and defender of Nathan Eagleton, a somewhat controversial figure with the Western Bulldogs fanbase. Eagleton was renowned for the distance and precision of his left foot kicks, but was maligned by some supporters as "soft" because they deemed him unwilling to defend as keenly as he attacked, and unwilling to sacrifice his body for the good of the team. In other words, Eagleton was viewed by a portion of the Bulldogs fanbase as talented but lacking in the "manly" virtues of courage, self-sacrifice and discipline. *firstdogonthemoon* however, treasured Eagleton's ability to do "brilliant" things on the football field, and the visceral pleasure this provided *firstdogonthemoon*. "I feel like my head is going to explode when Nathan Eagleton has the ball" he told me, "because something amazing might be just about to happen" (*firstdogonthemoon* 2006a). In late 2006 *firstdogonthemoon* became an active voice in support of Eagleton on the Western Bulldogs page of "BigFooty" – an online forum for followers of Australian Rules football. When some Western Bulldogs supporters advocated trading Eagleton to another club, *firstdogonthemoon* responded with an impassioned defence, arguing that such a trade would be:

foolish because it would break my football heart. I dont follow this game with my head! I follow it with my heart, and my blood and my underpants. I follow it because it brings me joy and hope and a chance to pay too much for beer in a plastic cup. I dont really know why I follow it but I know I have to. That is what I know.

I also know that number 10 [Eagleton], in certain moments, creates breathtaking acts of footballing grace and purity, acts of a magnitude such that I want to weep (*firstdogonthemoon*, 2006b).²

Perhaps it was the need to try and understand something more of his powerful feelings for Nathan Eagleton – and the intense bodily pleasures that he received from watching Eagleton play – that led *firstdogonthemoon* to draw the following cartoon in 2007:

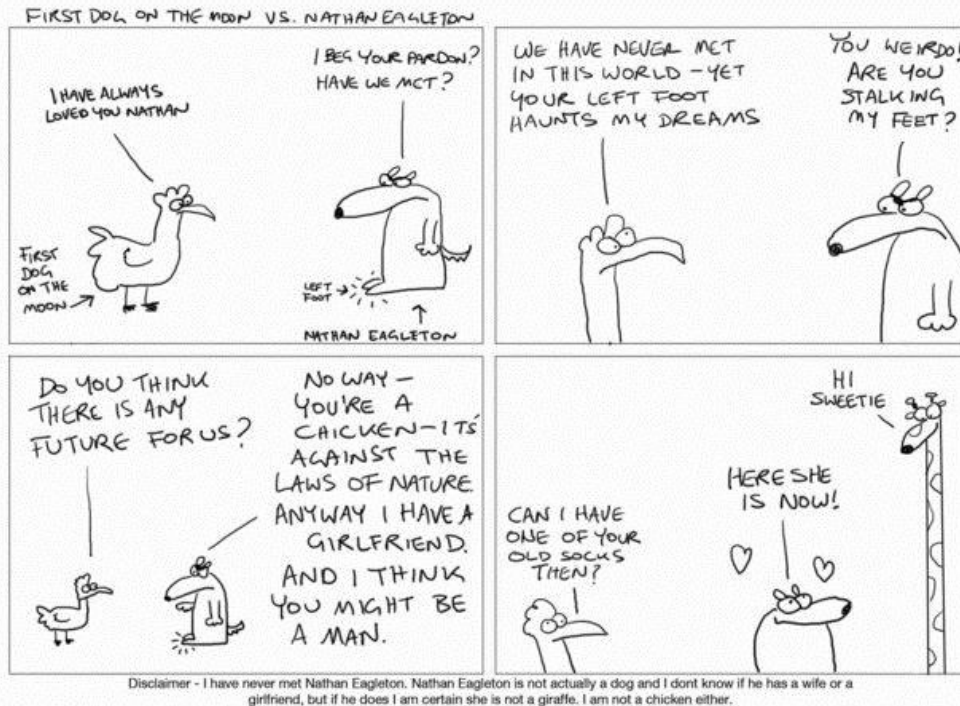


Figure 1. “firstdogonthemoon vs Nathan Eagleton” (firstdogonthemoon, 2007)

In this piece a chicken identified as firstdogonthemoon declares her (?) love for a dog identified as Nathan Eagleton. However, the dog is nonplussed by the chicken’s statement of love and veneration of his (?) left (hind) foot. The dog rejects the chicken’s advances on the basis of the laws of nature and also possibly gender, noting that “anyway I have a girlfriend and I think you might be a man”. Yet in the last panel of the piece, as the chicken plaintively asks for one of the dog’s old socks, the dog’s girlfriend turns up and we find out that she is a giraffe, not the most intuitive pairing for a dog. (Underneath the cartoon is a mock disclaimer pointing out that firstdogonthemoon has not met Eagleton, that Eagleton is not a dog, that if Eagleton has a girlfriend or wife “she is not a giraffe”, and that firstdogonthemoon is “not a chicken either”.)

It is, I think, an intriguing cartoon. Australian Rules football is one of those dominant, culturally fêted sports that many scholars have critiqued for their ongoing role in the construction, shaping and regulation of what some term “hegemonic masculinity” – an aggressive practice of masculinity which exults hyper-masculine traits such as speed,

power, aggression and extreme competitiveness (see for example Connell, 1987 and 2008; Pronger, 1992; Donaldson 1993; Hargreaves 1994; Nelson 1994; Messner 2002; and Anderson 2005). Like the Rugby codes, Association football (soccer), and American football, Australian Rules football was codified in the 1800s and became seen as a vital cultural site for the transformation of boys into men (Mangan 1987; Burgess, Edwards and Skinner 2003; and more generally Messner and Sabo 1990). The celebration of successful manly players “as heroes” is viewed as a key part of this for, to quote Raewyn Connell, the heroes perform “the pattern of masculinity” that is held up as the cultural ideal to be learned and emulated by others (Connell 1990, 94). In contrast, firstdogonthemoon’s cartoon examines his football hero (of somewhat questioned masculinity) as a figure that is not emulated but rather loved and perhaps even desired – a figure whose left foot haunts firstdogonthemoon’s dreams, who is capable of deeds that take his breath away and make him want to weep.

Although there is an emerging literature analysing sporting “stars” through the lens of “celebrity culture” (see for example Cashmore 2006; and Smart 2005), studies of the desire that sports fans might have for sports players are rare. In an illuminating, if brief, review of the scant literature on the heterosexual desire of some women for celebrated male athletes, Nikki Wedgwood suggests that this attraction “is such a taken-for-granted and commonplace phenomenon in Western society that it has received very little academic attention” (Wedgwood 2008, 311-12). Moreover, the few papers which did focus on the sexual relationships of women with elite male sports players tended to view these women as either searching for fame and money or as being subject to intense regimes of male dominance; statements by the women of love and erotic desire for athletic, macho men were left unanalysed; taken for granted as if such feelings were natural. Wedgwood concludes therefore that it is vital to study the sexual passions of these women in order to better understand “the ways in which women’s heterosexual desires affect the maintenance, reproduction, and/or subversion of the existing gender order” (Wedgwood 2008, 316).

If the sexual desire of (some) women for elite male sports players has tended to be presumed, the embodied desire and pleasures of the many men who devote themselves to watching these players has tended to be elided. That is not to say that the intersections of sexuality with elite male spectator sports have been wholly neglected. While one of the strictures of the highly charged masculine worlds of sports like the elite football codes is that discussions of sport and sex should not mix, much of the language deployed in descriptions and analyses of these sports is redolent of sex and the pursuit of sex. These games tend to centre around “scoring”, there is often talk of “holes” and “penetration”, while one of the central pleasures lies in the almost continual anticipation of the ecstasy that is hopefully to come. The sexual play here, however, is not necessarily consensual. Indeed, athletes and their supporters hope to gain pleasure while simultaneously denying pleasure to their opponents. Territorial sports in particular – such as the football codes – can therefore be read as a problematic acting out of homosexual rape. In 1978 for instance, the anthropologist Alan Dundes argued that American football acted as a homoerotic rite, but one where the homosexual acts were aggressive and often rapacious (Dundes 1978). Two decades later the sport sociologist Brian Pronger extended Dundes’ thesis to “deconstruct” modern sport more generally with his famous paper: “Outta My Endzone: Sport and the Territorial Anus” (Pronger 1999). “The emotional logic of sport” concluded Pronger, was “a celebration of patriarchal violation and homophobic resistance to penetration. As an immensely popular cultural spectacle and practice, therefore, competitive sport plays an important role in the reproduction of phallically aggressive and anally closed cultures of desire” (Pronger 1999, 373).

Pronger argued that those who followed these sports shared in the misogynistic and homophobic logic – that their gaze, in other words, was complicit in, and further still an endorsement of the phallically aggressive and anally closed cultures of desire. Although other scholars do not frame it in sexual terms, it is generally accepted that the spectacle

of the elite male spectator sports exalts “male physical superiority” for both a male and female audience (see for example Nelson 1994; Coakley 2004; and Wedgwood 2008). Yet might it be that this lionisation of certain powerful male bodies also has a homo-erotic element to it?

In 1990 Beverley Poynton touched on this issue with John Hartley in their pioneering paper analysing issues of gender and sexuality with regards to Australian Rules football (Poynton and Hartley 1990). While Poynton had followed Australian Rules football as a child and maintained an involvement with the club her sons played for, it was her work with independent films that led her to examine the visual culture of the game as it was mediated through television:

What attracted my interest were the images of male bodies. Here were barely clad, eyeable Aussie male bodies in top anatomical nick. The cameras follow their rough and tumble disport with a relentless precision, in wide-angle, close-up and slow-motion replay (Poynton and Hartley, 1990, 105).³

When Poynton replaced the sound of the commentators with music the performance could be “enjoyed as choreographed spectacle: lyrical, flagrantly masculine, and erotic” that appeared to objectify the male bodies on display. “The relation of looking and being looked at – a relation in which conventionally the feminine body is rendered as the object of specularly – is tenuously reversed”. (Poynton and Hartley 1990, 105)

Those who refer to the work of Poynton (and Hartley) tend to misread Poynton as confessing to a voyeuristic interest in football, whereas what she did was note an erotic subtext that was continually effaced by television commentators (see for example, O’Connor and Boyle, 1993; and Melnick and Wann 2011). In contrast to Poynton, the historian Margaret Lindley did half-jokingly argue in 1994 that “Australian Rules football was a game played by men, at considerable personal hazard, for the sexual pleasure of women. That was the meaning, the purpose, the essence of the game” (Lindley, 2002, 62). In the media-storm that followed, Lindley was happy to acknowledge that she

should have said “heterosexual women and gay men.” While intent on empowering female spectators, Lindley was also reinforcing clichéd assertions by some men that women were not legitimate football fans because they attended games primarily as voyeurs. Indeed, many female supporters of Australian Rules football are continually asked if they just attend football to enjoy looking at the bodies of players (Klugman 2012). The continual need to question what form of enjoyment women gain from watching men play sport deflects from the question that is generally unasked – what pleasures do straight-identifying men gain from watching other men play sport?

Much of the immense social, cultural and economic power of contemporary elite male spectator sports rests on the devotion of the many male fans who consume so many things related to the teams, players and sports that they love. My use of the term love is intentional, for love is one of the most frequent terms used by Australian Rules football supporters to describe their feelings for both their teams and many of the players for these teams (Klugman 2009). In her previously discussed review, Wedgwood suggests that scholars could fruitfully explore the love and desire that some women feel for elite male athletes by taking up Connell’s hitherto largely neglected development of Freudian notions of sexual desire, especially the concept of “cathexis” – the emotional energy or charge of erotic desire that attaches to the object of attraction (Wedgwood 2008, 312). Connell utilised psychoanalytic concepts such as cathexis in order to destabilise the frequent naturalisation of particular forms of sexual desire upon which much of the gender order (and associated privileging and hierarchies of certain forms of masculinity and femininity and attendant power relations) can be seen as depending (Connell 1995; Wedgwood 2009). The cartoon of firstdogonthemoon’s that I began this paper with also undermines commonplace assumptions concerning the nature of desire. The dog who is Nathan Eagleton reacts as if the chicken/firstdogonthemoon’s love for him is unnatural, but this accusation is undercut by the coupling of the dog with a girlfriend who is a giraffe. If the passion that firstdogonthemoon feels for Eagleton is unnatural, so is the more orthodox romantic pairing of a man and a woman. Or so the cartoon suggests. The

adoration that firstdogonthemoon feels for Eagleton – and the associated pleasures from Eagleton’s deeds on the football field, especially those involving his haunting left foot – thus becomes a means of questioning key aspects of the dominant gender order.

Might it be possible that there is a heterodox element at the heart of the hegemonic world of elite male spectator sports? Do many of the millions of men who are obsessed with watching their heroes – typically hyper-masculine men playing sports like the football codes – practice and embody an alternative form of masculinity? And if so, does this more heterodox masculinity undermine the dominant gender order, or does it leave it relatively unchanged? Or is firstdogonthemoon simply an isolated idiosyncratic example of a man who loved a particular Australian Rules footballer, and one whose masculinity was questioned by some other supporters?

It is around such questions that this paper seeks to foster a conversation and possible research agenda. My aim is not to provide an exhaustive catalogue or systematic analysis, but rather to examine some revealing fragments of love, desire and pleasure that complicate contemporary understandings of spectator sports as hegemonic spaces that regulate, shape, uphold and reinforce dominant conceptions of aggressive masculinity. These fragments are drawn from in-depth open-ended interviews with 22 passionate supporters (11 men and 11 women) of Australian Football League clubs together, as well as material posted on three public online forums – the Western Bulldogs forum of the BigFooty Internet football discussion site along with the public San Diego Chargers (American football) SB Nation forum “Bolts from the Blue” and the San Diego Padres (baseball) SBNation forum “GasLamp Ball” – and a film centered around the life of a male fan devoted to the New York Giants (American football) team.⁴ While these sources by no means provide a representative sense the fan culture associated with *all* elite male spectator sports, it is my hope that they provide a window into some of the so far neglected expressions of male love, desire and erotic pleasure, that modern spectator sports can provoke.

Heterodox Fragments?

My interest in this topic was sparked on June 17 2005 when I read the posts of a group of Australian Rules football followers engaged in a playful discussion about their favourite players on the Western Bulldogs BigFooty internet site. It began with 'Sporty Spice' declaring that "I'm in love with Daniel Cross" (Sporty Spice 2005). "Me too" noted 'Rookie' with a smiley face, with others following suit, though 'Top Dog' noted that "I love Cooney just a tad more though. That sexy mullet/rat tail flying in the wind as he dobs another one from 50 just does it for me ☺" (Rookie 2005; Top Dog 2005). 'Scooter600x', a poster who had consistently defended and praised Cross, playfully responded to Sporty Spice with the following warning: "I'll slap you, you bitch. He'd never go for a Spice Girl, he loves me. Keep away" (Scooter600x 2005). 'local yokel' then ended the discussion by with the punned instruction to "Take it outside you star-crossed lovers" (local yokel 2005).

Unlike Nathan Eagleton, the masculinity of the player these supporters were discussing – Daniel Cross – was never questioned by supporters. In contrast his courage was frequently lauded, though his skills were regularly criticized. Over time I would come to meet the posters who'd given themselves the names of Sporty Spice, Scooter600x and local yokel. All three identified as straight and saw themselves as normal, obsessed football fans. Here though, was the language of romance, of love and jealousy, being used about another man.

A year later another more erotic discussion ensued about Daniel Cross after 'always right' posted that "I have a statement. I love Daniel Cross.....but not in a gay way. Huge slap for this bloke who knows absolutely no fear" (always right 2006). While alwaysright wanted to avoid the sense that he was sexually attracted to Cross, other posters embraced the chance to respond in sexually charged terms. "I love him in an absolutely

gay way”, noted ‘Dog Town’, “his courage is non conditional and he plays at the same level every week” (Dog Town 2006a). The thread developed as follows:

‘Rocco Jones’: I’d do him. Firstly because he is Daniel Cross and secondly because you just know he would be a very considerate lover.

Dog Town: He is not like other guys.

Scooter600x: I’d jump the fence for him.
But you probably already know that [blushing face emoticon]

Rocco Jones: His smile makes me think of rainbows and butterflies on a sunny day.

(Rocco Jones 2006a; Dog Town, 2006b; Scooter600x 2006; and Rocco Jones 2006b)

Later in the thread ‘Fossie32’ posted a perplexed/distressed face, while ‘John Gent’ hoped “Charlie Sutton never reads this board”, and ‘Benno from Berwick’ responded that Teddy [Whitten] is rolling [in his grave] right about now!” (Fossie32 2006; John Gent 2006; and Benno from Berwick 2006.) The invocations of Sutton and Whitten – two legendary tough Bulldog champions who played key roles in the winning of the Dogs only premiership in 1954 and whose masculinity was also unquestioned – ended the talk of Daniel Cross’s attractiveness and the discussion returned to the previous weekend’s game.

Like Scooter600x, alwaysright, Dog Town and Rocco Jones saw themselves as straight, regular football-crazy men (I never met Fossie32, Benno from Berwick or John Gent), but while alwaysright was keen to make it clear his love for Cross was not “gay”, Dog Town, Rocco Jones, and Scooter600x enjoyed stating that their love for Cross was homoerotic. (In a similar cross-code instance a group of San Diego Padres baseball supporters on GasLamp Ball began to announce they were going “Gey for Gerut”, or just “Gey”, when a player named Jody Gerut began to perform well for the team in 2008 (GasLamp Ball Wiki 2010a)).

I followed this theme up with the interviews I was then conducting with Australian Rules football followers. When I asked the twenty-three year old ‘Charlotte’ about the

attractiveness of football players. She responded by noting that it was her straight-identifying male friends who sexualised footballers more than women do:

They see them as virile men, whereas I see them as blokes who play football, for the most part. They see them as the chosen of the species and they've got a more god-like quality for boys I think. Whenever my male friends are talking about footballers they talk in this passionate love way which they then don't qualify whereas they normally would if it wasn't a footballer – they don't need to say but not in a gay way because it is alright to talk about footballers in this way, because you can be in love with a footballer (Charlotte 2007).

But why is it ok for these straight-identifying men to “be in love with a [male] footballer”? One way to approach this question is to turn, like Connell, to the work of Sigmund Freud. Freud began his study of the feelings that members of a group hold for their hero (or a “leader”) by analysing love, and a particular love at that. More specifically, Freud used the infatuation that youth's (stereotypically) feel for the object of their affection as his starting point, suggesting that those people in a group act as if they are infatuated, at least in part, with the hero who leads the group (Freud 1921, 113ff). The online comments of Sporty Spice, Scooter600x, Dog Town, Rocco Jones and also firstdogonthemoon all evoke, or perhaps mimic, a certain breathlessness often associated not just with teenagers, but with teenage girls in particular. There is Sporty Spice's confession to being “in love”, Scooter600x's professed jealousy of a rival and embarrassment at the transparency of his devotion, the concern of firstdogonthemoon with a potential broken heart if Eagleton is traded, along with the idealisation of Daniel Cross as assuredly “a very considerate lover”, who Dog Town knows is “not like other men”, and whose smile makes Rocco Jones “think of rainbows and butterflies on a sunny day”. (Again there was a similar post on GasLamp Ball when a man calling himself ‘Hormel’ noted that the San Diego Padres player Seth “Smith makes me giggle like a schoolgirl” (Hormel 2014).)

The use of such feminised language and tropes fits with Vicky Lebeau's argument that Freud ultimately marks out groups as feminine, as demanding love from a paternal

figure who leads them onwards, hopefully to glory (Lebeau 1995). In the second Daniel Cross example, however, Dog Town marked his love as clearly homoerotic, stating that he loved Cross in “an absolutely gay way”. This statement had a particular significance for at the time Dog Town was the most respected poster on the BigFooty Western Bulldogs forum – someone whose treasured insights into tactics and the abilities of players were delivered in rough language redolent of a tough, working-class masculinity. Nevertheless the homoerotic element to the declarations of love and the subsequent playful intimations of femininity was disconcerting enough for Fossie32, John Gent and Benno from Berwick to indicate their discomfort with the heterodox masculinity on display, with the latter two effectively ending the play by invoking past heroes emblematic of hegemonic masculinity.

Freud himself argued that while the love of male group members for their (male) leader was homoerotic in nature, this love was sublimated rather than sexual, for in order for everyone to be able to love the leader they had to give up their sexual desire for him (Freud 1921, 111-5, and 137-43). The intriguing film *Big Fan* (Siegel, 2009), however, has a memorable moment where a male fan and his friend give up, for an evening at least, heterosexual desire in favour an intimate viewing of their hero. The film provides a searing portrait of Paul Aufiero, a man obsessed with the New York Giants who worships his favourite player, Quantrell Bishop, gazing up devotedly each day at the poster of Bishop that adorns his wall. When Aufiero and his friend see Bishop in a local neighbourhood, they follow him to an up-market strip club. Perhaps the most powerful scene of the film occurs at the strip club. Bishop and his friends are hanging out, watching the women dance and undress for their pleasure. In stark contrast, Aufiero and his friend sit on chairs with their backs to the half-naked women, intensely gazing instead at their hero, Quantrell Bishop who acts as the focus of their hopes, dreams and desires.

Despite the compelling scene, the homoerotic feelings that Aufiero and his friend hold for Quantrell Bishop are implied in *Big Fan* rather than explicitly articulated, and thus remain somewhat opaque. The main places that I have observed male fans expressing and articulating homoerotic love and desire for their (male) sporting heroes over the last decade has been on internet forums and, more recently, associated social media technologies. As Jakob Svensson has noted, the rich and at times contrary space of online worlds facilitates space for displays of reflexive emotion (Svensson 2014; see also the other chapters of the collection by Tova and Fisher 2014). In the years since the confessions of homoerotic desire for Daniel Cross discussed earlier, male posters on the BigFooty Western Bulldogs forum, as well as US supporters forums like GasLamp Ball and Bolts from the Blue (the site for fans of the San Diego Chargers American Football team) have become increasingly likely to frame their affection for players by using recent terms developed to denote the romantic/sexual feelings that straight-identifying men might hold for other men – in particular “man crush”, “man love” and “bromance”. Drawn from popular culture and typically used with regards to films, television and sometimes literature, these terms act to classify and situate feelings from the relatively non-sexual (and less frequently used) bromance to the more ambiguous and most common phrase of man-crush which refers to the “crush” a heterosexual man may have on a man they idolize or fawn over (for the use of these terms in scholarly analysis see Sanjek 2012; and DeAngelis 2014). There is not the space to expand on the use of these terms here, but it is notable that they adopt the language of romance and yet try to contain the romance reach by enshrining the heterosexuality of the men involved.

I have observed fewer instances of male fans verbally discussing their potentially homoerotic feelings towards the male players they love. However, in a revealing moment, the straight-identifying ‘Tony’ commented to me in an interview that “gee I love Scotty West, there’s not many men I would turn for but he is one of them. Chris Grant being another, and maybe Adam Cooney and Ryan Griffen” (Tony 2006). Tony let forth a big laugh after these comments, as he discovered that actually when it came to

Bulldog players, there were quite a few men he would turn gay for. Soon after Tony again laughed loudly about a friend who is a “bloke’s bloke (macho man)”, yet who had recently said at a game that “he was ready to jump the fence and boof (have sex with)” the Western Bulldogs star player Chris Grant after Grant performed an “amazing” deed.

This last comment of Tony’s brought to mind another set of intriguing internet posts – namely the embodied, often sexualised reactions of certain fans to the *promise* that a player might do something amazing that would bring fans intense pleasure. In November 2004, for example, Scooter600x wrote asking for “someone [to] please pass the tissues. I’ve got a mess to clean up” after reading a glowing profile of Ryan Griffen whom the Western Bulldogs had just selected with their first pick in the Australian Football League National Draft (Scooter600x 2004). Griffen was months away from even playing his first game for the Bulldogs but the intoxicating promise that he might lead his team to glory was enough for Scooter600x to suggest that he had ejaculated at the thought.

In a similar manner, in May 2011 San Diego Chargers fans alluded to bodily excitement when their team selected players they already loved in the National Football League draft. When ‘justdave’ saw that the Chargers had drafted Jordan Todman who had also played for the College team that he followed, he “very nearly pooped out of sheer excitement” (justdave 2011). ‘John Gennaro’ responded that he was “almost positive that” another male fan who followed the San Diego State Aztecs “had to rub one out [masturbate] after” the Chargers selected former Aztec Vincent Brown (John Gennaro 2011). He added that “I’d love to call you fellas nuts, but if Clayborn or Stanzi ended up on the Chargers I probably would’ve done the same”, while the fervent female fan of the Aztecs and Chargers ‘jodes0405’ reported that “I orgasmed so hard when I heard that I’m still experiencing aftershocks” (jodes0405 2011).

These fans were commenting not on the San Diego Chargers fan-site that they are also members of, Bolts from the Blue, but rather on the San Diego Padres (baseball) fan-site, GasLamp Ball. “GLB” as it tends to be known as is a more irreverent, sex-innuendo positive site than its more serious and macho American football counterpart. Indeed amongst sports fans in San Diego GasLamp Ball has become somewhat renowned for the erotic play of both male and female posters. In a common example, whenever the Padres load the bases – setting up the possibility for the next batter to score as many as four runs in one hit, but also for them to hit into a double-play that is likely to end the innings – one of the men will type in “BFOP” (Bases Full of Padres) followed by “PFOB” (Pants Full of Bone) (GasLamp Ball Wiki 2010b). Other men will follow suit, while one or more women will likely type PSW (Pants So Wet).

The fragments detailed in this section – from the gay love for Daniel Cross to the erections that some men profess to experience when the Padres load the bases – indicate that for at least some straight-identifying male fans of elite male spectator sports the players they love can be sites of erotic play both in terms of the way they express their devotion towards these players, and also in terms of the intense visceral pleasure that they players bring them (and promise to bring them). Neither forms of erotic play fit easily into the aggressive heterosexual hegemonic masculinity that spectator sports like baseball and the football codes are supposed to uphold and perpetuate. Nor do the countless other male fans of spectator sports who, while they may not engage in such erotic play, still speak of the (male) players who are their heroes in terms of love *and* are dependent on these players for considerable embodied pleasures (I discuss these pleasures in more detail in Klugman 2013; see also Oakley 2007). If these behaviours and relationships are in some ways indicative of a heterodox masculinity, does this masculinity subvert the hegemonic masculinity these sports purportedly uphold, or does it at least offer a site of potential social change around the configuring of dominant masculinities? It is to these questions that I now turn.

History and a Historical Moment

It is not a new thing to question the masculinity of male sports spectators. Indeed, when modern spectator sport culture emerged first in the Anglophone world in the mid-to-late 1800s, it was the subject of considerable alarm. In 1893 for example, James Wilson, then the Archdeacon of Manchester, gave a lecture warning against the perils of a “rage” for spectatorship that would lead to the physical and mental degeneracy of England’s youth because instead of playing sports like Association football (soccer), they were spending all their free time watching others play instead (Anon., 1893). Furthermore, instead of behaving like rational adults, the men attending these games were afflicted by passions, with terms like love, anxiety, excitement, and despair occurring in the early descriptions of sporting crowds – all emotions that were provoked simply by watching a group of men play a game. It was too much for the *Edinburgh Evening News* which complained in 1887 that the main problem with Association football was not the physical damage and injuries it led to (which the leading medical journal the *Lancet* had claimed), but that the “manly game” was being “turned into a nuisance by excessive devotion”, with the consequent “football mania” having a deleterious effect on the character of public lectures and the support of Mechanics institutes and related bodies (Anon., 1887). Criticisms of the at once seemingly emotional *and* passive men who were devoting all their spare time to football continued into the Twentieth Century with the leaders of the Scouting movement amongst others remarking damningly on the tense, “hunched shouldered, cigarette smoking football crowds” of the early 1900s (Russell 1997, 73).⁵

Thus on the one hand, modern spectator sports like the various football codes emerged in the mid-to-late 1800s and quickly became dominant cultural, social and economic institutions that celebrated a strong, typically aggressive form of masculinity that became arguably both orthodox and hegemonic. Male (and often female) spectators still frequently embody this masculinity in their anger, frustration and celebrations, along with their associated demands for hardness, violence and revulsion of ‘feminine’

expressions of softness, timidity and weakness. Yet, on the other hand, the sports fans extolling and demanding these hyper-masculine acts and ideals, are in some key ways themselves heterodox in their masculinity. They behave as if infatuated – acting emotionally, frequently describing themselves as loving their teams and players, and waiting anxiously upon the deeds of these teams and players, upon whom so much of their pleasure relies. They are happy when their team does well, sad when it does not, and cast in the role of supporting rather than taking centre stage.

One way of thinking about this intriguing Janus-like culture of spectator sports is to draw once again from Freud's generally neglected questions regarding the relationships of groups to their heroes. For along with loving of the leader, Freud also argues that group members also take pride in their heroes and often seem to identify with the heroes who lead them, whose achievements and travails can be experienced by the rest of the group as their own (Freud 1921).⁶ In other words, what happens to the leader can be felt by the rest of the group as if it happens to them – which tends to be how sports fans react, taking on their the victories and defeats of players and teams as their own. If we think of sporting clubs – and the players who represent them – as functioning like leaders who are loved and identified with, then we can see how fans might both take on, celebrate and embody the aggressive pursuit of these clubs (and players) for victory, while also passionately loving, following and supporting them (Klugman 2009). In other words, at the same time as loving their team and the heroes that represent them, fans can also feel part of the hyper-masculine pursuits, achievements and failures of their team and its players. The aggressive language of sexual conquest, unwilling submission and revulsion at the so-called feminine can be seen as aligned with the deeds of the club and its players (in similar terms to those described by Pronger), while the language of devotion is aligned with the love supporters have for their team and the players upon whom they depend for so much pleasure and suffering.

Freud's relatively ahistorical structural analysis of groups, however, does not help us understand why some fans seem to be beginning to speak of their favourite players in erotic terms. Instead there is a need to grapple with the recent historical moment that has seen the proliferation (if not normative) development and deployment of the terms like man-love, bromance and man-crush. The fragment concerning Tony's declaration of who he would turn gay for, for instance, self-consciously referenced the question "who would you turn gay for?", that the Australian comedian Rove McManus asked of every guest who appeared on his popular Australian TV talk-show, *Rove Live* (1999-2010).

It is possible to see the emergence of straight-identifying men noting the attractiveness of the players they love, and even at times their desire for these players, as confirmation of Eric Andersen's argument that we are witnessing a period of radical reduction of homophobia in and around sport as part of a move to what Anderson calls "inclusive masculinity" (see for example Anderson, 2009; 2011a; 2011b; and Anderson and McCormack 2014). Andersen argues that the masculinity of many young, middle-class men is no longer primarily policed and sustained by homophobia. The consequences of this shift are dramatic, he suggests, because homophobia essentially enforced a vertical hierarchy of masculinities with hegemonic forms at the apex, the current reduction in homophobia means that "multiple and varied masculinities can now flourish" and exist more equally along-side each other (Anderson 2009, 571).

The fragments of play that I have discussed in this paper, however, still occurred in a heteronormative context, where violent sexual metaphors are still common, and sport and sex remain a volatile and often dangerous mix (for more on heteronormativity see Herman, 2003). Alongside the erotic allusions of love and desire, I continued to come across violent and non-consensual sexual metaphors used by many men (and sometimes by women) in their anger, frustration and celebrations, along with their associated demands for hardness, violence and revulsion of 'feminine' expressions of softness, timidity and weakness. Indeed, aggressive, frequently misogynistic and

homophobic comments remain a feature of comments and shouts at sporting stadiums and on sports fansites on the internet (see for example Svensson 2010; and Kian et al 2011). Metaphors of sexual violence also recur regularly, with fans for example noting how their teams “reamed”, “raped” or “tore their opponents a new one [arsehole]” or were in turn “reamed”, “raped”, or “torn”. It remains a condemnation for men to be criticised as “playing like a girl” or being a “fag” and the preliminary results of the latest Australian research indicate that sport in Australia continues to be a significant site of homophobia (van der Riet 2014). Moreover, the 2014 Australian Football League Grand Final (comparable in some ways to the Super Bowl of the National Football League in the United States of America) was marked by the homophobic (as well as misogynistic and racist) jeers and jokes of some spectators (see Riley 2014a and 2014b).

The erotic play and more homophobic forms of masculinity can sit alongside each other in the same person. When I spoke with ‘James’ in 2008, I noted that his favourite player had grown a beard over the off-season. James responded by telling me that “the beard isn’t going to stop me from kissing him” (James 2008). Later that year when James was dreaming of the Western Bulldogs winning the premiership he joked that “If we win the premiership I’m going to go mad. I won’t go home for days. I’ll be kissing everyone, even the women!” Nevertheless, at another point James indicated that he was initially wary of a Bulldogs fan who joined the BigFooty forum, because it initially seemed the new supporter might be gay, and James frequently speaks of the Bulldogs tearing another team a new one, or of being raped by an opposing team.

There is also a sense of drag in the two occasions of feminised play over the love for Daniel Cross between Bulldogs internet posters. Following the work of Judith Butler, we can see how these performances can be read as both reinforcing gender differences and subverting them at the time (See Butler, 1990; and Alexeyeff, 2000). In role-playing femininity, the posters suggest that the appropriate love for their male heroes is feminine. However, their writings also indicate that men can act out these supposedly

female roles. The sense of subversion seems to add to the fun that these posters had – indeed the sense of the internet posters that they are being naughty seems key, as does Tony’s laughter that pointed to both his pleasure and discomfort in discussing the desirability of the players that he and his friends loved. After I was interviewed on the youth Australian radio station *Triple J* about these expressions of erotic love, the radio show host encouraged listeners to call in and give their own take on the matter. The final caller was “Chris”, who said “I think it’s just the language you use, isn’t it? It’s so extreme, it makes people go, ‘wow, that guy really likes that person if they want to boof em’, it’s just words you use... except for Gary Ablett who I would actually boof!”. Chris was in some ways down-playing the expressions of homoerotic desire as only meant to shock and intrigue, but then he undercut this with his final statement that when it came to his very favourite player, he would *actually* have sex with him.

This tension between the desire to excite or shock, and the professed desire of some straight-identifying men for sex with their male hero, brings us back to questions regarding the potential these desires create for social change. The emergence of these statements of desire, love and associated versions of crushes and bromance, together with the expressions of surprise and discomfort that these have evoked, points to the way this seemingly heterodox masculinity might challenge the hegemonic masculinity usually associated with elite male spectator sports and is perhaps indicative of a loosening of strictures regarding expressions and performances of masculinity around these sports. However, the heterodox fragments discussed in this paper also seem somewhat limited as a site for social change. Not only do they occur in a broader context in which heteronormative, homophobic and misogynistic comments are frequent and often unchallenged, the example of James shows how his professions of erotic love for a player did not seem to challenge his discomfort that another male supporter might be same-sex attracted. Furthermore there is evidence that the masculinity of male sports fans has been viewed as heterodox for a long time and yet this heterodoxy does not seem to have diminished the hegemonic force of the

aggressive masculinity celebrated and reproduced by these elite male spectator sports. Indeed from a psychoanalytic perspective the love of fans seems intertwined with their identification with the aggressive, territorial behaviour of their teams and the players who represent them. Thus it might be that the heterodox love that male fans can have for male players is actually a recuperative form of masculinity, rather than a challenging one. Nevertheless, the existence of such heterodox feelings in the sphere of the dominant reveals at the very least that the hegemonic masculinity associated with sports like the dominant football codes is not as monolithic as has been presumed, and further research into the potential this fissure creates for social change is warranted.

Conclusion

I began this paper with a cartoon entitled “firstdogonthemoon vs Nathan Eagleton”. It is a strong title, one that facilitates a reading of the cartoon as setting up a contest of masculinities. There is Nathan Eagleton who, though his masculinity was challenged by some supporters, was playing a popularly fêted macho sport at the highest level. And there is firstdogonthemoon, a cartoonist who represents himself in this instance as a chicken (and thus feminised) who has always loved Eagleton, whose dreams are haunted by Eagleton’s left foot, and who asks plaintively for an old sock when Eagleton rejects her/him in favour of his girlfriend. This way of telling the cartoon makes it seem like Eagleton – and the hegemonic masculinity that he embodies in this instance – wins the contest. Any claims for victory, however, are destabilised by the rendering of the relationship of Eagleton (a dog) to his beloved girlfriend (a giraffe) as equally absurd as the love professed by firstdogonthemoon.

Elite male spectator sports have been problematized as sites that play a key role in moulding and regulating a gender order dominated by an aggressive hegemonic masculinity that is patterned on male sporting heroes. These important analyses have tended to neglect the love, devotion and desires directed at these heroes by their many male fans, along with the way these male fans depend on their heroes for intense,

embodied pleasures. Such love and devotion for other men – who are in many ways strangers – seems heterodox, and yet these feelings may be intertwined with the way many male fans celebrate the aggressively territorial sports that their heroes play. Much work is needed to begin further fleshing out the desires of these fans and how the different masculinities intersect and potentially contradict and/or support each other. Moreover, questions of the differences between fans, sports, cultures and historical periods are vital, as are extended studies of the different forms of sexualised dialogue, shouts and whispers of sports fans, while it is also important to explore the role that humour plays in these interactions. The enticing promise of *firstdogonthemoon*'s cartoon is that even if the two (or more) masculinities are not aligned against each other – but are rather entwined – a focus on the intriguing, frequently elided devotion that straight-identifying male fans hold for male players might still help disrupt the naturalisation of hegemonic masculinity.

¹ Many of the sources discussed in this paper are drawn from sports-fan websites in which participants tend to assign themselves particular pseudonyms. I designate these names with single quotation marks in the first instance, and then without quotation marks thereafter. The other main group of sources comes from interviews I conducted with Australian Rules football supporters. Each supporter chose a single first-name as a pseudonym, and I also designate these names with single quotation marks in the first instance, and then without quotation marks thereafter.

² I have kept the original spelling for all quotes drawn from online sources.

³ Poynton and Hartley indicate that the use of first person in their text means that these sections pertain solely to Poynton.

⁴ The addresses of the three supporters forums are: <http://www.bigfooty.com/forum/forums/western-bulldogs.20/>; <http://www.gaslampball.com/>; and <http://www.boltsfromtheblue.com/>. Both BigFooty and SB Nation are online media companies that host independent fan forums upon which supporters gather to follow, discuss and debate sporting teams, competitions and sports. In other words, these fan forums are neither operated or controlled by the teams, competitions or sports that they focus on.

⁵ As Dave Russell notes, very similar attacks on “passive” consumption were directed at other emerging forms of “mass culture” including music halls, early cinema and popular literature (Russell 1997, 73).

⁶ Freud attempted – unsuccessfully in my view – to untwine the love and identification that members of a group (in his schema) hold for and with the leader. For more on this see Klugman, 2009; and Fuss, 1995.

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