

University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

2002

A game of distinction: Football, the world cup, and the Australian urbane

Jason Wilson

University of Wollongong, jasonw@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

A game of distinction: Football, the world cup, and the Australian urbane

Abstract

The title of Johnny Warren's *Shielas, Wogs and Poofers* (Warren, Harper et al. 2002) encapsulates an Australian attitude towards soccer, its players and its constituency that while certainly problematic, may also be outdated. But for a brief period in the 1970s, when a team led by Warren contested the World Cup finals, Rugby League and Australian Football ruled the ball-sports roost (Rugby Union trailed a-ways behind): the sport that most of the rest of the world knows simply as football was, in all senses, marginal. More recently, and especially in the midst of a FIFA World Cup finals held in a favourable time-zone, football is increasing its Australian presence.

Keywords

world, urbane, game, australian, football, cup, distinction

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Wilson, J. (2002). A game of distinction: Football, the world cup, and the Australian urbane. *M/C Reviews* Feature-Mediating Football's World Cup, Jun-Jul 2002, (16).

A game of distinction: football, the World Cup, and the Australian urbane.

Date: Wednesday, July 31 @ 00:00:00 EST

Topic: Feature Issue Articles

by Jason Wilson

The title of Johnny Warren's *Shielas, Wogs and Poofers* (Warren, Harper et al. 2002) encapsulates an Australian attitude towards soccer, its players and its constituency that while certainly problematic, may also be outdated. But for a brief period in the 1970s, when a team led by Warren contested the World Cup finals, Rugby League and Australian Football ruled the ball-sports roost (Rugby Union trailed a-ways behind): the sport that most of the rest of the world knows simply as football was, in all senses, marginal. More recently, and especially in the midst of a FIFA World Cup finals held in a favourable time-zone, football is increasing its Australian presence.

This change might have something to do with the same hunch that drives the small but effective SBS marketing machine to constantly refer to football with Les Murray's phrase, 'the world game'. In South America, and in much of Europe and Africa, no other sport has ever gotten a look-in. But in those countries with strong alternative sporting traditions - the U.S.A., Canada, South Africa, Australia - an interest in football has become more fashionable, and indicative of a broader cosmopolitanism. Pierre Bourdieu, in *Distinction*, discussed the preference for different sports being one marker of class, and the part this plays in turn in a larger system of cultural preferences that indicate and help to maintain class distinctions. In this way, the emerging preference for football can be linked with an emerging class-formation. In Australia at least, being a football fan can indicate membership in the class of networked, metropolitan, media- and information-rich, well-heeled, well-educated, pluralistic and mobile globalists; those whom McKenzie Wark refers to as the 'urbane'.

In the U.S.A., middle-class 'soccer moms' often use football as a vector for networking and social climbing; in South Africa, football, rather than the traditionally favoured Rugby Union, is the game of choice for the recently-emerged 'rainbow nation'; in the U.K., comedians like those of *The Fast Show* lampoon the Blairite bourgeoisie's new-found obsession with (and continuing incomprehension of) the game of the working-class tribes, and style-files like *The Face* feature footballers in fashion spreads. In Australia, the long-expected ascendancy of football never really happened - instead, the desires to participate in what is arguably the world's largest media event, to appear tuned in to global currents, to be seen to appreciate the nuances of *la joga bonito*, and most importantly of all, to *define oneself against* the outer-suburban constituencies of the local football codes, have been decisive. Games like Rugby League are seen as brutal, unattractive and embarrassingly provincial. Football's set of skills, its global reach, and even the physiognomy of its players sit much better with urbane-Australian tastes. The multicultural exoticism of soccer in Australia has played a part in mobilising such desires: the liking for, and participation in soccer (whether by playing or watching) has increased with the urbane desire to remove reminders of an older, monocultural Australia. But it's worth remembering that most

contemporary Australian soccer clubs that, after all, have only local histories to share, have been expunged of their old ethnic monikers and identifications. The new currency of football has less to do with a revaluation of ethnic-Australian histories or cultural contributions than it does with a scramble for a spot on one more global stage, and for a place in one more global conversation. It seems that class and aspiration, rather than ethnicity, have been the central factors driving football's popularity onward.

All this is not put forward as a reason to dislike the World Cup, or to tune out. After all, it is difficult to be too sanctimonious about something that offers us such spectacular athleticism, such a perfectly-paced ratchet of tension, and so much human physical beauty. No other sport (and most notably *not* baseball, if Ken Burns's tedious attempt is any guide) could give rise to the goosebump-inducing sweep of a documentary programme like the BBC's *History of Football*. Football's imbrication with all kinds of other histories is just one more reason to be interested. But it is important to recognise that, in watching, we are acknowledging something about ourselves, that we are involving ourselves in a homogenising tendency in global leisure, and thus potentially participating in all kinds of interests. The question then becomes, what do we think about this?

Interestingly, the most telling mobilisation *against* the interests of global media concerns in Australia has come from, of all places, Rugby League. After the Murdochs got their hooks into the game in Australia (and before they lost interest in it), on top of the agenda was a trimming-down of the competition by getting rid of older clubs ahead of a projected expansion. A series of financial criteria were introduced as a condition of remaining in the competition, which were designed in such a way that inner-city clubs had little chance of meeting them. When South Sydney was ejected, despite feeling that they had met the criteria, they mounted legal action, which resulted in their readmission this year. The spirit of their victory was clumsily, belatedly co-opted in the Murdoch media outlets; the gradual, but steady promotion of the AFL as the national winter game, at Rugby League's expense, continued in the Murdoch flagship, *The Australian*. Along the way, though, something interesting happened. A grassroots campaign, involving protests that attracted tens of thousands, gripped Sydney. Media-based social liberals, Rugby League fans and the remnants of the inner-city working class for whom the football club had always been an important community forum all united in opposing the National Rugby League's decision and giving support to the legal battle. Here, at last, was a context in which a broad spectrum of often-antagonistic groups were co-operating and prepared to listen: to one another and to other oppositional voices.

This is a reminder of the concentration of media ownership, the disruption of communities in the interests of multinational corporations, and the privatisation of community networks. It's also a reminder that resistance can emerge from the most unlikely and unfashionable places.

Works cited

Bourdieu, P. *Distinction : a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984.

Wark, M. *Celebrities culture and cyberspace : the light on the hill in a postmodern world*.

Sydney: Pluto Press, 1999.

Warren, J., A. Harper, et al. *Sheilas, wogs & poofers : an incomplete biography of Johnny Warren and soccer in Australia*. Milsons Point, N.S.W.: Random House Australia, 2002.