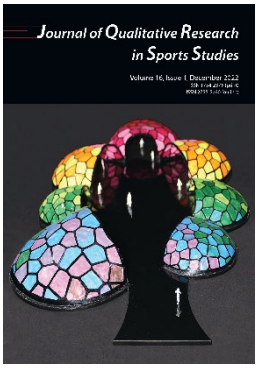
Published by:
Sport and Wellbeing Press
University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK.



Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies

Volume 16, Issue 1, December 2022

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ISSNs: 1754-2375 [print] 2755-5240 [online]
ISBN: 978-0-9955744-8-9 (124 pages)
JQRSS Article No: 5/5-16-1-2022-PG[105]-161

To cite this article:

Keeling, J. and Palmer, C. (2022) Rugby Mum's perspective:
a story of care and chronic social damage observed from the touchline.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 16, 1, 87-106.

Self-archived URL link to this article:
https://www.academia.edu/91362694/Joanne_Keeling_and_Clive_Palmer_2022_Rugby_Mum_s_perspective_a_story_of_care_and_chronic_social_damage_observed_from_the_touchline_Journal_of_Qualitative_Research_in_Sports_Studies_16_1_87_106

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Rugby Mum's perspective: a story of care and chronic social damage observed from the touchline

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Keywords: *Rugby League, ethnography, aggression/abuse, touchline, storied observation*

Editor's note: warning, some authentic language from the touchline features in excerpts from the data which some readers may find offensive.

Abstract

Mums know everything, don't they? The process of becoming the Rugby Mum was the catalyst for this ethnographic PhD investigation, during which many rich and informative events have been observed around the touchline of Rugby League. Events so rich in fact, that a definitive tactic in reporting was needed to protect the culprits, the victims, and the researcher. Thus, we have the storied ethnography, creative but non-fictional, establishing links and synthesis to philosophical critique about moral and ethical behaviour. In this paper we set out some of these instances for context (featuring two field episodes i. A tale of care and wanting for the best, ii. A short play of 'social damage') but also the rationale for this research concerning the 'game plan' and research objectives. The notes on writing style point not only to the kind of reading experience that the PhD thesis will present, but also the inspirations to communicate in certain ways, underpinned by the social analysis that those authors and performers demonstrated in their work e.g. from Victoria Wood to Eminem the rap singer. With the field research phases now completed, the paper concludes with some ideas to navigate the philosophical terrain of rules, attitudes and values in the sport of Rugby League, prompted by the behaviours witnessed in the course of this research. So, do mums really know everything? I think we can safely say the Rugby Mum knows a great deal more now than when she started and continues to learn with wisdom and humility.

Introduction

Rugby Mum 'kicks off'

> And the whistle blows… hang on, hang on, back up a minute ref, I need to start from before that, when we were setting this thing up. It always starts with the whistle, but there had to have been something that got me out into this cold and wind in the first place. I remember, it was the story of you, the referee who was crying; the day when 'Sunday is Funday' no longer held true. The day when I finally saw it, them, us; our angry rants and you, stood there in black with tears in your eyes. 'You cheating bastard' we all chanted, 'did you get paid for that shit?' 'How do you sleep at night you bent

JQRSS Article No: 5/5-16-1-2022-PG[105]-161
ISSN: 1754-2375 [print] ISSN: 2755-5240 [online]
Web: https://uclan.academia.edu/ClivePalmer/Journal-of-Qualitative-Research-in-Sports-Studies

> fucker?' And the boys all walked past you into the changing room, one of them spat on the floor by your feet as he went by. And I stood and I watched, it felt like being at the cinema, putting the cheap cardboard glasses on and watching in 3D vision for the first time. I saw it then, you, them, the players and coaches but not myself. But I was there all right; oh yes I was in full technicolour glory. I was a part of the angry mob who'd reduced you, a grown man to tears. Me a 'rugby mum', alleged caring mother, mental health nurse, advocate of good mental health and publisher of several papers to prove it: in essence, I felt a complete fake. I wondered how and when had this happened to me. When had I become a part of this – how had I been blind to this behaviour week in and week out: why hadn't I noticed, or had I? What sort of role modelling was this? What were we doing to you, the referee, these people and our own kids? So many questions and then the light came on. The show was over and I knew how I was going to try and remedy the situation. I turned to my friends, fellow parents and grandparents, each and every one, and I said slowly and with epiphanic dread, 'this has to stop'. Like that mattered…
>
> Then it was my turn, their eyes were rolling as they heckled me, 'what's up with you? Have you gone soft?' I'd get used to that reaction and seeing myself as unwanted from the game: much like you were that day. I've seen their reaction and heard their words many times within the touchline audience, when anyone dare object to 'the banter', because it 'toughens 'em up' don't you know?' My mob friends walked off for a pint and left me. I'd get used to that too, being an outsider, eyed with suspicion and given the dirty looks. And later on in my research, 'are you writing this down?' 'What you writing down?' and 'Did you see that to get it in your little book you bloody nosey bugger?' Then later, nothing, business as usual on the touchline. I often wondered if you continued refereeing or whether you threw the hat in like so many others had done, 'it's not worth the abuse for twenty quid'. Whether you did or didn't I am very sorry, I should have said more and done more.

The above recollection was the catalyst that led to this research - it all began with this incident and my disgust, predominantly at myself, for being part of something that I consider inherently wrong. But the thing is, this was my truth, I didn't know whether my perspective was shared by others, whether my feelings about the experience were justified to anyone but me, hence my entry into this study. You may think the recollection a bit extreme, as others have said, and perhaps it was not a typical example of touchline behaviour in grass roots Rugby League, or perhaps it was. Regardless, I felt it worthy of investigation both on a personal note and on a research note; that turned out to be personal anyway. I wanted to show this phenomenon and invite change - a naïve novice researcher aim as it turned out, or at least the change bit anyway.

As I write this it is several years since this incident and since my research journey into this sub-cultural phenomenon began, so now is the time to show and hope change ensues as a result. By the way, I did consider dressing the recollection up, or rather toning it down, probably storifying it in the 3rd person, keeping myself absent so you would never really know what motivated the study, or you would

know, but it would be a construction of avoidance rather than the reality of what took place. I know, I was there. However, this style of writing would have been a reflection of the main issue as I saw it in the first place; you see it but you don't speak of it, or you do, but in a way that admonishes any responsibility. So, in the interests of 'keeping it real' I have written this account as a researching rugby mum because that was the role I had at the time. I offer to you a personal explanation of the initial impetus for the study that was not derived from 'reading around the subject' or 'finding a gap in the literature'. The motivation for this study was derived from my experience of being on the touchline on a cold Sunday morning somewhere in the north, and feeling really bad about what we were doing in the name of kids' sport: guilt you might say and you'd be correct. And if we are all guilty together, we can form a mob and not feel as guilty.

My painful (and rightly so) memory of the referee who was reduced to tears is just one facet of a game and culture I've been involved in and witnessed for years. My decision to study that culture and produce a PhD thesis on this topic is my attempt to reveal to participants and spectators, the like of whom are contributing to my sport stories from the touchline, something of their behaviour and its impacts. This will provide a vehicle for philosophical questioning of behaviours and hopefully, petition for change from within. Perhaps idealism at its best, or perhaps naïve arrogance, but regardless I knew that the academic study of a culture and producing a few papers would not change behaviour, even if you start off as an insider in that community. This was the reason for sharing stories; stories people can read and think about and then decide for themselves what to do, or not.

During my research, I had conversations with countless people within the game of amateur Rugby League, governing body officials, coaches and parents/spectators of the sport who all expressed concern and stated numerous times that behaviours on the touchline were wrong, but very few seemed able, or willing, to tackle it head on. I got the impression people knew it was a problem, but that it was a 'part of the game', designed to 'toughen 'em up' and 'just a bit of banter'. Whether it was just banter or the legitimised abuse of kids in the name of sport, this 'banter' was an issue I wanted to explore.

Rugby Mum on style and influences

Towards my original contribution to knowledge, as is required within a PhD endeavour, this research is written to and for those on the touchline within the grass roots Rugby League community. I had and have no intention of *academonising* any part of this research to please disinterested others or my own requirements to produce the goods in terms of academic papers. I have tried to show my research in a way that stays true to the field, the participants, myself and my writing style. As Frankfurt (2005) remarks in his development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit:

> One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted' (Abstract from original paper 1986).

I did not want to contribute my share of bullshit within my thesis, I wanted to seek an effective means by which to communicate a social story from the perspective of being there and experiencing it. I took a steer on this from some authors I consider skilled and influential, both in terms of style and substance, so I will mention them here and the influence they had on not just my writing style, but on my confidence as an ethnographer and storyteller.

Johnny Saldaña's (2014) article *Blue Collar Qualitative Research: A Rant* takes pride of place pinned to my office notice board at work. I first read this article very early on in my research journey and found it very refreshing compared to many others I had read. The way Saldaña communicates his points is both personal to him in this piece and goes beyond the typical; in essence he says what he thinks about various elements of research ethics and such like, written in his southern 'red neck accent' and without mincing his words. I particularly like the part in his rant on 'positionality' (2014:976),

> The only reason I'm writin' 'bout this is 'cause some people seem to put a lotta stock in 'positionality.' Me: I can take it or leave it. But in case ya need to know, here goes: My position? I'm right here in front of you. Look at me: I'm a 59-year-old man with a white beard. Gay leather bear, Hispanic, a touch of Cajun (in spirit, not by blood), with a little bit of bad-ass biker in me, and a proud dash of red neck-wannabe. Overweight, asthmatic, a little arthritis; I don't complain much, I git by. There's other weird shit, but you really don't wanna know 'bout that.'

Saldaña's *Blue-Collar Rant* gave me the confidence to write in my own style and to appreciate that communicating means giving something of yourself as a qualitative researcher, as though you are having a conversation, both with your audience and yourself. I came across Saldaña again in a play he had written in Harry F Wolcott's book (2002) *Sneaky Kid and its aftermath: ethics and intimacy in fieldwork*. He had collaborated with Wolcott and turned an ethnographic study into a performance. Again, his skills in communicating a story were evident in the scripting. Wolcott is the second author I want to mention here as having an influence on both my style and on my development as a researcher.

Wolcott's storytelling of his time spent conducting qualitative research with a participant who was a young squatter had me enthralled; so much so that I read his whole book from cover to cover in a day. Wolcott's ability to explain his actions with such honesty, whilst relating to the theoretical and moral contexts meant reading his work was both interesting and educational, not least in his exploration of the ethics of being an ethnographer. I learned a lot about punctuating a story with

reflexive insights and conveying meaning through rich and often vivid description of personal experience:

> I was struck immediately by two things. The first was the strong smell of stove oil. An oil furnace, fed from a 500 gallon tank on the hillside above, heated the house. My guess, from the looks of things and the overpowering smell of fuel, was that the furnace had blown up and wreaked the havoc I saw. The second thing that struck me was a 2-by-4, or some similar wood object. I fell to the floor (Wolcott, 2002:74).

Although Wolcott was attacked by the academic community for his 'morally dubious' research, (he was having a relationship with the young squatter who was the focus of three of his research papers), the way he recounts his story eliciting the philosophical questions about qualitative research and the consequences of conducting it, had a great deal of impact upon me.

In terms of conducting social research and meeting the challenge of conveying meaning through telling the story, I took notes on the writings of those researchers I considered had 'cracked it', evidenced to me by the way I was engrossed in their stories. The sociologist Loic Wacquant is one such researcher. His ethnography contained in his book, *Body and Soul: notebooks of an apprentice boxer* (2004) is rich in both aesthetic description and social narrative. Wacquant spent over three years in a Chicago boxing gym initially as an observation point to study a black American ghetto. However, the way he became involved in a sport of which he had little interest in at first was fascinating especially in terms of his level of immersion and commitment as a researcher. Wacquant did in fact consider giving up his academic career in favour of 'turning pro'. His ethnography focused not only on those boxers around him in the gym and the general culture of that boxing world, but on his own development as a boxer adding to the analysis and sense making that he conveys throughout his story. I was keen to integrate auto-ethnographic insights into my study and took confidence from Wacquant. A comment he makes in the preface of the book, *The taste and ache of action* regarding the challenges of remaining authentic, reassured me that I wasn't the only one who had pondered how to communicate my story for wider consumption (Wacquant, 2004:i):

> …would I know how to retranslate this comprehension of the senses into sociological language and find expressive forms suitable to communicating it without in the process annihilating its most distinctive properties?

For me, the final part of his question was important to my writing style in respect of storifying certain parts of the data. I was keen not to detract from keeping it grounded in grass roots Rugby League with all its characteristics and carryings on.

On that note I feel it important to mention the work of John Sugden in his book *Scum Airways: Inside Football's Underground Economy* (2002). A brilliant

ethnographic study, in which he is very clear about the dangers of participant observation. Sugden took me around the world with the 'grafters' of the football world, a collective term used for the dodgy characters that operate and hide within plain sight of legitimate professional football following. Sugden's writing and no-nonsense sense of honesty gave me confidence to 'say it as it is' from the outset. He writes a very clear preface in the book where he ponders whether or not he achieved the correct balance of fact, observation and his own interpretation but leaves the readers to judge for themselves (2002:11). This was precisely the approach I wanted to take with my thesis, which I hope is apparent in this article too.

I couldn't finish this section without giving a mention to several other people who I consider prolific story tellers and writers and who would be at the dinner table, if I were able to choose the guests and they were around. Although not seasoned academics they have in their own way contributed to my thoughts on style and communicating to an audience. Victoria Wood, especially in her song *The Ballad of Barry and Freda* (1986), makes the everyday mundane moments come alive and uses her observations to feed the hilarity – there were funny moments in my fieldwork, and I hope I have done them justice. Next is Billy Connolly, who in a live performance had me laughing for three hours straight and told not one joke; his character observations and the way in which he recounts experiences transported me to the shipyard in Glasgow despite having never been there. I find him extraordinarily talented and detailed in his storytelling and although I could never emulate that, I was mindful of the detailing he uses to draw in the listener. And finally, I would like to say a little about Eminem a.k.a. Marshall Bruce Mathers III, the American Rapper and Producer. Those who know me well will attest that I consider him to be the best lyricist and song writer of all time; a fact one of my children found unthinkable because I'm 'middle aged'. Eminem writes about his life and experiences and every rap tells a story or is a lesson from a story. Not only has he the ability to write the story, but to make the lyrics rhyme without detracting from the message is a fantastic skill. I suppose what I am trying to say here is that there are fantastic writers and storytellers in all sorts of diverse places that have influenced me and my writing. I cannot name them all, but I hang around the above people's writing and works more than others.

To summarise, this research is an ethnography from within that seeks to highlight the observed in a way that is accessible to all those it aims to affect, in whatever way that may be. I personally hope my writing will see the light of day and provide food for thought for all those involved in grass roots Rugby League so that we can make it better for the many people that will walk onto the pitch in the future.

Rugby Mum as researcher: the game plan

As a researcher in the field, I think it important to set the parameters of what I did and didn't include in my research endeavour. I did not study the touchline behaviours within the professional domestic game that has at its pinnacle the Super League. Incidentally and importantly however, as I write this section, I did attend a Super League match last weekend and listened to the repetitive chants of 'You scouse bastards', a popular one when playing any opposition within twenty miles of Liverpool; 'referee open your eyes you twat' and various other very loud, derogatory comments aimed at the players and referee. I was also showered with beer any time the away team scored, over the years I have found a hooded jacket to be an essential for this reason. So, whilst I limited my research to the junior grass roots level, I am not claiming that morally dubious touchline behaviour is only for consideration in the amateur game, it appears to evolve and be present within Rugby League per se. However, as a seasoned supporter once reminded me, 'you're further away from the pitch in the pro game so they can't hear you anyway', so I guess that's OK then…

Within my research I considered the touchline to extend further than the side of a pitch and so I did investigate some wider issues when I got the chance to try and ascertain why people say and do the things they do within the junior game. I attended governing body stakeholder events and had conversations with various officials and spectators who all contributed to the social story, with their anecdotes, opinions and explanations. The intentions of the research were to explore elements of the Rugby League spectator culture and to show this phenomenon through the use of reporting and storytelling where necessary, and then interpret using different philosophical and theoretical lenses. The position of myself as the researcher but also as a 'rugby mum' within the field, was used as a basis on which to intertwine reflexive and autoethnographic insights to enhance the social story through sensory and aesthetic description and narrative (Warren, 2012). I was aware through my different roles: researcher, mother, friend, supporter, that personal subjectivity could be an issue, or rather would be. Containing and displaying my 'rugby mum' thoughts and feelings in reflexive transparent commentary (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011) I felt was a good methodological tactic; after all what researcher would curtail and compromise her own data? I found separation of roles easier as the data collection progressed. I was equally aware that intersubjectivity was inevitable (De Jaegher *et al*, 2017) as varying interpretations of my story were possible if not highly probable and beyond my control. The very nature of my research as being a participant observer in a social setting meant that I was interacting with people on the touchline and attempting to understand and interpret their behaviours, as I know they were mine on occasion, for example, as Reddy (2008:5) points out, 'Who is the expert when it comes to understanding people - the detached scientist or the ordinary person in everyday life?'

Rugby Mum's research objectives:

1. Through participant observation, to observe the touchline behaviour within junior grass-roots Rugby League in order to construct a socio-cultural narrative of that setting through storytelling.

2. To offer an interpretation of the content of that narrative using different philosophical lenses and reflexive auto-ethnographic insights.

3. To investigate through philosophical questioning, the potential effects of touchline culture and behaviours on participants within the sport.

Observational fieldwork was employed as in keeping with an ethnographic methodology (Emerson, 1981) and research design, to document and capture the behaviour of touchline spectators, supporters and club volunteers within the sport of Rugby League at junior grass-roots level. As an observer, my objective was to gather observational data that would provide the basis for the development of a socio-cultural narrative. Consequently, I observed touchline behaviours at grass roots junior Rugby League matches over an 18-month period (pre and post global pandemic), had 'spin off' conversations with league and governing body officials and attended various 'by invitation only' events within the sport to observe the ongoing discourse and rhetoric. I had many unsolicited conversations with spectators about all sorts of things, some of which I have included in my stories. I revisited the field post pandemic and observed further touchline behaviour, but the data gathered suggested the presence of the pandemic had little effect on the touchline and it was business as usual once we had seen COVID off, or at least suppressed it.

Following and during the collection of field data I wrote stories employing creative non-fiction techniques in order to protect the identities of those observed and any identifying features of the data elicited. I also wanted to make the research accessible to people, not least those involved the sport and particularly to young people playing the sport. This may have been a future aim at the time but in order to elicit any sort of interest I felt the data needed to live in stories in a readable 'non-boring' format (Caully, 2008). Using an interpretive approach to analysis (Silverman, 1993) the derived stories and narratives were explored and considered through varying philosophical and theoretical lenses dependent upon the insights gained.

Rugby Mum behind the scenes: a tale of caring and wanting for the best

My grandad used to play Rugby League: there's a picture of him in his kit on my mum's wall in the hallway. I believe he was very good and was scouted by a number of the big clubs but he failed to get picked up because of his alleged antics on and off the field which always, according to my mum, involved fighting, usually in front of the scouts. When my youngest son developed in an interest in Rugby League some years ago I always regretted the fact that I had never asked grandad about his playing days, the rules

and the politics and why he couldn't control himself long enough to be scouted for a pro club; but I guess I'll never know...

So, my involvement in Rugby League started when my youngest son announced that he wanted to start playing the sport. I looked round for a local junior club but because of where we lived, our choices were limited to one. Football would have been an easier option as my older son had always played football and there were countless local clubs to choose from. However, Rugby League was his choice so we took him to the local amateur Rugby League club and he started playing for the under 8s. This involved turning up for training twice a week as well as matches on a Sunday: muddy boots at the door, and mud and grass up the stairs became a regular feature of our household. Watching a swarm of 7 year olds all following the ball around the pitch is not what you would call organised play but my son loved it and we loved watching. Not long after, my older son came with us to training one week and was asked by a coach whether he fancied joining in: and then there were two at the club playing rugby at under 8s and under 10s.

As the kids got better at rugby and started to develop more skills I was asked, or rather volunteered, to contribute in a more involved capacity in our local club, so I became Vice Chair and then Secretary of the Club committee. This proved to be a mistake I paid for with more than my time. However, it did give me an initial glimpse into the politics of grass-roots Rugby League and some personal hypotheses as to why the sport remains the poor relation to rugby union and in fact most other sports. My life became consumed with disputes over subscriptions, funding, match organisation and league and club organisation: the latter of which I would have described as woeful at least. It became apparent that the club was largely run by coaches, who all had varying and mostly conflicting ideas of how the club should be run and different perspectives on what amateur Rugby League should be about. I became embroiled in the personal gripes of committee members, the dissatisfaction of parents and coaches amidst the constant concerns about funding and the month to month costs of keeping the club going. Needless to say my then husband became increasingly annoyed with the time I was spending on the Club sometimes at my doorstep speaking with the disgruntled, and the effect it was having on my sanity. The final straw came when a parent appeared at my door to express her thoughts about one of the club coaches. Her son was wanting to leave the club to play elsewhere due to a number of issues, and the coach was refusing to provide the transfer form which rendered her son unable to play where he wanted and unhappy at playing for us. After a lengthy conversation in which I tried to understand the perspective of the coach and, with the best will in the world couldn't, I agreed to sign the form as Club Secretary.

To me it was about, and has always been about, kids enjoying the sport, making friends and being able to play. Unfortunately, as I learned from my stint as a club official, this is not what it is seemingly about for a lot of people. After that I resigned and as we were due to move house, both my kids transferred to other clubs outside our local area after of course, having to justify to the league why, how, when and that we had no subs outstanding, on the relevant form.

The club my son played for was struggling for players to play matches and the commitment from a few of his fellow players had seemed to wain as they grew into fully fledged teenagers with all the distractions that this brings. Hence there was a crisis

meeting at the club with the team manager, the coaches and members of the club committee. From the outset the conversation was about the lack of commitment from the lads, despite the fact that most of them were the committed ones. Things became uncomfortable with a few truths being spoken by parents, the head coach resigning and the whole thing escalating into something that felt very wrong. The time to leave for me was when the club officials, who clearly did not want the team to fold, asked the players one by one if they wanted the team to fold – of course they said nothing in front of the coaches and manager. They had played together for years and of course didn't want the team to fold but had realised, unlike the club seemingly, that without a team there was no chance of competitive play anytime soon due to lack of players. They were then led away one by one to be asked whether they thought the team should fold, which would have enabled them to be free agents (league rules) and able to play for another team. I removed both my son and one of his teammates into the car and drove home with feelings of great sadness, anger and disgust at the way the whole thing had been managed, by adults who should have known better.

The upshot of the tale was that the club refused to fold the team but the kids could not play competitive rugby as they couldn't muster enough players for a team – checkmate. Needless to say that each and every player that wanted to leave (because they wanted to play) had to fill in a transfer form which would be processed by the league. It turns out that the league consists of members, some of whom are officials at clubs or who have various affiliations to other clubs: it's a small world. So some of the transfers were refused whilst others, the quickest off the mark, went to other clubs.

So, the team split with various players having to attend appeal hearings at the league as the club refused to sign the transfers. Clearly the transfer market in the Under 13s league was a serious business. I soon became aware of the bureaucracy and power plays that were to become part and parcel of that season. One of my son's teammates whilst waiting for an appeal hearing due to the club not agreeing to the transfer (for reasons I will not go into) did not play for months. His movements were monitored in person by an official to ensure that he was not training with another club; the official also being a club official of the very club he has sought to leave. I attempted to explain the safeguarding issues that were at play here, in terms of ensuring that the kids played and that their mental health and well-being were paramount. However, after a raft of emails from those in the know the response was that it was not a 'safeguarding issue'. A response that to this day is incredulous to me from people in positions of governing junior sport and who are supposed to be ensuring the well-being of the participants.

After a few months, and two committee meetings it became apparent to all that this second team would have to fold. This was not without the chairman shouting on the edge of the carpark that it was his club and he would 'run it as he saw fit!', despite the petitions of the parents. It was reminiscent of a scene from Wall Street or how I would envisage Machiavelli would have behaved, had he have been a Rugby League club official.

The above tale goes some way to explaining my position as a rugby mum in this game of Rugby League: a game that splintered away from the mainstream in 1895 and in many ways has never quite managed to establish itself on an equal footing to Football or Rugby Union. Don't get me wrong, it's not all bad in grass roots junior

Rugby League, the camaraderie amongst the players and parents, the laughs and the sense of community all make this sport unique and addictive. I am never ceased to be amazed at how resilient some of the junior players are, or at least act. The 'Rugby League family' has many plus points, but like a family there are also dysfunctional aspects to its existence.

My own background in the sport of Rugby League and my frustrations as a parent at the imposed bureaucracy that I faced, may have rooted as personal biases within this research and the way in which the data has been presented (Polit and Beck, 2014). I have witnessed the frustration of coaches, club team managers, referees and players at how 'rules' are applied, and how people are treated by whom and when. This has spilled out onto the touchline. I am not suggesting that the rules of the game are not necessary to ensure the proper operation of a league format and to safeguard the wellbeing of the players and participants within the sport. However, the rules may prove problematic for 'stirring up' subsequent touchline behaviours if not applied consistently, transparently and in a way that ensures the ethos of the game remains intact – children being able to participate in the sport without the fear of the spectator. As the RFL Parent and Spectator Code of Conduct (2021) points out:

Remember that children participate in Rugby League for their own enjoyment, not yours.

I have been careful throughout to critically question the authenticity of myself as researcher and of the data by balancing personal reflexive insights with the raw data collected and the stories I have told. In short, I have been mindful of distorting observations and have been as transparent as I can as a researcher, to acknowledge my feelings on matters. As with ethnographic research I am both part of the process and product (Galdas, 2017); there is no point trying to deny this or pretend I was absent from the field. I was there, I felt it, saw it, listened to it, documented it, interpreted it and discussed it: I hope in a way that is impactful to those that choose to read about it.

Rugby Mum on the touchline: parents, referees and spectators

Collins' (2006; 2009) and Dunning and Sheard's (2004) explanations of the breakaway of Northern Rugby Football Union, or Rugby League as we now know it, from mainstream Rugby Union in 1895 was not only interesting for its insights into the political, religious, economic and social class shenanigans and motivations of the origins of Rugby League, but also for its stories of touchline culture and behaviour. One such story was a case reported in the Yorkshire Post in 1888 (Collins, 2009:60) of a Rugby League referee, 'The referee had to climb the boards, be ferried across the canal to make good his escape and the bus which he took along East Street was followed by an infuriated and howling mob uttering the most demonical yells'.

Similarly, further stories in Collins' text make reference to players being hit between the eyes by spectators throwing objects and referees refusing to referee matches due to crowd trouble. A remark from Reverend Sydney Gedge, later to become a rugby club official (Collins, 2009:63) could arguably provide much food for thought dependent on the interpretation, 'the spectator is an element foreign to sport'. This statement would perhaps be alien to those 'fans' who turn up every week to support our children and consider ourselves to be encouraging and supportive. However, research focused on fandom and parenthood reveals that there is a plethora of emotional and challenging behaviour that we exhibit as 'supporters' that could perhaps have a negative effect on those on the field, clearly the opposite to that which was intended (Tinson *et al*., 2017).

Studies over recent years in terms of spectator or 'touchline' behaviour in a variety of sports have perhaps proved Reverend Gedge's point in that some of the behaviour from those on the touchline has been far from what one would call sporting, or indeed encouraging to those on the field of play (Moore *et al*., 2007). A study by Fields *et al* (2010) implored the reader to consider the relationship between negative coach and spectator behaviour and player behaviour. They assert that what happens off the pitch in terms of negative often violent behaviour, was a predictor of negative player behaviour on the pitch. Nicholson and Hoye (2005) investigated contextual factors relating to poor spectator touchline behaviour and asserted that this behaviour had various effects on young players' emotional health and enjoyment of the game. Their paper also explored strategies imposed to attempt to manage off field behaviour and concluded that more research was needed in relation to whether or not the strategies were effective, and this was certainly a concern of the governing body, the Rugby Football League (RFL) at the time of my field research. The paper suggested further exploration of what the potential emotional health consequences are from poor touch-line behaviour and how an awareness of these consequences might lead to 'investment' in strategy rather than 'buy in' from parents, coaches, supporters and governing bodies.

An example of one such avenue to facilitate this investment was explained in a paper by Omli and Wiese Bjornstal (2011), who conducted research to ascertain the views and wishes of young players regarding how spectators behaved and their preferences as to how spectators should behave. Ross *et al* (2015) researched the views of coaches and team administrators as to their perceptions of parent behaviour on child development within the sporting environment. Results showed that coaches and administrators observed more negative than positive effects of parent-child interaction and that parent education programmes were generally considered to be inadequate.

The Rainbow: a tale of chronic social damage

Context/setting: Rainy Sunday morning on the Pennines and it's cold. Pitch is through a park and is fairly boggy. Half the pitch is roped off and half not. No touchline managers apparent. Spectators dotted around here and there – golf umbrellas aplenty.

> *It's Sunday morning on the Pennines and the spectators surround the field with a smattering of umbrellas here and there. A child splashes in the puddles near the trees and a dog runs by with a stick. The rain is light but the sky grey, promising more rain to come. Coats have replaced summer clothes and boots and wellies, sandals. There is not much wind although it's colder than of late with a crispness to the air. The season is changing and the leaves have begun to fall from the trees hiding the boggy turf as they collect on the ground. Carol and Leanne stand on the touchline with an assortment of coats, hooded sweatshirts and small children. They have both come to the game today to watch their boys play rugby.*

Carol: Did you enjoy your holiday?

Leanne: Yeah a lot warmer than here. Glad I brought my brolly now: look at it dripping off the end. But it's good for the garden as they say.

Carol: Hmmm I've told Dan we'll have a roast for dinner. We usually got to Nando's after the game dependent on how our Simon's playing. Been falling out with his dad a bit recently.

Leanne: Sore subject rugby?

Carol: You could say that. Dan thinks he's not putting the effort in; he's had a word with Mal and told him to leave him out if he isn't pulling his weight.

Leanne: Well our Tom goes through phases like that – one week he's up for it and the next it's like he can't be bothered.

Carol: I don't know if our Simon will stick it. Dan was really annoyed after he stopped going to the development camp at the RFL Academy, but he just wasn't interested. Dan said we should have made him carry on going but how can you if they're not up for it? It's not like he's 10 anymore.

Leanne: I know...Tom only went once and said he wasn't going again. I don't know what he'll do next year.

Carol: Our Simon wants to do Art at college; not sure what he'll do with that. Dan wants him to stick at the rugby and try and get in this year.

> *Carol's husband Dan walks over and stands beside Carol and Leanne. He is smoking a cigarette: the smoke swirls around his bobble hat. He turns to Leanne and nods and then turns to Carol.*

Dan: Did you see him then? Completely missed that tackle; away with the bloody fairies again today. How long was he on that bloody computer last night? Half asleep he is.

Carol: I don't know. He had that art project to finish but I told him to turn it off at midnight.

Dan: Yeh well he can stay off it tonight if this is what it does.

Carol: Well he needed it to do his project.

Dan: Well he needs to concentrate on this and not messing about with bloody drawing.

Carol: Well it's what he wants to do.

Dan: Yeh and that's why he blew his chance this season. I bet Tom doesn't mess about drawing does he Leanne. He's having a blinder today.

Leanne (trying to calm the situation): Well he has his moments Dan. Mal says he's improved a lot this season and they've asked him about a scholarship.

Dan: See. Our Simon could have had a scholarship but can't be arsed can he. Too busy with his head in the clouds. Mal's just said it's a waste: I've told him to bring him off at half time.

Carol (upset): Good God Dan I think you want it more than him.

Dan (annoyed): No I don't; don't be so ridiculous. What's wrong with encouraging him? If he's got talent he should use it and not waste it. That's all I'm saying.

Carol: Well, he's talented at Art.

Dan: Art? Well I hope he can draw better than he tackles. Bloody art...waste of time. He needs to do something proper.

Leanne: Well it's his life Dan, you can't live it for them.

Dan (to Carol): Yeh well whatever. I'm going for a brew. You comin?

Carol: No.

Dan strides away up the touchline towards the clubhouse. Pete the assistant coach walks towards the women with water bottles.

Pete: You upsetting Dan again Carol?

Carol: Well, I'm sick of him having a go at our Simon.

Pete: Simon's doing OK, he'll find his way.

Carol: Not if Dan's got anything to do with it. They're all bloody obsessed.

Pete (laughing): I know what you mean but it does no good. They either want to do it or they don't.

The half time whistle blows and the sun has made it through the clouds. The boys start to walk to the edge of the pitch with Pete issuing water bottles. Simon sees his mum and walks over.

Simon: Alright mum? Did you see that try? That lad that scored is at Wigan: he's in my year at School.

Carol: Yes son. He's good isn't he.

Simon (laughing): Yeh not bad. Where's dad?

Carol: He's gone for a brew and to calm down.

Simon: Is he going on about me again?

Carol: Your dad's your dad Simon. Never mind him. He just wants what's best for you.

Simon: Best for him you mean. Anyway, see you in a bit.

Simon walks back to other boys pitch side. The whistle blows for the second half and play continues. Dan returns with his drink and stands again with Carol.

Dan: What did he have to say for himself?

Carol: Not much...just says he knows that lad who scored the try for them. He goes to his school. (Hesitates) He's on at Wigan apparently.

Dan: Yeh I've just been speaking to his dad in the club. Good future for him...doing something proper with his life.

Carol: Just drop it Dan will you. Just let him do what he wants to do.

Dan: Too soft you. Don't blame me when he's lying around doing nothing.

Carol: I won't: he wants to do his art.

Dan: Yeh crying out for artists this country.

Carol (annoyed): Just shut up I've had enough. Are you coming Leanne? I'm going to get a brew.

Leanne: No you're alright I'll stay here and watch the end of the game. See you later.

Carol walks away towards the clubhouse as the game continues to the final whistle. The sun is shining, and the spectators have taken down their umbrellas. A full rainbow has appeared over the playing field as the boys remove head guards and shirts and walk along the touchline clapping. The crowd claps and people randomly shout congratulatory comments to the boys. Simon and Tom walk over the Leanne and Dan.

Dan (to Tom): Well played lad you had a blinder there.

Tom: Thanks: tough one that.

Leanne: Well played boys; a good match that.

Simon: Thanks Leanne, where's my mum she's got my stuff?

Dan (interjects): Your mum's gone to the clubhouse and why's she got your stuff? Bout time you started taking responsibility.

Tom (to Leanne): Have you seen that rainbow?

Leanne: Yeh, didn't think we'd see one of those today.

Tom (laughing): We didn't see it but Simon pointed it out. The sun was getting in the ref's eyes.

Dan: Yeh he's good at that our Simon…should be focusing on the match instead of the sky.

Simon: There's more to life than rugby dad. I'm going to find mum for my stuff.

Simon walks away.

Wann has been lead author (1993, 1999, 2000) on several papers detailing western research on identifying precursors to fan spectators' abuse of opponents and officials. Seemingly spectators who highly identified with a team were more likely to engage in abusive behaviours towards opponents and officials. Being highly identifiable with a team is arguably easier, in this case, when you have a child who plays for that team rather than if one was a detached and 'neutral'. Rocca and Vogl-Bauer (1999) found that highly identifying spectators were also more likely to consider verbal aggression acceptable. The science unfortunately did not go further in ascertaining why this was the case. Wann and his colleagues (2017) expanded their work to consider the additional factor of 'fan dysfunction' (Wakefield and

Wann, 2006), a category described as appertaining to spectators who were highly confrontational and likely to complain about their spectator experience. Whilst the sport psychology research is interesting and points to a more individual rationale for spectator behaviours such as a childhood history of bullying, most of the research is carried out in the professional or semi-professional adult sports arena. However, what the research does prove, especially the body of work that Wann and his colleagues engage with, is that spectator or rather touchline abuse does exist, so much so that it is worthy of study as a phenomenon.

Whilst touchline behaviour suggests the overt familial behaviour that can be observed during a match, for the purposes of this research the study of the wider grass-roots Rugby League culture was included. In this respect the primary observational data, and my position as a researcher in the field led to my subsequent foray into the 'back room'. Consequently, the behaviours of coaches and administrators of the game were not detached from an ethnographic piece that sought to understand a culture. To focus merely on parental and supporter behaviour would have been insufficient to construct the social story. Therefore 'touchline' behaviour for the purposes of this study extended to all those regardless of role who were situated at the periphery of the playing field; one such important group were the amateur junior coaches.

Much literature has focused on the philosophy of coaching styles (Nash *et al* 2008; Bennie and O'Connor 2010; Carless and Douglas 2011; Rowley 2012; Garratt *et al* 2013; Grecic and Collins 2013, Coupland 2015) and how these philosophies shape the behaviours of both coaches and players within sports. However, there is little consensus as to whether having a coaching philosophy is useful or indeed applied at a socio-cultural behavioural level. Consequently, whether a coaching philosophy is a conducive factor to player and official wellbeing on the pitch was an interesting avenue to explore in my work. Similarly, the;

- 2017 parliamentary inquiry into the Football Association and it's handling of alleged complaints of racism,
- Operation Hydrant into childhood sexual abuse and the subsequent investigations of football clubs and academies,
- 2016 parliamentary inquiry into the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) regarding match fixing,

are indicators that the administrative and governing bodies of these sports may be failing in key areas of social responsibility – duties of care to all who participate. This has wide reaching implications on sporting culture from the professional to grass-roots levels. In relation to Rugby League, being a much smaller sporting entity, the impact of regional and national administration of the sport could arguably be exaggerated: another worthy line of enquiry.

Conclusion

From Rugby Mum the ethnographer to Rugby Mum the philosopher

Field work is completed for the PhD, and thesis writing is now in full swing. This signals a palpable shift in my researcher existence, at least for the time being, from being Rugby Mum the ethnographer to Rugby Mum the philosopher. My task now is to grapple with the synthesis of communicating my experiences to investigate this phenomenon in the field, with philosophical analysis to help make sense of it all. I have to endeavour to make sense of the moral and ethical dimensions of what I have observed if I am to reflect back with meaningful impact, what I have witnessed from the touchline. Or, to put it another way, there seems little point in just describing back to 'touchline people' - parents, referees and spectators and others… how they behaved on the touchline, as they probably know full well what they are doing, but they may not appreciate the broader [damaging] impacts of their actions. The philosophising that lays ahead will help me find ways to unpick scenarios and piece together new layers of reasoning that may help to bring about change.

Towards philosophical critique in my PhD, Graham McFee's work on *Sport, Rules and Values* (2004) has provided valuable lines of enquiry for questioning observed behaviours that manifest in my data. The purpose of sport in society and whether philosophical values are displayed or seen to be socially 'at work' on the touchline will be discussed using exemplars of different components of 'game'. Components such as rules and their application/enforcement; the interpretation of rules to exploit weaknesses in the opposition or the rules themselves; and the idea of playing fairly (versus cheating), or as McFee says, playing within the 'spirit of the game'. Adding significant momentum to this philosophical critique in my thesis is writing from Bernard Suits on *What is a Game?* (1972), *The Tricky Triad* (1995) and *The Elements of Sport* (1995a), alongside Fred D'Agonstino's analysis of *The Ethos of Games.* An ethical dimension is brought through Nigel Warbutons' exposition of *Right or Wrong* (1992), while Richard Calisch on *The Sportsmanship Myth* (1972) and Anthony Ralls' philosophical commentary on *The Game of Life* (1972) help to steer focus back on to a sports context. These lines of philosophical investigation have and will provide a lens through which to analyse behavioural instances witnessed from the touchline of grass-roots Rugby League.

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Reviewer Comments

Being a parent is more than just doing the school run. Being a mum or a dad isn't easy, and it certainly isn't easy on the side-line of a rugby pitch. Come to think of it, it can't always be easy for a child to have their parent(s) on that very side-line. As the first author of this paper, you are not just a rugby mum, you are part of the very fabric of community grass roots rugby league. That is, in large part, how and why it is so difficult to engage in this type of fieldwork. With some solid understanding of ethnographic principles and ways of making sense of the field, I see in this paper a researcher grappling with the ethics and politics of the field. I see the tension of field roles, the descriptive-analytic push and pull of the craft and an honesty to subject oneself to the field but with some delicate theoretical distancing and perspective. None of this is easy and if it was, everyone would be doing it. Rugby league isn't an easy game to play and watch either. What we see in this paper is someone thinking with the field and someone using language and field reflections in a very critical and creative way. There is lots to learn by reading this at both the methodological/ theoretical level but also the aesthetic level, and it will be interesting to see how the resulting PhD thesis evolves from this brief showing.