

‘It’s The Journey Not The Destination That Counts’: Meaning and the Match Day Routine of Sport Fans in Australia and England.

Abstract

When a sport fan speaks of their home ground emotions of belonging, ritual and local territory are often evoked. This paper examines the making of meaning behind the match day experience and how sport fans create meaning through their live presence in sport space. For some fans it is the phenomenon of going to the match and the pre-game rituals and meanings associated with this that makes their match day experience memorable. Whilst there are a number of gripping fan biographies that explore the match day experience, this has rarely been examined in the field of qualitative research. At a time when the culture of sport fandom is coming under increasing pressure and scrutiny examining how fans locate themselves and others in sport space marks an important contribution to the field of sport sociology.

This paper will discuss how sport space is being reworked and re-inscribed in the age of stadium relocation and (re)design. It critically explores the importance of physical space in enhancing and maintaining the social, cultural and masculine histories of a sport community. In so doing, I examine the practices of meaning making and meaning breaking in the inhabitation of sport space on match day. Sport fans from the English Premier League team Everton Football Club (Liverpool) and Rugby League team Canterbury–Bankstown Bulldogs (Sydney) will form the case studies for this paper. The employment of the ethnographic methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews explores how sport fans produce (re)produce and reinvent specific senses of local identity whilst travelling to live sport. Further, participants were asked to visually map their chosen route to their football stadium that required them to think reflexively and recount on their match day journey.

The focus of this research is on the match day routine, particularly in terms of the link between local, gender and sport fan identity. The match day routine therefore examines the

various sites in which fans congregate and engage with sport culture prior to the game commencing. These are often overlooked spaces but are argued to be imperative to creating and building up the heavily researched 'atmosphere' that exists inside of the stadium. It explores how certain spaces gain heightened meaning and significance on game day. This is achieved through examining the a) time invested and b) consumption practices in these areas by fans. This in turn reveals the clear cultural and regulatory structures and forms of ritual being practiced and reproduced by fans in their match day routine. These ideas can be tied to wider issues concerning the social organisation of sport crowds and how sport fans internalise the debates surrounding authentic and inauthentic 'types' of fandom.

It is these ideas that are used to explain why the match day routine of Everton and Bulldogs fans differs considerably. For fans of Everton travelling to Goodison Park remains typically focused on visiting familiar surrounding sites and spaces including local pubs, shops, take-away food outlets, terrace alleyways and streets. For fans of the Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs the relocation of their home ground to a multipurpose stadium has meant that these localised traditions now exists in a new space. Newer built stadiums such as these are isolated physically, culturally and symbolically from any sort of affiliation with a particular community. Rather than meaning breaking the pertinent masculine and localised forms of ritual that existed prior to the relocation are argued to be transferred through the match day routine where it is experienced and embodied in new forms.

The key findings of this paper suggest that architectural elements and the cultural meanings ascribed to them by fans are neither static nor unchanging. Whilst the match day routine reproduces and reinforces gendered and local identities and narratives, I argue it also creates space for counter-hegemonic and resistant practices and meanings. The variety of fan identities that exist in sport space means that the meanings and significance tied to the match day routine has the ability to shift, adapt and change with the currents of social and cultural influences. This issue is particularly pertinent when examining fans of both clubs who entered into in areas prior to the game in which they were not always invited.