



LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

Citation:

Turner, M and Richards, J and Lawrence, S (2023) Leisure and Fan Activism: Exploring New Cases and Contexts Across Men's and Women's Professional Sport. *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*. pp. 1-6. ISSN 2520-8683 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41978-023-00146-w>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/10125/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

The version of record of this article, first published in *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, is available online at Publisher's website: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41978-023-00146-w>

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Introduction: Special Issue

Leisure and fan activism: Exploring new cases and contexts across men's and women's professional sport

Dr Mark Turner; Dr Jessica Richards; Dr Stefan Lawrence

1 Introduction

The future of association football (soccer) in England and Europe stands at a critical juncture. Thirty years after the formation of the English Premiership, which later became the English Premier League, and rebranding of the European Cup as the UEFA Champions League, high-profile political mobilizations seeking to improve the governance, transparency, sustainability, and regulation of clubs, and their economic, cultural, and political practices, pervades the contemporary game. Recent ruptures, including the proposed breakaway of a European Super League (ESL) in 2021, and the reform of the UEFA Champions League, are prefiguring a new regulatory regime, in which supporter-based social movements, are increasingly connected to one another, mainly through digital networks (Lawrence and Crawford, 2019, 2022), encompassing an array of political standpoints (Turner and Millward, 2023). Consequently, new regulatory frameworks are emerging on supporter safety, and engagement, across both the men's and women's game, after the amplification of supporter discontent over the past two decades, both *in*, and *through*, football (Numerato, 2018; Turner and Ludvigsen, 2023). Whilst the national and transnational mobilizations of football supporters is not a new phenomenon, the long-term impacts of football's globalization and post-industrialization are becoming analytically illuminated through the practices and leisure identities of fans at this critical juncture.

Of vital importance here is the creative sociability of football fans and their processes of collective action. The negotiation of a political semiosis in football, through the production of meaning around slogans such as, 'Supporters not customers;' 'Football without fans is nothing;' and 'Against modern football,' reveals the long-term power of fan activist networks to bring dominant social discourses into both national, and transnational spaces, and in turn, become effective political actors. Whilst the revolutionary spirit exercised by some in

contemporary football cultures enhance the capacity for the counter-power potential of fan movements (Numerato, 2018), new norms, or forms of prefigurative politics tend to emerge quickly, and then entrench both outside, and inside, cultural movements (ella Porta, 2020). At this critical juncture in English and European football, new regulatory frameworks may thus represent institutional legacies of the system, and the corporate *lifeworld* of late capitalism (Turner, 2023).

Despite the burgeoning social scientific study of association football and fan-based movements over the past ten years in Europe, there remains a dearth of literature which critically examines the mobilizations of women fan activists, digital spaces for the emergence of mediatized protests, and new cases and contexts in the global south, and how these spaces of collective action, speak more widely to questions of sport and leisure rights, wellbeing, access, and equality.

Playing a small, but hopefully meaningful part in the evaluation of football's contemporary critical juncture, by widening the politico-economic, and sociological focus to beyond England and western Europe, this special issue explores one of the most central aspects of fandom as a practice of serious leisure and the shaping of identities, that being, the ritual of watching football inside the stadium, and the specific meanings ascribed to the leisure lives of those that engage in it/ How these meanings sometimes, agitate specific forms of leisure as deviance, resistance and protest through the gendered performance of fandom, and the search for authenticity and legitimacy amongst particular social groups, remains worthy of note. In order to address this, this special issue draws attention to important interdependent social relationships, solidarities, and interactions which fans of mainly association football, but also Australian rules football, form with each other, through untold contemporary social histories and the temporal practices and identities of fans.. It innovates further, by unpacking how alternative digital spaces provide the site for a different expressions and understandings of local, political, and cultural leisure identities through football (Lawrence and Crawford, 2019, 2022).

This special issue is important then for two reasons. First, sports fandom, as a leisure practice spanning three centuries, is pertinent for the critical study of collective identity: here, the *lifeworld* of football, in North America, Western and Eastern Europe, Australasia, and Africa, and the social and cultural relationships, identities, values, meanings, and intersubjective understandings that arise through processes of social interaction across the men's and women's game, tell us something important about wider social and political

transformations in late modernity. The construction of collective identities in sports fandom emerge out of the social relationships that are temporally significant, and coalesce around an implicit politics of the local, individual, club-based, but also national, and gender-based interests of communities, producing what Melucci (1989) described as loose, informal networks within a 'complex society'. As Millward et al. (2018) note, long established lines of club rivalry and isolation typically divide association football supporters' social networks, and thus research has tended to focus on supporters' critical engagement with modern football through opposition to individual clubs. Consequently, there remains a lacuna in the sociological research into fan-led mobilizations which connect supporters beyond club-based networks.

Second, the temporal dimensions of leisure across these different, but interdependently connected *lifeworld's*, demonstrate the ways in which popular cultural and sub-cultural forms, intersect across multiple temporal periods in ways which force us to stretch and problematise the relationship between leisure and sociology. For Spracklen (2013), social changes themselves affect how we spend our free time, and how leisure has capacity to impact on our understanding and experience of culture as well as the broader economic milieu. Recently, there has been a burgeoning area of research into the role events themselves play in our reconceptualization of leisure experiences, space, memory, histories, and power (Lamond and Platt, 2016; Spracklen and Lamond, 2016). Indeed, these scholars highlight how eventful leisure frameworks, in bringing these themes together, should seek to address one of the most under-researched areas in leisure studies; the study of protests and social activism, as communicative and serious forms of leisure.

Whilst some scholars have thus begun to theorise protest and activism *as* leisure, including case studies ranging from, but not limited to, urban environments (Lamond and Lashua, 2021), homelessness and public space (Harmon, 2019), skateboarding and gentle activism (Glover et al, 2019), and event bidding and new media activism (McGillivray, Lauermann, and Turner, 2019), there remains a dearth of research into the relationship between leisure and lifestyle politics, like fandom, in sport-based sociological thinking. Whilst the particular social worlds of men's and women's professional football have become new cases and contexts of analytical thinking on social movements, protest, activism, digitalisation, and fan engagement (Cleland et al. 2018; Lawrence and Crawford 2019; Numerato, 2018; Millward, 2019; Turner, 2023), these contributions focus on both the macro and micro-level events and networks of activists, and their strategies for relational collective action against corporate targets, but in doing so, neglect to unpack the relationship between resistance and identity. Consequently, there remains a gap within sociology and the sociology of sport and

leisure, in this case association football and Australian rules football, which brings together the study of protests, events, and activism, through critical engagement with leisure identities, and the specific cases of supporter-based mobilizations.

In this special issue then, we bring together international perspectives on sport-based fan engagement and activism, across a range of under-researched and under-theorised alternative cases and contexts in different global territories, to unpack and understand the complexities and temporalities of modern leisure, the constriction of collective identities and resistance projects, and their intersubjective and interdependent relationship with authentic, legitimate, but also alternative fan practices, to understand wider processes of political and social change in both men's and women's sport.

1.1 Scope and Content

With a focus on the importance of sport stadia in the production and reproduction of sociability, surveillance, resistance, and expression of collective identities, several of the papers conceptualise football stadia as seminal leisure spaces through which mobilizations across political, governance, anti-authoritarian, and equality-based fields and arenas are contested. Allison (this collection) addresses an important gap here in relation to women's sport, arguing that fan activism both *in*, and *through*, this space, is key to the construction of leisure identities. Central to this, is the search for authenticity amongst members of the women's football fan community, which characterises the complex relationship between fandom and late capitalism. Focusing on the expressions of activism that took place in the public leisure spaces of the 2019 Women's World Cup, Allison conceptualises these as the construction and communication of leisure identities, in ways which stretch and problematise the dichotomy of physical in-person, and digital fan engagement, and situates them within the wider contested commercialized, commodified, mediatized, and globalized professional sporting landscape.

Turning to the stadium as a space of surveillance in women's sports fandom with a focus on Australian rules football and sports film, Symons, presents an autoethnographic and critical discourse analysis of the performance of activism through contestations on dominant gender stereotypes. In doing so, the paper challenges and re-positions specific representations of women as sports fans to explore different ways of engaging with existing research on gendered perceptions of sports fandom. Focusing on the construction of the 'ideal' woman sports fan in what are hyper-masculine, heteronormative spaces, with social surveillance practices and influences, Symons presents alternative ways to consider how women

demonstrate and display a multi-layered form of activism which challenges their surveillance, and dominant constructions of women as sports fans in popular culture more widely.

Christian Brandt, Maryna Krugliak and Robert Warnecke's paper offers a comparative case study analysis of football fan activism in western and eastern Europe between 2014-2021, through specific focus on Germany and Ukraine activist supporter communities, to explore the relational and glocal motivations, tactics, and spaces of collective action, which are connected globally as a type of social movement, but determined by respective local contexts. Making a distinction between three levels of the political economies and structures of club-supporter relations; national level, association level, and club level, the paper shows how the activism of Ukrainian fans is mainly characterised by national and nationalist political mobilizations. In Germany, the construction of supporter-collective identity is agitated mainly around issues pertaining to governance and anti-commercialisation contestations. Despite this, the comparative analysis highlights similarities for fan activism, including match kick-off times securitization mechanisms, and the preservation of tradition and heritage; here, movement frames are mobilized through specific repertoires of contention such as, supporter demonstrations and unrest, including banners and supporter-led boycotts of matches. Bringing the research up to date, the paper considers the emerging significance of the Russian invasion of Ukraine which captures how some fan activists are no longer able to attend matches due to their presence on the front line of war; these images of ultras as soldiers have replaced previous displays of fan activism in stadia, with photographs of group members involved in the war. The authors note here, that despite war, the significance of football as a leisure activity, remains steadfast as the Premyer Liga persisted with a new campaign in August 2022.

The importance of nationalism and political resistance to the building and sustaining of fan activism communities is explored in Blessing Choto and Ncube's discussion of English-speaking African fans. It is an important, under-researched contribution emanating from a geographical region which is underrepresented in the literature on sport, leisure, nationalism and resistance. The paper highlights how football was a central tool in the fight for rights of the underprivileged during and after British colonial rule in Africa, and draws attention to how British colonial policies of indirect rule and regional-ethnic divide have shaped football and its utility as a mechanism of social and political control. The regional-ethnic division of football manifested in specific club rivalries, assumed political agency in the face of post-colonial political authoritarianism and marginalization. The paper thus demonstrates how football become a vehicle for fan opposition and political resistance and the promulgation of anti-nationalist political messages.

Finally, Rookwood and Hoey's paper examines the role of digital spaces in the production of authentic fan voices in late capitalism, and how these spaces provide an important site for a deeper expression and understanding of local, political, and cultural identity. Activism is thus understood through this context, and how the mediatized protests of fans emerge across issues including ownership and political identity, and supporters' rights and their mistreatment. Using Liverpool FC as a case study, the paper details the evolution of more traditional supporter-based literature (fanzines) to new, innovative cultural leisure events which provide a platform for various local music artists to perform and celebrate local and civic identity and culture, and how digital spaces operate to innovate the creation of specific alternative fan media content. The contribution of this paper captures the ways in which developments in modern technologies and accessibility to computer and mobile devices and internet connectivity constitutes a new form of active fan leisure through the growth of supporter-produced media. Consequently, fan experiences, including resistance communities, are captured and communicated more fully, than in previous historical periods. Indeed, such forms of content creation have begun to shape participation and engagement in cultural forms of leisure, including fandom, and the issues around which fan activists coalesce and mobilize.

2 Conclusion

This special issue has advanced our theoretical and empirical understanding of the social-scientific study of sport and leisure activism and the construction of collective identities across a range of diverse cases and contexts. The papers have brought together contributions from international scholars in under-researched, under-represented, and under-theorised geographical spaces to explore the role of sport and leisure in shaping the perspectives and experiences of fan communities, cultures, and engagement strategies. The key theme across the contributions is that fandom in diverse settings and populations, remains an important vehicle in the shaping of social identity and the specific meanings ascribed to this serious form of leisure. Drawing specific attention to the stadium as a space in which football fandom is constituted and an expression of supporter protest, unrest, resistance, and contestation, the specific gendered, and nationalistic performances of fandom, and the search for authenticity and legitimacy amongst networked fan actors are played out. Fandom and fan activism *in* and *through* sport, serves an important social and political function and thus the construction of leisure activist identities have wider implications for social scientists of social movements.

