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'Reimagining rugby league' and performative masculinities: the politics of rugby league fan spaces in Northern England

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ABSTRACT

Rugby league has been witnessing changes that could decentre its perception as a sport played and followed by 'hard gritty men' in mill towns and (ex)-mining communities in Northern England. In this exploratory study, we offer a snapshot into English rugby league terraces and interrogate whether the stereotypes of rugby league as a sport that has struggled to reinvent its northern, (de)-industrial, white, working-class, and (hetero)-masculine image still hold true. We found that rugby league remains predominantly white and working class. Nonetheless, we also found that there are incremental changes taking place whereby there is more diversity in terms of fans' gender and age, but not their ethnicity. We observed signs of decreasing homophobia yet instances of heteronormativity being reinforced; the performance of diverse masculinities by men fans that, at times, shifted within a short period of time; and humour utilised to police 'acceptable' forms of masculinity and to connect fans and players with one another. We argue that rugby league must do more to contend with the changes taking place within the game itself as well as with wider shifting notions of masculinity, race, and whiteness which could potentially disconcert its relationship to its traditional communities.

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Introduction

Rugby league, played professionally in front of paying crowds in a handful of countries – and dominant only in Eastern Australia and small towns in Northern England (Collins, 2020; Gorman, 2019; Rowe, 1997) – is a subset of the late modern sports industries, with their commodification, viewing figures and sponsorship packages. But rugby league in England is also a sport of working-class resistance, of community and pride against the 'Establishment' of rugby union, public schools, and the Houses of Parliament (Collins, 2006; Hinchliffe, 2000; Spracklen and Spracklen 2022). While this imagined, imaginary community gives rugby

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league fans a sense of identity, it can also be a source of exclusion and othering due to its historic association with white northern working-class culture and masculinity (Spracklen, 2007).

Rugby league has been witnessing changes that could potentially decentre its perception as a sport played and predominantly followed by 'hard gritty men' in northern mill towns and (ex)-mining communities (Spracklen et al., 2010). For example, there has been a remarkable growth in women's and girls' rugby league since 2017 with an increase of 53% in women and girls playing at community level, 359% in women coaches, 113% in volunteers, and 43% in match officials (Rugby Football League, 2021). Growth can also be witnessed at the professional level with eight teams now contesting the Women's Super League (the top-tier of women's rugby league), and the Women's Challenge Cup final being held in Wembley Stadium alongside the men's. Moreover, wheelchair rugby league, Physical Disability Rugby League (PDRL), and Learning Disability Rugby League (LDRL) have all been gaining traction with the Rugby League World Cup 2021 deemed to be the most inclusive yet as it showcased all the above formats under the same tournament.

Perhaps the change with the most potential wide-reaching impact on the sport is the Rugby Football League (RFL)'s partnership with IMG[1] to 'reimagine rugby league'. As part of its recommendations, IMG has published a list of essential criteria for entry into Super League (the top-level of British Rugby League).[2] The grading criteria consist of *Fandom* (match attendances, TV viewership, social media following, and ability to retain existing and attract new fans); *Performance* (clubs' on-field performances); *Finances* (clubs being financially stable with diversified revenue streams); *Stadium* (facilities to reach minimum standards and add value to fan experience); and *Community* (maximise growth and generate new fan bases).[3]

Accordingly, for any club seeking entry into Super League, working on their financial sustainability and engaging with their fans and communities (including attracting new fans) are now just as important as winning matches. This implies that clubs will need to engage more seriously with fans not usually considered as 'stereotypical' followers of the sport (e.g. white, northern, working-class men) such as women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds and LGBTQ+ communities.[4] This is crucial when considering recent incidents of homophobia, such as in June 2021 when fans at a Bradford Bulls match taunted the referee with a stream of homophobic abuse in which stewards had failed to take action (Love Rugby League, 2021); and in August 2023 when another referee was targeted with 'aggressive homophobic messages' on Instagram following a fixture between Leeds Rhinos and Huddersfield Giants (Ostlere, 2023).

Moreover, in July 2019, reporting on the double-header Challenge Cup Semi-Finals for ITV Calendar News, Arif Ahmed was racially abused by fans. As he explained on his Twitter account cited by *Serious about Rugby League* (Conlon, 2019):

> The Challenge Cup final/semi-finals was difficult but fun to cover yesterday with four of six teams coming from the area I report on. Ruined for me by a Hull FC fan who told me to 'F**k off' (on camera) and 'F**k off back home' later on. And a Halifax fan who asked if I was from 'Bollywood' and 'If I fancied him'. A shame for the RFL, the two clubs, one who I've worked for in the past, and the rest of the Rugby League community who were helpful, great and happy to talk to me after games regardless if their side won or lost.

Against the backdrop of the aforementioned developments in rugby league, the heralding of a 'New Age' of gender sporting equality in the UK (Pope et al., 2022), as well as a culture of diminishing homophobia and more inclusive displays of masculinity that deviate from orthodox and hegemonic forms (Anderson, 2009, 2012; Anderson & McGuire, 2010; Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Roberts et al., 2017), in this exploratory study we are interested in offering a snapshot into what is happening in English rugby league terraces. We interrogate the above claims and consider whether the stereotypes of rugby league as a sport that struggles to reinvent its northern, white, working-class, and hegemonic masculine image which excludes women, minority ethnic, and LGBTQ+ communities still hold true (Long et al., 1997; Spracklen, 2002; Spracklen et al., 2010).

In order to do so, it becomes integral to consider rugby league fandom and its associated spaces (the terrace, the pub, etc.) to explore how rugby league fans talk about the game, about their community, and about 'being a man'. Do they reflect changing dynamics between fans themselves, their relationship to rugby league and how they talk about it, as well as how they negotiate and perform masculinities? As Richards and Parry (2020) argue, attending games do not only help foster a sense of community amongst fans, but the terraces could be utilised to observe, negotiate, and resist gendered, classed, and racialised norms as well as institutionalised power (Richards et al., 2022; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2022).

We utilised participant-observation ethnography (covert observation) since it is a long-established and legitimate way of exploring issues of identity, community, belonging and exclusion amongst sports fandom (Spracklen, 2022). We found that rugby league remains predominantly white and working class that continues to provide a space where its fans can find identity and belonging. Nonetheless, we also found that there are incremental changes taking place whereby there is more diversity particularly in terms of fans' gender and age but not of their ethnicity; signs of decreasing homophobia yet instances of heteronormativity being reinforced; the performance of diverse masculinities by men fans that, at times, shifted within a short period of time; and humour utilised to police 'acceptable' forms of masculinity as well as connect fans and players with one another. We argue that rugby league must do more to contend with the changes taking place within the game itself as well as with wider shifting notions of masculinity, race, and whiteness which could potentially disconcert its relationship to its traditional communities, for good or ill.

Literature review

Rugby league and (white) working-class masculinity

Rugby league has been viewed as a sport of working-class resistance and defiance, of (white) northern working-class culture and masculinity, of northern mill towns and mining communities (Denham, 2004; Hinchliffe, 2000; Spracklen, 2007); a model of inclusivity (Melling & Collins, 2004) and a trailblazing democratic sport with a 'predisposition to identify with those facing discrimination' (Collins, 2009, p. 145). It represents an imagined, imaginary community that is built on shared myths and symbols that are 'rooted in some (rose-tinted) 'reality' of the past: the myth of the

split [from rugby union in 1895]; gritstone; gritty men; and northerness – white, and working-class' (Spracklen et al., 2010, p. 398). It is within this imaginary community that masculine narratives are informed by working-class identities closely associated with manual labour (Collins, 2006, p. 150; Spracklen, 2007, p. 222) which, in turn, view rugby league as a hard, distinctive, and anti-establishment sport (Spracklen and Spracklen 2022). As Hutchins and Mikosza (1998, p. 247) argue, rugby league is a flag-carrier of masculinity and manliness. Whereby, similarly to other men-dominated team contact sports, it can help reproduce an ethos of orthodox masculinity that is grounded in homophobia, misogyny, the sexual objectification and degradation of women, and physical aggression (Anderson & McGuire, 2010; Dempster, 2009; Light & Kirk, 2000; Muir & Seitz, 2004; Pronger, 1990). This can be exacerbated by the presence and influence of alcohol on matchdays where drinking (and being able to handle) alcohol is viewed as an assertion of masculinity (Collins & Vamplew, 2002).

Unsurprisingly, the game's historic strident masculinity, significant levels of male chauvinism, and inability to deal with issues of racial stereotyping and institutionalised discrimination have hindered its ability to engage communities not only stratified by class, but also by gender and race (Collins, 2006, p. 190; 2009, p. 145). For example, crowds at rugby league are overwhelmingly white despite changing demographics in Northern England (Collins, 1998; 2020, p. 197). Long et al. (1997, p. 252) observed that there were more black rugby league players on an average matchday compared to those watching it. Although conducted in 1995, this observation still remains relevant given the conspicuous absence of spectators from black, Asian, and other minority groups. The game's perceived parochialism, exclusivity to the white working class, and association with copious alcohol consumption, represented an 'alien territory' (Long et al., 1997, p. 253) which hindered its ability to attract both, fans and players, particularly from Asian communities (Collins, 2020, p. 197). In short, rugby league has struggled to shake off its association with a northern, (de)-industrial, white, working-class, and (hetero)-masculine image (Long et al., 1997; Spracklen, 2002; Spracklen et al., 2010) that has historically excluded women, minority ethnic and LGBTQ+ communities.

Nonetheless, given how influential rugby league's imagined, imaginary community has been in shaping its history, myths, symbols, and perceptions of masculinities, such an imaginary community is also inevitably susceptible to change whereby 'its symbolic boundaries will always be sites of contestation over meaning and interpretation, between insiders and outsiders' (Spracklen, 2007, p. 218). Rugby league must therefore contend with the aforementioned changes taking place within the game itself (e.g. the growth of women's rugby league, fandom as part of IMG's grading criteria, etc.), as well as with wider shifting notions of masculinity, race, and whiteness which will disconcert its relationship to its traditional communities.

Challenging hegemonic masculinity

Recent research highlights an evident change in the nature of masculinities which deviates from the more orthodox and hegemonic forms (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012; Nichols, 2018; Roberts et al., 2017; van Campenhout & van Hoven, 2014). Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT) maintains that within a culture

of diminishing homophobia and homohysteria (the fear of being socially perceived as gay), young men appear to exhibit attitudes and behaviours characterised by a softened version of masculinity, and that were once highly stigmatised (i.e. considered too feminine or would cause some to be perceived as gay) (Anderson & McGuire, 2010; McCormack & Anderson, 2010).[5] According to IMT, multiple masculinities can co-exist without any hierarchical arrangement whereby 'various forms of masculinity retain near equal cultural value and appeal' (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012, p. 370). This challenges Connell's (1987, 1995) Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (HMT) which is 'always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities, as well as in relation to women' (Connell, 1987, p. 183), whereby only one form of masculinity (hegemonic) is 'culturally exalted' above all others (Anderson & McGuire, 2010, p. 251; Connell, 1995, p. 77).[6]

For example, this was found evident in association football where Roberts et al. (2017) highlighted how elite young footballers in England performed such softened versions of masculinity, and Cashmore and Cleland (2012, p. 373) argued that English football fans are displaying increasingly liberal and tolerant attitudes towards masculinity and homosexuality evincing a 'decrease in cultural homophobia and a shifting away from hegemonic masculinity towards inclusive masculinities'. Murray and White (2017) research on Australian rugby league players found them to value inclusive masculinities through demonstrating pro-gay sentiments, being emotionally open, dressing in more feminine ways, and expressing feminine emotions and behaviours. Interestingly, these displays conflicted with Australia's rugby league media which attempts to construct and present orthodox perspectives on masculinity that 'lags behind the broader culture and the lived masculinity of the actual players' (Murray et al., 2016, p. 5). In rugby union, van Campenhout and van Hoven (2014, p. 1103) argued that masculinities and how they were performed, relied 'on the different spatial contexts within the club grounds and even though they all contribute to a hegemonic New Zealand masculinity […] not all spaces evoke the same performances'. Accordingly, they did not witness 'rugby masculinity' in all contexts (ibid., 1104) giving a nuanced account of how masculinities are performed beyond what is stereotypically expected.

However, IMT has been accused of promoting a discourse of undue optimism around men, masculinities, and social change which assumes that 'Anglo-American societies are somehow predisposed towards gender and sexual equality' (O'Neill, 2015, p. 109). It underplays the power relations and sexual politics between men and women, and in so doing exaggerates the centrality of homophobia to cultural definitions of masculinity (O'Neill, 2015, p. 111; Pope et al., 2022, p. 733). Problematically, IMT tends to credit young, white, heterosexual, middle-class men with the decline of homophobia thus downplaying the contributions of the LGBTQ+ movement (ibid.). For example, in Anderson and McGuire (2010, p. 258) study of university rugby union players, they concurred that their participants' privileged classed and racial backgrounds may have facilitated their ability to perform inclusive masculinities in ways not afforded to others from working-class and other marginalised backgrounds. This, de Boise (2015, p. 324) warns could end up as 'just another hegemonic strategy for some heterosexual, white, middle-class men to legitimately maintain economic, social, and political power in the wake of LGBTQ+ rights', with little done to address structural inequalities. Issues of class and its interlinkages with masculinities and how they

are performed and resisted must remain central, especially when considering a sport immersed in working-class culture such as rugby league.

Performative masculinities in contemporary sports fandom

It is important that we consider uncovering the multiple, contextual meanings behind sport fandom and their various performances regardless of their gender. As Osborne and Coombs (2013, p. 678) argue, this will enable us 'to understand the flexibility and fluidity of our roles and how they are performed. Roles are neither permanent nor fixed; rather, they constantly shift and reshape over time and across situations'. We believe that Pope et al. (2022) model of fans' performances of masculinities offers a productive framework to apply and further develop through our research. In their research on men football fans in the UK, Pope et al. (2022) utilised both Connell's (1987, 1995) HMT and Anderson's (2009) IMT to advance a three-fold theoretical model of fans' performances of masculinities: *progressive masculinities* referred to 'men fans who exhibit more gender-equitable attitudes characterised by IMT'; *overtly misogynistic masculinities* are 'men fans who openly exhibit hostile, sexist and misogynistic attitudes, characterised by HMT'; and *covertly misogynistic masculinities* are 'men fans who express gender progressive attitudes in some public arenas, but more privately or in other social conditions identify with hegemonic masculinity' (Pope et al., 2022, p. 735).

The authors argue that their model helps demonstrate how fans' positions are not fixed but can move across a 'continuum of performances of masculinities' (ibid., 745), where it is possible for a fan to shift between performing progressive and misogynistic masculinities depending on the social context. For example, they found that some fans, although expressed progressive masculinities publicly (e.g. discussing women's involvement in sport positively and by supporting gender equality agendas), still demonstrated misogynistic attitudes privately (e.g. viewed women's sport as inferior). Invoking Goffman (2022, p. 93), expressions of misogyny tend to be displayed 'back-stage' where the performer can 'relax', drop their 'front' and step out of character. These can include pubs, work, and stadiums/terraces 'spaces with other men with whom they can expect to share similar values and ideologies' (Pope et al., 2022, p. 743).

They conclude by arguing that there are signs of a shift towards expressions and acceptance of progressive (inclusive) masculinities amongst football fans, yet there is also evidence of persisting sexism and misogyny, including amongst young men, being expressed in covert ways. This is exacerbated by the use of irony and humour (including banter) to make sexism and misogyny difficult to challenge, to police appropriate forms of masculinity, and to hide homophobia behind a veneer of banter that is open to subjective interpretation (McDowell & Schaffner, 2011; Murray et al., 2016; Nichols, 2018; Pope et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2017).

Although the above typologies were not developed to accommodate men rugby league fans in England, they still offer productive avenues to explore in order to analyse men rugby league fans in a more nuanced manner. One which allows us agency to observe the changing dynamics between fans themselves and others, their relationship to rugby league and how they talk about it, as well as how they negotiate and perform masculinities against the backdrop of various changes taking place within the game itself and its communities, more generally. In short, can rugby league

shake off its association with a northern, (de)-industrial, white, working-class, and (hetero)-masculine imaginary community that has historically excluded women, minority ethnic, and LGBTQ+ communities?

Methodology

We utilised participant-observation ethnography since it is a long-established and legitimate way of exploring issues of identity, community, belonging and exclusion amongst sports fandom (see Spracklen, 2022). Covert observation is a successful research method that allows us to stand on a rugby league terrace and observe, listen and record (Calvey, 2008, 2017, 2019; Ripley, 2018). Covert observation was necessary as we are exploring how these rugby league fans talk about sensitive issues such as belonging and the contested (gendered, racialised, classed) identity politics of exclusion. If we asked for their permission, it would change how they spoke and acted in this space. In short, we would not have been able to observe their 'backstage' performance (Goffman, 2022) likely to be abetted by alcohol consumption.

With formal support from the RFL we identified and secured approval from four Championship clubs[7] that represented rugby league's heartlands, and we named them West Lancashire, East Lancashire, West Yorkshire, East Yorkshire, and Cumbria purely as geographical markers. Each club is located in post-industrial towns with significant problems of marginalisation and social exclusion (Pike, 2022). Three of the towns are predominantly white.[8] We also obtained the RFL's permission to observe the *Summer Bash*[9] in 2022 which formed the pilot stage of the project. In addition to observing the *Summer Bash* weekend, we observed the home terraces of each club (half a day or one evening over August and September of that year, depending on the time the chosen match kicked off). Our observations took place whilst standing on the terraces as opposed to being seated, since standing is deemed to provide a sense of masculine solidarity and reinforces boisterous male bonding and excessive drinking (King, 1997; Richards et al., 2022, p. 936). We took fieldnotes in situ as soon as it was safe to do so, and we were not challenged at any point (Kellehear, 2020). The fieldnotes were written up immediately and shared between the researchers. We used Discourse Tracing (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009) to frame the data analysis, whereby it is an analytical tool that helps connect our literature review with the different levels of meaning of the observations, behaviours, practices and words.

Practical limitations and ethical considerations

Given the exploratory nature of this study alongside its small data set and short time-frame, a number of limitations must be highlighted. We were unable to systematically compare between the home terraces of each club. With the exception of the *Summer Bash*, all other observations were conducted by each researcher separately making the 'triangulation' of data difficult. Although we shared our notes immediately afterwards, this was not sufficient to confirm if any significant differences existed between the games played during the *Summer Bash* and those played at the home grounds as well as between the fans of each club. Moreover, we did not observe matches in the Play-offs/Finals when more will have been at stake for the clubs and their fans.

Utilising covert observation carries practical limitations concerning our ability to accurately capture class, ethnicity, gender, and sexualities when such information is not self-reported (Krause, 2021). In terms of social class, our affirmation that rugby league remains a working-class sport was dependent on assumptions based on the locality, fans' strong accents, and how they presented themselves as evident in this fieldwork note:

> *The fans were all speaking with strong local accents and many wore club merchandise […] A tiny percentage of fans at the Summer Bash wore fancier clothes that denote they were middle-class.* (Fieldwork Note: 30/07/2022 Summer Bash)

We appreciate that it is difficult to precisely assert fans' social class based on these criteria, nonetheless we are confident that the majority of fans observed were from working-class backgrounds. As for capturing sexuality, it was dependent on over-hearing a small number of LGBTQ+ fans in attendance as well as through observing their chants and humour as discussed later. For ethnicity, all we had was our judgements based on our knowledge and census of the local populations around the grounds. We are of course aware of the ethics of researching people without their permission, and the importance of informed consent in the history of social scientific practice. However, there is a precedent set by Calvey (2019) whereby he did not obtain informed consent yet was still able to produce useful data, whereas we had permission from the sport's governing body (The RFL), the clubs included, and from the Local Research Ethics Co-ordinator at the School in one of the authors' universities. We took the utilitarian view that the need to see how fans performed without knowing they are being watched over-rode the golden rule of informed consent. And, in this case, we already had informed consents from the clubs, and informed consent and active support from the RFL.

Results and discussion

> *Two Carlings for a fiver offer in the bar. Smell of beer and burgers.* (Fieldwork Note: 07/08/2022, West Lancashire vs East Yorkshire)

Alcohol, particularly beer and ale consumption, comprises an integral part of sport fans' matchday experience with the pub representing an ideal setting for pre- and post-match gathering of fans with rugby league not being much different (Bandura et al., 2024; Collins & Vamplew, 2002; Dixon, 2014; Purves et al., 2022). The pub becomes part of what Bale (2002, p. 19) describes as a 'sportscape' which also includes the takeaways and streets surrounding the stadium with pubs working 'to evoke the different senses, mainly sight but also smell, sound and nostalgia, that contribute to a positive sense of place for a sports fan' (Richards & Parry, 2020, p. 653). Initially we did not intend to observe pubs or bars outside of the stadiums visited, but it was difficult to avoid altogether as these fieldwork notes attest:

> *[Fans]Drinking on the way to the train, but not visibly drunk. Polite conversations about how the season is going and a sense of camaraderie when the first train got cancelled and were able to find out the next train that stopped at Leeds.* (Fieldwork Note: 30/07/2022 Summer Bash)

On the bus up Otley Road. Small clutches of fans from the big Lancashire club heading for the Wetherspoons. Others stood outside. Around the Skyrack junction, hundreds of fans in both pubs. Mixed with stags in fancy dress doing the Otley run. All RL fans pass me by as I go down to the ground. (Fieldwork Note: 30/07/2022 Summer Bash)

Dropped off by taxi right outside a carvery/pub close to the ground. Sunny and warm weather with home fans (and a few away fans) sat on benches outside mostly drinking beer from plastic pint glasses. (Fieldwork Note: 21/08/2022 East Lancashire v North Yorkshire)

Although pre-match drinking is a hardly surprising observation, nonetheless, in the pubs and bars we observed fans were not segregated but mingled even if they supported rival teams. Moreover, these spaces were not predominantly occupied by men, but there was a substantial number of women and families comprising different generations, a point to which we will return to later. What makes rugby league distinctive, compared to football, another sport closely associated with alcohol consumption, is that alcohol is allowed in rugby league stands. Our decision to utilise covert observation was in part driven by the opportunity to observe fans' potential 'backstage' performances and whether these were exacerbated by alcohol which allowed them to 'cut loose' and 'let go' (Palmer, 2014, p. 267) as well as express and assert their masculinity (Collins & Vamplew, 2002).

There was a lot of alcohol consumed at each match observed:

Smell of beer as more fans arrive drunk, carrying beers ahead of the Yorkshire derby. (Fieldwork Note: 30/07/2022 Summer Bash)

Youngsters in, each carrying two bottles of lager in each hand. Stand and clap home players warming up. Maybe 20% fans overweight. Half-Time – lots of beer brought in by the younger men and some of the young women with them (Fieldwork Note: 07/08/2022 West Lancashire vs East Yorkshire)

Bunch of lads/young men to my right jeering and bashing the size of the stand to make a loud noise as match starts. Hardly anyone looks aggressively drunk, lots of older men with red faces though, and they keep nipping to the gents so I guess these are drunk. (Fieldwork Note: 07/08/2022 West Lancashire vs East Yorkshire)

This had the potential to create unease, yet fans were generally polite and respectful of each other. This was observed in various spaces of the 'sportscape' such as when queuing and having their bags searched at the turnstiles, queuing for the toilets and the concession stands where we overheard fans chatting about the weather, the ongoing game, and other games they watched over the weekend. There was some swearing and anger aimed at the game being played and the referee which was caused by fans who had been clearly drinking all day, especially at the *Summer Bash*. This, at times, spilled on to the outside:

6.30pm: observed an encounter between two opposing group of fans outside Headingley. Both groups visibly drunk, lewd remarks and gestures displayed, but then walked away without anything escalating. (Fieldwork Note: 30/07/2022 Summer Bash)

The excessive alcohol consumption observed is certainly not something unique to rugby league but is also intimately linked to football, rugby union, and even Australian Rules Football which raises concerns regarding the wider public health and social

harms associated with such cultures of intoxication where high-risk alcohol consumption is normalised (Bandura et al., 2024; Chambers & Sassi, 2019; Nicholson et al., 2014; Purves et al., 2022). Other problematic alcohol-related behaviours included chucking beer when scoring tries:

> *Pints thrown in the air when East Lancashire club score. Some of these pints were nearly full spraying everyone in the vicinity. A few fans voiced their disagreement from where I was standing, but no problematic responses from fans who were closer that I could observe. This is something that has been creeping into the game for over two seasons. This may discourage older fans and fans who do not drink from attending games.* (Fieldwork Notes: 30/07/2022 Summer Bash)

This, as we further develop afterwards, risks deterring prospective fans, especially those who do not drink or feel comfortable being around (or covered in) alcohol. Moreover, there was an incident during the East Lancashire vs North Yorkshire game whereby heteronormativity was reinforced by a group of drunk fans through mocking a young man for having a stylised hairstyle, suggesting that he did not display an 'acceptable' form of masculinity. Similar behaviour was demonstrated during the *Summer Bash* when fans of an opposing club chanted 'He's got Bird S**t On His Head' aimed at a popular player well-known for dyeing his hair blonde. The player responded by touching his hair and shushing the fans after scoring each try. In her ethnography of a rugby union club, Nichols (2018, p. 78) reports similar interactions amongst her participants where 'banter' was used to draw attention to a player wearing his hair in a top knot where the 'banterous tone was implemented to frame the comments as light hearted, when arguably the meaning was serious and sexist, acting to sustain and protect the masculine ideals values in the setting'.

As per Pope et al. (2022, p. 745) point on fans moving across a 'continuum of performances of masculinities', including those in contradiction to one another, we observed a number of instances where such swift shifts were noticeable:

> *Clapping for the 'Tackle It' campaign*[10] *[prior to kick-off], fans do it but some half-heartedly. 50–100 fans chanting/singing aggressively, to the tune of Que Sera Sera – 'go get your father's gun, and shoot the [rival] scum, we hate [rival]'. The fans singing it are young, white men and sing it with meaning and contempt.* (Fieldwork Note: 30/07/2022 Summer Bash)

> *Clapping for the 'Tackle It' campaign. Aggressive chanting after a few good defensive tackles at the start of the game: 'Get into them, and f**k them up'.* (Fieldwork Note: 31/07/2022 Summer Bash)

It is difficult to decipher solely from observing whether fans truly supported the *Tackle It* campaign, or whether it was part of their 'front door performance' to fit with the script to demonstrate progressive attitudes in public (i.e. demonstrating covertly misogynistic masculinities). It could very well be part of their routine performances on the terraces such as, for example, the 'half-hearted booing' aimed at opposition teams that we witnessed in a number of games. Interestingly, the use of bad language and offensive chants decreased in the presence of children and families in the immediate vicinity:

> *Some boos when the visitors entered the field, but perhaps more routine than aggressive. Roars when the home team entered. Again, there was not as much bad language as I expected perhaps because of the large numbers of children, including some very young children.* (Fieldwork Note: 27/08/2022 East Yorkshire vs Cumbria Reds)

Fans supported and applauded local amateur youth teams (usually mixed-gender) who played short matches during half-time as we did not witness any abuse or ridicule aimed at them. The use of humour and irony were noticeable throughout our observations albeit for different reasons to those found in other studies (Murray et al., 2016; Nichols, 2018; Pope et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2017). For example, instead of using humour and irony to mask homophobia, a small number of LGBTQ+ fans with a drum were heard chanting 'If you can't bang a woman bang a drum' (Fieldwork Note: 31/07/2022 Summer Bash). Despite its misogynistic undertones, its appropriation in such an ironic fashion highlights the complexities surrounding the use of homosexually-themed chanting, especially against the backdrop of changing cultural contexts of decreased homophobia and how it is interpreted (Magrath, 2018; McCormack, 2011). This, we believe, is worth further exploration within rugby league fandom.

Humour served to connect fans with other fans (including supporters of rival teams) where 'mutual taunting' was evident but never aggressive or problematic whether on the terraces or outside:

> *There was plenty of individual banter among mixed groups of fans, some of whom could be workmates or neighbours given the two club's and town's proximity. Both sets of fans were vocal but there was no aggression in the mutual taunting.* (Fieldwork Note: 29/08/2022 West Yorkshire Blues vs West Yorkshire Greens)

Moreover, it represented a way of relating to players given how close some of the terraces are to the action taking place on the field:

> *From within a small group of fans (predominantly men alongside two or three women), one young man shouted at North Yorkshire's number 7 (who had previously played for East Lancashire): 'hey [number 7], you fat b*****d'. The player heard this but laughed it off with the physio, turned back to face the crowd smiled and waved his hand which was reciprocated with a few claps from the home fans.*
>
> *The result was on its way to becoming a new club and Championship record. East Lancashire's goalkicker got booed jokingly by the fans for missing a conversion attempt (his first and only miss of the game). He appreciated the joke, smiled and raised his hand in apology.* (Fieldwork Note: 21/08/2022 East Lancashire vs North Yorkshire)

Given our limited sample of observations, it is difficult to ascertain whether such interactions between fans and players do take place on a wider scale, especially within bigger stadiums and when there is more at risk for the home team (e.g. a play-off match). Nonetheless, it arguably highlights rugby league players' closeness to the local communities they represent and, in many cases, where they grew up and still live.

A key finding from our observations was the relative diversity of fans particularly in terms of gender and age, but not of ethnicity:

> *Stood in West Lancashire home stand. All white working-class, maybe 150 people at this time but fills up to 1500 before kick-off. Some mums with dads and kids, some young women wearing lots of make-up and fake eyelashes. When I arrive, it is mainly older men, some older couples, maybe 80% male.* (Fieldwork Note: 07/08/2022 West Lancashire vs East Yorkshire)
>
> *Found a standing spot right behind the sticks with East Lancashire fans. A sizeable number at that point were older presumably retired fans, both men and women, enjoying the sunshine. Definitely more women and older couples attending in comparison to East Lancashire's match*

during the Summer Bash. Terrace started filling up with younger fans before kick-off. From where I was standing, 60% men and 40% women, almost everyone was white. (Fieldwork Note: 21/08/2022 East Lancashire vs North Yorkshire)

A lively sizeable Bank Holiday crowd on a sunny day and atmosphere to boot. There was a higher proportion of women and children than I expected. It was not the older male crowd with the stereotypical flat caps. The fans were almost entirely white with almost no BAME [Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic] supporters. The crowd was younger than I had expected, with a sizable number of children in 'party atmosphere'. (Fieldwork Note: 27/08/2022 East Yorkshire vs Cumbria Reds)

Boisterous atmosphere for what is a local derby. Nevertheless, it was a good atmosphere with a mixed age group. The crowd included plenty of young people, young girls as well as boys. Many of the young people were players at local teams wearing their club kit. This included BAME young people. There was a pair of Asian adult couples. (Fieldwork Note: 29/08/2022 West Yorkshire Blues vs West Yorkshire Greens)

Although predominantly men, there was a large number of women fans attending all games observed. As discussed in our methodology, we consciously chose to stand as opposed to sit given that standing on the terraces provided a sense of masculine solidarity that reinforced male bonding and excessive drinking (King, 1997; Richards et al., 2022). It is therefore likely that more women and younger fans would have been located in the seated stands, yet there were still more families in the standing terraces than we had initially expected. We could infer that this demonstrates an improvement in rugby league's ability to attract younger pre-teenage fans, but this, as the following fieldwork note demonstrates, should be taken with a pinch of salt:

Different generations including a number of families with young children, some of whom preferred to play on their phones rather than watch the game. I've noticed this in a few other games recently, especially if they were played on a Sunday afternoon where more families are likely to attend. Some children don't seem interested in the game being played in front of them, despite their families' engagement with it. (Fieldwork Note: 21/08/2022 East Lancashire vs North Yorkshire)

This is beyond the scope of the paper, but it signifies an issue worth considering by the RFL to how they could engage these much younger fans in ways that resonate with their everyday experiences and interests. A small number of LGBTQ+ fans were in attendance, but this was only observed in the *Summer Bash* and not in the other games. Encouragingly, numerous fans with learning and/or physical disabilities were in attendance in the games observed:

There was a young man with learning disabilities attending the match with his dad (or guardian). He was very engaged with the team, cheering on their tries and tackles and chanting alongside other fans. A few fans in wheelchairs were also present and sat in the designated spots at the front of the terrace. (Fieldwork Note: 21/08/2022 East Lancashire vs North Yorkshire)

The fans were nearly all white as far as it is possible to assess. There were a small number of British Asian and Black British fans identified supporting clubs that are known to be in districts that are polyethnic – and this is quite positive as previous research picked up an almost complete absence of these fans (e.g. Long et al., 1997; Spracklen et al., 2010). Nonetheless, there was still more ethnic diversity in terms of

stewards and hospitality staff compared to fans which, as we argue later, still represents a main obstacle in rugby league's ability to attract new fans from 'non-traditional' backgrounds.

Overall, fans were generally polite and respectful of each other, stewards, players, officials and others on the pitch (e.g. the cheerleaders and young local players). We did not witness anything particularly egregious around men fan's behaviour at the games we attended. No fan was aggressively violent, or overtly racist, sexist or homophobic, and no one leered at young women with the heterosexual gaze as far as we could tell from the different spaces we inhabited. Nonetheless, there were instances of problematic incidents caused by drunk fans. Based on our observations, we outline a number of implications that will present a snapshot of where rugby league is in terms of its ongoing efforts to reinvent its northern, white, working-class, and hegemonic masculine image. And outline practical (policy) suggestions that could help make rugby league and its terraces more inclusive for women, people from minority ethnic communities, and people who identify as LGBTQ+. This is going to be crucial given that the onus is now on clubs to better engage with their fans and communities as part of IMG's grading criteria which now carries serious consequences regardless of their on-field performances.

Alcohol comprised an integral part of a rugby league's matchday experience in the pub, the stadium (e.g. hospitality, concessionary stands and kiosks), and the terraces. Since fans are allowed to drink alcohol in the terraces, we, unsurprisingly, witnessed plentiful amounts being consumed by both, men and women. Although we did not witness overtly aggressive or offensive behaviour by drunk fans, there were occasions where alcohol contributed to heteronormativity being reinforced as well as spraying others with pints which many fans disagreed with. This could contribute to deterring fans who do not drink or feel comfortable being around alcohol (for religious reasons or otherwise). Given the significance and normalcy of alcohol consumption in team sports (Bandura et al., 2024; Dixon, 2014; Purves et al., 2022) as well as the importance of sponsorship deals with alcohol producers (Chambers & Sassi, 2019; Nicholson et al., 2014) it will remain difficult to ban alcohol consumption during games. In a report commissioned by Alcohol Change UK[11] (Fylan et al., 2023), it explored the attitudes and experiences of British Asians watching and participating in cricket and rugby union and outlined suggestions for making these sports more inclusive and welcoming to diverse communities. For example, through the introduction of alcohol-free zones that are clearly marked and advertised as well as alcohol-limited areas where people are able to drink up to a certain level. The report also suggested advertising campaigns to discourage fans from drinking alcohol to excess as well as banning people who have caused issues as a result of excessive drinking. Moreover, it called for demonstrating zero tolerance towards racist behaviour and introducing anti-discrimination training for stewards and staff. Arguably, these recommendations are applicable to the RFL and rugby league clubs more generally in their efforts to widen their catchment and links to their local community, especially in polyethnic areas.

We observed that rugby league fandom entailed a number of roles being performed that, at times, shifted within a short amount of time. For example, the fans' overt support of the 'Tackle It' campaign prior to kick-offs rapidly changed to aggressive and sometimes offensive chanting in contradiction to the message being conveyed

by the campaign. This raises the issue of whether fans were merely 'performing inclusivity' in public/front stage, with some potentially holding misogynistic masculinities covertly, or they were genuinely supportive of this (i.e. displaying progressive masculinities). Future research that utilises semi-structured interviews with fans regarding these campaigns would complement our observations.

Humour and irony were widespread throughout our observations supporting other studies (Murray et al., 2016; Nichols, 2018; Pope et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2017). Humour served to police appropriate forms of masculinity, but it also connected fans with each other (including rival fans), as well as with players. A key observation relates to a small number of LGBTQ+ fans who were able to reappropriate homophobic and misogynistic chants in ways that gave them a voice when supporting their team during the *Summer Bash*. There is still work to be done by rugby league clubs to attract more fans and players from the LGBTQ+ community. However, Keighley Cougars (who are owned by Ryan O'Neill and his husband Kaue Garcia, part of a small number of openly gay owners of professional sport clubs) are offering ways forward through their work in raising awareness and creating platforms for the LGBTQ+ community within rugby league.[12] It is crucial for other clubs and the RFL to not only embrace similar initiatives to Keighley Cougars', but to improve awareness of existing policies and initiatives, work on developing LGBTQ+ fan groups, and improve visibility through more (social) media exposure.

Our observations did confirm that rugby league fans are still predominantly white despite being played in areas with large polyethnic communities. This diversity has not been successfully translated in the terraces despite the increasing number of minority ethnic fans we observed compared to previous studies. In addition to the prevalence of alcohol, other reasons have been put forward to explain this conundrum. For example, rugby league has never been part of the historical development of minority ethnic communities in England where other sports were deemed to be more appealing, such as football and cricket (Long et al., 1997, p. 252). Given rugby league's marginalisation within British sport, it is not usually viewed as capable of enhancing social integration (Collins, 1998, p. 165, 2009, p. 142). Another factor revolves around the crucial role family and peer networks play in introducing white players and fans to rugby league (Melnick & Wann, 2011; Spracklen, 2022) whereby such networks are not always found in the same capacity amongst Asian and black players and fans who must find other routes into the game (Long et al., 1997, p. 257). Encouragingly, in December 2024 the RFL alongside the British Asian Rugby Association (BARA) hosted an event in Bradford City Hall to launch a groundbreaking report on South Asians in rugby league. This event was attended by numerous RFL and local community leaders as well as current and previous British Asian rugby league players and administrators, perhaps signalling future opportunities for increased participation.[13]

Given the limited scope of this study, we cannot claim that this is representative of rugby league fans' behaviour, yet we will attempt to answer our main question: has rugby league been able to shake off its image as a northern, white, working-class, and hegemonic masculine sport? The answer is yes and no. Rugby league remains white, working class, and continues to provide a space and a game where its working-class fans can find identity and belonging. When the towns and cities in Northern England remain precarious in the wave of post-industrial austerity, rugby

league provides pride and a sense of purpose for many even if it can be exclusionary for some communities. At the same time, we can argue that there are incremental changes taking place: there are signs of decreasing homophobia (at least overt homophobia), the performance of diverse masculinities by men fans, the acceptance of an increased number of women and families in the terraces, and the 'front stage' support of the RFL's inclusive and diversity initiatives. In the final analysis, then, rugby league is making good progress, but there is still much to be done.

Conclusion

Our research shows that sports fandom remains a leisure space in which belonging, and exclusion, are made. Rugby league, like other professional sports with significant spectatorships, is trying to sustain its historic clubs while trying to find new fans against the backdrop of changes taking place within the sport and the communities in which it is based. The growth of women's rugby league, wheelchair rugby league, physical disability and learning disability rugby league is proving that the sport can be inclusive, diverse, and supportive of the communities that believe it to represent an integral part of their lives. However, rugby league must do more to contend with the changes taking playing within the game itself as well as with wider shifting notions of masculinity, race, and whiteness which could potentially disconcert its relationship to its traditional communities. As Spracklen and Spracklen (2022, p. 330) succinctly argue:

> Rugby league fans and the people who run rugby league are quite happy to remain a sport played in the small towns of small parts of the north of England. It is time for the sport, and its fans, to be honest and move on from its foundation story that reflected, we can hope, the best thinking of rugby league folk of that era, and rethink rugby league's habitus, identity, and community, and what is considered the right cultural capital, to reflect the diversity of many communities of England.

We believe that rugby league is more than capable of doing so.

Notes

1. International Management Group (IMG) is an American global sports events and talent management company.
2. The Grading Criteria can be found here: https://www.rugby-league.com/uploads/docs/IMG%20&%20Rugby%20League%20Grading%20Criteria%202023.pdf.
3. Clubs can score a maximum of 5 points for Fandom (25% overall weighting), 5 points for Performance (25%), 4.5 points for Finances (22.5%), 3 points for Stadium (15%) and 2.5 points for Community (12.5%).
4. In February 2024, the Rugby Football League (RFL) introduced 'Respect', a game-wide campaign 'to promote positive environments for all participants in our sport and combatting any anti-social or discriminatory behaviours': https://www.rugby-league.com/governance/inclusion-diversity/respect.
5. IMT does not argue that homophobia is totally absent, rather there is a 'growing redundancy of its significance for young men' (Roberts et al., 2017, p. 342), especially in the Global North.
6. Anderson (2009, pp. 97–98) maintains that, although inclusive masculinities can help reduce sexism, they 'do not guarantee the erosion of patriarchy'.

7. The Championship is the second highest division of British rugby league.
8. Census 2021 data released 29 November 2022: https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/ethnicgroupnationalidentitylanguageandreligioncensus2021inenglandandwales.
9. The Summer Bash is an annual event where a round of Championship matches are played in one stadium over a weekend. The 2022 Summer bash was held at Leeds Headingley stadium.
10. The 'Tackle It' campaign represents the RFL's Action Plan on Inclusion and Diversity 2020–2025: https://www.rugby-league.com/governance/inclusion-&-diversity/tackle-it.
11. Alcohol Change UK is a leading alcohol charity working to significantly reduce serious alcohol harm in the UK and particularly through tackling White-centric approaches to reducing alcohol harm (https://alcoholchange.org.uk/).
12. Keighley Cougars' LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Statement can be found here: https://keighleycougars.uk/lgbtqiaplus. Their initiatives include organising the first 'pride' match in rugby league and professional sport in the UK, raising money for LGBTQ+ charities through their special edition pride shirts, and dedicating a match to LGBTQ+ History Month in February 2024.
13. We were unable to obtain a copy of this report, however, more information can be found here: https://www.rugby-league.com/article/63322/launch-of-groundbreaking-south-asians-in-rugby-league-insight-report and https://bararugby.co.uk/launch-of-groundbreaking-south-asians-in-rugby-league-insight-report/.

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