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# It's the way you tell 'em - storytelling from the touchline

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Keywords: *storytelling, creative nonfiction, rugby league, touchline behaviour*

## Abstract

Storytelling as a mode of research is the focus of this paper, but centred upon the topic of rugby; more specifically, the touch-line culture of Rugby Football League. This article, which is a development in ongoing PhD research, provides a glimpse in to the social complexities of (i) some youths playing the game, (ii) some parents emotional investments in their offspring to play the game, and (iii) the attitudes and behaviours of some match officials. The stories reveal some aspects of lived experience in this social arena, but in the boiling-pot of competition, expectations, and, the mud and sweat of physical and mental effort. The take home message from this strategy in research is not to merely tell or report upon goings on, but to show and reveal aspects this social phenomenon in a way that may have some resonance with the people within it. From an ethical stance of striving for greater good, if this research can act as a mirror for some unsavoury touch-line behaviour, it may help to bring about change within that social world.

## Introduction

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 the fact 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:



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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 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 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.

The above is a snippet from an early personal narrative entitled, *Ten Minutes to First Half: starting tales by a rugby mum*. I start with this as it provides a personal context for my ethnographic research into grass roots rugby league culture. It is a story entwined with reflexive narrative and analytical insights and, while I didn't know it then, this story-telling approach would become my modus operandi in presenting and analysing data for my PhD research. Story telling is not a new phenomenon in sport, because of the very nature of how it is reported in the media. There are the stories of the actual game and the play and then there are the other stories involving off field

antics – the juicy bits that are discussed at length by TV pundits and the fans on social media with speculation and gossip rife. However, when conducting my ethnographic study, the naming of names or reporting style approach, as in sports reporting in the media, would be unethical. In this respect a subtler approach was called for (Spracklen *et al.*, 2010; Sugden, 2002). As I like to write, the use of creative non-fiction to represent facts gathered from the field seems a good fit for me. Creative non-fiction enables the researcher to record the raw data from the field in the form of field notes, to compare, contrast and assimilate observations, then write a storied account of the synthesis of those observations to illustrate an insight into the social complexities of the culture being studied. No additional tools are required so the aim is for the story to stay true to the lived experiences and observations of the researcher (Silverman, 2007). Fictional in form, yet factual in nature, delivering the story enables the researcher to consider and provide a vehicle for deeper understanding and analysis of the raw field observations (Smith, McGannon and Williams, 2015). Hence, the reason for my use of this approach is manifold – to enjoy the writing, to protect the people I observe within the culture, to protect myself as researcher and to stay true to the data without ‘giving away’ the punchline – I leave this to the reader to discover.

To illustrate the use of this style I have provided a selection of stories, or rather creative non-fiction pieces, that are derived from my observations in the field of study (with ethical approval from the University and the Rugby Football League National Governing Body) in an attempt to show what is going on, but not tell in report style. The aim is to invite the reader in, to help me peel back the layers of this complex problem. These are products from my data analysis, to communicate something of the issues the sport is facing, hopefully in an accessible way for the intended audience I hope to influence for the better. You might call these my first ‘tries’ at creative non-fiction (pardon the pun).

### **1. Balaclava Boys**

The operation began shortly after teatime as one of the agents was found rifling through a tumble dryer for his blackest kit. The need to be incognito had not escaped this young recruit, and as such his choice of attire was aimed at being non-descript. Every civilian knows that it is very important when in the field not to be spotted under the floodlights by any of the counter-intelligence, being spotted would mean the end of this recruit’s aspirations and his chance to transfer to Department R. Basically being spotted was very bad and would end any opportunity to engage in another mission for at least a year.

The supervising agent had opted for a black bubble jacket and black bobble hat, although this only added to the size of the man, so a black scarf was added to shield his face. The black car was waiting on the driveway and all that was left was to practice the plan for the operation, which was duly conducted at the top of the landing.

With the dogs standing guard and knowing their place to intercept any unwelcome attention, the plan was rehearsed, clarified and alternative measures agreed. This would be a night of success with the goal to accomplish the mission in as short a time as possible, and definitely to be back in time to catch the United match on TV. Plus, there would be others engaged in these activities tonight, so any hesitation would cost dearly. The agents had been here before and had learned from their mistakes. There would be no mistakes tonight.

The agents filed out of the door and into the waiting car. There are other agents on the street so boots could be put on later, once in the comfort of the car and on the road. The sight of boots to other rival agents would have most certainly revealed the plan. This would be very bad. The supervising agent was confident the young recruit knew the drill, and the action to take if any familiar vehicles or people were spotted in transit. The drill involved the young recruit sliding down (just short of the foot well) whilst the supervising agent would wave and smile politely at the known observer whilst inconspicuously mouthing to a song on the radio, additionally, the route would be changed if any pursuit were expected.

The agents arrived at the target location, the floodlights were fierce and the civilians plentiful. The supervising agent did a sweep of the car park and then scanned the location of the central part of the mission; the detection of any counter-intelligence would mean the end of the mission. The field, upon which the crux of the mission would be performed, and where the young recruit would be assessed as to his worth in joining Department R, was also checked. All seemed well as the agents headed for the gates and the supervising agent made the exchange. It was all down to the young recruit now and how he performed in the face of pressure and for the civilian assessors.

With the mission accomplished the agents headed back to the car, they hardly noticed the oncoming ambush. The interception was speedy and targeted. Agent Indigo had spotted her prey and wasted no time in beginning the interrogation. She too had a young recruit that had aspirations to accomplish the mission and join Department R. She was also aware of the supervising agent's history and his keen desire to promote his recruit. However, her recruit was younger and less experienced and so there was no threat to this mission, this time. The agents arrived home and began the paperwork; the civilian assessment of the young recruit had been favourable and he would be supported to join Department R. The paperwork would be emailed for ratification to counter-intelligence tomorrow, who would have no knowledge of the clandestine operation or indeed the many agents in the field on similar missions. The balaclava boys' secret ops would remain a falsehood, banned and increasingly an urban myth... until next year's missions at least, when the drills would be passed down to the next batch of young recruits.

**Epilogue:** *Boys in Balaclavas* was written at the beginning of the rugby league season and is a drawing together of my observations of the secretive world of pre-season player transfers and behaviour. The children involved are personified as the recruits and the Agents as parents. Counter-intelligence refers to league officials monitoring this illicit type of activity. The civilians refer to the rugby league community in the Junior league, who from observations are well versed in the type of activity referred to. The final sentence in the piece is a testament to the secrecy and denial of children training at other junior clubs without being registered with that club. A clear breach of the league ‘rules’.

## 2. Touchline Sonnet

His face is on the silver screen,  
 This man they must revere;  
 His title tells a thousand lies,  
 But this they cannot hear.  
 His stride is on a sodden pitch:  
 These kids to show the way,  
 He must avenge this youngster glitch,  
 To win another day.  
 They know this man and know his game;  
 To that they all agree;  
 This clear façade of public fame,  
 But this they should not see.  
 We love this sport with all its faults  
 So let’s not call these things assault.

**Epilogue:** *Touchline Sonnet* was my first attempt at using poetry as a type of non-creative fiction. The study of the structure of different styles of poetry, in this particular case the iambic pentameters of a sonnet, was no easy feat. Practising the ‘dudum dudum dudum dudum’ whilst at the same time trying to populate words that were true to observation I found difficult. I doubt whether Shakespeare had the same rudimentary challenges. The sonnet is focused on coaching staff and my observations of well-known coaches within the game and their behaviour aimed at winning rather than development, seemingly at all costs. The ‘youngster glitch’ refers to young referees about whom I had observed countless incidents of verbal abuse towards them. The references to seeing and hearing are testament to the openness in which these

coaches operate, whilst being seen and heard by touchline spectators. The final two lines refers to the disregard of such behaviours, by the culture to normalise and maintain a status quo, and to not jeopardise the 'sport'.

### **Too Much Sun**

It's a mid-day start as the sun beats down on a dry pitch on a hot June day. The players are warming up for the cup match and the referee calls time. The whistle blows and the crowd begin their usual commentary on the ensuing plays. But wait...this is quieter than usual, is it the heat from the sun I wonder, that's knocked the ferociousness out of the touchline? If only every week could be as subdued, perhaps touchline heat-lamps would be a good investment, fry them into silence. My thoughts are interrupted by having to move slightly to see the play at the far end of the pitch. The pitch is roped off but true to form, it's been pulled in on the half way line so it's closer towards the field of play by two parents eager to have a more intimate experience with the game. I contemplate shouting 'get back' but can't be bothered, it's the heat. Cries of 'off-side' 'come on ref' and 'that should be free play' follow, with an ad-hoc conversation between opposing supporters as to the poor decisions of the referee, judged of course from personal perspectives and biases but nevertheless worthy of a debate most weeks. The players look to be struggling in the heat but are doing well as it goes end to end with a few errors in possession making for an interesting game.

It's half time, it's 25 degrees on my phone which is burning up in my hand. I'm watching a scantily clad fella walk up and down the pitch in front of us. He has no shoes on and as I squirm in my socks and trainers I wish I had no shoes on. I contemplate sitting on the grass and taking them off, as the two women have done at the side of me. I'm not sure who this fella is but I think he's a linesman. He's raised his hand once but there's nothing to identify him as being an official, he's devoid of flag or high vis vest, but nevertheless he's collected the ball a couple of times when it went out of play so clearly qualifies as a volunteer participant, shoes or not.

I witness a half time conversation between the man next to me and another spectator, a coach. They chat about the dry hard pitch and injuries to players. This progresses on to players having injuries during matches and going off injured. The coach recounts a tale from the previous week about a player who injured his arm and subsequently was back at training a couple of days later.

'I would keep them on as they think they're injured but it's usually nothing',

'Exactly', says the other guy.

'It's part of the game'.

'Of course it is, it's a rough, tough game so you're bound to get knocks – toughens 'em up'.

And the whistle goes for the second half...

It's a close game and the coaches/coaching staff (I count 6) who are stood in the technical area, I assume, are beginning to become more vocal. I hear, 'get into them', 'pull 'em out' and 'take him out' being shouted by red t-shirt coach to his players. The latter remark causes the blue t-shirt coach to shout down the line,

'are you having a laugh, take him out?'

'Really?'

'What you shouting at?', retorts red t-shirt coach.

'You shouting take him out', replies blue t-shirt coach,

'No need'.

'F\*\*\* off',

'You f\*\*\* off' and then an argument ensues.

I notice that the group of lads watching the match nearby are finding this exchange amusing. I can see them laughing as they watch the 'grown-ups show' from the shade of a tree whilst sat on post protectors.

'What's he on about?' asks the shoeless woman from the floor at the side of me, 'he's been shouting all f\*\*\*\*\* match that one.' I don't reply: the sun is still beating down and I don't want to get into the usual topic of conversation about touchline behaviour.

I avert my gaze from the side show back to the match. The players look to be tiring now and the opposition team begin to take advantage of the open wings. One player gets penalised for a high tackle and swears at the referee. The red t-shirt coach runs onto the pitch to shouts of, 'get him off' and 'what's that muppet doing?' I hope they're referring to the coach not the player, or the referee for that matter. Play continues and the game ends with a conversion to take the opposition to a win and the next round of the cup. The crowd clap and shoeless fella begins to gather the touchline rope up. The players start to walk around the pitch clapping and we all clap, 'good game lads'. A few of us muster as the losing team passes by.

The crowd starts to disperse and walk back to the car park as I remain attempting to ascertain whether my burning mobile phone is still a solid and will ever work again. I'm stood on the touchline still, and I watch the coaches gather the water bottles and paraphernalia to take back to the changing rooms. I can feel the sun on the back of my neck and hear the distant chatter of the spectators, carrying their fold up chairs back to their cars. Two or three people remain half-heartedly clapping and talking to each other. Three forwards from the winning team are slowly walking towards me still clapping accompanied by red t-shirt coach, their coach who is clapping. I can see the beads of sweat on the lads' foreheads and their hair stuck to their heads. Then he turns to them, away from the touchline, and he says to his players, 'you men were shit'.

And the clouds come and I no longer feel that sun, or hear the chatter. A silent stillness has enveloped the field. I stare at red t-shirt coach but he doesn't see me, why

would he? I can feel my eyes narrowing behind my sunglasses and that tight feeling in my chest that reminds me of when I were a teenager. I feel no compassion for this man, no disappointment at his remark, no understanding of his perspective. I feel only anger, disgust and dread. I want to shout at him. I want to ask him whether he has any idea what he's potentially doing to these kids and the potential consequences of his words upon them. I want to shout it so loudly that they'll hear it everywhere. But I don't... because I'd be no different to him. I know I need to be righteous and restrained and well, academic. I stand there as the three forwards walk past me and I see that the tallest one has tears in his eyes. He looks away as he sees me watching and wipes his face.

'Hurry up mum' is the jolting instruction from my son who's standing under a tree in the distance. I walk slowly towards him and back to the car and I think about things and my reasons for being here and doing this. We are driving home and my son says, 'what did you think of the match?' I reply to him with some vague offerings on certain parts of the game. Then he says, 'are you crying mum?' and I say, 'no son, it's just too much sun', and we both say no more about it.

**Epilogue:** *Too Much Sun* is on the edge of the intersection of truth in content, fiction in form, in that it is almost the truth in both. It teeters on the edge of real time reporting but refrains from identifying any incriminating facts. The reflexive thoughts at the end are my own, that have been experienced so frequently within my fieldwork, so as not to have been evoked and 'seen' at any one particular place or event. The use of reflection and narration of reflexive thoughts within stories, I have found to be useful in tracking where I have been in my development as a researcher, at those points, what my feelings were and my position within the field. A balance between showing the story and revealing myself as a character within it has been difficult to achieve on occasion. The personal restraint to not show and tell, but just to show, I have found particularly challenging.

## Discussion

Ethnographic research is rarely a 'pure' method of study, can be messy and outcomes difficult to predict; in line with human nature. Whilst data can be rich and plentiful, careful consideration needs to be paid as to what to do with the data and how to present the story for wider consumption (Sugden 2002). I have discovered that to compose a piece of creative non-fiction enables me as a researcher to not only present data, but to intrinsically analyse it during the composition phase. It requires consideration of a beginning, middle and end and to examine what the message or purpose of the story might be and to whom (Frank, 2015). I have begun to select points of ethical interest more purposefully and to consider the ways that these points can be represented by characters and settings. I have discovered that my position as a participant in the culture being studied has altered as my observational skills and

stories have developed; my initial idealist notion that I could remain fully immersed in the culture has changed (Wacquant, 2004). I now find that the compulsion to intervene in behaviour I consider wrong, as a parent or mother at odds with my role as researcher (McFee, 2004). After all, what researcher would curtail her own data? This is morally challenging for me and one I have had many thoughts about. A story will emerge from these thoughts I am sure.

The use of creative non-fiction and storytelling has allowed me the creative freedom to represent field observations in ways that appeal to my own skills and interests, in short, to indulge in the enjoyment of at least some aspects of my research away from unsavoury touchline antics. Whilst some ask me what I've seen or heard, or seek the 'truth', storytelling enables me to represent that truth as I have experienced it through ethnographic study. Whilst some believe that there is no ontological truth, (a paradox in itself and well worth a read of Nietzsche *et al* but thankfully not for now), only personal interpretation of experience and events, presenting data in this way enables any interested reader their own platform on which to make sense of and decipher 'the truth' for himself. This fits better with my own personal philosophy, rather than presenting 'truths' in a matter of fact way, as though the data has been contrived or moulded into fact for neatness and the benefit of the reader (Silverman, 2007).

## Conclusion

I haven't really got one yet... but I'm hoping to be nearer to one in the future.

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## Reviewer Comments

Having played rugby league and worked at the elite level for well over 25 years I found this paper quite upsetting. Joanne's vivid observations painted the sport in a very poor light and I feel personally responsible for this as an educator of grass-roots coaches. However, despite these thoughts and reviewing the paper as a form of research, I was fascinated by the creative non-fictional approach Joanne took. I really enjoyed trying to figure out who the characters were in Balaclava Boys and how they related to the real life scenario depicted. The epilogues' were a great addition, as I was able to rejoice in my success when checking the answers. I learned a lot there too. The Too Much Sun story was beautifully told and left the reader in the same awkward position as Joanne's. If it were me, would I have intervened or restrained myself from making any comment in fear of losing the authenticity of the research. A tough decision I'm sure, reflected in Joanne's emotion when driving her son home. I really hope this does reach a wider audience, in particular the rugby league authorities, as her observations of what is happening in grass-roots rugby league are vital for them to realise and to change, it seems so detrimental to the game's progress. I wish Joanne every success with this project, so clearly communicated I feel it will have huge impact, may be through the kind of the impact it has had on me.