RUGBY MUM:
AN INSIDER'S TAKE ON
GRASS ROOTS RUGBY LEAGUE CULTURE

by

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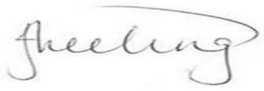
Signature of Candidate: 

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Abstract

Thesis title: *Rugby Mum: An Insider's Take on Grass Roots Rugby League Culture*

This thesis reports on a philosophically grounded, socio-cultural investigation into the behaviours of people supporting, influencing, and affected by their involvement in grass-roots Rugby League. A motivation to conduct the research was to understand the characteristics of the anti-social and often abusive behaviours that have been witnessed, to learn more about the problem in close quarters, in order to consider from a more informed stance potential ways to address it (or elements of it). Ethnography has provided the methodological means for the researcher to live alongside the issues as they have occurred, observing through the lens of a Rugby Mum. With full ethics approval, the research has been conducted overtly and covertly, from the touchline to the boardroom and onto social media.

Positionality of the researcher in the field, and in theory, as well as the means of reporting from data once collected, have been driving considerations in this research and thesis presentation. To the former, strong consideration is given to scoping the ontological, epistemological, and methodological stances to conduct this socio-cultural research. To the latter, there is a predominant emphasis upon storytelling throughout the thesis, using tactics drawn from creative non-fiction to report upon the data with impact and poignancy. Alongside and developing from refined field notes, the majority of data is elevated to short stories, vignettes, personal narrative, poems and a short play.

Captured within this thesis is how, during the course of this investigation, the researcher experienced a major shift in participant-observation modes, from

being relatively covert in her fieldwork activities at the start of the research, towards becoming relatively overt towards the end. Her researcher role and interests became known as the investigation progressed and thus her mission being recognised by those who frequented the rugby league space. Significantly this shift was accompanied by a social traverse from being an accepted ‘insider’ as a rugby mum on the club circuit, to becoming a relative ‘outsider’ as Rugby Mum the Researcher. These ethical and social shifts have influenced how the research has proceeded on the ground over the 6 years, but has also influenced the [selected] content and style of its presentation in this thesis, i.e. her duties to protect the innocent as well as ‘the guilty’.

In conclusion the research reveals the lived experience of becoming and being an ethnographic field researcher, with the incumbent honed skills of reporting honestly and sensitively her observations and inferences. The philosophical reflections of a Rugby Mum, with her interconnected roles and responsibilities in life, show that the consequences of getting too close to the chronic behavioural problems in grass roots Rugby League are high. What was an unquestioned love of the game becoming an informed decision to walk away… perhaps. What is learned is that the problems encountered and reported upon in this thesis are extremely complex and cannot be dealt with by some questionnaires or online survey about mental health, or Likert responses to witnessing aggression on the touchline or in a game. With a wealth of knowledge developed from this study, the Rugby Mum has ‘exited the field’, for now, but she makes the recommendation that the potential antidotes to these problems in Rugby League lay in education initiatives. Initiatives that must go all the way from touchline to include those in the Boardroom.

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I would like to thank the many people who have helped me throughout this research project and in the construction of this thesis. Without their unwavering support, encouragement and faith in me as a researcher and writer, I suspect I would have given up in favour of a quieter life.

Firstly I would like to thank my supervisory team Dr Joel Rookwood and Dr Clive Palmer for the years of supervision they have afforded me during some turbulent times. Joel, thank you for your comments and feedback on the chapter writing and for agreeing to stay on as my second supervisor despite changing jobs. Clive, as my primary supervisor I don't think there are enough words available to thank you for all you have done for me over the years. Without your inspirational presence throughout this project, I could not have done it. Thank you for your constant support, encouragement, and the confidence you have given me to tell the stories and stay true to my writing style. As you know, as far as I am concerned you are a genius.

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Statement of Originality

This thesis is distinct from existing research as it includes a pioneering personal account of my insider experiences within the grass roots rugby league community, something not previously explored in depth from the perspective of a mother, supporter and researcher. As such, the research as it is presented to the reader, cannot be replicated as its reliability and validity are borne from auto-ethnographic narrative aimed at exploring societal and cultural frameworks: in this respect the research will always be original. Although I do not consider the thesis an autoethnographic endeavour in its entirety, I aimed to balance ethnographic observations as a researcher, with autoethnographic personal narratives to make sense of the social and cultural phenomenon I experienced. By situating the stories from the field within broader theoretical frameworks, I believe I have provided a unique perspective that complements and challenges existing literature on spectator behaviour, in this case within the grass roots rugby league community. At times throughout the thesis I am the subject of the research, whilst at other times the observer, highlighting how this work is not solely personal but often as impersonal and detached as I could manage at the time, using my positionality as a researcher.

Using creative non-fiction to highlight the cultural and social phenomenon as I witnessed them highlights how this work can be a valuable addition to broader academic and community conversations on the purpose, nature and contribution of spectatorship in grass roots rugby league within the UK and beyond. Indeed from the research undertaken during the fieldwork and writing of this thesis, I consider that the insights provided can extend beyond contributing

to understanding touchline behaviour within one particular individual sport. The themes identified may have transferability to understanding culture within other grass roots games where similar behaviours have been documented. This research is not intended for a purely academic audience, and I do hope that the method of presentation of findings enables a broader audience to consider the implications of cultural phenomena on the development and sustenance of grass roots sport in general.

Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Setting the scene: becoming Rugby Mum

And the whistle blows…hang on, hang on, back up a minute ref, I need to start from before that when we were setting this thing up. It always starts with the whistle, but there had to have been something that got me out into this cold and wind in the first place. I remember, it was the story of you, the referee who was crying; the day when "Sunday is Funday" no longer held true. The day when I finally saw it, them, us; our angry rants and you, stood there in black with tears in your eyes. "You cheating bastard" we all chanted, "did you get paid for that shit?" "How do you sleep at night you bent fucker?" And the boys all walked past you into the changing room; one of them spat on the floor by your feet as he went by. And I stood and I watched, it felt like being at the cinema, putting the cheap cardboard glasses on and watching in 3D vision for the first time. I saw it then, you, them, the players and coaches but not myself. But I was there all right; oh yes I was, in full, technicolour glory. I was a part of the angry mob who'd reduced you, a grown man to tears. Me a "rugby mum", alleged caring mother, mental health nurse, advocate of good mental health and publisher of several papers to prove it: in essence, I felt a complete fake. I wondered how and when had this happened to me. When had I become a part of this – how had I been blind to this behaviour week in and week out: why hadn't I noticed or had I? What sort of role modelling was this? What were we doing to you, the referee, these people and our own kids? So many questions and then the light came on. The show was over and I knew how I was going to try and remedy the situation. I turned to my friends, fellow parents and grandparents, each and every one, and I said slowly and with epiphanic dread, "this has to stop". Like that mattered…

Then it was my turn - their eyes were rolling as they heckled me, "what's up with you? Have you gone soft?" I'd get used to that reaction and seeing myself as unwanted from the game: much like you were that day. I've seen their reaction and heard their words many times within the touchline audience when anyone dare object to "the banter", because it "toughens 'em up" don't you know?" My mob friends walked off for a pint and left me: I'd get used to that too, being an outsider, eyed with suspicion and given the dirty looks. And later on in my research, "are you writing this down?" "What you writing down?" and "Did you see that to get it in your little book you bloody nosey bugger?" Then later, nothing; business as usual on the touchline. I often wondered if you continued refereeing or whether you threw the hat in like so many others had done, "it's not worth the abuse for twenty quid". Whether you did or didn't I am very sorry, I should have said more and done more.

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

As I write this it is several years since this incident and since my research journey into this sub-cultural phenomenon began, so now is the time to show and hope change ensues as a result. By the way, I did consider dressing the recollection up, or rather toning it down, probably storifying it in the 3rd person (keeping myself absent) so you would never really know what motivated the study, or you would know, but it would be a construction of avoidance rather than the reality of what took place: I know, I was there. However, this style of writing would have been a reflection of the main issue as I saw it in the first place: you see it but you don't speak of it, or you do, but in a way that admonishes any responsibility. So in the interests of "keeping it real" I have written this thesis as a researching rugby mum because that was the role I had at the time. I offer to you a personal explanation of the initial impetus for the study that was not derived from "reading around the subject" or "finding a gap in the literature". The motivation for this study was derived from my experience of being on the touchline on a cold Sunday morning somewhere in the north, and feeling really bad about what we were doing in the name of kids' sport: guilt you might say and you'd be correct. And if we are all guilty together, we can form a mob and not feel as guilty. You'll hear more about this later. So I wanted to study a cultural phenomenon – an exploration of grass roots rugby league touchline behaviour, within the junior game, and question the morals and motivations driving those that were part of it, and consider those potentially affected by it.

My painful (and rightly so) memory of the referee who was reduced to tears is just one facet of a game and culture I've been involved in and witnessed for years. My decision to study that culture and produce this thesis at

the conclusion was in an attempt to show participants and spectators of the sport stories from the touchline, providing a vehicle for philosophical questioning of behaviours and petition for change from within. Perhaps idealism at its best, or perhaps naïve arrogance, but regardless I knew that the academic study of a culture and producing a few papers would not change behaviour, even if you start off as an insider in that community. This was the reason for sharing stories, stories people can read and think about and then decide for themselves what to do, or not.

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

1.2 On style and influences

In the interests of my original contribution to knowledge as I am aware is required from this endeavour, this research is written to and for those on the touchline within the grass roots rugby league community. I had and have no intention of “academonising” any part of this research to please disinterested others or my own requirements to produce the goods in terms of academic papers. I have tried to show my research in a way that stays true to the field,

the participants, myself and my writing style. As Frankfurt (2005) remarks in his development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit:

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

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

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

> *"The only reason I'm writin' 'bout this is 'cause some people seem to put a lotta stock in "positionality." Me: I can take it or leave it. But in case ya need to know, here goes: My position? I'm right here in front of you. Look at me: I'm a 59-*

> *year-old man with a white beard. Gay leather bear, Hispanic, a touch of Cajun (in spirit, not by blood), with a little bit of bad-ass biker in me, and a proud dash of red neck-wannabe. Overweight, asthmatic, a little arthritis; I don't complain much, I git by. There's other weird shit, but you really don't wanna know 'bout that."* (Saldana, 2014: p976)

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

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

> *"I was struck immediately by two things. The first was the strong smell of stove oil. An oil furnace, fed from a 500 gallon tank on the hillside above, heated the house. My guess, from the looks of things and the overpowering smell of fuel, was that the furnace had blown up and wreaked the havoc I saw. The second thing that struck me was a 2-by-4, or some similar wood object. I fell to the floor."* (Wolcott, 2002: p74).

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

In terms of conducting social research and meeting the challenge of conveying meaning through telling the story, I took notes on the writings of those researchers I considered had "cracked it", evidenced to me by the way I was engrossed in their stories. The sociologist Loic Wacquant is one such researcher. His ethnography contained in his book, "Body and Soul: notebooks of an apprentice boxer" (2004) is rich in both aesthetic description and social narrative. Wacquant spent some over three years in a Chicago boxing gym initially as an observation point to study a black American ghetto. However, the way he became involved in a sport of which he had little interest in at first was fascinating especially in terms of his level of immersion and commitment as a researcher. Wacquant did in fact consider giving up his academic career in favour of "turning pro". His ethnography focused not only on those boxers

around him in the gym and the general culture of that boxing world, but on his own development as a boxer adding to the analysis and sense making that he conveys throughout his story. I was keen to integrate auto-ethnographic insights into my study and took confidence from Wacquant. A comment he makes in the preface of the book, “The Taste and Ache of Action” regarding the challenges of remaining authentic, reassured me that I wasn’t the only one who had pondered how to communicate my story for wider consumption:

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

For me the final part of his question was important to my writing style in respect of storifying certain parts of the data. I was keen not to detract from keeping it grounded in grass roots rugby league with all its characteristics and carryings on. On that note I feel it important to mention the work of John Sugden in his book “Scum Airways: Inside Football’s Underground Economy” (2002). A brilliant ethnographic study, in which he is very clear about the dangers of participant observation, Sugden took me around the world with the “grafters” of the football world, a collective term used for the dodgy characters that operate and hide within plain sight of legitimate professional football following. Sugden’s writing and no-nonsense sense of honesty gave me confidence to “say it as it is” from the outset. He writes a very clear preface in the book where he ponders whether or not he achieved the correct balance of fact, observation and his own interpretation but leaves the readers to judge for themselves (p11). This was

precisely the approach I wanted to take with this thesis and I hope that this becomes apparent.

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

places that have influenced me and my writing – I cannot name them all but I hang around the above people's writing and works more than others.

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

1.3 Aims, objectives and development of the research

The core aim of my research was to present an ethnographic study from within a grass-roots rugby league sub-culture. My own lived experience of being involved in grass-roots rugby league for several years had led me to question some of the touchline spectator behaviour within the sport particularly at junior level, and I sought to understand why these behaviours existed and how these behaviours contributed to the social identity of the rugby league community. I also aimed to philosophically question the elements present on the touchline and illuminate key themes derived from my experience of being there, to varying degrees.

I think it's important to set the parameters of what I did and didn't include in my research endeavour: I did not study the touchline behaviours within the professional domestic game the Super League at its pinnacle. Incidentally and importantly however, as I write this section, I did attend a Super League match last weekend and listened to the repetitive chants of "You scouse bastards", a

popular one when playing any opposition within twenty miles of Liverpool; “referee open your eyes you twat” and various other (very loud) derogatory comments aimed at the players and referee. I was also showered with beer any time the away team scored; over the years I have found a hooded jacket to be an essential for this reason. So whilst I limited my research to the junior grass roots level, I am not claiming that morally dubious touchline behaviour is only for consideration in the amateur game: it appears to evolve and be present within rugby league per se. However, as a seasoned supporter once reminded me, “you’re further away from the pitch in the pro game so they can’t hear you anyway”: so I guess that’s OK then…

Within my research I considered the touchline to extend further than the side of a pitch and so I did investigate some wider issues when I got the chance to try and ascertain why people say and do the things they do within the junior game. I attended governing body stakeholder events and had conversations with various officials and spectators who all contributed to the social story, with their anecdotes, opinions and explanations. The intentions of the research were to explore elements of the rugby league spectator culture and to show this phenomenon through the use of reporting and storytelling where necessary, and then interpret using different philosophical and theoretical lenses. The position of myself as the researcher but also as a “rugby mum” within the field, was used as a basis on which to intertwine reflexive and autoethnographic insights to enhance the social story through sensory and aesthetic description and narrative (Warren, 2012). I was aware through my different roles: researcher, mother, friend, supporter, that personal subjectivity could be an issue, or rather would be. Containing and displaying my “rugby mum” thoughts

and feelings in reflexive transparent commentary I felt was a reasonable compromise; after all what researcher would curtail and compromise her own data? I found separation of roles easier as the data collection progressed for reasons I will elaborate upon later. I was equally aware that intersubjectivity was inevitable (De Jaegher *et al.,* 2017) as varying interpretations of my story were possible if not highly probable and beyond my control. The very nature of my research as being a participant observer (see Chapter 3) in a social setting meant that I was interacting with people on the touchline and attempting to understand and interpret their behaviours, as I know they were mine on occasion:

> *"Who is the expert when it comes to understanding people—the detached scientist or the ordinary person in everyday life?"* (Reddy 2008, p. 5)

Initial research objectives were three-fold as below:

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

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

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

Observational fieldwork was employed as in keeping with an ethnographic methodology (Emerson, 1981) and research design, to document

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

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

1.4 Behind the scenes: my original position

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 an interest in rugby league some years ago I always regretted the fact that I had never asked grandad about his playing days, the rules and the politics and why he couldn't control himself long enough to be scouted for a pro club; but I guess I'll never know...

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

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

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

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

sadness, anger and disgust at the way the whole thing had been managed, by adults who should have known better.

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

So the team split with various players having to attend appeal hearings at the league as the club refused to sign the transfers. Clearly the transfer market in the Under 13s league was a serious business. I soon became aware of the bureaucracy and power plays that were to become part and parcel of that season. One of my son's teammates whilst waiting for an appeal hearing due to the club not agreeing to the transfer (for reasons I will not go into) did not play for months. His movements were monitored in person by an official to ensure that he was not training with another club; the official also being a club official of the very club he has sought to leave.

I attempted to explain the safeguarding issues that were at play here, in terms of ensuring that the kids played and that their mental health and well-being were paramount. However, after a raft of emails from those in the know the response was that it was not a "safeguarding issue". A response that to this day is incredulous to me from people in positions of governing junior sport and

who are supposed to be ensuring the well-being of the participants. After a few months, and two committee meetings it became apparent to all that this second team would have to fold. This was not without the chairman shouting on the edge of the carpark that it was his club and he would “run it as he saw fit!”, despite the petitions of the parents. It was reminiscent of a scene from Wall Street or how I would envisage Machiavelli would have behaved, had he have been a rugby league club official.

So, the above snippets of tales go some way to explaining my position as a rugby mum in this game of rugby league: a game that splintered away from the mainstream in 1895 and in many ways has never quite managed to establish itself on an equal footing to football or rugby union. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not all bad in grass roots junior rugby league: the camaraderie amongst the players and parents, the laughs and the sense of community all make this sport unique and addictive. I am never ceased to be amazed at how resilient some of the junior players are, or at least act. The “rugby league family” has many plus points, but like a family there are also dysfunctional aspects to its existence.

My own background in the sport of rugby league and my frustrations as a parent at the imposed bureaucracy that I faced, possibly may have laid root as personal biases within this research and the way in which the data has been presented (Polit and Beck, 2014). I have witnessed the frustration of coaches, club team managers, referees and players at how “rules” are applied, and how people are treated by whom and when: this has spilled out onto the touchline. I am not suggesting that rules of the game are not necessary or required to

ensure the proper operation of a league format and to safeguard the wellbeing of the players and participants within the sport. However, they may prove problematic to subsequent touchline behaviours if not applied consistently, transparently and in a way that ensures the ethos of the game remains intact – children being able to participate in the sport without the fear of the spectator.

> *"Remember that children participate in Rugby League for their own enjoyment, not yours!" (Parent and Spectator Code of Conduct, 2021).*

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

1.5 Rugby league, the touchline and spectators

In the interests of context, the setting for this study and consequent fieldwork sits within the sport of rugby league, the origins of which can be traced back to the nineteenth century. The sport's formalisation under the umbrella term of rugby football, has often been attributed to William Webb Ellis, who in 1823 was a pupil at Rugby School in Warwickshire. According to legend

Webb Ellis, during a football match, picked up the ball and ran with it towards a goal. Whether this signified the birth of rugby football is disputed by most as the practice of carrying, passing and kicking a ball towards a goal was apparent in and around the town of Rugby long before the public school became famous for it. Whether or not Webb Ellis is the father of rugby football or not, the Webb Ellis Cup is the trophy awarded to the winner of the men's rugby world cup (rugby union code) to this day.

Perhaps a more believable attribution to the origin and development of rugby football is the popularity in 1857 of Thomas Hughes' novel Tom Brown's Schooldays, which depicted the playing of a rugby match at Rugby School. The popularity of the novel meant that the game became fashionable and by the mid-1800s, various schools and clubs across England were playing and had adopted rugby-style games, though the rules varied significantly within the then sport of rugby football (Collins, 2006a).

1871 saw the formation of the Rugby Football Union (RFU), when representatives from 21 rugby clubs met in London and created a set of standardised rules to be used in the member clubs. Unification in this way enabled the game of rugby to quickly spread, especially amongst the privileged and predominantly in public schools. Subsequently, it became apparent during this period that there were disparities and differences between how the game was being played in the south of the country in comparison to the less affluent industrialised north. In northern towns in Lancashire, Yorkshire and Cumbria the game was very popular, but the players were working-class men who could

not engage with the game at the expense of their wages and unless compensated would not be able to play at club level in work's time. This contrasted with players in the south who were arguably afforded more financial means and leisure time to engage with the sport. Consequently, secret payments were made within the northern clubs to enable working men to play competitive club matches, without the need to lose money if the match was within their working hours. This socio-economic disparity, if not northern requirement, came to a head at the end of the nineteenth century with the RFU refusing to sanction payments to players, upholding the principle of amateurism. They banned broken time payments to players as not in keeping with the ethos of the game labelling it ungentlemanly conduct: a term that stood the test of time in many sports as a synonym for rule breaking. The banning of payments to players led to frustration and rebellion amongst the northern clubs, who considered the RFU unsympathetic to the realities faced by northern players.

The dissatisfaction of the northern clubs led to the 1895 meeting at the George Hotel in Huddersfield, where 22 northern clubs made the decision to break away from the RFU and form the Northern Rugby Football Union (NRFU), the body which would now govern the northern clubs: this was known as the Great Split (Collins, 2006b, 2009). One of the first changes the NRFU made was to sanction the broken time payments to players who missed work due to playing the sport for a member club, Other rule changes followed which began to distinguish the northern game from that of how the game was played in the south and so established rugby league as separate to that of the

traditional rugby union. The NRFU changed its name to the Rugby Football League (RFL) in 1922.

The rise of professionalism as opposed to amateurism began in the early twentieth century with teams such as St Helens, Wigan and Leeds establishing themselves as professional clubs, attracting a large local support. As such the sport became embedded in working-class communities, where people would engage in attending and watching the sport as a symbol of local pride and community spirit. The NRFU had established the Challenge Cup in 1897, a competition that became embedded in the rugby league season. The Challenge Cup final, held at Wembley Stadium since 1929, attracts a large spectatorship with fans travelling far and wide to attend the event. Coupled with the growing popularity of rugby league domestically, the game also began to expand internationally with Australia and New Zealand adopting rugby league and international tours became regular fixtures. The inaugural Rugby League World Cup was first held in 1954.

The game continued to develop and expand post-wars until the 1970's: the time that heralded the rise of televised sport. More people stayed at home to watch sporting events and matches and crowds and consequently ticket sales fell at local matches. This led to many clubs struggling financially with media sponsorship being monopolised by larger sports such as football: this situation arguably remained for many until the 1990s. This decade however, marked a crossroads for the sport and with the introduction of a summer season as opposed to a winter one, and the establishment of the Super League

in 1996, rugby league gained sponsorship from the Sky Sports network. This meant that elite level rugby league was televised, and the sport enjoyed somewhat of a revival although it remains, financially speaking, a long way off the revenues gained from many other sports. Later developments saw the emergence of the women's game and Women's Super League in 2017, alongside the inclusion of the sport in disability games: wheelchair rugby league enjoying particular success.

Rugby League has faced significant challenges in establishing itself as a professional sport with a globally recognised presence, not least due to its origin of being borne in angst with the RFU. The ability of the sport to evolve and develop cannot be divorced from its cultural, social and economic roots that have all shaped the sport as we see it today, in one way or another.

Collins' (2006;2009) and Dunning's (2005) explanations of the breakaway of northern rugby football union (or rugby league as we now know it) from mainstream rugby union in 1895 was not only interesting for its insights into the political, religious, economic and social class shenanigans and motivations of the origins of rugby league, but also for its stories of touchline culture and behaviour. One such story was a case reported in the Yorkshire Post in 1888 (Collins, 2009, p.60) of a rugby league referee, "The referee had to climb the boards, be ferried across the canal to make good his escape and the bus which he took along East Street was followed by an infuriated and howling mob uttering the most demonical yells". Similarly, further stories in Collins' text make reference to players being hit between the eyes by

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

Studies over the years in terms of spectator or “touchline” behaviour in a variety of sports have perhaps proved Reverend Gedge’s point in that some of the behaviour from those on the touchline has been far from what one would call sporting, or indeed encouraging to those on the field of play (Moore *et al.,* 2007). A study by Fields *et al.* (2010) implored the reader to consider the relationship between negative coach and spectator behaviour and player behaviour. They assert that what happens off the pitch in terms of negative often violent behaviour, was a predictor of negative player behaviour on the pitch. Nicholson and Hoye (2005) investigated contextual factors relating to poor spectator touchline behaviour and asserted that this behaviour had various effects on young players’ emotional health and enjoyment of the game. Their paper also explored strategies imposed to attempt to manage off field behaviour and concluded that more research was needed in relation to whether or not the strategies were effective, and this was certainly a concern of the governing body, the Rugby Football League (RFL) at the time of my research.

The paper suggested further exploration of what the potential emotional health consequences are of poor touch-line behaviour and how an awareness of these consequences might lead to “investment” in strategy rather than “buy in” by parents, coaches, supporters and governing bodies.

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

Wann has been lead author (1993; 1999; 2000) on several papers detailing western research on identifying precursors to fan spectators’ abuse of opponents and officials. Seemingly spectators who highly identified with a team were more likely to engage in abusive behaviours towards opponents and officials. Being highly identifiable with a team is arguably easier, in this case, when you have a child who plays for that team rather than if one was a detached “neutral”. Rocca and Vogl-Bauer (1999) found that highly identifying spectators were also more likely to consider verbal aggression acceptable. The science unfortunately did not go further in ascertaining why this was the case. Wann and his colleagues (2017) expanded their work to consider the additional factor of “fan dysfunction” (Wakefield and Wann, 2006), a category described

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

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

Much literature has focused on the philosophy of coaching styles (Nash *et al.,* 2008; Bennie and O’Connor 2010; Carless and Douglas 2011; Rowley 2012; Garratt *et al.,* 2013; Grecic and Collins 2013, Coupland 2015) and how these philosophies shape the behaviours of both coaches and players within

sports. However, there is little consensus as to whether having a coaching philosophy is useful or indeed applied at the operational level. Consequently, whether a coaching philosophy was useful as a conducive factor to player and official well-being on the pitch was an interesting avenue to explore. Similarly, with the 2017 parliamentary inquiry into the Football Association and its handling of alleged complaints of racism (UK Parliament Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2017), Operation Hydrant into childhood sexual abuse and the subsequent investigations of football clubs and academies, the parliamentary inquiry into the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) regarding match fixing (2016) are perhaps indicators that the administrative and governing bodies, even at the professional level can have wide reaching implications on sporting culture at grass-roots level and the subsequent well-being of those who choose to participate. In relation to rugby league, being a much smaller sporting entity, the impact of regional and national administration of the sport could arguably be exaggerated: another worthy line of enquiry.

McFee's work on sport, rules and values (2004) provided some further interesting lines for enquiry for questioning data when studying sporting culture. The purpose of sport and whether philosophical values are displayed at the normative or operational level are all discussed using exemplars of different components of "the game" such as rules and application or not thereof, interpretation of such and the subjectivity that effects whether "the game" remains consistent with sporting values. These lines of investigation provided a philosophical basis on which to analyse exemplars from the touchline.

1.6 A guide to the chapters

In Chapter two I explain the methodology underpinning this study and where the research is positioned philosophically. Chapter three explains the methods that were used within the field for collecting the data, and also some of the methods that I thought I would use but didn't due to a number of factors that I will explain in more detail. I thought it important to illustrate in this Chapter what went well and what didn't go as planned; perhaps attesting to the messiness that often characterises ethnographic study. I explain my understanding of how ethics applied to this study; the issues that I faced in achieving ethical approval to enter the field and the subsequent ethical considerations when in the field and beyond, in presenting the data. Chapters four, five, six and seven are the crux of the matter and contain the narrative of the touchline, my stories from the field and my descriptions, philosophising and reflections on what I experienced from being there: in essence my interpretation of the social story. Chapter eight concludes the thesis and my thoughts on matters, a summation of what has gone before which I am very aware may not be the reader's summation, but I am sure you will make your mind up for yourself.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2. Philosophical Positioning

2.1 Setting the scene: what am I doing here?

> *Side of pitch – raining as usual, it's half time and I'm cold and in need of a coffee: note to self, buy a flask!*
>
> *Green Coat Man: "What's going on here? What you doing? Have you come to watch the ref. He's doing alright you know, just that decision at the end of the half: it should have been offside that..."*
>
> *Me (trying to sound matter of fact): "No I'm not here to watch the ref.: I'm doing research".*
>
> *Green Coat Man (looks perplexed) "Research? Oh right... on what?"*
>
> *Me (feeling a little embarrassed) "Just what goes on here…. at the touchline, what people say and do... you know just to try to make some sense of it all".*
>
> *Green Coat Man (laughs) "Ha… Good luck with making sense of this lot love".*
>
> (Fieldnote)

"What am I doing here?" was a question I pondered many times throughout my research, both as a rugby mum and researcher or a combination of both, so in this chapter I explain where my research sits, philosophically, and why. I would thank Professor Tara Brabazon here for reminding me in one of her many vlogs, that this endeavour was in the pursuit of a *Doctor of Philosophy*, a situation that I had perhaps overlooked in my relish to construct the stories from my fieldnotes and show versions of my observations. So in essence before I explain what I was doing there, I offer the *where I was coming from*: the philosophical foundations upon which the study is based – the precursor to Green Coat Man's question "what are you doing here?" which incidentally I was asked by spectators more than once in the field.

In this chapter I will illustrate my thinking and decisions regarding the positioning of this research, both in philosophical and moral terms. The philosophical foundations of my research (of what I was doing ethnographically) afforded me the freedoms to operate within the field in what I considered as ethically transparent a way as I could.

I began the research already having formed some concept of what I might find in the field, or rather on the touchline; after all I had been a “native” for some time (Kanuha, 2000). However, this conception borne from my own involvement in grass roots rugby league was not “a truth” or indeed “the truth”, it was based upon empirical knowledge and personal perception and was not enough to illustrate a phenomenon, to analyse, reveal or interpret it. I needed evidence of my experience: tales derived from the field that I could use as case studies or vignettes and storify when necessary. Preferably I initially thought, I needed data that didn’t include me as a subject…but invariably and then by philosophical positioning and ethnographic design, always had to in some form (Hegelund, 2005).

> *My situation is not subjective since the others in it are more than I can experience, but neither is it "objective" since my situation does not exist apart from me* (Gendlin, 2004: 147-148).

During my early research, my desire to be objective and detached was overwhelming as I was conscious of not wanting to tarnish the data. However, as an ethnographer my very presence in the field was part of that data and I soon realised that my presence and auto-ethnographic insights and ponderings

added to the polish and richness of the story: it was the reflexive approach I wanted to take.

> *Observing a phenomenon from afar is fruitless in terms of contextualising it within a culture; similarly I can't illustrate this phenomenon without that context. Essentially we (the audience and myself) would be absent from that culture and consequently the domain of knowledge in which the phenomena exists – there would be no reference points/ontology on which to seek to understand it and show it. In order to understand touchline behaviour as a lived experience I had to be close to the action and sometimes involved in the action. Is this a problem as I'm already a native or rather "was" a native? Not a problem as an ethnographer – as long as I am being transparent about my part in it. Do I have to look at the phenomena in a different way from that of being a "rugby mum"? Not necessarily - I have to evolve into a researcher which in itself has many facets – difficult to split identity and experience – look at title of study!!!!*
>
> (Reflexive fieldnote)

I wanted to document what was happening on the touchline, my observations of what people were saying and doing and tell some stories about a phenomenon that I suspected many knew existed, but rarely spoke of. So whilst studying the meta-ethical, and in an attempt to refrain from sub-consciously trying to emulate Socrates with my questionings to myself about "what am I doing here?", I found it useful to return to the research problem and to the crux of how and what I wanted to research. In essence rather than start with the higher order theory of knowledge in some attempt to seek direction, I started with the activity on the ground and considered my actions as an

ethnographic researcher, both in terms of acquiring data and then handling it. I then needed to be confident that my methodology and actions in the field were congruent with my ontological and epistemological beliefs as a researcher: my philosophical position.

Thankfully I became acutely aware that any research philosophy or theory is exactly that; some person's or group of persons' take on our purpose or set of ideas on the human predicament. However, being that there are no proven philosophical absolutes, or at least none that philosophers have consensus upon (Miller, 1999), a pragmatic approach to situating this research seemed an efficient and reasonable option. I became conscious not to expect too much from philosophy as it unfortunately does not provide the answers or roadmap to "working it all out"; as Bertrand Russell (1950:24) in his seminal text *Unpopular Essays* puts it quite nicely, *"Science is what we know, philosophy is what we don't know"*.

However, what philosophy does do is offer a school of thought or research paradigm with which to identify. This enabled me to consider what I was doing out in the field, what the purpose was of my mission (if any), and how I knew this or anything else in the world in the pursuit of generating new knowledge. Philosophers in these paradigms more broadly, have paved the way for us to consider the nature of the world and how we ought to live within it, and how we know what we know (justified belief). Hence the ontology and epistemological positions related to research paradigms is central to our comprehension of the world and guides actions, methodology and presentation of findings.

2.2 The interpretive paradigm

Previously I admitted my early desire to be detached from the field: to distance myself from them. I considered being impartial and objective, in an effort to find the answer to why people behave as they do on the touchline. I initially though that by getting *The Answer* or *The Truth,* rather akin to Admiral James T. Kirk searching the Universe for the Truth, my research would lead to an acknowledgement by all involved in rugby league that change was required. I considered a positivist paradigmatic approach to a social phenomenon; research that could be replicated, reproduced elsewhere and everyone would see it the same way because I could *prove* it. The methods in the initial madness of Plan A were interviews and a survey: my weapons in my battle for *The Truth.* As I write this I want to laugh at how ridiculous that sounds to me now and my naivety at that time, although my initial intentions were well meaning. The problem with Plan A was that the touchline, in all its guises, consisted of human beings, with all their complexities, who were the social actors in my stories (Hasan, 2016). Their utterings, relationships to one another, actions and behaviours were open to a range of interpretations by both myself and others. So as much as I initially wanted to put the touchline in a virtual goldfish bowl, and gaze at it from without, it was never going to happen because of the nature of the subjects; human beings in a social world interacting with one another on any given day:

> *Social life cannot be known through the measurement of surveys and experiments, because of the infinite variability of human interpretation, action and interaction* (Williams 2016:3).

My research methods and perceptions were always going to affect the data as I went about constructing the story of the touchline, because I was there: that is, I was one of the social actors in my story, reporting my observations and interpreting my perceptions and experiences to show some sort of meaning. For this reason my research could only sit within the interpretive paradigm.

Researchers who sit within the interpretive paradigm believe that the social world has infinite interpretations that constitute only whatever can be a subjective reality (Wight, 2018). Believing that perceptions and interpretations of the world are individual, unique and borne from human experience, the task of the researcher is to identify and offer the meanings as associated with this lived experience (Fossey *et al.,* 2002). In order to elucidate consequent knowledge, researchers of the interpretive persuasion attempt to make meanings rather than seek universal truths or the answers “out there”. The meanings are defined by the cultural context in which the research is being undertaken and involve the researcher trying to understand the personal meanings and actions of the participants through “verstehen” (understanding). Related to Max Weber’s work (1947), concerned with conceptualising the “nature and determinants of social conduct” (p 88), verstehen is a central concern of qualitative research requiring the researcher to be empathic to the participant behaviours and potential meaning of these to them (Hennick, Hunter and Bailey, 2020). Weber’s effort to define social action and its causal effects in terms of verstehen resonated greatly with this research in which the social action of participants was “meaningfully orientated to that of others” (Tucker, 1965) and offered data for interpretive investigation.

> *Three forwards from the wining 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".* (Reflexive Fieldnote; Keeling and Palmer, 2018)

2.3 Ontology

Several years ago I embarked upon a Masters degree in Ethics; an experience which to this day evokes memories of my feelings of unpreparedness for the study which was to follow. The first area of study within this programme was philosophy, which was to culminate in a 3 hour written examination testing whether or not I knew enough to pass, or rather whether I had thought enough to evidence I knew enough to pass. As I walked into the stuffy hall on the day of reckoning, the spongey dark wooden floor squeaking beneath my trainer clad feet, I considered the possibility that I might just keep walking, right out of the other side of the hall into a world where I didn't have to worry about philosophy or what this might mean to my immediate life. However, I decided to go through with it, sat down at the desk, put my pens down and turned over the paper. There was only one statement on that paper for me to grapple with for the 3 hours looming ahead, and to this day I recall it well:

The only ethical truth is relativism – discuss.

I was expecting a question on Plato and his world of the forms, and how we know the true essence of things because they exist in their perfect forms in the Universe. I hoped for a question on Aristotle, virtues and vices and practical wisdom in the pursuit of eudaimonia. A question on positivism would have

sufficed, with a bit of Comte's work on trying to base the most incoherent things (or certainly to me) within a systematic framework (Gane, 2006). Perhaps more honestly, I hoped that the fire alarm would go off and save me from the hellish nightmare I perceived myself to be in, but it wasn't to be, so I was stuck with attempting to discuss relativism.

The reason I wander off with this random story of academic inadequacy is because I really struggled with relativism at the time and I found it quite a sad state of affairs, although now a much older version of myself, the truer I believe it to be although I still find it sad. Relativism to me is reminiscent of when I began to doubt the existence of Santa Claus, or rather Father Christmas as he was known in our house. I wrote him a letter one Christmas Eve when I was about eight years old and stuck it on the fridge in the kitchen. In the letter I asked a range of questions, "did you get my bike in OK?" Did you like the mince pie and beer?" "Did Rudolph like the carrot?" and "he" replied with one-word answers and a signature. The handwriting looked suspiciously like my mother's, and I began to doubt. Fast forward a year or so later and I no longer believed that the jolly man in a red suit, with his pack of reindeer would visit me again to answer my letters: the truth was he just wasn't out there and consequently, Christmas was no longer magical. Without belief in this ontological mystical being it was, in fact, devastatingly disappointing.

Relativism is the ontological stance most associated with the interpretative research paradigm. Relativists believe that there are no universal truths and everything, whether it be knowledge, truth or morality exists relative to the culture or societal context in which it is accepted as true. In other words

right, wrong, good, bad exist in relation to contextual accepted norms – there are no ontological essences for us to find and model behaviour upon. So, relativism offers a good rationale for conducting culturally specific research and deriving meaning in relation to that culture – after all if there is no truth out there it is difficult to dispute the truth offered from within, from the participants perceived experience in any given community. This leads me back to my examination question; if there are no absolute universal truths according to relativists, it is contradictory that relativists would cite a universal truth as being their own theory. If all things are relative, and relativism is a thing, what is relativism relative to? This classic circular argument is explained in McFee's book *Sport, Rules and Vales* (2004, p168) in which he outlines an *argumentative strategy* as being to simply state *relativism is not true for me* upon which *the relativist has nothing to say*. I never did deploy this argument on the touchline because I struggled with the idea of presenting as the touchline moral compass: the rugby mum who had *gone soft*. I witnessed the many times that verbal abuse, profanity and aggression towards and about young players and officials was condoned, and *right* on a touchline because it isn't seen as wrong by the majority who constitute it. In my research the sub-culture of *the touchline* was the community of interest but whether a sub-culture, part of the larger entity of grass roots rugby league, could be legitimate as a community capable of moral decision making is open to question. This is an underpinning problem on which the whole school of relativist thought can be destabilised (Wight, 2018);

> *Just because we all do it don't make it right.* (Fieldnote)
>
> *"What you shouting at?", retorts red t-shirt coach.*

> *"You shouting take him out", replies blue t-shirt coach, "No need".*
> *"Fuck off", "You fuck off" and then an argument ensues. I notice that the group of young boys watching the match nearby are finding this exchange amusing – I can see them laughing as they watch the 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 fucking 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, what's the bloody point?*
>
> (Reflexive fieldnote; Keeling and Palmer, 2018)

2.4 Existentialism

It was at this junction of my philosophical positioning that I turned to existentialism as I pondered *what's the bloody point* and as a natural conclusion to the unfavourable position of being potentially perceived as the moral compass. Given the variable interpretations attributable to my data, a moral reason or tangible explanation regarding the behaviours and actions of people on the touchline would prove to be near impossible. As a researcher I began to experience acute feelings of dread, despair and sympathy both for those on the touchline and for myself: so much so that I didn't re-enter the field much post pandemic because I had had enough. Central existentialist concerns: what is the meaning, purpose and value of human existence and more locally, of our existence on the touchline, would form the basis of my philosophical questioning later on. Existentialism became a significant philosophical movement following World War 2 when the nature of our existence was poignant, although philosophers of this persuasion were around earlier (Macquarrie, 1972).

Kierkegaard (1813-1855), often cited as the founding existentialist philosopher was concerned with Christian Ethics and in particular ideas of individual moral agency and the conflict between faith and reason. Kierkegaard believed that by studying individual psychological responses to life's challenges rather than through observation alone, one could decipher human reality. His concern was the interference or perceived involvement of society in influencing the decisions of individuals, so they made unhealthy spiritual choices. His philosophy centred around the concept of individual subjective experience and the significance of personal choice and commitment, rather than reliance upon an outside agency such as the Church for moral guidance.

> *The RFL should do something about it… what do they do anyway?*
> *The league knows this goes on, they should ban the offenders.*
> *It doesn't happen at my club, and if it does, we deal with it.*
> *Touchline managers should be doing their jobs instead of keeping their mouths shut.* (Fieldnotes – stakeholder meeting)

Kierkegaard emphasised the importance of an individual's subjective truth and advocated the necessity of individuals to take responsibility for their own behaviours and choices. For Kierkegaard, *existence* was not merely the status quo, but was a process of work on oneself that included self-reflection on one's own action and choices in order to *become*.

> *Life must be understood backwards; but…it must be lived forwards.*
>
> *(Journals and Papers (1843)* cited in Ratcliffe (ed.), 2017)

Kierkegaard embraced the negative aspects of the human condition, such as anxiety and despair and thought these necessary experiences to develop as an individual (Hannay, 2003). His ways of presenting his philosophical ideas involved the use of pseudonyms, the metaphorical and examples of irony (Hong and Hong, 1980). Whilst I wasn't inspired by the spiritual and Christian thrust of Kierkegaard's work I did identify as a researcher with the notion of the need for some sort of self-governance on the touchline, and the opportunities that self-reflection might create for the development of a more pleasant experience for those involved with the game. The literary styles Kierkegaard used to present his ideas certainly resonated with my own presentation of the data I gathered during the study. I too used pseudonyms, irony and different styles during the construction of the stories I wrote, although mine were not of design, but rather of necessity in protecting the people that I observed and met.

Later existentialist writing, in particular the works of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone De Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) became my staple reading material and a guiding force for questioning touchline behaviour, as well as somewhat of a comfort in my development as not only a researcher but as a person who was becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable. The existentialist premise, that existence precedes essence, afforded freedom to examine what existed in front of me minus the moralising, especially during my fieldwork. I also became familiar with my own absurdity in trying to find meanings and *answers in an answerless world* (Camus, 1942) and I began to accept the possibility that maybe we are condemned to be free, as Sartre once noted:

> *Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. It is up to you to give [life] a meaning.*
>
> *(*Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness 1942).*

For the post war existentialists (Sartre, De Beauvoir and Camus) there was an acknowledgement of the need for meaning, or to live well, but the discovery of the Holocaust perhaps did affirm the belief that as human beings we are born into a backdrop of searching for this meaning in a meaningless world. It appeared that Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), known for his critiques of traditional morality, religion, and the concept of truth had worked this out sooner. His concept of the "Übermensch" or "the overman" in which an individual must create their own values and live authentically in a world was central to the work of existentialists. We need to determine who we are through the way we choose to live is a simple assertion but could also be terrifying as it was to Sartre, who purported that the world is a terrifying abundance of freedom. If there are no guidelines for action perhaps we are forced to define our own moral code and condemned to be free, and any evasion of this is Sartre's *Bad faith* (Haynes-Curtis, 1988). In terms of this study an existential lens does afford responsibility for people on the touchline to examine their own behaviour and decide whether this is how they want to live. However, more philosophy later…

2.5 Methodology

In concise summary this project was framed as an ethnographic study that pointed to philosophical questioning through telling and interpreting of

stories from the touchline. My research ambition (or perhaps mission at the time) was to *be there,* to experience the touchline behaviour within grass-roots rugby league in order to construct a socio-cultural narrative pointing the way to some clarity about this lived experience seen through a philosophical lens. This being the case, physical and social proximity to the phenomenon were essential and required me as a researcher to be immersed in the touchline (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011). I needed an underpinning methodology that would enable me to legitimately *be there* as a researcher and phenomenology offered this vehicle. Phenomenology as a first principle is ontological and considers consciousness as the arena for the self-disclosure of being (Moran, 2000). It advocates the investigation of phenomena as we consciously experience them as human beings. The second principle is epistemological in that knowledge is a matter of confirming the judgement we make about things in a concrete experience of that thing. Consequently, knowledge is about achieving clarity through confirming judgements in our experience of phenomena. This is the basis of interpretivism: that knowledge is socially constructed. The methodological principle or the method for obtaining evidence is through phenomenological reduction, which is focused on our act of looking at something not merely the object itself.

Phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamar, Merleau-Ponty), was the methodology supporting my ethnographic methods. The interpretative or constructivist paradigm (Sprake and Palmer, 2022) would underpin my research endeavour and how I chose to handle the data through creative non-fiction (Kotišová, 2019; Sass *et al*, 2021; Smith *et al*, 2025) to present what I

observed, experienced and perceived. This provided the platform for interpretation through philosophical questioning and analysis later on.

It is important that I doff my cap to the many philosophers and renowned thinkers whose work is available to us presently, who have worked to promote the qualitative approaches to research. There are still arguments in the academic literature to this day about the reliability, validity, inefficiency and downright “research worthiness” of qualitative methodology (Hammersley, 2007). Those of the phenomenological persuasion offered an alternative to the traditional, conventional natural science contemporary, by thinking about how we know what we know. Hence the theory of Phenomenology has evolved over time to encompass different facets of consciousness. I continue here with what I consider an expedient explanation of phenomenology and how this approach provided the rationale for my methods. I illustrate the thinking behind why I lurked around touchlines, spying and eavesdropping on people, making notes and then interpreting whether this may have meant something to them, their community and to myself.

2.5.1 Husserl (1859-1938): An inclusive turn to understanding the human social condition

Attributed to Edmund Husserl, phenomenology claims to reject the idealism of Plato and asserts that the only realities are phenomena as they are experienced by the consciousness, and that is the starting point on which to understand and derive knowledge: philosophy is the description of experience/reality without interpretation, judgements, or assumptions (Koch,

1999). So instead of the *truth is out there,* Husserl's phenomenology asserts that the truth is as experienced within; a description of intentional conscious experience. For Husserl the human experience was central to acquiring knowledge, through intuition i.e. consciousness about phenomena or realities, which was a move away from the traditional position of the natural sciences (Husserl, 1970). Husserl gave instruction on how to achieve this reductionist position by a method he referred to as "bracketing" (he was a mathematician so seen in those terms this makes sense), which is the conscious act of suspending long-held assumptions and judgements about the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1994). Essentially the purpose of this bracketing is to increase one's own awareness of what is given within an immediate human experience to fully describe it's structure or *shape.* Husserl referred to a principle on reducing subjectivity in this manner as *the epoché*:

> *The elimination of everything that limits us from perceiving things as such, since the natural attitude, due to its objective nature, prevents us from doing so. To apply the epoché, refers, to abstain or to do without* (Villanueva, 2014, cited in Guillan, 2019 p.218).

Husserl's belief was that by "bracketing" one could describe the essential structure of a phenomenon free from it being tarnished by pre-conceptions and judgements, a singular conscious effort of perception. For me this was reminiscent of the core principles used in "mindfulness", now a recognised therapeutic approach in the UK used to treat mild depression and to maintain workers' mental health (National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence, 2022). I was first introduced to the practice of mindfulness by being asked to

immerse myself within the conscious experience of a piece of chocolate: to taste, smell and listen to the chocolate and to document my experience of it. It was not easy being *mindful* in this way, or perhaps *bracketing* and in truth I found it quite frustrating, as it isn't every day that you listen to a piece of chocolate. The pre-prejudgement as to what is socially acceptable crept in: how did I look, how would others in the group perceive me, why did I listen to chocolate I know cannot speak, what was my purpose of being there? Hence, the requirement to consciously *be there* in the conscious in this manner for me was not possible, is perhaps contextual and relies on certain conditions that enable immersion in an experience; environmental, auditory and aesthetic stimuli all play their part. To rid oneself of biases and pre-judgments in order to discover the essence of a thing, to me as a human being in the social world, seems a formidable task.

Often my fieldwork was conducted against a backdrop of angst, significant noise, mud, tears and sweat. Not often did my researcher experience of phenomena happen singularly, quietly and in an environment where one could contemplate and savour the conscious experience. The very nature of the touchline and my experience of it meant that there was often a number of interactions and exchanges happening simultaneously and I had to decipher, interpret and choose which to document and why. Similarly, when it came to handling the data away from the touchline, Husserl's descriptive phenomenology didn't go far enough: I often felt compelled to start the questioning and interpreting to provoke further observations. Without these details or rather interpretations, I felt the subsequent handling and illustration of the data would be far less authentic or interesting.

I had to handle the data in such a way so as to protect the participants including myself and the details of the research from being identified so an interpretive approach (by using creative non-fiction or story telling: see Methods Chapter) had to be adopted, both in method i.e. collecting the data and in presentation later on. In order to construct stories from the touchline I had to have more detail than Husserl's descriptive, conscious approach. I had to think about how to illustrate and present the phenomenon under study. In short I had to have more direction in what to observe and what to ignore as repetitive or irrelevant: for this I had to rely on my empirical knowledge and inherent values and beliefs. My fieldnotes and subsequent actions needed to show not tell the social story and philosophically question; a description of Husserl's *things in themselves* (Moran, 2000) was not going to be enough. In order to make sense of the initial observed data and to show it in a way that might offer meaning I needed an interpretive approach, what is referred to as hermeneutic phenomenology forged by phenomenological pioneers such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty.

2.5.2 Getting closer to the action for them and for me: Heidegger (1899-1976), Gadamer (1900-2002), Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961)

Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the philosophy of experience, the understanding of everyday life, the subjective perspective and interpretation of *being there* within the phenomena and highlighting the interactions/relational experiences that offer insight into meaning (Suddick *et al.,* 2020). Whilst Husserl was concerned with knowing, Heidegger (once Husserl's assistant) was concerned with "being": what he called "Dasein". The

main difference between the two phenomenological standpoints is largely described as going from description and knowing to interpretation and being: from consciousness to lived experience. Heidegger believed that understanding develops through our thoughtful, considered experience of the world rather than any *apriori* knowledge of it (Thompson, 1990). He asserted that phenomenological reduction was not possible as the human condition does not allow one to disassociate from being in the world. Heidegger (1962) developed the hermeneutic circle as it applied to human existence “as it is, as being there, as being in the world, as being with others”. He advocated the constant re-evaluation of the past experience as a way to contextualise, provide meaning to and understand the essence of the present (Polt, 1999). By re-examining the parts of the lived experience in relation to the whole and vice versa, one engages in a hermeneutic act of discovery to decipher new meanings.

Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, focused on philosophical hermeneutics and considered that no scientific method could reveal the truth within the human sciences, because humans were involved. He cited a person’s experience of art as an example of how inaccessible human sciences were to any scientific method that sought to derive meaning. Gadamer believed that the truth could only be derived from the continual effort of interpretation and reinterpretation of dialogue and texts because language is the common ground between the traditional and historical *horizons* of the interpreter and that which is being interpreted. The meaning and understanding derived from this effort or the relationship between the interpreter and the text (belongingness) constitutes phenomena in itself which then opens to further understanding. Gadamer was principally concerned with the method of obtaining a deeper understanding of a

phenomenon, rather than discovering any objective truths. In short any meaning derived from interpretation, results from the relationship and interaction between the interpreter and the dialogue. Gadamer has made substantial contributions to the fields of communication and medical ethics (Gadamer, 1996) due to this emphasis on the dialectical and interactionism. Gadamer's work resonated with the data that emanated from the touchline during this research as it was usually the conversations and verbal exchanges between spectators and people on and around the touchline that formed the raw data for interpretation. The stories, vignettes and creative non-fictional pieces that followed were my interpretive product of those interactions.

Merleau-Ponty was concerned with the phenomenology of perception and associated with contemporary existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir: he is often cited as both a phenomenologist and existentialist. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in post war France, was centred primarily upon how we experience the world through our bodies, and secondly how we then perceive things. He argued that perception is not merely an intellectual act based on objective observation and deduction but relies on the primacy of the body's relationship with the world: a rejection of dualist thinking (Langer, 1989). He argued that the conscious mind did not dictate action to the vehicle of the body, but that the bodily experience in the social context in which we exist, shapes our primary perception and understanding of the world and others. This *embodiment* involves our body as situated in the world interacting with others, our senses, the environment and the time in which we experience it (Van Manan, 1990). In this respect Merleau-Ponty emphasised a pre-reflective stance in which the bodily lived experience shapes perception; thus the world

can never be seen in objective terms and will always be a perception from the perspective of whomever is experiencing it. The body he argued is the embodiment of the external communication with the world and therefore can never be separated from the mind. So, it follows that for Merleau-Ponty any absolute truth is an illusion as each observation has to be linked to the position of the observer. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception was directly applicable to this study and provided some further rationale as to why taking the moral high ground with the people on the touchline may have proved futile. I observed that many differences of perception form the bases of arguments at the side of the pitch and often considered how my own perceptions were not shared by others and vice versa.

> *"Don't know why that ref is always biased to us…"*
>
> *"I thought he had a good game…"*
>
> *"You're joking aren't you, what you looking at?"*
>
> *"Same as you he did nowt wrong"*
>
> *"He's always wrong when I've watched him"*
>
> *"In your opinion"*
>
> *"I've seen him plenty"*
>
> *"Well you gotta give them a chance to learn"*
>
> *"He's the bloody referee, he should know"*
>
> *"Look mate he's 13… that's why we can't get refs... people like you".*
>
> (Fieldnote)

Chapter 3

Chapter 3. Methods

3.1 Setting the scene: It's hard to write with woollen gloves on

In this chapter I explain my actions and motives in terms of gaining the data for this project and in subsequently handling it. On reflection I made many mistakes in my eagerness to get out there into the field, most of which might have been negated if I'd have known more when I set off on my ethnographic journey. Don't get me wrong I had read some literature, but I feel I didn't fully contemplate and understand it before I raced off for ethical approval to enable me to start data collection. At the time my Director of Studies likened me to a racehorse; if only he thought that of me during the construction of this thesis, as I mulled over the chapters and missed so many deadlines whilst generally mulling over life, for which I would like to blame the existentialists. So, I learned the hard way: by experience and making mistakes, experiencing disappointment and eventually becoming comfortable with the uncomfortable. So now I explain my *modus operandi*, and in the interests of reflexivity and the overall story of this project, the challenges I encountered in my research ambitions.

3.2 Ethnography: an overview

> *It's cold and windy at the side of this pitch and my note pages in my notepad are blowing over. It's hard to write with woollen gloves on but I can't take them off because my fingers might drop off. Red Hat Lady is particularly interested in my presence here and the type of research I'm conducting. I think she might be spying on me on behalf of any number of enemies and I hope our conversation ends soon.*

Red Hat Lady (laughing): "So you're just lurking about watching the games?"

Me: "No I'm not just watching the games: I'm watching what goes on around the games."

Red Hat Lady (pretending not to look at my notepad): "Like at the side then, with us lot?"

Me (closing notepad): "Pretty much, yeh."

Red Hat Lady: "Didn't know you could do research like that."

Me: "Nor did I really… before I started this". (Fieldnote – 15.09.19)

My study was qualitative in nature and adopted an ethnographic approach to data collection, in keeping with the study objectives and in order to capture the social story. I chose ethnography as the methodology for this study as it is suited to the sociological study of people within communities and cultures, in this case the grass roots rugby league community. My study relied on the gathering of authentic data from the field, so primarily I obtained a collection of observational field notes that reflected the interactions, behaviours and emotions of people, including myself, in the natural context.

Data collection methods had to adapt to situations as they arose in and around the field of study and hence were determined by the social environment (Silverman, 2013), the people within it, and the opportune and sometimes inopportune situations that arose. This included observation of behaviour and dialogue on rugby pitch touchlines, conversations with spectators, officials and coaches and attendance at *by invitation only* stakeholder events. The extensive work I had done on planning for focus groups and interviews turned out to be wasted and later in the project I was glad about that, as I will explain later on.

Due to the relative unpredictability of social environments and human relationships, qualitative research advocates flexible approaches to, and methods for, the study of social phenomena (Saldaña, 2011). I was thankful for this as my observations and various encounters could legitimately be counted as constituent parts of my data (Koning and Ooi, 2013), without having to worry about whether these encounters were valid from a research perspective. This flexibility in approach was in keeping with maintaining the essence of the social story rather than a manipulation of the data to fit with a rigid methodology (Andrews *et al,* 2005). It also enabled me to better record events in fieldnotes and produce richer description in terms of the analysis through storytelling that came later on. So I lurked about on touchlines and had informal conversations with a range of people, including parents, coaches, volunteers and officials. I also attended governing body and stakeholder events, which were doors opened to me by contacting the Rugby Football League at the start of the project. Hence, ethnography gave legitimacy to myself as the researcher being present within the research context (Ottenberg 2006; Schwandt, 2007) in one or more fluctuating roles. My roles as a researcher ranged from an observer looking in or at situations and social interactions to that of an immersed/complete participant looking within: an actor in my own play (Hammersley, 2007). I wrote extensive auto-ethnographic notes as a companion to that which I observed, experienced and later interpreted from fieldnotes (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). I felt these personal situated researcher insights enriched the subsequent social stories I wrote and may have kept me from going mad, or worse, giving up.

I was aware that my presence as an ethnographic researcher within the field may have, when overt about it, affected the natural environment and the behaviour of the those within the social setting being observed, thus affecting the authenticity of the data. However, as an existing member of the community being studied, this consequence was negated by the observation that the social setting and community under study often returned to its typical behaviour given not much time (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015); people got used to me being there and I became an irrelevance, usually in a matter of minutes. That coupled with the choice and range of settings I was able to operate in, meant that my presence as a researcher was often unrecognisable, unless anyone asked. What I did not foresee or rather believe before I entered the field, was that ethnographic research could be so emotionally and intellectually draining (Dickson-Swift *et al.* 2009; Cappuro, 2021). Not only was I witnessing and documenting the emotions of others as I observed them, but I was experiencing my own emotions and reactions to that which I observed. The documentation of this in both fieldnotes and stories from the field could be cathartic in terms of making sense of the situation and the production of an artefact, but nevertheless was draining. However, in describing events and constructing stories from the field the inclusion of the emotions and subsequent dynamics between participants and myself as researcher was necessary, and I believe made for a richer description and narrative as is the essence of ethnographic method (Parvez, 2018).

In terms of my role as an ethnographer, I initially felt that it was important to put aside any preconceived hypotheses when gathering and documenting the data: this I later realised was quite impossible (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). In the

early days I tried a descriptive approach to data collection so as to maintain the integrity of the social story, in keeping with the eidetic phenomenological philosophy (Belt, 2022). However, this could not be adopted at the expense of my empirical knowledge and experience of being part of the community under investigation. As Belt (2022:405) neatly summarises:

> *… eidetic variation is needed to labour through our initially vague and often confused conceptions in order to reach a clearer and more intuitive grasp of essences*.

As my experience with data collection grew, my fieldnotes adapted a more interpretive style, and synthesis of observations into potential themes for enquiry meant I could be more purposeful with the sampling of situations and social contexts (van Maanen, 2011). Interpretation of data through my own subjective view of the world through auto-ethnographic narrative (Chang, 2007; Smith-Shank and Keifer-Boyd, 2007) was balanced with interpretation through different theoretical lenses, dependent upon the content and themes of the data collected. Later on I illustrated this in storified form. It is acknowledged that 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 was paid as to what to do with the data and how to present the story for wider consumption (Sugden, 2002).

3.3 Gaining access to the field, overtly and covertly

> *A good starting place is to be more revealing about ourselves. In our sometimes-grim determination to learn all we can about the individuals with whom we conduct our research, we forget that others can be quite curious about us, including why we are curious about them.* (Walcott, 2002:162).

As is usual with research projects, I was required to ethically justify my proposed methods prior to being let loose in the field. I include here my experience of gaining ethical approval as I think it highlights some of the wider ethical issues debated in the literature related to ethnographic study (Sparkes, 2001; Hammersley, 2006; Bell, 2019). Ethical approval for me proved exhausting and required several amendments/submissions prior to approval. I managed at the time, although others have surpassed me now I believe, to gain the department record for most conditions imposed by an ethics committee: seventeen in total. The main sticking point, of the many sticky points, was concerning the methodology, or rather the method of data collection or perhaps both. I provide an excerpt of that which I initially submitted to the University Ethics committee here:

Participant Observation

> *This study relies on the gathering of authentic data from the field; a collection of observational field notes that reflect the behaviour of people in this public context. The source sample will be gained from observation of the spectators at mass participation events which take place in a public arena……As such it is not feasible or reasonable to gain individualised consent from attendees. Field*

> *notes will be taken by the researcher based on observations. Further data will be gathered from public sources of information such as league governance web sites which again are within the public arena.*

Although I did not mention the term *covert observation* the Ethics Committee did – I include an abridged version of their response to the above:

> *…a stronger level of justification is required to support what is effectively covert research. In other words, the researcher needs to demonstrate that the data collected in this project can only reasonably be obtained through covert observation. For example, in view of some of the comments made in the research proposal, some rugby league clubs can be very defensive about their reputation and may not want someone in their ground undertaking observation. Ultimately, the researcher needs either to obtain permission to do the research or to justify why the significance of the research overrides the need to seek permission.*

My modus operandi was since I was already a regular bystander on the touchline, the only thing I thought I would be doing differently would be to take notes on, or after the fact, on what I had witnessed within the field. As I saw it, turning up as a spectator and announcing what I was doing would have seemed quite bizarre and possibly caused some “Hawthorne effect” which I considered rendered the gathering of any valid data futile (Brannigan and Zwerman, 2001). I would like to point out that I had no intention of deceiving anyone or being deliberately secretive, in fact I had no problem explaining to anyone who asked what I was doing and why, the emphasis on “if” they asked of course. I just

couldn't imagine doing a widespread announcement at the start of a match as to my role and motives within the field: a sort of “whatever you say may be given in evidence” disclaimer. Nor could I have possibly obtained ethical permission from every amateur rugby league club without it taking several years before the research would have even started, if at all. I think the overt versus covert debate within ethnographic study (Jones and Smith, 2017; Lugosi, 2016; Strudwick, 2019) of which I read quite a lot about at the beginning of my research journey, detracts from the main issues I see within the ethics of ethnography. The first issue or truth is that whether overt or covert when in the field you are essentially watching people, or rather spying on people, documenting the way they behave and interpreting what this may mean for them and you, for wider public consumption at a later date. Yes, being overt might skew the data in that in all likelihood people act differently when they know what you are up to, but ethically you are still up to the same thing.

Secondly at the outset of this ethnographic project whether I claimed to be overt or covert, it was impossible to predict what my role would be in the field. For example, when I was in the field, I rather expected people seeing me with a book and pen would want to know what I was up to and so would ask. However, my experience was that sometimes people assumed what I was up to, for example assessing the referee's performance or scouting for a club, and sometimes they did not seem bothered at all. Therefore, the line between covert and overt was not as crisp in the field as it could be in the academic discourse (Virtová, Stöckelová, and Krásná, 2018). I was only ever asked a handful of times when in the field what I was doing; one instance leading to a very interesting conversation with a gentleman about the history of amateur

rugby league, and the other leading to me being verbally abused and labelled “a bloody nosey bugger”. Both situations were worthy of inclusion in my field notes. Subsequently I rephrased my ethics submissions to further explain my intended position:

> *This study relies on the gathering of authentic data from the field; a collection of observational field notes that reflect the behaviour of people this public context. The source sample will be gained from observation of the spectators at mass participation events which take place in public access areas of which the researcher will be one spectator/participant. As such it is not feasible or reasonable to gain individualised consent from attendees or individual venues. By public arena this will include council owned public sports grounds, playing fields and amateur rugby league club premises. Public access is available at all grounds and matches routinely advertised on public social media sites and open access websites. The ethical issues arising from this are that if the intentions of the researcher were openly declared, the behaviour of the spectators might alter through her intrusion. However, the researcher is already an established member of the community being observed and is already a participant/spectator within that community. Covert, or rather, more discreet observational methods will allow for observation of the authentic social interactions and behaviours of the community that would otherwise be hampered by overtly declared observational methods and would potentially affect the behaviour of the community being observed. It is reasonable to acknowledge that declared observation could place the researcher at risk of occasional confrontation but is unlikely as she is an accepted member in that setting. Also, large crowd sizes and the relatively short duration of the event rendered individualised consent impractical on a given day.*

> *Letter from RFL (Rugby Football League) attached evidencing National Governing Body (NGB) approval of the research: a line of communication with the NGB has been established who are very keen to support the research and understand the need to preserve the primary field context for observations. The significance of this research will be to discover the* ***positive*** *and* ***negative*** *aspects of the grass roots rugby league community with the intention of improving or mitigating any negative aspects in the future, both for participants in the sport and those on the touchline. Retrospective field notes will be taken by the researcher based on observations and personal narratives/diarised entries. Further data will be gathered from public sources of information such as league governance web sites which again are within the public domain with open access to all.*

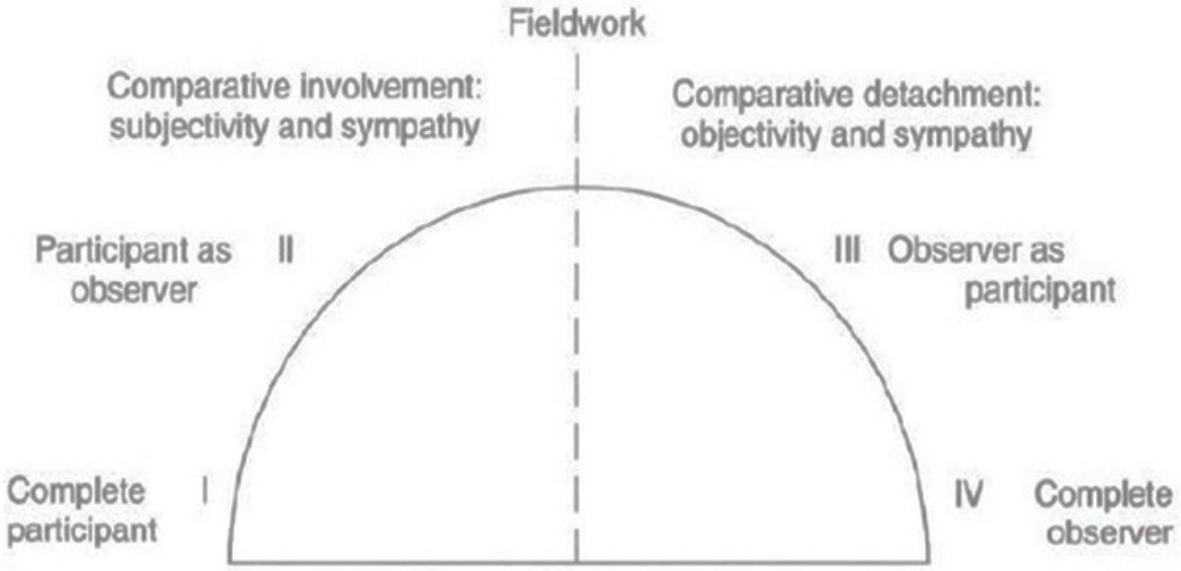
The reworded application and further level of explanation seemed to be enough to satisfy the University Ethics Committee and approval was granted to commence the fieldwork in early 2018. However, the whole experience of attempting to justify the ethical validity of ethnographic fieldwork led me to engage with the academic discourse centred around whether ethnographic fieldwork can ever be truly ethical (Laine, 2000; O'Neill, 2002; O'Brien, 2006).

> *Field research can, at bottom, be considered an act of betrayal, no matter how well intentioned or well-integrated the researcher. You make the private public and leave the locals to take the consequences* (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

I concluded that ethnography is unique in that it enables the researcher to observe human behaviour and interactions in naturalistic settings, and you can better do this if people sometimes don't know what you're doing. The

vulnerability of the other participants, the sensitivity of what you are researching and the experience of the researcher as it unfolds in situ, all account for subsequent actions and behaviours, which at the time you can only hope are as ethical as possible (Li, 2008; Walcott, 2002).

3.4 Being in the field: participant observation



Taken from Hammersley in Atkinson (2007) to illustrate fluctuating role of the ethnographer.

> *Observation is always participation. There is no way to escape becoming a participant and, as such, co-producer of the observed phenomenon. There is no such thing as a neutral or objective description. As observation deals with differences and process meaning, all descriptions are reconstructions and interpretations of the observed. Hence, the idea of neutral descriptions as well as the idea of the naïve observer becomes a void* (Keiding, 2011).

In this section I explain what being in the field meant within this project, principally in terms of my role as an observer at grass roots rugby league matches and various stakeholder meetings and events. When I commenced the project and even through the ethical approval process, I naively assumed that my role would not be that different from being a *rugby mum*, supporting her sons at rugby matches. I recall thinking that the only thing I would be doing differently would be note taking either in situ or retrospectively following observable interactions and goings-on around the touchline. This proved not to be the case at all, and there were various junctures throughout this project when I wished I'd chosen a different subject: one I wasn't as passionate about. The reason behind this was that as the observational fieldwork progressed so did my visibility of the micro-society and cultural oddities that were under study; in observing the participants interactions I reflexively challenged my own, both in my pre-researcher days and then as a researcher, standing by and watching some very uncomfortable exchanges. Gold (1958) and Junker (1960) define participant observation as anything on the spectrum between the poles of complete-participant role and the complete-observer role. The complete-participant role requires the researcher to be fully immersed in the culture under investigation which requires concealment in terms of purpose; the covert observational stance the Ethics Committee did not like the sound of. Whereas the complete-observer role enables the researcher to stand afar and observe the culture in a detached manner with no interaction with the subjects of interest. The less hard-lined positions of participant observation within these two poles are participant as observer and observer as participant, both of which I employed during the fieldwork.

At times I was on the touchline with the spectators and officials and so had little option but to interact and pass the odd comment on this and that in order to fit in and not cause alarm as to my presence. Similarly, as an invited guest at Rugby Football League events and club events, I needed to converse with the other attendees in order to extricate opinions, viewpoints and explanations that would add to the telling of the social story. The participant as observer role enabled me to reveal my motives and research, and was particularly useful in finding ways into events that would usually be closed shops. For example, I was invited to a *by invitation only* event hosted by the Rugby Football League in Manchester in 2018; a sort of stakeholder consultation event to review the 12–18-year-olds game, in terms of touchline behaviours. The event was attended by the great and the good of Rugby League including several professional club's coaches, scouts, Heads of Youth Development and League Officials. My role at the event had already been revealed in the seating plan as *Parent/Researcher,* so there was little point in being discreet from the outset. Incidentally I was later announced as someone who would be helping deal with poor touchline behaviour, which was news to me, perhaps a testament to the probability that the hosting organisation did not understand the limits of my project. I was part of the round table discussions and was able to speak to individuals away from their professional tribes, with their associated expectations. Consequently, I gained some invaluable insights about the scouting process, the dissatisfaction around the professional scholarship system and potential reasons some of my contemporary parents may have been wasting a lot of time and effort sneaking around, in the hope that their kids would get picked up by a professional club:

> *They should be left alone 'til they're at least 16 and then be looked at properly once they've developed a bit ... it's that what's ruining the grass roots game... same 20 big lads on the list... every club has the list... doesn't matter what we think...* (Fieldnote 11.10.18)

Whilst I considered and outlined this stance of participant observer, I may have been over-selling my faith in my role there. I never really felt part of the event, as I did not want to be manipulated and cajoled into being the token gesture voice of the parents, despite the free buffet. However, the insights I gained from being invited into events such as these assisted me to develop storied accounts later on during my analysis.

I often found it a relief to be able to retreat to the role of observer as participant and complete observer as this enabled me to stand away, both metaphorically and physically from the fracas, shouting and verbal abuse that I became to dread in the field. I would often stand away from the touchline but within view and earshot so that I could see and hear the comments, but I was far enough away from it to sometimes watch some of the game, or the coaches' actions or what the referee was doing. It was a strategy that I employed several times during my fieldwork and allowed me the opportunity to take a breather and regroup my notes, which as an observer from afar were easier to construct in the moment without any explanation necessary. In terms of observer as participant I also just turned up at games as some random woman spectator with my dog, who I often used as a decoy. I would just listen to what was going on and write up what I had heard later. This was a particularly useful strategy

when observing post-match interactions, when the touchline had decanted to the club house for a few drinks.

Although my roles did fluctuate during this study I believe there was a definite shift from my initial role as participant observer to that of one that was more detached. Sometimes that position was what the data or the field called for, and at other times, I believe it was what I needed to happen in order to protect myself from the angst of the touchline. It is not easy staying quiet, as a mother or a researcher or a combination of the two, when you are watching incidents and interactions that you personally believe are fundamentally wrong and damaging to the children who are participating in rugby league, whether that be as a player or official. This discomfort was compounded in most of my observations of “touchline managers”, the people in the high-visibility vests whose role it was to dampen any flames of abuse.

> *“It's starting to kick off down there, can you hear ‘em shouting at that kid? I’m off if it gets any worse” (laughing).* (Fieldnote,12.05.19)

3.5 Fieldnotes

Making fieldnotes enables the researcher to capture first hand detailed accounts of their observations and experiences of being situated within the culture being studied. Initially my fieldnotes resembled jottings that took the form of handwritten accounts that I made in situ, on the touchline, within my blue notebook. This proved to be a fairly inefficient way of briefly documenting my observations as it rained a lot and also attracted unnecessary attention in some cases. I dabbled with producing in situ electronic accounts on my laptop

but this required resorting to the comfort of a camp chair, which amplified both the attention issue and the likelihood of rain damage. The in-situ jottings were valuable for documenting direct quotes and description, which I did a lot. As for the aesthetic contextual component of the observations I added that later from memory, as I did the reflexive dimension. I would like to say that I followed some systematic structure to composing my fieldnotes from the offset (Bernard, 2006; O'Reilly, 2012) but alas I did not. My initial scribblings were messy but defensibly in keeping with the ethnographic method. The systematic approach came later as I began to construct the fieldnotes into tangible storified accounts of my observations.

In either format, initial fieldnotes were descriptive of what was going on with a peppering of my own thoughts and feelings. When I returned home from the touchline, I rewrote the fieldnotes which aided my recall and enabled me to add things to them from memory. I took guidance from the book *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2005) in which they outline a process for *Moving from Field to Desk* (p48): a process I believe I followed. From initial raw fieldnotes, fuller fieldnotes were created from recalling events and dialogue then reflecting on their significance. Next came scene setting and characterisation in constructing the tales from the field: storified versions of observations and testimonies.

Examples of raw fieldnotes taken pitch side during the summer of 2018:

Match day – 10th June 2018. Cup match.

> *Hot day and pitch roped off. Some man walking up and down pitch with no shoes on and no high vis wear – not sure what role is – think linesman. Various shouting throughout match but seems to be more subdued that usual – is it*

because of the heat? Main shouting comes from coaches shouting constantly at kids and then at each other. One coach yells – get into them and take him out which causes other coach to shout at him. Coaches end up in argument during match at side of pitch. Kids playing OK apart from one player getting warned 3 times for high tackles to shouts of "get him off" from crowd. Ref makes a few decisions that are open to question by the crowd. Rope is straight then bends in as 2 parents have pushed it so they're right at the edge of the pitch.

Match ends and lads walking off including 3 forwards from opposition team who have won - we are all clapping and then crowd disperses apart from me and a couple of others who are hanging around to watch lads walk off. Their coach is also clapping and then…turns to lads who are sweating and worn out and says…." You men were shit".

They don't notice me stood there behind my sunglasses, but I watch them. Coach says no more and lads walk past – one has tears in his eyes. No-one says anything – I walk to car and contemplate a story. I look back and they are going into changing rooms.

Match day – 24th June 2018 10am

Hot dry pitch for the under 11s game. There are more women shouting than men – raucous shouts of offside and knock on. One woman says to another, "I'm doing what you said" and walks away – don't know what she means – potentially had enough? Spectators shouting to ref, "they're playing you… come on". Boys just getting on with game. Touchline manager present but not for away team – stood in crowd. Walks up and down twice but not past away fans who seem to be making most of the noise. There's a match going on behind me – no touchline managers at that one again!! 2 lads in middle of pitch now pushing each other – coach shouts "keep them down here and get off his

head". Few shouts from crowd – "C'mon ref high every time" – lad goes off injured – spectators clap.

Match day – 1st July 2018

Coaches come on pitch and say something to ref – now 2 coaches on pitch speaking at ref. Touchline manager stood with own supporters drinking water. Parent comes over to me to complain about the opposition supporters shouting at kids – think she thinks I'm official because of book in my hand. Some woman gets off her fold up chair to hurl abuse at one of the kids on sideline who tackled and stopped a try. They see me writing and start whispering about a disallowed try – they think it was a try. "Bully boy tactics didn't work" shouts one spectator to the away team.

Match ends and 2 men start discussing "disgusting" behaviour of away supporters. "Ref had a good game but that coach was out of order". "Did you see 'em having a go at the ref? They're out of order"

Woman asks the ref what coaches said. He says they said he was a disgrace. Another coach on sideline tells me that the coach (involved in this game) came up to him and started having a go at the ref – "I told him to fuck off as ref didn't do anything wrong".

Man sat in chair with sticks – has high vis touchline manager vest on but cannot walk well. Doesn't leave chair all match. Other touchline manager same woman as previous game stood in crowd. Lad goes down injured – ground as hard as rock.

Coach to players during team talk right in from of me, "they've only got one player – you know who it is take him out" Role modelling/teaching – there's something about that here. 13.05pm.

Match day – 8th July 2018

Hot sunny day and last match before break. Travelling fans in good spirits as team won league. Pitch hard and ref stays for 2 games. Opposition coach shouts and bawls continuously at home team who are losing. Some pushing of heads down into dusty grass – I can see the hills in the background which have been burnt with recent fires. Clapping and shouting from fans "well done" "awesome" – hear the odd shout of criticism at ref but nothing like recently. Is this because the ref is an adult? Looks about mid 50's. Regular water breaks are given but lad from opposition doesn't realise and comes on late to which his team shout "you might as well stay there now" – laughing from the crowd. Home team losing and seem to have lost confidence. Match ends with away victory. Both sets of lads make guards of honour for each other and are clapping each other. Non-alcohol champagne comes out to shouts of Championes to away team. Many take shirts off and drink from the bottle – fans clap and take photographs. Today is a good day.

Match day 17th July 2018

Conversation pre match with group of parents regarding xxxx at xxxx and the folding of under xx – apparently coach "called one kid a fat cxxx" and was suspended. Half the team said if he wasn't coaching they'd leave and half the team said if he was they'd leave – hence folding. Nobody commented on coach's words to this child – conversation revolved around the folding of the team – getting priorities right!!??? Match kicks off – coaches continually shouting at the referee. Crowd cheer at 2 mistakes by boys on pitch – making me cringe. One parent comments on another who laughed at her child at a mistake – "this is why mums should be banned from matches" bit of a generalisation there, Criticism continues from touchline – "come on boys – you're playing like it's a "Sunday Morning Stroll". Coach of opposition then

cheers at mistakes made by opposing boy. One mum for opposition continuously shouting at boys – "watch this wing" "change play" – one woman turns around and says "are these 2 writing essays on us". Another spectator is sat in a chair writing/drawing. They then continue to shout at boys on pitch – "start passing boys". Boy takes a goal kick and spectator has to remove crowd who have pushed in the rope roping off the pitch. Few disgruntled comments about this. Coach continually abused by crowd. One boy shouted to by a home supporter – put your dummy back in. Full time and whistle blows – one spectator shouts at ref – "Well done ref – that's it go and get your money you fucking prick" as he walks away. Turns to me and says are you writing this? Yes. Which bit? The bit where you said and repeats statement. Some woman laughs – woman then looks at me as I get the notepad out again and looks away.

Match day – first match. 23rd July 2018

Absolutely boiling hot day – all in shorts and summer clothes and sun is beating down. Opposition have brought 5 coaches all swarming round touchline (like wasps). Boys warming up on field away from us – both teams look bigger than before. Match is a midday in this heat. Match kicks off – again I cannot see any touchline managers but apparently the ref has insisted that the pitch is roped off – good news. Play gets underway – few scuffles and swearing from lads. Home team goes one try up due to an error. Half way through 1st half ref speaks to a player for swearing – next the whole team are on a warning. This is followed by all 5 high vis coaches shouting at the ref from the touchline – ridiculous – you can't be serious amongst other expletives. Second half gets underway and again lots of swearing and crowd shouting at ref. home team now seem to have taken the game. Fight starts on the middle of the pitch - all players running in – home kid and away kid both get sent off and away coaches not impressed. Ref

speaks to coaches and warns them. At end of match there is an agreement not to report the incident so that both boys don't get match bans at this crucial time of the season. Woman at touchline says – "how is this getting on YouTube as I can't wait to watch that fight again". Lots of talk over the fight and all the "lads running in" – who was winding who up – injured boy has cut his eye – is going to be taken to hospital. Both teams come off to pats on the back.

Match Day 12th August 2018

Weather has turned and it's raining like nobody's business – sheeting rain and a trip over the Pennines. Game kicks off at 12 but home team say game being played on Annex pitch a complex 5 min drive away. Supporters complaining that this is a tactic and not a necessity. Boys trudge over and some go in cars – some get lost enroute and turn up late. Pitch is shocking, not roped off and no sign of any officials apart from the ref who looks cold and older. Game begins to cries of outrage from the fans due to a couple of non-decisions. Moans and groans from supporters – opposition coach tells one supporter to shut up "or you will get penalised".

They're talking about leagues and club resignations – screen shots from FB are doing the rounds. A bit sad really. Going in, wet through.

Match Day August 26th 2018

Away match on a nice crisp morning. We arrive to gossip about opposing teams and ineligible players – the Facebook wars have begun amongst the parents. I have the dog with me and the players have gone off to get changed. They appear a little quieter than usual. One of the injured boys has turned up to watch – he has his finger wired but played on last week despite a bleeding finger. The match begins and the opposition are a tough side. The touchline is not too vocal but the coaches are. The ref's decisions get questioned every

time he blows the whistle and he appears to like blowing the whistle – we will be here all day. I walk around the pitch several times with the dog then I can hear and see what is happening on the touchline. There are several matches at younger age groups taking place and the little ones are herding around the ball whilst the coach tries to direct them – one player is running in the opposite direction to where he should be and I laugh to myself, cos he doesn't look like he cares. One of the other age group games the supporters are quite vocal shouting instructions to the kids. The coach tells one of them to shut up and a reason is given by the particular parent as to why he's shouting – shouted back. I meander back to the U15s match and the away team has given away the lead and it's neck and neck. There's a scuffle in the middle of the pitch and a player gets sin binned to cries of "what was that for…ridiculous" – although it was plain to see what it was for. The players appear to be arguing with the referee and the coach pulls them all to one side. The punched boy gets up to pats on the back and the game restarts. Both sets of players are now fired up and a few nasty tackles ensure – thankfully on-one is injured. The supporters are now shouting at the players and instructing them what to do – pass it out; make him do some work; why're you running there? A spectator shouts to the ref that he should have a home team shirt on. Game ends to people saying it was a good match but "we were robbed" "it could have gone either way".

3.6 Ask no questions; get told no lies

At the beginning of my journey as a researcher and having decided upon an ethnographic design for my study, I thought that to strengthen the validity of my data I would conduct focus groups and interviews with a range of stakeholders, for example parents, coaches, and officials. Consequently, and in retrospect naively, I wrote extensive participant information and constructed

semi-structured interview questions for this purpose (duly included in my ethics committee submission). Early on I approached several potential participant groups, explained my research and asked permission to meet with them and ask them about their experiences of being on the touchline of grass roots rugby league. I received responses from only 3 people who assured me that they would get back to me with dates for the focus group or individual interview to take place: as I write this some five years on, I am still waiting.

I believe this predicament was borne from being overt and I suspected that the lack of enthusiasm on my potential chosen participants' part, was down to them perhaps knowing the way the interviews might have gone. This is the ethical challenge with being up front about what you're doing as a researcher; if it's a touchy subject you can put people off talking to you (Li, 2008).

Alternatively, the people that will talk to you are often the marginalised few and *not typical of other insiders* (Walcott, 2002). It is at this juncture that I must mention "Mole Man", or at least that's what I called him for the purposes of anonymity. I initially met him on the side of a pitch and had quite a lengthy conversation about my research: at the time I didn't think much of it. To be clear I had explained my modus operandi in terms of an ethnographic study, and I thought at first, he wanted no part in it. I may have been wrong as shortly after our pitch side exchange I was contacted via email by Mole Man indicating that some shenanigans at his club would be worthy of investigation as to its impact on the touchline and he would be willing to communicate, but not about "confidential club matters":

> *“I might have given you the wrong impression when I said I would have to deny certain aspects of information I gave to you. That would be access to personal and private information passed between...”* (Excerpt from Mole Man email)

He explained via the email that he had been associated with grass roots rugby league for over thirty years and he was disgusted by the way the “club officials” behaved and used the junior teams as pawns in whatever power struggle was that week's fancy. I was keen to follow up with him as a potential interviewee and emailed him back, pushing my luck to see if he had changed his mind. The response I received from him was advisory, asking me if I was sure I wanted to pursue this line of enquiry: he underlined a part of his response that at the time appeared somewhat strange considering I was at such an early stage in the fieldwork:

> *“You have ruffled a few feathers here and there”.*
>
> (Excerpt from Mole Man email)

On reflection I understand that as the focus of my research was on touchline behaviour I may have “ruffled a few feathers”. I wondered what may have been said if I had have had the chance to conduct some interviews or focus groups with touchline participants and asked them about their motivations for verbally abusing other spectators, players or officials, or whether they even recognised their behaviour as being abusive. However, I am glad that I didn’t get the chance to enact these methods because if anything I no longer feel they would have validated my actions in the field, and in fact I now feel that they would have spoilt the whole piece. I wanted to capture data that emanated from

the field and felt that data elicited away from the social setting was too contrived, or as Silverman puts it *researcher provoked data* (2014:55) which I felt didn't belong. So I relied on conversations and rapport on the touchline, which in themselves could arguably be contrived (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012), but this method seemed to fit better as being situated within the social story. I did not elicit these conversations, they just happened as and when the conditions were right, but I used the content and context of them to add to the various stories and insights that I will discuss in the following chapters. The validity and naturalist debates regarding the methods used in ethnographic research seem secondary to the protection of the participants, whose lives and behaviours are under investigation, so careful data handling had to be employed.

> *The central issue for "naturalness" may not be the data—or even necessarily the method—but how the data are analysed, contextualized, and represented.* (Prior, 2018)

3.7 Using creative non-fiction

It became obvious early on in this project that I would have to be careful with handling the data that came from the field as it was sensitive. Firstly, as the project was based in the north of England within the amateur grassroots rugby league community, there was a real danger that participants within the data could be easily recognised. This is because the community under study was fairly small in size, compared to that of grassroots football for example, and key people within varying positions, whether it be at league, club or spectator level tended to be known to quite a few. Secondly, in keeping with the interpretivist

paradigm, I as the researcher, co-produced the field data (Harris, 2006), so protection of myself was also required. For these reasons, I employed a method of writing that I considered would provide a protective anonymity to the participants I had encountered during the project. I adopted the use of creative non-fiction (Smith, McGannon and Williams, 2015) as the means of showing and interpreting the data, so that it could be shared for wider consumption, including to those within the rugby league community itself.

Creative non-fiction is a style of creative writing that evolves from the selected use of non-fictious events, observations or testimonies. It involves constructing true stories using literary techniques typically associated with fiction, such as narrative, characterisation, dialogue, and vivid descriptions. This approach enables the writer to interpret real life events and experiences in a more subjective manner than would be acceptable from pure non-fictional documentary, which by necessity would involve revealing true identities, places and times of events (Caully, 2008). Hence, for the purposes of showing and interpreting the data from this project I constructed stories as a vehicle for presenting a selection of field observations, combined with my personal experiences and reflexive thoughts.

In the stories that I will present for discussion in the subsequent chapters of this thesis, I had a responsibility not to distort the underlying *matters of fact* that I documented in the field: to maintain the integrity of the data. Consequently, I was careful to use the dialogue and behaviours I had documented in raw field notes to illustrate significant observations and points within any storified accounts. The purpose of the stories was to elicit meaningful

interpretation from the data and to express my understandings through philosophising and theorising about the implications of my discoveries. I wanted to offer this to the reader so they could consider their own interpretation of the story: a *show but not tell* approach (Keeling and Palmer, 2018). By using stories in this way I hoped to illustrate the social world I had witnessed and interpreted and provoke some ethical thinking from any potential readers (Smith and Weed, 2007). Throughout this thesis I refer to my observations and notes as simply fieldnotes, whether they were contemporaneous, reflexive or retrospective.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4. Great Expectations

4.1 Setting the scene: “no problem at our club, I won’t allow it”

In this chapter I shift my attention to the observations I made and experiences I shared regarding the potential effects of expectations, both positive and negative, on the grass roots rugby league game. Within the context of this research, the touchline was usually made up of a mixture of players’ parents, carers and relatives, public spectators, younger or older players who had either just finished a match or were waiting to participate in one, and various league and club officials. It was clear from my position on the touchline that they all had expectations. These expectations on the one hand were present on match day, whether that be to see a win at all costs, or to be able to watch the match free from listening to the verbal abuse being hurled across the pitch. On the other hand, expectations were more discreet and manifested within the behaviours in the club house, at training sessions or within the general discourse around the league on social media. There were expectations of the parents on their children, their coaches and the club; expectations of the coaches on the team and club; expectations of the players on their parents, teammates and coaches and expectations of the Rugby Football League on everybody. These complex relational dynamics played themselves out in various ways in the many interactions and behaviours I observed and participated in during this research. Consequently, I concluded that the manifestation of expectations in conversations and behaviours was a recurrent theme. My investigations led me to ponder the possible relationship between these expectations and arguably, the resultant behaviours.

The responsibility for managing the expectations and behaviours of spectators on the touchline, according to the various safeguarding guidance and Codes of Conduct available on the RFL website, is that it should be everybody's responsibility (RFL.com): a sort of shared moral value. This has been a consistent message under the banners of the RFL *Respect* campaign of 2005 and the subsequent *Enjoy the Game* campaign still in operation today: here are some excerpts provided for context:

> *Everyone shares the responsibility for safeguarding and creating safe environments in Rugby League whether as a parent, coach, spectator, or club official. This means that everyone should operate and demonstrate exemplary behaviour to both safeguard children and protect all personnel from allegations of abuse or poor practice.* (RFL Parents Handbook, 2023)

Similarly, the RFL has published numerous Codes of Conduct dependent upon one's role in the game. Here is an example of one such code written on the RFL website: it reads as more of a command by the use of capital letters shouting from the screen:

> ## *What can the club expect from parents?*
>
> - *BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL*
> - *RESPECT THE MATCH OFFICIALS*
> - *DO NOT ENGAGE IN DISCRIMINATORY OR THREATENING BEHAVIOUR ENCOURAGE A SAFE AND FAIR ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL PLAYERS, MATCH OFFICIALS AND SPECTATORS*
> - *USE POSITIVE LANGUAGE WHATEVER THE SCORE*

- *REPORT ANY INSTANCES OF DISCRIMINATORY OR THREATENING BEHAVIOUR TO THE NEAREST STEWARD OR THE GAME DAY MANAGER*
- *MOST OF ALL, ENJOY THE MATCH AND OUR SPORT*

(RFL Parent and Spectator Code of Conduct, 2023)

From being present on the touchline during this research, I observed that the management of expectations and allied behaviour on match day usually fell to the coaches and *touchline managers,* sometimes visible by their high visibility vests, and at other times invisible, because there weren't any. Additionally, it appeared from my research that any attempt by the RFL to govern the game or at least influence the expectations within it, had little or no effect, and this they recognised as a problem. Early on during this project I spoke several times with RFL officials about poor touchline behaviours, one of whom openly remarked:

It keeps me awake at night: it's ruining it for all of us. (Fieldnote)

The main concerns expressed by RFL officials were that poor touchline behaviour had hit participation levels within the sport which were beginning to dwindle in the junior game, and similarly the number of trained referees was on a downward trajectory. The RFL officials did not specify what they meant by poor touchline behaviour but in their subsequent comments I surmised that this amounted to inappropriate use of language at junior games, verbal abuse to officials and players and a disregard for the aforementioned codes or commands of conduct. Another concern was that the clubs and leagues were

not consistent in their approach to try and control what went on at the side of the pitch on match day, if they tried to control it at all. Interestingly at a *by invitation only* stakeholder event hosted by the RFL, I had an impromptu conversation with a club official who was vehement that the behaviour we were discussing that day and that which I was witnessing in my fieldwork didn't happen at his club. I was intrigued to know how this oasis of calm had been achieved amongst the melee of agitation I perceived from observation of the touchline:

> *Spoke to this guy at this stakeholder event. He claimed that it would never happen at his club because he won't allow it. He got quite angry about the idea that it was a widespread problem. He said to me, "it doesn't happen at our club because I won't allow it. It's usually the parents that are the problem. If we see it going on they get banned from the club and that's that". He went on to say that spectators knew the expectations from the club and any infringement wouldn't be tolerated. I excused myself as he was getting wound up and I suspected the conversation wouldn't end well. Notes: I think I will go next week and check it out AND what happens to the kid who wants to play if his parents are banned? AND what's the mechanism for banning people and for what – how much is too much?* (Fieldnote)

Incidentally I did *check it out* during this project, and I was disappointed: I did not experience any oasis of calm at *his club,* in fact quite the opposite. Before I left the ground that day I called in at the clubhouse and saw a group of boys all around the mixing decks on the stage, in what I assumed was the main room you could hire for parties and such like. Snippets of music were being

played by one of the coaches and I learned from another rugby mum leant on the bar, that they were picking the songs to be played at the end of season presentation evening later that month. One of the songs played was *Two Tribes* by Frankie goes to Hollywood, which seemed a strange choice to me for a group of youngsters that weren't even born in the 1980s. However, as I drove home with that song playing over in my head, it evoked a different meaning for me from my experience on the touchline on that day so I paid homage to it in my fieldnote:

> *Two Tribes – XXXX Under 11's Sunday morning (it's early)*
> *Women arguing across the pitch at the Oasis of Calm (or not as is the case). I'm not documenting the whole spectacle today as typical of usual, just an excerpt from blue book (clubhouse writing post-match):*
> *Shouts from home side: Your fucking kid needs telling; he's out to hurt someone him. Shouts from away side: You're talking shit he's just playing the game. And Home again: Is he bollocks, he's just had our player round the throat.... stupid bitch* (Fieldnote)

So, I carried on the rounds of the touchlines, continuing to observe the seeming chasm between what was happening on the touchline and what was allegedly being done to control it. In this respect the expectations I personally had were continually thwarted, against a backdrop of defensive discourse from within the grass roots rugby league community. The Code of Conduct and guidance readily available on the RFL website outlining the expectations around behaviour, from my observations, did not appear to be taken seriously, internalised or respected by most on the touchlines.

In this chapter as with the following discussion chapters, I include some raw fieldnotes, creative non-fiction accounts and personal reflections on my experiences, before philosophising and theorising on the emergent themes as I saw them, in my own light. This is to extricate the implications of my discoveries and observations and for the reader to consider their own perspective on matters: I begin with the parents on the touchlines.

4.2 Parenthood

Below I offer a vignette in the form of a creative narrative that I wrote about the expectations of parents on their young players. Made up from listening to several conversations of the same ilk on the touchline, the narrative is a creative, but non-fictional synthesis of several pitch side exchanges I overheard between parents about their children:

The Rainbow

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

Carol: Did you enjoy your holiday?

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

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

Leanne: Sore subject rugby?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Carol: Well he needed it to do his project.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Carol: Well he's talented at Art.

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

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

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

Carol: No.

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

Pete: You upsetting Dan again Carol?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Simon: Is he going on about me again?

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

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

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

Dan: What did he have to say for himself?

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

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

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

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

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

Dan: Yeh crying out for artists this country.

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

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

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

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

Tom: Thanks: tough one that.

Leanne: Well played boys; a good match that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During construction of the above piece, I wondered if the expectations demonstrated within it could be the cause of some of the behaviours at the side of the pitch and provide some rationale as to why parents choose to behave in ways that could not be classed as positive. From the conversations I have heard there seemed to be a distinct line that was crossed between supporting a child and feeling the need to belittle other elements within a player's life that

might jeopardise their performance on the pitch, or at more junior ages, destroy the parental hope that a professional scholarship might be on the table. The focus on performance over holistic development seemed to be a common theme in this research, especially from parents with children at younger age groups:

> *Side of pitch with dog. Some fella has a hold of his kid, kid is crying and trembling (he looks about 8) and I don't want to watch. Just get out there, stop being soft and bloody play and don't you be dropping that ball like you were last week: stop showing me up.* (Fieldnote)

Certain moments have stood out in my fieldwork, that may not have stood out to another rugby mum or observer. My ethnographic research and lived experience shaped a particular reading of exchanges that might not have been comparable to others, and the above incident that I documented in a fieldnote was perhaps one of them. I recall the above exchange well; it was a miserable morning with moisture hanging in the air signalling the rain that was to come, and later did, in sheets. I felt sorry for the young boy who, from the way he was trembling, looked like he did not want to be there. I noticed that the man with him who I assumed was his dad, had no awareness that he was being watched; not just by me, but by a few spectators who had turned to see what the fuss was about, but of course we all said nothing. The emphasis within this interaction from this father to his child was not on ascertaining why the child was crying and trembling, but on asserting control and verbal punishment in ensuring that his son played well and wasn't *soft.* This is certainly not an unknown strategy in junior sports (Sagar and Lavallee, 2010). Additionally, not

being *soft* was very important in my observations of the northern terms used within the grass roots rugby league community and it is a mantra I have heard from the touchline to players many times: *you mustn't be soft, stop acting soft, that tackle was a bit soft, your soft cos of your mum, you're just too soft.* Similarly the alternate mantra reflected the seemingly preferred position which was for the players to be hard and unyielding, to *act like a man, man-up* and *stop acting like a girl.* I found these particularly interesting turns of phrase when I observed them being shouted at young children. I often pondered how one should and could *man-up* at the age of 9 or 10, or indeed at any age considering the current emphasis on good mental health and well-being in the country and the promotion of talking about one's feelings, particularly targeting men.

So back to the story of the trembling child: it appeared apparent to me at the time that performance in the match and what happened on the pitch was more important than how this child felt about it, or himself, and it didn't look like he felt good about either. However, his impending performance in the seemingly crucial under 9's match was all that mattered to his father. Maybe the child would look back one day, on that sodden morning at the side of the pitch and consider it the life affirming moment when he learned not to be *soft.* Or maybe he would look back and pinpoint that moment as the catalyst for his fear of failure and his struggle to express his emotions, and this is why this incident in my fieldwork resonated for me and I identified with this young boy. Being the same age I recalled watching the Steven Spielberg film E.T. and crying at the end when the alien flies off in his spaceship and leaves Elliot behind with the

advice to *Be Good:* it was a sad moment only broken by the words I would hear many times as a child, *are you crying? … don't be so soft.*

4.3 Let children play the game

> *If we, adults, did not impose our will on children then maybe they would game before they sport. We have socially constructed expectations and our children `become miniature 'sportsters', while in terms of development, they should be 'gamesters'.* Giulianotti (2004:15)

There is an entire literature on whether children should adopt the Scandinavian approach of trying lots of physical activities and games before going into competitive sports later, with an emphasis upon the development and transferability of skills, and the importance of the child's motivation and autonomy rather than that of the parents or coaches (Huéscar Hernández, Andrés Fabra and Moreno-Murcia,2020; Støckel *et al*. 2010). Therefore, a central argument amongst social theorists is that children should be allowed to play the game before they play the sport (Ingham, Chase and Butt, 2002). They should mess around, cavort, have fun and learn the social skills to cope with life as they grow and develop, but alas, I did not see this so much as I stood observing the touchline. I saw the competitive attitude, a punitive edge and the linking of young players' performances as reflections of adults' worth; the fantastic player must have such good parents (Coakley, 2006).

During fieldwork I observed that not only did parents shout and bawl at opposition players and parents (the assumed threat), but they afforded the same hostility and criticism to their own children and players, albeit more

discretely. There has been a plethora of research over recent years investigating parental expectations and the potential effects of this in youth sporting environments (McCarthy and Jones 2007; Lauer *et al.* 2010; Sagar and Lavallee, 2010; Ede *et al.* 2012; Sorkkila, Aunola and Ryba, 2017) but one recent piece of research that I identified with in reflecting as a participant in this project was fabulously entitled *Rage at the Rink: Parental Aggression in Quebec Minor Hockey* (Sailofsky and Fogel, 2023). I thought this paper a good frame of reference as it focused on a similarly physical game with cultural currency, but one in the face of other bigger sports globally. From their research Sailofsky and Fogel, drawing on Spaaij's (2014) earlier work, develop a socio-ecological model to explain the various elements of why parents may behave aggressively and considered this as applicable to the context of Canadian minor hockey. However, on considering my experiences on the touchline I suspect there is high transferability potential for their model to grass roots rugby league in the UK, if that is, we are in the business of trying to explain what is essentially, according to a learned man, *just shit* behaviour. The *Rage at the Rink* model has five interrelating spheres, *Structural, Social Environmental, Situational, Interpersonal and Individual*. One such example of applicability of the model in this project is parental expectation as a socio-environmental factor manifesting itself in interpersonal exchanges and relationships (the shouting and bawling at players, coaches and referees), so much so that there was either a lack of recognition that it was happening by the perpetrator parents, or it was justified as *just part of the game:* a cultural norm or example of an inherent structural feature:

The shouting is all about encouragement... We get carried away sometimes but it's only because want 'em to do well

There's no harm in shouting... they've said as bad to my kid (opposition)

What's in a bit of name calling? Just a bit of banter

They're at it more than us (opposition)

You've got to expect this in rugby league; it's not table tennis

(Comments taken from fieldnotes)

4.4 Parental game playing

More than once, what struck me as incoherent about the parental shenanigans on the touchline, was that it was against a backdrop of the many sacrifices they made in the interests of their children participating in rugby league. They drove all over the region to ferry children to matches, washed muddy kits after a sodden game in the thick mud and purchased endless kits, headgear and expensive mouth guards to save their children's teeth. They showed unwavering support in the off-match activities; collections for injured players, fundraising for away days and player trips abroad, the sponsoring of kits and volunteering to run the coffee stand and food stands: all examples of caring activities that seemed completely at odds with the behaviour exhibited on the touchline. During the duration of my fieldwork there were a couple of players (from other teams than those I was observing at the time) who were injured quite badly and bucket collections were quickly instigated. No matter what team the player was from, the buckets went round the touchlines and spectators gave generously: a scenario I commented on within a fieldnote as it was incongruous to what I was observing:

> *How is it they can all chuck the pounds in the buckets for this player, most don't know who he is. Very generous and because they're kind so why are they behaving like this on the touchline?* (Fieldnote)

That affirmed to me the notion that parents and touchline spectators' behaviour whilst watching junior rugby league, extended beyond the mere purpose of watching and supporting their children playing sport. Standing on the touchline appeared to be a social practice providing an opportunity for adults to socialise and play out their own game within socially constructed rules in which negative behaviours were allowed and expected. This was the real game: not objectified by any imposition of respectable sportsman like behaviour which would most certainly have detracted from the pleasure of it (Giulianotti, 2004). In this respect the social interactions and practises such as name calling, swearing, shouting and general bad behaviour was OK and acceptable because it was an expectation shared by all engaging in it. Parents and spectators had constructed a social situation in which the game of rugby league or rather the match taking place, only served as an excuse to practice adult interactions, to vent frustrations and generally spoil the day for anyone not in the tribe. There were the pre-match conversations, usually involving a rerun of the previous week's match and associated opinions, the criticisms of the coaches and officials, and perhaps a character assassination of the allocated referee for the match when he appeared. Then there were the touchline interactions, which involved a repeat of the pre-match utterings and then the abusive language and threats shouted across the pitch. Then there were the post-match discussions in the club house, which would go one way or the other depending on the score and whether any child or player was worthy of

individual praise or lack thereof. Following this and dependent on the vociferousness of the day's events there would be social media, if required, to continue the onslaught. So power and intimidation seemed to be at the root of the exchanges on the touchline. The maintenance of power seemingly needed acts of intimidation to ensure that the match was controlled by the spectators as much as possible, and that the culturally constructed status quo was maintained. Any attempted to deconstruct this state of being and question the behaviours on the touchline was often met with targeted intimidation of the perpetrator as I had firsthand experience of (see Chapter 1). At the centre of this activity were the parents of the players, the major constituents of the touchline who were held together, in their own social world, by the fact that their child played grass roots rugby league.

4.5 It's a gender thing: the rugby mums

When I first began this project I was asked if I thought that touchline behaviour had anything to do with gender and in my naivety, I didn't think it did at the time. I suspect I was thinking about this question in terms of myself as the researcher, a woman in what might be considered a *man's world* and the challenges this may have presented, which at the time I did not think much of. As I reflected on this seemingly rather large omission, considering the title of this thesis, I considered this question more in terms of a female role: the role of a mother and in particular a mother of a rugby league player. I was clear that I did not want to consider only the masculine expectations upon players, masculine behaviours and the need to be tough; a "blame it on the dads" slant, since they're men, responsible for a lot, and I may have been a feminist.

Besides, the masculinity angle had been done before (Spracklen, 1996). Similarly, since the start of this project the participation of women in rugby league and indeed football had come a long way, not least due to the Lionesses fantastic performance at Euros 2022 and the investment in girls and women's sport as a whole. Arguably one could surmise that this will mean an increase in the numbers of female fans and spectators present on touchlines, and perhaps changing expectations on the roles of women in society. Unfortunately, I cannot predict what effects this may or may not have on the behaviour exhibited within grass roots sport, and whether behaviour will be different towards female players from female fans: it is an area of research worth pursuing in the future.

The gender question that does resonate with this study is identified as my title suggests "Rugby Mum" so I will consider "rugby mums" and how on numerous occasions the behaviour within that group could be contradictory to what one would expect from society's ascribed female role: that of the mother. I think illustrating this is a remark from a coach after one match in a clubhouse which I noted at the time was worthy of a fieldnote as it sort of summed up where I was first coming from when I embarked upon this project: *I'd rather face a row of 18 stone forwards than an angry rugby mum. (Fieldnote)*

Motherhood has emerged as an academic area for research and has involved studying experiences of motherhood and the impact of this role on identity, employment and various life chances (Kahn, García-Manglano and Bianchi, 2014; Miller, 2007; Kerr, 2023; Shloim, 2020). Motherhood in terms of mothers of sports players has also been investigated within the context of the effects of the type of mothering behaviours afforded to young sports players

particularly in terms of emotional development and role modelling (Knoester and Fields, 2020). I considered how what I experienced and observed from some mothers on the touchline was the opposite from what is usually expected from a nurturing and caring mother. Generally, there is an expectation that mothers are caring and nurturing and one would like to think they would extend those traits past their own children to the children and young people of others. My experience of rugby mums was often contradictory to this expectation or supposition. Certainly, on numerous touchlines, I observed mothers being more vocal than their male or female partners at matches and hurling verbal abuse to opposition players, coaches and referees across the pitch: perhaps anyone perceived as a threat to their child or child's team's success. Their screeches could be heard above anything else, and at times I likened them to banshees, and how I imagined they must have been when they appeared to foretell of imminent doom:

> *Row of mothers holding coats making an absolute racket: bunch of banshees and one has just called a kid near me a XXXX. I walked away.* (Fieldnote)

I have seen mothers argue and swear at one another which was particularly stressful to me as a mother at an age where I avoided (and still do) aggravation at all costs. If anything, some mothers I witnessed on touchlines practically invited aggravation (from fieldnotes):

> *Two tribes mark 2 – women arguing.*
> *Your fucking kid needs telling; he's out to hurt someone him.*
> *You're talking shit he's just playing the game.*

Is he bollocks, he's just had our player round the throat.... stupid bitch.

Maternal aggression is not a new phenomenon and can be seen particularly in the animal world, such as the lioness protecting her cubs or the elephant mother protecting her calf as the lioness spies the cubs' dinner. Mothers who exhibit aggressive behaviours whether directly at their children or in the context of a spectator at a sports match is counter-intuitive to the role of a mother and may be a protective instinct; a mother wanting her child to succeed. However, whatever the reason for the aggression by the rugby mums there was an impact on whoever that aggression was directed to. That impact often seemed to be the desire to intimidate the opposition; quite often opposition players/children and their equally protective mothers and there the real match began. In this respect the often physical dominance of dads did not preclude the mums from being dominant in the domain of intimidation.

> *Car Park Argument between 2 women: one has a baby in a push chair with her and the other a young girl about 4yrs of age with an ice cream. They are accusing each other of shouting at each's child during the match that incidentally finished about half an hour ago. From one of them I don't think I've ever heard as many expletives in one sentence. I hang about with a coffee and don't look out of place as a crowd of nosey folk are gathered, pretending not to listen. Red Hat woman who I am seeing a little too often for my liking, makes a comment to me about the one with the pushchair, "Jesus, you'd think it was all about them"* (Fieldnote).

It was interesting to me to observe the behaviour of parents on the touchline and in particular how mothers, in displaying raucous shouts from the

touchlines seemed to be more protective in their rants, which did not stop at the side of the pitch. Not that I want to single out mothers as the main instigators of touchline strife, but I do think it worthy of mention considering my personal reason for starting this study in the first place. The question that intrigued me was why mothers behave in such a way that appears alien to their role in life both as a role model and nurturing parent. Perhaps it is the protective nature of a mother that necessitates her screaming at anyone perceived as a threat to her child, in whatever context that may be, even if it is directed to other children. In this respect the traits of motherhood such as nurturing, protecting and moral role modelling become distorted, turn themselves inside out, and act as weapons towards the opposition (Mareš, 2022).

Aristotle in his virtue theory advocates that to behave well one must be taught good habits of character and emphasised the moral development of the young (Cain, 2005). I was assured that some of the mothers I observed within this study did have good habits of character due to the kindness and caring they showed in activities away from the pitch. However, in some instances this seemed to have gone awry – disproving Aristotle's theory that good character habits naturally enable us to know the right way to behave. And perhaps these mothers did know the right way to behave and they just chose not to as the protective instinct became too much: a case of behaviour trumping morality.

4.6 Fandom and fan dysfunction: for the love of the team and the child

When I observed behaviours on the touchline, I considered the differentiation between fandom and spectatorship and when these roles of engagement with grass roots rugby league might become blurred. The latter,

spectatorship, often has a personal connection, the former may be more cultural. So, you watch your child play rugby league because it's your child, more so than it being your team or club. You are a spectator, and in more engaged contexts, a supporter who is less passive. In fandom you watch your club or team, and the players who come and go are transient and could be considered less central to your relationship to it. There was no doubt that parents who attended every week to watch grass roots rugby league were engaged and passionate, whether that be with the sport or their child's team. Sometimes they were engaged and passionate about their own child's performance and sometimes not, but I considered them to be fans in some context by the very fact that they kept turning up and cheering the team on. Fandom of course can also apply outside of sporting contexts for example as a fan of a pop star or film star, where people identify with an individual rather than with a team or a club. Thus, as an alternative to merely consider factors of parenthood, fatherhood, motherhood, and associated expectations, I considered whether elements of fandom (Hills, 2002) and fan expectations could explain the behaviours on the touchline. *Fan dysfunction* is a term I do not like as it appears to attempt to reduce human behaviour and suggests we should know the proper function of a fan and further, which specified system or organ is abnormal or impaired. I considered this recently when the photocopier malfunctioned at my place of work, and upon visiting, the engineer asked me what part I thought might be to blame for the fact I could not print my chapter. I considered the reductionist approach, in that it may have been the card reader, but knew that it was probably more complex by the way that the card reader display went on and off and there was a strange smell coming from the side of

the machine; I suspected the problem would require an investigation of a few connected parts. The diagnosis from the engineer was that *something has just blown:* a great descriptor for use in this Chapter.

Fan dysfunction is a term for a general phenomenon when something has just blown. It refers to various behaviours related to being a fan, in this case of grass roots rugby league or maybe one's own young *sportster* child. Many studies have been conducted on fan dysfunction particularly in the realms of psychology (Lock *et al.* 2012; Wakefield and Wann, 2006; Wann *et al.* 2017) with a few reasons elicited as to why fans may dysfunction, or in this case why parents may behave in negative and aggressive ways. Over engagement, disregard for canon, social identity mergence with the team, level of identity with the team or player and lack of critical engagement have all been cited as possible explanations for the dysfunction and I believe I have observed instances of all during my fieldwork on the touchline. Perhaps the two I have considered most during my research is the over identification of spectators with the team and the lack of critical engagement with the associated content and behaviours that come with being a fan of that team.

Wann *et al.* (2006) found that the more fans identify with a particular team, the more vocal and dysfunctional they may become, in an effort to use the shouting and aggression as a tool for *their* players to be successful. The interesting point from the psychological research is that the more a fan identifies with the team the more potential there is for aggression and dysfunction. In considering this it seemed poignant to ask oneself what stronger identification a mother or father might have than that with their own child. Using

this theory one could logically conclude that the potential for a parent to be aggressive and dysfunctional couldn't be greater when it is their child on the pitch. Some players may respond to aggressive parenting out of fear, if the parent/child interaction is built on such exchanges. That may get more out of a player – but less out of a relationship, and that may be acceptable and indeed preferable to some parents. Similarly, regarding the lack of critical engagement, I observed this to be endemic within the grass roots rugby league community. There was a distinct lack of appetite to talk about the behaviours on the side of the touchline or to tackle them in any way, a sort of blind fandom:

> *They don't talk about it... they just laugh it off or turn away. Touchline manager today is clearly not bothered about the rope being pushed in by the parents or by the verbal abuse being shouted to the ref. He must hear it cos he's stood in front of him. Hang on… he turns and says, 'listen guys less of the shouting', someone makes a comment and he turns and laughs. It carries on.* (Fieldnote)

Another aspect that is of importance to fandom and was particularly pertinent to this project, was how the matches and overall sport of youth rugby league were consumed. Generally, sports fans may watch their matches and sport from a distance (on TV for example), wearing their symbols of support (team apparel), or participate with chants from stands away from the touchline. However, in grass roots rugby league, the sport is supported directly from the touchline, meaning that any behaviours, symbols of affiliation or verbal exchanges were much more visible to those participating. The very nature of proximity to the action meant that the segregation of fans often seen in professional sporting contexts did not exist, and thus in grass roots rugby

league the touchline became part of the action: roping off the touchline seemingly fairly arbitrary in tackling this.

In conclusion the lessons I learned from the touchline when focusing on parental behaviour and expectations were these: parents have a lot to do with the social construction of grass roots rugby league and the consensus is that the behaviours on the touchline are acceptable or if not, regulated by reciprocal bad behaviour which nullifies the notion that they are not. Further, the holistic development of young people is secondary to the desire for performance, and inextricably linked with parental esteem and expectation, typically for winning or the need to see strong dominant behaviours. And finally, that some rugby mums and parents can lose sight of good social priorities, portraying traits directly contradictory to those that they may exhibit away from the touchline, whether those be in a parental context or just as a social human being.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5. Heroes and Villains

5.1 Setting the scene: “it was just a bit of banter”

I now turn my attention to focus on the team coaches, players, club and league officials who featured on the touchline and consider how the individuals in these roles contributed to this social story, and why it mattered on the touchline. I entitled this chapter *Heroes and Villains* as during my fieldwork, at certain junctures in time, I concluded I came across a few people that were and could be perceived as either heroes or villains by what they said or did on the touchline. In early fieldnote analysis, I felt it would have been a cathartic task, although I admit completely unethical, to label various individuals and put each into categories dependent on their behaviour that day. If we take A.J. Ayer’s Boo-Hurray analogy in his attempt to illustrate emotivism (Miller, 1998), the theory that all moral utterances are expressions of emotion and literally meaningless, then this categorisation exercise could have been greatly assisted by the spectators on the touchline. Most had an opinion of this particular coach or that particular committee member, and they would often boo at the perceived villains and cheer the heroes (Hurray!) in expressing their emotions; any subsequent moral judgement in conversation would be a further iteration of emotion with no real value. Hence, my hero and villain lists would have had little merit, as they would have been merely based on the reception of the behaviours by the touchline mass on that day. However, in order to show the contribution of these particular groups on touchline behaviour and the things that happened off the pitch, I felt it important to consider some of the admirable actions and traits I witnessed as well as some of the less admirable.

I began to consider what we should expect from our heroes in grass roots rugby league and perhaps more importantly whether we should expect anything from them at all (Kohen, 2014). Similarly, I considered whether some of the villainous behaviour I perceived to have observed could be categorised as villainous, because some of us were expecting too much from coaches and officials. I worried that I had become one of Guilianotti's (2004) *sport evangelists* viewing grass roots rugby league as the answer to developing the players' characters, preparing them for adult life by instilling transferable skills and generally offering them positive role models, all of which I considered possible but perhaps not realistic considering none of these claims about the utility of youth sports have been wholly substantiated (Coakley, 2011). I began to wonder whether it was fair for parents to expect coaches and the orchestrators of grassroots sport to contribute to the moral development and preparation of their players for adulthood, potentially at the expense of the children simply enjoying childhood. Perhaps the expectation of this *paternalism by proxy* was too concerned with the prospective adults of the future and not concerned enough with the rights of the players themselves as children in the present (Matthews, 2008).

As my fieldwork progressed and I came across the behaviours of those with the role of coach, referee, chairman, secretary, touchline manager or team manager, I concluded that the behaviours of the *hero or villain* were often not diametrically opposed and often revealed themselves within the same individual during what might be seen as everyday routine interactions, dependent on the audience and the perceived expectations.

> *It seemed everyone was in good spirits today at XXXX club as a new coach was brought in by official John Parry (pseudonym): Parry said this new guy used to coach at higher levels which pleased a lot of the parents. Parry was singing his praises before the match but later as the new coach ran onto the pitch, he spent a few minutes holding court laughing and making fun of how this guy ran. I cannot write what he said as it would be too identifiable as half the club heard it. Nice welcome.* (Fieldnote)

The above incident exemplified to me the co-existence of heroic and villainous acts and behaviour as embodied in the same person dependent upon the socio-cultural and environmental conditions. On the one hand you had this club official who had gone out of his way to obtain and welcome a new coach to the club and praise his pedigree, whilst patting him on the back in front of spectators. Then on the other hand, he had proceeded to make fun of him in front of spectators as he took charge of his first match at this new club. This inconsistency of seemingly adhering to one set of moral principles and showing that of another, is not I would argue unique to those within the grassroots rugby league community, after all we can all *bend with the wind* when it suits (Dubreuil, Dion and Borraz, 2023). It is a common affliction of being a human being when we sometimes struggle to do the right or good thing because it is more enjoyable to interact with others in doing the wrong thing; *having a laugh or it's just a bit of banter.* However, when this type of inconsistent behaviour is outwardly shown in sporting contexts, especially in ones where young people are involved, it creates an environment in which young people don't only reap the benefits of sport, but they are exposed to morally debateable behaviours. But what's wrong with that I asked myself at perhaps every juncture of this

study knowing what I was witnessing was wrong to me, but apparently less so to others.

It's just a bit of banter… does 'em good… character building. (Fieldnote)

5.2 Character building

There is a contemporary discourse in many fields, in particular academia and sport (Berg and Pietrasz, 2017; Pederson, 2022) that children these days and since the millennial era are less resilient and are not *how we used to be.* This rhetoric has become more pronounced following the Covid-19 pandemic which is no surprise, considering that it was arguably very difficult for children to build resilience and develop life skills when they couldn't leave the house. An extreme example perhaps but the scenario does lead to a central question for this study in how far do we realistically go in protecting children from realities such as morally dubious adult behaviours. Is it acceptable that grass roots rugby league should be a forum for children to enjoy competitive sport and that its seasoning by touchline abuse should be tolerated, or even ignored in the interests of *keeping it real?* Do we have any moral agency and responsibility within grass roots sport to protect young people, and indeed all people from the villainous behaviours of ordinary people? As I meander off into visions of anarchy, or maybe recollections of such as a researcher on the touchline, I suggest that the rules and parameters of organised community sports provide us with just the vehicle to provide protection to competitors and participants. However, from my touchline observations the vehicle was often not running as well as it could have been, and in some cases perhaps the starter motor was

kaput. To extend the rules and ethos of fair play beyond the field we needed drivers and the people who could best drive any change were arguably right there with me on the touchline. These people were not just spectators but spectating parents and carers, with a set of responsibilities that were questionably crying out to be extended onto the touchline: if only it were that simple. The idea that engagement in sporting activity somehow builds virtuous habits of character that extends off the field naturally leads to the position that it must work the other way around: that virtuous people are capable of being, or rather should be respectful when they attend or engage with a sporting event. To me this theory, whilst very attractive, basically doesn't work as it lacks a focus on how human behaviour changes in different contexts: the caring and nurturing rugby mum in real life becomes banshee screaming abuse on the touchline. An example of a scenario that has been philosophically debated by many learned scholars as they sought to understand this dichotomy and relationship between character and human action in a sporting context (D'Agostino,1982; McNamee, 2008; Suits, 1995). So, I contend from my observations in the field that Aristotle's guidance on developing good habits of moral character was a work in progress as we stood there on the touchline, some of us struggling to find that mean between virtue and vice.

5.3 The lists: heroes or villains…. or a bit of both?

At this point I think it useful to try to unpack the hero and villain labels and consider what might be heroic and what might be villainous behaviour in the context of this research within grass roots rugby league. The concept of a hero is multifaceted and identification of who is considered a hero can vary

across cultures, contexts, and depend on personal beliefs and values. Heroes in sporting contexts often serve as role models, inspiring others to emulate their positive characteristics and achievements but less often their conduct outside of their sport (Lines, 2001). A hero is often a source of inspiration to others and admired for their outstanding achievements, noble qualities, courage during adversity or selfless acts. In this context, coaches and officials were often perceived as heroes by the fact that they gave up their time, for no monetary recompense, to coach young aspiring rugby players or to get up early on a wet and windy weekend morning to referee a junior match. Others too who managed the general business of a club, ensuring that the players were signed on properly and that the subs were paid so that the funds extended to being able to operate for another season, were at times considered heroes. These people were not infamous in films or TV, they were everyday people only famous within the context of this small sport for perhaps their supererogatory acts in that they did morally good things often outside the call of duty. I observed in my fieldwork several times the reverence that the young players often paid to their coaches as they listened intently to the pre-match instructions, at half time and following a match back in the clubhouse. The *Man of the Match* awarded at younger age groups often affirming the notion of the coach as a hero as one young player remarked to a crowd of parents: *“he thought I got it right today and I’m well happy with this especially off him”.* Additionally, the club officials that often worked in the background were not without their affirmation of being heroes by parents and spectators in the many gifts, plaudits and offers of a drink that were afforded to them at presentation evenings or at the clubhouse post match. All these individuals could be

considered heroes by nature of their roles in grass roots sport and their willingness to sacrifice their own time to support the effort in keeping the relatively small entity that is amateur rugby league alive.

This led me to question whether this was enough to be considered a hero, or whether the substance or label of hero was dependent on the behaviours that needed to be shown, rather than reliant on an individual merely holding a title. I consider this in relation to my own perception of a hero as a young person who I will call Mrs Brown, a teacher of mine at Secondary School. I consider Mrs Brown was a hero of mine not merely because she was an English teacher and chose to go into teaching for the benefit of people like me. I considered Mrs Brown as a hero because unlike so many other teachers, she never gave up on me, despite my best efforts to disengage from any notion of compulsory secondary education evidenced by *wagging it* as often as I could. Other teachers would even wave at me as I strolled home from School at some inappropriate time of the day, and I surmised they had given up as I had, on finding out why I thought it acceptable to behave in the way I did. Not Mrs Brown though; she continued to try to contact me, offered support when she managed it and complemented me on my supposed academic potential, which to this day had an impact on me. Against all the odds, and perhaps her own better judgement, she seemed to care about me, when quite frankly I didn't care about myself very much. Mrs Brown was not only a teacher by profession or label but was a teacher and hero to me by her actions and caring traits; something I tried to emulate some twenty odd years later when I started nursing and then teaching. In short Mrs Brown walked the walk not just talked the talk, and whilst not some infamous public figure she was a hero to me through her

actions; her efforts would prove instrumental in my life and her behaviours were ones I sought to replicate in later life. Mrs Brown could be considered a *Paragon* hero which is as Womack (2003 p17) explains:

> *Exemplifying social virtues. He or she is cited as an example to youth and is considered the ultimate in human achievement. The role of the paragon is to abide by the rules and embody social values.*

Questioning Mrs Brown's motives, I suspect that the teacher in her identified some well-hidden spark of academic ability within me with which she sought to ignite the studious in me. An act of professional care one might argue as an educator, and caring acts perhaps do have their limits in the interests of professional boundaries and codes of practice. Mrs Brown's limit however, by extension to the social and pastoral care she offered, seemed to be higher than that of other teachers I had come across; another example of going beyond the call of duty perhaps. To me she embodied a role and by doing so became authentic: a teacher by profession and a teacher by nature. And now I think how sad that I labelled and consider her a hero by virtue of the fact she was authentic. Do we live in such a world where honest, authentic, caring people are so rare to find in life, that when we happen upon one, they are heroes rather than just honest. Which leads me back to the beginning of this tale of the rugby mum on the touchline:

> *Me a "rugby mum", alleged caring mother, mental health nurse, advocate of good mental health and publisher of several papers to prove it: in essence, I felt a complete fake* (Chapter 1).

The question here is how far did rugby mum's caring duty extend, or perhaps this is just a smokescreen so that I don't have to consider the original position of this research. I had many caring roles: rugby mum, nurse, educator but what is the point if you're just playing at it when the environment suits? When I am a mother with my children I am caring towards them; when I am a nurse I am caring towards people within my care, when I am an educator and researcher I am caring to my students and participants: and when I'm not seen as any of the above I can perform whatever villainous behaviours I choose. This state of affairs is classic *impression management* as Goffman (1959) explained it in his seminal text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* I studied Goffman as a student nurse and as I recall I think the point was that to be a nurse you should embody the role, not just perform it… or at least I hope that was the message. During my field research I observed the different roles people played dependent upon the audience, with individuals as both actors in their own rights and audience members on the touchline, participating in the construction and interpretation of social roles. This shared attempt to maintain some sort of social cohesion and understanding could be considered, as Goffman calls it, *team performance* where people basically get on with it together in order to get through life. The part I initially played in the touchline audience caused me to *role distance* as I recognised the conflict between who I was supposed to be (and wanted to be) and the mobster role I was playing. I have no doubt Mrs Brown would have been bitterly disappointed by that performance. Looking back, I no longer consider Mrs Brown a hero, she was merely (or not so merely) caring and authentic in the ways in which she

conducted herself in everyday life, which to me was not dependent on impression management because that dealt with itself.

5.4 Heroism on the touchline

During this study in the many field observations and interactions I had with people on the touchline, I considered whether like Mrs Brown, there were such heroes within the sport who walked the walk and were deserving of their hero status as evidenced by their authentic behaviour. I perceived that there were, and that someday if not then and there, the players, parents or spectators would be justifiably thankful. The *Boy with the Borrowed Boots* was a story written from fieldnotes taken on the touchline and illustrates what could be considered as quite commonplace actions by some, but perhaps heroic by others in the context of this research:

The Boy with the Borrowed Boots

> *Sunday morning at an Under 11's match and it was cold; there was a thin layer of frost still on the ground but luckily the pitch wasn't frozen or it would have been all off. Coaches were warming the lads up over the other side of the ground and the clubhouse had opened up early for business, so I went and got a tea. I hung around a bit at the side of the warm up area trying not to look out of place as I didn't have the dog with me as a distraction. Home and opposition coaches then had a conversation and the home one came over to about six parents not far from where I was. Coach tells them, "We're going to have to play with one man down as one of theirs has forgotten their boots and they've no subs". Various moans and complaints by the group followed on. "Well what can I do we can't play with the full team if they've not got a full complement", said the coach. The*

response from a parent was interesting; "Why not?" Coach replies, "because it wouldn't be fair... We're not about that Bob... I'll go over and tell them now". The coach walked off towards the other team warming up, I assume to let the opposition coach know that the game would be played with one less on each side, to even things up. Bob didn't look too impressed and went on to mumble something to the guy stood next to him. I turned to put my now empty cup in the bin and saw one of the men who was initially stood with these home side parents trotting over to the two coaches on the training area. When he met them he had a large carrier bag in his hand and I watched from afar as he pulled out various boots and put them on the ground. The opposition coach waved the player over who I assumed was the one who had forgotten his boots and I could see the coaches and this parent trying to find a pair for him to wear: he got fixed up. The home coach came jogging back to the parents and said, "Jobs a good 'un, we can play with a full side as we've found their kid some boots". I looked over at Bob who clearly now had got what he wanted: to play with a full side; what a shame he looked less impressed than before! I wondered why, or maybe I didn't. We all proceeded to the main pitch to watch the match which had the usual features and one or two unusual gems. Firstly, the boy who had the borrowed boots scored two tries, one of which was particularly impressive. Secondly at the end of the match, when the opposition team had won by ten points, the boy came over to the home touchline and thanked the parent who had lent him the boots. "Good game that son, you played well" said the parent, to which this young player with a wry smile replied "thanks, I think it was the boots". (Storified Fieldnote)

The above fieldnote illustrated to me a couple of examples of where characters within this social story embodied the virtuous behaviour of sharing. Their behaviours on match day at the touchline being reflective of what I hoped

were their personal values as applied to the sport. The coach who was willing to sacrifice the clear advantage of having more players in his team on the pitch, in order to keep the playing field on a level footing, I considered a display of respect for competition and the rules of the game; perhaps less of a sacrifice than just being fair. Similarly, the parent who offered his bag of boots to the opposition coach, so that a child would not be left on the side-lines and could play in the match, was I thought, a display of kindness and altruism. The actions and behaviours of both these individuals on that day were not what many might consider significant, but they had significant consequences for at least one child, a team and no doubt the integrity of that grassroots rugby league match. Returning to Mrs Brown and my attempt to emulate her values as she revealed them to me, I hoped that the sporting values shown by the coach and the parent would invite others to want to emulate them (Kristjansson, 2006). I considered they could be valued as touchline heroes by those who witnessed what happened that day.

During my research I had little problem in finding acts of kindness on the field or further afield than the side-line, but I rarely found it in-situ as I stood there at the side of the pitch. Away from the field I witnessed many kind acts such as rugby parents who ferried numerous players around when lifts were required to matches or training sessions. Spectators gave up their weekend mornings to stand in the cold and rain to support their child(ren) and often brought flasks of hot tea to share around the group before the start of a match. People would step in when there was a problem with a referee attending a game or arrange a friendly when a game was cancelled, all in the interests of ensuring that their children had as much opportunity to participate in the sport as possible. So it was clear to

see that the caring side of grass roots rugby league was alive and well, albeit away from the actual touchline, but connected to it in a way that could make one ponder about what happened to these kind folk when their role changed to spectator.

5.5 Villainy on the Touchline

> *Listen love, there's only a few of 'em in this sport that do it for the right reasons: the kids not themselves. I will tell you this now... there's many a villain knocking about at all levels of the game.* (Fieldnote)

The above words of advice or maybe words of warning, were given to me at one of the stakeholder events I attended early on at the start of this research. There seemed to be a group of people at these events that had some axe to grind with various individuals and they were not afraid to let me know, once it had been established that I was a researcher and being supported in some way by the RFL. I assumed that they thought I would in some way pass this information on and the villains would be removed from the piece which I learned very early on in this project was highly unlikely.

During my fieldwork I observed many people on the touchline behaving in ways that could be considered as villainous; this was seemingly not a position that could be attributed just to the parents or spectators watching the matches. I also observed people in positions of power, as far as the sport was concerned, behaving in similar morally dubious ways. I did not notice this immediately as I stood on the touchline one day at a local tournament, but it came to my attention later on when I asked discretely who a particular

individual was and what he was doing at the tournament; he certainly did not sound like a fan of the game or the children playing it for that matter. When I found out who this person was, I likened it to the final scene of every *Scooby Doo* show I had ever watched: the bit at the end when the ghoul is unmasked to reveal the supposed friendly caretaker who was in the episode all along. This man was apparently concerned with the *development side* of the sport which I found surprising in any context, particularly a moral one. He had spent ten minutes complaining to a club coach about the referee's performance during the match and how *useless* the kid was and how he should *never have been allowed anywhere near rugby league*: the referee must have been no older than fourteen years old. The behaviour of this alleged *development centric* coach affirmed to me the notion that there were characters on the touchline masquerading as one thing by title but were perhaps unmasked to be another. Through observation of their behaviours and interactions I thought they might have given themselves away in terms of what their real values and beliefs might have been. Using my fieldnotes from that day I composed *Touchline Sonnet* which was my first attempt at using poem as a type of creative non-fiction. Poetry proved quite handy in my responsibility as a researcher as I had a duty to protect the vulnerable, including in this case, the villain. The study of the structure of different styles of poetry, specifically 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 or Eminem had the same rudimentary challenges. Poetry proved quite handy in my responsibility as a researcher as I had a duty to protect the vulnerable, including in this case, the villain. However,

I did not use poetry to completely mask the villainous behaviour in this case, only the identity of the villain. Wittgenstein in his philosophical concept of a private language (Kripke, 1982; Mulhall, 2008) argues that there isn't much point or it is indeed not possible to have a completely private language, the meanings of which only the author is privy to. This would negate the need for social and communal meaning and so render language, as a form of communication somewhat pointless. Hence the poem *Touchline Sonnet*, although written to protect the central character was meant to communicate key concepts to the reader. Concepts I will share in the interests of unpacking the critique of the sonnet: that critique being led by my refined fieldwork notes.

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 assaults.

His face is on the silver screen, this man they must revere speaks for itself I believe, in that there were quite a few well-known characters in the small world of grass roots rugby league with very fancy coaching titles that did not always reflect what they did and how they behaved: *His title tells a thousand lies, but this they cannot hear.* The coach starring in the sonnet was one such person and I will leave it at that in the interests of protection of the villains. *His stride is on a sodden pitch: these kids to show the way* was focused on coaching conduct and my observations of well-known coaches within the game and their behaviour which was arguably aimed at winning rather than development, seemingly at all costs. They were purported as role models within the sport by various people involved with the community game and arguably this was validated to young people as these individuals often had links with, or held roles at professional clubs. The *youngster glitch* within the poem referred to young referees, as I had observed countless incidents of verbal abuse towards them, not just from parents and spectators but from club officials and these coaches too (more on that later in the next chapter). It was as though young referees should not dare apply any rules that had not been ratified beforehand or were at the distaste of the coaches with the fancy titles. The references to seeing and hearing were testament to the openness in which these coaches operated, whilst being seen and heard by touchline spectators. The final two lines, *we love this sport with all its faults, so let's not call these things assaults* referred to the disregard of such behaviours by the touchline to maintain and not jeopardise the "sport", which I considered after my experience in the field, with our sonnet coach as just one example, was potentially already in significant jeopardy.

I found it quite difficult to remain impartial when I witnessed the particular coach that inspired the sonnet because not only did he have a title that was arguably contradictory to his conduct but he also had the props, or rather what might be considered as the disguise. The title, shiny kit and coaching entourage all belying the fact that here he was, his words so openly nasty about a child refereeing that at the time it could have beggared belief; others during this interaction looked away, as I think I may have done as solely a rugby mum. But as a researcher on the touchline, I considered his behaviour worthy of inclusion in this story and not something to turn away from. I think what struck me the most was that here was a coach who was entrusted with not only the development of the sport and youth system but was also advertised as a role model for future aspiring coaches.

Here I considered the issue of trust and the trust the touchline put into these local celebrity characters within the sport and how that trust seemed to admonish them from being questioned. What outwardly could be considered as behaviour damaging to those who participated within grassroots rugby league, in this case predominantly children, was met by many of those who witnessed that behaviour by doing nothing. Here I would like to stress two points, the first being that one observed episode from an individual did not make him an inherently bad coach, perhaps more a poor judge of what should be socially acceptable in coaching conduct and from one in a position of role model. And secondly that *doing nothing* is not a revelation in terms of what people do who have witnessed unacceptable and/or illegal behaviour and/or abuse in youth sport; the findings and recommendations from the recent Sheldon Review (2021) into youth football and the Whyte Review (2022) into gymnastics being

testament to that. Academic discourse regarding trust in youth sport has focused on the pre-requisites for trust in an adult by a child or another adult seeking to protect the best interests of their child (Burke, 2001). The notion that society operates from an *apriori* position of trust within youth sport has been long criticised and an alternative position of distrust advocated by some (Scutt, 1996). The key message being that we have blindly trusted people asserted into positions of power and responsibility by sporting organisations and the more sensible approach is to *manufacture distrust* and set limitations whereby in this case coaches have to earn trust and should be challenged not only by adults, but by players themselves (Brackenridge, 1994). However, to challenge a coach or a person in a position of power within grassroots sport it is necessary for the conditions to be conducive to challenging behaviour that one might consider unacceptable. I considered whether my observations of the touchline environment in grassroots rugby league could reasonably be considered conducive to this endeavour if one had a mind to pursue it, and concluded that overall, there was still much work to be done. I learnt this very early on, before this research began, when I dared to challenge the many rugby mums and dads on the touchline that fateful day:

> *Their eyes were rolling as they heckled me, "what's up with you? Have you gone soft?" I'd get used to that reaction and seeing myself as unwanted from the game: much like you were that day. I've seen their reaction and heard their words many times within the touchline audience when anyone dare object to "the banter", because it "toughens 'em up" don't you know?" My mob friends walked off for a pint and left me: I'd get used to that too, being an outsider, eyed with suspicion and given the dirty looks.* (See Chapter 1)

It was clear to me that day, and on the many other days subsequent to it as I stood observing the touchline, that the power of the many is an intimidating force to the power of one. In my case as a sole rugby mum and later sole researcher, I felt vulnerable, and just in case I was in any doubt as to that vulnerability in challenging the status quo, I was on the receiving end of *a bit of banter* myself. I suggest this was in the interests of the many confirming to the one (me) that any pursuance of doing the right thing would have unfavourable consequences. However, leaving the consequentialist school of thought behind, there is a Kantian categorical imperative to think about here. I had little doubt when I observed breakaway factions of the touchline, that people had good will and knew what was the right thing to do. However, when it came to doing the right thing that was a different matter: people were motivated by the personal will to fit in and the desire not to suffer the consequences of speaking out. In this respect as with Kantian ethics as a philosophical position, it's a nice idea in theory but when it comes to the application of implementing the right thing to do, human beings often don't do it. In consideration of a less ethical stance, in creating conducive conditions to challenging the status quo, perhaps we should favour a sociological one. Some time ago Coakley (2011) recommended the need for the sociology of sport to focus its research efforts on assessing the impact of youth sports programmes on the wider determinants of how young people learn and develop, especially in relation to recognising negative factors that may impact upon them and their lives, not just on the field of play. He advocated education and guidance of the young players in how to engage in collective efforts that sought to change the negative influences within youth sport. Arguably this approach could hold merit in being extended to the adults

on the touchlines, as it was clear from this study that just by virtue of being an adult does not mean challenging negative behaviours will follow.

5.6 Winners and losers

> *Kids want to win... It's as simple as that and no amount of pretending otherwise is going to change it... coaches and parents too and that's why nothing's going to change*. (Fieldnote)

The above quote from a fieldnote is a statement I heard many times, in one form or another, whilst standing on the touchlines. I had many déjà vu moments evoked by various individuals when they thought it appropriate to give their personal justifications for the behaviours being displayed by the rugby league community at various junctures in proceedings. Apparently, the general consensus was that any angst or strife on display was because everyone wanted to win, and thus morally or socially undesirable behaviours were legitimised by the desire to win, and quickly forgotten if they did win. *That's how rugby league differs from football* I was told, *all the aggro stays on the pitch.* Losing however, I found was to be a different story. From my experiences of observing the behaviours when a loss occurred within matches, of which I witnessed quite a few, I constructed the story *Too Much Sun*:

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 Under 15s 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 halfway 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, and 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".
"Fuck off", "You fuck 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 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 fucking 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: 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". These "men" being 14 year old boys…

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 and call him a fucking arsehole piece of shit so-called coach who's a fucking disgrace to the game and should be nowhere near kids. I want to ask him whether he has he any idea what he's fucking doing to these kids and the potential consequences of his words on them. I want to shout it so loud 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 the sun in my eyes" and we both say no more about it. (Storified fieldnote)

Too Much Sun was on the edge of the intersection of truth in content, fiction in form: in that it was almost the truth in both. It teetered on the edge of real time reporting but refrained from identifying any incriminating facts. The reflexive thoughts at the end were my own, but were experienced so frequently within my fieldwork, so as not to have been *seen* at any one particular place or event. The use of reflection and narration of reflexive thoughts within stories, I found to be useful in tracking where I was as a researcher at those points, what my feelings were and my position within the field. The balance between showing the story and revealing myself as a character within it was difficult to achieve on occasion: the personal restraint to not show and tell, but just to show, particularly challenging especially when witnessing examples of behaviour, I personally found morally incomprehensible. *Too Much Sun* as well as revealing my personal position of "it's too much son", led me down the path of questioning whether it was the element of competition in these matches that caused people to lose sight of the enjoyment of participation whether you were on the pitch or on the touchline.

Most if not all grassroots rugby league matches are competitive, whether the score is recorded on a website or not: a match involves two teams playing on the pitch with the purpose to score as many points as possible and more than the opposition team. I recall an RFL official explaining to me how the scores were not recorded at younger age groups to instil the sense of purpose of participation being in order to develop rather than engaging in competition and by default winning. However, from my observations of younger age group matches I doubted that this message had filtered through to the parents, spectators and coaches as they were often heard to be very vocal and critical up to the age group of the Under 15s. I noted that at this age players started to drop out of the sport in favour of other pursuits:

> *Johnny's not coming today 'cos he's been vaping too much and his lungs are fucked; They all got pissed last night so half the team's missing* and *Paul's jacking it in cos he's working with his dad and he can't afford to get injured.*
>
> (Fieldnote)

The above fieldnote excerpt explaining a few of the reasons why at older age groups the impetus for participation, competition and the desire or ability to win seemed to dwindle. Indeed, I witnessed many incidents of players from both teams at older age groups walking off the pitch together laughing and patting one another on the back in congratulatory merriment. But not in the observations I used to construct *Too Much Sun:* the actions of the coach at the end of one particular match was poignant in illustrating when the competitive nature of an individual soured the whole experience. There was no doubt that the boys on that day had done their best as the sweat and toil was visible to

see but marring the whole day was the comment affirming the disappointment of the coach in that *you men were shit.* I found it interesting that boys were often referred to as men when they were in fact children, in this case fourteen or fifteen years of age. I found many sections in coaching textbooks about the element of competition and what this potentially means in youth sport whether that be in terms of what a coach should or could do both in action and sharing personal philosophy. Additionally coaching literature contains discussion about the character and values of coaches, advocating the need for an awareness of the impact of coaching action upon vulnerable young people (Hardman *et al.* 2011; Palmer, 2011). Whether or not this translates onto the field of play is a different matter and not something I am convinced the coach at the end of *Too Much Sun* had considered. As the boy walked past with a tear in his eye, I wondered what that coach's comment had done to him, his game or his desire for further participation in the sport; I certainly knew what it did for me in terms of once being an avid spectator.

I published the story of *Too Much Sun* as part of an article in the Journal of Qualitative Research in Sport Studies (JQRSS) in 2018 (Keeling and Palmer, 2018). I leave this chapter with a review of that article, and in particular the comments regarding that storified observation. This is not as a self-indulgent plug, but to illustrate the effect that telling the story can have on people, and should have on people, if only to make them think:

> *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…...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.

(Peer Review from

Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies

12, 1: 337-346)

Chapter 6

Chapter 6. Values, Rules and Ethics of the Touchline

6.1 Setting the scene: ought we hang our traitors?

In this chapter I offer a critical exploration of sport as rule informed behaviour, people's spoken values cloaking judgements and the pejorative nature of the competitive versus developmental argument within grass roots rugby league or indeed in sport in general. These were key themes that were exposed during my research and led to the creation of many of the tales I told from the touchline. As a preamble to illustrating these themes a discussion of the power of the *ought* or rather *duty*, is warranted in order to frame the tales and philosophising that will reveal itself in the following writing.

6.2 Values and ethics

I have never ascribed to the idea that ethics is external to human beings, hanging over us like the Sword of Damocles ready to strike us down when we get something wrong or do a bad thing. For me ethics is individual, inherent and evolves as a personal framework for living based on values and being virtuous, which according to Aristotle is achieved by practising virtue. This sits well with my progression into existentialism (discussed in Chapter 2), or the inherent nature of deciding one's own self-destiny does, if not the practising virtue bit. When I stood on the touchline and concerned myself with the various shenanigans within the grass roots rugby league community, I often wondered about the power of the *ought* (Johnson, 1969), and I could not reconcile the notion that the people I observed did not have a sense of what they ought to do or what their inherent duty was.

From my observations I came to understand that the social context played a large part in perhaps detracting from the personal ethical framework that many people may have had, and the *ought* seemed to take a back seat. At various times the social context contained what can be referred to as *red mist* where certain individuals appeared to lose control over their judgements and act in ways that seemed quite alien to their ascribed duties as an adult, parent or carer and/or lover of the sport. Roles and expectations appeared to be divided into uniformed and non-uniformed positions with players, referees and those in high visibility clothing adhering to some sort of ethical code which enabled the game to be played in its true spirit, with rules and goals. Whilst those in the non-uniformed position: the audience/supporters on the touchline, appeared to have had to be told how to behave decently, rather than know it instinctually. I pondered whether this meant that because of the game context, people relied too heavily on the organisation of the game (the referee, touchline managers or RFL) to tell them how to behave.

Suits (1998, 2005) explores the inter-relational aspects of games and play within his *tricky triad*: games, play, work and sport as work which will be discussed later. Suits described a game as a sub section of play with its rules and ends with play being unstructured and free with perhaps no goal in mind. So perhaps the players on the pitch were not the only individuals playing; although they were playing a game. The spectators could also be observed to be playing in Suit's literal context and the words with which they used to describe that play were *banter*, *bit of fun* and *to be expected*.

6.3 Morally good decisions and unethical actions

Any fool can make a rule, and any fool will mind it. - Henry David Thoreau (1849 from his essay "Civil Disobedience).

I've never been a lover of rules, apart from personal rules that one can put into place as a means of trying to live well and be good, or at least that is what I tell myself. Of course this all goes out of the window when it is not within one's own self-interest to follow one's own ethical rules and act accordingly; then comes the separation between the real and the ideal, and we forgive ourselves usually with the explanatory caveat that we wouldn't *usually* do this or that, but at the time we *had to* for whatever reason. Throw in some formal rules and we can legitimise our actions more easily, because an external influence caused us to behave in a certain way whether that be out of the human trait of pursuing our own self-interest, or in the case of grass roots rugby league, disagreeing with the rule and pursuing the perceived interests of one's child, which one could argue is a morally correct standpoint. Singer (1997) summarises the paradox well:

> *We picture ourselves as constantly torn between the drive to advance our self-interest, and the fear of being caught doing something that others will condemn, and for which we will be punished.* (p.21)

I offer here the rule that many people have of being honest in their intentions and interactions with others, surely an admirable virtue in anyone's book. However, the situation and audience affect how that honesty is displayed and this was reflected on the touchline.

> *The degree of candour appropriate for one's various audiences will always vary with the circumstances and especially with the times.* (Wolcott (2002): p161)

Whilst the above quote from Walcott was referring to honesty as a fieldworker, it resonates as a general principle in life, and consequently in the role of a parent/carer. As a carer not many would argue that it is important to act in the best interests of a child, to be honest with the child and to show you are acting honestly as a role model by showing this in your interactions with others. Which brings me back to the field and the seeming dishonesty I observed from parents when attempting to further their rugby playing youngster's aspirations or prospective careers. This dishonesty appeared to be borne from parents not wanting to be seen as breaking rules, whether written, implied or merely perceived. But when those rules conflicted with the interests of their child, unethical actions appeared to follow.

6.4 Poaching and gamekeeping off the pitch

Let's start with the rules, not in so far as the rules of the sport but the rules of the competition or leagues, whether real or perceived. An example of a phenomenon I observed during fieldwork revealed itself in the observable, where parents went to great lengths to avoid being seen as rule breaking, which involved varying degrees of dishonesty. The rule I would use as the case in point involved not requesting to transfer a player to another team from the one they were already at, which was not strictly the rule (according to the Leagues) providing certain conditions had been met. However, it appeared from my observations within the field that not many parents knew the written rules,

but most knew the unwritten rules and the consequences of breaking them. The unwritten rule I refer to here is *one should not take a child training at another club other than the one they are registered at, in anticipation of a potential transfer.* This implied rule as perceived by the touchline led to, what seemed to me, quite bizarre behaviour and involved parents sneaking around to avoid detection, ably aided and abetted in this dishonesty by their child:

> *Get caught doing this and the transfer won't happen……*
>
> *All this and he only wants to play where his mates play….*
>
> *You'll get a coach in trouble; they'll say he's poaching….*
>
> *They've already had 3 in… you'll have to look elsewhere….*
>
> *Is he a free agent 'cos if he isn't you've had it and he'll have to stay put….*
>
> (Excerpts from Fieldnotes)

Arguably this bizarre behaviour of sneaking around at the cost of being apprehended by A N Other could be borne from a parent/carer's desire to act in the best interests of their child. So what destructive forces are at play here when an adult has to break their own ethical rule and act dishonestly in acting in the best interests of their child? Has the pervasiveness of the competition leaked from the muddy waters of the pitch onto the spectators too? Having a competitive league structure within junior grass roots Rugby League has a lot to answer for both in terms of dictating the rules of off pitch behaviour and, to be fair, providing much enjoyment to spectators and players of the game. When I spoke to an RFL official during a *by invitation only* event he informed me that the RFL were considering establishing an alternative structure where competitive leagues did not exist at junior level, the emphasis being on

development. He considered this would alleviate some of the poor behaviour behind the scenes and on the touchline and encourage more emphasis on youth participants learning the game and associated skills. He continued that the RFL's main concern with this idea was that when proposed to the touchline, they feared that the uptake would be poor and that there wouldn't be enough participants to implement such a format. The competition again proving far too attractive for the touchline contingent and arguably the players themselves.

So here is the root of the dilemma: the nature of which one could argue was an attempt at implementing Bentham's *greater good* (Schofield, 2009): it just doesn't work in the context of grass roots rugby league where conservativism, in terms of traditional values and cultural norms, meant that the majority favoured a more competitive structure, as it's been since 1898 in more ways than one. It also doesn't work in its aim of promoting the greatest pleasure for the least amount of pain. Implementing such an idea would not address any competitiveness angst and associated behaviour, as the proposal was to run this developmental format alongside the already established grass roots game, which debatably may have fuelled the fire if players swapped from one format to another. So this more liberal sense of greater good i.e. equity for the sake of access, participation and development, like the RFL official said was the aim, would clearly not sit well within, or indeed alongside this competitive sport. Trying to implement an alternative to the pre-existing state of affairs appeared to equate to sitting on the fence or trying to introduce something new as a distraction from the core problem. The official here had committed the sin of claiming he *liked the idea, but.. I can see what's good about it, but..* an erroneous claim that appeared to be in denial of the reality of how things had

become. Or put more simply by numerous authors, he perhaps attested to the lesson that *everything before the word "but" is bullshit.* The reality of the matter to myself as a researcher as we chatted that day, was that there was no going back, and certainly no appetite from the majority for an alternative developmental grass roots rugby league entity. It appeared he and most others involved could not separate the activity of grass roots rugby league from fierce competition (McFee, 2013) on and off the pitch; just as you could not separate boxing from the act of hitting people in the face.

Competition as a concept has attracted much philosophical and sociological attention. Since prehistoric times when human animals walked the earth, symbols such as cave paintings, have depicted humans with spears seemingly in conflict and competing for food or a companion, dependent of course upon the interpretation that anthropologists and those concerned decide to attribute to our ancestors (Price, Theron and Feinman, 2024). It appears that competition is a fundamental aspect of human nature, passed down the generations pervading our lives from an early age. Take for example Darwinism and natural selection, Hobbes and social contract theory, and various other philosophers (for example J.S. Mill, F. Nietzsche, H. Spencer, A. Rand) who argue that competition is necessary in some form or another, whether it's to develop the gene pool, increase efficiency, facilitate individuals to socially interact or generally enhance the progression of modern society on various levels (Morse, 2019; Wolff, 2023). Competition exists in the areas of business, politics, sports, economics and generally surviving in the world, so on that basis it is rational that grass roots rugby league spectators and players would foster a degree of this inherent trait. However, it does not follow that the related doctrine

of survival of the fittest or the belief that without formalised rules chaos would ensue should be manifested on the touchline; but if one chooses to interpret it that way, then the naturalistic perspective holds some merit, even if it does lead to rather depressing viewing. Perhaps a more pluralist view was required in the consideration of how to deal with poor touchline behaviour and the consideration that it could quite possibly not all be attributed to parental competitive traits. It seemed a far more complex issue and required a recognition that lack of understanding of the rules, lack of agreement with them or lack of knowledge of who the rules served may have been better tackled with a greater degree of explanation, transparency and candour.

6.5 Breaking rules and the spirit of the game

To maintain the thread here I return to the case study of the transfer rule: all junior rugby leagues had rules around transfers. The essence of the transfer rule at the time of this research was that each club, at the junior level, could only admit 3 external players per season unless the child was a *free agent* (not already registered with a club). I asked a league official during a conversation what the rationale behind this rule was, for reasons that will become apparent. He kindly gave me a thorough explanation that the leagues did not want just a few clubs being oversubscribed with young players leading to children not being able to play regular rugby league if they were not in the *chosen few*. Similarly, the leagues wanted to ensure that no grass roots club was disadvantaged and forced to *fold* due to a lack of local players. It seemed reasonable to surmise that both scenarios were clearly not what the sport wanted, considering participation levels had been dropping for some time. However, it was

reasonable to conclude that this particular rule regarding transfers needed to be balanced against the individual child's wishes in terms of where they played, who they played with, and who they played for. And so the deception commenced as parents attempted to act in what they must have considered were the best interests of their child: an individual child not subject to contract. Conversely, from my observations of the touchline, it appeared that there was a shared outwardly voiced consensus amongst parents that any actions that sought to circumvent any transfer rules would not be acceptable, either to the league, the home club or indeed other parents: *nobody likes a bloody traitor*. I heard many comments and stories on the ever-flowing grapevine about league officials turning up at training sessions to ensure that non-registered players were not playing at a particular team. I heard stories of parents being reprimanded in car parks and at clandestine training sessions and in-house parental arguments questioning loyalty and commitment. I also heard about children being prevented from training and made to stay at a particular club against family wishes, in the name of the rules, often leading to non-attendance or drop out altogether. This was something that I had experienced several years earlier with my own child, but thankfully the situation was resolved, and he continued to play rugby league, up until the time that work became more important than risking injury on a rugby pitch. So getting back to the deceitful lengths parents would go to in ensuring that their children got what they wanted I turn to a story I wrote. The situations I observed at the time reminded me of those action films where secret agents and spies intermingle with no one quite knowing each other's motives. Below is a piece of creative non-fiction that I

storified from a series of observational field notes illustrating the point; I called the piece *Boys in Balaclavas*:

Boys in Balaclavas

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 rehearse 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 counterintelligence would mean the end of the mission. The field on 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 Bluer had spotted her prey and wasted no time in beginning the interrogation. She too had a young recruit who 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 counterintelligence tomorrow, who would have no knowledge of the clandestine operation or indeed the many agents in the field on similar missions. The boys in balaclavas 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.

(Storified fieldnote in Keeling and Palmer, 2018)

The story of Boys in Balaclavas was packaged through the lens of secret agents and documented their clandestine activities that involved clear rule breaking. The story also meant to depict the effort involved in ensuring the young recruits were deposited at the appropriate departments so that the civilians could assess their worth for recruitment. The observations that underpinned this tale from the touchline were a testament to the work of achieving that goal and led me into the theme of sport as hard work, but only by the athlete or players on the pitch, but in this case also by those secret agents who supported the sporting endeavour of their young recruits.

6.6 Sport as work

The industrious nature of sport leads logically to the conclusion that sport or in this case grass roots rugby league could be a form of work. However, sport and work are often considered as rather opposite entities: you enjoy one when you have finished for the day with the other (Donnelly, 2007). Sport as a form of work is very much on topic in contemporaneous times as the language of sport has transferred to the language of the workplace. Coaching, teamwork and achieving the goal are all common terms in the business world today and conversely Taylorism (Prechel, 2007), the scientific management and measurement of work has significantly impacted sport. Since World War 2 sport has become highly commodified and industrialised and is now big business.

The similarities between sport and work in terms of contracts, training, times of labour and achieving the task cannot be ignored and the very nature of the young recruits in the tale signify that youngsters are subject to similar activity in pursuing their sport.

In considering whether all sport is a form of work; rule governed, regulated and with a clear aim then arguably it should be a matter for a player to decide which shirt they wear and who they play for. Just as with work when you don't like your job anymore because it isn't fulfilling, you look around at who is hiring, and you get another job at another company or place because you want a new challenge. But why is this free will not respected in the work of sport? Perhaps with grass roots sport (as I have also witnessed in youth football), the penalty for wearing another shirt signifies the pervasiveness of the competitive nature, or destructive force within grass roots rugby league. Suits (2005) uses the term *lusory attitude* to explain why people engage in sport; the lusory attitude being the voluntary disposition to work to accept and abide by rules, in order to enjoy the challenges within the play. But when that work has to involve breaking the rules in order to play the sport, surely it must follow that the rules, in the case of grass roots rugby league, affect that attitude and make the purpose of engaging in sport not in keeping with the spirit of the game. It seems a pity that sport as work in this case has been marred in the implementation of over complicated rules that arguably create too much effort in youngsters and parents, the effect being that the pursuit of playing rugby league becomes too much like hard work.

6.7 The impact of knowing the rules

Before I published the story of *Boys in Balaclavas,* I used it as a class material in a teaching session I was asked to do with some first-year physical education students at university. Primarily I wanted to use the story to illustrate the use of creative non-fiction as a means of telling a story based on real events using characterisation to cloak participants' identities from field observations. A few of the students in the class played rugby league, which was handy as I wondered whether they would be able to decipher what was going on within the story. I was pleased when they read the tale and begun chatting about the very issue I was highlighting with a student saying to me *I think this is really clever.* Praise indeed from a reader but more importantly for me it reaffirmed the authenticity of my efforts: I thought that I was reaching exactly the people I was aiming for, rather than the usual academic game of *you cite me I'll cite you* and that will make for good evidence. The lesson for me as a researcher here was a consideration of the facts that this group of students recognised what was going on within a story and laughed at the behaviours being displayed by the characters within it. We discussed several spin off stories within the session that day (from other sports too), but all with the underlying premise that we knew it was going on in terms of rule breaking and secretive behaviour; some of us had been involved in the sneaking around and yet we still said nothing within our own sporting communities. This led me to question what the spirit of the rules were that seemingly made parents and adults firstly behave in such dishonest and in clandestine ways and secondly not feel able to speak about this with the perceived rule makers: the *counterintelligence* in *Boys in Balaclavas.*

So, the students referred to here were in on the game, but at a cost to them having learned what the rules were. The Boys in Balaclavas tale certainly evoked some laughter and shaking of heads but sadly no-one doubted that the mischiefs contained within the story could have happened, and no-one admitted to being on the receiving end. The ludicrous nature of both adults and children acting in such a surreptitious manner appeared to be taken for granted and assimilated as part of the rules of the game. This led to several questions worthy of philosophical exploration: Who are the rules for? In whose interests are they written? Who controls the rules? Are the rules just? If the rules are applied to children, do they understand the rules? Had the rules been communicated to them? Had the children had any input into the rules by which they were governed? I looked to D'Agostino (1981), McFee (2004) and Suits (2005) for guidance with the answers here especially in terms of the purpose of rules, formalism versus anti-formalism and discovered that consensus was lacking, as were any answers. Contemporary scholarly debate only complicated matters by contrasting and adding to the differing theoretical perspectives on the issue of rules, purpose and efficacy (McRae, 2020; Moore, 2020 for example), but I consider it made for good academic discourse, and perhaps would not be out of place on the touchline.

6.8 Rules and ethos

As a starting point in attempting to make sense of the debate about the formalist versus ethos perspective (a simplistic description on my part) on how a sport should be constructed, defined or identified, the first question arose about the purpose of the rules. If we take in this case grass roots rugby league,

or in fact rugby league per se, the rules of the game distinguished it from other sports, let's take for example rugby union. The rules are purposeful in that the spectator recognises the sport they are watching and the players know what is permitted and what is not in achieving the aim of winning; hence there are constitutive rules that tell one how to play the game and regulative rules, that are invoked to punish one when there is an infringement of the former. If we move off the pitch to the touchline behaviours as illustrated in the tale of *Balaclava Boys*, it became apparent that regulative rules were perceived to be invoked when organisational rules were broken.

Constitutional and operational rules are set out in the British Amateur Rugby League Associate (BARLA) handbook (barla.org.uk) and apply to all leagues and clubs as associated or full members. There are lists of rules and regulations but none appertaining to the organisational rule of ethos of the game, apart from the requirement of not to bring it into disrepute. Advice as to safeguarding junior players featured in the handbook but the requirement to safeguard appeared to be devolved down to individual clubs and leagues. Nowhere was there reference to the rules of the touchline in so far as a written rule of *one should not take a child training at another club other than the one they are registered at, in anticipation of a potential transfer,* and nor were there any sanctions suggested if this should have occurred. Which led back to the formalist versus anti-formalist rhetoric as D'Agostino (1981) concerns himself with: it seemed that formal rules are needed to identify and define a sport but in terms of game playing and the game in its entirety, no formalist implementation of rules could go far enough when cultural norms, traditions and general consensus as to what is acceptable and what is not are added to the mix.

Additionally, the formal transfer rule as written in the BARLA handbook appeared to by nature to have created competition amongst the touchline. If only three players per season could transfer into another club, and there were four youngsters wanting to transfer in, it would be of benefit to get that paperwork in first, as illustrated in *Boys in Balaclavas.* So the written constitutional rules appear to create unwritten rule breaking or as McFee (2004:44) more eloquently conveys the point:

> *We cannot just assume that behaviour that accords with a rule is rule-following behaviour.*

I consider now the questions as to in whose interests the rules are written to serve and who controls the implementation of them. When we consider formalist rules such as the constitutive or regulatory rules as appertaining to the sport of rugby league it is to the officials of the specific league or club and the referee on the pitch to ensure the rules are implemented and penalties applied for any infringement. However, in terms of supporting the ethos of the game and the unwritten rules it is difficult to consider who would be responsible for keeping a handle on this and perhaps the focus of the rule keeping is off kilter here. I have provided throughout this thesis examples of unruly poor behaviour on the touchline that appeared to go unchecked, but when it came to infringement of the transfer rule the *counterintelligence* appeared to spring into action, in ensuring the unwritten rules were upheld. So in terms of who the rules served, it appeared that the maintenance of the league requirements and sustenance of the sport and individual club structures

took precedent over individual player well-being and enjoyment of the game: a formalist idealistic approach at all costs. Hence, in keeping the grass roots rugby league machine motoring along, it appeared that there would always be some casualties left by the roadside, as attested to by dropping participation levels and players and officials leaving the sport. It appeared that not enough informed judgement and attention had been given to the *set of unofficial, implicit conventions which determine how the rules of that game are to be applied in concrete circumstances* (D'Agostino,1995: 48-49). So summarily, the ethos of the game had been sacrificed for ensuring that the sport lived on: arguably a false economy.

> *Even those formalists who take merely playing sport according to the rules to be ethically approvable behaviour should admit that the rules must be actualized in practice. Yet the behaviour must depend on the rules, not simply conform to them. And no rule uniquely circumscribes the behaviour it requires or prohibits, as we acknowledged: rather, any rule's application to behaviour involves an exercise of judgement, of a kind a referee or umpire might make.*
>
> (McFee, 2004)

6.9 Just Rules and infringements

I return here to the realisation for me as discussed in the previous chapter: that sport or in the case of this research, grass roots rugby league and in particular the rules, may have nothing to do with moral development or eliciting morally preferable behaviours from participants, whether players or spectators. Merely having a set of rules related to play on the field or organisation of the game off the field, does not mean that people will abide by

them, or more importantly, think about the spirit in which the rule was made and internalise the ethos. In the case of the example I gave in the previous section: the transfer rule, it was apparent that the alleged rationale behind imposition of the rule had perhaps not been understood, or even if it was, not felt worthy of following by the touchline in its truest sense. The rule had in effect created negative behaviours amongst parents and young players who were sneaking around in an attempt to get to the plate first and avoid being subject to perceived punishment:

Your kid can't go anywhere… he ain't one of the first three…

(Comment from fieldnote**)**

It appeared that this rule, which I was told had been put in place because of legitimate concerns about the overall sustenance of the game, appeared to be flawed in its effects. The first effect being the emergence of secrecy and deceit amongst the touchline and more importantly, the effect on the young players who were privy and indeed complicit in this secrecy and potentially prevented from playing at a club of their choice if the secret got out. Compounding this was the perception amongst the touchline that officials from the leagues were on the case and behaving in equally bizarre ways such as intercepting parents on car parks and preventing children from training wherever they wished. I did not witness any interception by league officials (counterintelligence) during my field observations, but the reports could not be ignored and may have fuelled some of the angst on the touchline. I knew from experience as a rugby mum that a child not being able to play competitive rugby league at a club of their choice could evoke anger and frustration from

both the parent and the player. It appeared from my field observations that the touchline did not like being told what to do when it came to their child engaging with the sport of rugby league. This is understandable when considering values. The value parents placed on the desires and ambitions of themselves and their child appeared paramount, and certainly seemed to override any of the leagues ambitions to try to implement governance via rules. On the field rules were one thing (that they didn't much like being implemented either on occasion), but the off-the-field rules of the game appeared to be a sore subject for many. The league trying to create a level playing field was perhaps creating more problems within the game than it was seeking to address, because such a thing could never exist. The introduction of competition in getting to the transfer paperwork first rendered this as diametrically opposed. I witnessed much animosity towards officials who held various positions within the leagues and as I reflected, I doubted that they deserved the verbal abuse and profanities, but as officials that were part of an organisation and had some responsibility to take heed of the dissatisfaction; or at least explain the rules and why they existed. During field observations, and following listening to a conversation about the *travesty* of the transfer rule, I considered one self-professed neutral non-parent on the touchline who summed the whole thing up quite succinctly in his opinion:

> *They moan about everything…the league can't do right for doing wrong but nobody else wants to step in and suggest anything different.* (Fieldnote)

The above fieldnote excerpt contained a comment that illustrated an interesting opinion as I did not observe many people, if any but for this person, taking pity on the leagues and the many club officials that sought to uphold the

rules. Additionally, there were many people who were suggesting something different than that they were subject to, you only had to bring the subject up to realise that. This judgement from a neutral on the whole state of affairs was from an enviable position: as sitting in the comfort of an armchair passing judgement often is.

Rules that are applied consistently and applicable to all does not necessarily make them just. I recall playing Monopoly this Christmas with my partner's young children and revelling in delight as I placed my second hotel on Mayfair, which was incidentally my game plan, which would render any player landing on that spot as bankrupt and out of the game: rules are rules after all. However, when applying the rules with those being subjected to them no older that 8 or 9yrs old it does raise the question of whether they should be applied and whether the youngsters understand the rules.

If rules are applied to people within the game and infringement of such means penalty, could intent legitimately be considered as a mitigating factor? On the field rules were one thing but off the field antics were another: both seemed subject to rules. Throughout this research I did not witness any training session held at any age group where education of the spirit of the game and subsequent rules were the focus: I wondered if perhaps one didn't necessarily follow the other. As such I wondered how rules could be broken and penalties applied if one did not know the rule in the first place or maybe there was no excuse; the *ignorance is no defence* doctrine; whether one was an adult or 9 years of age. What I did witness was education being afforded to match officials as clearly it was important for them to know what the rules were and how to

implement them within context. I once observed a young referee at a match who seemed to take a different approach to implementing the rules than I had witnessed previously; it was an under 12s match:

> *The touchline massive were complaining at tiring length that this referee was not blowing for the fouls and missing half the decisions. As the final whistle blew the young referee came over to the touchline for his drink of water before doing the usual handshakes and traditional gentlemanly conduct expected following a game. "You missed a few there son" was the comment from one spectator to which the young referee replied, "if I was to blow for every foul or infringement there would be only 10 minutes of play, not the hour you've come to watch. They're still learning…"*
>
> Note: *Personally, I was waiting for a round of applause for this voice of sense, but none came.* (Retrospective Fieldnote)

To conclude rules are contextual as displayed by the young referee in his response to *missing a few.* Values, ethos and the spirit of the game must be taken into account when implementing the rules that constitute the play on the pitch, and the activities on the touchline. Achievement of the partnership of ethos and rules would go some way to ensuring that ethical decisions follow that encourage enjoyment and fun as either a player and spectator.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7. Rugby Mum: Roles and Reflections

The further a society drifts from truth, the more it will hate those that speak it.

(Selwyn Duke attributed to Orwell, 1949 (see Moustaki, 2000)).

7.1 Setting the scene: stories from the heart of Rugby Mum

In this chapter you will find the odd reference to brilliant social thinkers but an explanation of how Rugby Mum attempted to assimilate them, or in fact, came anywhere near to thinking that she could ever be one, you won't find. Life for her just got in the way, as did books, interesting people and a thirst for reading and thinking rather than writing down; a fatal flaw when one's memory isn't great and one has a job to do. I recall Rugby Mum's evolution throughout this project fondly, as she stood at the back door smoking Spanish menthol cigarettes whilst pondering questions such as whether Simone De Beauvoir really was as liberal as she made out, in her wranglings with the relationship between herself and the other, or how Graham McFee found time to be so analytical about sport, rules and values. She contemplated the bravery with which Wolcott and Wacquant told their stories and what it cost them to put their money where their mouths were. So, in watching her develop in this way perhaps I always knew the fate of Rugby Mum and was just trying to delay the inevitable; the fact I would miss her when she finally left. This chapter is a series of reflections on her transformation from rugby parent and Rugby Mum through a range of roles and circumstances into a researcher. I don't believe Rugby Mum exists anymore as her time came and went but I do miss her, and I know she misses supporting grass roots rugby league as I do now, the researcher who by all intents and purposes killed her off. If you want to see her,

look back at the previous chapters and you will find her; lurking about trying to expose the culture within grassroots rugby league through the telling of her tales to those who might have cared to listen.

7.2 Rugby Mum as a rugby parent

There is only one way to avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing and be nothing

(Based on Aristolian ideas (See Ross, 1995))

In the beginning prior to her research project, Rugby Mum used to love watching grassroots rugby league. She was very proud of all her children and would watch her two boys playing the sport with both a sense of nostalgia, knowing her grandad played the sport before them, and a sense of love of the game and that her boys were a part of it. Rugby Mum was part of a community of likeminded people where the stories of forgotten kit, muddy washing loads and trips to away matches were commonplace and shared; that's what made the community what it was. Also shared were the chants and emotions on the touchline, the shouting at the opposition, hurling abuse at the referee and the loud criticism of the players, the dirty looks thrown to a rival of whatever nature; all part of the culture in which she believed she fit in. All the behaviours were admonished at the end of a match by friends and groups who shared the common trait of justifying bad behaviour. They weren't bad people and Rugby Mum didn't consider herself a bad person: after all most of the touchline crowd would volunteer for clubs, help with coaching and organise the collections for kids when they were injured or needed money for boots or kit. Rugby Mum was part of the crowd, the behaviour and banter were all part of it, until they weren't.

That was the day she found she could no longer justify the banter, the verbal abuse and the hostility she had been a part of for several years. Reducing an adult referee to tears was not what she was about, personally, professionally or philosophically. The horror of seeing that event did something to her: it woke her up like the proverbial slap round the face. She thought that she had recognised a big problem in grass roots rugby league and that she was a part of it, as were many others. If only they could see it the way she saw it that day, then she was convinced a change could occur for the better. Consequently, Rugby Mum decided that she had to change as did the environment in which her children played rugby league. There was no need for the abuse and hostility, that not only manifested itself in front of these kids but was often aimed towards them.

In the beginning Rugby Mum found it very difficult to avert her gaze from the children and young people playing the game on the pitch to those surrounding her on the touchline. The transition from Rugby Mum to researcher did not come without cost. The people she considered her peer group and friends on the touchline began to distance themselves and were ultimately no longer her friends; this did not take long to happen. During her research on the touchline and around the game at the clubhouse post match, at meetings and events, Rugby Mum felt very alone; both as a researcher and a parent. It transpired that her naïve original position was not one shared by many; people did not want to see it, think about it or hear it preferring to subsume poor behaviours as *banter* and a *part of the game.* It was then that she realised that her research journey was one that largely would be travelled alone.

How naïve the impetus and purpose of Rugby Mum's research sounds now to me the researcher who initially joined her on her mission to expose the truth, or at least a version of it. Her mission was doomed to failure in many respects, but perhaps not in all. Rugby Mum thought that exposing touchline behaviour to those who constituted the touchline would affect positive change and maybe it will one day. Conducting this research, with all its challenges, has taught me as a researcher today many things about myself, culture, method and effect. I now consider this research as merely the beginning and a grounding for future efforts, where I will not be so mission driven and personally invested in the research outcome. As a rugby parent I assumed my research would be easy, just hanging around on touchlines as I always had, but actually it turned out to be one of the hardest things I have ever done. I knew my role as a rugby parent would eventually come to an end as the boys grew up, but I did not anticipate it being curtailed whilst I was still within the rugby league community. This is the price I paid for assuming roles other than that of a rugby parent.

7.3 Rugby Mum on the touchline

Rugby Mum standing on the touchline up close to the action, was usually a bi-weekly occurrence which would consume most of Sunday mornings. Being part of the community, she would stand with her friends, other rugby mums, dads and relatives, and cheer on the teams in which her sons played. There were numerous occasions where she would give her opinion on a decision made, opposition touchline or general progression of the play on the pitch: these opinions usually being yelled at the top of her voice in keeping with the

others standing there with her at the side of the pitch. Then there was the general banter pre and post-match and the after match post mortem, where the game was recalled, dissected and discussed and occurrences debated dependent upon the narrator's particular bias. As one parent usually put it "*same shit different week"* pretty much summed it up. It was a fun time in Rugby Mum's life and one in which she could participate in something with her young boys which was a privilege if she didn't realise it at the time. There were many positive aspects of being part of the touchline and not a week went by without some gossip being learned of or a humorous incident which would go down in club folklore. The community was fairly tight knit and everybody knew everybody else; a "*Mafia without guns"* as one club coach described it.

Consequently, I think the most difficult part of engaging with this research was when my role changed from Rugby Mum on the touchline to that of not really having a role. Apart from, of course, that of a researcher which in general, over the course of the project, was only known to me. I remember early on during the preparatory phase of field work, reading a chapter in Van Mannen's book about ethnography and how this method was intended to be progressive in moving the researcher from the periphery of a culture to the centre of it. This was the opposite of what happened to me. I did not go from the outsider to being an insider. Instead, I went from an insider to being cast from it: an outsider with a notebook. I cannot blame or attribute blame to anyone on the touchlines for my feelings about this: it was entirely my doing and aligned with my transition from the role of rugby mum to that of researcher. I could not stand on the touchline anymore and engage with the behaviours as I have done in the past. I was now seeing things from a different perspective,

observing the behaviours of others, the conversations of others, and having no part in them wherever possible. As I became more skilled in the ethnographic effort, and collected more data, I dropped the props of the notebook and pen but I was still recognised as the outsider: differentiated by my silence and position away from the yelling hoards. The truth was that in my latter days of being in the field post Covid pandemic, when I hoped that people's priorities had perhaps changed, I really could not stand to be part of the touchline with it's hostility and verbally abusive taunts. And this remains my position now as I have been exposed to another grass roots sport, that of football. I linger on the edge of the pitch usually away from the crowd in order to enjoy the match, for the very reasons I have explored in this project.

7.4 Rugby Mum as a club official

On reflection, I cannot fathom why Rugby Mum decided she would volunteer for a position on the committee of a grass roots rugby league club. It was a decision that caused her lots of hassle and pain and was probably at the time an unwise one to have made. That being said, it did provide some background experience and knowledge of the workings of a grass roots rugby league club and the behaviours and culture of those who were associated with it. The whole sorry episode came about when Rugby Mum's youngest child decided that he wanted to play rugby league and started to watch the sport on the television. Within a week he was signed up at a grass roots rugby league club in the Under 7s team. At this point rugby mum had no knowledge of the game of rugby league, its rules, traditions or culture. But after a few weeks of standing in the rain and hail she began to learn about the sport, the rules of the

game, and the expectations of the touchline in supporting the team. Rugby Mum began to enjoy attending the matches and watching her youngest son play and it was not long before her older son decided that he too wanted to play rugby league; the casualty being grassroots junior football. Rugby Mum became part of the rugby league community who travelled round the counties supporting their children, grandchildren or relatives playing the game. Following that first season in rugby league there was an open meeting for parents, as the club was struggling to attract volunteers to serve on the committee, as there had been my falling out previously which had led to an exodus of parents and quite a lot of bad feeling. In the interests of showing support Rugby Mum attended the meeting, and at the conclusion of it was Secretary of the club.

As I reflect on this now, it really was a bad decision on Rugby Mum's part and one that should have merited more thought and consideration. Being the secretary of the club meant that Rugby Mum was responsible for all the player transfers to and from the club and the paperwork evidencing general governance, that had to be in place to ensure that the club continued to function. This was on top of her other jobs such as being a mother of three children and working full time: as I stated a bad decision. On various occasions Rugby Mum had to deal with irate coaches, unhappy parents and records of subscriptions and contracts with external businesses, one being the provider of the club's only portable toilet. There were discrepancies in how the club functioned at the junior level compared to the senior level which was a constant angst amongst supporters. The disorganisation and mayhem that often accompanied a committee meeting or touchline gathering was something that Rugby Mum was not accustomed to, but soon became part and parcel of the

role. She kept it up for two years before she resigned, which was quite an accomplishment for her (both the role and resignation), but a mere second in time compared to those within the rugby league community that have served on committees for years; and well done to those stalwarts. The final straw came with the dissatisfied parent on the doorstep whose child was being denied a transfer to another club by a coach. Rugby Mum felt for this parent and could not agree with the ways in which the rules were twisted to deny freedom of movement of a 11-year-old kid. She signed the transfer, enabling the kid to go and play anywhere he wanted and subsequently resigned as a committee member of the club. To this day I still agree with her and the decisions that she made, both in supporting what should be the spirit of the game of grass roots rugby league and giving up her position as someone potentially expected to act in ways that contradicted it.

7.5 Rugby Mum as a nurse

In 1991 I dropped out of college where I was studying to go to Oxford or Cambridge and read for an English degree, or at least that was my mother's plan. When I say I dropped out, I rather walked out on a whim, as I'd had it with being told what to do and when to do it. Of course, at seventeen I knew everything anyway so what was there to lose? Quite a lot really as I reflect, wishing I'd stayed on and made it to Oxbridge or any University as a teenager. I believe it is a good experience as testified to by my daughter, who went to University as a teenager, and intermittently recounted her experiences and stories, the abridged version I'm sure because I am her mother. Consequently, at seventeen I was rudderless, and it was left to my own mother to steady the

ship, which she did within a day or so of my departure from college with the threat of "*don't think you're living here for nothing".* This led to me embarking upon a career in a garage, part marking, which I grew to hate. To me it was boring and repetitive, and time stood still as I checked the clock at least every fifteen minutes. It was the worst job I ever had, and I wished I'd done the English degree if only not to be marking parts, one after the other, and logging them onto a system that I didn't understand. Thankfully, around that time I was seeing a boy who's sister-in-law was a nurse and she encouraged me to give nursing a go: "*you like talking to people"* she said, which was true, so I gave it a go.

In 1992 I applied to become a nurse: in those days it was very different to the depressing state of affairs nowadays as there were limited places with lots of applicants rather than lots of places for limited applicants; telling of the view then, that if you got in *to do your nursing* that you were one of the chosen few and lucky. Not just lucky in the fact that you had made it into nursing but chosen as being in the privileged position of eventually able to do a job that directly impacted upon people and their lives, hopefully for the better. I was invited to a nursing interview and successfully made it through the lunchtime culling exercise to the individual interview in the afternoon. Thankfully that week I heard I had been successful at interview and started my nursing career a few weeks later, due to someone dropping out of the cohort. Initially I had applied to the local nursing school to become a general nurse but at about twelve months into my training it was made clear to me by my tutor that mental health nursing would better suit my talents. Apparently, I had a habit of talking to the patients

too much when there were important nursing duties to be carried out, which in those days, were considered not to involve talking.

One of the things I quickly learned about being a mental health nurse was that it is important to find out what makes people tick and to try to understand why people behave in the ways that they do, in the different circumstances in their lives. Nursing is not about judging people, their behaviours and actions, it is about caring for and about people in as compassionate a way as one can, whilst upholding the professional standards that are aimed at giving people the confidence to let you into their lives and accept help when they need it. Whilst these principles are honourable they are difficult to abide by in everyday life and there have been many times during this project when I have struggled to refrain from judging behaviour and actions.

The grounding as a mental health nurse was beneficial to me in more than just my job and I suppose it has affected my outlook on most things in life. The moral compass I struggled so much with when reading about existentialist philosophy, I believe comes from my role as a nurse: it guides the person I want to be and have tried to retain during this research project, to varying degrees of success. Nurses are professionally bound by The Code (NMC, 2018) which is a code of professional standards that set out the practice and behaviour expected of nurses, midwives and nursing associates. A breach of these standards can lead to questions of fitness to practise and potential sanctions or worse by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). Right at the beginning of this thesis I wrote about the personal impetus for this study and how the behaviours that I was close to engaging with and witnessing would have to me, breached The

Code. It was a personal disappointment to me in light of my professional standards, that I was around and advocating behaviours that were not in keeping with those expected of one in my profession; in short it seemed wrong to me to agree to one way of being in a professional capacity and then dismiss this when it suited. Suffice to say that my role as a nurse had a direct impact on this study, my reasons for embarking upon it and the approach I have taken with the research since. It is a pity that the various Codes of Conduct within the sport of rugby league don't hold as much weight, but then again, on the touchline people aren't signing up to a set of professional standards. However, you would think they would sign up to a set of moral ones especially in front of young people.

7.6 Rugby Mum in the boardroom

On commencement of this project myself and my supervisor met with rugby football league officials to outline the scope of the project and garner some support. Both my supervisor and I thought it more prudent to have the Rugby Football League on board with this research rather than find out about it later and potentially cause problems. I knew that these officials could open doors for me as a researcher that might otherwise be shut, and that was important for this research, which focused not only on the physical touch line at the side of the pitch, but also on the wider connotation of the touchline including how the grass roots game was organised and orchestrated. At this meeting we listened to comments from one official such as he "*couldn't sleep at night"* because of the things that were going on in grassroots rugby league. At the time I recall feeling quite sorry for him, whilst also wondering why such an

organisation as the RFL appeared powerless to affect the undesirable behaviour in the grass roots game. He considered that the problems at the amateur level were caused by the competitive nature of the game and they had considered offering alternative formats as I've discussed in previous chapters. At the time, I struggled to believe this was wholly true and suggested that some sort of governance or oversight by them, might go some way to alleviating some of the difficulties on the touchline. They explained in some depth that the role of the RFL was not to govern the grass roots game: this was ultimately down to the leagues or the clubs. They were particularly worried, however, about participation levels in grassroots rugby league as this is a pipeline to playing at the professional level. The professional game, which of course generates significant revenue through contracts with for example, Sky Sports who televise the Super League, appeared to be their priority. I think the take home message I left with that day, was that the grass roots game was somewhat of a fly in the ointment to them and needed dealing with in terms of the behaviour on the touchline, just not by them.

Subsequent to this initial meeting a door was opened to me by the RFL at a stakeholder consultation event for which I received an invite in my ascribed role as *parent/researcher.* The event was held at a very prestigious venue in the Northwest, which was, by all accounts, a nice change from the muddy fieldwork I had been doing for some time. I attended the event and documented my observations of people's behaviour and the conversations that were taking place around the various roundtables. The event was focused on the questions of how as stakeholders we could ensure that grassroots rugby league remained valued and how participants, predominantly children, could be safeguarded and

protected from the problems everyone knew existed, but squirmed in talking about as my observational notes attested to. I spoke to some very influential people that evening about touchline behaviour and the only feeling I can describe as leaving with, was that of acute disappointment. The analogy I used to describe this experience in my reflective notes was that of the experience of watching The Wizard of Oz (the 1939 version with Judy Garland).

I have fond memories of watching the Wizard of Oz at my nan's house in the early 1980s. It was the film version that starts off in Kansas in a strange sepia colour, but then goes into full colour in Oz, as I imagined they learned to enhance colours later on. I know it was around Christmas holiday time as I remember the smell from my nan's kitchen of something being freshly baked; it turned out to be apple pie and she was good at those. I remember sitting perhaps too close to the gas fire as my left cheek began to burn but it was a necessary side effect of keeping the chill off, as it was always freezing in my nan's house. They had no central heating at that point and did not believe in *wasting money* on non-essentials like warmth, so you either had to wrap up in clothes or blankets or burn a cheek in front of the gas fire, when it was switched on, which was rare.

As the film played, I recall being particularly enamoured with Dorothy's ruby red slippers and I thought that I might ask for a pair for Christmas. I was enthralled with the story of this young girl with these three characters she met along the yellow brick road and the adventures that they would go on avoiding the Wicked Witch of the West and her monkeys. I was so looking forward to Dorothy finally getting to meet the Wizard of Oz who would give the characters

exactly what they hoped for: the cowardly lion bravery, the tinman a heart and the scarecrow a brain. I wasn't too bothered about Dorothy getting home as I thought that place (Oz) must have been far more interesting than the one in the opening scenes of the film which were of her childhood home in the sepia of Kansas. I remember how excited I was when Dorothy and her companions eventually arrived where the Wizard of Oz had set up his stall. There was a big bulbous head on the screen, fire and smoke billowing as the Wizard of Oz boomed his price for providing the seemingly missing traits of each character: it was great. However, after Dorothy and her friends had retrieved the Wicked Witch of the West's broomstick to take to the Wizard as payment for the bravery, heart, brain and ticket home, they discovered something that was as I recall, one of the most disappointing discoveries of my childhood. It was the part where the Wizard of Oz is revealed by Toto the dog, to be merely a little man behind a shower curtain booming through a microphone. Much like a stage set, it looks one way but actually when you get behind the scene there's nothing there, or in the case of the Wizard of Oz, just a small man pretending to be something he isn't. This scenario was the first one that came into my head upon reflecting upon my experiences in the boardroom. I think at the time I was expecting a powerful character like the Wizard of Oz who would appear and provide all the answers and information necessary in order to ensure that the touchline was decent. But much like the Wizard of Oz, this didn't happen. There was no powerful being that would rescue the sport from all its ills as much as I tried to find one during my fieldwork. The fact of the matter was that there was a stage set and lots of words and promises, but actually when you got behind the words of these people there was nothing of substance there, only men or

should I say predominantly men, saying how bad things were, how they couldn't sleep at night. They did not appear to be able or willing to do anything about poor touchline behaviour, or if they were they did not indicate this to me. I had a conversation with one official at the end of the stakeholder event who was the head of something or other. When I spoke to him about my observations on the touchline and enquired to what he thought could be or should be done about it, he stated to me: "*I'm only a figure head really, there's not anything I can do".*

The next event I was invited to attend was at the RFL headquarters in Manchester concerning a piece of research being done by a university: a university that was different to the one I was studying at. I am not quite sure that when I was invited to this gathering, that my hosts had considered the small research concerns of confidentiality, intellectual property or how my presence might have breached various ethical standards. So, I approached the meeting in the spirit of which it had been offered and decided to keep my mouth shut about the other research going on. I duly arrived to be ushered into a waiting room to await my invitation to the main boardroom conversation. From what I could make out of the conversation at the point I was invited into it, they were discussing safeguarding for young players and a subsequent survey that they planned to conduct with players about mental health and well-being. The project was explained to me in some depth by the project leader, who seemed a nice enough lady who shared some of my concerns about what was happening on the touchline. She asked me about my research and what the results were and what this proved; proving to me that from my brief description of my project they didn't get it, as I didn't get their approach to safeguarding. The problem I flagged to them with the survey approach to *elicit the data* that

would *prove something* one way or the other, was that to my mind, you cannot ask a kid a question without being prepared for the answer. (I also raised the issue of consent in the first place which they assured me would be sought before the survey was filled in; the how had not then been decided). I asked the group around the table what would happen if when they asked one of their questions to a player, for example; "*Have you ever been subject to abusive language or behaviour during a rugby league match"?* and the answer that came back was 'yes'. I was assured as was becoming a by now *per usual* answer, was that it would be up to the individual club and league to investigate further: back to square one. So, my time in the Boardroom was not a resounding success as far as this research is concerned affording me with the answers I had hoped for, but it was an experience, if one I never want to repeat.

7.7 Rugby Mum as an educator

This woman used to come to our door when I was a kid: she was a gypsy. I knew this because my mum said so and she looked like one: not that I'd ever seen a gypsy at that time in real life, but I was sure that if I had she would have looked like her. She had olive skin, thick black hair and flowing purple skirts with a lot of blue eyeshadow and gold jewellery on, and she'd come to the door selling pegs, trinkets and lucky heather. She matched the stereotype and I found her fascinating and mysterious, and I imagined that once the door had been shut on her, as it often was, she disappeared into a puff of iridescent smoke. But she didn't disappear and I'd see her hobbling up our driveway and around the street with an old shopping trolley – her mobile stockroom. My mum said it was a disgrace that they were allowed to do it:

"*coming to people's doors mithering and selling crap"*, but I didn't mind it. It was something a bit different, outside the usual suburban goings on. An interesting alien in our midst who provided the means by which to imagine and speculate about her and what her world might look like and who she might really be, in that other world. I had no idea of the truth as to why she needed to come into our world selling her wares but I suspected that she needed the money; I couldn't think of many other reasons why you would subject yourself to being abused on doorsteps. "*Come away from that window Joanne; don't encourage her",* were my instructions on many of her visits to our street. I felt sorry for her and what her efforts achieved, which certainly on our doorstep were not a lot and I hoped that one day someone would speak to her and find out what motivated her saleswoman behaviour.

I offer the above story as evidence that I have always been inquisitive. I suspect I was a very annoying child in that I asked lots of questions as I always wanted to know more and learn more than perhaps people had the capacity or inclination to teach me. In 2002 I left nursing on the wards to become a lecturer at a university. I thought it would be my dream job and in many respects it was, and has been ever since. I enjoy teaching and the sense of inquisitiveness that students often bring with them to higher education. But of course, not all students have a thirst for learning which sometimes I have struggled with. In relation to this project I have had the opportunity to disseminate my observations and findings to students in the classroom, which has made my efforts worthwhile to me as an educator. I feel that the debate and questioning from students and colleagues has refined my ability to explain my choice of methods and methodological approach. In essence that has been a point of

learning for me personally, in that I have come to realise nothing will be perfect and not everyone will understand nor agree with your approach despite your best efforts, and that is OK.

If I think back to the beginning of this project it was a personal aim of mine to show the constituents of the touchline the behaviours that I witnessed and they were exhibiting. This was in the hope that they would better be able to see the potential impact of these behaviours on the participants in the game of rugby league, and the longer-term consequences that these behaviours might have. The problem that arises from this noble cause is that sometimes people do not want to be shown a different perspective on things. Certainly, some of the people I have happened across during this project were not willing to engage in any conversations about observable behaviours with the criticism that this was patronising and the defence that the behaviours were harmless and an accepted part of the game. As an example, I recall discussing this research (generally of course) with someone known to me personally, who stated to me that it was "*not up to you to tell people how to behave on the touchline"*. To me, this was a far too obtuse interpretation of where I was coming from with the research, and I was taken aback. After all, I had discovered early on that you couldn't tell people how they should and shouldn't behave on the touchline; if only it were that simple. A more realistic endeavour and what I did want to do, was to show and illustrate through story telling a different perspective on widely accepted behaviours. I hoped that shown in a different light, people might look at things in a different way, which would enable them to make a choice as to whether or not they continued to accept the status quo or changed. However, that in itself was no mean feat and is arguably too

ambitious for one research project ever to achieve. But it isn't all doom and gloom and is synonymous with the struggles of being an educator; sometimes you can't kick the door through to help people what might be the light. You can often only open the door a small amount to let a chink of light through, and in some cases you never manage to open it at all.

7.8 Rugby Mum on social media

Rugby Mum on social media as a physical act does not happen very often. For some reason this, as I am informed by my children, makes me one of the strange few. Whilst there is smoke coming off their thumbs in posting pictures and this and that on Snapchat or Instagram (called Insta I believe), I prefer to watch TV or read a book like in the *olden days*. As Rugby Mum commentating on social media I just don't understand the attraction of providing a running commentary on your life to people who you may not even know and are in effect strangers. Personally, I have never thought I am interesting enough to warrant wasting people's time checking out my profile and posts, pictures or whatever else it is you are expected to post on social media platforms. I do have a Facebook account and I was on Twitter which is now called *X* I believe; I'm not on X anymore. My unapologetic opinion is that the problem with social media is that it can pervade your life and provide the means with which to provide yourself with even more hassle or stress to contend with. The only time I was thankful of having a profile on Facebook was during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we were all housebound and it was reassuring to know that there were other people out there, tapping away on their phones, sharing their

weight gain and descent into alcoholism, whilst having similar problems with obtaining a doctor's appointment, prescription drugs and the coveted toilet rolls.

However, as this research project focused a great deal on people much younger than me, I felt it was important that I include the role that social media played as part of the touchline. I will start with TV, an older platform that now includes social media and seems to be standing the test of time. Some years ago at the beginning of this research project I was watching the rugby league Challenge Cup final on the television. The presenter was discussing with some pundits an issue that had arisen that week which involved the head coach of a professional rugby league club and his family. They had been subject to verbal abuse and physical threats and intimidation in the street from fans, which had been reported in the national press. I listened to the debate intently; I was a season ticket holder at a professional club at the time and knew the wrath of the fans towards the staff could be vile when things were not going well for the team. The concluding remark to this televised offering about the abuse of a head coach, his wife and their two small children was: *well, whether it is right or wrong we all know it goes on.* I wondered and still wonder to this day under what circumstances could it ever be right, and who, if we all knew about it, was going to stop it.

In terms of other media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp groups and Twitter and the likes, I have read first hand some very heated debates amongst people regarding the grassroots game, which have targeted individuals. I have read countless opinions on the performances of players or referees, some of them very young, and not in an encouraging or good way. I

have read written criticism, containing hostility and nastiness towards individuals who have been named, on various groups on Facebook and feeds on Twitter. This activity has not been regulated or taken him from the site before a large majority of people could read it. In short my point about social media is that touchline behaviour as I've illustrated in previous chapters, does not disperse at the touchline. Arguably it continues in the clubhouse, at training sessions, in car parks, and on social media. Social media provides another context or facet of the touchline in which the arguments and poor behaviours can continue long after a match has concluded: a form of group cyber-bullying with a similar amount of governance and management as one might find on a physical touchline.

7.9 Rugby Mum as a researcher

When I first pondered upon this study and later bent the ear of an unsuspecting Research Degree Tutor, I half expected that I'd be sent away to consider a more *traditional* line of inquiry. My proposition that I study rugby league culture as part of that culture, within it in fact, only compounded my feeling that I would be shown the door and advised otherwise. However, the Research Degree Tutor was a football fan (I use that term loosely as he supported Bolton Wanderers, which I know is an unfair remark), and from his experiences of standing on touchlines he thought I had something. Later I met my soon to be Director of Studies who shared my passion of trying to make sense of cultures and social interactions: he introduced me to ethnography and all it had to offer. He gave a passionate first tutorial on this method and I must say I was hooked. What I didn't realise at the time as a novice to the research

endeavour was that in order to conduct an ethnographic study, one had to become an ethnographer in order to consider and observe in a different way than a rugby parent or rugby mum might do. The role of researcher was to become a challenge in the sense of maintaining the character of a run of the mill spectator whilst at the same time documenting touchline behaviours and considering them philosophically. That being said, I did not assume the role of a covert ethnographer, much like David Calvey (2019) did when he worked the doors in Manchester and retained the role of bouncer throughout. He had to return to character when not researching in order to avoid potential violence should he happen across a previous colleague. I took a softer approach in the fact that I didn't shout about my raison d'etre, but nor did I deny it should anyone have asked; which they did now and again.

Since the inception of this ethnographic project I have read and then read some more: I'm still hooked on this method but realise that this ethnography lark is not as easy as being hooked on a line, reeled in, put in a bucket to swim with other fish and then gently put back in the ocean to ponder the experience. For me, ethnography is a conundrum, an ever-evolving series of treacherous hooks and juicy tit-bits and as the minnow, you never know which hook to test. Test the wrong one and you will be potentially reeled in and gutted, much like Harry Wolcott was when he spoke his truth and his research became too personal for many. So, to try to avoid being gutted and never managing to make any sense of the society or culture I wished to study, I realised that a full and frank consideration of this method and its relationship to the study (process and point), and me as *Rugby Mum* couldn't do any harm. In fact I'm fairly sure it is requirement of any minnow in an attempt not to be gutted

come examination of doctoral thesis; that you can defend your choice of method, where you're coming from in a philosophical sense, and in the interests of honesty, where you came from before you even knew what philosophy was. To this end I believe we are all researchers from an early age; one has to be in order to navigate life and to learn. I guess the only difference now as an adult and formal researcher is that you need to be able to explain your actions and methods to other people and take some responsibility for defending how you know the things you think you do.

When I was a kid, I talked a lot: so much so that when I used to walk down to the market (he called it the moor) with my grandad (rugby player partly inspiring this study), he used to largely ignore me or answer me with a half-hearted laugh and a "*I don't know".* He would reward himself for putting up with my incessant questioning by buying himself (and me) a pasty and a cup of tea from the market café. He probably hoped that the pasty would go some way to filling my mouth and he would get five minutes of respite. As he sipped his tea spillage from the saucer (which I loved watching as I found it particularly amusing watching the reactions of disgust to this habit from the other café dwellers), he would look up at me asking my 100th question of the morning and say, "*Joanne, you talk too bloody much: just let things be"*. This was advice that I never contemplated taking until much later on in life when I realised that *letting it be*, in some cases, was the holy grail of advice, and if heeded would make life much less stressful, a bit boring, but definitely less stressful. I found it difficult and still do, to *let things be*, especially things that intrigue me. Like why in cartoons the characters when running after their prey often slip on a banana skin skilfully thrown in their way by whoever they are chasing. I recall Shaggy in

Scooby Doo falling foul of this defence numerous times and at about aged seven, whilst eating one of these potential weapons (a banana), being intrigued by whether this were a true defence and would work should one ever be chased by a ghostly figure with only a dopey dog as protection. A vivid memory I have is asking my auntie and mum whether banana skins were really that slippery. In short, the unrefined research question could have been:

Q: Are banana skins slippery enough so as to be that effective to make one's legs rotate numerous times before falling on one's backside?

Another "*I don't know*, *just watch the telly Joanne and stop mithering"*, compelled me to test this phenomenon in more depth; as primary investigator. I duly entered the test site (my Auntie's kitchen) which helpfully was about twenty-five-foot-long with a lino flooring; it was the early eighties after all. I placed my banana skin slippery side down (outside peel side up) on the lino about fifteen foot from where I had decided to take the run up from, and then I went for it. I later found out that this type of research could have found a home in the study of *tribology*; the study of friction, wear, lubrication, and the design of bearings, which is *the science of interacting surfaces in relative motion.* I believe some Japanese researchers continued my work on the slipperiness of bananas in 2012 to some acclaim; although they were well behind my 1981 breakthrough. Tribology is a word I will remember, because the doctor told me about it as I was recovering from a hairline fracture of the skull in the children's ward shortly after conducting the research; but at least the question was answered or rather, deduction achieved. *You won't be told Joanne* was the consequent appraisal by my mother: a phrase that rarely changed for the next twenty years or so.

As my juvenile research career began, I would engage in many other exploratory endeavours over the years in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. I successfully deduced that superglue does in fact stick your fingers to a tap; a moped will exceed sixty miles per hour but probably shouldn't (a finding that my co-researcher and moped owner is still traumatised by); a moped, driven at sixty miles per hour can go through a six foot fence like a knife through butter; penguin biscuit wrappers burn really well; and children cannot deceive mothers easily, even through creative movement of furniture to cover scorched in penguin wrappers on a shag pile carpet: this only arouses suspicion. The point I am making with this indulgent description of personal growth and nostalgia is that my mother was right, I wouldn't be told. So an enquiring mind is indeed the basis on which I initially defended my choice of method but epistemologically, I have always wanted or needed to be involved: a participant you might say, because I don't like being told, I have always wanted to find out for myself and for me, that meant seeing it, being part of it and trying to come up with meaning, to me at least.

Throughout this study at various intervals, people have asked me what I've learned from this research project and what the results were. I have often been quick in my retorts to say, *it's ruined my life* and *I can't watch grassroots sports anymore and enjoy it*, and *I'm not the person I was*. Of course these *results* were my doing and my choice to find. People often say *ignorance is bliss*, and from this position you can put up with a lot more then when you try to actively chip away at that ignorance. For myself, what I have learned from this research project in terms of Rugby Mum's position as a researcher, is that I am keen to conduct more ethnographic study. As I sat in the doctor's waiting room

the other week, I found myself studying the interactions between people and the staff thinking of stories in my head that could illustrate these interactions and what they might mean in that context. So, my conclusion is that what I have learned from using the ethnographic method to further my knowledge is that it isn't so much about results; it is about the development of the personal confidence to transfer the skills of research and enquiry into another context. Perhaps in any future research I would choose a context that isn't so personal and close to home; but I suspect it would become that way, if only by the nature of the method of study and the realisation that people, their interactions and relationships in any given context observing have a habit of changing the game in so many ways.

7.10 Rugby Mum playing the game

There were many times during field work where I had to play the game, whether this be a game of pretence, a game of indifference, or a game of refraining from showing my true feelings about an observed experience. I suppose playing the game was an eventuality I hadn't considered when I began this research. I assumed as an accepted member of the community that I wouldn't have to play any game and people would be willing to support me in my research, rather than considering me to be a spy in their midst if they asked or suspected what I was doing on the touchline. I think the hardest game I had to play was that of keeping to the role of a researcher and ethnographer, rather than reverting back to my previous role of a rugby mum; which would have been easier in terms of data collection but dishonest, in my opinion. I did not want to play the game as others had done, in being covert in their method,

pretending to be something that they were not in the interests of getting information from people that they otherwise wouldn't have provided. And on reflection, perhaps I wanted people to know what I was doing and why, so that they would think about their behaviour preferably before they hurled the next line of abuse. It seemed that either way I couldn't win, as one way I was being dishonest and in the other may have skewed the data in the way in which I wanted to. So, the game I played was that of appearing aloof and indifferent to what I was observing and then contemporaneously documenting in my field notes: portraying a sort of moral ambivalence. The outcome of this was that I was largely ignored during my fieldwork and that eventually didn't bother me. In honesty it gave me some warped sort of self-satisfaction in that I had changed, and they hadn't and I could see what they didn't. However, that was playing a game with myself and that didn't matter either, at least not for the purposes of the research.

7.11 Rugby Mum as a mother

I think I may have been a little unfair earlier on in suggesting that there was some sort of dichotomy between Rugby Mum and myself as the researcher who is narrating this series of reflexive points and positions. I do think that the development of Rugby Mum as a researcher was the sole cause that led to that previous persona eroding or indeed dying off. However, I would stick by the realisation that I don't feel there is a trace of her left anymore, as she was on that touchline. This is in part due to the natural progression of life in the fact as a researcher I'm still a mother, but I do not have young children anymore. My children have grown up and have their own lives that do not involve grassroots

rugby league, which I no longer think is a shame. The very nature of the human experience is that things move on and roles have to evolve with that progression. I still have motherly instincts towards my children, and in fact children in general, as a lot of people do. But the role of the screaming Rugby Mum on the touchline is no longer required. I can further argue that this is as a result of this research project in that now I know better. But this would be a simplistic explanation and avoids the basic fact that children grow up over the years, and there's nothing you can do about it. The role of a mother I feel for many always remains constant, it is the context in which that motherhood is able to be played out that changes and this takes some getting used to. When I was first asked about whether this research involved gender and whether it was a *gender thing*, I dismissed the idea as some sort of attempt to pull me down the feminist route. I now realise as I've illustrated in previous chapters, that gender may have a lot to do with the way Rugby Mums, Football Mums or Swimming Mums behave on the touchline. Perhaps sport is a context in which we can display our motherhood, protective instincts, and support for our children. And this would be a good thing, if in the process we could refrain from hurting and damaging other people's children and loved ones in the process.

Chapter 8

8. Conclusion

8.1 Setting the scene: What have I learned from this sticky mess?

Drawing this thesis to a close is not the ‘final chapter’ in researching and seeking to understand the problems of abuse on the touchline in Rugby League, far from it. While I rather like the idea that these ‘problems’ might be neatly summed up and packaged with actions and recommendations, (although some of those do appear), to magically make all the tensions, troubles and harm go away, that is not the case. I have learned as a PhD researcher, ethnographer and thinker on this issue that I am now at the start of much a bigger task, not the end of it. However, as a result of this study I am equipped with many new insights into this phenomenon and can recognise the nuances and complexities that identify the ‘problem’ in order to recommend some actions from this research. That is, my ethnography in this sport has rendered visible some key characteristics of the issues that I believe need to be tackled for the good of the social experience in this wonderful sport. To this end, I realise that I can’t bring about change on my own, but I can work alongside others to inform their thinking, if there is a collective will for meaningful change in behaviour - from the grassroots to the Boardroom.

In this chapter I revisit my aims and objectives to critically reflect on the study’s contribution to understanding touchline culture and behaviour in Rugby League. I will explain something of the study’s application and impact, while also acknowledging its limitations and how these were mitigated, or at least recognised and accepted. Finally, some recommendations for future research are made, matched with problems that are now identifiable, suggesting possible directions for future research.

8.2 What did I set out to do - and what have I done?

Aims and objectives revisited

- **Aim**: "The core aim of my research was to present an ethnographic study from within a grass-roots rugby league sub-culture" (Chapter 1: section 1.3).

So, I'm done, right? Not quite, as I allude to above, from achieving this aim I have passed GO, gone round the Monopoly board and found myself back at the start again, but at least now with a wealth of experience from having travelled and lived with the experience, observing through the lens of Rugby Mum. Below, I revisit my research objectives and reflect on their impacts on the game, or me as researcher, and what is new springing from these objectives.

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

I am glad I narrowed my gaze to focus upon behaviour at junior level - 'grass roots' rugby league, as it has become plain to see that the problems of abusive language and behaviour, and the resulting psychological harm as these individuals get older, is to a large extent normalised, 'taking root' at this level of the game. It is normalised by some parents amongst other parents who publicly retaliate to each other, in front of the young players from under 6 to 12 years old who see this as an acceptable way to behave. I see it in the referees and club officials who either cower, breathing relief for not being a victim this time, or they join in with the 'banter' giving as good as they got - all with chronically pejorative effects for 'the game' i.e. the game as a social event for everyone to enjoy. However, from my extensive period in the field, at any given match, it is

often the few spoiling it for the many, but all get tarred with the same brush. The problem or challenge for the RFL as governing body trying to change that behaviour, starts right here, at grass roots level, but, precisely because they are not on the touchline witnessing it first-hand as I have done, they only get reports of it, which I am now guilty of contributing to also in this thesis.

Alongside my reading I learned a lot about participant observation at a summer school PGR training event called *Being in the Field: Data Collection Strategies, Negotiating Space, Roles and Duties* (Palmer 2022). At this event I saw my very existence as a field researcher being played out in scenarios of being ‘relatively attached or detached’ shared to help others in their qualitative research quests. It was the realisation at this event that my insider-outsider status had been completely flipped on its head, from being accepted in Rugby League touchline settings to becoming despised, or at least the cause of suspicion, that I found strangely freeing in the field as time went on. I discovered some theory that made sense of my weird feelings from the field towards becoming an outsider (Britton, 2019; Bukamal, 2022; Finlay, 2002a; 2002b). However, it is fair to say that this period signalled a mid-way researcher-crisis-of-confidence as I was feeling unsure about how to proceed with the research, if at all. That is, I was rejected from a culture that initially welcomed me and my family, but they were now showing that quality of ‘keep your enemy close’ which was somehow worse than just being openly abused, at least then I knew what I was dealing with. However, this experience made me more calculating in my research writing in the content I selected to share and the style I presented it in, which was part of my ethical self-censorship to protect me, and them, in what I reported. This is part of what Finlay (2002a:

p.209) called ‘negotiating the swamp’, through reflexively making sense of what is directly ahead and finding ways of moving forwards. This has affected the overall character of the ‘socio-cultural narrative’ that is my PhD thesis, through my deliberate turn towards creative non-fiction, storytelling, poetry and plays, to emphasise the behaviours and actions of others. The writing genres and styles I have adopted have helped me to understand the subtle characteristics of these behaviours better, they are not written to expose and prosecute the perpetrators. That is, my data collection was not an exercise in naming and shaming of guilty parties, rather, in refining the data through these writing strategies, I am able to communicate and learn from telling the story of abuse on the touchline, from a Rugby Mum’s perspective.

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

I have always liked writing stories and reading stories, however, I discovered that ‘constructing a socio-cultural narrative’ was easier said than done (towards Objective 1). This was because of the ongoing reflexive requirements in ethnography, acknowledging that I was present in the field and impacting the situations I was observing and reporting upon. Perhaps it was me making others angry? I know that to be the case on more than one occasion with the abuse hurled at me from time to time. The point is, that as researcher, my duty was not to hurl it back (or even provoke it), but to soak it up somehow, record it best I can, and report it carefully by some means or other. Ironically, the more abuse I was able to witness the richer might be my data and resulting stories. But my PhD is not a horror story, it is about interpreting what is observed and communicating it in such a way that might help bring about

positive change. That would be my obvious claim to impact, which is discussed in a more detail below.

The philosophical lenses, or philosophical grounding of my research underpins the originality to my 'process' going into this research, and also the make-up of the 'product' manifested in this thesis at the end. My philosophical training (I have 2 Masters Degrees: one in Health Care Ethics, and another in Health Care Law) leads me to be constantly interpreting and judging, and I have found it difficult to observe in the field without being judgmental - too much or too quickly about what I see. However, my inclination of being 'quick to judge' I am patently aware of and have metered this through my own reflexivity, and in my auto-ethnographic writing.

The Rugby Mum stance is a deliberate donning of a lens, an inherent bias through which to filter and interpret events. This indicates there is a pre-defined point of view, or at least a skewed one from the start, i.e. 'motherly care', that influences data interpretation throughout this research. While 'motherly care' is not an obvious characteristic to be levelled at Rugby League players of any age or sex, for the researcher, it is inescapable. Therefore, this bias is embraced right from the start, rather than hidden or cloaked. Chapter 7 was an extensive exploration and critical reflection of Rugby Mum's roles and responsibilities which, presented in its narrative form serves to fully explore the reflexive auto-ethnographic insights that were central to Objective 2.

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

One might think that Logic would be a good philosophical discipline to apply in the circumstances of this research as it seems totally illogical to

instigate, cause or create the abuse and harm I have witnessed in grassroots rugby league - on or off the pitch and on social media. These behaviours are frequently weighed upon the conscience of young people who play the game, a game that is violent and competitive enough without these chronically damaging social 'extras'. While Algebra is not necessarily the answer, some philosophical questioning of these occurrences have helped me to focus on philosophically derived premises and reasonable conclusions. For example: a deductive argument:

> *If abusive behaviour on the touch line is an inevitable feature and accepted norm of experiencing this social event, then how can Rugby League be promoted as a family friendly game that is also suitable for young children? My research, and my experience shows that abuse occurs frequently at grassroots level, therefore, Rugby League is not a family friendly game and especially not suitable for young children.*

Stepping back to 'check my view', and refocus on Rugby League culture and its customs more holistically, the question of whether violence and abuse is customary in various other popular sports cultures can be raised – and we find that it is, for example in football (Ekmekci *et al.,* 2018; Guilianotti, 2005; Rookwood and Spaaij, 2017), in basketball (Assaf *et al.,* 2022; Draganov *et al.,* 2022, Wann *et al.,* 2017) and in cricket (Bateman and Binns, 2014; Carrington and Mcdonald, 2001; Vamplew, 2006), which leads me to the next philosophical argument:

> *If violence and abuse has been studied in other sporting cultures, and it has been, extensively, then we realise what variety of human customs and behaviours exist. If we realise that there is a variety of human customs and*

behaviours, then it is possible to question Rugby League customs and behaviours specifically. Therefore, it is reasonable to question Rugby League customs and behaviour through ethnographic research and further, help Rugby League to question its own customs.

From these philosophical arguments we understand that change is eminently possible, in that the problem of touchline abuse is couched in human customs and behaviour which can be influenced, most likely through education. By contrast, the 'problem' is not locked down and immovable, like the pull of electrons that bind water molecules together in the drinks brought out at half-time, which only exists in the form of 2 hydrogens and 1 oxygen – 'water' is locked into a state of being, while by contrast, abusive touchline behaviour is not. It is socially evolved and therefore may be changed. That is, there are things in the rules and conditions of the game, that affect the customs and behaviour of players and spectators, which have to change to address the problem.

Touchline abuse has become one of the accepted (or at least endured) customs of human behaviour in Rugby League i.e. habituated abuse, in this socially constructed event. From this philosophical stance in objective 3, I have come to understand that much of the cause and effects of this problem may be rooted in the aggressive and invasive language of Rugby League. This is not dissimilar to many other 'invasion games' cited above, and I have observed in the field that the pleasure for some spectators is in the giving of abuse, not receiving it. From this there is hope for change in touchline behaviour if the use of language at all levels can change. That means changing the language of the

game itself, as possible contributory cause, with the potential effect of altering the perceptions and the language used by people on the touchline.

On the topic of rules presented as formal language which becomes engrained in cultural understanding, but also the cause of damaging behaviour, I recall attending the prestigious launch of a Research Institute in Sport and Health at UCLan, at which my research supervisor asked a question that illustrates my point. I captured the following in my reflexive journal:

> *We are in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic 'lockdown' and I am attending the much-publicised launch of a new Research Institute in Sport and Health at UCLan. We are all online. The Keynote speaker is a high-profile expert in the field of football research, advising the FA concerning mental health and welfare in the professional game. The Keynote's speech and the following discussion turned to head injuries through collisions and the chronic trauma caused by heading the ball over the course of a football career, leading to concerns that 'heading' triggered dementia in retired players. At the end of 'any questions' following the Keynote Address, I noticed my supervisor on the call among the 60-70 attending – the yellow cartoon hand was up and halo lighting up a small picture of Clive as he speaks. "If brain injury or chronic damage to the brain is a genuine concern of yours, then there is a simple solution, it seems to me. The FA enforce strictly a basic rule of 'don't touch the ball with your hands', so why not have a rule that says 'don't hit the ball with your head'. What do you say? Clive was publicly castigated for his comment and accused of not understanding football at all, and not being a lover of the game. I wonder if he's got a point though – just change the rules?* (Reflexive Journal: April 2021)

This recollection highlights the problems that Rugby League has with the language they use to define their game; it is deeply engrained into their sense of what Rugby League 'is', like an immovable state of affairs. At some point in its history, the language of law has been transferred onto Rugby League to communicate how to play and conduct the game. This probably seemed like a good fit at the time, but now Rugby League is also classified as an 'invasion' game, which is another social evolution of labelling and classifying in itself, adding to the new vernacular for comprehending the game. To promote acceptable conduct by all parties interested in Rugby League, change is needed on this account, especially in the shadow of a documented history of abuse, chronic harm and violence around the game (Webb, Rayner and Thelwell, 2018; 2019).

The verbal abuse I have observed on the touchline derives from quick-to-hand negative inferences that can be made by people (parents usually) who readily point to 'obvious' injustices as they see them, and excitedly shout out what they feel, for example, *"Hey Ref, do your duty, that tackle is bloody illegal and you know it, chuck him off the field".* To illustrate the pervasiveness of the language issue, influential 'law language' is used through match commentary on television, news reporting and also in modern-day parlance. We understand obeying 'laws' to denote peoples' duty to uphold the law and 'offences' where the laws are broken, or crimes committed. These are policed by a referee with a duty to enforce these laws – or the rules in this instance. The referee is a symbol of power and therefore entrusted to interpret the written word of law (Rugby Laws), who is to be respected and obeyed for the decisions they make by the power of office invested in them, like a 'law enforcement officer' or court-

room judge. If *players* 'break the law' they are judged to be offenders, for which they are punished with various penalties. Culprits, who are the players *that get caught* breaking the law, are obliged to take responsibility for their actions, which are deemed to be intentional. The severity of sentences that can be issued are determined by various penalties, such as giving territory or points away, and/or red and yellow cards held aloft to signal the infringement – or 'criminal act'. A red card means a player is excluded immediately from play probably, fined and banned for bad behaviour; at playing in the next match, for the next month or even next season. There is the 'sin-bin' aka prison, (or at least Remand Home), whereby, if the infringement is somehow deemed accidental or not so severe, this warrants a yellow card. After a cooling off period in the 'sin bin', they are let back on the pitch with a reprimand of being constantly monitored for good behaviour, demonstrating they show remorse and are a reformed sinner, rehabilitated. The threat being that there is no return to the pitch from a second offence. Liberty and freedom curtailed.

In combination with this 'law' rhetoric, the 'new' language of invasion may also be particularly damaging for the connotations of going into battle, which in players from under 6s, 7s and 8s to 12s may be keenly transferred from their school playgrounds, or from the television and reinforced by parents on the touchline as I have witnessed. For example, notions of attack and defence prevail, missions to invade and tactics to occupy territory, holding position and dominating the opposition (Palmer and Rookwood, 2014). Then there is strategy for stifling the opposition players' freedoms to move, keeping them 'locked down', maintaining an offensive line or a defending with courage… laying one's body 'on the line'. Further, on the concept of line, physical

boundaries are enforced to monitor for intruders and offenses, for example, who should be on the pitch or off the pitch, ensuring equal size teams in play, or being on the line or over it (to score or not to score, in play or out of play), as well as the behavioural impacts on spectators from being ‘roped off’ by a physical barrier, as I have also discussed earlier in the thesis.

Exacerbating the whole language issue a little further, impacting acceptable conduct of the game by players and spectators, is that there are no tangible rewards for ‘good behaviour’, in that to ‘play well’ or ‘play fairly’ but perhaps score nothing, and/or lose for ‘playing well’ goes unrewarded. Closer to home, and I mean in my home, all this has been felt and lived through, on the field, in our discussions in the car on the way home and around the dinner table. All this and the referee just has a whistle to perform their difficult task and defend themselves - my son, having played and refereed for a number of teams for many years… I am a concerned Rugby Mum.

8.3 Impact and limitations

Impact: Without a doubt the greatest impact from this research has been on me. In the various roles I have and identities I outwardly portray, conducting this research has changed my life and changed how I feel about the sport of Rugby League, even how I feel about being a Rugby Mum. This thesis will be a constant reminder of that. I have grown and evolved as a researcher and had the opportunity to publish and share my work, where it has had impact upon others in the Rugby League coaching community. (A list of my publications appears in the appendices).

Where my philosophical and ethnographic research has impact is highlighted in the current practices and decisions from RFL managers and leaders, whose communication below demonstrates an awareness of the problem with touchline behaviour, but arguably a lack of awareness about what to do about it. For example, on the 5th of May (2023) a Safeguarding Case Management Group statement from the Rugby Football League was published on the RFL website:

> *The RFL have ordered a number of junior fixtures to be played without any spectators on the touchlines over the coming weeks, as the result of persistent unacceptable behaviour by parents or guardians of players at the clubs involved. The unprecedented decision will involve boys and girls games, on both sides of the Pennines.*
>
> Kerry Simmons, the RFL's Safeguarding Manager, said:
>
> *This is not a decision the Safeguarding Case Management Group ever wanted to take. A positive touchline environment is a major part of Rugby League's appeal at all levels, and we are consistently grateful to the majority of clubs, players, parents and guardians who support our Enjoy the Game and Respect campaigns.*
>
> *However, we have been dealing with more instances of unacceptable behaviour than ever before on a consistent basis in the early weeks of the 2023 season. We have adopted a number of less drastic approaches with consistent offenders, but they have not achieved the necessary change in behaviour – so we now feel duty-bound to underline that this behaviour is unacceptable, as it is unfair to that majority of participants, especially children, who are being prevented from enjoying their Rugby League in a safe and enjoyable environment.*

> *We hope those affected by the touchline bans in the coming weeks will now recognise that their behaviour has been unacceptable, and that we will be able to welcome them back to Rugby League later in the season.*
> *"We all have a duty to protect the welfare and enjoyment of children. Junior players and match officials do it for fun, to build friendships and to learn. We ask all adults when watching to remember this.*

What is clear from this RFL statement is that the law vernacular is now extended to warning the parents-as-spectators on the touchline at matches about their anti-social behaviour. Significantly, punishments, restrictions and bans being applied by the RFL to people on the 'other side' of the white line, are seemingly outside of their jurisdiction and may not be enforceable by the RFL, compared to rugby-behaviour inside the white line where Rugby Law may be enforced to help 'play the game'. So does the Referee's whistle have force or is it an ASBO? that needs to be 'awarded' (Anti-Social Behaviour Order), either way, philosophising about behaviour in this context has influence on understanding the processes for identifying and managing the problem, where hopefully the product is helping to curb anti-social behaviour.

A positive impact is the RFL's actions to manage the physicality of Rugby League for younger players and teams in opposition, making '12 of the 44 recommendations for changes in the current rules relate to specific age groups' (RFL, 2023). For example, the RFL have changed the physical paraments of some rules, such as the height of 'legal' tackles are below the armpit, while 'illegal' tackles are around the neck (RFL, 2023). While this is good and may have some impact to alter perceptions of physicality and 'legality' from the touchline, it is still communicated in 'law' language – denoting new

stipulations in terms of what is legal or illegal. So, while change is happening to safely manage physicality on the field of play, little change is evident from the RFL to change, and ideally soften the language of engagement for those off the field of play. The language to communicate these changes are endorsed by the Boardroom at present as these dictates are approved at that level. The will and trend for adapting the rules and conditions of playing a sport more widely is gathering pace in other areas of sporting activity whereby children are better accommodated to playing ‘an adults’ game (Palao *et al.,* 2023), or women playing ostensibly a ‘man’s game’ (Encel, *et al.,* 2023), so as stated above, change is eminently possible, and is certainly recommended in the case of Rugby League from this research.

Stories have impact – and my thesis is a story revealing my Rugby Mum interpretation of touchline behaviours, however, as this story is couched as doctoral research there is a question of; upon which audience might my research have impact? Accession metrics to my research stories published to date indicates I have had impact upon some sectors of the playing and coaching community, but also in the doctoral, and educational research community. While stories are widely used within the ethnographic research community (e.g. Baker, 1988; Downey, 2005; Howes, 2005; McAdams, 2013; Sachs, 1985, 1995, 2010; Sparkes, 1999, 2002), stories are also being used within corporate business with significant impact. From this new perspective comes a dimension of ‘audience’ that is relevant to the impact of my touchline research. New research from business and marketing shows how large multi-nationals are using stories for greater impact beyond the transactional sale, i.e., to influence cultural behaviours to ‘buy into’, or ‘identify with’, as a particular

type of consumer (Rizvi, 2024; see also: Damodaran, 2017; Freeman, 2017; Dolan, 2017; Smith and Neergaard 2015; Cayla, Beers and Arnould, 2014; Jørgensen and Boje, 2010). A good example of this is Apple Inc. as Rizvi (2024) explains:

> The company doesn't just sell technology; it sells an experience wrapped in innovation and design elegance, often telling a story of revolutionizing how we interact with technology. This narrative has cultivated a loyal customer base that doesn't just buy one product but instead buys into the entire Apple ecosystem and identity.

The RFL is also an international business concern, as well as being a governing body for a sport with a distinct culture and identity. The RFL also wishes to have impact upon the behaviour of people who partake in the sport, on either side of the touchline. Therefore, stories, of the type 'played out' in my research, are a proven and effective means of achieving the behaviour change that will appeal to the corporate RFL, as well as the rugby community at grassroots level and upwards.

Limitations: The limitations that apply to my research are those which classically apply to many ethnographies, principally that I was limited by my personal ability to access all eventualities relevant to my mission, although to re-acknowledge that I did have full ethical approval from the RFL and UCLan to conduct this research across 'all levels' (see Appendices). As a lone researcher in the field, I was limited by my own physicality; I can't see everything that goes on at every touchline in the country, only the touchlines I was able to visit. Similarly, while I have been present at some corporate level Board meetings at

the RFL, I have not been to them all over the last 5-6 years, but I have monitored reports and communications from them. However, what I have witnessed firsthand, and crafted into my stories, resonates closely with other reports and research about aggression and poor behaviour in sport. That is, as Wolcott (2002:154) points out, 'I had only to identify the characteristics that help to specify where my research fits into the bigger picture' of this phenomenon.

I was limited by my positionality in a number of roles and responsibilities that I have in life alongside being a researcher. Also, as mentioned above, becoming the Rugby Mum represents my donning of a lens that is laden with bias, which for me is inescapable, so I have embraced it. The previous chapter [7] is a reflexive critique which brings to the surface many of my biases in various roles, which I have acknowledged to the best of my ability.

Lastly, while conducting the research has been incredibly time consuming which is a limitation in itself for a busy working academic, there is the question, on account of my creative writing strategies, of what my research has become and how to judge it. On the one hand is the writing of a thesis, on the other is the crafting and composing of stories, plays, poems etc from my data. Therefore, what counts a 'good story' and what counts as 'good research' are questions begging different criteria to judge the products. However, for me, the question is whether the two can be one and the same thing, because as a doctoral candidate I have little choice to present anything other than a PhD thesis. So, working within my chosen methodology and adopted methods, I believe these are no longer two separate entities in the context of my research

journey and discoveries, but I accept the limitation levelled at my work from this point of view, to query the various criteria for ‘what does good look like’?

8.4 Problems and recommendations

	Problems	**Recommendations**
1.	Problem - Sport generally, and Rugby League specifically, has become a catalyst for aggressive behaviour. Can anything be done about this in our community or wider society?	Have the conversation from grassroots / club level right up to the Boardroom, that Rugby League is a violent game. What are the stakeholders’ perceptions of this? See: Stokvis, R. (1992) *Sports and Civilization: Is Violence the Central Problem?*
2.	Problem - Rugby League is now understood as an invasion game. Managing the physicality of this is a continuing priority for boys and girls playing an adult game with adult expectations.	Continue the trend of changing the rules to accommodate smaller bodies playing this sport. Discussions from the coaching community and also spectating community – i.e. how spectators might perceive play under new rules to accommodate children players, and possible new terminology to communicate these changes.
3.	Problem – Ivory tower powerlessness: [from my data]:	The Boardroom has become detached from the field of play that

	"I'm only a figure head really, there's not anything I can do".	it manages. Re-engage officials in positions of power and influence, to use their power and influence. Stories from my research could galvanise such action. Share reports of powerlessness in my data: e.g., "what can I do, I am nowhere near the field of play?" This conversation has to extend from Boardroom to match officials. (see also: Webb, Rayner and Thelwell, 2018 and 2019).
4.	Problem – Law Language: the all-too accessible common language of law has been transferred to Rugby League with pejorative effects. The common understanding of how to play the game is through the legality or illegality of actions, meaning that injustices can easily be voiced in powerful ways that may undermine the purposes of the game for the under 6s to under 12s especially.	Engage the Board room to highlight the issue of 'law language' and then work from the ground upwards with new data to reveal the issues and the need to change the vernacular. See: Hiller, J. (1978) *Language, law and sports and culture: the transferability or non-transferability of words, lifestyles, and attitudes through law.*
5.	Problem – Greater appreciation and understanding the complexity of prompts and triggers for poor touchline behaviour is needed at grassroots, club and Boardroom.	Education is key. My research offers a detailed account of instances of abuse and poor behaviour helping others to see in accessible ways the triggers in poor behaviour at the touch line.

		This needs to be communicated across the Rugby League community at large.
6.	Problem – Behaviour and customs: engrained habituation and normalisation of aggressive language and behaviour, in coaching, spectating, officiating	As above, language and education is key to address this issue – my research reflecting back like a mirror some instances of abuse that may promote change.

8.5 Closing

To close, I will return to the story which had most impact on me as a child, and that was the Wizard of Oz. While my scientific curiosity with the impact of banana skins was quickly satisfied at the time of conducting those experiments, the Wizard of Oz has had a lasting impact, the kind which I would like to think my research will have. That is, that through my Rugby Mum ethnography, I have discovered that the sport already has what it needs to bring about change, it just needs to see it, and believe it… and want to change itself.

THE END

8.6 Afterword

So the whistle has blown and the game is over, for this thesis endeavour at least. What remains is for me to answer the “so what?” question, in terms of how this research might be disseminated and built upon in the future. I never wanted this research to be cast aside into the virtual repository of PhD efforts, never to be read by those it aimed to reach. That is why I chose to write the thesis in the way in which I did: storified accounts from an insider, and later outsider perspective and then later again, somewhere in the middle. The stories I have written and philosophised upon are meant for wider consumption and I see the opportunities that creative non-fiction brings here: the stories from the touchline are powerful and can be shown in many ways. Much like Saldana turned Wolcott’s experiences and story into a play, I consider this research could be disseminated in a similar vein. I have always liked the idea of making an animation or film from the research, richly scripted to offer a visual insight into the different experiences of characters in and around the touchline of grass roots sport. For example, a series of animations on touchline conversations could spark debate and perhaps evoke a sense of identification that may enable those interested, to consider future actions and areas for development, in ensuring spectator sport does not become damaging to participants. Similarly combining this with a podcast discussing emergent themes may also be worthy of consideration and would open the discourse to those preferring an auditory approach, whilst on the bus to school or driving in the car. In short, to disseminate the findings in as many ways as possible to spectators would be the aim. Personally, I would like to write a book: a full storified account of one week on the touchline of rugby league because I prefer the written word.

Perhaps a selfish perspective but I am aware that many of us still like to read, feel the pages between our fingers and hear the story in our own voice. Whatever means of dissemination, this research is and always has been aimed at contributing towards positive change. Stories are very powerful and the simple act of reading and reflecting on narratives from the touchline, I believe can influence this change. Offering commentary from those on the touchline can provide a means by which those with the ambition, can consider what to do about the less savoury elements within the game of rugby league. Narrative accounts have been used to try to understand thought processes in other fields, such as healthcare, so why not within sporting spectatorship.

I would hope that the research within this thesis is taken into account by those responsible for shaping and developing the rules, policies and procedures of the sport. Research from the insider perspective and from within the context of the touchline, may enable governing bodies to garner a different perspective than that which is offered by statistics and contrived through formal surveys and interviews. To help shape policy and inform priorities in grass roots rugby league, would I hope, go some way to ensuring the healthy maintenance of the amateur game, and keep it attractive to youngsters wanting to be involved in team sports.

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Appendices

PhD Appendices

Contents

16 May 2018

Clive Palmer / Joanne Keeling
School of Sport and Wellbeing (Social Science areas only) University of Central Lancashire

Dear Clive / Joanne

Re: BAHSS Ethics Committee Application Unique Reference Number: BAHSS 555 FR

The BAHSS ethics committee has granted approval of your proposal application 'Rugby Mum – an insider's take on grass-roots Rugby League culture'. Approval is granted up to the end of project date.

- It is your responsibility to ensure that
- the project is carried out in line with the information provided in the forms you have submitted
- you regularly re-consider the ethical issues that may be raised in generating and analysing your data
- any proposed amendments/changes to the project are raised with, and approved, by Committee
- You notify EthicsInfo@uclan.ac.uk if the end date changes or the project does not start
- serious adverse events that occur from the project are reported to Committee
- a closure report is submitted to complete the ethics governance procedures (Existing paperwork can be used for this purposes e.g. funder's end of grant report; abstract for student award or NRES final report. If none of these are available use e-Ethics Closure Report Proforma).

Yours sincerely

Douglas Martin Deputy Vice-Chair

BAHSS Ethics Committee

* for research degree students this will be the final lapse date

NB - Ethical approval is contingent on any health and safety checklists having been completed and necessary approvals gained as a result.

Red Hall
Red Hall Lane
Leeds
LS17 8NB

Tel: 08444 777 113
Email: enquiries@rfl.co.uk
rugby-league.com

4th May 2018

To Whom it may concern

Re: Rugby Mum – an insider's take on touchline grass-roots Rugby League culture

As a National Governing Body (NGB) of sport, our mission statement is "To consistently deliver great Rugby League experiences.'

Our function as a NGB is to grow the sport to get more people playing and make them better at it. The impact of the sporting experience on the mental wellbeing of our participants is also very important to us. It is a key measure for the public funding that we receive from Sport England.

We are acutely aware that some behaviours exhibited by volunteers and parents are inhibiting the NGB's ability to truly deliver on our mission statement. Consequently, the RFL support the research into touchline behaviour for the wellbeing of young players, coaches and referees.

The research will shed some much-needed light upon the social hierarchy of RL 'on the ground' and social influences upon behaviour. The outputs from this field study are welcomed in the best interests and wellbeing of all participants and supporters of the game. It could lead to a contribution to policy decisions and inform the creation of learning materials with reference to our 'Respect' policy.

If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

David Rotheram

Head of Coach and Player Development

dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com

Research Information Sheet

Study title

A study of grass roots rugby league culture.

Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this research is to present a study of grass-roots rugby league culture from the perspective of players, officials, coaches and supporters. I aim to seek to understand how behaviours contribute to the social identity of the rugby league community and the effect behaviours have on the people taking part in the sport. The research aims to tell the social story of our rugby league culture.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to take part in this research as you are involved in the game of rugby league at grass roots level.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you choose to take part in this research you have a right not to answer any questions that you don't want to can leave the focus group at any point.

It is not possible for you to be able to withdraw your data following a focus group due to the group based nature of the discussion.

What will happen to me if I take part?

I will be using a number of means by which to collect the thoughts of those involved in the study. These "data collection methods" are:
Focus group: You may be asked if you wish to take part in a focus group which consists of a small group of people in which you will be asked to discuss some of your thoughts about grass roots rugby league culture. An electronic recording and typed notes will be made of the contents of the focus group on my PC and stored on a password protected networked drive: you will only be identified by nature of your preferred role within the rugby league game – no other identifying details will be used.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The benefits of taking part in this research is that you will have the opportunity to air your views and to make suggestions as to what would improve the atmosphere of rugby league at grass roots level. You will also be contributing to a unique study that aims to further knowledge and understanding of the impact of grass roots rugby league culture on players, supporters and officials.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

The probability of the you being exposed to any degree of risk is extremely unlikely. The researcher is an experienced academic has full DBS clearance and is fully aware of safeguarding procedures.

I will handle your privacy with the strictest of confidence. All data collected will be stored using a coding system to ensure all participants (coaches, players, interviewees, etc.) remain anonymous. All electronic files relating to the research will be stored on a password protected networked drive and encrypted USB stick. This drive, along with all paper documents, will be stored in a locked room that only the researcher will have access to.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

The only information collected about you will be your preferred role within the game. Information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). Data generated by the study must be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity. Data generated in the course of the research will be kept securely in paper or electronic form for 5 years from the end of the project.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this research will be used to complete a PhD thesis. The results will also be published in academic journals which are widely available. You will be told when and where these are available to read.

Who is organising and funding the research?

There is no funding of this research – the research is part of a PhD study registered at the University of Central Lancashire.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by the University of Central Lancashire Research Ethics Committee. The Rugby Football League (RFL) has also reviewed the study and is in support of this research.

Contact for Further Information:

Joanne Keeling JKeeling1@uclan.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Clive Palmer CAPalmer@uclan.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you should contact the University Officer for Ethics Ethicsinfo@uclan.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

8th May 2018.

Research Participant Consent Form – Interviews and Focus Groups

Project overview/informed consent form: for the research participant (and responsible legal guardian if applicable)

Working title/area of study: A Study of grass-roots rugby league culture.

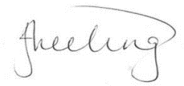
Name of Researcher: Joanne Keeling (PhD Student, School of Sport and Wellbeing, University of Central Lancashire, Preston)

Dear interviewee,

The aim of this research is to explore the behaviours of the rugby league community and how these behaviours may affect those involved within the game of rugby league at grass roots level. You are warmly invited to contribute to this research through participating in an interview. Electronic notes and audio recordings will be made in order to help me as the researcher interpret your responses more clearly. This also provides an opportunity for any additional thoughts or comments you may wish to add.

All of your contributions to this research will be kept in the strictest confidence (you will remain completely anonymous and you will only be identified by your preferred role in the game) and it is hoped that your responses will feature in publications to add to a broader narrative of the 'Grass roots rugby league story'.

Your participation in the interview or focus group is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time up until Nov 2019. I thank you in advance for your valuable comments and sharing your time to support this research.



Joanne Keeling

1	The research has been satisfactorily explained in verbal and/or written form by the researcher	YES	NO
2	I understand that this research will involve either an interview or focus group	YES	NO
3	I understand that I may withdraw from this research at any time without explanation	YES	NO
4	I understand that my information with remain completely anonymous and that I will not be named in any reporting/publishing of the study	YES	NO
5	I understand that any recorded material of me will be used solely for research purposes, will be stored securely and will not be used out of context	YES	NO
6	I understand that you will be discussing the progress of this research with your research supervisor from the university	YES	NO
7	I freely give my consent to participate in this research and have been given a copy of this form for my own information	YES	NO

Name:

Date:

Signature…….....

Contact information: Joanne Keeling (Researcher) JKeeling1@uclan.ac.uk

Clive Palmer (Research Supervisor) CAPalmer@uclan.ac.uk

Focus Group Schedule: JK Stage 2:

Title: A study of grass-roots Rugby League culture

Following the observations; Stage 1, the researcher will facilitate Focus Groups with those involved in grass roots rugby league. This is to gain further insights into their experiences, perceptions and attitudes towards grass roots rugby league culture and its relationship to mental health and well-being. The focus group/interview will explore the following areas:

Question 1

What aspects of being involved in grass roots rugby league do you enjoy?

Prompts:

1. *Do you like watching, supporting, cheering your team along, playing or officiating?*
2. *Why do you enjoy these aspects the game?*
3. *How does this activity make you feel?*

Conceptual value

This question and the prompts will spark discussion about the perceived positive elements of the sport and effects on mental well-being/community cohesion.

Question 2

What aspects of being involved in grass roots rugby league do you not enjoy?

Prompts

1. *What aspects of the game do you not enjoy watching?*
2. *What aspects of the game do you not enjoy hearing?*
3. *What are some of the negative feelings you experience when you see and hear things that you don't like?*

Conceptual value

This question and the prompts will probe into the perceived negative aspects of the game at grass roots level and will enable facilitate participants to discuss the perceived "downside" of the culture being studied.

Question 3

Do you think any negative aspects of the grass roots rugby league culture outweigh any positive aspects or vice versa, or do you feel they are balanced?

Prompts:

1. *Consider what the game means to you?*
2. *If negative out ways positive or vice versa why is this?*
3. *How are they balanced?*

Conceptual value

This activity will encourage participants to reflect on and critique their the positive and negative aspects of the game according to their self as an individual in preparation for following questions.

Question 4

Have you ever been involved in behaviour that you think may have an effect on people in the game, coaches, players or officials?

Prompts:

1. *In what way – positive or negative?*
2. *On the touchline?*
3. *On social media?*
4. *With and between other people?*
5. *Can you give an example?*

Conceptual value

This question and its prompts will hopefully lay the foundations on which to 'make a case' for change and improvements in the game.

Question 5

How did you feel being involved in that behaviour or seeing that behaviour?

Prompts:

1. *Good, bad, indifferent?*
2. *What are your feelings about it?*

Conceptual value

Enables participant to reflect on self and contribution towards culture.

Question 6

Have you ever been positively or negatively affected by behaviour in the game? Did you tell anyone or complain? What happened?

Prompts:

1. *Have you heard or seen anything that affected you?*
2. *How did this behaviour affect you?*
3. *What were your feelings about it?*

Conceptual value

Enables reflection on personal experiences of being part of community and culture.

Question 7

How do you think types of behaviour within the grass roots game affects those on the pitch – be it players, coaches or officials?

Prompts:

1. *Consider different aspects of the game such as social media, administration, touchline.*

Conceptual Value

Enables participant to explore how behaviour and culture may affect those directly involved in the game.

Question 8

Do you think there should be any changes made to the game so that the culture of it/behaviour is improved? If so, what would be your suggestions?

Prompts:

2. *Consider at club, league and national level.*
3. *Rules, values or awareness.*
4. *Consider where and when and by whom.*

Conceptual Value

Enables participants to make suggestions and further demonstrates their perceptions about the culture and areas they see as most problematic or meaningful to them.

(4)

[redacted]

[redacted] Aug 2018

Env - HOT HOT HOT → Too much
Sunglasses
Grass cut ++
Crates of water on pitch
Crowd/me - no shirts on some spectators
Kid in buggy crying
Coaches on both sides pitch
Taped off, being pushed in
Some kids sat under tree
Bikes in Sweat, towel, work?
Ref warmup - looks hot + older than usual. Hard work?

me on touchline # part of notes again

Verbally - some woman saying last time she saw this ref he should have sent someone off but didn't - fella can't remember says that many errors. Match hasn't even started!!

(1) Everyone a referee?

(2) Criticism play before play

10am - kick off
Match kicks off - all well - kids trying hard. Coach now shouting at ref - ignores. Coach now shouting at other coach. Woman on T/L 'This is ridiculous'. Full blown argument - plenty swearing going on in front of players, parents + spectators. Too hot to do anything other than watch.

(3) Role modelling?

Water breaks a plenty for all the players and coaches + ref. Hanging around after match + ref critising players. Feel awful. Coach to boys - one crying 'YOU MEN WERE SHIT' - Awful day.

(4) Abuse kids!

(14)

[redacted] v [redacted]

[redacted] Sept 18

Big game, pretty windy today - U9s match be a nice change. Lots of conversations going on this morning between specs Recognise a few specs from other matches, Woman here always interested what I'm 'up to'. Just acknowledged her and said hello. Opposition team here with coach warming up on sidelines. Pitch roped off - can't see any touchline managers —

(1) Governance/ responsibility Who is in charge?

Some fella shouting one of the boys has not got boots big problem as team no subs! Coaches talking - one comes over with boots. Must recall conversation later for story - he lends boots. Their specs/ parents don't look too happy!

(2) Hero / Kindness

Good to see opposition parents thanking coach and kid can play

↳ heroics ?

Match progresses - some still complaining re the boots being lent to the kid/player without - a shame?

(3) Love of the game?

↓

Purpose of sport? * Competition

Development v Competition

Big factor

Last bit - Kid comes over and thanks coach for boots - !! - parents & kids?

(17)

Cup Game 'Up North' ~~[illegible]~~/19

Sport - kids grow up ← Notes (Chapter Themes?)
Competition
Development
Governance
Behaviour.

Travelling up north to cup match. Not much appetite from players as cold +++. Past 2 weeks focused on themes from notes/chapter ideas - themes recurring from observations but not all bad!

10:32am

Pretty bad pitch - no ropes or T/L manager today and both sets of spectators pretty vocal. Woman in hat here again - think about how taking f/notes and positionality!! → (Fieldnotes practice)
May not be best idea with book and pen ?transcribe later/document from memory
Usual verbal 'ping pong' from spectators → (Wacquant?)
ensues but with players being older perhaps not as strong as younger boys - why?
As boys get older not same ambition?
Scholarship gone? Kids making decisions for themselves. Conversation here about disappointment of kid wanting to do art at college - long dialogue 'Let him do what he wants' - seemingly here it is art. How much of ambition is connected to social scene for parents/spectators rather than about kid? → (Environment? Sport - Social) (2)
(Development (1) nice idea)
(# Think about dissemination/ ?play (words))

Need to consider purpose of sport in society - examples from touchline - what is the point?
{Social? Work and Play?} Chapter?

PhD Candidacy Publications: Joanne Keeling

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

Palmer, C. (2022) JQRSS Editor's Academic Award Volume 16 - Qualitative Researcher Award recipient: **Joanne Keeling** (University of Liverpool). *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 2021, Vol. 16, Issue 1.

Naylor, R., Palmer, C., **Keeling, J.** and Byrne, C. (2021) Show me on the doll where the music touched you… Captain 'Titus' Oates (Chapter 23: pp.158-161). In, Palmer, C. (Ed.) *Arts-Based Education in Outdoor Learning.* Sport and Wellbeing Press, Preston, UK. ISBN: 978-0-9955744-1-0

Pryle, J., **Keeling, J.,** Sprake, A., Lee, D. and Palmer, C. (2020*) LA lingo: a view from the cricket commentary box.* Sixth Public Engagement and Performance Conference "Flesh Out – Connections". The Hepworth, Wakefield, Yorkshire. 20th - 21st March.

Keeling, J., Sprake, A., Pryle, J., Lee, D. and Palmer, C. (2020) *Tainted love.* Sixth Public Engagement and Performance Conference "Flesh Out – Connections". The Hepworth, Wakefield, Yorkshire. 20th - 21st March.

Sprake, A., **Keeling, J.,** Lee, D., Pryle, J. and Palmer, C. (2020) *'Homework, in PE! Are you 'avin' a laugh?'* Sixth Public Engagement and Performance Conference "Flesh Out – Connections". The Hepworth, Wakefield, Yorkshire. 20th -21st March.

Lee, D., Palmer, C., **Keeling, J.,** Sprake, A. and Pryle, J. (2020) *Hatch, match and dispatch: corporeal ceremonies in the mud & The Runwell Ladies.* Sixth Public Engagement and Performance Conference "Flesh Out – Connections". The Hepworth, Wakefield, Yorkshire. 20th - 21st March.

Palmer, C. and **Keeling, J.** (2020) *Where did the fun go? Engaging staff as active learners… in Sport-ology.* ANTF Annual Symposium 2020 – A decade of change?' Association of National Teaching Fellows. Aston University, Birmingham, 5th - 6th March.

Palmer, C., Byrom, A., Grecic, D., Pryle, J., McGregor, K., Sprake, A., Wilkinson, S., Gray, P., Massaro, D., **Keeling, J.,** Dransfield, F., Whall, R., Wragg, J. and Lee, D. (2020) *Promoting staff as active learners – co-producers of CPD for research in Sport and Health*. Presentation at the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing Research Away Day, University of Central Lancashire, Westleigh Conference Centre, Preston, UK. Tuesday 11th February. And at the 6th International Health and Wellbeing Research with Real Impact Conference, Sustainable Development Goals. Tuesday 18th February.

Keeling, J. and Palmer, C. (2019) *An exploration of touchline culture in grass roots rugby league.* Presentation at: 10th International Conference of Sport and Society, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. 19th-21st June.

Keeling, J. and Palmer, C. (2018) It's the way you tell 'em - storytelling from the touchline. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies,* 12, 1, 337-346.

Keeling, J. and Palmer, C. (2018) *Boys don't cry but men should try?* European Conference on Mental Health, 19th-21st September, Split, Croatia.

Keeling, J., Sprake, A., Palmer, G. and Palmer, C. (2017) In conversation with PE, learning and school. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies,* 11, 1, 105-120.

JQRSS Editor's Academic Award Volume 16 - Qualitative Researcher Award recipient: **Joanne Keeling** (University of Liverpool). *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies,* 2021, Vol. 16, Issue 1.

JQRSS

Qualitative Researcher Award 2022

This is to certify that

Joanne Keeling

has been recognised by the JQRSS Editorial Board
for her outstanding research activities,
scholarly conduct and valuable contribution to the journal:

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

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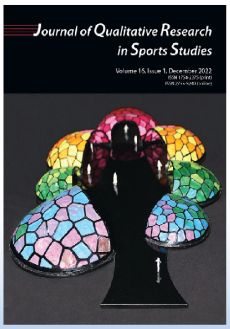

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RECOGNISED RESEARCH SUPERVISOR

Clive Palmer

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