

**Is Australian Rules Football now Feminist?**  
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There was some unwitting irony in the commentary about the Women's AFL exhibition game in 2016 where Penny Cula-Reid was given credit for her contribution to the progress of the Women's Australian Football League (AFLW) by forcing the existing adult female league to create a junior competition. Paul Amy of *The Herald Sun*, explained as follows:

She'll be a trailblazer in 2017 just as she was almost 15 years ago when, as a schoolgirl, she went to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal and effectively forced AFL Victoria to create a youth girls competition. (<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/leader/localfooty/penny-culareid-picked-up-in-afl-womens-draft-13-years-after-helping-get-girls-league-set-up/news-story/9e692e5cca813aa74a53b86cc6079014>)

Cula-Reid was one of the three adolescent complainants in the *Taylor v Moorabbin Saints Junior Football League and Football Victoria [2008]* case held before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal on 17 February, 2004 ([http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/vic/VCAT/2004/158.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=sa%20consol\\_act%20eoa1984250%20s35](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/vic/VCAT/2004/158.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=sa%20consol_act%20eoa1984250%20s35)). Cula-Reid and the other two female footballers did not win the case, although the youngest, Helen Taylor was able to keep playing in the competition whilst under 14 years of age. The Moorabbin Saints Junior Football League, led by men, revoked the registration of Cula-Reid and one of the other female players, Emily Stayner. This was not a case about participation in a newly-developed girl's junior league; it was a case about the continued participation in an established junior football league with the club Cula-Reid had played with since the age of six. The loss in this case meant that Cula-Reid and Stayner could no longer participate in the competition that they had been playing in. Even when presented with the suggestion by Justice Stuart Morris that the league could use their discretion, and allow the girls to continue to play (note sections 83 and 84 of the brilliant tribunal judgement), the league chose to deregister the young players.

A worthwhile, whilst personally inadequate for the two banned footballers, by-product of this loss was the development of junior leagues for female footballers in Victoria. The statistics suggest that the rate of female participation in Australian Rules Football has greatly increased since this development. There was a 56% increase in the number of female community club teams to 983 during 2016 and a 19% increase in the total number of female participants, continuing an expansion of both that commenced in 2005 but has significantly accelerated in rate since 2013 (<http://www.afl.com.au/news/2016-11-22/womens-football-explosion-results-in-record-participation>; <http://www.theage.com.au/afl/womens-afl/female-footy-participation-on-the-rise-in-2016-afl-20161122-gsup2x.html>). The numbers are a little rubbery, because when you discount the 53,409 female Auskick participants (up 21% on 2015), you end up with an average of just over 332 players per community team. So obviously, a lot of female participation occurs outside of formal community competitions, at school competition and in other forms of the game such as AFL 9's. Regardless of this quibbling, there is no doubt that there has been an explosion in female participation in football, particularly from 2013 onwards.

Whilst females rightly pursue greater political representation and influence across all parts of societies, we should not neglect the importance of sport to feminist politics. Sport remains the most evocative public demonstration of difference between the sexes. Does the increasing participation

of females in football and the development of a professional women's football league mean that football is now feminist? The automatic response from most feminists would probably be 'which feminism.' Feminism is a broad church, made up of a number of different, and sometimes contradictory, theoretical positions, but all of which share a desire to improve women's authority over their own lives. So I'm going to change the question to 'How could participation in football improve women's control over their own lives?'

As a proudly pro-feminist male sport philosopher, I am torn by the introduction of the AFLW. It is great to see that opportunities and support for women's participation in this sport have expanded to the point where the peak organization has recognized this growth opportunity. Almost forty years ago, the feminist philosopher, Jane English wrote a pioneering piece called 'Sex Equality in Sports.' ([https://www.jstor.org/stable/2265148?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2265148?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)) In it, she argued that any restriction on providing women with the basic benefit of participation in a sport is inequalitarian. All women, and all men, should be allowed to play any sport that they wish to pursue. This does not mean that they should have to play against each other- but all should have access to all sports, including women to football. Lenkic and Hess have detailed a 100+ year history of women participants in football that has largely been kept 'under the radar' (<http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/sport/afl/expert-opinion/michelangelo-rucci/after-100-years-in-the-background-australian-football-finds-its-female-side/news-story/64679f8ef31875343573026da5036506>). Participation in football by women is now certainly on the radar.

Further, in an Australian sporting environment which has a history of few well-paid jobs in female team sports, the new league in women's football, along with the big bash, netball and soccer leagues, may be opening up careers for women (admittedly not as well paid) that have been available to men for ages. The maxim, 'a rising tide lifts all boats' might apply to the economics of women's sport generally, especially if established sports, such as basketball, soccer, netball and cricket, continue to lose players to the new AFLW. A liberal feminist perspective may take this even further and suggest affirmative action principles should come into play regarding public funding of these sports, in order to produce greater substantive equality between the genders in terms of both supporting resources and player wages. Before critics bring up markets, note that this action is limited to re-allocation of public funding, which could be justified by the large amounts of government funding that the men's game has received over the past fifteen years (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-09-27/kennett-correct-on-afl-investment/4983476>) .

When I listen to men in football organizations lament that they do not have the ground space and facilities to cope with the introduction of women's football teams, and that local councils should do something about this, my pro-feminist antennae prick up. Why must the existing historical organization of football facilities, ground use, competitions, timing of games and allocation of resources be left unmodified, and women be hammered into that structure in some ill-fitting way as add-ons? Why not start from the premise of an equal per capita share of public resources between the genders, and then make adjustments from there? If men and boys have to play shorter games, or play or train less frequently, to allow women and girls access to playing time, then this is what equality demands.

Secondly, I am hopeful that the media coverage of AFLW encourages the production of a strongly feminist embodiment. It is now 36 years since the Iris Marion Young, the prolific feminist author,

published the ground-breaking article, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Bodily Comportment, Motility and Spatiality.'

([https://www.jstor.org/stable/20008753?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20008753?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)) In it, she argued that young women are trained such that: "Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned and objectified." Whilst some women obviously escaped from these restrictions on embodied action, they escaped as eccentrics to normalized or emphasized femininity.

Twenty years on, Young was encouraged to report that women in the United States were no longer as restricted in their forms of athletic embodiment, and that women are now able to escape as respected athletes (<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24880-on-female-body-experience-throwing-like-a-girl-and-other-essays/>). The opportunity to present female embodiment as athletic, powerful, competitive, strong, physical and combative through AFLW would stand in stark contrast to current female football embodiments of emphasized femininity that reinforce female objectification and vulnerability. Whether feminist or not in their own perspectives, female footballers in action are feminist in embodiment. In 1992, Colleen Vale, then coach of the Fairfield women's football team and president of the VWFL, said

It is a fantastically important thing for women to feel comfortable about their bodies, to know they can tackle somebody, to know they have the strength to stand up to somebody else's tackle. In some respects it is another form of self-defense training.

(<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/womens-football-makes-its-mark>)

Reminiscent of Martha McCaughey's physical feminism learnt by women in self-defense classes (<http://o-journals.sagepub.com.library.vu.edu.au/doi/abs/10.1177/0891243298012003003>), the female footballer becomes an agent of an embodied and physical resistance to the broader rape culture in society. There is a deeper feminist purpose to AFLW that challenges hegemonic beliefs about the appropriateness of violent confrontation for women, although nowhere near as effective as the practiced scripts learnt by McCaughey's respondents against male attackers in self-defense, boxing and shooting classes.

There are other feminist perspectives that would question whether these benefits offered by AFLW, outweigh the potential costs of incorporation in a male sport. The history of Title IX in the US has shown that the funding of women's sport resulted in men entering and occupying coaching and administrative roles (i.e. the roles with authority) and replicating men's sport with women participants. When coaching and administration of women's collegiate sport was poorly paid, the labour market offered opportunities for females. Once the women's collegiate sports system became funded to (theoretically) equal levels to the male system, men entered the coaching and administrative roles.

Will this occur in the AFLW? It certainly looks like it could. Despite the success of female coaches in most of the local women's football leagues, six of the eight head coaches in the AFLW are males, and several management positions have also gone to men. It is important to note that most clubs have female coaches in developmental roles, so there are opportunities for careers in both areas in the longer term. But it is fraught.

Jane English argued, following a radical feminist perspective, that:

If women do not attain roughly equal fame and fortune in sports, it leads both men and women to think of women as naturally inferior... it is not a right of women tennis stars to scarce benefits, but rather a right of all women to self-respect that justifies their demand.

Aside from this important benefit of 'roughly equal fame and fortune,' the relatively poorer wages offered to women participants suggests that the participants that we will see are likely, in the longer term, to come from very specific social classes. Erin Riley explains that regular training, weekend games and drafting to distant clubs may necessitate home relocation, sacrifice of educational and work opportunities, the need for more expensive childcare, and the loss of local support networks. Such sacrifices are more easily made by players, or parents, of independent wealth (<https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=49831#.WK5mm1WGO70>). Unless some extra forms of support can be put in place at all levels of football (this may be where affirmative action is important at the local and developmental level), then other groups of women will miss out. The AFLW may end up subsidizing the leisure pursuits of rich and middle-class women. Feminists might question the dominance of the middle-class female perspective in the women's football discursive space.

Feminists would also oppose the loss of female authority that could occur with any safe incorporation of female resistance into a female version of an established male sport. David Fairchild, a North American sport philosopher, would suggest that the development of a women's league is one method of incorporating female participation and resistance whilst making sure that any overlap in gender performance cannot be demonstrated, and that men can continue to control the discourse of the game (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00336297.1994.10484133>). The danger is that in this incorporation, the women's voice is lost. I loved the observation of Janelle Crib, a Fairfield Falcon's women's footballer in the VWFL, who said, 'If I knock someone over in a game, I will turn around and pick them up... Seems to be more friendly but just as competitive, but doesn't seem to be nasty' (<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/womens-football-makes-its-mark>). I hope that the enigmatic Mo Hope, and other female footballers, will be allowed to be different in the newly professionalized world of AFLW. Certainly the provocative tweet of the Carlton AFLW footballer Darcy Vescio, 'wen you laugh togetha cos you know ur gonna smash the patriarchy' (<http://www.theage.com.au/afl/womens-afl/carlton-blues-aflw-star-darcy-vescio-comes-under-cyber-hacking-attack-20170207-gu7bnf.html>) and the open and proud gay partnership between Melbourne's Cula-Reid and Collingwood's Mia-Rae Clifford (<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/feb/13/will-the-aflw-herald-changing-times-for-gay-players-in-the-mens-game>) both suggest some space for individuality and resistant discourse. But I also hope that the varying perspectives of the different women footballers will be able to form a united front on issues of specifically female concern, such as maternity leave and on-site childcare, without being shouted down by either the organizing body or the football public. Then we will know that football has become more feminist.

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