

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

Sport study –The History of Rugby League

Physical Education Sport and Society- 9893

Word Count: 2200

Due: March 30th 2018

Sport holds a high significance within Australian culture which dates back to pre-colonization. On a daily basis, Indigenous Australians took part in 'sport' as a part of everyday life- (Tonts, 2005). Within modern society, the definition of what sport is differs depending on the source in which the information is coming from. According to Chandler, Cronin and Vamplew (2002) sport is a set of physical activities which are goal focused, competitive in nature, contest-based and allow for spontaneous play.

Commented [J1]: Useful approach to define early in your assignment what the term sport means.

A sport which fulfils this definition and holds a long rich history within Australia is Rugby League (RL). Formally known as "Northern Union", discussions surrounding its formation began at the George Hotel in Yorkshire, England on August 29th (Caneen, 1979). 122 years later, RL has established itself in Australian society where it sits behind the Australian Football League (AFL), as the country's second most popular spectator sport (ABS, 2011).

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RL began in Yorkshire, England in 1895 when a group of members from the 'working class' rugby society broke from ~~the well established~~ Rugby Football Union (RFU) to create their own rival competition known as "The Northern Union" (Moorhouse, 1995). These members found the ideologies and strict principles enforced by the RFU, now known as Rugby Union, were neither fair, nor reasonable for the 'working class' man. Up until 1895, men were not allowed to earn money from playing the sport of rugby, nor be financially compensated for the time spent away from work whilst participating (Gate, 2002). It was seen purely a pastime for participants, a form of exercise and a means of enjoyment for those who could afford it.

Commented [J6]: Well written paragraph with well thought out linkages to the literature.

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The governing body of the RFU stood firmly against these principles and were unreasonable in implementing suggested rule changes to make the sport more appealing to spectators (Gate, 2002).

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The level of social-power shown from the RFU, controlled the rugby world at this time among many

nations. Social power is the ability an individual or organisation has to influence and control society and social organisations (Teese, 2000).

Commented [J10]: Useful and important unpacking here showing that you understand key terminology in your work.

The Northern Union was the first of its kind to acknowledge the working-class citizen and issue professional payments to its participants. They recognised the opportunity to enhance the game of traditional rugby and create new rules such as the “play-the-ball” rule to entice spectators (Collins, 2006). This rule diminished ‘rucks’ which had players pile on top of each other when a tackle was made. The “play-the-ball” rule meant players would play the ball with their foot allowing spectators to view the ball for longer periods of time (Moorhouse, 1995).

Commented [J11]: Good example as it is a defining characteristic of rugby league.

RL soon gained extensive support with 22 ex-rugby clubs around England supporting the shift away from social inequality shown by the RFU and word about the newly formatted sport started taking action around the globe, including Australia. Within Australia, the RFU of England continued to control the rugby clubs until 1907 when the New South Wales Rugby Football League (NSWRFL) commenced. The working-class rugby footballers and supporters in Sydney and Brisbane heard news of the growth of RL within England and were disheartened by the strict unjust attitude of the RFU governing body. Australia began planning their own RL competition away from the RFU with support and funding from entrepreneur James Giltinan and a test cricketer, Victor Trumper (Rowe, 1997). An Australian competition consisting of eight teams began in 1908 playing under RL rules and also involving player payments.

Commented [J12]: Good information included, but a lack of necessary in-text references in most of this paragraph.

Commented [J13]: Accurate? Best choice of words?

In 1997 a Nationwide RL competition was formed in Australia known as the National Rugby League or NRL as it is commonly known (Collins, 2006). The NRL is the pinnacle of RL in Australia and New Zealand consisting of 16 teams and it continues to grow nationwide at an amateur and professional level with over 1.4 million registered participants nationwide (ABS, 2015). Although RL prevailed as a sport that responded to the negativity from the social power conducted by the RFU, it has also been a sport in which racial discrimination and gender inequality issues have been raised (Long & Spracklen, 1996). Studies conducted within the 1987 and 1988 NSWRFL competition found the use

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of racially 'stacking' Aboriginal players within teams was prevalent. 'Stacking' refers to the positional placement of athletes within teams based off racial stereotypes (DeSensi, 1994). Within these two years the number of Aboriginal players was at one of its highest points within the country's league history. However rather than highlight cultural diversity within the sport, people soon realised the consistent roles in which Aboriginal participants were having within teams (Hallinan, 1991).

Commented [J15]: Excellent explanation of a key term here and elsewhere in your assignment.

Commented [J16]: Strong link to the literature here.

Video analysis and statistic examination from the NSWRL from 1987 and 1988 showed large proportions of Aboriginal players were in positions requiring speed and endurance such as the 'wing', however, they rarely/if ever filled positions such as 'halfback' that require quick-decision making and intelligence (Judd & Butcher, 2015). These prejudiced results were not the only findings from the data collected. Tackle counts, and possession statistics showed the positions typically held by Aboriginal players, totalled the lowest scores for participation and involvement of any position on the field (Hallinan, Bruce & Coram, 1999).

Commented [J17]: Excellent work in this paragraph again with strong links to the literature.

RL on both an amateur and professional level have worked hard to bridge the gap of Indigenous equality and have formed professional partnerships with many Indigenous organisations to help promote the participation of Aboriginal players in the sport (Rugby League Australia, 2016). It seems to be working as in today's game, Aboriginal players are part of each NRL club and take part in a variety of roles within the team.

Commented [J18]: Current literature – for example the recent work of Colin Tatz might have been useful to support what you have mentioned here.

Gender equality is another issue within RL which only recently started to mend in the sport. The first RL board in Yorkshire in 1985 stated they had no dealings with women at all (Collins, 2013). This sexist comment portrayed the stance RL would make against the significant inclusion of women in the sport up until recent decades. RL is commonly referred to as 'hyper-masculine' (Georgakis & Russell, 2011). It is a sport that allows for primitive spectacles of brutality and vigorous contact with no protection. A sport often related to war, the stadiums called 'battle-grounds', and the men referred to as 'warriors' (Hogg, 2013). It can be argued RL was and is not appealing to women based off this masculine view and the multiple forms of social oppression within the RL foundation meant

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Commented [J20]: Good work here and interesting.

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women played no role in the sports structure for some time. Women were perceived as 'spectators' within the sport of RL in Australia up until 1993 when the first female RL competition was formed. This movement took 98 years since the beginning of RL and many argue the masculinity of the sport plays a huge role in female participation. Ian Davies, founder of the Australian Women's RL, said minimal documented attempts to make the sport appealing to women was found when searched for, nor were leagues or pathways even available like they were for men (Australian Rugby League Commission, 2016). RL inducted its first female board member to the NRL in 2004. Women up until this time had no social-power within the RL figuration however participation in women's RL is now one of the fastest growing sports in the country (National Rugby League Australia, 2018).

Commented [J22]: Reasonable speculation.

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Commented [J24]: 'limited' rather than 'no'? Figuralists argue that social power exists relatively rather than absolutely.

In 2016, more than 500,000 females played a form of RL in Australia and over 60,000 roles within RL clubs were held by females (ABS, 2016). Women's RL has grown rapidly in the past decade with a women's NRL competition introduced in 2016. With women now offered a pinnacle prospect within the sport and with statistics suggesting the rapid growth of female participation, equality issues still remain evident. Women's NRL receives no air-time unlike the men's competition in which each round game is televised. Female player match payments and paid contracts are also a rarity with only 40 players from the 2018 Women's NRL offered 'paid' contracts this season (National Rugby League Australia, 2018). These contracts often just cover daily living expenses and medical benefits. This is a far cry from men's NRL with each player on a team roster being paid for their time at the club whilst also inheriting 'third party' extras such as housing deals or vehicles. The minimum contract wage of \$90,000 dollars a season for male players within the NRL beats any female contract in the women's NRL by a long margin, with the highest paid men's NRL contract now worth \$1.1 million dollars a season (National Rugby League Australia, 2018). The sociogenesis of RL has developed from a sport created to support the 'working-class' men in the late 1800's, to a sport which now produces some of the wealthiest sporting contracts in the country and a platform in which even females can earn a living (Meir et. al, 2007). Sociogenesis, refers to the way a social organisation has evolved overtime (Novak, 1982).

Commented [J25]: Seems like a lot? What kind of roles?

Commented [J26]: Agreed, but it is a figural term that should be contextualized and referenced to figural sociology.

Although Women's sport has started developing nationwide, across a spectacle of sports, it still has a long way to go. Women's sport receives just 7% of air-time within Australian television. With such a media influenced 21st century perhaps this statistic lends support to the negative impact media has on female participation and equality within sports like RL (ABS, 2016). Females cannot endeavour to be what they cannot see and with minimal air-time comes minimal opportunity for advertising and sponsorship revenue (Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013). RL has made positive steps towards gender equality, however, this does not hide the fact that gender equality issues still occur within the sport.

RL, as mentioned earlier, is seen as an opportunity to showcase pure masculinity of the body (Macklin, 1974). This body discourse associated with RL may lend reason for the heavy inclusion of Pasifika (people of Pacific Island heritage) participants within the sport over the last decade. Tinning, MacDonald, Wright & Hickey (2001) refer to a discourse as a 'view' or 'assumption' that characterises certain events or groups. RL requires a strong fit body to compete; a RL player must train the body to fall, be hit hard and uphold large amounts of weight. They must be big and fit, fast and agile (Baker & Newton, 2008). As this discourse somewhat criticises against the small male and women in particular, creating further gender issues and divides, it heavily supports the bodies of Pasifika people whom are largely stereotyped for their 'hyper-masculinity' and large strong bodies (Dewey, 2014). In the past 15 years the number of Pasifika men within RL has become a dominant figure. Nearly half of the contracted players in the NRL are Pasifika men (48%) with 50% of junior RL participants of Pasifika heritage also (ABS, 2016). Pasifika people are often stereo-typed as 'un-educated' or 'criminalized' and are negatively represented in the Australian media and culture, much like Aboriginal Australians (Ravulo, 2015). The body discourse associated with RL however have drawn Pasifika people to the sport due to the masculine discourses associated with the people of their heritage. Pasifika people see a realistic pathway within RL, they see a way to earn a potential income and see a way to be positively recognised by the wider Australian Community (Panapa & Phillips, 2014). RL has become one of only a few avenues within Australia which highlights Pasifika

Commented [J27]: The term 'body discourse' needs to be explained.

Commented [J28]: Suggested connection here is in need of more development.

Commented [J29]: Good understanding of discourse!

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Commented [J31]: Good connection with the literature.

people in positive light and the statistics of Pasifika people involved within RL and their standing the game support this claim (Grainger, 2009).

As shown by this paper, looking back on the history of something provides people with a deeper understanding about an issue or topic, a way of identifying and understanding changes that have occurred overtime and allows people to reason as to why these changes occurred. Health and Physical Education (HPE) teaching has adopted the same approach to learning; a shift from explicit medico-scientific, biophysical and psychological foundation teaching is underway with a socio-cultural approach seen as a lens to produce critical inquirers and way of truly understanding content (Dunning, 1999). A socio-cultural approach has learners understand the 'whys and where's', it has students understand the history and culture behind what they are learning and question certain things to gain a further understanding (Cliff, 2011).

Teaching RL using a socio-cultural approach would allow students to understand the significance of the game within Australia. It would include teaching about the heritage of the sport, questioning the issues that are apparent in the game like gender and racism and helping them understand how these negative discourses have made influence. In line with The Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authorities (ACARA) Year 9 HPE achievement standards, students could take part in a modified game of RL, playing under both the traditional RFU rules and contemporary RL rules. Students could explore how these rule changes may have enticed participants and spectators in the early 1900's and come up with 'new rules' they believe might make the game more attractive in the 21st century. "Students could experience different roles that contribute to successful participation in physical activity and propose strategies to support the development of preventive health practices" (ACARA, 2018).

Modifying versions of a main sport to include all participants and highlight certain areas of a game reflects Bunker & Thorpe's (2008) 'Ggame Ssense' approach. The Ggame Ssense approach encourages critical thinking through a variety of modified activities that allow students to participate,

Commented [J32]: Good unpacking here.

Commented [J33]: Great idea in this section that would definitely add value to how you teach RL in PE and school sport.

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reflect and analyse certain aspects of a game (Pill, 2016). RL has a long and rich history as this paper has outlined, therefore, it provides copious amounts of content able to be studied through a 'socio-cultural lens'.

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