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'It's Only Sport': The Symbolic Neutralisation of 'Violence'

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Abstract

Within the commodified world of professional ice hockey, athletes sell their bodily performances in return for a salary. A central feature of this transaction is the very real risk of physical injury – a risk inherent within most contact sports, but particularly so within those that feature seemingly 'violent' confrontations between competitors, as ice hockey is widely reputed to do. Yet within the spectacle of sport, where physicality can be constructed as playful and unserious, it is possible for the consequences of such action to be concealed behind a symbolic, ludic veneer. Within this paper we explore this process with a particular focus on ice hockey spectators, for whom notions of sport violence as in some important way 'mimetic' of the 'real' enabled their propensity to both enjoy, and find moral validation through, potentially deleterious behaviours among athletes.

Introduction

Yeah, fighting is part of the game. It's what brings in fans, at least initially, particularly when they don't really know the rules or understand what's going on on the ice. I don't really like it. And they don't get it. I've had over 300 stitches in my face. They just think that it doesn't hurt. That it's a show. (Preston Schmidt of The Belfast Giants, cited in Carter 2011: 112)

Athletes such as Schmidt, and occurrences of violence connected to sport more broadly, have been the focus of much social scientific research (see Young, 2012 for a recent overview). This is perhaps unsurprising considering the often dramatic speed, power and physicality displayed as athletes engage in what Smith (1983) termed 'brutal body contact'¹. Those working within the sociology of sports violence have done much to build up a critical understanding of the phenomenon in relation to various concerns, such as its historical development (Elias and Dunning, 1986; Guttman, 1978); its painful/injurious consequences (Young *et al*, 1994) and concurrent implications for athlete healthcare (Malcolm and Scott, 2011); its relation to the commodification of athletes as workers (Young, 1993; Robidoux, 2001); its implications for constructions of gender (Channon and Matthews, 2015; Messner, 1990; Matthews, 2014, 2015; Thing, 2001) and other ideologies embedded in performance sport (Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Jakubowska, Channon and Matthews, 2016; Maguire, 2004); the enjoyment it generates (Gard and Meyenn 2000; Maguire, 1992; Matthews, 2014); and its relation to hooliganism (King, 1991; Dunning et al, 1988) and other violences (Young, 2012).

A core concern throughout this diverse body of scholarship has been the question of how sport-based violence is legitimised, and much work in this area has drawn attention to narratives that athletes use to justify the damage done to their bodies as 'part of the game' (especially see Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Messner, 1990). However, comparatively less is known about the ways in which spectators who consume such action make sense of these experiences, particularly regarding the manner in which they understand their own enjoyment of sports that

regularly result in damage to athletes' bodies. This paper therefore aims to examine this aspect of the 'violence' that appears to be so central to certain sports.

Using professional ice hockey as our empirical focus, we explore some of the ideas embedded in Schmidt's epigraph. Is it the case, as he suggests, that fans 'don't get' the bodily damage that he experiences? How do supporters make sense of the enjoyment they receive from this physically injurious 'show'? And what might enable fans to think that body checks, falls, trips, blocks and fights 'don't hurt' athletes? Our goal here is twofold; firstly, we explore the manner in which people experience and symbolically frame the 'brutal body contact' associated with ice hockey and, secondly, we draw attention to the manner in which they attempted to neutralise our attempts to problematize consumption of such action. Here, we aim to draw attention to the relationship between the fans' symbolic ordering of the sport and the commodification of athletes' physical health. To contextualise our analysis we begin by exploring a number of interconnected empirical and theoretical themes.

Athletes, Representation, Consumption and Material Bodies

Carter (2008: 72) argues within his exploration of Cuban baseball that "the playing fields and the stadiums demarcate unique social spaces with their own logic for ordering social interaction". As Goffman (1975) contends, such spaces are sites where social life can exist in a different 'key' from that of the day-to-day. This process of 'keying' transforms actions and behaviours by encoding them with different meanings and symbolic representations. As such, the often brutal and injurious physicality that can be found within a variety of sports, but especially ice hockey, is usually framed by a set of cultural narratives that highlight their distinctiveness from 'real' violence that might occur on the street and away from the sporting realm.

Building upon this, a foundational premise for this paper is that within sporting enclaves, athletes can become symbolic representations largely separated from their fleshy materiality. For as Geertz (1942 [2005], 81) demonstrated in his study of Balinese cockfighting, such sites can be considered as stages where important social stories can be presented as "acts and objects which have their practical consequences removed". With these ideas in mind, 'star athletes', in this case ice hockey players, can then become dynamic cultural artefacts available to be consumed by fans within the symbolic world of the spectacle (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). Moreover, this symbolism is intertwined with the bodies of such athletes, and it is the material realities of this process that underpins our motivation to conduct this study.

With this point in mind, we contend that the term ice hockey 'player' is somewhat misleading; following the work of many critical scholars, 'play' can hardly be considered a suitable primary descriptor for what goes on in the contemporary world of elite, high-performance sport (Brohm, 1976; Hargreaves, 1986; Hoch, 1972; Maguire, 2004; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002; Rigauer, 1981). Within the world of professional ice hockey, athletes sell their bodily capacities in return for a salary, and a central feature of this transaction is the risk of suffering both minor and major physical injuries (Robidoux, 2001). Indeed, the injurious nature of ice hockey has been consistently highlighted across many clinical studies of the professional game (see Biasca et al, 1995; Daly et al, 1990; Sims et al, 1987; Tator et al, 1991; Tegner and Lorentzon, 1991), with more recent research also detailing the prevalence of physical damage at the junior level (e.g. Emery *et al*, 2010).

Furthermore, ice hockey stands out among comparable team sports as being renowned for its relatively high level of physicality and partial legitimization of fighting between opponents (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993; Robidoux, 2001; Smith 1987), which clearly amplify the sport's latent risk of injury as competitors routinely and deliberately target one-another's bodies in more-or-less harmful clashes. And, if we accept that ice hockey's reputation for such physicality is a powerful draw for (some) spectators, it thus becomes possible to argue that the professional side of the sport is at least partially built upon the excitement generated by possible and actual damage inflicted on the bodies of its 'players'.

When the fleshy realities of pain, injury, disability and potential death are considered alongside the increasingly spectacular nature of professional sport, a disconnect between representation and materiality can be predicted. For as Debord (1994 [1967]: 84) argued, "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation". And if this is the case, then the damaged bodies of ice hockey players might be concealed within the long shadow cast by the narratives embedded within the sporting spectacle. This is the effect of 'the show' of which Schmidt speaks, and this, we argue, is an aspect of sports spectating which requires further exploration in order to grasp the nature of fans' roles in symbolically producing, maintaining and consuming the damaged bodies of athletes. We now develop these opening points through a discussion of the peculiar nature of the contemporary professional sporting spectacle.

It's Only Sport: Play, Spectacle and Neutralising 'Violence'

In this paper, we hold that there is something relatively unique about the sporting spectacle; its connection to play can allow people to consider it as "isolated from the rest of life" (Caillois, 1961: 6). Such discursive framing can then be used to hide the damaging effects that often accompany a career as a professional athlete (Young, 1993, Robidoux, 2001). Lasch (1979: 105) gives us a starting point from where we might begin to unpack this problem:

In all games, particularly athletic contests, display and representation constitute a central element – a reminder of the former connections between play, ritual, and drama. The players not only compete; they enact a familiar ceremony that reaffirms common values. Ceremony requires witness and enthusiastic spectators conversant with the rules of the performance and its underlying meaning. Far from destroying the values of sport, the attendance of spectators makes them complete.

Fans and supporters are thus essential components of the sporting spectacle, not only through the fact that they pay to attend events, but in that they actively generate and maintain the connections to play and drama that provide meaning for such phenomena. In this sense, their presence at sporting events is what enables the process of keying to which Goffman (1975) draws our attention. In turn, such rituals form the basis upon which localised identifications and social meanings can be actively carved out and consumed (Atkinson, 2002; 2011; Carter, 2008; 2011; Crawford, 2004; Maguire, 1992; Matthews, 2014).

As Geertz (1942 [2005]: 77) argues, this enables social narratives to be lived out but "in 'play' form, coming dangerously and entrancingly close to the expression of open and direct interpersonal and intergroup aggression (something which again almost never happens in the normal course of ordinary life), but not quite because, after all, it is 'only a cockfight'." While such social spectacles may be understood as purely symbolic rituals by spectators, actually "the cockfight is 'really real' only to the cocks" (1942 [2005]: 81). The 'really real' material consequences which underpin this 'deep play' (Geertz, 1942 [2005]) are transposed within the

sporting spectacle into potential and actual damage to athletes' bodies. In a similar manner to Geertz, Atkinson (2011: 140-141 – emphasis added), while discussing the ways in which uneven landscapes of gender power continue to be recreated and recast within sports worlds where violence and aggression are common, argues that:

Such is often tolerated or ignored because, after all, participation in sport is voluntary and simply not for everyone. From this perspective, the residual patriarchy is excusable from outside, since *'it's only sport'*.

Such critical analysis of narrations of sport as 'different', 'not serious' and 'playful' serve to highlight why such enclaves can persist as sites for experiences, behaviours and discourses that are no longer routinely accepted within Western societies. Indeed, during our previous research within combat sports subcultures we evidenced a recurring theme from various participants who experienced their actions as substantively different from the 'real' violence that occurs outside of the ring/dojo/cage (Channon, 2012; Matthews, 2014, 2015). Clearly such understandings trouble simplistic claims that the 'brutal body contact' of ice hockey (and similar sports) is fundamentally the same as 'real' violence (see also Matthews and Channon, 2016). Yet, we contend that the availability of such symbolism can act as an opaque ludic veneer, masking the realities of commodified, professional sport through the insistence on separating sporting realities from those of the wider world.

This is not to say that such physicality is necessarily unenjoyable, nor inherently damaging or immoral. Indeed, a difficulty in sustaining a broad critique of sports violence often comes from the empirical reality that much of what is popularly imagined as 'violent' action in sport settings takes place within mutually-accepted rules, and therefore with the consent of both parties involved. Furthermore, such 'violence' contains a significant ritual or mimetic dimension (Dunning, 2008 [1983]). Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) and others (Atkinson, 2002; 2011; Maguire, 1992; Matthews, 2014) have highlighted the importance of attending to this component of sporting activities. The argument goes that when engaging in *sportif* battles, competitive combat becomes a pleasurable mimicry of 'real world' experiences, allowing participants to enjoy the thrilling sensations of risk-laden activities such as fighting, in a manner *supposedly* involving significantly less risk of at least some of their more seriously negative consequences (such as maiming, death, prosecution/imprisonment, etc.).

This form of mimetic violence is a well-established element within the sociological study of sport (Atkinson, 2002; Elias and Dunning, 1986; Maguire, 1992; Matthews, 2014) and has some resonance with research examining sadomasochistic practices (Chancer, 1992; Kleinplatz and Moser, 2006), 'edgework' (Lyng, 2005) and the 'sneaky thrills' available when committing crime (Katz, 1988). The term is used here to highlight the subtle yet stark differences which symbolically encode certain acts of sport-based violence as culturally and experientially different from 'real' violent acts, despite some material similarities between them. Thus, rather than engage in well-trodden debates about the mimetic (or otherwise) nature of sport, our central theoretical contention within this paper is that the *discursive construction* of sports violence as 'mimetic' and 'playful' enables materially damaging or otherwise deleterious behaviours to be concealed behind a symbolic neutralization of such acts². We argue that it is because of professional sport's traditional links to play, ritual and drama that the damaging consequences of 'brutal body contact' can be neutralised through the processes of interpreting them as existing in a different 'key' (Goffman, 1975) than that of their 'really real' (Geertz, 1942 [2005]) equivalents.

Furthermore, Carter (2011, 119) draws our attention to the way in which such symbolic constructions overlay the political economy of professional sport, in that “the commodification of [athletes’] immaterial labour and the fetishization of it into ‘play’ goes a long way to obscuring their precarious unequal labour positions.” Fetishizing the professional world of sport, which is so clearly shaped by a Weberian work ethic (Brohm 1976; Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Maguire, 2004), into a fun, enjoyable and expressive ‘pastime’ hides the damaging physical and psychological realities produced by what Maguire (2004) calls the ‘sports-industrial-complex’. For as Preston Schmidt’s quote at the outset of this paper suggests, he did not repeatedly require stitches in his face due to his enjoyment of fighting. Rather, it was the commodified show of professional sport and the perceived need to ‘bring fans in’ which was to blame.

A central feature of the maintenance of this process is the symbolic construction of sport as in some important way different from the ‘real’ world which exists outside of the spectacle. Discourses around this mimetic dimension of sport enable harmful experiences to be cast as playful and non-serious. While there is certainly a degree of empirical reality to differences between the ‘mimetic’ and the ‘real’, the symbolic framing of behaviours which produce pain and injury within the sporting spectacle as ‘a game’, ‘playful’ and in various ways ‘separate’ from normal social life serves as a kind of discursive ‘white-wash’, practically obscuring damaging consequences and material realities from critique. Following a discussion of methodology, we will empirically detail this process through the analysis of ice hockey fans’ experiences of the sporting spectacle and the ways in which they symbolically neutralise the harmful implications surrounding sports violence.

Method

We have both followed ice hockey to varying degrees, and have often used examples from the game within our teaching as a means of illustrating conceptual points about the contested and controversial nature of sport-based violence. When attending a live game together some years ago, we became intrigued by the ways that supporters made sense of their enjoyment of actions on the ice. As such, the data presented in this paper were generated over a six-month research project that set out to detail this side of the sport. We took as the site of our study the Nottingham Panthers (hereafter, Panthers), a professional team who regularly play in the Elite Ice Hockey League – the UK’s highest level of competition in this sport. Although ice hockey has a comparatively much smaller audience in the UK than in North America or some other European countries, the Panthers enjoy a strong local following in the city of Nottingham, with average game attendances during the 2013-14 season of over 5,200 (Merk, 2014). This makes the Panthers currently the best attended professional ice hockey team in the UK, and therefore a fitting site for us, as UK-based scholars, to research fans’ perspectives on the game.

Our research aim was to specifically explore how fans interpreted the on-ice action relative to concerns over violence and physical injury, with particular respect to the moral framing of these phenomena. Following Chaney’s (1993: 15) comment that, “it may be that our most productive sociology (has and) will develop from concentrating upon moments of disorder”, we sought to challenge our interviewees by encouraging them to confront the damaging effects that a career in ice hockey can have on players’ bodies. Here our goal was to document the ways in which they made sense of their financial support for and enjoyment of behaviours which damage players’ bodies by challenging taken-for-granted assumptions that ice hockey was ‘only sport’.

Given that this issue could be handily explored using discursive methods, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, all of whom were season ticket holders or regular attendees for two years or more, and for whom the sport was identified as a central aspect of their social and leisure lives. The interviewees included 11 men (9 self-identified as white British, 2 as mixed-race British) and 9 women (all self-identified as white British) aged between 25 and 62, with a mean age of 37. Importantly, we make no claim to generalisability on the basis of this sample, who were recruited either at random through interacting with groups of fans at and around the Panthers' home stadium, or through the 'snowballing' method following this initial contact. What this sample does provide, however, is a small window on processes existing within the ice hockey milieu in the UK, and one which may help identify pathways for further, more systematically structured follow-up studies.

We favoured the semi-structured approach for its targeted yet flexible nature (Gray, 2014). In this respect, while every interview centred on the research aims outlined above, which informed a loose interview schedule jointly developed at the outset, each one took a slightly different direction as participants developed conversations with us based on their own unique experiences and perspectives. In addition, we also chatted informally with several of the participants before, during and after games in pubs and spaces near the arena. Coupled with field notes taken during observations at live games (we attended five home matches during this period), these informal chats provided valuable additional insights which helped to inform our questioning in the more formalised interviews, which were conducted at the interviewees' houses, or in less populous public spaces such as cafés.

The interviews, which were conducted separately by either author, were recorded on digital devices with the consent of interviewees³, and subsequently transcribed verbatim at the earliest opportunity, usually within a week. When possible, informal discussions at/around games were also recorded, although this proved difficult in the majority of cases, given the ambient noise levels within the stadium and nearby pubs. These transcribed interviews were then subjected to a thematic analysis, following the multi-phase model detailed by Sparkes and Smith (2014). Firstly, each transcript was separately coded by both authors, following an inductive approach which identified multiple initial codes. These were then collated by both authors and grouped together in a second level of analysis, reducing coded elements into three discreet, patterned themes, which were checked against the wider dataset and refined through reflexive discussion of the emergent findings.

Together, these themes identify three important aspects of the ways in which the 'violent' spectacle of ice hockey was produced and consumed, given meaning, and legitimised. These themes reveal in turn the spatial and social context within which ice hockey took place; the meanings that fans attached to the on-ice action; and their discursive strategies for legitimating their consumption of such spectacles. We discuss the key findings within each of these in three separate sections below.

The Capital FM Arena: Where the Action is

In Goffman's (1967) essays on *Interaction Ritual* he concludes his discussions with a chapter that explore the specifics of 'where the action is'. This is Goffman's attempt to capture the sociological importance of spaces where thrills, excitement, risks and gambles can be experienced relatively easily. He suggests that "enterprises are undertaken that are perceived to be outside the normal round, avoidable if one chose, and full of dramatic risk and opportunity. This is action" (Goffman, 1967, 260-261). The Capital FM Arena where the Panthers played their

home games was one such place. Located in Nottingham city centre, this 10,000 capacity stadium was built in the year 2000, and its imposing external and internal architecture mark it out as a site for the spectacular. We noted on numerous occasions the dramatic size of the building both externally and internally.

While we have both been in larger stadia, the enclosed building with seating almost the entire way around the ice with a huge scoreboard in the centre was certainly an impressive sight. This architecture was more than grand; it also acted to focus attention toward the ice. Carter (2008: 202) captures this neatly in his general note on stadiums, where “the very space in which sport takes place suggest this remote, separate nature of sporting experience. A stadium’s strong walls and inward sloping stands focus energies down and in, towards the centre, while keeping the outside world at bay.” The arena existed as a focal point where the spectacular could be experienced and it drew the Panthers fans’ attention to ‘where the action is’. It was a crucial element in the fan’s understandings of the action on the ice as different in important ways from the rest of social life.

On match nights, streams of Panthers fans march towards the arena, highlighted by their yellow, black and white oversized ice hockey shirts and other matching merchandise. The significance of the occasion was not lost on the fans:

[Tell me about all this (motioning to the collected Panthers fans that are waiting outside the arena before the game)]

John: It’s what it’s about, all coming together like a big Notts tribe⁴. In’t it great, everyone gets they kit on, not like at [Nottingham] Forest [Football Club] where all’t lads think they’re too cool to wear’t shirt, most people who come down regular make the effort to get something to show they support. I start to feel it when I park up and see town’s been kind of taken over by black an’ gold.

The “it” which John, a 55 year old electrician, felt was also described as “the vibe” (Darren, 36 year old teacher), “that rush” (Sarah 39 year old photographer) and “the atmosphere” (55 year old housewife and former pub manager). As the fans filter into the arena, the symbolic power of the space as in some important ways different and separate from the normality of life became manifest in the feelings and narrations of fans:

[So does the stadium mean anything to you?]

Sarah: Well its obviously home for the team if that’s what you mean, it’s connected to them.

[What about when you walk into the main arena, or when the lights go down?]

Sarah: Right, yeah I still sometimes get that rush when I walk in, especially on a big game. At the start of the season I walked in after 3 or 4 months of not going anywhere near the place and I was like a kid, full-on tingles and stuff. I never used to be like that when I first started coming, it’s since I’ve started caring about them [the team] I think.

The idea that watching ice hockey provided space for behaviours that were not so commonly experienced within the emotionally restrained normality of adult life was a recurring theme, as the following quote from Simon, a 42 year old IT consultant, reveals:

[Could you tell me what you enjoy about it?]

Simon: It gets ya out the house don’t it (laughs). Na, but, I don’t wanna go into town drinking and that anymore, I need something a bit more than that. Ice hockey’s like an

event, it's a show. I know sometimes it can be a bit frustrating you know 'cus it's a small sport really but when it's good there's really nothing like it.

[What do you mean?]

Simon: Play-offs right. Think about the play-offs. All season builds towards them, and then this place is packed, everyone's on it. Tense games, big checks, all that, there's been times when I've not been able to sit down, it's almost too much sometimes. It's one of the only places I've seen old boys bloody crying and hugging each other. Where else can ya get that?

On numerous occasions we witnessed – and took part in – the behaviours that Simon details here. It was clear that the arena was considered a space within which such feelings were appropriate. Gorn (cited in Gruneau and Whitson, 1993: 217) neatly describes the significance of these experiences: “we go to the ballpark not just to watch the craftsmen, but to be infused with passions to love and hate, to be moved by all we see”. We argue then, that the arena was a space with its own physical and emotional logic that helped to ‘key’ (Goffman, 1975) the action and behaviours inside it with a specific pattern of social meaning.

In this respect, many of the fans also discussed ritualising the lead-up to the game and their journey to the arena in ways that heightened the anticipation and tension felt within the spectacle. Such rituals contributed to ‘keying’ the event and highlighting its separation from ‘normal’ daily life:

[Can you tell me about what you do pre-game?]

Darren: I have a cracking routine. So usually there will be a bit of banter [with his friends] over email towards the end of the week, that starts to get us in the mood. Then we meet up usually at Hooters and walk up together, someone will go get some beers and we try and catch them warm up for a bit, not the Panthers, we go and check out the away players, you can get right down to the ice and size them up. Then we head out [of the main arena] for a bit and meet everyone else. We usually come back in when it's filled up a bit, and get our seats. Ya ready then, the place is filling, the music's up, ya've 'ad a few pints and its time to get stuck in to 'em.

For John, Sarah, Simon and Darren, and the other ice hockey fans, the arena was indeed thought of, and experienced as, a unique social space, tied to which was a set of significant, often ritualised practices. The fact that these experiences belong within the ‘stadium’s strong walls’ in a definitive and temporary spatial locality reinforces the separation of ice hockey from the mundane normality of the outside world. And it was by means of their various pre-game rituals that Panthers fans prepared themselves to step inside this otherworldly space, preparing for the spectacular experience that awaited them.

Moral Lessons from the ‘Violent’ Sporting Spectacle

For Goffman (1967), experiences of finding ‘where the action is’ provide the opportunity for significant social expression. Particularly, such “serious action is a means of obtaining some of the moral benefits of heroic conduct without taking quite all of the chance of loss that opportunity for heroism would ordinarily involve” (Goffman, 1967: 262). Importantly, for the fans we spoke with this process was largely articulated around the embodied performances of players, and in particular their propensity for the on-ice ‘violence’ otherwise proscribed from spectators’ lives. They used narratives embedded in the spectacle of the Panthers, and sport more broadly, to account for the enjoyable, unique experience of attending live games, but also

to frame important and meaningful 'truths' concerning their wider lives beyond the stadium. As Geertz (1942 [2005]) shows, these were symbolically powerful spectacles engrained with social stories. In particular, the 'brutal body contact' which was commonly witnessed when watching the sport enabled Panthers supporters to confirm certain moralistic narratives about the (in)appropriateness of different kinds of physical confrontation, brought to life for them on the ice. In this way, John described the following 'classic' fight:

I remember years ago when things with Sheffield⁵ got really heated for a while, I mean more than usual, some of the scraps were a bit close to getting out of hand. Greg Haddon absolutely smacked Corey Beaulieu, I mean he nailed him with a few decent punches and then landed on top of him, the lot. The thing is Greg was like five foot eight or something and Cory is well over six foot and had a rep, especially with Panther fans. And it shows you that it's not the size of the dog in the fight it's the size of the fight in the dog that counts. I've got a video of that game somewhere, I'm tempted to buy a tape player just so I can watch it again.

We asked other fans about this particular fight and it appeared to hold great significance as evidence apparently proving the strength of character which Panthers players displayed in comparison to players who represented their rivals, the Sheffield Steelers. As Gruneau and Whitson (1993: 216) remind us, athletes such as those within John's description "become larger-than-life folk heroes, exemplars of skills and apparent personal qualities that most people can only dream about". Such symbolism can be actively embedded within narrations of social life which the fans find to be of significance.

Other Panthers fans repeated such moralistic lessons in slightly different guises. A central feature within these narratives was that ice hockey was a space *writ large* with clear evidence that there was a 'right' and 'wrong' way to engage in social life. As Mary stated:

Mary: With ice hockey it's the opposite to football 'cus it's a physical game so what you find is that all that stupid diving and cheating stuff doesn't get accepted here. You know what happens if anyone is trying it on like that and the ref doesn't pick it up, someone will get him. It might take a whole season, but the hockey karma comes around eventually and it usually hurts. [laughs]

[Is that just within ice hockey or does stuff work like that away from here?]

Mary: I always tell my friends who've had bad things happen to them that karma will sort it out, I really believe it, but you can't always see it happening, so you see it here more obviously 'cus its a contact game, you can't go and hit your boss anymore if he's a dick to you [laughs], but karma still comes round, it just takes longer nowadays.

The 'social drama' (Turner, 1974) of the Panthers provided symbolic representations that the fans could use to construct moral frameworks (Goffman, 1967). The parents among our sample also discussed using such narratives as educational devices for their children. Here, the spectacular representation of violence was framed as a central feature in helping them to shape their children's understandings of the social world beyond the arena. Brian, a 42 year old quantity surveyor, told us the following after being asked about his children watching fights at ice hockey:

You know what I learned when I started bringin' the kids here? If you wanna teach 'em some life lessons, then this is ya place. The thing is, kids get protected all't while now, wrapped up in cotton wool, my missus won't even let them go out after dark, so they're

not learning 'bout life, they're not learning from actually seeing it. When they're at the Panthers they learn that sometimes you 'ave to stand up for ya self and sometimes it's best to rise above it. It depends on the situation ya see, I can't say to my lads fighting's always bad 'cus they'll always back down then, they need to learn when you have to stand up for ya self. This isn't just in terms of scrapping, I mean standing up for ya self at work an'll.

Brian highlighted the significance of socially-legitimated representations of violence, which he was able to frame in ways that fit the lessons he wished to pass on to his children. Here, the fans' subjective definitions simplified action on the ice into polemic narratives. In this way, Panthers players' roles as fight instigators could be forgotten, 'close fights' could be symbolically reframed, and the material costs of these actions could be largely ignored. Thus, our participants actively constructed and consumed the spectacle in a manner which resonated with their discursive representations of a preferred moral order. The fans were attached to these ideas and found a personal and social significance in them.

In a social world where 'real' violence has increasingly been removed from public spaces and controlled by state monopolies (Elias, 2002 [1939]), the sporting spectacle becomes a 'social drama' (Turner, 1974) which draws on the signifying power of a legitimated, mimetic form of violence in socially-approved ways. Here, we have evidenced some of the ways in which narratives about violence have been invoked as symbolic devices in a world where 'real' violence has become increasingly restricted. However, this 'real' violence has not been fully replaced by its simulacra (Baudrillard, 1995) or the "mere representation" of the spectacle (Debord, 1994 [1967]: 84); rather, it is our contention that the material basis and consequences of these moralistic lessons have been shifted. The actions upon which the spectacle of sports violence depends, and, importantly for the analysis presented here, upon which these fans' narrations are founded, trades upon the bodies of professional ice hockey players. As such, the fans were able to consume the action and confirm their collective moral interpretations of the social world while maintaining a personal distance to the on-ice 'violence'. However, to maintain an unproblematic reading of their role in this process of bodily commodification, the fans had to neutralise the 'really real' (Geertz, 1942 [2005]) consequences of ice hockey's 'brutal body contact'.

The Symbolic Neutralisation of 'Violence'

The ice hockey supporters we interviewed all enjoyed, to varying degrees, the physicality of the sport. Indeed, we witnessed the embodied nature of this enjoyment when we recorded the following note:

The game got particularly physical towards the end and as the intensity increased on the ice there was a parallel increase in the seats. The crowd could see the players were trying to finish their checks and some of them were finishing them with them, raising out of their seats and leaning into the check as Panthers made contact with the [Manchester] Storm players. Every hit was met with a roar of excitement and encouragement from the fans.

A central element of our motivation to explore these experiences was an attempt to investigate how such enjoyment is problematized, or not, with respect to the typical moral framing of 'violent' behaviour outside of sport. With this in mind, we attempted within the interviews to draw attention to the potentially deleterious physical consequences of the sport for the athletes

involved. In effect, we implied that fans' enjoyment could be understood as based on the destruction of players' bodies, as we were interested in how our participants might respond to our attempts to undermine the legitimacy of this entertainment.

It is perhaps unsurprising that all of the ice hockey supporters took issue with our attempts to make parts of 'their sport' problematic⁶. Indeed, our (admittedly sensitive yet purposeful) use of the term 'violence' was often the first point around which the supporters would take issue. At various times the supporters argued that "it's not violent" (James, 23 year old student), "you can't really call it violence in the strict sense" (Eamon, 54 year old accountant), and "there's more to it than that" (Carol, 57 year old teacher). These comments were usually followed by references to the important substantive and subjective difference between the often-similar physical acts that occurred within the sport and in 'real' violence. According to 46 year old mortgage advisor Mickey:

[You don't like street fighting but its OK in ice hockey?]

Mickey: Yeah, no one should condone fighting, it's horrible, but a scrap on the ice isn't a fight in the same way. There's a big difference 'cus it's only sport.

Like Mickey, Sharon, a 37 year old designer, also described what we consider a 'mimetic' dimension to hockey fights. She referred to her understandings of the players' friendships as evidence that the physical actions on the ice did not carry the same meanings or social consequences as those same actions would elsewhere. Interestingly, in this respect she pointed to another apparently 'violent' sport – mixed martial arts – as evidence of a sport where the distinction between 'real' and mimetic violence broke down:

Sharon: You know these guys go drinking together after right? Even the ones who have been at each other all night, it's all part of the game.

[So if it's not real why do you think you enjoy it so much?]

Sharon: I don't wanna watch people fighting for real, Jesus I'd hate that, [my son] James is into the cage fight stuff and I hate it. I don't understand what there is to like about it.

These accounts illustrate the ways in which narratives reflecting on a given sport's mimetic appropriation of risky/thrilling activities can be deployed to mask the damaging outcomes of engaging in such action. In 'keying' (Goffman, 1974) the meaning which is attached to such physicality the fans were able to continue to leverage moral critiques of 'real' violence. This process rested on not only the arbitrary, symbolic differences that they constructed between sports, but also their ability to neutralise our attempts to draw attention to the very similar material consequences of engaging in on-ice fighting and illegitimate physical violence.

Mickey and Sharon both believed 'real' fighting/violence to be reprehensible, but rejected notions that any 'reality' remained within what they witnessed in ice hockey; in this case, the risk to players' bodies arising from the regularity and intensity of body checks, collisions and fights (cf. Biasca, et al, 1995; Daly et al, 1990; Sims, et al, 1987; Tator et al, 1991; Tegner and Lorentzon, 1991) was stripped of its importance in formulating moral criticism. This symbolic construction of ice hockey's mimetic violence, which has much in common with Bredemeier and Shields' (1986) notion of 'bracketed morality,' was ratified by some of our participants using the formal rules and codes of the game. Take the following example:

[So, you don't mind your kids coming and watching ice hockey, but what about the big hits and fights, is that OK?]

John: Yeah of course it is, as long as stuff's within the rules it's OK innit, and it's not often that proper bad stuff happens, and if it does it's a good way of learning 'em wrong from right. Come on, it's fun ain't it, you know that, you can over-analyse things you know. In the end, it's just a good old night out, no harm no foul... Anyway, it's not like you hear these guys say they hate it, you've seen them, they effin' love it, it's a game after all!

Here, John cites the players' apparent enjoyment of legitimate, rule-bound fighting within a fun 'game' as a means of neutralising the tension which is loaded within the question about his children's consumption of spectacularized fighting. And while players might certainly enjoy parts of the game, narratives around such enjoyment and playfulness could then be made available to undermine our attempts to highlight bodily damage. This process of differentiation shaped the meanings that John was able to attach to such action and underpinned the moralistic lessons that he believed his children learned at Panthers games. This discursive device effectively voided any further questions probing the physical and mental effects that players experience throughout and after their careers. Sharon told us something similar, claiming that "these guys know what they're doing, they wear padding and the refs are there to stop anything serious. In the end it's different and that's what's important." This symbolic keying of the 'really real' results of a career in ice hockey enabled Sharon and other fans to neutralise our attempts at problematizing their enjoyment and consumption of a sporting spectacle that ultimately rests on the material damage done to athletes' bodies.

When the interviewees were challenged to explain the serious bodily damage that occurred during ice hockey games, the following response from James was typical:

[What about when it does get real though, you know when someone gets injured?]
James: Yeah, these guys take some lumps, but they get rewarded for it, they do all right [financially]. Anyway they're not being forced remember, no-one is making them. Like in a fight it's not a big guy picking on a small guy, it's usually a fair fight in terms of their size. Injuries happen but that's a part of life isn't it, at least these guys get wages for the risks.

In another recent paper (Matthews and Channon 2016), we draw attention to the philosophical and empirical underpinnings of the use of the term 'violence' in sport settings, particularly highlighting the importance of exploring the degree to which actions in sport might constitute 'violations'. In focusing on the ice hockey players 'volunteering' to be the target of physical damage, and their apparent pay conditions, James voids our attempts to cast athletes as victims⁷ of any such violation – either by other players, or implicitly, by the structures of professional sport which are conducive to the harm previously outlined. In this way, players' injuries were marked as excusable in that they had 'chosen' to play the sport (and in so doing accepted the associated and partially managed risks) for financial gain. This process trivialised and rationalised the threat of serious physical damage and meant that such injuries could be accepted by the interviewees as 'part of the game', while remaining central to their experiences of the spectacle. As such, the deleterious side of the sport could "be neutralized by an insistence that the injury is not wrong in light of the circumstances" (Sykes and Matza, 1957: 668).

A further dimension of this process came forth when the specifics of team rivalry were discussed. Here, the supporters highlighted "appropriate and inappropriate targets" (Sykes and Matza 1957: 668); for example, the opposing team's enforcers⁸ were generally seen as 'fair game'. We observed numerous examples of such players being demonised and dehumanised in this manner by fans. Take the following examples: "you know what, fuck him, he's a cheating

bastard anyway so whatever happens to him is fine” (Gary discussing a Manchester Storm player); “I honestly hate him, I’d love him to get a proper slap and not come back for a while” (Darren on a player who had been instigating fights between other players); “I heard what’s-his-face was injured before we were due to play them and I laughed, great news was that” (Mickey on a key player for Cardiff not being able to play against the Panthers). Furthermore, Lisa’s comments following an earlier suggestion that opposition players “deserved to get hurt” pointed to the athletes’ bodies as justification:

[So it’s OK for the bigger guys to get hurt?]

Lisa: That’s why they are in the game, I’m not condoning people being malicious or doing anything massively beyond the rules, but when its one of the guys who’s like six-foot-two and fifteen stone or whatever, they’re built for it.

Such players were symbolically significant for the fans, as they offered larger-than-life characters whose physicality and/or playing style suited them well for particularly injurious roles within the moral drama that the games represented. As Gruneau and Whitson (1993: 216) have argued, these folk heroes and villains were invested with fans’ “dreams and fantasies”. For players to continue to hold such significance in the unfolding of ice hockey’s spectacle, it was important for the material bodily harm which is embedded within the game to remain largely out of view or neutralised in some form. In the above, Lisa combined the rules of the game, which marked ice hockey’s physicality as different from ‘real’ violence, with the size and physical conditioning of players as a means of negating the seriousness of injury in the sport. Certain players could then be symbolically positioned as being ‘built for’ a certain level of violence, which effectively resisted the implication that the fans’ consumption of ice hockey was a central factor of continuing a system which caused pain, injury and disability to the players. Moreover, the interviewees could further negotiate the tension between their enjoyment and the physical harm that players experienced by attempting to dehumanise the oppositional players as “goons” (Lisa), “thugs” (Gary) or “psychos” (John).

The fans of the Panthers that we spoke to used the substantive difference between mimetic and ‘real’ violence as a means of symbolically neutralizing the very real bodily outcomes of engaging in ice hockey. As such, the belief that the vast majority of ice hockey’s ‘violence’ is different in important ways to that of ‘street’ violence was used as a representational proxy to enable the interviewees to deny the material consequences of the spectacle they consumed. This was a symbolic framing which enabled them to continue to experience the enjoyable emotional landscape of the spectacle, as well as dismiss the implicit moral dilemma of learning life lessons about and through ‘violence’ at the expense of the athletes’ health.

Concluding Remarks

Within the preceding sections we have explored a small set of ice hockey fans’ symbolic framing of a particular sporting spectacle. We have attempted to weave together three themes which help think through the symbolic ordering of social life that fans used to neutralise our attempts to highlight their complicity with processes of commodification of athletes’ bodies. Within the context of the spectacle of sport, our interviewees found compelling enjoyment within, and drew important moral lessons from, the consumption of on-ice, ‘mimetic’ violence. In this way, the athletes were transformed into icons which were largely separated from the damaging bodily realities of ice hockey. The on-ice action, which formed the basis of this symbolism, enabled these men and women to interact with representations of violence otherwise absent

from their own lives, whilst shifting the risk of actual bodily harm inherent within this action onto the objects of their consumption – the ice hockey players.

While it is important to accept that there are differences between the ‘mimetic’ and the ‘real’ in terms of sports-related violence (see Matthews and Channon, 2016), it is our contention that narratives reflecting this important conceptual distinction are employed by fans in ways which effectively invite the dehumanisation of players. Thus, they assist in normalising the commodified world of professional sport where athletes’ bodies and bodily damage are reduced to a site of production and signification. As such, spectators continue to enjoy consuming the ice hockey spectacle regardless of the potential and actual pain, injury and disability suffered by its players, because, in so many of their own words, ‘it’s only sport’.

While this study is only of modest scale, and represents a partial and limited view of the phenomenon we set out to explore, we believe that the findings indicate a vitally important problem which future research could do well to more fully investigate. That athletes’ bodies are subjected to pain and injury as a routine element of many high-performance sports is widely understood by scholars, yet the manner in which fans of such sports make sense of the potential for the harm inherent within them remains relatively under-explored. Indeed, we have presented here a case study which highlights the manner in which interactions of the type described by Geertz (1942 [2005]) as ‘deep play’ can enable a symbolic neutralisation of damaging social phenomena. This present paper therefore invites further study of similar social worlds wherein which such processes are ongoing, and we hope that colleagues interested in doing so will find our current analysis helpful in shaping the future direction of their own. A further hope is that the theoretical tools employed in this paper can have a useful application within research that attempts to explore the symbolic neutralisation of violence beyond the realm of sport.

Notes

- 1 This term is part of Smith’s (1983) four-point typology of sports violence. Specifically, ‘brutal body contact’ refers to actions which may be seen to constitute ‘violence’ in other contexts, and may be particularly injurious in their consequences, but remain legitimised within sporting spaces as normal, appropriate and legally permissible behaviour. See Matthews and Channon (2016) for a discussion of this typology and its enduring usefulness for conceptualising sport-related violence.
- 2 We acknowledge that the concept of mimesis is a contentious one within the scholarship on sports-based violence, wherein the suggestion that acts resulting in serious physical injury are somehow ‘not real’ is met with some scepticism (Dunning and Rojek, 1992; Horne and Jary, 1987; Pringle, 2009). In response to such claims, we argue that defining mimetic violence as ‘not real’ violence, or rather violence without ‘real’ consequences, is overly simplistic and ultimately inaccurate, and do not presuppose that this is the case here. Rather, we hold that mimetic violence involves acts which are more-or-less the same as those involved in what is socially defined as ‘real’ violence, but yet are abstracted from the conditions typical of the production of such violence (e.g., fighting for survival; the need to subdue, maim or kill; etc.) and so therefore they can be understood and experienced differently by those involved – even at times when their physical consequences are identical. For lack of space, we are unable to fully elaborate on the debate over whether the concept of mimesis is useful in conceptually explaining actual acts of sport-based violence (see Atkinson, 2002, Matthews, 2014; Matthews and Channon, 2016; Maguire, 1992), and since this is not the point of our paper, we will not engage more in this discussion here. Instead, we use this term in the present paper to describe the discursive handling of hockey violence observed among our sample.
- 3 Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym by the authors to protect anonymity in this report. Also, all original recordings were deleted following transcription.
- 4 The term ‘Notts’ is a shortened version of Nottinghamshire which was commonly used by the Panthers fans we spoke to.

- 5 The Sheffield Steelers are the Nottingham Panthers' arch-rivals; historically, games between the two sides have often been highly competitive.
- 6 See Matthews and Channon (2016) for a discussion around the importance of attending to the manner in which participants articulate their understanding of engaging in sports 'violence'.
- 7 See Young (1993) for a study which explores victimology in professional sport
- 8 An 'enforcer' in ice hockey is a player whose unofficial role is to intimidate the opposition players through the selective administration of fouls and rough play.

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