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Australian and American Football: A Comparison in Principles

Introduction:

Football is considered by many to be the most demanding collision sport. However, the term football can be used to describe a wide variety of sports throughout the world. For example, football played in the United States is much different than football played in most European and South American countries, a sport American's have termed soccer. Soccer, however, would not be considered a collision sport by most Americans. Australia is the only other country in the world that plays a version of football much different than soccer. Even though football in the United States and football in Australia are both collision sports, the sports differ greatly. The first disparity is in the rules and structure of the two sports. The second major difference is in the inner workings of the two sports, as in management, salary caps, disciplinary actions, etc. The third difference lies in the way the two sports interact with their fans and how they influence the culture of their countries. The AFL, through its presentation, is much more involved with and more appreciative of its fans, unlike that of the NFL, which puts money and player support above support of its fans. Australian football (footy) bases itself on principles that put the fan first, whereas American football (NFL) is focused on making money rather than supporting the wishes of its fans.

Technical Differences: Rules and Regulations

There are many major differences between Australian Football and American Football. First, American Football is played on a 100-yard by 45-yard rectangular field. Each team fields 11 players from its squad of 80 players (NFL). Each game is made up of four twenty minute quarters and the clock can be stopped for a variety of reasons: penalties, incomplete passes, and rule infractions to name a few. Each team is given the ball for four possessions to gain at least ten yards. If they do so, they are given another four downs, or possessions, to go another ten yards. The main goal is to go the full length of the field, reaching the end zone and scoring a touchdown. Upon scoring a touchdown the team receives six points and is allowed an attempt at scoring extra points. The team can also receive points for kicking the ball through two posts behind the end zone called the 'goal posts.' If they cannot take the ball in for a touchdown, they may decide to kick the ball through the goal posts for three points. After scoring a touchdown, the team can go for two points by running another play from the 2.5 yard-line or by kicking the ball through the goal posts for one point. If one team fails to go ten yards in four downs, they give the ball to the other team who will attempt the same task. The National Football League consists of 32 teams, broken into two conferences, the NFC and AFC. The top eight teams from each conference are taken into the playoffs, and the top one from each conference play in the championship game, the Super Bowl.

The Australian footy field, on the other hand, does not regulate the size of its fields, which can vary anywhere from 164 yards to 202 yards in length and anywhere from 142 yards to 164 yards in width. An Australian footy team fields eighteen players

of its 22 player squad. Much like a game in the NFL, each footy game consists of four 20 minute quarters but, unlike American football, the clock constantly runs. Because there are no stoppages of time, coaches are forced to use a runner to relay messages onto the field. The runner runs from the sideline to whatever player the coach wants to address and gives him the message. Rather than the two posts in an NFL game, in Australian football there are four posts at each end of the field. The outside posts are called the behind posts and the two inner posts are called the goal posts. Goals are worth six points, while behinds are worth only one. Points are scored when the ball is kicked between the goalposts without being touched. The major difference between this action and kicking a field goal in the NFL, is that field goals are held by one player and kicked by another, whereas goals in the AFL are kicked while a player is moving. The Australian footy league is made up of sixteen teams, while the top eight with the most points and percentage at the end of the season go into the playoffs, and the last two teams play in the AFL Coca-Cola Grand Final to decide who wins the AFL Premiership.

Inside the game: the Front Office:

When an American football fan turns on sporting news channels in the United States, he or she is bombarded with player salaries and decisions on how players are being punished for acts deemed unsportsmanlike, making much of this information common knowledge. This is related to the fact that professional football players in the United States have astonishing salaries and the decisions for broken rules and, occasionally, broken laws are so astonishing and unpredictable that many Americans become entertained by them. However, the blame for these ridiculous salaries and

decisions cannot be put on the players themselves; the laws governing salary caps and disciplinary actions are to blame.

In the NFL, the teams are given a maximum salary cap of \$71.101 million dollars (ESPN). The salary cap, however, is only applied to the first fifty-two players signed by the team, making the salary cap substantially higher. The average salary of an American football player is atrocious when compared to the salaries of players in the AFL. In the AFL, the average salary cap is A\$4.75 million (Official). The average salary of player in the Australian Footy league is around 125,000 Australian dollars (roughly \$65,000), whereas the lowest a player got paid in the NFL last year is approximately \$250,000.

Similar to their respective salary caps, when it comes to punishment, the two leagues differ greatly. For example, lets take a player who was whistled for leading with an elbow when making a tackle in a game between Sydney and Melbourne in 1999 (Channel 7). The player's punishment was a four game suspension without pay, a just punishment for a vicious incident. To put this into perspective, take the NFL's Cleveland Brown's tackle Leroy Brown and an incident from two years ago involving an umpire and himself. After being called for a violation by a referee and accidentally being hit with the flag that the referee throws to signal a violation, Brown ran over and pushed the referee to the ground and yelled obscenities at him in the middle of the field. Claiming that he thought that the referee threw the flag viciously at him, Brown received a one-week suspension and a \$25,000 fine, representing only a small portion of his 3 million dollar contract for that year.

The differences in the decisions made in response to these unsportsmanlike actions can be found in the front offices of the two leagues. In the AFL, there is a

tribunal that oversees instances like these. At the end of the week, players that have been reported by an umpire for striking, kicking, tripping, rough play, time-wasting, and even rough language, are taken before the tribunal, a group of six league officials representing the league. The tribunal decides, through video and testimony, whether or not the act deserves a suspension, fine or both (Official). In the NFL, however, one man handles all player infractions, the Commissioner of Player Infractions, Michael Stanley (NFL). His decision, although official and final, is influenced directly by the Players' Union, a group that represents the players and protects their rights, as decided upon in contracts between the NFL and the Union. Therefore, every instance of an infraction becomes either a court case or heated argument between the Union and the Commissioner. This not only leads to an inefficient system, but also to players being disciplined with actions that do not fit the severity of their infractions. Having one person deal with all instances of broken rules and infractions is inefficient in itself. However, the system becomes a travesty when adding the ability of players to directly influence decisions on their own rule violations

The Relationship between Sport and Fan:

With the NFL's focus on monetary value and its lack of player policies, there is little room for one to argue that it professional football in America is centered around the fan. Though millions of fans watch American Gridiron football and support their favorite teams, the teams or the NFL as a whole does not show a lot of respect for the common fan. A comparison of ticket sales in the United States and Australia support this statement. In America, ticket sales have risen over the last year from an average of \$40 to \$50. This is more than a twenty percent increase for stadiums nation-wide (NFL.com).

Most of this money directly contributes to player acquisitions throughout the season, a price that could be lowered if player's salaries were not so extraordinary.

Ticket prices in Australia are much more fan-friendly. In Sydney, the average adult fan pays fourteen Australian dollars to get a seat in an AFL stadium (Official). While these ticket prices did rise from the previous year, the ticket price does include the new GST tax (a federal tax on all purchases), a tax league has no control over. Also, in Melbourne, Australia, fans under the age of six get in free of charge, an attempt by the AFL to involve Australian youth in their sports society. In America, there is no discount for age, whether it is for young children or senior citizens.

Ticket prices, however, extend to the amount people are willing to pay to watch a live sporting event. In the United States there is no reason to change the price of tickets, as fans are willing to pay the current ticket price. As seen throughout the league, waiting lists for season tickets can span several years or even a decade. Therefore, through the common law of supply and demand, there is nothing pushing the front offices of NFL teams to lower ticket prices. It is interesting however to include the fact that Australian ticket prices do not seem to be rising at an exponential rate to meet prices close to those in America. Interestingly enough, Australian fans seem to receive more entertainment for their money.

The experience that a fan gets for coming to an AFL stadium also is better than the experience felt when a fan enters an NFL stadium. NFL stadiums are gigantic buildings that hold over 75,000 people on average (NFL.com). The stadiums are so big that one does not feel connected to the athletes on the field, as even the front row is about forty feet away from the actual in-bound playing field and raised about twenty feet off of

the ground behind a barricade. Most fans have to look to the large screen televisions located at opposite ends of the stadium to actually follow what is going on. American stadiums are not constructed to involve the fan or connect him or her to the players on the field.

Conclusion:

The Australian footy league is an obviously efficient and fan-focused sport. Their focus on the fan is, however, in danger. As with American sports, Australian footy has become overloaded with corporate sponsors. For example, in Melbourne's Colonial Stadium there are promotional signs for everything from local television stations to fast food restaurants and beverage companies. McDonalds and Coca-Cola labels are written on all memorabilia from AFL games, and direct media coverage of the national sport has risen drastically over the last few years. With this direct corporate sponsorship comes corruption and greed. With an increase in team capital, through either corporate sponsorship or media coverage comes many new problems. For example, footy players may believe that they should receive a larger portion of this newly found funding. As more and more money is allocated, more money will become necessary, almost always ending in the increase in ticket prices.

However, if the Australian Footy League and its front office executives stick with their policies and connection to the community, problems will be avoided and its preeminence preserved. As the AFL Commercial Operations Department stated "the AFL does not seek to use this support from corporate sponsors as just a means of raising revenue...they help to keep admittance prices within reach for football fans and enhance

our involvement in the community” (AFL). They go on to say “we are mindful of our sponsors and have strict rules to keep them away from teams, players, and specific sectors of the AFL...we are here to protect and preserve the game of footy” (AFL). While this attitude may not keep corporations from poisoning the sport forever, their foresight will help to keep Australian football from any current danger. Australian football is a game that originated for the fan and will hopefully stay as fan-friendly as it is now.

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