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*Article*

# Novel Insights into Sports History: Croatian-Australian Ultras in Australian Football

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to explore particular dynamics of a handful of past articles and book chapters that managed to illuminate contexts within sport that ultimately transcend it in certain ways. John Hughson published five articles/chapters on the Bad Blue Boys ultras that followed a club called Sydney Croatia in Australia's now defunct National Soccer League. The present author wrote several articles about the MCF (Melbourne Croatia Fans), the ultras of the sister club of Sydney Croatia known as Melbourne Knights (originally Melbourne Croatia). We observe here two groups of young Croatian-Australian men, part of the Diaspora of Croatians that left the country, mostly in the communist era and afterwards, that aim to construct workable hybrid identities for themselves in an Anglo-majority nation on the other side of the globe. They fight on two fronts--against an Anglo, corporate-style administration that effectively bans their clubs for reasons of ethnicity from the new national-league; and against the Serbian youth that often live in the adjacent or nearby suburbs and follow Serbian-origin clubs.

**Keywords:** Croatian diaspora; Croatian nationalism; Melbourne knights; national soccer league

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore particular dynamics of a handful of past articles and book chapters that managed to illuminate contexts within sport that ultimately transcend it in certain ways. John Hughson (1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2000, 2002) published five articles/chapters on the Bad Blue Boys ultras that followed a club called Sydney Croatia in Australia's now defunct National Soccer League (NSL). The present author wrote several articles about the MCF (Melbourne Croatia Fans), the ultras at the sister club of Sydney Croatia known as Melbourne Knights (originally Melbourne Croatia) (James, Tolliday, and Walsh 2011; James, Walsh, Mustata, and Bonaci 2012; James and Walsh 2018; James 2023). We observe here two groups of Croatian-Australian young men, part of the Diaspora of Croatians that left the country, mostly in the communist era and afterwards, that aim to construct workable hybrid identities for themselves in an Anglo-majority nation on the other side of the globe. Loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church and the Croatian football clubs are the inherited wisdom of the Old World that is romantically and self-consciously adopted and honoured against all detractors (Hughson 1997b, 255; Hay 1998, 55). A nationalistic Croatian identity takes on reified, heavily romanticized form that partially forgets the events after Croatian independence, a willful forgetting, a little bit like Glasgow Celtic fans who increasingly sing songs in support of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) of the Troubles era pre-the triumph of the Peace Process. The Peace Process, and the reversion to democracy after the Balkans wars of the 1990s, both seem to give licence to old dreams and enmities, now conducted largely in symbolic forms as acts of symbolic resistance to whatever forces may be threatening to oppress in any particular case. The safer modern situations put some distance between us and the past, but, in the Croatian-Australian case, magnified by geographic distance as well as by time, the ritualized search for meaning and rebellion seems to ignore modern developments (and certain past developments too) in the search for the more visceral and unsettling.

This case is an example of where this type of sports history or sport sociology goes way beyond sport. This is contrary to the prevailing trend where the sports academics from the business schools

have increasingly begun to challenge the sociology and cultural studies researchers for control of the storyline. The business school approach tends to define the supporters as consumers and as part of the club business model and, in the English Premier League, some supporters are beginning to use the terms of the business world among themselves in fan discourse. The work on the Croatian supporters in Australia highlights the life struggles of the ultras, mostly lads in their late teens and twenties, and, as mentioned, the sports stadium is simply one place where they tend to congregate on certain days of the week. Their struggles there tend to be symptomatic of their wider struggles in an Anglo-dominated society on the other side of the world where, when the Croatians first arrived, they were already cast into the subject position (Gordon 1980, 244-245; Foucault 1994/1998, 222, 1994/2000, 331, 336; Weeks 2003, 56, 65) of strange interlopers--non-Anglo, and hence irredeemably foreign and European, with all the cultural baggage and ideological misconceptions that were bound up with that.

Initially, the new immigrants from the Baltic states and Eastern Europe had to work for two years on large-scale government projects such as the Snowy Hydro Scheme (McHugh 1995; Hollinsworth 1998, 234). Between 1947 and 1954, 170,000 displaced persons arrived in Australia and took up employment in construction and manufacturing (Appleyard 1964, 46; Hollinsworth 1998, 234) and many, if not the majority, held anticommunist views (Hollinsworth 1998, 234).<sup>1</sup> Especially in the early years of the community, the Croatian Diaspora had very little influence and very little ability to speak and be listened to as they had limited English-language skills (Hay 1998, 57) and worked in manufacturing jobs in the western suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney (Hollinsworth 1998, 225). They were vulnerable to exploitation and abuse from both mainstream and small employers. This is what Foucault means by a "subject position" with little or no authority to speak according to the dominant discourses and practices of the time. Only at the Croatian football clubs could men find welcome and community as well as jobs and marriage partners (Hay 1998, 55). Although the situation has changed somewhat, at least in terms of the ultras' ability to speak English and operate within mainstream society, their location in the working-class areas of the major cities and their social-classification as Croatian and Eastern European still limits their ability to influence events including the ability to be heard and seen on important issues such as national-league entry (Hughson 1997a, 168, 171). Then, as now, they were perceived as secretive, clannish, quasi-criminal, overly religious, volatile, and passionate (Hughson 1997a 171, 2000, 20) and these raw and strange passions were seen and perceived to be fully displayed and unleashed at "their" football stadiums, those unwelcoming cauldrons for Anglos who couldn't speak the language or understand the intricacies of Balkans politics.

The better-educated, middle-class Croatian émigrés created a new dynamic and sense of identity but they tended to be more assimilated into the Anglo world. Hughson (1997b, 242, 257) talked of the "old Cro builder" as a kind of stereotypical cultural icon for the BBB lads, a working-class figure that never could or want to assimilate. This discourse led to a certain tension emerging between the middle-class Croatians that took over Sydney Croatia in the 1990s and the ultras (Hughson 1997b, 253-254). When the new managers changed the club name to Sydney United, the ultras "kept ethnicity in on the sly" (that should really read "sectarianism") (Hughson 1997a, 175, 1997b, 255) by interpreting the U in United to be a reference to the Ustaše. The middle-class Croatians lacked the

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<sup>1</sup>. The countries of the former Yugoslavia provided a relatively large number of the new post-War immigrants. Among the top-ten birthplaces of overseas-born Australians, there were 145,591 persons from the former Yugoslavia in 1976 (fourth) compared to 161,064 in 1991 (still fourth) (Hollinsworth 1998, 221). In terms of arrivals, there were 3,931 persons from the former Yugoslavia who arrived in 1975 (second) compared to 6,165 in 1995 (third) (Hollinsworth 1998, 221). The sharp rise is largely due to war in the Balkans and these arrivals increased crowd numbers and strengthened the playing squads at Sydney and Melbourne Croatia.

hard nationalistic edge, that was both symbolic and practical, valued by the working-class Croatian lads who turned to it for rallying purposes.

The research articles and book chapters of this type are also interesting and important, beyond the realms of sport and sport history, because they illustrate types of Diaspora masculinity that are freely chosen and acted out (Connell 1995, 2000, 2007; Butler 1990/1999, 1991, 2002, 2024), but which are incomprehensible or seriously off-putting (if not offensive) for Anglo-Australians and others. It is not just the brash assertion of a non-Anglo identity but the willed acting out of this identity, with the clear implication that it is important and vital, if not primary (for them). There is no apparent desire or willingness to grow out of it, to put it to one side, or to repent of it in favour of adopting Anglo-Australian values and behavioural norms.

The next section will briefly outline background factors and following this is a Methods section. Then we look at the day the Serbian club, Springvale White Eagles, visited Somers Street stadium, followed by a section utilizing Michel Foucault's theory on power-knowledge. The fifth and sixth sections look at the MCF's views relating to Europe and Australian mainstream organizations respectively. A Discussion section explores why this research contributes novel insights to sport history.

## 2. Background

While the Scots in Australia and elsewhere were seen as clannish and the Irish as emotional and passionate followers of an emotional and passionate religion, in Australia, they were integrated into the mainstream at various stages, the Scots first and the Irish later. By the 1950s, when the mainland Europeans arrived in larger numbers, this was a further spur to work towards the integration of the Irish. The British and Irish immigrants, by and large, and especially by the second half of the twentieth century, had marshalled together under the banner of being Australians (of "Anglo-Celtic stock"). The assumption and normative expectation was that hostilities and enmities from the Old World, whether they be religious or political or both, were to be put to one side and forgotten in the interests of nation-building (Hughson 1997a, 173; Hay 1998, 53, 56). By and large, with a few exceptions here and there, these dictates, somewhat surprisingly perhaps in hindsight, were adhered to and the white Australians now saw themselves primarily *as Australians* rather than British, Irish, English, Welsh or Scottish. The Italians had no "natural" "ethnic" rival in Australia and hence they were largely left alone although generally still regarded as Other. By contrast, the Croatians, Serbians, and Macedonians (there were also some that self-identified as Yugoslavs) tended to keep these identities as primary and this perspective was anathema to many Anglo-Australians (Hay 1998, 53). The Greek Macedonian teams, such as Heidelberg United Alexander in Melbourne, had a further conflict with the teams associated with what is now is in Europe independent North Macedonia (Hughson 1997a, 174).

The Croatians at the BBB and MCF took on Australian identity only instrumentally at the times and places of their own choosing (Hughson 1999, 22). They maintained a largely *rights-based* discourse on the basis of their Australian citizenship (Hughson 1997a, 168, 169, 179). While they did make claims upon, and to some extent valued, their Australian citizenship, culturally they saw themselves as distinct from the Anglos. In actual fact, their Croatian identity was generally more meaningful to them and they saw it as highly culturally significant and relevant (Hughson 1999, 22). They self-identified with the political and ethnic struggles in the Balkans and in no way did the majority ever accept the Anglo-Australian concept that Old World struggles should be put to one side, or put to bed, once in Australia.

## 3. Materials and Methods

The researcher wanted to investigate the reactions of traditional ethnic-based former National Soccer League (NSL) clubs to the current situation in the sport as well as their opinions on the future of the sport and their own club's future. He sent an email to the full collection of those former NSL



clubs that had an ethnic identity inviting them to participate in the research. Only Melbourne Knights responded and so he journeyed to Melbourne from Queensland in February 2010 to interview the then president of Melbourne Knights, Ange Cimera. He took detailed shorthand notes but this 16 February 2010 interview was not audio or video-recorded. It was a quiet weekday out-of-season and hence a long and detailed discussion was possible. The interview length was 1 hour, 40 minutes. Because only Melbourne Knights responded, the researcher chose to reorient the topic so as to focus only on the Knights.

After this trip, he decided that he needed more primary data and began to talk online with Ange's daughter, Melinda Cimera, who was the club secretary. In January 2011 he revisited Somers Street stadium to interview Melinda. As her main day job was as a school-teacher he had to wait until the school holidays. On that day, he interviewed Melinda in the boardroom of the club. Also seated around the table was a young man who said nothing and looked taciturn. As the researcher was on the club premises, and grateful for the opportunity to interview people from the club, he made no comment. At the end of the interview, he asked Melinda whether he could interview members of the MCF ultras. Then the same young man who had been present for the first half of the interview, Pave Jusup, was brought back into the room. Pave and the researcher were joined by Kova and we toured the club including the dressing room before conducting a group interview at the empty Batcave Social Club located under the grandstand. The researcher was offered a bottle of Croatian beer from the fridge and the atmosphere became jovial as the ultras culture began to take hold. Despite the humour, sarcasm, and irony of the interview discourse, many serious points were made, often buried somewhat within the humour. At this interview the researcher also made detailed shorthand notes, and made a consistent effort to attribute the right comments to the right person. He had to write quickly as the interaction and banter often came at a fast and furious pace and a chain of conversation would appear incoherent later if a relevant line was left out. Pave, then aged 22, chose to use his real name, while Kova, then aged 26, chose to be referred to only via his nickname Kova. In later years, Pave would become vice-president and then president of the football club.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the interview, Kova drove the researcher back the considerable distance to his hotel accommodation in Broadmeadows in the far northern suburbs of Melbourne, and the car conversation centred on football topics.

In terms of participant-observation, the researcher attended three or four Knights home games at Somers Street in the seasons 2010, 2011, and 2012. He stood with the MCF on the terraces on the eastern side of the stadium underneath the small bar which was sometimes manned by Pave and/or Kova. He was able to interact with and ask a few questions of Pave and Kova, although their main attention was devoted towards serving customers.

Melinda Cimera gave the author in January 2011 the mobile phone number of the then president of Sydney United (formerly Sydney Croatia) Eddie Krnčević. When the researcher phoned him and requested an interview for the research project, he declined on the grounds that his views were already on the public record. Using mixed metaphors, he also said that he wanted to "keep his head down" from now on and "avoid making waves". When the researcher mentioned this to his study participants at Melbourne Knights, they rationalized the refusal in terms of the Sydney United president having been co-opted on to various committees and projects of the regulatory body and hence, compared to the Melbourne Knights president, he had more incentives to keep quiet about any dissatisfaction with the structure of football.

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<sup>2</sup>. Pave Jusup was president of Melbourne Knights from 2018-2023.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *The Day the Serbian Club Springvale White Eagles Visited Somers Street*

At the same time, a certain kind of ironic detachment was sometimes possible as when, for example, Pave Jusup (a key MCF leader) told me at a match at Melbourne Knights' Somers Street stadium in 2011 or 2012 that the Serbian supporters of the Serbian club (Springvale White Eagles) were not in attendance in the capacity or subject position of ultras, but were seated quietly with their parents in the grandstand. Whether that was a literally true comment or not on the day in question, Pave had a clearly apparent glee as he felt that the Serbians had admitted publicly to a lack of bravery in not arriving in the capacity of ultras. They were there, but they were *incognito*, as it were, almost in hiding, so as to avoid troubles at the home ground of their rivals, as it were. But there was also a sense where Pave was admiring their dedication as fans and their family loyalties. In the presence of their parents, they were expected to engage in good behaviour and this was seen as a cultural trait and expectation that the Croatians also shared. Hence, Pave rejoiced in the clear moral victory while grudgingly awarding the Serbians some respect in at least turning up with their parents. They had shown loyalty to their club, the sport, and to their parents, all of which were seen as admirable cultural traits (Hughson 1999, 21). Perhaps it was the ultras culture and Anglo-Australian cultural influences (everyone will be influenced, to some extent, by the dominant culture of the country) that provided Pave with the right to be ironic and to look at the Serbians with a kind of practiced disdain, mixed in this case, interestingly enough, with an element of respect. Turning up with parents could be seen as a sign of weakness, in the working-class masculine culture--and hence they were facilitating the Croatians' moral victory openly, leading to Pave's mockery.

Sports historian Roy Hay (1998, 2001) has claimed that the Croatian clubs in Melbourne and Sydney have done all that they could have done over the years to calm down the more extreme elements in their support. Hay (2001, 79) quotes Mosely (1994, 35-36) approvingly when he writes that the Ustaše did not control Sydney Croatia. Ustaše elements existed within the supporter base but never dictated club direction or policy and, as, Mosely says, they were only "tolerated on match day". For Hay (1998, 61), to view the Croatian soccer clubs as primarily political in the 1950s risks reading the post-1970s situation on to an earlier, simpler time. Furthermore, Hay (2001, 88, 90) argues that crowd violence at matches has usually been due to personality-based or regional tensions rather than being a simple playing out or acting out of animosities exported from the Balkans (James 2023). This is an important point that has not been emphasized enough. By the 1990s, the Australian football administrators had taken a dislike to the two Croatian clubs and they were not made welcome when invitations were opened to participate in the new A-League that was to replace the NSL in 2005. Hughson (1997b, 247) has expressed concern about fascist tendencies within the clubs' supporter bases including within the BBB during the early and mid-1990s. Backed by the influx of fresh immigrants fleeing the wars in the Balkans, the 1990s were a time of success on- and off-the-field for both Croatian clubs as crowds soared and teams became more ethnically Croat.<sup>3</sup> This was the same time that the Italian and Greek teams were being diluted as their populations dwindled in the face of declining immigration rates. The newfound achievements and successes of the two Croatian clubs added to the jealousies and anxieties surrounding them. Their Croatian nationalism increased in strength and abrasiveness as new immigrants blended in with second- and third-generation people. An important event in this regard occurred in the 2000-2001 NSL season when Perth Glory's striker

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<sup>3</sup>. This was probably due in part to rising ethnic nationalism. For example, the Sydney United team of 13 October 1996 was as follows: Zeljko Kalac, Joe Vrkic (sent off 76), Mark Bacic, Tony Popovic, Chad Gibson (Damir Cvetko 62), Robert Enes, Ante Moric (Velimir Kupresak 83), Paul Bilokapic, David Zdrilic, Kresimir Marusic, Ante Milicic (Esamie n.d.).

of Serbian descent, Slobodan “Bobby” Despotovski, gave a three-fingered Serbian salute to the Croatian fans behind the goal at Somers Street. In retaliation, Croatian fans angrily assembled around the Perth Glory team bus after the game. Despotovski avoided substantial criticism for the incident as the new club Perth Glory, not aligned to any particular ethnicity, was drawing big crowds and seen as a team for the future. By contrast, Melbourne Knights was painted as a team of the past, displaying outdated and “foreign” sectarian attitudes and unacceptable “European-style” violence. The abrasive approach of the then president, Harry **Mrksa**, must have been seen as an own-goal in hindsight. This event contributed to a general hardening of attitudes from regulators and some Anglo-Australians towards the “ethnic clubs” in general and the two Croatian clubs in particular. Although it is true that Despotovski largely escaped blame, the Anglo-Australian regulators and general public were able to portray the incident as reflecting the Eastern Europeans’ unwillingness to let go of “foreign identifications and enmities” once they moved to Australia. This narrative was important to the right-wing but those who might have otherwise been supportive, such as the local left-wing, were alarmed by scenes from Europe of Nazi salutes and ethnic war. While I argue that any right-wing fan-culture is more an expression of opposition to the Communist regime in Yugoslavia than anything more general, it is easier for people to seize upon signs to the contrary and this then gets wrapped up in more general anti-immigration discourses.

In the 1990s, the club officially adopted the “Knights” name, which is an acronym for *Klub Nogometa i Gdje Hrvati Takmice Srcem* (meaning: football club and where Croatians battle with their heart) (Gorman 2014). This acronym shows the amazing skill and ingenuity of the Croatians in bringing ethnicity into the league on the sly during a period when names of foreign countries were not permitted to be inserted into club names (Hughson 1997a, 170, 2000, 8).

#### 4.2. Foucault and Power-Knowledge

Based on Michel Foucault’s (1975/1977, 1980, 1994/2000) idea of power-knowledge, we can look at the power and meaning evident within discourses and practices, and their location within physical space, at Somers Street stadium and the broader society. The average Melbourne Knights home crowd now might be one thousand people or fewer, increasing for derby matches or special games. Back in the NSL era (1984-2004), home crowds were four to eight thousand.

The older, more respectable fans sit in the grandstand, the Mark Viduka Stand, on the western side of the stadium. Based on my participant-observation, the other three sides are concrete terracing and the 60 or 70 MCF members stand on the terraces on the outer wing in front of the refreshment stand/bar. The MCF members are carefully positioned in space with the 10 or 12 younger teenagers on lower steps and the older ones higher up near the bar. They are of drinking age and so their position higher up the terrace signifies higher status (which the right to drink symbolizes and reinforces) and grants them the spatial location to control the teenagers via the regulatory gaze. A clear two or three unoccupied concrete steps is a no-man’s land between the territory occupied by the groups. The remainder of the terracing is largely empty although some older fans stand at the back in the centre of the outer wing, including a minority (possibly 10%) of Anglo-origin fans who are leftovers from the NSL era. In Driver’s (1985, 428) words:

The disciplines become techniques for use in power relationships of various kinds. For example, [Foucault] identifies a new architectural discourse concentrating not on display but on control. Hospitals become machines to ensure better observation, treatment, and ventilation. Furthermore, this “observation” was at the root of a “normalising” judgment which distributed individuals according to their aptitudes and conduct, pressuring them to conform. The medical or educational examination becomes a technique for placing individuals along a whole range of degrees of normality.

The regulatory gaze also extends across the field from the grandstand. At one home game, probably the game against Springvale White Eagles, I observed the teenagers singing political chants relating to homeland conflicts and the then club president Ange Cimeria walked over to them and stood next to them in the second half—his manner was friendly and benevolently paternal, but there

was also a clear aspect of surveillance and control and the wish to minimize “deviancy”. As Driver (1985, 429) goes on to explain based on his understanding of Foucault’s (1975/1977) most famous book *Discipline and Punish*:

A complete panoply of disciplinary techniques was employed in Bentham’s Panopticon scheme—a plan for a model prison institution proposed at the end of the eighteenth century—and Foucault designates the discourse from which it emerges as “panopticism”. In ideal form, this represents a segmented space-time, supervised continuously and at every point, in which power is exercised without division and in which each individual is constantly distributed, located, and examined; all this in place of a haunting memory of “contagions”—plague, crime, vagabondage, rebellion, disorder. At the heart of the Panopticon is the optical-mechanical technique whereby the inmates, in their cells at the periphery of a circular building, can be observed by an observer they cannot see; they are always, potentially, under the gaze of the prison governor.

In our case, the football stadium stands in for the prison, but the general points of the analysis continue to apply. In terms of “policing”, any violence or disruptive behaviour at games featuring Central or Eastern European clubs tends to get highlighted in the media as examples of Central/Eastern European politics and passion, neither of which are seen as desirable and both of which are feared. As Driver (1985, 429) explains, “The carceral discourse, for Foucault, describes both the penitentiary technique and the production of the delinquent.” In fact, “The disciplines themselves are described as ‘small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion’ (DP, page 139)” (Driver 1985, 430). So the Anglo-Australian mainstream also “polices” events within the stadium but from a distance both in space and time. That distance does not reduce its power, but instead the Anglo figures take on spectral form, haunting the inhabitants of the stadium with the threats of future condemnation ringing in their ears. Hence “policing” within the stadium is largely based on Croatian cultural hegemony while outside it comes mostly from Anglo-Australian regulators, journalists, football fans, and assorted others, including Members of Parliament trying to spread moral panic. The difference between the situation in the Balkans and Australia is that any moral panic in the Balkans centers on “disruptive ultras” whereas in Australia it centers on “disruptive Eastern European ultras”, so the stigmatization based on class is augmented by stigmatization based on race/ethnicity, although most or nearly all of the MCF are Australian citizens. In other social and institutional contexts, they may function as part of a “mainstream”, and their adaptability and strategic ability to stand out or fit in, as they so wish, points to a kind of rival power based on both collectivist cultural and religious values from Croatia and exposure to Western European human rights discourses. These two things, mixed with an eternal sense of grievance, have proved to be quite powerful, as the case of Glasgow Celtic in Glasgow indicates where, arguably, the Unionist/British discourse of Rangers fans has been eclipsed by the rebel, anti-Unionist, and Republican (in both the Irish and Scottish senses) discourse of Celtic fans as a source of social power, even in elite realms of society, in the twenty-first century. The MCF, for its part, also has a good relationship with the club, with Pave going on to become club president, which allows for its power-knowledge to be extended somewhat throughout stadium space, online space, and beyond. But their immigrant status, race/ethnicity, location mostly in Melbourne’s working-class western suburbs and the satellite city of Geelong, puts limitations upon that power (Hughson 1997a, 168). The club and its administrators are affected by most of these factors too.

#### 4.3. *The MCF and Their Views on Europe and European Communities*

My understanding of the ideology of the MCF, as at 2011, was gained from interviews and conversations with Pave Jusup and Kova as well as an intensive study of online fan forums.

We need to return to the last week of the 1989 NSL season and to an obscure ground in suburban Melbourne. The match in question was Melbourne Croatia versus Footscray JUST (Jugoslav United Soccer Team). Footscray JUST, during this particular season known as Melbourne City JUST, was the club widely understood as being supported by the Yugoslav government and those émigrés who saw themselves primarily as Yugoslavs. Their official sponsor was the national airline of Yugoslavia.



Their archrival was Melbourne Croatia, the club that drew its support primarily from the local community of anticomunist, Croatian nationalist émigrés. They would freely fly the red-and-white checked Croatian coat-of-arms and proudly use the club name Croatia (the Melbourne Knights name came later).<sup>4</sup> Hence, the tension in the Balkans was being literally played out in a nondescript Melbourne stadium thousands of kilometres away from Europe. The émigrés disliked the communist regime and the MCF adopted a stylized and exaggerated form of this ideology, inherited as it were from parents and grandparents (Hay 1998, 54, 2001, 79; Hughson 1999, 21-22).

At this game, JUST, if they lost, would be relegated from the NSL into the Victorian State League (Hay 2001, 88). The YouTube highlights video shows a crowd of five thousand people witnessing Melbourne Croatia score two goals to win the game 2-0 (Anonymous n.d.; Straza41 n.d.; Stock, Punshon, and Howe 2023). The game was played as a double-header at Middle Park, the home of South Melbourne (Anonymous n.d.; Stock, Punshon, and Howe 2023). The scorers were Željko Adžić in the 52nd minute and Joe Čaleta in the 77th minute (Anonymous n.d.; Stock, Punshon, and Howe 2023). In the lead-up to the second goal, the flamboyant dreadlocked black striker Francis Awaritefe skillfully tapped the ball over to his left, at close to a ninety-degree angle, for Čaleta to score, right in front of the Croatia fans (Straza41 n.d.). JUST dropped down into the bottom two, was relegated and never recovered from the blow, disbanding a year later (Anonymous n.d.). It is interesting how this game and even the result mirrored political events in the Balkans with Croatia declaring its independence in 1991.

The ideology of the MCF was resolutely anticomunist, but this should be seen as a particular historical position relative to the Yugoslav communist party. It does not mean, by inference, that the members were right-wing in their everyday lives outside of football contexts. I have seen members wearing merchandise of the left-wing Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and, due to the Mark Viduka connection at the time, Celtic Football Club merchandise. Celtic is known worldwide as a left-wing club and one of the most left-wing in the world alongside St Pauli and several others. This would seem to indicate that the members have a variety of attitudes that tend to include both left-wing and right-wing elements.

While Ante Pavelić (1889-1959) was something of an icon figure for the ultras and the club supporters in general (Hughson 1997b, 247, 2000, 12), Pave Jusup declares that his appeal was that he was the last leader of an independent Croatia prior to the 1990s rather than fascism. While some might view this position as disingenuous, Pavelić was the most obvious person who could be used as a symbolic and ideological counterweight to Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980), whose framed picture to this day still allegedly hangs behind the bar at Perth procommunist club Spearwood Dalmatinac (which merged with Cockburn United to form Cockburn City).

Pave and others tended to have an ideology that was essentialized and somewhat frozen in time, at points in the 1950s and the 1990s. They did not believe or acknowledge that there were people who were sincere communists or sincere Yugoslavs—they saw these people as Serbians in disguise and hence dishonest. Hence, they saw the supporters of JUST as Serbians by another name, and, after the fall of communism in the Balkans, they switched their rivalry over to Serbian clubs such as Springvale White Eagles and Bonnyrigg White Eagles. Their ideological system did not try to comprehend that the Tito regime in Yugoslavia had support, and that that support varied, in multiple often

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4. During the communist era in Croatia, the use of the checkerboard symbol was restricted. The Socialist Republic of Croatia, as part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, had a one-party system controlled by the Communist Party. This party suppressed nationalist symbols, including the Croatian checkerboard, which was associated with the Ustaše regime of World War II. The checkerboard was not officially banned but was not widely displayed due to its association with the Ustaše and the political climate of the time.

contradictory ways, during the period 1950-1990. It is hard to ascertain the support it received at any particular moment due to the absence of opinion polls (Goldstein 1999, 162) but presumably support was highest in the late 1940s through to the 1950s and then experienced transitory rises and falls (Goldstein 1999, 162). With the influx of emigrants into Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, the ideology and historical knowledge was updated through contacts with these people and reading of news media. Links to the homeland were rarely broken and there are historic links between BBB and the original Bad Blue Boys of Dinamo Zagreb (Hughson 1997b, 246). As MCF leader Kova told me: "I think that there were more Masseys [Macedonians] than Croatians at JUST."<sup>5</sup> The MCF leaders seemed convinced that support for JUST was distributed, in their way of thinking: 85% Serbians, 10% Macedonians, and 5% Croatians. The MCF refused to acknowledge Yugoslav identification.

Historically, in Europe, we had a situation that was not as clear-cut as the storyline that was portrayed by the MCF although there are clear points of similarity, as occurs with all myths and their relations to complex reality.<sup>6</sup> While the Communist Party had a reservoir of goodwill in the 1940s and 1950s due to its role in defeating fascism and its ability to plot a somewhat independent course vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, the notion of Yugoslavia and Yugoslav was never adopted willingly by the residents of Croatia. Judah (1997/2000, 143) connects waning Communist Party strength and popularity after 1966 with the removal in that year of Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983), who had been Tito's her apparent and a Serb centralist. The Croatian renaissance aka the Croatian Spring, led by the intellectuals at Matica Hrvatska and later by young communists, Savka Dabčević-Kučar (1923-2009) and Ante "Miko" Tripalo (1926-1995), dates back to 1967-1971 and is another important period in Croatian history (Judah 1997/2000, 146). A key development indicative of the mood of the times was the reinstatement of Stjepan Radić (1871-1928), the assassinated leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, as a Croatian hero, despite the fact that he had, as Tito well knew, despised communists (Judah 1997/2000, 146). Judah (1997/2000, 146) perceptively remarks that "the debates of the period 1970-1 in Croatia were simply a dress rehearsal for those of the late 1980s". He then added the insightful observation that "without Tito to draw everyone back from the brink, the second time around the national questions were pushed relentlessly to their bloody conclusions".<sup>7</sup>

In terms of unwillingness to identify as Yugoslav, the Censuses reveal that while, in 1991 (1981), Croats were 77.9% (unknown%) of the Croatian population and Serbs were 12.2% (11.6%), those who self-identified as Yugoslav were only 2.2% (8.2%) (Goldstein 1999, 180, 193-194; Judah 1997/2000, 340-344). These people tended to be left-wing Croats, government workers, and children of mixed-marriages (Goldstein 1999, 193-194). The unpopularity of Yugoslav identification was to become one reason for the historic victory, in Australia and Europe, of the MCF's worldview. For his part,

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- <sup>5</sup>. Kova, group interview by the author, 11 January 2011, Melbourne, Victoria, notes in possession of the author.
  - <sup>6</sup>. For example, the Communist Party of Croatia membership was 57% Serb and 43% Croat (Bilandžić 1999, 235), and this 57% substantially exceeded the Serb percentage of the population of Croatia. This fact would support the MCF's ideological presumption that there were "no sincere Yugoslavs" because the Croat percentage of the Serb party would have been miniscule. In fact, there were only 1.1% Croats resident in Serbia, according to the 1991 Yugoslav Census, and just 140,000 (1.55%) in 1981 (Judah 1997/2000, 331, 334).
  - <sup>7</sup>. The huge crowd at the funeral of Ranković in 1983 surprised the authorities and suggested nationalistic romanticization of strong Serb leaders of the past, concern about the Albanians in Kosovo, and a rejection or questioning of Titoism three years after his death. Tito was seen as both a symbol and victim of an era and historians debate whether he was a Serb nationalist or committed Yugoslav.

historian Ivo Goldstein (1999, 212, 260) notes that the émigrés who were expected to return to the home country after 1991 never did so in big numbers and those that did often had regressive views that focused on old enmities. While this passed as romanticism in some émigré circles in Australia, the Balkans was very different.

#### 4.4. *The MCF and Their Views Towards Mainstream Australian Organizations*

Pave Jusup has defended his club from its detractors, by stating, very reasonably, that meetings are conducted in English rather than Croatian, and “we also never check at the gate if you are Croatian or not”. In defence of the second proposition, he refers to an MCF member known as “West Ham” because he wears a West Ham United shirt. The point in relation to this person was that everybody simply assumed he was Croatian and a couple of years passed before he was realized to be of Anglo origin. This story is not as farfetched as it may sound given that most or nearly all of the second- and third-generation MCF have Australian accents. Croatian power-knowledge may operate within the confines of the stadium but there are gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions within it, and it is not necessarily seen as oppressive.

The MCF, as well as Melbourne Knights club president, Ange Cimera, and secretary, Melinda Cimera, were very critical of Football Federation Australia (FFA) effectively banning ethnic-origin clubs from the A-League although in recent years they qualify for the FFA Cup (now Australia Cup) competition. Sydney United, formerly Sydney Croatia, came 10th out of 13 in the final season of the NSL and were certainly treated unfairly in terms of not being welcome into the A-League. The club Western United, based not far from Melbourne Knights, in the Melbourne western suburbs, was admitted to the A-League only a few seasons ago and has struggled to attract crowds. Pave argues that “the Poms”, meaning the English, “have taken over the game”.<sup>8</sup> He and Kova don’t attribute any extra legitimacy to the Anglo-Australians—they regard each ethnic group, including the Anglos, as being in competition for their moment in the Australian sun, with only the Indigenous Aboriginal people having a special status. Therefore, Pave and Kova dispute that the FFA was or is acting in the best interests of the game or in the best interests of all ethnic groups. As Hughson points out, the problem with the Australian concept of multiculturalism was that it was never made clear whether the Anglos were just one ethnic group among many or whether they had special status as the inner wheel in the circle around which were located the other groups in some kind of outer ring. Hughson (1999, 25, 2002, 47) says that the English were never regarded as an “ethnic group” and, in football and wider public discourse, clubs such as Perth Glory and Melbourne Victory have been called “non-ethnic”, as if such a thing was ever remotely possible. The term itself is ludicrous.

The following somewhat humorous and politically-incorrect exchange between Pave and Kova took place at our interview at the Batcave Social Club in 2011:

Kova: For a multicultural country it [Australia] is still very racist.

Pave: It is an undercurrent; you have to understand what the double-speak is to understand what they are really doing. When the Socceroos play there are [Anglo-Australian] people behind it but there is tension. There is still an “us-and-them” mentality but it’s not out in the open. We never said [at Knights] that “everyone’s welcome” but we also never check at the gate if you are Croatian or not. We are not holding meetings here in Croatian are we?

Kova: It comes back to the White Australia Policy; they are white, we are olive.

Pave: But we came in under the White Australia Policy.

Kova: They wanted people with the big tits really [laughs]. It’s like David and Goliath but we don’t have a Jewish name [all laugh].<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>. Pave Jusup, group interview by the author, 11 January 2011, Melbourne, Victoria, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>9</sup>. Jusup and Kova, interview.

The last three comments are especially illuminating here, with serious commentary being wrapped up in banter, consistent with the way that these ultras talked throughout the interview. We may need to infer the meaning of some comments, and interpretations might differ. At the beginning, Pave and Kova maintain that Australia has a racism problem, and even when the Australian national football team, the Socceroos, play, there is tension and an us-and-them mentality--the accepted mainstream discourses and their hostile underside amount to what they call "doublespeak"--two sets of meaning existing at the same time. Pave talks about inclusivity at Melbourne Knights, contrary to the strong opinion existing in the mainstream world, as evidenced by speaking in English and not checking ethnicity at the gate. This has to be balanced, in his view, by the club never saying "everyone's welcome", which reflects a refreshing honesty about the importance of Croatian identity and culture at the club.

Kova moves on to mention the White Australia Policy, which forbid non-white immigration into Australia between 1901 and 1973, with the initial core pieces of legislation being the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (Cth)*, the *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901*, and the *Naturalisation Act 1903* (Willard 1923/1967; Palfreeman 1967; Markus 1994; Hollinsworth 1998, 103-104, 109, 237-239, 244-245; Jayasuriya, Walker, and Gothard 2003a, 2003b). Here Kova makes a distinction based on skin colour - "they are white, we are olive" in order to assert that whiteness is the criteria for social acceptance in Australia. But it seems likely that they rejoice in the distinction too as it is a mark of difference. By this time, the conversation picked up speed and the lads were enjoying the wordplay and banter. But they managed to be humorous and serious at the same time with the humour perhaps being used to smooth over any anger that might have emerged in relation to the topics being discussed. Pave interjects to say "but we came in under the White Australia Policy", referring to the relaxation of the policy in practice so as to admit Southern and Eastern Europeans into the country after World War II. Kova ends the sequence here with an out-of-place Jewish joke and the reference to the Australian authorities wanting "big tits", more humour here being used to make a sly dig at the authorities while praising the alleged characteristics of Eastern European women. Kova and Pave control the discourse here while we share Croatian beer in the empty Batcave Social Club on a quiet weekday afternoon out of season--they deconstruct the Australian authorities' motives and jokingly refer to repressed sexual preferences as a way to take the moral high ground away from the Australian authorities. While the usual primary motive for relaxing the application of the White Australia Policy is assumed to be the need for extra manual labourers to assist in the task of post-War reconstruction and nation-building, neither the mainstream understanding, nor Pave and Kova's Freudian take, allows the authorities to keep the high moral ground or at least not in discourse. Kova's biblical reference to David and Goliath reveals the underdog mentality that the group almost at times revels in while also being frustrated by it when things go against them. Pave boldly asks the rhetorical question: "Why should we not be in the top division? We are the club of Mark Viduka."<sup>10</sup> At this time, Mark Viduka, a Croatian-Australian who began his senior career at Melbourne Knights, had just retired after successful stints at Dinamo Zagreb, Glasgow Celtic, Leeds United, Middlesbrough, and Newcastle United. The Mark Viduka Stand at Somers Street was renamed after him and paid for from his transfer fee.

To return to Kova's remark about "big tits", sociologist Sarah Thornton makes the following comments about breasts in a *Guardian* article (Thornton, cited in Saner 2024):

Our top halves have been invaded by male supremacy and I did not realise how deeply patriarchal even my own view of breasts was. I was dismissing them as dumb boobs, partly because they're positioned primarily in culture as erotic playthings and I didn't want to just be an erotic plaything. Breasts are not evolutionarily, or universally, erotic. But the sexualisation of breasts causes many women a lot of stress, anxiety and dissatisfaction. That is a real shame, if not a serious political problem, and I think elevating the esteem of this body part that's so emblematic of womanhood is important.

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<sup>10</sup>. Jusup, interview.

While Thornton refers to breasts being invaded by male supremacy and patriarchy, her later remarks about the sexualization of breasts causing women stress and dissatisfaction makes the issue deeply personal as well as political. As the only reference to women in our cited quotes, and indeed in the whole interview, it might be quick and easy to just lump Kova and Pave in with the patriarchy. While Croatian culture, like Eastern European culture in general, has clearly defined gender roles, and this must impact on the culture at Melbourne Knights, the remark by Kova does, even if in tongue-in-cheek fashion, reference Croatian women obliquely and hence, in the specific context, humanizes the Croatian immigrant community in the face of Australian authorities that apply hyperlogical and hyperrational categories and arguments in their efforts to control population and workforce statistics and workforce flows in the interests of economic growth and social control (Foucault's biopower). By using the phrase "big tits", the controlling hyperrational discourse is subverted, mocked, and challenged in a humorous way that consistently humanizes. The Australian authorities wanted to admit Eastern Europeans by modifying the White Australia Policy, but Kova refuses to let the authorities' instrumental logic go unchallenged by referring back to human desires and frailties as well as hinting at one of the last great unspoken issues--intercultural desire.

## 5. Discussion: Novel Insights into Sports History

The power of the data in this case overpowers and overflows conventional binary understandings of social life--western/eastern, north/south, rational/emotional, pure/hybrid, immigrant/local, and marginalized/mainstream. We see nothing but hybridity and Diaspora, their fixed ideological position fixes them in space and time, but their real lives, attitudes, and actions overflow the simple narrative storyline--they articulate resistance against everybody at every juncture for any and every reason--they judge others while they are also judged but their judgements, due to their marginalized and interesting social position seem more powerful, more cunning. Their homeland has returned in Europe, just as they said it would, while they waited in Australia wearing their red-and-white checked football shirts and Dinamo Zagreb tops. They flout conventions of one type or another--local and foreign, labelled Croatian and self-identifying as such, while, strategically and on occasion, speaking a rights-based discourse with an Australian accent from their suburban location in western Melbourne. They speak a variety of truths to a variety of powers, and their self-positioning is ironic, always ahead of the game, unabashedly Croatian to the nth degree. These people overwhelm sport sociology and even more so the conventions of sport history--they transcend sport and they catch history out by rushing ahead of it--their Croatianness was both a past relic and a present and future reality and their émigré national consciousness predated the creation of the nation state in Europe--Viduka welcomed Tudjman rather than the other way around on Tudjman's tour of Australia in 1995. They should not have been excluded from the A-League and they know it--as Pave says: "We are the club of Mark Viduka."<sup>11</sup> Kova adds: "We are just like Liverpool--they are living on their former glories just like us."<sup>12</sup> Both European and Australian, but not in any simple kind of easily constructed or deconstructed hybrid, the MCF remains at Somers Street, a challenge to behold. I hope that this article too will be part-Croatian and part-Australian, but not as a simple addition of parts--more like a snake that can appear anywhere and be very hard to pin down or catch, alternately grinning and striking. The MCF hands out a challenge to the FFA and the Australian mainstream, laughing at the categories to which they are assigned, reinventing those categories from negative to positive creations, and repositing them yet again in defiant uprising.

Meanwhile, the Serbians sit in the grandstand next to their parents, both more family-oriented and conservative, while also being laughed at for being allegedly less brave. And the hierarchies of the Balkans are allegedly discursively overturned, at least for one day. The hierarchies of Australia are discursively challenged, on their own terms, but these oppressive power structures are still

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<sup>11</sup>. Jusup, interview.

<sup>12</sup>. Kova, interview. This comment was obviously made years prior to Liverpool's 2019/20 EPL title victory.



remote and strong, beyond and outside the western suburbs, beyond ultras culture, beyond family and hearth, annoying and oppressive, but historically non-Croatian, and that is what counts (as they turn the tables). Despotovski was wrong and the A-League sucks. Preston Lions, formerly Makedonia, and South Melbourne, formerly Hellas, drew a crowd of nine thousand people to an ordinary match this season. The NSL (spirit) lives on. You can't defeat "the ethnics". Because the Anglos tend to prefer Australian Rules football and rugby, the "ethnic" base in football will always be formidable even when beaten and defrauded by regulatory power.

We have something here like ideological time, rather than linear time, where ideology pushes down its weight. "Thirty or forty years later we will still be the Knights backed by the Croatian community", says former club president Ange Cimera, "but second, third or fourth generation".<sup>13</sup> The self-identity, and here we begin to depart from Foucault who did not want to talk in terms of ideology (only discourse), stands as something of an eternal truth, battered from all sides, but not defeated, as long as the club continues to hold on to loyalties and serve as a vehicle for hopes and dreams, in the midst of challenges, difficulties, and disappointments.

An independent Croatia exists in Europe now, says Ange Cimera.<sup>14</sup> Now we (the Knights) mirror them but before, they, deprived of their independence, could only look to us on the other side of the world as their true anchor and identity, or moral compass even, holding out against the odds, the red-and-white of Somers Street. We have here Croatian time, not linear time. With the club now using the "Knights" name, the word "Croatia" takes on power of a different kind as an unspoken, but nearly universally understood, signified,<sup>15</sup> and functions as an unbreakable mental connection to a new and yet very old country in the heartlands of Eastern Europe.

## 6. Conclusions

In Natalie Araujo's (2018) research, two Colombian women arrive in London in order to explore its democracy and alleged sophisticated cosmopolitanism where gender roles are not so rigidly prescribed as in their home country. While they encounter numerous frustrations and disappointments in London, including noting that all of their friends are Latin Americans, they remain torn between the unresolved binary of an imagined Colombia and an imagined London. This may well be true for the MCF, but I want to reach a more optimistic conclusion where their numbers, their cunning shifts between aspects of identity, and their brash self-confidence in asserting their rights with flair and irony allow them to, if not become the victors, then at least enjoy the moment while avoiding obvious defeats. The high moral ground is seized, in an ironic way, as they morally assert their club's right to join the A-League and their own right to maintain Croatian identity as primary. The Australian citizenship obviously comes in useful at times too by giving them a subject position from which to speak while their accent allows them to focus their disgust at times and fade into the background as and when required. The creation of the homeland in Europe proves, in their own eyes, that the émigrés were right all along.

We see complex issues of globalization and multiculturalism exposed in our case with sport almost being relegated to the lens through which we view the MCF and the arena that brings the lads together, although they exist as individuals, at the very least, outside of sporting contexts. Their struggles are against two targets, as mentioned--a new one and an ancient one. And yet there are innumerable targets or points of struggle--against the historic concept of Yugoslavia; against communism now turned into a struggle against "woke" liberal democracy; against the pull to force

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<sup>13</sup>. Ange Cimera, interview by the author, 16 February 2010, Melbourne, Victoria, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>14</sup>. Ange Cimera, interview.

<sup>15</sup>. Ange Cimera, interview.

them into becoming assimilated Anglo-Australians; against the various youth supporting other ethnic-origin football clubs; and against the forces of law and order.

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