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Service



Commentary

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A finals response: women and footy – we're running backwards

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'Dad, why are those women there?'

The question took me a little by surprise as I wasn't really paying attention to the half-time festivities at this year's AFL Grand Final, but there on screen was a footy player who'd won a foot race, a couple of suits looking thrilled to be part of the action, and two scantily-clad women who were, well, standing there looking scantily-clad.

I try to be careful about feeding personal opinions to our children, and we often have some rather enlightening conversations about this weird and wacky world in which we live, but I couldn't think of anything to say other than something benign about some people finding them attractive, and that seems to help sell whatever the sponsor is currently spruiking.

'That's stupid,' he retorted, and went in search of chips. Again, I was stumped, mainly because there wasn't much to add. But it did get me thinking again about the representation of women in male-dominated sports, and particularly footy. We were at a Grand Final barbeque, and our son's question interested one other guest who then linked it to some albeit predictable shenanigans on the most recent Footy Show, where it seems a St Kilda player was invited to 'cavort' with a female stripper on stage.

St Kilda had no shortage of controversy this year with allegations of rape and of players' impropriety with a teenage woman. The media had several field days and opinions ran rife about responsibility and consequences. I'd heard them all before – 'he' did nothing wrong, 'she' got what she deserved, etc – but even before the dust had settled a footy club had gained a stench that was going to be difficult to cleanse.

So you would think that the adult men either directly embroiled in that hullabaloo, or those by association – that is, all the men officially involved with the club – would take a couple of minutes to reconsider the invitation to undress a woman who then clings to a pole on stage before a large in-house audience and an even bigger one glued to the tube. Aside from the ethical dilemmas, surely it was only going to raise more eyebrows.

And, importantly, you'd think that AFL players would think twice about it in the context of the AFL's Respect and Responsibility policy that not only "represents the Australian Football League's commitment to addressing violence against women" but also aims at "creating safe, supportive and inclusive environments for women and girls across the football industry as well as the broader community."

I'm reliably informed that the vast bulk of the 'player revue' involved players not wearing much and women significantly less, with single entendres aplenty. This is how far we have evolved.

To top it all off, a couple of Geelong thigh-slappers thought it hilarious to dress up on 'mad Monday' as the abovementioned young 'St Kilda' woman and a now discredited and admonished player agent whose 'support' for her seemed more self serving than compassionate.

The three examples over only five days suggest that some players aren't taking the issue of respectful behaviour towards women all that seriously. Looks good on paper, but it's just a bit of a laugh, and nobody's getting hurt, right?

“The Respect and Responsibility Policy,” the paper states, “is about shifting attitudes – ensuring that people throughout the Australian Football industry are aware, and have structures in place, that

recognise that violence against women and behaviour that harms or degrades women, is never acceptable.”

So where’s the disconnect here? Family violence and sexual assault experts understand that inappropriate attitudes towards women often leads to actions far more sinister and damaging. Violence against woman including sexual assault is rife, as recent police data shows. Specialists in the sector have no shortage of work, and it doesn’t look like it’s abating any time soon.

The Footy Show’s continued objectification of women (and there is no end of examples) and the Cats’ quaint dress-up day are perhaps not directly the AFL’s turf, except it calls into question what players now consider appropriate behaviour, and the basis on which players are making informed decisions. Players across the country have undertaken specialised training in considering attitudes towards women, including sexual assault, but one wonders what broader impact it has had.

Young dressed down models on the footy field on the AFL’s biggest day, though, falls directly into the AFL’s territory. If the AFL was serious about Respect and Responsibility, it wouldn’t have allowed it to happen. It had nothing to do with a foot race, nothing to do with footy, but everything to do with supporting ingrained sexism – and perhaps teaching boys and young men that ogling near-naked women is something they should value and aspire to.

I’ve witnessed Andrew Demetriou thumping the lectern stating that violence against women is always wrong. And it is. But unless there are actions following the statement – actions that all players and officials can undertake – then it’s just spin. Violence against women does not happen in the abstract. It happens because some men consider women as sexualised playthings, with a belief that inappropriate references to women are inconsequential.

How sad that we need to think twice about whether our boys and girls should be watching the footy.

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