

Of Nerds and Men: Dimensions and Discourses of Masculinity in *Nerds FC*

In the lead-up to the 2006 FIFA World Cup, Australian television abounded with soccer-focused programs to celebrate the national side's first World Cup qualification since 1974. Amongst these programs was *Nerds FC*, a remake of 2004 Danish reality television series *FC Zulu*. In the course of the series, various "nerds" – including computer scientists, maritime historians, chemists, physicists and so on – were transformed from feminized intellectuals to masculinized sportsmen. The series premise is predicated upon an understanding of muscular masculinity that sees sporting prowess as indicative of manliness, but it also engages with the new, postmodern form of masculinity, metrosexuality, most readily associated with star footballer David Beckham, as the nerds are also groomed to look the part of the modern celebrity sport star. In Australia, soccer has often been denigrated as both a feminine and "ethnic" sport. The effects of the Australian series are therefore twofold: *Nerds FC* utilises the reality television trope of transformation to use sport as a means of changing the nerds into men, and to use this process of masculinizing the nerds to in turn masculinize the sport in the eyes of its Australian audience. This chapter also seeks to locate the position of such a television program within the contexts of both reality television and the documentary tradition.

The original Danish series, *FC Zulu*, first aired in 2004 and ran for three seasons. The show has since been remade in ten other countries, including Australia. In all iterations of the series, a group of nerds with varying interests but little sporting prowess or knowledge of soccer is trained for three months by former professional players with the ultimate goal of playing a match against a professional team. In the course of the program, the nerds are put through various physical challenges and team-building exercises, as well as recording a team song and being given a makeover. They also play against several other sides consisting of such various players as teenage girls, young boys, prisoners, celebrities and military

servicemen. While the nerds compete against other teams, they do not compete against one another, as is the case in many reality shows. The program's aim is to construct a team out of a disparate group of people so that collectivism wins over competitive individualism.

The Australian series ran for two seasons in 2006 and 2007 on SBS, Australia's partly-government subsidized multicultural broadcaster, and does not deviate from the original Danish format. It is, however, notable as the only English-speaking production in the franchise and the only version from a non-European country. Significantly, Australia also differs from the other countries in the franchise, which include Denmark, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands, in that soccer is not the nation's dominant code of football. As a result, discourses of soccer and masculinity utilized by the program differ according to national context; in nations where soccer is the dominant code, soccer masculinities are hegemonic, whereas in the Australian context there is a complex interplay between sport as a defining characteristic of hegemonic Australian masculinity and soccer as a marginalized and feminized sport. R.W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."¹ Athleticism is identified as one of the key indicators of hegemonic masculinity, but even within this there is a hierarchy and soccer, in the Australian order of football masculinities, ranks the lowest. As Johnny Warren, former team captain for the 1974 World Cup team, famously said in his autobiography, "'Sheilas', 'wogs' and 'poofers' were considered the second-class citizens [during his youth] and if you played soccer you were considered one of them. That's how soccer was regarded back then and, to some extent, still is considered today."² Similarly, nerds are identified by Connell as one of the subordinated masculinities in modern society.³ This brings into question the extent to which the nerds were being indoctrinated into a hegemonic sporting masculinity in the

Australian context in the same way that this could be argued for the European contexts. While exploring the process of masculinization of the participants and the transformative dimensions of reality television, it is important to question the usefulness of soccer as a means of masculinization in light of these social and cultural connotations of Australian sporting masculinity.

Nerds FC is referred to variously as a “reality television show,” a “reality TV-style documentary,”⁴ and a “documentary,”⁵ but also draws upon some of the style and techniques of sports documentaries. The distinction between reality programming and documentaries is the subject of much debate in film and television studies. Documentary, it is argued, is “a way of documenting the world and observing people’s real lives and experiences”,⁶ whereas reality television is, Jack Z. Bratich observes, “less about representing reality than intervening in it; less mediating and more *involving*.”⁷ Annette Hill argues that reality television and documentary fall together with news programming into the category of “factual television,” which she defines as a “container for non-fiction content.”⁸ In her study of audiences’ reception to these various types of factual television, Hill found that viewers constantly perform genre work wherein they “draw upon their knowledge of genres to personally respond to various programmes, highlighting the often contradictory and confusing responses that are part of dealing with the changing nature of factuality.”⁹ Reality television in particular is a “feral genre,”¹⁰ Hill argues, as it transgresses generic boundaries, disrupts existing factual genres and resists containment, but it is also the type of factual television of which audiences are most critical without denying its appeal.

Situating *Nerds FC* generically is complicated by both its interventionism and its lack of an internal competition between participants. While reality shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* intervene in reality, which Bratich above suggests is a key feature of reality television in that it constructs a challenging environment for its participants, the nerds are not

in competition with one another for individual success, nor is there a tangible prize. Rather, the participants work cooperatively for a team-based outcome; performing well as a team during the final match is the ultimate goal, and the resulting feeling of team belonging and accomplishment is the prize. Post-production editor Paul Watling describes the show as “sort of reality slash comedy.”¹¹ Both the show’s dry, self-deprecating humour and its focus on collectivism in part explain its appeal to Australian audiences, who value these features as important national characteristics. Television producers have found that global franchises must be tailored to the local context in order to be successful as Australian audiences are less comfortable with the aggressive, individualist competitiveness of American programs, as well as the humiliation and class conflict often central to British shows.¹² As one producer for such reality shows as *MasterChef Australia*, *Farmer Wants A Wife*, *Project Runway*, and *The Biggest Loser* explains, “Aussies like to be entertained and they like a sense of fun...They also like a sense of authenticity. They’re not as turned on by celebrity...in America, fame is a religion that everyone worships. Here the audience can be a bit more cynical. They look for shows that are fair dinkum and true blue.”¹³ In Australian reality programming, competition or personal improvement is more likely to be reframed to fit with Australian cultural values such as mateship and social egalitarianism.¹⁴

This is not to say that reality programming that is based upon competition has not been successful in Australia, but it is heavily criticized for its negativity. In recent years, Australian audiences have shown a preference for more upbeat reality programming like *MasterChef Australia*, which has been one of the most successful reality television shows in Australia since it first began airing in 2009. While it is not entirely free of tension and interpersonal drama, *MasterChef Australia* deliberately casts appealing contestants, encourages positive, constructive criticism from its judges, and promotes supportive camaraderie between its contestants even as they compete against one another. One of the

judges, George Calombaris, even voiced his reluctance to work with Gordon Ramsey as a guest judge on the program given the British chef's reputation as a bully; Calombaris felt that belittling the contestants was not what the Australian show was about.¹⁵ *Nerds FC* is similarly good-natured; audiences do not laugh at the nerds so much as laugh with them. The producers of *Nerds FC* wished to create a positive show that focused on the group's achievements in the face of adversity,¹⁶ and in this regard we can see the program's relationship to sports documentaries and sports films that favor underdog narratives. While the ratings for *Nerds FC* were not as high as *MasterChef Australia*, due in part to not being screened on a commercial network, it was reviewed positively by television critics, all of whom praised the show for its good humor and the affable appeal of the nerds themselves.

It remains somewhat ironic that a reality show about sport, which is essentially competitive, should be presented as a counterpoint to competitiveness. Interestingly for a nation that professes to be obsessed with sport, sport has been relatively absent from Australian reality television programming, with the exception of a single season each of *The Club* (an interactive show about an Australian rules team created for the sole purpose of the program) and *The Contender Australia*, as well as the two seasons of *Nerds FC*. In the United States, a similarly sports-mad nation, the sports sub-genre in reality television has been comparatively prolific, aided also by the greater robustness of the American television industry compared to that in Australia. The UK and Europe boast only a small handful of sport-based reality programming, the majority of which focus on soccer. Sport was a latecomer to the reality genre. This is perhaps, as one sportswriter pointedly stated when the subgenre first began to emerge, because “[s]ports *is* reality TV.”¹⁷ Another writer makes a similar point but also explicitly defines competitiveness as a key feature of both sports and reality television: “*Sports already is the ultimate reality television series*, remember? The thrill of victory! The agony of defeat! The human drama of athletic competition!”¹⁸ In light of

this emphasis on competition, it is somewhat surprising that observational, documentary-style shows dominate American sports reality programming with only a few, such as *The Contender*, following competitive formats. This can, however, be understood as producers presenting viewers with another dimension to the sports programming they already love, thus a broadening of the sports industry and a capitalization on its existing appeal.

Given the popularity of the documentary-style format in sports reality programming, there is clearly a strong relationship to be drawn between sports documentary and sports reality television that derives in part from the existing relationship between documentary and reality programming more broadly, as well as the significant contribution of sports to the documentary tradition.¹⁹ As Ian McDonald observes, “Sport events have a pro-filmic existence. They have a real-world presence before, during, and after the camera has captured its images.”²⁰ McDonald’s observation is, of course, yet another articulation of the sportswriters’ claims discussed above that sport is already the ultimate reality television show; recording sporting events is already a mode of documentary. McDonald laments the lack of attention paid to sports documentaries in documentary studies, despite their significant contribution to the tradition. He argues that sport is not a topic that fits into the “discourse of sobriety,” which key documentary critic Bill Nichols has defined as central to the form and its thematic preoccupations.²¹ Reality television itself fails to fulfil Nichols’ sober expectations, and is perhaps doubly hobbled in this regard when its main preoccupation is sport. Soccer scholar John Hughson draws upon a similar discourse of sobriety when discussing former BBC presenter Kenneth Clark’s concept of public service broadcasting and the role of documentary within this: “[Clark] believed that television held a humanising ‘power’, as long as it provided programmes of educative worth and artistic quality to outweigh the descending ‘vulgarity’ threatened by unregulated commercialism. Although

much current television may have lived up to Clark's worst fears, his influence in documentary making can still be seen."²²

Central to this discourse of sobriety, evident in the views of both Nichols and Clark, is the idea that social betterment is the purpose of documentary. Reality television, on the other hand, is often thought to be detrimental to modern society and culture, or at least one of its less positive by-products. Laurie Ouellette, one of the key scholars of reality television, argues to the contrary: "Many of the functions ascribed to the documentary and the public service tradition in general – particularly citizenship training – have been radically reinterpreted and integrated into popular reality formats... If the civic functions of reality entertainment are more difficult to recognise, it is partly because they now operate *within* market imperatives and entertainment formats, but also because prescriptions for what counts as 'good citizenship' have changed."²³ Reality television, she argues, provides viewers with new scripts and resources for navigating the changing expectations and new demands of this modern citizenship. Rather than simply educating its audiences, reality television intervenes directly in the lives of its participants and only through these real-world examples provides an educative model for its viewers. Ouellette refers to this as "do-good television," a form of reality programming that utilizes the common mechanisms of competition or makeover for the better good of its participants.²⁴

In the case of the nerds, it is implied that while they are good men generally speaking, their intellectualism and various obsessions isolates them from mainstream society. Specifically, they are excluded (or exclude themselves) from the national culture by their disinterest in sport. The show offers the nerds the opportunity to become healthy citizens in both the literal and social sense; as the nerds become fitter through their physical exertions, they also learn to work together as a team, endure and overcome hardship and, perhaps most importantly, to develop an interest in the achievements of local and national sporting teams.

One nerd's explanation of his decision to become involved in *Nerds FC* emphasizes his understanding of the anti-social dimensions of his nerdy existence and the personal gain offered by the show: "I think it is going to be good to do something completely and utterly different. My existence and my world revolves around one room with four walls and lots of books. This? This is completely opposite. This is outside, this is with *other people*, this is, you know, out there, on the field, running. Blood, sweat and tears, basically." *Nerds FC*'s emphasis on teamwork and collectivism is a clear criticism of the increasing individualism of modern Australian society, of which competition-based reality television programming might well be cited as a symptom, and a return to the nation's original communitarian ideals.

In Ouellette's view, the common trope of transformation in reality television can be harnessed for social good, and can be used to establish positive models of responsible citizenship. Dana Heller refers to reality programming that focuses on transformation as "makeover television." As suggested by Ouellette's invocation of the makeover mechanism in do-good television, makeover television is not limited to the cosmetic transformation it may imply; it focuses on the interventions made by productions that result in a new reality for the participants and possibly for society as a whole. Makeover television, Heller clarifies, can transform the body, change the dynamics of courtship and family life, make celebrities out of nobodies and is capable of "recasting critical elements of social identity, in particular gender, race and class."²⁵ Brenda Weber takes a more critical and cautious view of the trope of transformation and its relationship to selfhood and citizenship, arguing that "the television makeover functions as both aspirations fantasy and cautionary tale, ready to delight with romantic possibilities and to frighten with dire outcomes."²⁶ Taking up a similar focus on the fantasy of the makeover, Bratich suggests that reality television's closest cultural form is the fairy tale, which also centers on the reversal of fortunes and the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary. Like fairy tales, the transformations found in reality

television are particular to gender: women are transformed from unattractive to beautiful and men “from loser to winner...and from loser to player.”²⁷

In reality television, nerds are subject to this enduring trope of transformation. As discussed above, the participants in *Nerds FC* are not competing for a prize but in reality television, L.S. Kim argues, personal transformation is the prize.²⁸ The trope of transformation is foregrounded in *Nerds FC* from the outset; the narrator promises that the programme is about the transformation of “boys into men, mice into lions and nerds into athletes.” Furthermore, coach Andy Harper immediately draws upon the journey motif commonly employed in reality shows; this allows both presenters and participants in the reality show to narrativize their personal progress and transformation. Each of the first six episode titles of the first season underlines the centrality of transformation to the show’s premise: “From Nerd to Player,” “From Individual to Team,” “From Shy to Bold,” “From Afraid to Brave,” “From Mice to Men,” and “From Nerd to Beckham” (episodes seven and eight are titled “The Rematch and “The Final Challenge,” respectively, and only a handful of the episode titles, such as “From Afraid to Brave,” are carried over into the second season). Nerds are consequently characterized as cerebral, individualist, shy, fearful, meek, and unfashionable, in opposition to the desirable traits of athleticism, collectivism, boldness, bravery, manliness, and polished appearance. In the final episode, Nick draws an explicit connection between sport and personal transformation afforded to him via participation in the show: “I’ve definitely changed. Sport does change your life.”

The dimensions of the transformative trope and the values implicit within this are, of course, relative to cultural context. As discussed above, in order to be consumed in a more meaningful way by its viewers, reality television must draw upon particular national values and local identities. Emma Price argues that audience taste has shaped Australian reality programming over time and as a result the format increasingly focuses on reflecting aspects

of national culture and identity.²⁹ Price's study of the reality show *Bondi Rescue* is useful for understanding the intersections of nationalism and masculinity in Australian reality television programming like *Nerds FC*, particularly given the athleticism implicit in the figure of the surf lifesaver (the original, Australian iteration of the lifeguard). *Bondi Rescue* reinforces the idea of the surf lifesaver as an exemplary national type characterised by athleticism, masculinity, mateship, and militarism, all tempered by their larrikinism. Price argues, "*Bondi Rescue* can be seen as a new incarnation of ongoing mythic ideas of the nation. Its 'factual' style, format construction and mythic qualities all combine as elements of its performance; where the national myth appears 'real.'"³⁰ *Bondi Rescue* lacks the transformative trope – largely because the surf lifesaver is already a national and masculine ideal – but it highlights the complex relationship between representation and reality: "Through a reframing of narrative and characters into a format, 'reality TV' works beyond the limited question of actuality or artifice to a more complex and fluid space of blurred genres and mythic televisual conventions."³¹ The examples of both *Bondi Rescue* and *Nerds FC* demonstrate the role that reality television can play in shaping or reinforcing social reality; this is, as Tom O'Regan has argued, an example of Australian television's "important agency of 'popular socialisation.'"³²

Masculine figures, like the surf lifesaver featured in *Bondi Rescue*, dominate both historical and contemporary imaginings of what constitutes a typical Australian. The sportsman is amongst the dominant icons of Australianness: the stockman, the larrikin, the bushman, and the digger.³³ Shaped historically by environment, necessity, and social reality, the nationalist icons are all white men. They are also, in essence, all iterations of the same figure, but with different occupations. This typical Australian is:

practical rather than theoretical, he values physical prowess rather than intellectual capabilities, and he is good in a crisis but otherwise laid-back. He is

common and earthy, so he is intolerant of affectation and cultural pretensions; he is no wowser, uninhibited in his pleasures of drinking, swearing and gambling; he is independent and egalitarian, and is a hater of authority and a ‘knocker’ of eminent people. This explicit rejection of individualism is echoed in his unswerving loyalty to his mates.³⁴

This type was outlined at length in Russel Ward’s 1958 treatise on Australian culture, *The Australian Legend*. What we see in Australian culture is a consistent reiteration of these national types in the form of particular sports stars, celebrities and fictional characters that has made it difficult to significantly challenge these national archetypes to find alternatives more representative of modern, multicultural, and egalitarian Australia.

Even the seemingly broad category of the sportsman finds its limitations in the Australian social imaginary, defined as it is primarily by cricket and Australian rules football players. The soccer player’s place within this category is compromised by its migrant associations; as Toby Miller, et al. observe, “The signified of soccer is ‘new Australian.’”³⁵ While sport is a means and mechanism of social and national inclusion, certain sports, like cricket and Australian rules football, are still coded as “more Australian” than others, due to their links to colonialism and empire. Despite soccer’s British origins, its popularity with post-war European migrants has led to a marginalization in Australian culture that is only just beginning to subside. This is, in part, thanks to increased success by the Australian national team in international sporting competitions, such as the FIFA World Cup, but it is also the result of a determined campaign by Australian soccer authority Football Federation Australia (FFA) to rebrand the game as hypermodern and cosmopolitan.³⁶ This involved restructuring the sport’s national organizing body and a revamping of the national A-League tournament, accompanied by a slick marketing campaign that touted the A-League as “football but not as you know it.” Featuring attractive players in fashionable street wear and an urban setting,

fast-paced play and trick moves, and a hip hop soundtrack by a popular artist, the commercial promoted not just the A-League but soccer itself as (post)modern, edgy, sexy, fast-paced, and global. Its tagline clearly played upon the ambiguous status of soccer as a football code within the bounds of Australia as a “football-mad” country. Rather than marketing the league as *soccer*, the marginalized sport, the campaign emphasized the sport as an alternative *football* code.

The intellectualism of the nerds is clearly at odds with the anti-intellectualism of the Australian type. Linzi Murrie argues that the late nineteenth-century emphasis on the bushman as the figure of exemplary masculinity can be understood as a response to anxieties over the threats to hegemonic masculinity represented by the growing body of bohemians – largely urban, middle-class men more interested in intellectual and cultural activities than rugged pioneering.³⁷ The nerd/jock binary (or nerd/sportsman, in a more Australian parlance) is arguably the modern corollary to this bohemian/bushman binary. Christine Quail contends that representations of nerds in popular culture rest upon what she terms the “hip/square dialectic” wherein the nerd is “culturally placed in contrast with a more athletic, socially-skilled, sexually aware individual – the cool kid or jock, who demonstrates a hegemonic masculinity... This dialectic serves to construct both halves – the hipster and the square or nerd; without its counterpart, each loses its meaning.”³⁸ In fictional narratives, this dialectic plays out in two ways: the odd couple friendship, and the antagonistic narrative.

Nerds as a social category are not new to reality television programming. They have appeared as individual contestants, such as *American Idol* reject-cum-ironic success William Hung, and as a show’s focus, such as *Beauty and the Geek*. The latter plays upon the odd couple friendship as an important dynamic of the show’s premise, wherein nerds are teamed up with attractive women with the purpose of uncovering each other’s inner beauty through a series of challenges, but it also leaves room open for the antagonistic narrative. In *Nerds FC*,

the hip/square dialectic is played out in the relationship between the nerds and their coaches. This also affords the show one of the more interesting dimensions to the transformative trope as the show is partly framed as an equal challenge for these professional athletes to coach a disparate band of unfit amateurs, as it is for the nerds themselves to become soccer players. Furthermore, the series also documents the coaches' changing attitudes to the nerds, suggesting the need for mutual tolerance between these social types. The coaches in both series are frequently shown laughing at the efforts and antics of the nerds, but they also regularly express their growing admiration for the nerds' unfailing determination and enthusiasm. As Andy Harper admits in episode three of the first season, "I'm finding this collection of nerds inspirational in their own way. You know, there's genuine and sincere enthusiasm for this and there's nothing that you can give them that they won't have a crack at. And you know there's a lot in that we can all learn from." Harper's admission suggests that the sportsman may be in as much need of transformation as the nerds.

Even as they are actively emasculated by the show's challenges or suggested to have marginalized masculinities, the nerds frequently exhibit opinions and behaviours that firmly align them with hegemonic masculinity, if not male chauvinism. David, for example, perhaps least fits the traditional definition of the nerd and the challenge to masculinity that the figure of the nerd represents. In a qualitative study of participants' responses to images of various masculine types, Andrew P. Smiler found that "the nerd stereotype appears to refer to a physically weak, unattractive, poorly dressed male who favours academics and is not particularly engaged in the social scene."³⁹ David is conventionally attractive, able to efficiently navigate social situations, and his nerd interest in vintage cars aligns with normative masculine interests. It is unsurprising when David is elected team captain by the other nerds; it signals their recognition of his status as the dominant male in the group and reinforces normative understandings of what masculine characteristics are expected in a

leader. This behaviour is in line with Lori Kendall's findings about the role of the nerd within American popular culture. She argues that since the 1980s the nerd has been partially incorporated into hegemonic masculinity, and that this is the result of changing economic and job prospects for middle-class, white males.⁴⁰ Through her analysis of the *Revenge of the Nerds* film franchise (1984-1994), Kendall illustrates how this reconfigured nerd identity is frequently complicit with hegemonic masculinity. "The nerd stereotype", she observes, "includes aspects of both hypermasculinity (intellect, rejection of sartorial display, lack of 'feminine' social and relational skills) and feminisation (lack of sports ability, small body size, lack of sexual relationships with women)."⁴¹ By the third film in the franchise, the nerds have established a new social order wherein the only difference is the valorization of intellectualism over athleticism; the films remain problematic in their treatment of women, people of color, and homosexuality. While nerds may present a challenge to some dimensions of hegemonic masculinity, they still understand that the marginalisation of Others is the nexus of power.

The ethnically diverse nerds do not express problematic views about race but are complicit in various feature and mechanisms of hegemonic masculinity. In an example of the nerds' chauvinism, throughout the series Nick is the nerd who expresses the most problematic views on women and gender. The nerds' first match against the Young Matildas, the national under-17 women's team, appears to be an act of deliberate emasculation in order to get the nerds to understand the skill and athleticism required to play high level soccer. Yet Nick, who welcomed the seemingly easy prospect of a team of young women at the beginning of the match, is able to remain incredulous at their defeat: "Goddamnit, I'll never hear the end of this. Beaten by a bunch of...females." By calling out, "Ladies!" to the prison team played several episodes later, Nick exhibits a clear understanding that insulting another man's masculinity by invoking the feminine is an

effective way of aligning himself with hegemonic masculinity. Other nerds similarly find ways of reasserting their masculinity when possible; Tim, for example, insists that the shimmying dance move they must learn for their team song's music video is "not designed for males, that's designed for females."

The literal makeover of the nerds in the "From Nerd to Beckham" episode demonstrates one of the few arenas in which hegemonic masculinity has shifted in recent years: personal grooming and appearance. Similar to their attitude to traditional gender roles, this interestingly is an area where the nerds express more regressive understandings of masculinity. The rise of metrosexuality since the 1990s demonstrates how masculinity has been shaped by the climate of increased consumerism and globalization. As I have argued elsewhere, metrosexuality has been a key part of the cosmopolitan rebranding of Australian soccer discussed above.⁴² This is derived in part from famed international footballer David Beckham's role as the ersatz poster boy of the metrosexual look. Glamour and celebrity are now an expected part of the international soccer industry, if not the sports industry more broadly. Examining the effects of these makeover processes on American masculinity, Weber argues that the makeover process subordinates the gender position of the male subject. Weber differentiates here between "traditional homosocial male sites of change, such as the military training facility or the athletic practice field, where men are invited and compelled to undergo alteration in the name of improving their gendered subject status,"⁴³ and the sites of change in makeover television that focus predominately on feminized spheres of fashion and grooming. While the metrosexual makeover is part of the transformative process in *Nerds FC*, its primary site of change remains the athletic practice field. This emphasizes rather than subordinates sporting masculinity as hegemonic Australian masculinity, yet establishes personal care and grooming as part of that dominant masculine identity. Consequently, the nerds' professed disinterest in fashion no longer functions as a means to align with

hegemonic masculinity; rather, it demonstrates how they are out of step with modern consumer culture and modern masculinity's assimilation to this. John's refusal to wear pink is a clear indication of his outdated understanding of sartorial masculinity. Only Jones, the politics nerd, presents an informed critique of the economies of fashion that demonstrates an awareness of consumer culture beyond the nerds' common dismissal of fashion as simply impractical or frivolous.

The fifth episode of each season, titled "From Mice to Men" in the first season and "From Afraid to Brave" in the second, is the most explicit in the aim to masculinize the nerds. In the first season, the nerds are taken on an adventure camp. Upon their arrival, the nerds are depicted as fearful of nature, inept with the logistics of camping (such as setting up tents), and preoccupied with cleanliness and "civilization." The designated activities at the adventure camp imply that manliness is achieved through endurance and overcoming fears. After completing a jump from a 30-foot pole, Phillip admits, "I do feel more of a man because I have been completely taken out of my comfort zone. I mean, I have literally – quite literally – been put in the worst possible situation that I could ever have hoped for in my life...and I've come through it." Upon the nerds' return from the camp, the coaches surprise the team with a birthday cake to celebrate Phillip's twenty-first birthday. Significantly, this is the traditional age of adulthood;⁴⁴ Phillip's birthday symbolizes the coming-of-age as men of each of his teammates.

The camp and its bush setting clearly evoke the figure of the bushman from amongst the Australian archetypes. As John says at the camp's conclusion, "I feel more in tune with the bush and everything and definitely more of a man." In the equivalent episode of the second series, the nerds are again taken to the bush but this time they complete a military boot camp, thus evoking the bushman's military corollary, the digger. The series systematically references key icons of Australian manliness as core components of its main

archetypal preoccupation, the sportsman. In so doing, the show does not challenge these national types but works to assimilate the seemingly marginalized nerds into the mainstream masculinity that these types represent. While these types are revised for a modern context to some extent, their constant revisitation is indicative of the limitations of the Australian national imaginary.

Following Australia's 2006 World Cup qualification – Australia's first qualification in thirty-two years – every attempt was made to capitalize on the unprecedented interest in soccer. This involved a proliferation of soccer-related books, DVDs, and CDs in stores, including official World Cup merchandise, histories of soccer (both global and national), biographies and autobiographies about soccer players and coaches, and fiction. Australian television coverage of the World Cup is held exclusively by SBS, a unique hybrid public broadcaster that is funded by both the government and by commercial advertising, that is mandated to reflect and represent multicultural Australia; while the initials stand for Special Broadcasting Service, it is known colloquially as “Sex Before Soccer” in reference to its programming preferences for art house cinema and international soccer. In the lead up to the tournament, as well as repeated for its duration, SBS also televised a documentary series that examined the World Cup histories of the various participating countries, as well as other various soccer-related programs and films. These programs included the search for a team song, *Song for the Socceroos*, and the reality television series, *Nerds FC*. As mentioned above, *Nerds FC* did not win the same ratings as reality programs on commercial channels, but it undoubtedly benefited from the increased interest in soccer and its positive critical reviews.

The first season of *Nerds FC* therefore coincides with this movement to rebrand soccer and, it is argued here, should be understood as an agent in this process. The statements the program makes about the sport are, to some extent, normalized in its broadcaster's own

context but are actually quite sophisticated criticisms of the place allocated to soccer within Australian sporting culture. When the nerds in season one first meet their coaches, one nerd observes incredulously, “They’re huge!” This is a subtle reference to the assumptions made about soccer players as a physical type; in comparison to Australian rules and rugby players, soccer players are often imagined as diminutive and, by extension, both feminized and marginalized. When the nerds later play a prison team, they again focus on the impressive physicality of the players. Interestingly, in season two the nerds are more impressed by the coaches’ polished appearances than their athletic physique, which underscores soccer’s increasing reputation as the sophisticated, cosmopolitan sport. The nerds note that they were expecting someone “scarier” and that Craig Foster and Francis Awaritefe looked more like “Cleo Bachelor[s] of the Year” than soccer players. The response with which the season two coaches’ introduction ends best expresses the desired effect: “[The coaches] ooze strategy and sophistication; if they were the generals, I would follow their lead.” In addition to clearly recognizing these players as belonging to the sportsman archetype discussed above, the military reference also functions to align it with its fellow archetype, the digger. The emphasis on the physicality of soccer players as well as their well-groomed appearance corresponds to the desired image of the sport as athletic yet dapper, while the ethnic diversity of the coaches is as much a refusal to completely deny the migrant connections of the sport as it is a reflection of the multicultural nature of the professional game.

Winning the nerds themselves over to the sport is integral to the sport’s rebranding project in the show. In the first episode of the first series, one nerd, Tim, explains that he comes from a “family of soccer nuts and I am the only one immune from the disease.” Although Tim’s views are not explicitly revisited in the course of the series, he, like his teammates, participates with enthusiasm, demonstrating devotion and commitment to the team. Nick, on the other hand, admits in the fourth episode: “Soccer itself is really fun. Once

you get past the physical barrier, it's a top sport...wow, never thought I'd hear myself saying that." Throughout the first season, Andy Harper continuously frames the sport in terms that would appeal most to the nerds and, by extension, to the viewers. Specifically, Harper refers to soccer as the "thinking man's game," but is clear to emphasize that it is about a "physical exchange as well as a cerebral one." The nerds appear to respond well to the intellectual dimensions of soccer, such as strategy, even if this is often forgotten in the heat of the game. In the closing credits to the series, each of the nerds makes various statements to the camera about their new love and appreciation of the game, but it is Daniel's victory toast after the team's final match that provides the most fitting conclusion to the nerds' changing relationship with soccer as a sport: "To football, the beautiful game!"

Ultimately, while *Nerds FC* succeeds in framing soccer as an inclusive and enjoyable sport, it fails to present any meaningful challenge to hegemonic masculinity in Australia. In fact, the nerds' transformation is achieved in part through their strategic alignment with hegemonic attitudes and behaviors. This is, however, part of the desired result: the sport turns the nerds into men and their expression of attitudes in line with hegemonic masculinity assists in masculinizing the sport and aligning it with the other hypermasculine football codes. The reality television format assists in this process, as the transformative mechanism often utilized in such programming is pivotal to these processes of masculinization. The blurred generic lines between reality television and documentary produces a space in which reality can be both reflected and manipulated; the program does not suggest anything about the sport of soccer that is not factual, but its format allows it to use characters and narrative in a way that establishes a new meaning for that sport in the Australian context.

¹ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 77.

² Johnny Warren, *Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers: An Incomplete Biography of Johnny Warren and Soccer in Australia* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 2002), xiv.

³ Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

⁴ Jon Fitzgerald, "Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry: the use of production music in Australian reality television series *Nerds FC*," *Perfect Beat*, 1, no. 1 (2009), 16.

⁵ "Confessed Nerds Take On Football Challenge," *Centralian Advocate*, 11 Apr 2006, 17.

⁶ Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3.

⁷ Jack Z. Bratich, "Programming Reality: Control Society, New Subjects and the Powers of Transformation," in *Makeover Television: Realities Remodelled*, ed. Dana Heller (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 6-7.

⁸ Hill, *Reality TV*, 3.

⁹ Hill, *Reality TV*, 215.

¹⁰ Hill, *Reality TV*, 215.

¹¹ Fitzgerald, "Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry," 30.

¹² Tania Lewis, "Changing rooms, biggest losers and backyard blitzes: A history of makeover television in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia", *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 22, no. 4 (August 2008), 455.

¹³ Tim Kroenert, "Keeping it real," *Inside Film: IF*, no. 144 (November 2011), 49.

¹⁴ Lewis, "Changing rooms, biggest losers and backyard blitzes," 456.

¹⁵ Siobhan Duck, "Hannah's lobster risotto fails to tickle the taste buds," *Herald Sun*, 17 October 2011, <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/hannahs-lobster-risotto-fails-to-tickle-the-taste-buds/story-e6frf96f-1226167933337> (20 March 2012).

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, "Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry," 31.

¹⁷ Ron Sirak, "Sports is reality TV", *GolfWorld* (29 October 2004), 13. Original emphasis.

¹⁸ Fritz Quindt, "To Know List 1: A blitz package of sports-themed reality shows," *Sporting News* 228, no. 12 (22 March 2004), 4. Original emphasis.

¹⁹ Ian McDonald, "Situating the Sport Documentary," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 31 (2007), 208.

²⁰ McDonald, "Situating the Sport Documentary," 211.

²¹ McDonald, "Situating the Sport Documentary," 210.

²² John Hughson, "Sport and History on the Ground: Documentary and the Feature Film," *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* 12, no. 1 (2009), 119.

²³ Laurie Ouellette, "Reality TV Gives Back: On the Civic Functions of Reality Entertainment," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 68.

²⁴ Ouellette, "Reality TV Gives Back," 68-69.

²⁵ Dana Heller, "Introduction: Reading the Makeover," in *Makeover Television 2*.

²⁶ Brenda Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship and Celebrity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 35.

²⁷ Bratich, "Programming Reality," 9

²⁸ L.S. Kim, "Race and reality...TV", *FlowTV* 1, no. 4 (2004), <http://flowtv.org/2004/11/race-and-realitytv/> (15 March 2012).

²⁹ Emma Price, "Reinforcing the Myth: Constructing Australian Identity in 'Reality TV,'" *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 3 (June 2010), 452.

³⁰ Price, "Reinforcing the Myth," 457.

³¹ Price, "Reinforcing the Myth," 458.

³² Tom O'Regan, *Australian Television Culture* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 81.

³³ Briefly, the stockman can be understood as similar to a cowboy; the larrikin is a jovial and somewhat mischievous but well-meaning character; the bushman is a pioneering figure who lives and works in the Australian bush, and the itinerant version of this is known as a

swagman, made famous by the song *Waltzing Matilda*; and the digger is an Australian soldier, a term popularised after the First World War.

³⁴ Linzi Murrie, "The Australian Legend: Writing Australian Masculinity/Writing 'Australian' Masculine," *Journal of Australian Studies* 22, no. 56 (1998), 68.

³⁵ Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay, and David Rowe, *Globalisation and Sport: Playing the World* (London: SAGE, 2001), 118-119.

³⁶ Carniel, "Sheilas, Wogs and Metrosexuals," 80.

³⁷ Murrie, "The Australian Legend," 70. See also Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958).

³⁸ Christine Quail, "Nerds, Geeks, and the Hip/Square Dialectic in Contemporary Television," *Television New Media* 12 (2011), 461.

³⁹ Andrew P. Smiler, "Living the Image: A Quantitative Approach to Delineating Masculinities," *Sex Roles* 55 (2006), 625.

⁴⁰ Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 (1999), 261.

⁴¹ Kendall, "Nerd Nation," 264.

⁴² Jessica Carniel, "Sheilas, Wogs and Metrosexuals: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Australian Soccer," *Soccer & Society* 10, no. 1 (January 2009), 74.

⁴³ Weber, *Makeover TV*, 172.

⁴⁴ While the age of majority in Australia is now eighteen, the twenty-first birthday is traditionally celebrated as a further milestone in young adulthood.

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