

# Competitive sport and social capital in rural Australia

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## Abstract

Sport is often regarded as an important part of life in rural Australia, contributing to community identity, sense of place, social interaction and good health. The involvement of rural citizens in sport also has the potential to contribute to social capital. Understood in simple terms as norms of reciprocity and associational life, social capital is often regarded as a positive resource in rural areas. Drawing on a case study of the Northern Wheatbelt of Western Australia, this paper examines the links between sport and social capital in a rural region. In particular, it considers the ways in which sport acts as a vehicle for the creation and expression of social capital. The paper also considers the so-called darker side to social capital, and the extent to which this is evident in the Northern Wheatbelt. The paper shows that sport is an important arena for the creation and maintenance of social capital. However, it is also clear that this is being eroded as a result of wider processes of economic and social restructuring in rural Australia. The paper also points out that the social capital generated by sport is often fragile, and can lead to social exclusion and marginality for some residents.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most distinctive characteristics of many Australian country towns and regions is the role that competitive sport plays in local social, cultural, political and economic relations. Indeed, popular myth often holds that sport is a binding thread in rural areas, contributing to local identity, sense of community and a spirit of egalitarianism (see [Cashman, 2002](#)). While this is almost certainly an over-exaggeration, and ignores questions of exclusion and inequality, it is clear that sport is an important element in the lives of many rural citizens ([Bourke, 2001](#)). Rarely, though, have the social dimensions of sport been given detailed attention by geographers, sociologists or other social scientists. Indeed, much of the research on rural sport has focussed on questions associated with infrastructure provision, facilities management, physical activity, and health promotion.

This apparent oversight is all the more interesting given the growing body of research on rural social and economic conditions and, in particular, the role of social capital in rural communities. Understood simply as norms of reciprocity and associational life ([Das, 2004](#)), social capital is often regarded as resource that can contribute to social cohesion, resilience and adaptability. For a growing number of policy makers and academics, social capital is a positive attribute that can help communities to respond to challenges, such as depopulation, service withdrawal, environmental degradation and so on ([Cocklin and Alston, 2003](#); [Sobels et al., 2001](#)). There are also those who suggest that it can also help to overcome social and economic divisions and antagonism ([Black and Hughes, 2001](#)).

An important vehicle for both the creation and expression of social capital is voluntary organisations and associations ([Field, 2003](#)). To date, however, very few studies have considered the role that citizens' involvement in sporting clubs and competition plays in the creation, maintenance and expression of social capital in rural areas. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to examine the links between participation in

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sporting clubs and the creation and expression of social capital in a rural region in Western Australia. The paper begins by discussing the recent literature on social capital, particularly in relation to wider processes of economic and social restructuring. The paper then considers various aspects of participation in sport and the way in which this can help to shed light on key elements of social capital theory, including the role of networks, trust and a sense of reciprocity. Finally, the paper examines the so-called darker side of social capital, including elements of social exclusion and marginality.

## 2. Social capital and sport

The past decade has witnessed the rise of social capital as an important concept in academic and policy debates. While the term has a long history (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), its recent use is often linked to the writings of political scientist Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000). He argues that social capital is about the connections between individuals and refers to the “features of social life—networks, norms and trust—that enable participants to act together to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam, 1995, pp. 664–665). In a similar vein, Cox (1995, p. 15) describes social capital as the “social fabric or glue” that ties members of a given place to one another. At the heart of the concept lie norms of trust and reciprocity (Field, 2003). The networks and social norms associated with social capital are created through various forms of engagement in associational and civic activities that involve personal interaction, thereby producing greater disposition towards trust and reciprocity (Mohan and Mohan, 2002).

Social capital is not necessarily a static and unchanging concept, and will vary considerably across space and time. Indeed, this is a theme taken up by Mohan and Mohan (2002) who argue that in attempting to understand the nature of social capital it is important to recognise that its form will vary considerably depending on geographical and social context (see also Onyx and Bullen, 2000). One element of this is the difference between what Putnam (2000) has called bridging (or inclusive) and bonding (or exclusive) social capital (see also Black and Hughes, 2001; Woolcock, 2001). Bonding social capital refers to trust and reciprocity within dense or closed networks. It tends to be inward looking and reinforces exclusive identities and homogenous groups (e.g. the bonds within a closely knit sporting club). By contrast, bridging social capital refers to wider overlapping networks that generate broader identities and reciprocity (e.g. links between people from other social groups which may differ in religion, ethnicity, or socio-economic status). This form of capital, while more fragile than bonding social capital,

can make available resources and opportunities that exist in one network available to the members of another. Heterogeneity or diversity of network members in both formal and informal groups is argued to enhance the bridging capabilities of social capital (Stone and Hughes, 2002).

In general, social capital tends to have been regarded, perhaps rather naively, as something that produces largely beneficial outcomes for both individuals and communities (Mohan and Mohan, 2002). For individuals, social capital is alleged to promote better health, social and economic support networks, improved employment opportunities, and a climate of entrepreneurship (Coleman, 1994; Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Pearce and Davey-Smith, 2003). At the wider community level, social capital has been argued to contribute to social cohesion and harmony, economic and social development (through access to shared resources, including labour and capital), lower crime rates, and more effective democratic procedures (Field, 2003).

There is also a ‘darker side’ to social capital. While networks and the associated norms of trust and reciprocity can be beneficial for those inside a particular network, the external effects on others can be negative. Black and Hughes (2001) argue that these norms can easily form the basis for prejudice or hostility towards ‘outsiders’ (see, for example, Tonts, 2001). Thus, social capital can, in some cases, be linked to problems such as racism, sectarianism, social exclusion, and corruption (Field, 2003). The message from a number of scholars is: just as economic capital can have positive and negative implications, so too can social capital (Black and Hughes, 2001).

Despite social capital having both positive and negative elements, at the centre of Putnam’s (2000) research has been a concern with the general decline of social capital in the United States. He suggests that the bonds and bridges that make up social capital have been steadily eroded over the past few decades, largely as a result of declining levels of sociability, the rise of television as a dominant form of leisure, the erosion of trust in government, institutions and individuals, and a growing emphasis on individuality ahead of notions of ‘collective good’. In other parts of the world, scholars have also attempted to track changes in social capital (see, for example, Hall, 1999; Zhao, 2002; Baron et al., 2000; Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Das, 2004). However, one of the problems in determining levels of social capital is measurement. Most often, social capital has been measured by analysing trends in, inter alia, participation in clubs and voluntary activities, voting rates, attending church, sense of community, and various measures of trust and confidence in governments and other institutions (e.g. Hall, 1999; Stone and Hedges, 2002; Das, 2004). However, the underlying methodological problem is how to make explicit the link between, for

example, participation in community organisations and the creation and maintenance of social capital. A more serious issue with the concept is that it tends to be characterised by logical circularity: social capital as a property is simultaneously ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ (Portes, 1998). In other words, the factors used to measure social capital are often taken as the same factors that contribute to its production. In response to this argument, a number of scholars have suggested that social capital is a relational concept and that a linear approach to understanding it is problematic (Schuller et al., 2000). Social capital is a complex phenomenon embedded in the behaviour, culture and institutions of social groups and cannot be easily measured. One of the main problems is that there tends to have been a relatively heavy reliance on trying to quantify social capital and statistically measure cause and effect, rather than accepting it as a rather subjective and highly nuanced quality (see also Boix and Posner, 1998; Schuller et al., 2000). Accordingly, there are increasing calls for approaches that recognise the multidimensional and complex nature of social capital (Das, 2004). The outcome has been a growing number of studies that utilise both quantitative and qualitative methods in their attempts to uncover the nature and role of social capital (Field, 2003).

For those interested in social capital, studies of sport and sporting clubs have gradually become a more serious avenue of inquiry. The associational nature of sports participation (and particularly sporting clubs) is sometimes seen as a forum for the creation of social capital (Jarvie, 2003). Indeed, a significant component of Putnam’s (2000) analysis of the decline of social capital in the United States was focussed on a tendency amongst a growing number of people not to participate in traditional sporting clubs (e.g. his observation that Americans are now ‘bowling alone’ rather than bowling as part of a team or club). At the same time, however, he notes the emergence of new sports (e.g. youth soccer) with high levels of participation and civic engagement.

There is evidence that sport provides opportunities for the development of both bridging and bonding social capital. For example, Harris (1998) suggests that sport can be used to foster new friendships and social connectivity, often across class, religious and ethnic boundaries. This can include players, non-playing participants (e.g. coaches) and spectators and can ultimately lead to increases in the norms of trust and reciprocity. In other words, it provides bridges or links between different groups and social networks. Sport can also act as what Putnam (2000, p. 23) might describe as ‘sociological superglue’, bonding people together through a sense of pride, common purpose, and commitment to place (see also Bale, 2003). For example, research by Hague and Mercer (1998) in the small Scottish town of Kirkcaldy demonstrates how the local football team helped to create a sense of identity and

strong attachment to the locality. In essence, the club provided a basis for the formation of bonding social capital. In a somewhat different vein, Wacquant’s (2003) ethnographic research in a boxing club in Chicago points to the role of sport in creating tightly knit, or bonded, social groups.

Of course, it is important not to romanticise the role of sport. Indeed, numerous studies point to inequalities and social divisions associated with sport. In some cases this can be linked to the negative outcomes of social capital. Strong bonds within sporting clubs or organisations can make them homogeneous in their membership and relatively hostile toward outsiders. Jarvie and Burnett (2000), for example, point to the exclusive and elitist nature of many golf clubs in Scotland. They suggest that certain clubs are secretive, closed entities that tend to be hostile towards outsiders. Similarly, participation in sport in some parts of rural Australia is sharply divided according to class, status and ethnicity (Wild, 1974; Whittaker and Banwell, 2002). The outcome is clubs and organisations that tend to be exclusive in one way or another and unwelcoming of those demonstrating some form of ‘difference’ to the dominant group.

There is also likely to be a geographical dimension to the relationship between social capital and sport. This is particularly true for team sports that are anchored to particular places. Indeed, it may be the case that the formation of social capital around sporting teams within a locality could act as a barrier to the formation of social capital at wider geographical scales. For example, in the case of Kirkcaldy in Scotland, does the intense loyalty and support for Raith Rovers described by Hague and Mercer (1998) limit the potential for the formation of bridging capital with neighbouring towns or regions? Certainly Atherley’s (2003) research on competition between football teams in rural Australia suggests that the intense local bonds that form within particular clubs can undermine efforts to establish cooperative ventures in both sport and other spheres of rural life. In such cases, it would appear that bonding social capital at the local level is undermining the formation of bridging capital at a wider regional level (see also Maloney et al., 2000, p. 218). Indeed, Putnam (2002) has also recognised the possibility that some forms of bonding ties may inhibit the formation of the looser bridging links that may be required to resolve larger collective problems. This, in turn, begs the question ‘to what extent is the social capital formed through sport directly transferable to other arenas of social life?’

### 3. Rural restructuring and social capital

One of the longstanding concerns of rural geographers, sociologists and other social scientists has been to

better understand the way in which broad processes of global economic restructuring are affecting rural regions and localities. This has been a particularly important theme in Australia, where many rural areas and communities have experienced a range of significant social and economic changes in recent decades (see Cocklin and Dibdin, 2005; Pritchard and McManus, 2000; Gray and Lawrence, 2001). The economic restructuring of agriculture in Australia has resulted in a situation where farm incomes have steadily fallen and forced many families to leave the industry. Indeed, recent estimates suggest that the total number of farms operating in Australia fell from around 201,000 in 1960 to a little over 145,000 in 2000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Much of the evidence indicates that these families rarely remain in rural areas, and tend to migrate to cities or the coast (McKenzie, 1994).

The restructuring occurring in agriculture has had direct flow on effects for the country towns that service the industry. Fewer farm families, and reduced local spending by remaining producers, has undermined local economies, contributing to business closures, falling employment opportunities, and further outmigration (Smailes, 1997, 2001; Hugo 2005). More recently, these changes have been exacerbated by a general shift away from government policies based on socio-spatial equity, towards those that emphasise economic efficiency (Tonts, 2005). The subsequent reforms in public policy have seen the withdrawal of many services that are essential to both the identity and survival of country towns, such as the local school or post office, on the grounds that their provision cannot be justified in narrow economic terms. Needless to say, the impact of such changes on the well-being of rural people has received considerable attention (see HREOC, 1998; Black et al., 2000; Haslam-McKenzie, 2000; Alston, 2005).

Most of these studies considered issues such as income, access to services, health status and educational attainment. Somewhat surprisingly though, there has been relatively little attention paid to the impacts of restructuring on the socio-cultural dimensions of rural life, such as voluntary organisations, sporting clubs, church attendance, social networks or cultural norms. This is despite a widespread recognition that these are critical components of the social fabric of rural areas (see Wild, 1974; Oxley, 1974; Poiner, 1990; Dempsey, 1990; Gray, 1991). More recently, however, the rising prominence of social capital as an analytical framework has seen a growing number of scholars give more explicit attention to the links between restructuring and these socio-cultural dimensions of rural life (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Whittaker and Banwell, 2002; Cocklin and Alston, 2003). While it is difficult to draw any universal conclusions from this research, it is apparent that population decline, service withdrawal, and financial

hardship are eroding social capital in a number of Australia's rural communities. Notwithstanding this trend, much of the research points to potential for remaining social capital to be harnessed in such a way that it can revitalise local economies, solve environmental problems and improve socio-economic well-being (Sobels et al., 2001; Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Cocklin and Alston, 2003).

A small number of studies have also made reference to the possible impacts of restructuring on sporting clubs in rural Australia. Atherley (2003), for example, demonstrates how longstanding patterns of population decline have resulted in the gradual demise of numerous sporting clubs in a rural district of Western Australia. She goes on to suggest that one of the outcomes has been the erosion of social networks, local bonds and sense of community. Other studies have noted the gradual demise of many sporting clubs in rural areas and speculated about the implications for rural social systems and the well-being of residents (Jones, 1993; Smailes, 1997; Haslam-McKenzie, 2000). To date, however, none of these have looked explicitly at the relationship between rural restructuring, sport and social capital.

#### 4. Methods

The focus of this research is a mixed crop and livestock farming area in the Northern Wheatbelt of Western Australia (see Fig. 1). The region consists of seven small inland country towns, with populations ranging from less than 200 to 629 (Table 1). Over recent decades, it has experienced considerable socio-economic upheaval associated with broader processes of restructuring in Australia's agricultural sector. The outcome has been a gradual reduction in the total number of farm families in the region and a concomitant pattern of decline in the small towns that service the agricultural industry. Indeed, during the past decade, all of the region's towns experienced considerable population decline (ABS, 2004). Other problems common to many rural regions within Australia, such as an aging population, service withdrawal, restricted employment opportunities, low incomes and the collapse of social institutions are also affecting the Northern Wheatbelt.

Two main data collection methods were used. The first was a series of face-to-face interviews with 40 residents, including representatives from sporting clubs, local voluntary groups, and local government. Most of the interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h. The interviews were used to gather information on the role of sport in social life, the networks associated with sport, participation and volunteering, and the links between sport and other realms of rural life, such as economic development. The second main method was a

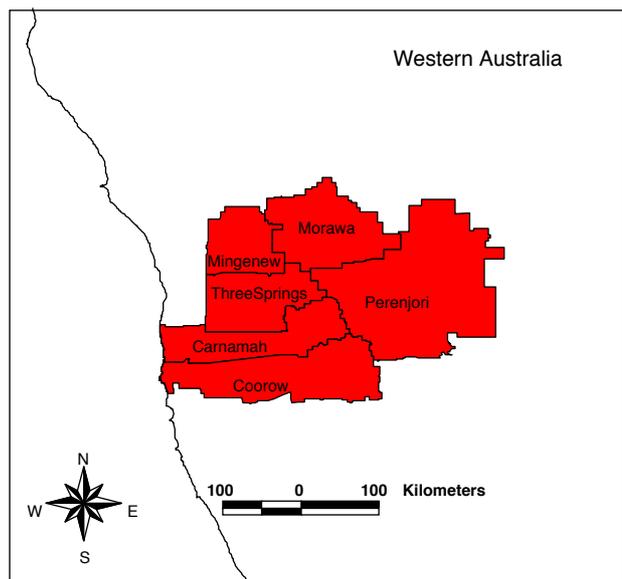


Fig. 1. The Northern Wheatbelt case study region.

Table 1  
Population structure of the Northern Wheatbelt region, 2001

Local government area	Town population	Rural balance	Total
Carnamah	359	491	850
Coorow	240	1101	1341
Mingenev	306	239	545
Morawa	629	305	934
Mullewa	532	561	1093
Perenjori	n/a <sup>a</sup>	600	600
Three Springs	473	262	735
Total	2539	3559	6098

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004).

<sup>a</sup>Population figures for settlements with populations less than 200 are not published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. According to the Shire of Perenjori, the townsite of Perenjori has a resident population of about 185.

questionnaire survey that was sent to 50% of the region’s households (588). A total of 285 useable questionnaires were returned (48.5%). The questionnaire contained a combination of quantitative and qualitative elements and included a number of questions

on perceptions of ‘community’, levels of participation in sport, and the social role of sport in rural life. In addition to these two main sources, the research drew on qualitative data obtained from numerous informal discussions with residents of the region, many of which were at local sporting events.

### 5. Participation in sporting clubs

Sporting clubs have traditionally been regarded as an important forum of civic engagement in Australian rural communities (Wild, 1974; Forster, 1988; Bourke, 2001). While not referring explicitly to the concept of social capital, a number of studies also suggest that sport is an important vehicle for the production and expression of social capital. For example, in their study of a rural community in Victoria in the 1950s, Oeser and Emery (1954) describe sport as a cohesive force and a temporary solvent of status differences. Similarly, McIntyre and McIntyre (1944) point to the importance of sport in facilitating local social activity and interaction. They also suggested that, during the 1940s, participation in sporting clubs in rural areas tended to be extremely high. Indeed, this is still the case for many parts of rural Australia. According to recent research by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001), in Australia’s six state capitals 25% of all individuals over the age of 15 participated in organised sport, either as a player or in some other capacity, such as an umpire, coach or assistant. By comparison, 30% of people in the remainder of Australia (including regional cities such as Newcastle and Townsville) are involved in sport. The survey of the households in the Northern Wheatbelt of Western Australia suggests that participation in agricultural regions might be even higher still, with some 63.4% ( $n = 375$ ) over the age of 15 playing some form of organised sport. When children under the age of 15 are taken into account, of the 814 people in the survey a total of 501 played at least one sport (61.5%). The gender differences in participation were minimal, with 60% of females and 62.8% of males playing sport. The sports that residents of the region participate in are reasonably diverse, although conform to what Cashman (1995) has described as typical ‘rural sports’. In winter, the most popular sports in the study area are Australian rules football, golf, hockey and netball (Table 2). The most popular summer sports are tennis, basketball, lawn bowls and cricket.

There are a number of apparent reasons for the high levels of participation in sport in Australian rural communities. Firstly, given the small size and relative remoteness of these communities there are few opportunities for engagement in formalised recreation and leisure activities. The absence of facilities such as cinemas, entertainment arcades, cafes and cultural

Table 2  
Participation in different sports by age in the Northern Wheatbelt

	0–14	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+	Total
Tennis	18	21	34	45	21	9	1	149
Australian rules football	65	36	17	12	4	0	0	134
Golf	2	5	24	38	27	12	4	112
Basketball	35	36	18	11	7	0	0	107
Hockey	56	11	16	11	3	0	0	97
Lawn bowls	1	1	11	26	24	10	19	92
Netball	35	18	11	20	1	0	0	85
Swimming	46	6	1	7	2	1	0	63
Cricket	4	11	6	9	1	0	0	31
Badminton	5	1	2	9	4	0	0	21
Other sports	23	15	8	14	5	2	1	68

Source: Northern Wheatbelt Household Survey (2002).

facilities means that sport has few competitors in the recreation and leisure market. Secondly, sport has traditionally acted as a node for social interaction in country towns, and non-participation can lead to social exclusion (Greble, 1979). As such, participation in sport provides access to social networks and helps provide a sense of connectivity amongst residents—a theme taken up later in this paper. Finally, in a region that has suffered a combination of drought and low farm incomes, sport provides a relatively affordable form of recreation and social engagement.

In addition to participation as a player, a total of 73 people captured in the survey were involved in sports solely as a non-playing participant, such as an umpire, coach or spectator. The level of support from non-players at certain sporting events is particularly high. Australian rules football matches, for example, regularly attract 2–300 spectators. In towns with relatively small populations this represents a considerable local following. There are often large numbers of volunteers involved in the administration and management of sporting clubs and events. A number of interviewees also pointed out that there are many residents who do not participate actively in any capacity but maintain a close interest and affiliation with local sports. This might involve attending various fundraising events, following sport closely in the local newspaper, or engaging in local conversations with players and other supporters about the performance of particular teams.

There is, however, considerable evidence pointing to declining levels of participation in sport in the Northern Wheatbelt. This is largely linked to wider processes of rural restructuring that have contributed to a deteriorating regional economy and a process of outmigration and depopulation. Indeed, the total population of the region fell from 8043 to 6098 between the 1981 and 2001 censuses; a decrease of 24.2%. Not only did this contribute to the closure of a number of businesses and services, but also to the collapse of a range of voluntary organisations and social institutions. In terms

of sporting clubs, dwindling numbers over the past decade have resulted in the loss of three of the region's cricket clubs, the closure of one football club and the demise of a number of basketball, badminton and tennis clubs. It is, however, difficult to know how *per capita* involvement in sport has changed over this period. Participation rates remain much higher than the national average, and interviews with local residents suggest that, notwithstanding some club closures, local enthusiasm for sport has not waned significantly over recent years. This was also noted by Jones (1993) who found that sporting clubs were usually the last organisations to fold in small declining communities, often lasting longer than local shops, pubs and churches.

The relatively high levels of participation rates in sport (by both players and non-players) in the Northern Wheatbelt provides some indication of its potential to act as an arena through which social capital is produced and maintained. However, documenting levels of participation in organisations does not in itself provide insights into social capital (Field, 2003). Ostensibly, participation simply suggests that a network may exist that has the capacity to contribute to social capital. In developing a fuller understanding of the link between sport and social capital, it is important to consider the nature of the relationships between individuals and the extent to which these might reflect the concept's intrinsic attributes.

## 6. Social connectivity

The importance of sport in providing a forum for the formation and maintenance of networks was highlighted by a survey question that asked respondents to nominate what they regarded as the three most important aspects of sport in their local area (Table 3). Of the 522 responses to this question, a total of 233 (44.7%) suggested that one of the three most important aspects of being involved in sport was social interaction.

When taken as a proportion of all surveyed households, 82% suggested social interaction was the most important aspect of sport. The next most popular categories were health and fitness and community spirit or bonding. Thus, it would appear that one of the central reasons for people participating in sport is to interact and engage with other people. This has the potential to be an element in the production and maintenance of social capital. A similar set of findings also emerged when residents were asked to respond to a number of statements about sport (Table 4). A total of 93% felt that sport was an important way of keeping in touch with friends and neighbours, while 91.2% indicated that it was important in promoting a local ‘sense of community’.

The survey findings were supported by data collected during face-to-face interviews with residents. Participation in sport was rarely viewed simply as a form of physical activity and exercise, but more as a form of social interaction. Importantly, this interaction was generally seen as leading to stronger connections between individuals and groups within a particular community. As one interviewee pointed out:

In a lot of ways sport is a sort of glue that keeps us all together. Most people follow it or are involved in one way or another, and I think this means that we get to know each other better. Lots of benefits flow on from that, the main one being that I think we are generally

a pretty tight knit and proud community. (*Male interviewee, aged 30–40, Coroow*)

In a similar vein, a resident suggested that Australian rules football was important in overcoming isolation and ensuring a degree of social connectivity in local communities:

That’s an important aspect of the footy, it’s a family day. It’s a very social aspect of a small town, sport in general, because without any sport people will stay on their farms and not come in during the winter months and socialise as much. (*Male interviewee, aged 40–50, Carnamah*)

It was also evident that sport is an important form of social interaction for more than just players and their families. Indeed, spectators and other non-playing participants were seen as intimately bound up in the social relations surrounding sporting events:

It doesn’t really matter if you don’t play. The main thing is to get involved and show an interest. Going to footy is as much about being with your friends and part of the community as getting fit. (*Male interviewee, aged 40–50, Three Springs*)

Certainly the evidence would suggest that sport plays a role in the formation of networks that contribute to both bridging and bonding capital. Residents saw sport as a focal point of community life that brings people together and creates an opportunity for meaningful social interaction. The role of bonding capital was particularly evident, with numerous people discussing the way in which sport creates a sense of local pride and forms the basis of a ‘tight knit’ community. This was particularly evident when local teams played against those from other communities. In the case of Australian rules football, for example, competition between teams was generally seen as synonymous with competition between communities. The result was what Alomes (1994) has referred to as ‘sporting tribalism’ where individuals form strong social bonds in support of a particular team. In the words of one local footballer:

We’re not doing this for ourselves, it’s for everyone from here. If we get flogged, in a funny way people see that as a bad reflection on the town. This puts a fair bit of pressure on us, but it helps build a pretty

Table 3  
Most important aspects of local sport according to survey respondents

	Number	Percentage of all responses (n = 522)	Percentage of households (n = 285)
Community spirit/bonding	78	14.9	27.4
Social interaction	233	44.7	81.8
Health and fitness	95	18.2	33.3
Competition	22	4.2	7.8
Relaxation	36	6.9	12.6
Other	58	11.1	20.4

Source: Northern Wheatbelt Household Survey (2002).

Table 4  
Residents’ perspectives on sport and social connections

	Agree	Disagree	No opinion	No response	Total	N
Sport is an important way of keeping in touch with friends and neighbours	93.0	1.0	1.4	1.6	100	285
Sport is important in promoting a sense of community in this area	91.2	2.8	1.4	4.6	100	285
Sporting clubs in this town are cliquey and not welcoming of newcomers	8.1	79.3	8.1	4.5	100	285

Source: Northern Wheatbelt Household Survey (2002).

strong spirit. There's nothing like going down the road a beating the pants off the opposition. (*Male interviewee, aged 15–20, Three Springs*)

Similar sentiments were expressed by another player, who claimed that it was difficult to separate the football club with a common sense of community identity:

During the season it's all people talk about. It gets everybody together, and probably gives us all something in common. It's also funny how when we're playing we're more than a footy team—we're the whole town if you know what I mean. People see us and our supporters at games and to them the way we play and everything pretty much sums up our town. (*Male interviewee, aged 20–30, Mullewa*)

While there is certainly an element of bonding social capital apparent here, sport was also seen as contributing to bridging social capital. Indeed, local residents often placed considerable emphasis on the way in which sport was able to transcend class, ethnic, religious and other barriers. For example, one resident claimed:

It really doesn't matter too much about your background. Sport really is a great leveller, so there are people from all walks of life here: farmers, council workers, teachers, the whole lot really. (*Female interviewee, aged 40–50, Mullewa*)

Another resident argued that in small rural communities there was a need to overcome social barriers if sporting clubs and other organisations were to survive. It was pointed out that the small population of the region and towns meant that exclusivity would result in clubs being unviable because of too few participants. This was also noted by Dempsey (1990) in his study of a Victorian country town, where overcoming class, status and ethnic barriers was a necessary ingredient for the survival of organisations. In addition, Dempsey's study suggested that the bridging links created as a result of this helped to contribute to a degree of local social cohesion. This was also apparent in the Northern Wheatbelt:

One of the reasons I think we have a good community spirit and people generally get on ok is our sports. We all mix a lot and socialise together. There's all different types in there (playing sport) so you get to know about each other a bit better. I reckon that's why there's so many social troubles in Perth. It's because they don't mix with other types much. (*Female interviewee, aged 40–50, Morawa*)

This sentiment was expressed by a number of other interviewees and tends to reinforce Putnam's (2000) argument about the need for social interaction that helps to form heterogeneous groups. This, he argued, helps to create communities that are more under-

standing and accepting of social and cultural 'difference'. To some extent, this was reflected in discussions about sport and ethnicity in the Northern Wheatbelt. A number of Aboriginal residents commented on how sport helped, at least in part, to overcome the problem of racism and a certain degree of social exclusion:

I never really felt like an outsider. I was always part of the team and I reckon it made me a lot of white mates. Things were always easier for me than my relatives, because I played footy. If you didn't, you're just another Blackfella. (*Male interviewee, aged 30–40, Three Springs*)

This comment is particularly noteworthy as it points to the role of sport in facilitating a sense of inclusion, at least for participants. Indeed, it may be the case that sport is helping to contribute to social networks that might not otherwise be created. However, it is also clear that non-participation could hinder or prevent the development of social networks across racial lines. The role of sport in creating links between different racial groups was also noted by a number of white residents. For example:

Aboriginal people are just part of the team. Their race is not an issue and they are treated just the same as everyone. It's a good chance for lots of mixing. (*Male interviewee, aged 50–60, Morawa*)

The potential integrating role of sport was also noted by Elkington (1982) in a study of social relations in regional Victoria. He claimed that sport is a great equalizer drawing people from diverse backgrounds together and providing public admiration of individuals regardless of their ethnicity. However, it is important not to romanticise about the apparent social virtues of sport. Indeed, as outlined later in this paper, there is considerable evidence to suggest that race, as well as class and status, shape the nature of social networks and interaction. Notwithstanding these comments, sport does appear to play a significant part to building a degree of bridging social capital. The networks that are created through sport can connect different social groups that might otherwise remain disconnected from one another. Some of the positive outcomes of this bridging include a relatively high degree of local social harmony and, perhaps, the prospect for greater cross-cultural understanding and reconciliation. It might also be the case that these bridges can provide a springboard for further social interaction and collaboration.

## 7. Volunteering

No sports in the Northern Wheatbelt are run by paid professionals, with all administration and fundraising undertaken by local volunteers. Furthermore, it is often

volunteers who construct and maintain sporting facilities in the region's country towns. This demands considerable amounts of time and resources. For example, the Corroow Football Club relies on at least 20 volunteers to administer the organisation and run matches. One interviewee from the club estimated that volunteers donated around 950 h a year on match days alone. This includes running the bar and canteen, some umpiring and coaching, staffing the ticket booth, and the provision of ambulance officers. When non-match day volunteering is taken into account (e.g. committee meetings, fundraising activities, etc.) it was conservatively estimated that more than 2000 h a year were donated by volunteers.

The role of volunteers in constructing and maintaining sporting facilities was particularly noteworthy. While major facilities were usually provided by the local government, it was often the case that volunteers still provided labour and other resources to assist in their construction. It was widely accepted that without this support, local authorities may not be able to provide facilities at all. Consequently, volunteers had donated time and expertise to projects such as the construction of new cricket training facilities, the upgrading of golf courses, the resurfacing of tennis courts, and the refurbishment of club houses and changing rooms. The fundraising activities of volunteers were also considerable. For example, it was not uncommon for sporting clubs to provide the manual labour needed by farmers to transport hay from paddocks to storage facilities in return for a cash donation.

The commitment of volunteers to sporting clubs was not restricted to the Northern Wheatbelt, and is a common feature of many small towns (Greble, 1979; Rice, 1993; Atherley, 2003). Indeed, reporting on research conducted in Victoria, Elkington (1982, p. 75) noted "in small rural communities volunteerism and recreation activities are a vital part of the functioning and character of a community". For example, in the small Western Australian town of Pingelly the process of laying a new synthetic surface on the local bowling green relied almost entirely on volunteer labour and resources (Atherley, pers comm.). A local farmer donated land, fertiliser and seed to grow a wheat crop that would provide the funding for the venture, while another resident donated his time and truck to transport soils and other materials, travelling a total of 1116 km. Other volunteers prepared the new green and laid the surface. The total project required an estimated 884 h of volunteer labour and involved some 20 club members.

The role of volunteers is particularly important with regard to social capital. Indeed, a number of scholars highlight the role of volunteering in the formation and reproduction of social capital, since it generally involves a degree of trust, altruism and reciprocity (Cox, 1995;

Putnam, 2000; Black and Hughes, 2001; Field, 2003). Certainly in the case of the Northern Wheatbelt, these elements were evident in a number of the interviews with residents:

I don't think anyone much really expects anything from it. It's really just a community thing and everyone pitching in makes this a better place to live in I guess. A big part of it is, I'm not sure of the word, but probably camaraderie, with us all working together to get a community wide benefit. (*Female interviewee, aged 60–70, Perenjori*)

This keeps me involved in things. I don't play anymore, but I can still do my bit. I played for the club for 10 years, so it's the least I can do. Also, it's a good excuse for a booze-up with the boys. (*Male interviewee, aged 30–40, Corroow*)

We're in there because it's important for our community. I spend hours and hours working for the footy club and I love it. I know that lots of people get a lot of enjoyment out of it, and I do too. I don't even think of it as work, it's just something that I do. A hobby or pastime I suppose. (*Female interviewee, aged 50–60, Carnamah*)

Generally, volunteers expected no direct financial or other return for donating their time, labour and expertise. However, it was pointed out by some interviewees that there could be additional benefits from volunteering, both in terms of the individual and the local economy. For individuals, it was recognised that volunteering could help strengthen networks and add to the perception that an individual was 'a good bloke' or 'community minded'. This could be especially important if someone was in small business and these perceptions translated into additional trade. At a wider level, it was noted that the activities of sporting clubs could generate local economic benefits. For example, while labour needed to be donated for the construction of facilities, materials still needed to be purchased. It was claimed that there was a general tendency in such cases to 'buy local'. If the absence of volunteering meant that these projects would not occur, this potentially reduces (albeit only slightly) levels of economic activity.

One of the problems facing the Northern Wheatbelt, as in many other regions, is the decline of population and the overall reduction in the number of people who are willing and able to act as volunteers. One resident described the outcome as "volunteer burnout", with some people simply being overwhelmed by the increasing responsibilities. In part this is not only the result of population decline, but also part of an increasing emphasis on volunteerism in Australian society. Traditional volunteer tasks, such as running sporting clubs, have been accompanied by a range of new activities that require volunteer involvement, such as environmental management, welfare activities and

economic development strategies. The following helps to illustrate the pressures facing clubs and individuals:

“the population decline here has made it harder to put together a committee. We’ve had the same faces on ours (committee) for the past few years, and there just isn’t anybody to replace us. The problem is we’re all doing other things around town as well. I’m on the committee for Landcare, the Fire Brigade and the cricket... It gets pretty wearing after a while”. (*Male interviewee, aged 50–60, Carnamah*)

Thus, while sporting clubs and the associated activity of volunteers may have traditionally been an important part of the formation and expressions of social capital in rural communities, there is a risk that this is under threat. Not only is population decline likely to impact on social capital (Cocklin and Alston, 2003), but the stocks of this ‘resource’ that remain may be insufficient to meet the needs of rural communities, particularly given the increasing emphasis by governments on volunteerism in other arenas of social life.

## 8. A darker side?

There is a growing body of literature which cautions against overemphasising the positive attributes of social capital, arguing that the formation of dense social networks based on trust and reciprocity might also have negative outcomes. In the case of the Northern Wheatbelt, there are some quite clear examples of sport and social capital having this so-called darker side. Perhaps most obviously, sport is often not the egalitarian institution that many residents claim. One of the most obvious forms of ‘social sorting’ in sport is linked to income. In some cases, this has a direct impact on the types of sports that people participated in and is, in part, linked to the class structure of small towns, with more wealthy business owners, farmers and public servants tending to dominate some sports, while other sports are more egalitarian in nature. For example, one interviewee pointed out that participation in golf was linked to affordability:

I’d like to play golf, but it’s just too expensive. You need the clubs and then have to pay membership and about ten dollars a weekend. It’s pretty exclusive because of that. Mostly farmers and shop owners. (*Male interviewee, aged 30–40, Three Springs*)

Another resident suggested that status and length of residents tended to determine membership of the golf club:

The Golf Club is pretty much a closed circle of old locals. I think they like to think of it as an upper class thing. (*Female interviewee, aged 30–40, Carnamah*)

The exclusivity of some sporting clubs was also noted by Wild (1974) in his study of Bowral in New South Wales. Wild found that class and status were particularly important in determining membership and participation. Thus, it is apparent that the social capital associated with sport may not be particularly even in its distribution. Furthermore, even in those clubs thought of as egalitarian and inclusive, such as Australian rules football, there appear to be fractures along class and status lines. For example, a resident of one of the Northern Wheatbelt towns noted:

Playing for the footy club is one thing. Anyone is welcome, especially if you’re any good. But the show is run by the same old crowd year in year out. It’s the old farmers really. So there’s a division, it’s just not on the ground. (*Male interviewee, aged 30–40, Mullewa*)

There are similarities here with the findings of Wild (1974) and Dempsey (1990), who suggest that, despite a degree of on-field egalitarianism, the behaviour of residents off the field was often divided along class and status lines. At football matches, for example, farmers and small business people often tended to mix together, with farm labourers and other ‘blue collar’ employees remaining visibly separate. It is also the case that in many of the clubs in the Northern Wheatbelt older established farming and small business families are prominent in management and administration. However, this is not always the case, and there are a number of examples of clubs that have elected senior officials who do not conform to this pattern and come from a range of income and occupational groups. It is also not necessarily the case that a community divided along class and status lines does not possess social capital. Putnam (2000), for example, suggests that bridging social capital should transcend these divisions. Thus, social capital is not necessarily a homogenising force, but one that can link or bind together diverse groups and individuals.

Notwithstanding this, it is apparent that some barriers present more serious challenges than others. This is most obvious in relation to ethnicity. As outlined earlier, one of the most prominent ethnic groups in both regions is the local Aboriginal population. At the 2001 Census, the Northern Wheatbelt had a total Aboriginal population of 581 people, or 9.5% of the total population. While there was a general belief that sport was inclusive, levels of Aboriginal participation remain quite low and tend to be restricted to particular sports, such as netball, basketball, and Australian rules football. Not only are these sports affordable, but popular myth suggests that these require considerable speed and athleticism and therefore are ideally suited to Aboriginal people (Tatz, 1996). It is also apparent that some sports, such as golf and lawn bowls, are seen as ‘white sports’,

with virtually no participation by Aboriginal people. Even in those sports that were seen as relatively inclusive (by both white and Aboriginal people), examples of racism, ethnic conflict and disharmony do occur. For example, one resident stated:

I've seen and heard some shocking things at times on both sides of the fence. It's not good but it happens. Sometimes in the heat of it all racism does come out. It's a shame, but it's part of the way it is. (*Female interviewee, aged 50–60, Mingenew*)

There was also a view amongst some residents that Aboriginal people are treated well and included as long as they are good players. For those who are not, social exclusion tends to remain the norm. In addition, when Aboriginal players retire from sport their status within the local community tends to be diminished. This raises questions about the ability of sport to build long-standing and meaningful social capital across different racial groups in Australian rural communities. While there are certainly some bridges built between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people through sport, it does not appear to have led to substantial changes to the social status of Indigenous people. However, it is important to stress that, if Aboriginal people did not participate in sport at all, the bridges between white and black would, in all likelihood, be far weaker.

There are also other residents that are excluded from sport in different ways. Perhaps one of the most obvious is associated with gender. A number of female residents pointed out that they were not welcome at some of the functions at football clubs, particularly training sessions and the 'booze ups' that often followed. The division of labour at club functions in a range of sports was also noted, with women usually responsible for activities such as preparing food, cooking and cleaning. This division of labour often contributed to a spatial division of labour within clubs, with women and men often occupying different parts of a club or venue, with little interaction (see also Wild, 1974; Dempsey, 1992). It was also noted that, in a number of the golf and lawn bowls clubs, women are not allowed to become full members and are only regarded as 'associate members'.

A number of interviewees also raised the problem of non-participation in sport. For those people who are not actively involved in or interested in sport there is often an acute sense of social exclusion. For example, one resident commented:

I find it a bit hard here, because I'm not into sport. It makes me a bit of an outcast really, and a lot of things seem to happen around you and you miss out. I think there is too much in sport here, and any of us who are not into it are out of the loop. (*Female interviewee, aged 20–30, Carnamah*)

Similarly, those who may not be particularly good at sport can also be marginalised. This suggests that the social capital associated with sport is exclusive, and can act to marginalise certain residents. This, of course, raises questions about the fungibility of this form of social capital (see Coleman, 1994). While 'sporting social capital' may be a valuable resource for those involved in sport, it may have limited use in other arenas of rural life.

## 9. Conclusion

Sport in the Northern Wheatbelt is an important part of life for many of the regions citizens. Not only does it provide an opportunity for physical activity and exercise but also, and perhaps more significantly, it offers a forum for social interaction and engagement. In this respect, sporting events and clubs can be conceptualised as nodes for local and regional social networks. Such networks form the basis for both the creation and expression of social capital. High levels of participation in sport, together with the considerable time and resources that residents were willing to provide as volunteers or supporters, helps to emphasise the sense of reciprocity and altruism often found in sporting clubs and associations. It was also evident that sport sometimes played an important bridging role between people from different ethnic, age, class and status groups. In many respects, these linkages tie in with Putnam's notion of 'bridging capital'. Similarly, the intense sense of loyalty and community identity that often builds up around local clubs tends to reflect the formation of 'bonding capital'. One of the obvious challenges facing the region is that economic restructuring and depopulation are undermining both social capital and the viability of sporting clubs and organisations. In the longer run, this has the potential to impact on institutions and cultural practices that are important elements of rural life.

It is also apparent, however, that the formation of social capital in and around sporting clubs is not without problems. Indeed, the so-called 'darker side' to social capital is often evident in the Northern Wheatbelt. In a number of cases, the networks and bonds associated with some clubs or particular sports acted to exclude certain citizens on the basis of race, class, gender and status. In the case of ethnicity, it is apparent that the bridges formed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are often quite weak and have not contributed to major improvements in the status or well-being of Indigenous people. Another obvious issue is non-participation in sport. For those who are unwilling or unable to become involved in sport, the outcome is often a degree of social exclusion. Not only are these people excluded from social

networks, but also from popular notions of community identity. However, while there are undoubtedly aspects of country sport that are problematic, its the positive contributions to rural life that should not be underestimated. Its role in fostering social interaction, a sense of place and community, and the range of physical and mental health benefits contribute significantly to the well-being of rural citizens.

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