**The Rules of the Crowd**

It was September 25, 2010, and the crowd was silent. I was at the AFL Grand Final for the first time in my life, there, hopefully, to see my team Collingwood win the premiership cup. It was a hard-fought game that had seen the Magpies on top by a razer's edge until the final quarter, where our opponents St Kilda seemed to will themselves into ascendency. Finally, the ball bounced through for a St Kilda behind in the 30th minute of the game, tying the match at 68 points apiece. The siren blew, and no song played: the 2010 AFL Grand Final was drawn in stunned silence.

For all that is made of AFL crowds as collective beings of volume and amplified emotion, I have never felt more aware of my place in a crowd than in that moment of silence. Strangers looked at each other, unsure of what would come next and unbelieving of what they'd seen. The players on the field simply collapsed in place, too spent to stand, and too numb from the sudden suck of atmosphere to act. It takes a great moment to quiet one hundred thousand people. Here was a vacuum that, in its silence, reminded me of the power of the crowd.

For those who attend them, AFL matches are volumetric masses of bodies that play by competing rulesets. First, we have the players on the ground, who improvise and flow around complicated protocols. AFL is a game of freedom in open geography: the earliest matches in the late 1850s were played in the massive paddock where the MCG is today, encompassing a ground of some 800 metres, and 40 players per side. The paddock also contained some enormous gum trees that blocked both the spectator's view and sometimes also the path of the ball, which players were happy to see bounce off trunks from time to time. Today, despite being a corporatised, professionalised sport, the sheer space and unpredictability of AFL means it still lacks the focus on intricate, pre-set plays found in soccer or rugby. It is improvised performance, bound by a complex ruleset of disposals, ball bouncing, lawful tackles, stoppages, and imagined and fast-moving 'protected zones' where players can and cannot move. It is difficult to capture this broad complexity on detail-oriented broadcast television, but watching AFL live in the stadium means watching a highly-trained mass of bodies, improvising in strictly regulated ways.

The crowd is, of course, the other great improvisational force at work at an AFL match. One of the highest-attended league sports anywhere in the world, AFL crowds respond to the events of the on-ground play within the architecture of their

seats or standing room, and the strictures of social convention. Crowds are, in some ways, regulated forces – a text-line at the MCG calls for patrons to report unruly behavior, along with their bay and row number, while specially-rostered police patrol the aisles and escort out drunken or over-aggressive spectators (usually to the soundtrack of theatrical boos offered by nearby supporters). In 2013, Sydney superstar Adam Goodes stopped playing and pointed at a Collingwood supporter who had racially abused him, breaking the barrier between crowd and player and highlighting the way that crowd improvisation is nonetheless still subject to consequence. The public vilification of Goodes for this act and the ongoing booing of him at matches that followed only amplified this fracturing of the spectator and the player.

Nonetheless, putting individual acts aside, how can one read a crowd? Sometimes, AFL crowds are stage-managed by teams. They are primed to roar at the right moment via the lifting of a premiership flag from last year's successful campaign, or the ritualistic pre-siren running through of the club's sloganised and sponsored banner. Richmond has in recent years recruited pre-match taiko drummers; Collingwood on the other hand plays recorded chants to live crowds before home matches, in the transparent hope that the crowd will follow along. Yet the AFL crowd is hardly so predictable or easily provoked as to be induced into supportive, game-changing hysterics with the flick of a switch. The crowd follows the ebb and flow of the match itself as its primary commander: a dull roar to accompany every potential holding the ball decision, rough tackle, and shot on goal. The crowd is prompted by the events of the match but is still unpredictable. How loud the boos for a villainous opposition player will be, when will a supporting chant begin and how loud and persistent will it be, and how a cult hero player will be selected (Hairstyle? Marking attempts? Physical build?) are all open questions with no real answer except the one formed in the unpredictable, erratic moment. As a mass, the crowd answers to nobody and impacts on all.

Crowds can define matches and places, and change the fortunes of teams. Much was made of the sheer volume of the crowd at the Adelaide Oval when it reopened after renovations in 2014. Playfully dubbed 'The Portress', the noise generated by Port Adelaide supporters rivalled world decibel records and initially rendered the opening and closing siren inaudible, to the point that the volume had to

be lifted to rock concert levels. The home crowd suffocated the opposition and brooked little defiance.

Crowds may follow the whims of a match, but 100,000 people are led by no-one. They may support their teams, but they are not merely their instruments, and a team can fail to hold their supporters' attention or even occasionally incur their wrath. Crowds have, after all, influenced more than just the outcome of sport, and historians and sociologists have tried to understand their impact on uprisings, riots, and revolutions, too. The historian George Rudé famously argued that the crowds that played such a formative role in Revolutionary France were neither simple destructive forces (as had been assumed by some writers, thinking of them as 'the mob') nor homogenous blocks representing a single political or socioeconomic force. Put simply, the crowd is not an abstract being: it is made up of individuals with competing interests, political sympathies, and class backgrounds. This equally holds true for AFL crowds, something that is plainly obvious to me, now an upper-middle class and highly educated Collingwood supporter, who doesn't easily fit the elitist and simple-minded stereotype of a working-class, uneducated, poor, and possibly criminal Collingwood army. For a nation mythologised as egalitarian, the vocabulary of AFL crowds and supporters has evolved for a hundred years to be almost exclusively about class. Collingwood fans have no teeth, runs the hateful joke; Melbourne fans only turn up when it doesn't clash with ski season and even then are accompanied by a cheese and antipasto board and a general disinterest in the match.

Yet AFL crowds are no more allegiant to class than to geography: two spectators raised in the same street or even by the same family can vehemently barrack for diametrically opposed teams. They are led in the moment not by club CEOs, corporate mascots, sponsors, or an FM radio commentary team, but simply by the whims of the game on the field and a brutal loyalty as strong as blood. I have shared celebratory hugs with strangers who I would never encounter in my day-to-day life, and screamed for 'holding the ball' decisions alongside those who might otherwise see me as hopelessly locked away in an academic ivory tower.

The crowd gives us the braying for death or the stilling of the blade of a Gladiatorial match, a democracy rendered in noise. It is emotion, analysis, and a kind of quasi-religious support, a prayer and a plea simultaneously combined into a single act. There is a tempo to this democracy that is also quite legible. The crowd unfolds in peals of thunder, with reports of each strike echoing around the ground in

stages. Boos for umpiring decisions stagger themselves as counterpoint to the central theme of the ball's path from end to end; sections of the crowd unite in calling out a cult player's name while opposition supporters jeer; the crowd hushes in anticipation of a set shot on goal, building in a crescendo of anticipation that follows the flight of the ball across the big posts. Reducible to no single element, this is the music of a hundred thousand people, performing as individuals but sounding as a mass ensemble.

How do you begin to represent such a force? On television, such 'atmosphere' is reduced to ambient microphones and commentator notice. My youngest memories of watching AFL on television are those of being lulled into sleep by the steady, gated sound of the match crowd, so much white noise for tired young ears to hear. The vision of AFL on television is hardly any more representative of being there. The length of the ground itself – up to 185 metres long, depending on the venue – is impossible to capture in any meaningful sense on a television screen. Focal points must be picked, and accordingly, watching AFL on television means resigning yourself to the surprise of an opposition player arriving from just out of frame, anticipated by everyone at the ground but entirely unforeseen by those at home. A great pass can become a nightmare in the fraction of a second: a cheer catches instantly in your throat. The movement of players is incredibly difficult to mediate, too. The world of AFL videogames is one riddled with failures, given the absurdly difficult balance of expansive strategic planning and centimetre-perfect personal skill required by AFL: this is a game of the macro and the micro. Crowds too are often disappointingly static in AFL videogames, and recede into the background as simply the unimportant detritus of live sport.

Instead, in *Clanger*, Baden Pailthorpe has chosen to represent and contrast both the movement of the players on the field and the intensity of the crowd. He has been able to codify the kind of moment-to-moment flow of emotion and animation by everyone present at an AFL match into an expressive force. Through Pailthorpe's art, potency and sensation becomes representation. This kind of experience of the game is immediately inescapable for those who attend AFL, but has so far challenged representation: despite all of our modern inventions, you cannot easily take the crowd with you.

That Bailthorpe does this via statistics and data is only natural: this is the language of the modern game. Nothing has impacted on AFL quite as much as the

contemporary boon in statistical analysis – how many interchanges have been made, how many kilometers have been run, what an individual player's movement heatmap looks like, or how teams perform from stoppages is the Moneyball-style analytical advantage in an era where every team will pay big money to get ahead. We even have statistical fads – today, we focus on 'possession chains' where yesterday we looked to contested possessions as a marker of in-game domination. By taking this kind of data and turning it into representation, Pailthorpe returns this kind of sport analytic to the world of emotion and sensation. In *Clanger*, we feel and hear the crowd react to every data point as it is metamorphosed into organic and beautiful forms. Organic matter is data-fied and returned to organic representation. The crowd does not care about your favourite player's GPS statistics, but we can see in *Clanger* just how clearly the moment-to-moment action translates into an affective crowd response.

The result is a representation of AFL that goes some way towards finally capturing and maybe even aestheticising the experience of amalgamating spectator and player in the moment of the AFL match. The crowd and the player are both organic bodies moving within structures: the rules of the sport as well as the social mores that govern appropriate crowd behaviour. As a whole they combine together to create an emotional, expressive moment that transcends any single point of origin or affiliation.

I keep returning to sound as a metaphor for thinking through the experience of AFL. Eighteen players per team, and tens of thousands of supporters – each group improvising within their set of rules and reacting to one another. Together, as a single unit, it creates a sound that is unmatched by anything else: the sound of unpredictability, of unplanned, uncontrollable action and reaction. It is the sound of the crowd – responsible for revolutions, on the stage of world history – this time deployed with the tempo of an AFL match and the strictures of professional sport. The result is irrepressible, volatile sound – and occasionally, given a rare moment of greatness, silence, too, just to remind you of the power of the crowd.

- Dan Golding