

Unsociable Game – Episode 05 – “It Is What It Is”

Music (Tourist Kid) (Entry Theme)

A repetitive, mournful synthesiser loop, with heavy bass intonation at the end.

Ben Rodin

This is Unsociable Game – A podcast about concussion and community football. I’m Ben Rodin.

Music (Tourist Kid)

Score fades to silence.

Ben Rodin

After the last few weeks in the world of concussion, I can’t help but feel, even after understanding hits, even after understanding why people stop and even after understanding how it plays out in similar and different ways in women’s footy, there is a discussion to be had about what the AFL is doing about this.

It is worth noting at this point, that no metropolitan, Victorian football league has an individual policy for handling concussion. In other words, the AFL makes the recommendations, rules and regulations, and it’s up to the community leagues and clubs to implement them to the best of their ability.

When I go to meet the AFL’s chief medical officer, Peter Harcourt, they are keen to avoid drama and hysteria when discussing this.

However, Harcourt acknowledges that developing policies and tools for community football has become a greater priority in the past few years.

Peter Harcourt

At the community level I’m sure its under-diagnosed and there’s not the same level, you don’t have the same level of health care support...

Ben Rodin (in background)

Of course.

Peter Harcourt

... at the local footy. So the quality of the decision making is not going to be as good.

So we’re really relying on that people look after each other, because when you stop and think about it when someone’s concussed they’re cognitively not working so well, their thinking is not as good, and they need people around them to say, “Sorry mate, you’ve gotta get out of the game.”

Ben Rodin

However, despite these focus points Harcourt ultimately believes the AFL’s elite competitions are the best starting point for change, because of the extra resources they attract.

Peter Harcourt

The AFL competition itself is sort of like the Rolls Royce of the competition, has a lot of support around, a lot of video review, a lot of scrutiny, a lot of auditing of what goes on, and hopefully that sort of trickles down to the lower levels that don't have the same resources around the game, so that the rules which are implemented at the top level can be implemented lower down, but without the same sort of scrutiny and oversight.

Music (Tourist Kid)

A repetitive motif, jittery ambivalent synthesizers that sound as if they are slightly underwater.

Ben Rodin

Let's walk this back and recap some stats. The AFL had 1.5 million participants last year, with just under a third of those women.

The rules and regulations of the game at all levels, and subsequent concussion protocol, are largely dictated by the eight hundred or so professional men's players that train four to five days a week, and have anywhere between a dozen to thirty conditioning, coaching and medical staff on the books.

It is also worth considering that throughout the first ten rounds of 2018, there have still been twenty eight reported occurrences of concussion in just under 90 games of elite men's football and this roughly aligns with the AFL's baseline.

Notwithstanding the overwhelming commercial rationale for the current policy, wouldn't the AFL want a game that also meets the needs of the majority that play it, the community footballers that we don't know how often are getting hit or even if they are receiving proper diagnosis?

Music (Tourist Kid)

Music fades out slowly.

Ben Rodin

Harcourt concedes that there are limitations, but insists that the current top-down policy formulation is the best that the AFL has.

Peter Harcourt

So we can't, we can't get coverage for everywhere...

Ben Rodin (in Background)

Yeah of course

Peter Harcourt

...It's not practical, it's not possible.

Ben Rodin

Yeah

Peter Harcourt

And so we're really relying on the policies as being important, and raising the awareness to the community that this is a really, this issue matters and it's about health.

What has been a little bit different is if we can get something like an IT system, like a phone app or something like that, it means that actually we then can start looking at some of the data coming through, and pick maybe where the diagnosis is really low, or really high, and start to, provide educational resources or awareness to those areas where we might perceive that things are not being managed as well as they could be.

Ben Rodin

The Headcheck app, alluded to by Peter Harcourt, and developed by the AFL with Murdoch Children's Research Health Institute, helps make concussion testing available to junior community footballers, with potential to be expanded to collect baseline data on metropolitan and country football leagues.

As Professor John Olver, and Nicole Hayes, both of whom have spoken across this series, note, it's a big positive, but one with significant ifs and buts attached to it.

Professor John Olver

So I fully support it, but it's how it filters down to the ranks that's important and at the moment, we're still seeing in sort of amateur and other competitions, that there isn't a protocol and there isn't a recognition, and it's often due to individuals who are advocates or have had relatives that have had concussion, that the treatment is given. It's not a formal protocol, and I think if this new app can be formally adopted then it'll be great.

Nicole Hayes

That's a great starting point if it's one, widely used, correctly used, foolproof, the data is handled properly, the um, research that goes beyond that, because the data has to be interpreted properly, it has to be secure, because what if the outcome is very negative for the AFL?

What if there's an indication that this game is causing damage? Can we trust the AFL to publicise that, to reveal that information?

Ben Rodin

To that end, I ask Harcourt the following – Is it possible that we're going to have to have a discussion about what the game might have to look like, and whether there's a role for the physicality and aggression that haunts the game's past? His answer reserves a definitive judgement.

Peter Harcourt

The long term consequences we've got our eyes on, trying to understand what those risks are, but it, it seems to be low, seems to be, we don't really know. So we take a very conservative approach at this point in time. I don't think the game will change too much. If anything, it'll just evolve in a particular direction, but it'll always be obviously Australian football.

Ben Rodin

While Nicole Hayes is skeptical about the AFL's handling of the concussion issue, she does believe the rules of the game, as they currently stand, are adequate for player safety.

Nicole Hayes

I know the quickest thing to do would be to change the rules. I'm reluctant for them to do that because it's a safe game if you play it properly, I'm confident it is, if you play legally and observe the rules, it's mostly safe. The injuries are no greater necessarily, the risk is no greater necessarily, than other football codes or other sporting codes.

Ben Rodin

Professor John Olver, for his part, is wanting more clarity.

John Olver

What I hope that I'll be able to offer and at the same I worry that I can't offer now, is the answer to the question about: "What should I do now? Should I go back to football, what happens if I get another concussion?"

And I can make a general statement saying, "Well, multiple concussions don't seem to be good in a whole group of people but I can't answer it for you."

So if we know more, about the nature of concussion, the pathological nature of it, what actually happens in the long term, then I'll be able to advise them much better than the sort of vague answers I can give now.

Ben Rodin

As someone who just stopped playing, I must admit I find the fact there are still so many gaps in knowledge frightening, but it is what it is.

I also wonder though, just where the present day amateur fits in all this. As you've heard across the episodes, there are many experiences to consider and people I'm speaking to are still reflecting on what has happened to them even now.

Here's what I think:

This is a game that I love. It's like a ballet in boxing ring, but on an open expanse with an oval-shaped leather ball. It is the only thing I'd get up early on Saturday for. A lifelong proliferation of friends continue to play at West Brunswick, a place I still go to as often as I can.

And yet? I hate the brutality, the unnecessary aggression and bravado. Someone's want to win has cut this game short for me as much as an elbow to a head. If not bravado or aggression, it is poor technique, and sometimes, malice.

Is a game that allows that to exist in varying forms something I want to be a part of? A game that doesn't actually know what its doing to the bulk of its participants? That only, to this point, in its history, uses the experience of the few to dictate the how everyone else plays the game? That considers one concussion in every three games a stable baseline?

Music (Tourist Kid) (Exit Theme) (Slow Fade In)

Piano melody anchored, with intervening bursts of digital noise and feedback. Small amount of reverb and echo. Feeling and mood is melancholic but again, slightly ambivalent – it isn't telling you how to feel.

Ben Rodin

I really want to say, no it probably isn't, but I also desperately don't want you to give up on this game, even if it sometimes feels like it has given up on me.

Music (Tourist Kid)

Music fades up.

Ben Rodin

Thanks for listening.

Music (Tourist Kid)

Music fades up more and then out gradually.