AFL's stance on crowd behaviour and umpire abuse leaves fans confused

By Offsiders columnist Richard Hinds

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Another week, another reminder of McLachlan’s Law of AFL governance: For every action, there is an equal and opposite overreaction.

This time it is the AFL’s crackdown on loud and abusive spectators that has confused fans of Australia’s most popular spectator sport, not least because the league claims there is no crackdown.

Well, not on paper. Just if you happen to breach some nebulous guideline about behaviour that the AFL does not feel obliged to explain even while you are being ushered to the exit by a security guard who doesn’t particularly care if he spills your beer or hot chips.

If messages about what constitutes acceptable behaviour at AFL matches were not already mixed, they are murkier than a coal miner’s bath water after a Carlton fan was ejected from Docklands last Saturday for reportedly calling umpire Mathew Nicholls a "bald-headed flog" within earshot of the follicle-depleted official.

We should hasten to add that despite the predictable "PC gone mad" defence launched by enraged fellow supporters, football fans should have no more right to abuse officials from such relatively close quarters than they have to relieve themselves on the goal posts.

The need to protect the safety of umpires at all levels — and ensure their continued recruitment/retention — is obvious to anyone who has looked into the frightened eyes of young officials at junior games as they run the gauntlet of disgruntled and sometimes even deranged coaches and families.

Yet this spectator can consider himself unlucky, and not just because the sharp-eared security somehow heard his "baldist" abuse above the cacophonous thumping from the now omnipresent "fan activation" speakers.

In quasi-legal terms, the fan has 120 years of umpire-abusing precedent to support the case that supporters are entitled to blame their team’s inept play, the hole in their betting accounts, some strife with the missus or a day-time drinking problem on the performance of the umpires — whether those umpires be as bald as bandicoots or luxuriously bouffant.

This history of abuse, and a rising tide of violence at AFL matches, is why the AFL executive needed to deliver a clear and unequivocal message to the game’s supporters to ensure that there was no misunderstanding about its intentions when down it cracked.

And I’m sure they would have done just that had they not been locked in a bunker trying to escape the fallout from the first of two damning Adam Goodes documentaries that have done for the AFL’s reputation what the Hindenburg disaster did for the airship manufacturing industry.

This, incidentally, leaves open the question whether the AFL have considered the toxic fallout from the first of those documentaries, The Final Quarter, and particularly the way it failed as an organisation to act strongly on crowd behaviour, and have somehow come up with a response to current non-race related incidents that misses the point almost as badly as their response to the vile vilification of Goodes.

AFL sending mixed messages to fans

If possible, the AFL’s position became even more confusing upon the release of a statement on Wednesday, which failed to explain why the Carlton supporter was ejected, what he said, what rule he breached to earn an official warning and whether others would be kicked out for doing whatever it was he did.

It then helpfully encouraged fans to "barrack as loud as you can" while also warning them they would also be evicted if they breached the guidelines they had failed to explain.
Got that everyone?

The worst consequence of the AFL's sudden intrusion into fan behaviour is not that otherwise well-behaved fans could be swarmed by security for whispering their slight disgruntlement at the height of the most recent centre bounce.

The AFL has not yet reached the A-League stage of crowd policing where laws designed to curb violent hooligans are now aggressively applied to spectators crossing into non-authorised areas to check the suitability of the toilets for use by their disabled daughters.

The worst consequence of the AFL crackdown-but-not-a-crackdown is that it has given those supporters who are most likely to behave in the kind of offensive and antisocial manner that deserves punishment a platform upon which to justify their worst excesses under the catch-all "Nanny State gone mad" banner.

You can hear them wallow "you can't even carry a loaded shotgun in the non-drinking area anymore", as they are accosted by security in weeks to come.

But the AFL's failure to sell its message, or even acknowledge the problems created by some of its botched solutions, is becoming an unfortunate hallmark of an organisation that, for two decades, could rightly boast about its peerless administrative strike rate.

The other most obvious example of McLachlan's Law is the stuffed grab bag of regulations, interpretations, gut-feels and tosses-of-the-coin now laughingly referred to as the "Laws of Australian Football".

Presented with the choice to react to sensibly and conservatively to the game's awful congestion by further reducing interchange numbers or correctly interpreting existing rules such as those governing correct disposal, the AFL instead created yet another layer of technical infringements that has made umpiring even more difficult.

The result? The congestion remains, the scoring is even lower and there are even more reasons for fans to become frustrated with the umpires who have had a target painted on their backs by the officials very well paid to protect them.

Topics: sport, australian-football-league, melbourne-3000
Fan crackdown goes too far

SATURDAY REFLECTION

WARWICK McFADYEN

I once took an American friend to the football. I was new to Melbourne and she was new to the country. Perfect introduction for both of us to the game and the MCG. It was Collingwood versus St Kilda. Not long into the game we realised we were caught between two warring tribes. Comments started to rise, tempers to fray, until one detonated the equivalent of an atomic bomb, and screamed, “Remember ‘69!”

How odd, I thought, what’s the invasion of England by William the Conqueror to do with this? Sure there are battles on field, but it’s not the Battle of Hastings. Still, knowledgeable fellow.

But it was too much. A fired-up bloke in black and white jumped the seats to get to the other fired-up bloke in red, white and black behind us. Fists were thrown, limbs went akimbo, others dragged them apart and steadied them back to their seats. My friend and I left for safer ground. It was only later I learnt the significance of the day. A point victory to St Kilda in the grand final. Such passion, this time turned to violence, drawn from a well decades earlier.

Passion runs deep. It’s the barracking, the reaction, the urging-on, and the disgust. The disgust can be ugly. So much shouting, so much anger, and as the Adam Goodes documentary, The Final Quarter, has shown, so much racism.

Where would the game be without the noise? Diminished certainly, a whisper of its potential to excite both spectator and player. But equally so, where would the game be with less noise, if you could yell and boo, but only to a certain decibel level? How can you regulate the excitement? Designate stands to different levels: the 30-decibel stand, the 60-decibel stand, the 90-decibel stand, the Manuwai-decibel level?

Magpies fan Simon Grech recently found out at the MCG. He says he was told by police he was barracking too loudly. Jordan De Goey had just scored. Turn the volume down or be ejected. Others hadn’t shared his vocal enthusiasm.

Grech felt aggrieved. He told The Age: “It’s getting beyond a joke. I’m not at the ballet, I’m at the footy. For the whole second half I didn’t say boo. They used the words ‘unsociable barracking’ or something like that... do they want us to wear seat belts now so we can’t jump up?”

The conditions of entry to an AFL game forbid patrons from engaging “in any conduct, act towards or speak to any player, umpire or other official or other patron in a manner, or engage in any conduct, which threatens, offends, insults, humiliates, intimidates, disparages or vilifies that other person on any basis including, but not limited to, that other person’s race, religion, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin, special ability/disability or sexual orientation, preference or identity”.

Patrons also cannot “interfere with the comfort of other patrons or their enjoyment of any of the matches or other activities at the venue, or use indecent or obscene language or threatening or insulting words, or otherwise behave in a threatening, abusive, riotous, indecent or insulting manner”.

The decibel level that could lead to eviction seems couched in the phrase “interfere with the comfort of other patrons or their enjoyment”. Now it would seem to me that merely losing would be enough to interfere with one half of the crowd’s enjoyment. The MCG is not a library. It is a colosseum of epic dimensions and drama. One simply can’t put a lid on it, nor would one want to. It’s a passion play on and off the field.

That said, foul words and aggressive body language can intimidate, harass, and frighten people. The game may be gladiatorial but watching it should not.

On Wednesday, the AFL said it would not take any further action after it evicted a Carlton fan for yelling at an umpire that he was a “bald-headed flog”. I admit I don’t know what a bald-headed flog is, but maybe I’ve lived a sheltered life. The fan got a warning.

We got this from the AFL. “For over 100 years, the footy has been a place to come together, barrack, cheer and share in the experience in whichever way you choose. There has been no directive from the AFL to change this.”

“The theatre of match day is one of the great sporting experiences, a place to be expressive and passionate about your team and the game, it always has been, it always will be.”

It denies it is cracking down on supporters. Presumably it also denies it is sending secret agents into cheer squads. Warning fans, watch out for the man with the shoe to his ear.

It is to be hoped that in the pursuit of finding a balance from high spirits to ejection a point can be found that does not make the watching of it over-censorious. By all means rid the game of those who vilify and debase, but hasten slowly in reacting, lest the colour drain from the barracking that is shot into the air like confetti from a cannon.

Warwick McFadyn is a regular columnist.