

CULTURE

Recently the playing group has been throwing around #culture. And BA was impressed enough by a 'Your Brand' presentation given at the Level 2 coaching course that he requested it be repeated to our playing group.

A complex concept, some would dismiss as over intellectualising and irrelevant to the playing group; or prefer to lump in with organisational mission and vision statements in structuring a strategic business plan for off field club success. We are advised that some form of culture/brand is necessary as it has been and is present in every successful (football) group with collective aspiration.

The nucleus of our player groups, male and female players, display huge commitment in attending pre-season, turning out for the club week-by-week, and season after season. As do our coaches. And for that matter, our volunteers and supporters.

Do they have anything in common? Does any one group influence the other? Do individuals impact the group? How do other teams perceive us? What response will players who have moved on give about their experiences at Broady? What does the QAFL think of when Broadbeach is mentioned? What do we want all of the above to think of Broadbeach? What is our image? Why are there people who were involved at Broady 30+ years ago, still give of their time to volunteer, meet for a beer at training, or just enjoy a game on match day? When is culture invoked?

A dictionary definition suggests **Culture** is "The sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another."

We could consider culture at say National or Clan levels.

National: What is the Aussie culture, or Australian culture for that matter? Football, meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars? Or climate sceptics, agility, fair go, innovation, stop the boats, mateship and/or detention centres?

Clan culture: Aboriginal, European, Asian etc..

What are some of the (*friendly and not so friendly*) descriptors that come to mind in consideration of a more specific and relevant context? What do they evoke – what do you think about on reading the descriptors about the code, coach, club or player?

Sport culture: Amateur, professional, no drugs, ASADA, WADA, One punch and Diversity

Code culture: “Soccer is a gentleman’s game played by thugs. Rugby league is a thug’s game played by thugs. Rugby Union is a thug’s game played by gentlemen.” “Gaelic football is a game for hooligans played by hooligans” “Aussie Rules is The Game.”

League is all about front on ‘biff’, tackling, sin bins and small crowds. Soccer is ‘diving’, world wide, goal celebrations and boring. Union is ‘raking’, referee lectures and ‘bum sniffing’. Aussie Rules is ‘buttering up’, ‘aerial ping pong’, ‘having a ‘RHG’, soft and 360 degree contact with high speed collision.

State Footy Culture: “State of Hate”; “Queenslander”; “Sandgropers”; “Big White V”; “Croweater” Cockroaches”; “Mexican”; “Apple Islanders”; “Banana Benders”; “Cabbage Patchers”.

Club Culture: ‘Supplements (Essendon); ‘Handbags’ (Geebung); ‘Animal Enclosure’ (Sainters); ‘Bloods no dickhead policy’ (Sydney); ‘Toffs’ (Melbourne); ‘Shinboners’ (Nth Melbourne); ‘Blue-collar’ (Port Adelaide); ‘family club’ (Hawkers); ‘Western Suburbs’ (Footescray) ‘Missing teeth’ (Collingwood); Community Club (SUNs); to name a few.

Coaching culture: Player development on and off the deck; win at all costs; winning culture; alcohol consumption; sex frequency (yes Barassi tried it at North); white line fever; pride; team role; player accountability; feedback; whole club; selection policy; structure; home ground fortress; buy in; leadership by example; play it out; defensive/attacking, thinker, see ball/get ball, traditional enemy, milestone minded.

Player culture: Mateship (often the defence force is used as a metaphor, particularly ANZAC Day: ‘only thing worse than death is letting down your mates’); personal performance; doing a job; playing for the coach; dirty/clean/bruise free/show pony/professional; playing for the club and gaining respect. And as expressed by some of our playing group: “hanging out with your mates”; “nothing tangible”; a buzzword for “any act that demands group respect.”

Supporter culture: Hooligans, good blokes, ferals, abusive, fair minded, foul-mouthed, friendly, life members

Are there cultural descriptors that cut across levels? Can we develop a culture that is appropriate to whole of club? Can it be used as a motivator? What is the contemporary Broadbeach culture? Who knows? Does it matter? Apparently: the Gold Coast City Council is using your rates to develop a \$37 million Cultural Centre. Maybe we need one?

And in the words of Luke Ablett

On Friday night my old club Sydney will line up in another preliminary final, their sixth in the last 12 years. I told myself for years that after I finished playing I wouldn't care about footy but on this weekend two years ago, when things were tight at half-time in the Swans v Collingwood prelim, I found myself getting really nervous. It was the first time since my retirement that I'd realised that I really care and I want them to win. By the time the grand final rolled around I was a mess. The Swans really were *my* team.

A lot has been said about the 'Bloods' and the culture of Sydney as a club, so the finals is a decent time to assess some of the cultural traits that have made the Swans so successful over the past decade or so. I finished my career in 2009, so all of these observations are based on the time up until that point.

For me, Stuart Maxfield was the guy who really got the ball rolling back in 2002 and 2003, when the club first started using the 'Leading Teams' model to establish the player-driven values that the club should adopt to become successful. This was the point at which the players started looking more critically at what we were doing, why we were doing it and what we weren't doing right.

That might all sound straightforward but for players who were set in their ways, it was not always a smooth process. Stu drove a lot of this and from the outset there was a significant amount of respect for him for wanting us to get better. Driven by him, we started questioning the way we trained, the way that we viewed ourselves – a whole different range of things. Stuart Maxfield was that crucial first guy who said, "You know what? What we're doing right now isn't working."

There were other drivers along the way, too. A year or two before things started to turn around, then-Broncos NRL coach Wayne Bennett came and spoke to us. We were given a lot of motivational speeches at the time, as is the case for most clubs, but most of them are rubbish. Bennett was the opposite. He was so understated and so honest, asking us when we'd last won a premiership. It was 70 years ago. I'm paraphrasing here but his reply was blunt, "Well, what are you doing? You're obviously doing *something* wrong."

His message was simple but it really stuck in my mind. At that point I was too inexperienced to do much about it. I was young and naive and too worried about getting a game and fitting in to really run with it but those sorts of discussions started happening a lot, and within two years, what's now referred to as the Bloods culture was born.

Unfortunately Stuart Maxfield never got to taste premiership success, but the seed had been sewn. We rotated captains after Stu's retirement and with guys like Brett Kirk, Jude Bolton, Leo Barry, Craig Bolton and Barry Hall all around the same age there was never a power vacuum. They were a strong group of players who stepped up and continued on with what Stu had started.

We always tried to refine what The Bloods actually meant and ultimately how we wanted to judge ourselves. ***That is probably the most important element of successful football club culture; not just the statistical measurements, but the character traits that you aspire to.***

That might be training standards, recovery standards or what you go and do on a Saturday night. You establish those values and desired characteristics and decide how you want see yourself as a group. I'm now too far removed to know whether any of the values we established back then remain now, as it's almost an entirely new set of players. Each of them would have had to contribute to and buy into their own set of values, but I would guess that if you spoke to some current Swans players, you would be able to trace the lines back to those early days.

Thinking back on my own time at Sydney, one of the key strengths of the club was that you were answerable to your teammates first and foremost. Of course you had to impress the coaches and you had to be playing well but there was also this idea that if you did something wrong, whether it be in a game, on the training track or on Saturday night, you had to look your team-mates in the eyes the next day and answer to them.

My personal experience is limited to Sydney, but when I was out on the field I felt that there were some reasons why certain other clubs had underperformed for so long. At these clubs players often got games really easily when they maybe didn't deserve them, and never had to work or eradicate their weaknesses. For clubs like that to change, it's probably a matter of someone coming in and breaking the circuit and setting a new standard. If no one has set or raised that standard for 20 years or more, it's pretty hard to expect a No1 draft pick to come in and

change it because young players just fundamentally don't know what's required.

At an unsuccessful club, a highly prized draftee might spend four years in the system and play 80 games because the side is winning only three to five games a year. I feel that what clubs like that need is players from outside who've played at a club with really high standards and who are willing to sit there and say, "You know what? This isn't good enough. If you think this is going to win you games of AFL footy you're kidding yourself. It's a really hard game." That was what Stuart Maxfield did at Sydney.

If you can't recognise problems it's hard to change them. I remember one pre-season training session at Sydney when we weren't training very well and the season was almost upon us. Paul Roos said, "Put your hand up if you think you've had a good pre-season." Ninety-five percent of us did and he said, "Well, every club is going to have everyone putting their hand up. It doesn't mean anything"

It takes character to be the person who shakes things up a bit and potentially makes a few people unhappy in order to make a positive change.

Culture isn't foolproof, either. Success is also about the way a group of players fit together and complement each other. If I'd have been drafted a pick earlier and gone to the Bulldogs I probably would have been in the system for two years and spat out the other end because they were a fast-running, outside, skilful team and I wouldn't have fit that mould. So much of the success of a football club is about the way the players fit together and adapt to the game plan.

There's one other important thing to remember. If the group of teammates I played with hadn't changed at Stuart Maxfield and others' urging in 2003 or if the 2005 season had continued the way it was going after a 1-3 start, then The Bloods wouldn't have lasted very long. It might have lasted three years and people would have said, "Well, that wasn't the right way to do things". So ultimately these things are defined and reinforced by the successes they bring.

Whatever it is that Sydney are doing now and even if it doesn't have its origins in the standards established in my time at the club, I'll be watching tomorrow night and hoping it brings them success.

This article was originally published in The Guardian and can be accessed [here](#).