

The State of Play

by Chanel :)

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state of play - *phrase, British English.*

1) the score at a particular time in a cricket or football match.

2) the current situation in an ongoing process.

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The problem wasn't Hawthorn ending up losing by 82 points. Nor was it the fact that my favourite player Sam De Koning (who happens to play for Geelong) wasn't playing. The problem was the middle-aged Hawks fan who led me to question whether I was a 'proper' footy fan.

I'd always wanted my first live AFL game to be the yearly Easter Monday clash between Hawthorn and Geelong. I'm an avid Hawks supporter, and a number of my favourite players happen to play for the Cats. Win, win, right?

Wrong.

Sitting on the ground floor, just left of the interchange benches, it felt like I was surrounded by Geelong fans. The only other Hawthorn fan I could see was sitting in the row in front of me, and it was clear he was with a friend. Everywhere I looked, there were people donned in navy blue and white. Their scarves, their beanies, even their dress codes were those iconic colours I couldn't help but favour. I looked down at my Hawthorn guernsey and scarf - adorned with brown and gold in stark contrast to the sea of blue. But even then, I felt like I fit in in *some* way. It might have been the light blue puffer jacket I wore over my top, or the blue and white striped shirt under my guernsey that made me somewhat fit in with the sea. Or - and here was the problem - it was my thoughts, pulsing serotonin into my veins as I looked at people's player badges, smiling as I saw familiar faces that wore the navy blue and white hoops. At some points during the game, I'd look out onto the field, and the faces and figures that struck me weren't those in brown and gold, but those in the hoops, with that blonde hair I'd grown accustomed to and a sort of flair I couldn't see in the Hawks.

I didn't mind feeling nice about it then. I'd known for a while that I had a soft spot for the Cats, despite my first choice of team always being their modern classic rivals. I embraced it, too.

Well, until I realised it wasn't normal.

It happened during the second quarter. Or maybe it was the first. I distinctly remember that Hawthorn was still winning at this point because my emotions weren't yet soured by the oncoming 8-goal-to-nil-third-quarter that I know now awaited me. Until then, I was enjoying myself. It felt surreal to be sitting in a fold-down chair with thousands of other people instead of sitting on my couch on my own, being able to choose where I drew my attention instead of letting the TV decide what I got to think about, and of course, joining in with the crowd's cheers whenever Hawthorn kicked a goal or jeers whenever Geelong did something stupid.

Right then, the play's on the other side of the ground, and a bunch of players have started piling up into a tackle. I can't see much from a few rows back on the ground floor, and all I can hear is the shouts of 'BALL!' starting to echo around the stadium. It's tradition to call for nearly invisible frees, but this time, of all times, the umpire agreed with the shouts. I don't remember the exact call, (holding the ball, as everyone appeals for? a high tackle? a push in the back?) but it was a Hawthorn free kick. Yay, us.

Nay, me.

I had *no* idea whose free kick it was over the crowd. Getting a tad confused, I said, "Hey, what was that for?" into the open grass. I don't know why I said it. Maybe it was another Geelong player I liked that infringed, or maybe they got Nash or Newcombe in the face or around the neck and I hit protective mode, or maybe there was no real infringement and I was confused as to why the umpire would give a free kick *either way*. But I asked. And... I got an answer.

The middle-aged Hawks fan turned around and looked up and down at me and my guernsey and scarf, but also at the words I'd just thrown out into the world, suggesting the opposite of what I appeared to embody. It confused him. Almost as much as it confused me, to be honest.

"Hey, are you going for us or not?" he asked, with a laugh.

"I just..." I trailed off, the realisation coming to me. *What was I asking for?*

Just. I just wanted to know the call. *I just* wanted to feel for my team.

My team. My team- was it Hawthorn, judging by my clothes and everything else I'd done or said that day? Or was it Geelong, judging by the words I'd just uttered, and everything I'd said in previous games, and the art and the writing and...

It's widely accepted in the r/AFL subreddit that you're not meant to go for two teams. Sure, you're allowed to have dual flairs if you ask the mods, but the person with a Bombers/Suns flair keeps getting questions and is only protected from online bullying by their status as a regular. Alongside this, many discussions around 'if your team doesn't win '___' who would you support' often have responses like 'Nobody, what the hell!' or 'I won't bother watching if it's not my team making it'.

You're not meant to support two teams. You're *definitely* not meant to support two teams who have an active rivalry. God forbid someone out there likes Carlton *and* Collingwood, or Collingwood and Geelong. Or just Collingwood. God forbid someone like Collingwood.

Yet here I am, wondering if I really do just support the Cats as much as I support my beloved Hawks. Was the idea of Geelong winning Easter Monday pissing me off not enough to cover up for the drawings of De Koning I've done, the time I've spent discussing the offseason in the Geelong Cats subreddit, or the Geelong beanie my friend offered me which I plopped on my head without a beat?

Was it not enough?

I kept quiet for the rest of the game. I didn't complain when Geelong kicked 8 goals to none in the third quarter, or when James Sicily saved our hearts from a ten-goal onslaught with his intercept marks. I was thinking about the moment, letting it live and rot rent-free in my head.

I knew I was a Hawthorn fan. I'd stuck with them despite them falling off in the last 5 years, and I knew I was starting to fall in love with the club in a way I knew mattered.

But was I to add Geelong to the list of clubs I supported? I loved so many of Geelong's players, I loved their colours, I celebrated their premiership as if I was one of their own, and it begs me to ask - am I as much a Cats fan as I am a Hawks fan? Is that a betrayal of my beloved Hawks? Was that okay? Would it change who I was, how people saw me? Was I going to be known as the person who supported two teams? Did I like that?

I'm still figuring that out. Since that day, I've accepted that people are going to ask questions. I've figured out that that's okay. Let them ask. I'm happy to answer.

In a way, I'm glad I was called out.

I'm proud of my Hawks, even though we lost. I hated Geelong for a week after Easter Monday. I liked them again after De Koning came back to play West Coast in the next round. I think that sums up my experience as a footy fan.

Nobody can take that from me but myself. I'm not letting that happen any time soon.

I think.