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***CONSTRUCTING AUSTRALIAN SOCCER:  
The Media's Influence on Soccer's Position  
Within the Australian Culture.***

**A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF  
ARTS, SPORTS HUMANITIES/MEDIA, DIVISION OF SCIENCE  
AND DESIGN, THE UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA.**

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OCTOBER 2001**

<b>1. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>
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**This piece of writing was inspired and maintained by the simple pleasure that comes from kicking a football. My thanks go to Toni Bruce and Daryl Adair for helping me turn some random thoughts into something less random. The most thanks go to my father for putting a roof over my head, feeding me and introducing me to the round ball.**

## 2. ABSTRACT

Despite soccer being arguably the world's most popular sport, Australia's national soccer competition has consistently failed to attract the prolonged mainstream support that is given to the comparable rugby league, Australian Rules football and rugby union competitions. This is a puzzling situation considering Australia's British lineage, soccer's British origins and the game's pre-eminent international status. Indeed, soccer's lowly position in Australia is paradoxical given the sport's historically dominant status in Britain and Australia's traditional adoption of Anglocentric culture. Most research into the situation has pointed to the sport's inability to shake-off the adverse effects of a lingering connection to post-World War II immigration and certain ethnic communities. Soccer has, in the eyes of many, been unable to access popular culture primarily because it has been viewed by the mainstream as 'foreign' or inherently un-Australian. The sport has clashed with traditional notions of national identity even though, historically, the Australian men's national team has received relatively strong community support.

Strangely though, there has been little attention paid to the role the mass media has played in establishing, maintaining and even altering soccer's position in relation to mainstream Australian culture. While some researchers, such as Mosely and Hay, have criticised the media's coverage of violence associated with soccer at the domestic level, there has been no textual analysis of the mass media's role in soccer's marginal position in Australian popular culture. Considering that the mass media is critical to the development, reinforcement and maintenance of culture and has been implicated in shaping entire professional sporting competitions to its own ends, this is an area of considerable scholarly neglect. By undertaking a textual analysis of the mainstream newspaper coverage given to two critical periods in the history of the Australian men's soccer team it becomes clear that there is marked divergence between the media's treatment of internationally-based soccer and domestically-based soccer. This divergence in coverage has contributed to the development of two distinct mediated

'realities' of soccer, which in turn has influenced the game's ambivalent place in mainstream Australian culture. First, the media's control over the news production process has given it the ability to send textual messages that elevate soccer from its traditional cultural exclusion and establish the national team as part of the historically dominant Anglocentric mainstream culture in Australia. This process has been inextricably linked to the increasing ethnic diversity of Australia's population and the dominant culture's efforts to maintain, despite this emerging plurality, the pre-eminence of a traditional Australian 'way of life'. Second, the media's messages have helped to maintain the ascendancy of the dominant culture by establishing the characteristics of modern day corporatised sport as the 'normal' expectation for soccer's development in Australia. As a result, soccer's future in Australia is deemed to be limited until it is able to conform fully to the commercialised and professionalised mode of production that defines the sport overseas.

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*“Soccer is THE world game and that is why it will eventually become Australia’s major sport – it’s as simple as that!”<sup>1</sup>*

*Tom Anderson, Soccer Journalist, 1974.*

*“There is an incredible explosion of interest from the Australian people but you are always going to struggle with a sport, I believe, that is not driven by television. If it is not driven by television, it will not prosper quickly enough. But at the same time, Australia cannot afford to be out of this world game. They want to be in it and they are trying their best, but their culture won’t allow it.”<sup>2</sup>*

*Former Socceroos coach Terry Venables, 1997.*

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, T., Soccer, in Lord, D. (ed) (1978) *The Best of the Last Ten Years in Australian Sport*, Savvas Publishing, Kurralta Park, South Australia, 91-98.

<sup>2</sup> Knockabout Venables has no divided loyalties (1997) *The Australian*, November 28.

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