

The University of Exeter
2014 BA Geography Dissertation

“You could bring down all
of Rugby with this”:

Following a  Rugby Ball

Will Kelleher

Submitted 25 March 2014

I certify that this dissertation is entirely my own work and no part of it has been submitted for a degree or other qualification in this or another institution. I also certify that I have not constructed data nor shared data with another candidate at Exeter University or elsewhere without specific authorisation

Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Geography at the University of Exeter

Signed: March 2014

ETHICS FORM

Your application for ethical approval (2013/343) has been accepted

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To: Kelleher, William

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some people get tired of their dissertation twelve months into the project. Not me. I'm still fascinated, appalled, intrigued, shocked, grateful and connected. For that I have to thank Dr Ian Cook, my supervisor, for providing a sounding board for my enthusiasm and convincing me to follow the rugby ball in the first place. Also to Ben Doherty. Without him my project would not have been possible. The powers of Twitter! Much of the information is down to his grafting, dogged and professional journalism. Thank you for sharing your information with me. Finally, thank you to [REDACTED]. Your employees' quotes have made this project very interesting indeed...

ABSTRACT

A Geographical journey starts with following a single “thing”.

I follow my ██████ rugby ball from my home in Twickenham, England to wherever it takes me. Through internet research and interviews I expose the connections in the “life” of my ball. We are inexorably connected daily to thousands of “unseen others” via the commodities we buy. I look to expose the links behind the commodity “fetish” and untangle the ball’s web of “social relations”. Some shocking, surprising and illuminating issues are raised.

It’s amazing what you can find sitting behind a computer.

INTRODUCTION

Exeter. Late March 2013. I'm in a mild panic. The dissertation proposal deadline is in a couple of weeks and I haven't decided on a project. I want to "follow the thing" (Marcus, 1995; 1991) but have no idea what. Let's look around the house...there must be something!

I'm intrigued by the connections geographers have made via their everyday stuff (Abrahams, 2007; Clare, 2006; Cook, 2004; Wrathmell, 2003) but need something that will be up *my* street, personal. I want it to be new, different, exciting and very *me*. What about using sport? I play rugby, cricket and will watch any other sport, it's my passion! There's a rugby ball in my room. That would be too hard to follow. How about a football though? I know they've been embroiled in scandals over the years (India Committee to the Netherlands, 2000). Nothing has been done on rugby, following a football is a safer option.

I told my supervisor Dr Ian Cook that I was going to follow a football having discarded the rugby idea. He stopped me:

"Do you play football?"

"I don't, I play rugby"

"Well then follow a rugby ball"

Come to think of it, yes. Of course rugby! I've played since I was five years old and when growing up was inseparable from my ██████ ball. I still play now and use a ██████ twice a week for the University of Exeter Rugby Football Club 5th XV, the "Flair XV" as we're known. It's perfect. The personal connection. Rugby matters to me and Ian made me realise that I know an awful lot of useless information about balls that has now become useful!

Right. Following the █████ ball. I've never stepped back and thought about the balls I throw about every week. It's so ritualistic. Go to training. Pick up a ball. Kick it about, throw some passes, catch some line-outs, score some tries, home again. I love having "ball in hand", as they say, every Wednesday playing in matches for the university. But what about the ball itself? A commodity. Made. Sold. Bought. Used. The one in my room was bought on a French exchange to Marseille, it's made by the German company *Adidas* and branded with New Zealand "All Blacks" insignia. Wow, a world of hidden connections with potentially thousands of others (Cook et al, 2002).

It's my job now to dig deeper, to "lift the veil" (Harvey, 1990; 423) and discover "not just what commodities are but where they move to and who encounters/makes/uses them" (Castree, 2001; 23). I have no idea what this journey will uncover. No geographical project has ever had a rugby ball at its centre before. In some ways this is seminal. Pretty daunting. In fact, only a few studies have investigated any sort of sporting paraphernalia (Lund-Thomsen, 2013; Nadvi et al, 2011; Siegmann, 2008). An untapped market of commodities to follow...

Research Aims

I shall show how the purchase of a seemingly lifeless █████ rugby ball can link me, and you, to a vast array of "unseen others" (Cook and Tolia-Kelly, 2010) around the world. I shall be making and revealing connections in the ball's commodity chain, its web of "social relations" (Cook, 2006; Crang, 2005; Foster, 2006) to tell you the story of my █████ ball. Many researchers undertaking studies of this type jet off to far-flung destinations, thousands of miles away on a quest to find the source of their "thing" and engage with the lives of others via participant observation (Abrahams, 2007; Clare, 2006; Cook, 2004; Wrathmell, 2003), but I stayed put. Never left these shores. In fact,

hardly left my desk! What follows proves how much you can find by staying still, using contacts, making connections, still following, but virtually. How restrictive will this be? How much will I be able to find from the comfort of my student house?

What follows is a journey, a rollercoaster ride, my story. I can't wait for you to read it. For you it's just beginning, for me it's over. Well, not really... you'll have to read on to find out.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Following a thing

My study of a [REDACTED] rugby ball contributes to the ongoing literature on commodities. This discipline in geography has its basis in Marxism. Marx saw commodities as the “economic cell form of capitalism” (Cook et al 2002) and as “very trivial” at first glance, but then “mysterious” on closer inspection (Marx, 1867/1999). In modern, monetised societies everything is commodified (Kopytoff, 1986) and commodities themselves seem to come from nowhere having qualities of their own; Marx sees this as the “fetish” of a commodity (Marx, 1867/1999). Commodities are complex, mobile and tied up with social relations, culture and economics according to Castree (2001) and have various meanings behind them (Crang, 2005); but the linkages created by commodities and how they travel across the globe, through the hands of “unseen others”, is masked by the fetish that can be created by branding and advertisements (Hartwick, 2000). As Hartwick (ibid) comments we, as consumers, consume this fetish, this image.

Buying a product links you to thousands across the world (Cook et al 2007), and these “social relationships” between people via commodities are made to appear abstract relationships between commodities only. This is a deceit, (Cook et al, 2002) as global capitalism is born from relationships between real people. The geographer’s job, my job, is to uncover these linkages (Cook et al, 2002; Hartwick, 2000). This point is elucidated by Marx (1867/1999) too. He comments that relationships between producers and consumers are hidden by fetishism, which is inseparable from commodities. Linkages determine value, however, so need to be understood and examined (Marx 1867/1999). But as Harvey (2010) adds, value is not a fact of nature, it is socially

constructed and so “lifting the veil” (Harvey, 2010; 423), as I hope to do, will help uncover the hidden labour that is put into a product.

Foster (2006) explains that to become a “geographical detective” you need to unmask, expose and reveal the network of connections hidden by advertising, the fetish and spatial distance, all by looking “beyond a commodity’s exotic surface” (Hartwick, 2000; 1184). This “defetishising” of a commodity, exposing the real life connections, can attach voices, places and lives to our things (Cook et al, 2007). In my case, a rugby ball. Studies of this type look to

“repair the disjuncture in knowledge that renders consumers ... ignorant of the abuses suffered by the poorly paid producers of these commodities” (Foster, 2006; 296)

by showing the consumer the hidden exploitation behind their product and its “social relations” (Cook, 2006; Cook and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Crang 2005; Foster, 2006). Through the uncovering of the “unseen others” (Cook and Tolia-Kelly, 2010) that make our stuff the hope is that newly found knowledge will help shape consumer thinking in the future, thereby shaking up the system (Cook, 2006 Cook et al 2007a; Micheletti and Stolle, 2007; Sack in Hartwick, 2000).

Goss (2004), however, critiques this approach claiming it will not help consumers understand the processes, adding that we, as consumers, cannot intervene in these practices that are being uncovered. Often these studies can be seen to be rather Eurocentric, as they usually study products bought in the global North and made in the South (Cook and Tolia-Kelly, 2010). An additional critique is that often studies focus on everyday objects, rather than the less trodden path of dangerous, illegal or “hidden” commodities (ibid).

The rugby ball is my companion throughout this study. It will not be a single, linear path to uncover the “messiness” of the fetish web hiding these “unseen others”. By

embracing the “messiness” I shall “get in touch with the fetish” to truly understand my rugby ball (Taussig, 1992; 122).

From Football to Rugby

As I mentioned, the original plan was to follow footballs, but I quickly took up the challenge of a sport closer to my heart, Rugby Union. I have not looked back since that first meeting in April 2013. I currently play the sport at university and have never been far from a ball, almost since I could walk. I am connected. Involved. Time to go deeper.

This is a “challenge” as no study of this type has been conducted on rugby balls. Some isolated studies have been undertaken on football manufacturing in Asia (Lund-Thomsen 2013; Nadvi et al 2011; Play Fair, 2008; Siegmann 2008) which sparked my interest. All four cite Pakistan, India and more recently China as the main sites of football manufacturing, among other inflatable balls. The sports ball industry is significant with world exports of \$1.149 billion in 2008 (UN Comtrade 2010 in Nadvi et al 2011). China, in 2009 exported 50.5% of inflatable balls, with Pakistan at 13.2%, Thailand at 6.6% and India at 2.3% (Nadvi et al 2011). Through looking at Lund-Thomsen’s (2013) study on Sialkot, Pakistan, it is clear that this is a hub for football manufacturing, with an estimated 80% of the world’s balls made here (Siegmann, 2008). Staggering figures for one, albeit large, industrial town. Ball manufacturers often cluster in towns like Sialkot, Jalandhar (Punjab, India) and Meerut (Uttar Pradesh, India) (Nadvi et al 2011).

These areas came under intense scrutiny in the 1990s, as did huge companies like Nike (\$15 billion profits 2006 (Siegmann, 2008)) for poor labour standards, gender inequality, child labour, abuse of worker rights and subcontracting¹ (Lund-Thomsen, 2013; Nadvi et al, 2011; Play Fair, 2008; Siegmann, 2008). In 1997, as a reaction to

¹ ‘Subcontracting’ is explained in the *Analysis*

these growing reports, the “Atlanta Agreement” was set up in order to monitor the industry more stringently, with companies’ Corporate Social Responsibility and factory regulations high on the agenda (Lund-Thomsen, 2013). This agreement was not far reaching however and only focussed on Pakistan and specifically football stitching. It promoted more primary school enrolment, support for child labourers and generally monitored Pakistani football manufacturing (Nadvi et al, 2011). But according to the “Play Fair Report” from 2008 the issues highlighted in the 1990s have not dissipated. “Substantial violations of worker rights are still the norm in the sportswear industry” (Play Fair, 2008; 5) it declares and workers are still underpaid, overworked with no safety net for their seasonal employment. Western consumer demand keeps prices low, which affects the workers at the bottom the most (ibid). The industry is flooded with middle-men all taking a slice via subcontracting work, a huge web of actors that is difficult to control.

So nothing changes it seems. But where are the rugby balls in this? It’s all football, football, football. The ‘beautiful game’ marred by child labour. But maybe you expect this? The saying goes “football is a gentlemen’s game played by thugs...” and maybe this “thuggery” translates to the manufacturing of the balls. But surely not rugby too. Not the “thug’s game played by gentlemen”? But why would rugby ball manufacturing be any different? Studies have only been focussed on rugby ball aerodynamics (Djamovski et al 2012) and grip patterns (Lewis et al 2013) so far. Time to break the mould. Time to follow the rugby ball.

My Personal Voice

I am here to tell a story. To take you on the journey I have experienced myself from April 2013 to March 2014, with all its ups and downs. You’ll need to read the Analysis

in its proper order to get a true feeling of this, and it'll help you understand the ending. With this story-telling aim in mind I write in a style advocated by a sort of “new-age” of geographers (Amin and Thrift, 2000; Bondi, 1997; Cook, 2001; Law, 2004; Mitchell, 2006). It's personal. It embraces the “mess” of social science research (Law, 2004) and it's connective (Cook, 2001), rather like Bondi's (1997) comment:

“Within geography a number of attempts have been made to write in ways that challenge the norms of academic knowledge. Most commonly the use of first person singular is now often used as a mechanism for maintaining an identifiable, overtly positioned, subjective voice within the text” (Bondi, 1997; 247)

This style may be criticised for being too vague and lacking theory (Markusen, 1999) or even too personal, as another researcher may come up with a different response (Herbert, 2000), but my writing style and approach fits this personal journey. It's partly a reaction to three years reading a great deal of “dense, turgid and usually mind-numbingly boring prose” as Mitchell laments (2006; 205). I am writing for me, for you and for everyone. Engaging both outside and inside the academy. It will start with me “groping” my way to find connections through my ball (Marcus, 1995). Who knows what chains, paths, associations and threads I shall uncover. Come with me. Let's get following.

METHODOLOGY

Methods of Data Collection

Ethnographic Approach

Ethnography, my research method of choice, is unplannable, impulsive and sometimes a random and accidental process (van Maanen, 1988), which suits my following of a rugby ball. It's a slow, largely unstructured, flexible and non-linear process which brings together small pieces of information to help build a wider tapestry or web of connections (Allsop et al, 2010; Cook and Crang, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Herbert, 2000). I needed to make decisions in uncertain circumstances (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) and pursue a variety of different angles in case some did not work out (Cook and Crang, 2007) as the project morphed. It is often difficult to know where to start (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) but I "groped" my way following chains, paths, threads, all tracing the circulation of my ball through different contexts (Marcus, 1995) by using Kopytoff's "biographical approach to things" to understand the process a commodity goes through in its "life" (Kopytoff, 1986). The order with this ethnographic style comes *from* the field and is not imposed on it (Herbert, 2000).

As the researcher, I am bound up in my journey, following the ball. My postionality matters (Allsop et al, 2010; Cook and Crang, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Herbert, 2000; van Maanen, 1988), so a personal, vivid and emotional account to connect with my story and fascinate my reader will reflect this.

Apart from one afternoon at Harlequin FC's training ground at the University of Surrey in August 2013, the whole project was conducted from behind a desk, in front of a computer. Unlike other commodity following studies (Abrahams, 2007; Clare, 2006; Wrathmell, 2003) I did not travel abroad to trace the route of my ball. I followed my

ball through various routes, mainly searching the internet, using the Nexis database to find old newspaper articles, and scholarly search engines to find studies on football stitching for context. The internet provides the “potential to access large and geographically distributed populations and achieve quick return” (Madge, 2010, 176) and this suited my project because I could not logistically travel to India, mainly due to the unpredictability of the Sports Ball Industry. Ethics is important for a researcher online, as the private and public can merge (Bassett and Riordan, 2002; Hay, 2010; Madge, 2007, 2010). This makes gaining consent from participants tough (Bassett and Riordan, 2010), but all information I gathered was in the public domain and did not require consent as it would be seen by Bassett and Riordan (2010) as a “text”. I provided consent forms to participants whose information was more personal, making sure they knew they could withdraw at any time (Madge, 2007). Generally, I took a teleological stance to ethics; judging ethical dilemmas by looking at the consequences and what was “right” to do (Hay, 2010). As you will see this occurs near the end of my *Analysis*.

The main source of information was Ben Doherty, an Australian journalist who I found through his newspaper articles and Twitter. I spoke to him via email and Skype. I also created a blog about my project to collate my thoughts which has helped with the writing process immensely. Finally I maintained a document detailing all my findings in chronological order.

Interviews

None of my interviews were rigorously structured. I conducted three separate interviews with Ben Doherty over Skype and in these the conversation flowed naturally; I had in mind certain topics to cover, but made sure I reacted to what was said (Cloke et

al, 2004; Valentine, 1997). In this sense they were more “conversations with a purpose” (Webb and Webb 1932 in Cloke et al, 2004) and more “human” (Valentine, 1997). The same applied for my more informal conversations at Harlequins with Graeme Bowerbank, Ben Botica and Rob Buchanan. Generally the interviews gave me an insight into the subject’s experiences, allowing me to exact truths from willing respondents (Cloke et al, 2004). With ■■■ my contact at ■■■ the situation was a little different. Despite only speaking on the telephone I was wary, heeding Hughes’ (1999) advice, that more structure would be required as I was lucky to have half an hour of ■■■’s time and was keen to glean as much information from him as possible (Hughes, 1999). Ben and ■■■’s interviews were audio-taped on my personal dictaphone so that I could engage with the conversation. This gave me detailed transcriptions, which I could quote directly and use as the basis of my coding data (Cloke et al, 2004; Valentine, 1997).

Methods of Data Analysis

Coding

“Open coding” was used to analyse my transcribed interviews, newspaper articles and other information to get to know the data. This helped me improve my understanding of the meanings in the text by discovering patterns and categories (Cope, 2010). The long process of reading transcripts, listening back to recordings and coding data consequently helped me notice aspects I had not picked up on before (Cook and Crang, 2007). Formatting, like having a wide margin and line numbers, aided the organisation of this “messy” process and constant re-coding allowed me to develop connections between pieces of data (ibid). Another organisational aid was the use of a “code map”. I drew up a hierarchical chart with subcategories to link certain aspects

together (Cook and Crang, 2007; Cope, 2010). For example the code “Rugby Balls” had a subcategory “Stitching” which contained codes relating to child labour, piece work, factory work and social implications/worker rights.

I did not feel it was appropriate for these codes to formulate the structure of my *Analysis* chapters as the story needs to be told and read chronologically to experience my journey with its twists and turns. Coding helped me make connections between processes, issues and people and the codes are embedded in my analysis, if not overtly visible.

Methodological Limitations

Bearing in mind that the vast majority of my research was conducted via the internet alone, I feel I have found a surprising amount of information on my [REDACTED] rugby ball. I could not have imagined the detail I have managed to gather, just by sitting at my desk in London and Devon, at the start of this project. I should admit, however, that travelling to Jalandhar, India with Ben Doherty and shadowing his investigation would have added another dimension to my project. Although, I feel it has not mattered one iota, some may say a first-hand experience may have been more powerful.

The main issue I came across was time. With this unplanned, impulsive ethnographic approach it was difficult to cram everything into eleven months! Fourteen days before my dissertation was due my project exploded in a very interesting and different direction. I have tried to capture the last minute nature of this at the end of my *Analysis*, but with more time the full implications of my newspaper story may have been realised. It is still uncertain!

ANALYSIS

CHAPTER ONE

KICK OFF April to May 2013

The doorbell rings at my lifetime home in Twickenham. The home of rugby and where I grew up. An apt place to start. The delivery man from the German company *Dynamic Parcel Distribution*, or *Deutscher Paket Dienst* (DPD) hands me a package containing a [REDACTED] rugby ball. It's here! I always find it exciting having a brand new grippy, pristine rugby ball in my hands and this one more so than the others. It signals the beginning of a journey. The start of my investigation. The first step on the winding path. Who knows where it will take me. I'm just following the ball.

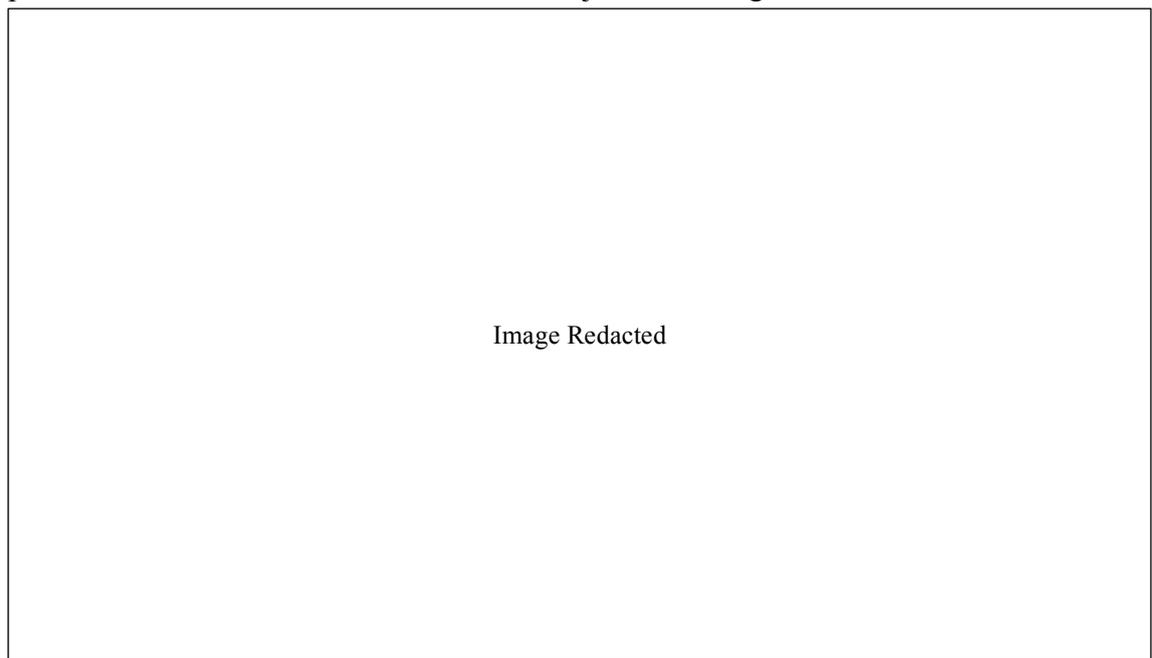


Image Redacted

I haven't had a new ball for ages. The feel of a new ball is brilliant, super grippy, easy to catch and pass. The vibrant yellow and blue branding on it stands out. It's an [REDACTED] [REDACTED] replica costing £19.99 plus £7 delivery. It's mine. There are a few old, discarded balls lying in my garden, others rotting away in the shed. Their "life" over. Condemned to the scrapheap of my childhood memories. But where did this 'life' of

theirs begin? How many human lives did they touch? Where in the world are they from? And how did they get here?

As I remove this new [REDACTED] specimen from its sealed package I head straight for the label drooping limply from one end of the ball. Looking for that curious sign. There it is.

‘MADE IN INDIA’

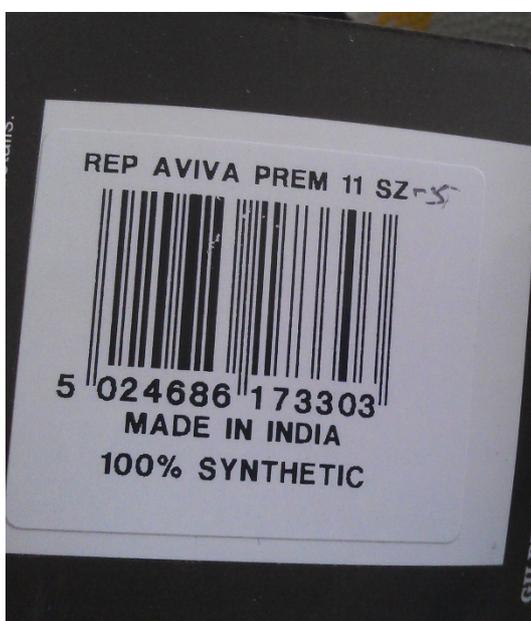


Figure 2: ‘MADE IN INDIA’

Already my mind is racing. A very English product delivered by a very German distribution company, now tells me it is ‘Made in India’... so much to think about.

Where to begin? Why not the company who makes my ball? [REDACTED] Here’s a brief summary of [REDACTED]’s history:

[REDACTED] has a rich and very English history dating back to the foundation of the game in Rugby, Warwickshire. The legend goes that a certain William Webb Ellis, attending

Rugby School in 1823 “first took the ball in his arms and ran with it”² thus establishing the sport of rugby. Ever since then [REDACTED] balls have been synonymous with the game. The founder [REDACTED] [REDACTED] started the company by providing balls to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] out of pigs’ bladders in the late 17 to early 1800s. The ball used in the famous tale of Webb Ellis undoubtedly would have been a [REDACTED] and their reputation as the leading rugby ball manufacturer in the world has been maintained over the centuries. Under the guidance of [REDACTED] [REDACTED] nephew of [REDACTED] in the mid to late 1800s [REDACTED] were exported abroad, mainly to New Zealand, South Africa and Australia. [REDACTED] kept expanding until 1978 when the family sold the business.

After passing through several owners in the 1980s and 90s [REDACTED] was back at the top of its game thanks to ex-rugby player [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. He set up the “[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]” which still exists today in the town of Rugby. By 1995 it was chosen as the official ball for the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] ([REDACTED]), a feat repeated in the 1999 [REDACTED] based in [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] sold up in 2000 and by July 2002 “[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]”, as they were known, were then rescued from receivership by another family run, sporting company, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED], that make [REDACTED] hockey equipment, [REDACTED] cricket bats and [REDACTED] rugby league gear.

Upon taking over, the now renamed “[REDACTED] [REDACTED]” was competing alongside a new company, namely “[REDACTED] [REDACTED]” that ex-[REDACTED] owner [REDACTED] [REDACTED] had now set up, also in Rugby. Some members of the same “[REDACTED]” family were now on rivalling sides. Nowadays [REDACTED], under the auspices of [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED], works as a semi-independent body with offices in [REDACTED], [REDACTED].

This history lesson provided the context but one thing that kept leaping out at me was “hand-stitched”. [REDACTED], in all their promotional materials on their website and in interviews, have always greatly emphasised that all their balls are hand stitched. But

² Quoted on the [REDACTED] Rugby Ball Fact Sheet: [www\[REDACTED\]rugby.com](http://www[REDACTED]rugby.com)

never *where*. In fact an IRB (International Rugby Board- the FIFA equivalent in rugby) “Total Rugby” television documentary on [REDACTED] gives the impression that one old lady sits in [REDACTED] stitching all the balls!

A family business, strong English routes, at the heart of the game, making millions of balls but very few staff. So where are these “unseen others” making them? I got the feeling there was a lot more to glean from this story. I tried to get in contact with [REDACTED] but was palmed off and sent the “Rugby Ball Fact sheet”, a longer version of what I have written above which can be accessed via their website. Nothing new. I need a different path. Time to get the metaphorical magnifying glass out and do detective work.

‘MADE IN INDIA’ the label said...

More delving. Wait. Is this the link I’m after? 1999. On the eve of the [REDACTED] kicking off in the new Millennium Stadium, Cardiff, *The Sunday Mirror* investigated [REDACTED]. Balls were allegedly being stitched in Jalandhar, Northern India. Largely by children in poor conditions. They reported at the time that these children are paid between ten and forty pence a day. [REDACTED], who are supplying all the balls to the tournament, denied the accusations.

Wow. Where has this come from? India. Jalandhar. [REDACTED]. Then more articles. A quote from an *Associated Press* article in November 1999, in the aftermath of the *Mirror* investigation, stands out:

“The International Federation of Commercial, Clerical and Technical Employees (FIET) said Friday that the meeting with Stephen Baines, chief executive of the International Rugby Board, had made progress toward a code of practice to combat child labour and introduce some form of monitoring.”

Codes of practice. Combatting child labour. Monitoring. Very similar to the stories of football stitching in Pakistan.

Then in June 2000 [REDACTED], then owner of [REDACTED], successfully sues MGN limited, owner of *The Sunday Mirror* for libel, accepting £10,000 in damages. [REDACTED] sued, seemingly, because *The Sunday Mirror* had falsely claimed that [REDACTED] had not sent anyone out to India to investigate the issue under the aggressive headline '*Slave balls firm breaks its promise*'. [REDACTED] had indeed sent out employees to investigate. [REDACTED] always denied profusely that children were stitching their balls.

Despite the fact that [REDACTED] won the case against MGN Ltd this story sparked my interest. Surely a newspaper would not allege anything without some, however small, basis in truth? Child labour accusations may have been false, but India? It's cropped up again. Specifically Jalandhar...

As I'm gathering more information I find another investigative piece. Not about [REDACTED] but *Sherrin*, who make Australian Rules Footballs. Published in September 2012. A shocking story with child labour at the forefront.

*"The footballs Australian children punt, pass and mark in weekend games are stitched by India's poorest children, working in appalling, dangerous and illegal conditions to earn as little as 7 [Australian] cents a ball"*³.

It talks about terrible working conditions, children as young as seven stitching balls for domestic and international markets and involves *Sherrin* and *Canterbury*. I am wearing *Canterbury* trousers. That hits home. The subsequent articles on the same topic show an unwavering use of child labour in the urban slums of Northern India. The paltry sums these workers receive for each ball are highlighted. Tiny amounts compared to the £26.99 I paid for my ball. We are told how these children miss school to stitch

³ (Doherty, 2012)

and are taken through a catalogue of their injuries. It paints a desolate and depressing scene. The worst thing is that it seems these children and their families have no choice.

The investigation was conducted by Ben Doherty, South Asian correspondent for *Fairfax Media*, which produces the *Melbourne Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

My next lead.

The story pulls on the heart-strings, as many investigative journalism pieces do. With the use of emotive language it jumps at you, pulls you in, personalising the issues. I have to look past this and get into the facts. Different shaped balls are involved now. Up to this point it's just been footballs under investigation but now netballs, Aussie rules balls and, more importantly, rugby balls. I'm getting closer. The balls are becoming the right shape, at least.

And where is all this happening? Where is the place that this comes back to?

Jalandhar, Northern India.

Time to find Ben Doherty.

CHAPTER TWO

A LINE BREAK

June to July 2013

By the powers of social media I found Ben and a tweet later I sent an explanation of my project.

Ben came straight back with an intriguing response. He was very happy to help and knew of ■■■ balls being stitched in Jalandhar. He wanted to chat on Skype. Amazing! I could glean so much useful information from him as he has followed different types of sporting balls himself. It's all kicking off now! I was finally feeling genuinely connected via my ball. Me, an Exeter student connected to the South Asian Correspondent for *Fairfax Media Australia*, working in India, simply via an ■■■ ■■■ ■■■ replica ball now lying in the sun at my Twickenham home. The powers of Twitter!

I spoke to Ben at length about his investigation, the Sports Ball Industry, Jalandhar and more. He painted a shocking picture of children stitching balls for little to no money in the backs of dimly lit houses, children who were taken out of school so that their families could earn enough money to put food on the table. But the story gave me strange optimism. I felt a little selfish having these feelings. This information was all helping my research, but it involves real people's lives and their daily struggle. It can be a case of life or death and I was excited about finding out about it...an odd set of thoughts.

Ben, having been given a tip-off from someone in Australia that all was not well with the Sports Ball Industry in India, went to Northern India, and more specifically the towns Jalandhar and Meerut, to investigate first hand. Here he found an industry hidden from Western eyes where child labour and piece-work were rife and the fees for stitching a ball were unfathomably low.

Ben gave me a huge amount of useful information that made me understand more about how this industry works. He explained that children are often used to stitch balls, valued because of their nimble, small hands which make the final, difficult stitches easier. Children also have better eyesight. Many stitchers are hidden away in the dark so their eyes deteriorate enormously by the time they are twenty years old. According to Ben there is an understanding that child labour is wrong, and it is certainly not conducted in broad daylight on the streets, but it is seen as an unfortunate necessity.

“If you’re a poor family you’ll need every rupee you can get. If that means children working, well then we’ve gotta eat today”

Ben explained.

Piece-work, in which stitchers are paid a fixed rate for each individual ball finished, is also very common and, more importantly, not illegal. However, Ben went on to explain how the system of subcontracting out labour functions; how it takes the balls out of the control of the branded companies, like *Sherrin* the Aussie Rules ball manufacturer. He detailed how companies like *Sherrin* subcontract out their stitching to a small ball manufacturing company in Jalandhar. They sign a deal to produce a certain number of balls at a price and under certain working conditions for a fixed deadline. The Western company then has a supply contract in India with detailed plans for auditing, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and worker rights that are in force within the factory. That’s the key. *Within* the factory. The problems arise when smaller companies over-estimate how much they can stitch and so often balls are farmed out of the back door, via a middle-man to the local men, women and children. These piece-workers get paid a pittance, the middle-man takes a slice and the codes of conduct and signed agreements are useless as the balls have left the original factory. This often happens at “peak” times, near tournaments like the RWC, for example. The stitching

company will bite off more than it can chew and will end up sub-contracting the stitching further to make sure they meet their target of balls finished. Even the auditing process can be very dubious as Ben explained;

“This is not necessarily designed to work this way but the way the system is built means that companies lose control of their supply chains...They have auditing procedures that are regularly corrupted; part of the supply contract will be [that] you’re audited twice a year, but the auditors are paid off and it’s all fairly dodgily done. Sherrin, from their end look at it and say, “look we’ve got a supply contract in India and it says this, and these are the conditions, we’re audited twice a year and we’re confident that this is the way it is in our shiny new factory” but it ignores the realities on the ground that as soon as their backs are turned, basically, these balls are being farmed out and manufactured in another way.”

The system is fundamentally flawed. Ben was adamant that many companies will have no idea what goes on in these Northern Indian suburbs like Jalandhar. He mentioned that it is a “deliberately arcane” industry, as few people as possible are “in the know”, people in this labyrinthine system of middle men will usually know the link above and below them but nothing else;

“The companies have a subcontractor on the books and so they ring them up and say “Look, we’ve got so many balls that need stitching, can you come and get them” and he’ll come on his motorbike or whatever and get a whole stack of balls. He doesn’t really worry about where they go, they’ve given the balls to the subcontractor and at the end of the week he’ll bring them back stitched. So they don’t know and they really don’t care. It’s quite a deliberate thing.”

Ben seemed very passionate about his research. Exasperated about the wrongdoings of companies, he was keen to divulge all this information, and more that I have

promised not to repeat, to a student he had only met via Skype! We had built up an instant trust it seemed and Ben's anger at some of the ignorance shown within *Sherrin* was palpable.

“Sherrin and other companies will say “we didn't know about this” and that sort of thing but the argument is that that doesn't really matter, they are your balls, you should know, you should have a little bit of responsibility for how they're being made... My response to that was, it doesn't matter if you knew or not, it's still happening, the people are still being paid 12 [Australian] cents a ball. What do they care if the CEO knows or not?”

He said that this “race to the bottom” is unfortunately inevitable in places like India and the companies need to wake up to the realities.

“India is a hyper-competitive place, they've got around a billion people and so there's always competition and pressure to screw prices down. If there is an opportunity to cut corners it will be taken because of this hyper-competition. The criticism level at the sports ball companies is that they sort of take advantage of that without thinking of the outcomes for the people that make the balls.”

Mind-blowing. An amazing insight into this different world. A world unseen. Unmentioned. Unknown. What I really wanted to know was whether he saw ██████ balls being stitched in this way though. He hadn't. But had seen ██████ *netballs* stitched via piece-work, as he mentioned in an email. So the brand is still linked to Jalandhar. Surely the rugby balls aren't far around the corner? Why would they be so different?

Another fascinating insight for me was the world of investigative journalism. How to expose a company for their wrongdoings. Ben went to Jalandhar six times and only found useful information for his story on the third visit. Then it was a case of looking for a reaction from *Sherrin* and releasing a series of reports as the story unfolded as well

as longer comment pieces. All in the build up to the Australian Football League (AFL) Grand Final where the ball of choice for Australia's game was, you guessed it, a *Sherrin*. How about that for impact?

My dissertation had been blown wide open. I had hundreds of questions. Mainly, what on earth can be done to stop this? Whose responsibility is it to change the situation? The big brands? Subcontractors? Consumers? And if it's us would we genuinely want to pay more for our ball to know that it was made more ethically? Do we care from afar?

So much to think about. I emailed some new leads in India that Ben had given me including Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA), the anti-child-labour NGO based in Jalandhar that he had worked alongside, and the Sports Goods Foundation of India (SGFI). No replies. Frustrating after such a leap forward.

I guess I would have to prepare another pathway on my way to █████ HQ.

CHAPTER THREE

RUNNING A DIFFERENT LINE

August 2013

As the Indian angle had dried up for now it was time to pursue different avenues. I decided to come back home, metaphorically, to the English side of the ball's "life". The end of the supply chain. What stories were to be uncovered here?

I thought it would be interesting to see the professional rugby club's angle to the tale of the ball. The logistics, the distribution, the usage and the fetishism of the ball- it's a commodity after all! So where better to go than the club I support that is ten minutes from my house, Harlequin FC.

I was invited to Harlequins' preseason training, in the build up to the 2013/14 Aviva Premiership season, at the University of Surrey Sports Complex, by Head of Rugby Operations, Graeme Bowerbank. He was more than happy to help me in my quest for information and I gathered a great insight into a different aspect of my ball's life. When I explained my project Graeme said something intriguing that has stuck with me.

"You could bring down all of rugby with this."

I was a little taken aback. I suppose he's right. This could get serious. I didn't really know what to think about that...

Anyway, I ascertained an enormous amount of useful and interesting information from Graeme, some of which surprised me. In terms of logistics, Harlequins, like all the other eleven Premiership clubs, order a large batch of balls from the league at the start of the year. The league has a contract with █████ who supply all the official match balls and these are duly distributed so that all clubs, from as far apart as Exeter and Newcastle, have their orders for the start of preseason training. This process must occur at the beginning of *every* season as █████ make subtle changes to their official match

ball product for each campaign. The geographically fascinating part, however, comes when balls are coming to the end of their useful “life”. As rugby players will know, after usage a ball starts to “polish”, becoming more and more slippery and harder to handle. Match ball products, which the professionals use, “polish” more easily because of the higher natural rubber content in them. This makes the ball grippier than a lower natural rubber replica version, but the replica lasts longer as the casual user prioritises durability over grip quality. Therefore come winter, a few months into the season, clubs like Harlequins have a lot of balls unfit for use. The players test the balls regularly on the training field and will discard them on the basis of “feel” or weighting, according to Graeme. These are then either signed and donated to charities or displays or given to children after matches. The life of the ball now takes on a different form. On a display. In a child’s garden. Its purpose morphed.

Intriguingly and surprisingly Graeme also mentioned that clubs *never* use brand new balls in matches. He said that the brand new versions have a slippery film that makes the ball harder to catch. The players “knock them in” so to speak, partly to get used to the feel of the ball, but also to get rid of this film. Not often do you buy a commodity that is not immediately usable. An odd concept. The only other sporting comparisons I can draw with this are “warming-up” a squash ball or “knocking in” a cricket bat before use.

After speaking to Graeme I then chatted to Harlequins’ 23 year old New Zealander fly-half and kicker, Ben Botica. He told me that because different balls are used for different competitions (*Adidas* for European games and ██████ for LV= Cup and Aviva Premiership) he has to refine his goal-kicking technique depending on which ball he is using. Ben said it is about “getting to know the right feel” of a ball, learning how it reacts to you, how it flies, how much it is pumped up and so on. He mentioned how using his preferred ball, the *Adidas*, is like going back to an old friend as he grew up

playing with this brand at home in New Zealand (*Adidas* is widely used in NZ as the national team the “All Blacks” have a long standing sponsorship deal with the brand). For Ben there are significant differences between *Adidas* and [REDACTED] balls- [REDACTED] are “skinnier” and more pointed compared to the more rounded *Adidas*. A week before a European fixture Ben will gather a batch of *Adidas* balls to re-hone his skills. I found it fascinating that kickers would use a different technique in a different competition solely based on the ball used.

As I spoke to Ben, the ball was coming to life. Fetishised. The ball is a rugby player’s life. His *modus operandi*. He is inexorably linked to the ball, how it performs and how he performs with it. It is more than just an elliptical rubber compound stitched together by cotton and flax that is passed and kicked around a field for eighty minutes. The ball matters. You’re told to “look after the ball” in a game of rugby. It is a precious thing without which you can’t win the game. The method of scoring points. Central to the sport. Scoring a try, there’s the ball. Goal kicking, there’s the ball. Even the traditional team photo, what’s the captain holding at the front? You can’t get away from it as a player.

I also spoke to Harlequins hooker Rob Buchanan and both he and Ben discussed this idea of sporting kit fetishised; taking on a life of its own. Ben mentioned how he took a bag of balls home over the summer break so that he would not “forget” the “feel” of a [REDACTED] and I was glad to see that he shared my enthusiasm for the concept of having something “new”. Ben mentioned his excitement when receiving a new kit, eager to check out the “features”. Rob pointed out that in sports like cricket you focus on what bat someone has as it seemingly corresponds to how well they will play. The ball is the same for everyone, so less fetishised. It’s the same for football and rugby, everyone uses the same ball so the boots get more focus. Sporting kit is advertised and sold through these discourses of fetishism making the product in question seem powerful.

Before I left I wanted to sound Rob out on the potential ethical side of rugby balls and their production, the interview with Ben Doherty fresh in my mind. Rob mentioned that if anything was found to be awry with ball manufacturing he would naturally be concerned, as a moral human being. He said there probably would be something you could do as a player to inform people of the issue but, he honestly pointed out that it is not his job to be concerned with the ball's life. He had never really thought about it before, but neither had I before this project. Rob could never turn around to his team mates or coaches and declare that he would not play with a potentially "unethical" ball, if that were ever the case, he would be laughed at and dropped for someone who didn't care. He said if it ever were a problem, it would be an issue for Premiership Rugby and the ball manufacturer to sort out. He's right. It's unreasonable to think that players would put aside their careers to make a moral stand. Players have no reason to waiver from their trust in the ball, yet. And even if that trust was broken, what then? They can't just boycott the ball! Surely if one type is unethical they all are? So, what can be done? It doesn't matter to them, really, where, how or under what conditions the ball is made, and why should it? Life goes on.

But what if there *are* problems with these [REDACTED] balls? The consequences could be huge, as Graeme Bowerbank commented...

I better try and find out, hadn't I? All the science, branding, knowledge, all the people, all the lives, all the stories and all those glorious, and possibly inglorious, connections for that little ball.

Next stop [REDACTED].

CHAPTER FOUR

A WORD WITH THE CAPTAIN

September 2013

Having heard what Ben Doherty had to say about this seemingly underground, “deliberately arcane” and messy industry, I needed to bring the ball makers themselves into the mix. ■■■ have always been the captain in my team of angles to pursue and it was now time to call them over for a word. Like the referee would in a match. What they told me would greatly define how the game was played from here.

I found my man. ■■■: Research and Development Engineer at ■■■ *Rugby*. Due to his busy schedule, and the fact that ■■■ had just launched their new ball that will be used in the English ■■■ I couldn't meet ■■■ in person. Nevertheless a lengthy telephone conversation sufficed.

With Ben Doherty's investigations in mind let's start with the headline. All ■■■ balls are made in the same factory in India. None in England. Confirmed. The tag's right, my ball *was* 'MADE IN INDIA'. ■■■ told me that ■■■ has an exclusive factory in the country where every ball, regardless of size or quality, is made. For my replica ball all the component parts are also Indian, but this changes higher up the range of products. Despite being made in the same way the component parts are sourced from other locations for the more technological, higher end, match-ball. ■■■ would not be drawn on two counts, however. First, where this exclusive factory is located, and second where the component parts of a ball are sourced from. Classified information, which is interesting in itself! Am I getting closer to linking ■■■ with Jalandhar? At least I know it's India now.

■■■ took me through the process of making a ball:

“Taking a concept from a design on a computer would involve me creating a design, using my knowledge of how panels go together and how the designs would work together. Then we would send that to our factory and have that prototyped quite quickly [in their ■■■ HQ], just to make sure the design worked. From there, then, we would get full approval, if it involved a third party, let’s say it was ■■■ and then we’d work on a pretty standard lead time which is around about twelve weeks from approval of design to delivery of product. Within that there’s usually a six week manufacturing time and a six week delivery time. And then from there it’s into our warehouse. Picked and packed and out to the venue or to the clubs and they would use it from there.”

I was starting to get an, albeit highly summarised, picture of how this deeply complicated process works, but still had dozens of questions. ■■■ also mentioned that ■■■ have stringent ball checking and assessing procedures. They have a “batch recognition system” which was implemented after that *The Sunday Mirror* investigation (which ■■■ sued the newspaper for) in 1999. Now they can keep track of where and when their products are made more easily.

“I think the biggest change we have now is we have the ability to give anyone who wants to question that information straight away whereas I think the reason the story ran for the length of time that it did was that the information wasn’t really available. We have all that information ready to go for anyone who wants it. I think recently Canterbury had a couple of issues and they were in a similar position to we were perhaps in ’99 that they couldn’t come out categorically and state it was untrue at the start. We’re in that position and we’re comfortable.”

Further to this ball checking all component parts of a ball are individually weighed and examined to make sure they are within “tolerance”. ■■■, ex-England fly-half, is hired as their human ball tester and ■■■ also have machines that can test balls’

durability and performance. Finally ■ himself hand checks *every single ball* that is used in each ■.

I had the impression that ball manufacturing is highly technical and ■ pride themselves on being atop of the field. For them each ball needs to be perfect, especially the match balls. One small error and the ball is compromised and a player at Harlequins will discard it as useless. With this in mind I find it fascinating that India is at the forefront of the rugby ball manufacturing industry. ■ told me this is the country where they “pioneered” certain manufacturing techniques. Certainly the technology and expertise required to make a ■ ball seems substantial. ■ himself designs the balls from England on a computer and has the ability to create a physical sample at ■’s - ■ Headquarters before committing to making thousands in India. The science of pimple patterns for grip, the aerodynamics, even where the pump valve is positioned, among many other variables, are vital to creating a quality ball. ■ ■, a man who has this knowledge, is based in England and visits the factory in India a couple of times a year, surely ■ must have an equivalent person in India, who understands the science and technology that goes into making the ball, and can then relate this to stitchers? Is this person British? Indian? Or from somewhere else? When a new ball comes onto the horizon, like the 2015 ■ one, does this person tell the workers what’s new and how to make it? Does this person even exist!? I find it intriguing that all this rugby and ball manufacturing knowledge is present in a country that has no discernable affiliation with the sport. Indians do not play rugby.

A lot of what ■ told me sparks more questions than provides answers! Anyway back to this unnamed, elusive exclusive factory.

Ben Doherty had opened the door to a hyper-competitive, exploitative and decidedly dodgy industry, so I was interested to see how ■ made sure their balls were not

embroiled in similar scandals to *Sherrin* balls, seeing as they are made in similar locations. ■■■ was supremely confident that ■■■ had their house in order saying that ethical issues, worker rights and a secure supply chain were “top of the list, making sure... everybody in the chain is happy”. An exclusive factory and careful planning is the key.

“Having a factory that’s exclusive makes a massive difference. If you were looking at other manufacturers around the world, who don’t have exclusivity, then I’m sure that they would say if they could have an exclusive supplier it would make a big difference because you’re then not up against workloads from other manufacturers that need to be done at the same time. So we’re happy with where we are at the moment.”

And the unseen world of subcontracting that makes all codes of conduct and CSR void, seemingly endemic in the Sports Ball Industry, apparently does not affect ■■■ either.

“I can imagine much larger manufacturers or even larger companies who are making for lots of different manufacturers that would be the case [that balls may be subcontracted]. The fact that we do plan all of our ordering on a twelve monthly basis means that it’s very easy to make sure our factory is kept in work and not overworked, unless there was an extraordinary order that came in. That’s all part and parcel of planning really.”

This all comes directly into contrast with the picture Ben painted. So how is ■■■ sure that ■■■ is above board when other manufacturers aren’t? He mentioned that their unnamed factory was one of the founder members of the Sporting Goods Federation of India (SGFI), a NGO committed to the prevention and rehabilitation of child labourers in the industry. Set up in 1998, it now boasts thirty manufacturers and exporters of inflatable balls responsible for 95% of the total ball exports of the country.

The companies contribute some of their profits each month to the cause. Where is it based? Jalandhar.

But how does SGFI help [REDACTED]? CSR, auditing and “cover” [REDACTED] says:

“The Sporting Goods Federation of India have set up a base and auditing facility and an external auditing facility so there are ways and means to make sure those involved, not just in the stitching but the printing and any other element within the sporting goods field, are covered by the collective right to bargain and make sure they’re not being put into bonded labour in any way and making sure that they have access to various things to medical, to eye cover to lots of different things. We’re happy with the level of cover the workers have got.”

All in all my chat with [REDACTED] was very constructive and helped answer many of my questions. As expected he gave an almost polar opposite view of the Sports Ball Industry from Ben Doherty. If you take [REDACTED]’s side, [REDACTED] could be seen as a shining example to other companies. Maybe the question is why can’t other manufacturers work like this? Is it that simple? Is there more under the surface? Another twist to the tale?

Where do I go from here? I still have many questions but I am starting to build a detailed picture of my ball’s route around the world. So many connections. So many lives. Just from a ball. You never know what’s around the corner, it’s messy, upside down and inside out at times. Like real life.

In the back of my mind there’s a persistent voice. “Keep going. Keep delving. There is more to find.”

It has an Australian accent. Ben Doherty’s.

He is heading back to Jalandhar to see if anything has changed. He's keeping an eye out for █████ balls for me. What lies in wait for him there? The good? The bad? Or the ugly?

CHAPTER FIVE

THE RUCK

October 2013 to March 2014

The ugly.

On 1 October 2013 Ben published an article entitled "*Summit rugby league footballs linked to Indian child slave labour*". Having returned to Jalandhar a year on from his investigation on *Sherrin* Ben found that even though this company had moved out, another had moved in. *Summit* make rugby league balls and were being stitched by children in the slums of Jalandhar.

I jumped straight on my email to see what had happened and, crucially, if Ben had any information on █████. The reply came back straight away.

...I went up basically just to check Sherrin weren't still using child labour. I was staggered to find that they'd move out, but another Australian brand had moved in. Summit were really aggressive in saying they weren't using child labour. But two days' worth of evidence convinced them they were and they have now issued a grovelling mea culpa.

Anyway, as promised, I kept an eye out for █████ balls being stitched, and found plenty of them. At least a dozen homes I would say (I visited about 100 homes over three days), so it's hard to keep an exact count, but █████ were definitely there. █████ balls seemed to pay better, but the standards required were higher, so they seemed not to be balls that were being stitched by kids.

I didn't get too many pics of █████ balls being stitched. I did not see any children stitching █████ balls. I was really there looking for child labour, which is illegal, as opposed to home piece-work, which is not.

But █████ might be telling you that all of their balls are made completely in factories, where they can control production. This is demonstrably untrue. █████ is a very common ball for families to be stitching.

The photos attached are of a family stitching █████ balls in their home. This picture was taken in September 2013, about a week-and-a-half ago. I can go back through my notes to find out how much they were being paid.

Ben

I was NOT expecting this. Wow. Unbelievable. Shocking. This goes against everything I was told by [REDACTED]. This is huge. Wide implications. Supremely powerful information. In my inbox. It has happened. A photo. Damning evidence. What on earth have I got myself into...? What do I do now!?

Skype Ben. Need details. So many questions.

Summit were now the subject of investigations. Ben had photographic and video proof that children stitched their balls in Jalandhar. *Summit* had merely taken the place of *Sherrin*, who were exposed just over twelve months previously. Same story, different company. The same old issues came across when speaking to Ben. Subcontracting, abused codes of CSR, loss of supply chain, piece-workers and children earning less than one Australian dollar a day. But Ben was angrier this time. His words sharper. Clearly exasperated by this endemic in the Sports Ball Industry, there was more emotion behind his words than before.

“To suggest that we [REDACTED] or equivalent company] have put in place this code of conduct or this code of CSR and then everything is fine because we’ve got it written down on a piece of paper is naïve in the extreme and it almost beggars belief that people can still believe it given all the evidence that has come out about how sports balls [industries] operate in Pakistan and in India.

The cheapest way to do it is to farm these balls out to get them made in homes. So to pretend that just by saying that we’ve got this contract with this one factory and we’ve got a code of conduct is incredibly naïve to think that that will necessarily be adhered to. That’s not the way this industry works, it’s been proven, not just by my

[investigations]. It has been [uncovered over] a decade. The way the industry works, and still works, has been exposed so to make an argument that they alone have got their house in order is difficult to believe.”

Nothing changes, it seems, and Ben, who uncovered two large companies, knowingly or otherwise, abusing the system in twelve months could not contain his frustration. This, in a strange way, made me trust Ben more, not that I didn't trust his information before, but this time it was different. He was telling me information that few others knew. Stuff about ██████ that wasn't part of his story. Saying all this to a guy who had just found him on Twitter. I've never met Ben, but it seems we've built a mutual trust through our virtual conversations. He trusted me with this information. I trusted his work through the clear emotions he displayed when talking about it.

This increased emotion was no doubt due to the fact that during this new investigation Ben's information and professional pride had been subject to a vitriolic attack by *Summit*. Originally when shown a photo of one of their balls being stitched by a child, the company went on the attack. They categorically denied they were using child labour, even going as far as saying the photo had been staged and doctored by Ben to blackmail *Summit*. A scathing and somewhat unbelievable accusation. Ben was informed that this was “a very dangerous thing to be writing about” by the company and also detailed other aggressive actions *Summit* took;

“We were presented with this signed affidavit from this boy, written in English, a language he doesn't speak, let alone read or write, and signed in English by him, basically saying that he was home alone and we came over and forced him to stitch, he didn't know how to do it but we forced him to pose so we could take a photo. They also made these claims that it was impossible to stitch a ball in the position he was sitting in.”

But *Summit's* claims collapsed when a video of this boy stitching was released by *Fairfax Media*.

“Almost everything they’d said was proven to be a lie. Two days later they admitted it and put out a statement saying “yes we have been using child labour, we didn’t know about it” But that was the most extreme example of trying to kill the story and they were doing that through threats and intimidation.”

Clearly this attack did more harm than good for the company and they were held to account by Ben and his editors in an article called *“Eight ways to deny you’re using child labour”* a powerful piece which detailed all eight of *Summit's* unfounded denials and the newspaper’s systematic statement of the hard facts. Ben, despite being vigorously called into question, was quite calm about this attack as he knew the facts.

“It happens, it’s part of the deal in journalism, if you’re writing things that people don’t want you to write. And that’s what real news is, the rest is advertising. People will try to intimidate you, threaten you or dissuade you from publishing in some way.”

Within all this I found it fascinating how a journalist like Ben went about his investigation, increasingly this following of a rugby ball was becoming a study of how companies are exposed. So how did he go about it? A long, old fashioned slog apparently. For each person Ben quoted in a story he estimated he had visited ten or fifteen houses. It was a case of going door to door in the towns of Jalandhar, Meerut and their suburbs asking people about their work. Ben went to the Punjab to investigate six times in all; the first two occasions he found nothing to run on from an Australian angle, as most balls were being made for the domestic market, but an indication that there was more to find. Ben was very ethically conscious, making sure families were clear that he was a journalist interested in finding out information on the sports ball industry and

stitching. Some were not keen to talk but the ones that did welcomed him with great politeness.

Despite the claims of *Summit*, which were later rescinded, Ben was conscious never to move any balls into a shot for a photograph, he did not ask people to change how they sat or to do anything different from what they were doing when he arrived.

“Often I would have to get into odd positions to take the photo. For example because the balls are laid on the ground and they sit on these very low stools, most of the shots are from low, going up because that’s the way you can get the ball, the person and the stitching happening [in the same frame]. You can’t shoot it down[wards] quite as easily. I was quite conscious not to stage in any way.”

Ben mentioned that credit should be given to his editors for sticking by the story. Nowadays you are not usually given a long time period for a story but with this his editors allowed him to gather all the necessary information to complete the piece.

This investigative journalism was “follow the things” personified. Uncovering, lifting the veil, exposing the lives behind our stuff. Fascinating.

So what about me? What about ██████?

Well, Ben, as he mentioned in the published email, sent me an image. It’s powerful. Turn the page to have a look.

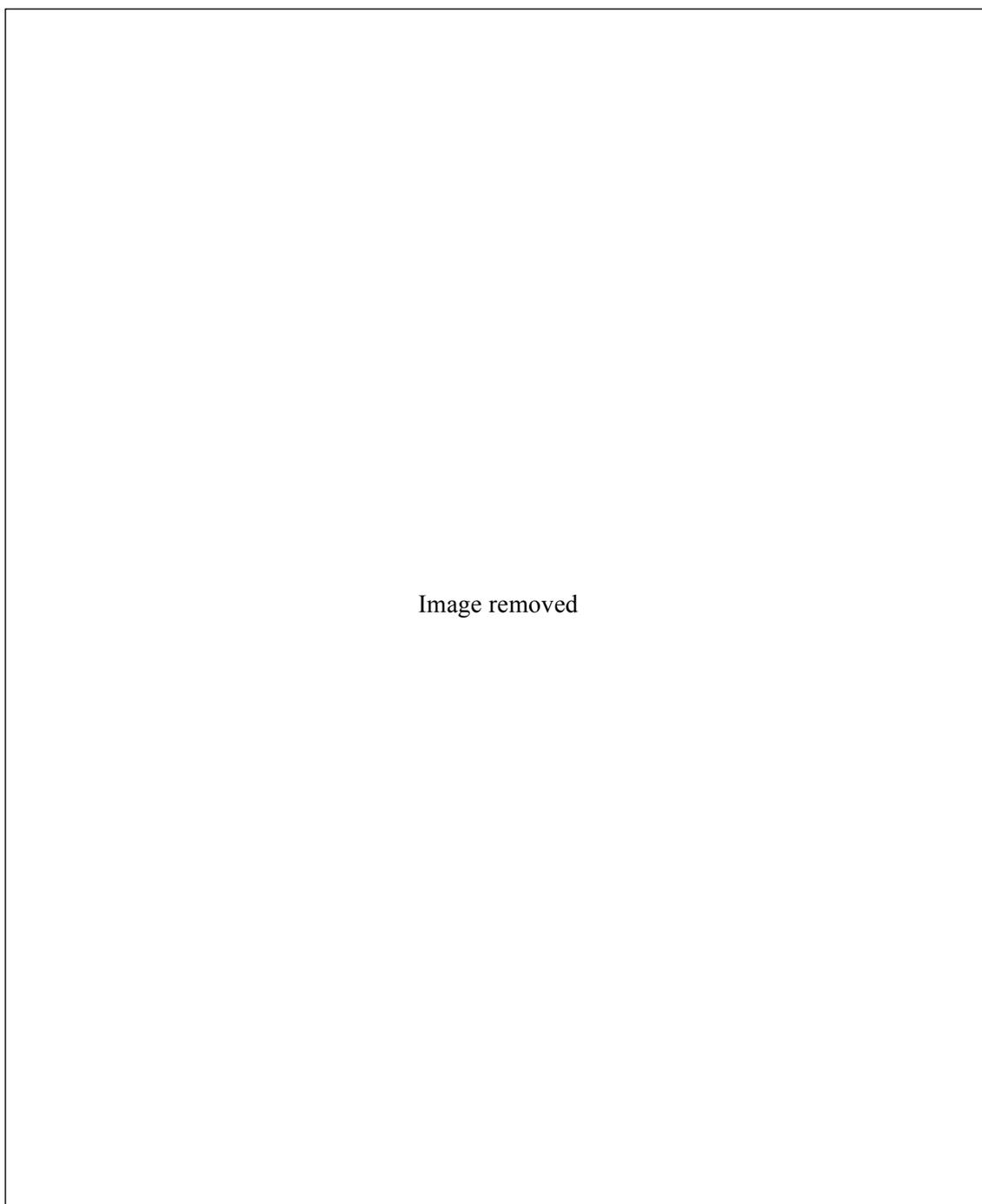


Figure 3: Damning evidence

Well, actually you can't see it. Sorry. Let me explain.

From October 2013 to February 2014 I tussled, deliberated and carefully considered what to do with this powerful image. Countless conversations, meetings, thoughts. It was tough, but I finally came to a decision.

The image shows three people sitting in their home. The curtains are drawn but the door is open, beams of light shine on the brickwork outside. Sitting on a stool is a woman on the left of shot with two rugby ball panels between her legs, her fingers threading them together with a needle. She wears a long, flowing, floral lilac coloured sari and is accompanied by a man, also on a stool on the right, who stitches a different ball, possibly a football, it is unclear. The man is barefoot with dirtied beige trousers and a white vest. There is another lady who sits behind, on a bed who is not stitching. She looks directly down the camera lens. The room is small and stitching equipment, like threads and needles, lie on the floor. But it is what lies waiting at the woman's feet which is the most striking part of the image. It is there, centre stage.

A  rugby ball.

I have decided not to publish the photo due to ethical reasons. I declared at the start of my project that I would inform any participants of their involvement in my research and agreed that anyone could withdraw their information or be anonymised on request. I have never spoken to or met the three people in this photograph and so cannot possibly gauge their reaction to being part of my research. Therefore, I have decided that the image will not be part of the project. You will just have to imagine the scene. In some ways it's more powerful...

All this toing and froing about whether to publish the photograph in my dissertation has allowed me to look at the differences between academia and journalism. It seems in academia the ethical considerations are far more stringent than in journalism. As a

journalist, in an article, I could publish the, albeit censored, photograph and all the details with it. As an academic, in this dissertation, I have omitted it. Journalists will lean towards publishing contentious information, when academics may not. I was wary that I needed to protect the people in the photograph, as an academic. It was not advisable to have a situation where █████ could find the stitchers, as it may threaten their employment, like with Ben's *Summit* article. I find these subtle differences intriguing. I have had to wear two hats these last couple of months and strike a difficult balance. Hopefully my reasons are understandable. I have written, and was about to publish, an article for my student newspaper, the aptly named *Exeposé*, alongside the photograph that you cannot see. *About* to publish. Yes. Let me briefly explain.

In order to publish the article in *Exeposé* I had to contact █████ for a response. Their reaction goes almost identically to Ben Doherty's script of how companies attack bad press about them. █████ were initially shocked and promised to "launch a full investigation", but having demanded more information and read the article they went on the offensive. Claims that the image was doctored. Claims that I had embroiled them in child labour, despite me making it clear in the piece that only piece-work was involved in their case. An aggressive response concluding:

"We request that you do not publish this article and we work with you to ensure that the piece is correct and does not make any unproven allegations which will end in financial damage.

We would strongly urge you to speak to a lawyer who can advise you on the damage that can be done when unproven claims are publicised. Alternatively, you should consider removing any reference to █████ in the article."

Due to the fact that neither *Exeposé* nor the Student's Guild had the money to pay lawyers we had to withdraw the article at the eleventh hour. I couldn't risk a legal case.

Who would have thought I would be threatened with legal action just because I had followed and discovered the thing? ██████ had gagged the press. Stopped the story. But not for long.

This isn't over.

CONCLUSION

Is this an ending? A conclusion? Not really. I have come to the end of my project but where does this really end? Not here. Not now. There is more to do but time is up. More to say but words are limited. More to investigate as following never stops.

In April 2013 I started off following my ██████ ball. It was a blank canvas, a pristine white ball with protruding grippy pimples. Now in March 2014 it lies in my bedroom dirty, “polished” and faded. The same ball, now physically different in appearance, crucially altered for me. Worn out. Marked. This ball has become symbolic. The tapestry has been revealed. The ball has been the driving force, the key component, the investigated commodity, the product to follow. It now symbolises the German delivery company, the English sports manufacturer, the Australian journalist, the English Aviva Premiership rugby club, the New Zealander fly-half, the Indian factory, the Exeter student newspaper, the unseen piece-workers in the Punjab uncovered, and me, a twenty-one year old student with the ██████ ball in my hands. What a world of connections. All from my ball.

Is this actually about me and my ██████ ball? No, I don't think so. It's wider, more complex and detailed. I started off “groping” for connections, to “follow the thing” (Marcus, 1995). Never would I have thought it would tie together a whole range of varied issues. From supply chains to ball supplies, from investigative journalism to my journalism investigated. Just like Ben Doherty's “*Eight ways to deny you're using child*

labour” this project has shown how companies react, attack, threaten to stop the story. ■

■■■■’s reaction to my evidence is absolutely to the script.

Maybe I should have known it would end like this? Just look at things previously followed (Chamberlain, 2010; Cook, 2011; Skau, 2013). These reactions are common. Maybe I have started my own “Streisand effect” where the more the company tries to censor information the bigger and more well-known the story becomes. I guess in this respect my following could not have gone any better really. I was not *trying* to find this information but I did. All from my desk. I hardly moved! I did not start out *wanting* to find this information either. I am a ■■■■ consumer, user, fanatic. I love their rugby balls. I have been inseparable from a ■■■■ since I was five. Whatever game I play and the majority I now watch on the television, or at the stadium use a ■■■■ ball. I cannot get away from it. And nor should I. This has changed how I feel about my rugby ball. Maybe it’s changed you and your views too.

What a journey. A year in the making. A world of commodities. A world of connections. A world of “unseen others” (Cook and Tolia-Kelly, 2010). The people that make our stuff, whether they are in the Punjab or anywhere else. Will the situation of ball stitchers ever be improved? Will subcontracting end? Will manufacturers wrestle back control of their supply chain? Who knows? All we can do is uncover, reveal and detail the stories of our stuff so that maybe one day we can live in a world where we have a better idea of where things come from.

Am I an activist? “Rugby Ball activist” that sounds fun. I guess I probably am. Funny where these projects take you...

It’s not over. Keep your eyes peeled. This story needs to be told.

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