Communicating anti-racism
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CHAPTER 2
Accidental racists
Experiences and contradictions of racism in local Amsterdam soccer culture.¹

Introduction
Soccer fan cultures around the world are renowned for their potential to bring people together and produce a positive sense of collective identity. Paradoxically, their potential to function as a public arena for the expression of racism has become equally notorious. At first glance, some recent statistics seem suggest that this notoriety is increasingly unjustified. In the Netherlands, for example, only 2.2% of all reports of racist incidents made to the official anti-discrimination agencies were related to soccer and other forms of ‘sports and recreation’ (LVADB, 2004).

It would, however, be premature to conclude that soccer racism is gradually disappearing. Many authors writing on racism in soccer have started to adopt new paradigms that define racism in much wider, cultural terms and to document racist aspects of soccer culture that were previously ignored. It is now increasingly accepted that expressions of racism can take many forms in the various domains of soccer culture: collective racist chanting on the terraces is only the most visible (Back, Crabbe & Solomos, 1999 & 2001, Garland & Rowe, 2002, Jones, 2002). Racism, it is argued, often insidiously structures the interactions and decisions in soccer culture from the terraces, locker rooms and playing fields up to the boardrooms, soccer media and patterns of financial endorsement. From this perspective, a (temporary) decrease in collective forms of racism during soccer matches cannot be taken as a straightforward indication that racism is retreating from soccer culture as a whole. Moreover, the low numbers of complaints and lack of discussion about daily racism at soccer clubs and matches might be an indication of processes

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of ‘ignoring and silencing’ rather than a genuine absence of abuse and inequality (Back et al., 1999).

Despite considerable academic attention to the field of soccer racism, only a handful of empirical studies have been published that substantiate and deepen our understandings of the ways racism is being expressed and experienced within local soccer fan cultures. This article aims to do just that, by discussing the forms in which racism manifests itself locally in Amsterdam soccer culture and analysing how these forms are experienced by soccer fans and players. Our results show that fans and players draw on one particular discourse to make sense of their experiences of racism in soccer culture. However, the positions they take up in this discourse are different, as are the ways that they deal with racism when they experience it.

In the following pages, we will first present a short outline of the new paradigm that has emerged for the study of racism in soccer. We then discuss the research design of our study and the ways in which various concepts were applied during data analysis. After that we present the results of our analysis, followed by a conclusion and a discussion of the relevance of our results for further empirical study of racism in soccer culture.

Theories of soccer racism
Proponents of a more cultural perspective on soccer racism have argued that many conceptualizations of racism tend to suffer from an unduly limited analytic framework. In both academic writing and in the minds of the general public and their representatives, racism in soccer is often exclusively associated with the aggressive behaviour of groups of hooligans in and around the stadium (Garland & Rowe, 1999, Back, Crabbe & Solomos, 1999, Jones, 2002). However, racism has also been documented amongst ordinary soccer fans (Brown, 1998), between players (King, 2004, Burdsey, 2002), amongst referees and coaches (Back et al., 1999, King, 2004) and in the institutional sector of soccer associations and soccer media (Back et al., 1999, Hermes, 2005). Back, Crabbe and Solomos (1999) have argued that most of the literature on soccer and racism ignores this variety by reducing the problem to a clearly identifiable, problematic ‘racist/hooligan’ group. They propose instead that soccer racism should be considered as an aspect of wider soccer culture (Ibid.).

Back et al. (1999) have argued that studying the expressions and processes of radicalization in soccer is facilitated by the subdivision of soccer culture into four domains. They refer to these domains as ‘the vernacular’, ‘the occupational’, ‘the institutional’ and ‘the culture
industry’. The ‘vernacular’ domain roughly corresponds to those contexts and forms of racist behaviour that are generally recognized as a problem within soccer. Collective racist chanting amongst fans falls under this domain, as well as the excesses of ‘neighbourhood nationalisms’ in which soccer club identities give rise to racist behaviours within and outside the stadiums (Crabbe, 2004). The ‘occupational’ domain draws attention to the forms of racism that professional players experience at their own clubs during matches and at the training grounds, including the racist expectations and the processes of ‘stacking’ black players in particular playing positions referred to above. It also includes racialized interactions and exclusions in places like the locker rooms and sports club’s bars. The ‘institutional’ domain involves issues of racialized access to decision making in the club, racialized patterns of club ownership, and a lack of representation of different ethnic groups on club boards. It also involves the shapes of social networks that can constitute racialized networks of patronage, which obstruct access of certain minorities to the world of professional soccer (Burdsey, 2004). The fourth domain, ‘culture industry’, covers racism involved in biased representations of soccer players from different ethnic backgrounds in the popular media and patterns of commercial endorsement that support them (Hermes, 2005). This domain also covers racialized discourses in sports programs and match coverage.

As this short list illustrates, the shapes and locations in which racism may be expressed and needs to be challenged and studied has expanded tremendously from the older focus on mere excesses of spectator violence. For our present research, we focused on the ways in which racism was experienced and expressed in the vernacular and occupational domains of soccer culture in particular.

Race and culture

The focus on different cultural domains and interactions outlined above has particular consequences for the way racist behaviour is interpreted, and its reproduction theorized. Overt and instantly recognizable ‘racist’ acts can no longer be taken as shorthand to classify a person as belonging to a deviant group of soccer fans that is characterized by moral degeneration (i.e. ‘racist/hooligans’). They should rather be seen as expressions of a larger ‘racialized’ culture of soccer (Garland & Rowe, 1999). Thus, the key to understanding racism does not lie exclusively in the study of the content, consequences and intentions behind the overt racist act itself. It also
requires taking into account the cultural context in which such acts become meaningful expressions (Miles, Ibid., Back et al, 1999).

The cultural context of racism is reproduced through contingent processes of ‘racialization’ (Miles, 1993), which are contained in the unobtrusive, sub-conscious minutiae of everyday practices. Such everyday practices can range from jokes about black players in the locker room to differential racist expectations on the training grounds and the formation of mono-ethnic sub-groups of players within mixed soccer clubs and teams (Miles, 1993, King, 2004). These practices do not necessarily produce overt racism nor may people recognize these interactions as rooted in racialized perceptions of reality. However, by reproducing a racialized context they do constitute the necessary potential for overt racist abuse to occur in meaningful ways. Since the potential for meaningful expressions of racism lies in sets of racialized practices and interactions of wider soccer culture, the usual focus on the ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ of the racist act needs to be complemented with a similar rigorous attention for the culture in which the act was expressed. Because Racialization implies a set of differentially racialized cultural contexts, it also constitutes a move away from the common assumption that such a context is formed by a single, coherent racist ideology. Instead, it allows for an understanding of the contradictions and incoherencies within and between the expressions of racism in different domains of soccer culture.

For example, white soccer fans can racially abuse black players of the opposite team whilst supporting those on their own team (Garland & Rowe, 1999, Burdsey, 2004), and racist abuse is also common between different non-white ethnic groups and in situations where the white majority is underrepresented (King, 2004, Mercer, 1994). It has also been noted that a racialized black identity can have a number of advantageous connotations within a masculine culture like soccer. In some circles, the mythical dimensions of the black body (of physical, sexual and athletic prowess) may even make a black identity preferable over a white one in terms of its ability to signify a powerful masculinity (Carrington, 2002, Jones, 2002). As a result, such racialized identities may sometimes be sought out for short term gains as a kind of ‘strategic essentialism’ (Mercer, ibid., Spivak, 1988). Without doubt, the contingent admiration of racialized black bodies and men is not only a source of possibility within soccer culture, but also one of restraint. Racialized expectations of ‘black performance’, for example, position black players mostly in attacking roles, and much more rarely as key defenders or goalkeepers (Maguire, 1991). Moreover, this particular black identity is not available to all black players. In
contrast to players of British-Caribbean descent, those of British-Asian descent are rarely perceived as potentially talented professional players in any position at all. The latter ethnicity, as Burdsey (2004) has shown, is stereotypically taken as effeminate and too frail for soccer (also King, 2004).

Anglo-American authors have developed this cultural perspective on soccer racism with a particular focus on black minorities. However, while a considerable number of Dutch minorities are from the African Diaspora, the Dutch debate on discrimination and racism has centred much more on the abuse of specifically Muslim (Turkish and Moroccan) immigrants and their offspring (Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). Racialization draws attention to the ways in which essentialized conceptions of difference become salient in a particular context and enable the meaningful expression of racism. For an empirical study of racism in soccer culture, this implies that the focus needs to be wider than only overt expressions of racism. It also requires an investigation of the ways in which the necessary preconditions for such an expression are reproduced in the form of ‘race’ and essentialized and naturalized cultural differences between ethnic and religious groups.

Method
For this research, we used 20 in-depth interviews that were carried out with soccer fans and players for a larger soccer research programme conducted by the Centre for Popular Culture of the University of Amsterdam. The soccer fans were interviewed as part of a thesis project about fan behaviour and expressions in the so-called Ajax F-side: the hardcore supporters of the Amsterdam club. All of these supporters were of a white ethnic-Dutch background. The soccer players that were interviewed were players from local Amsterdam clubs that varied in terms of their geographical location, ethnic diversity in the club and the size of their membership. The players that were interviewed for this study were of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, Afghani, Pakistani and white Dutch backgrounds.

Interviews were held at the soccer grounds, cafés nearby or at the respondents’ homes and usually lasted about one hour. During these interviews respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences with ethnicity in the context of soccer culture. The interviewers worked with a topic list that provided thematic pointers, but did not contain any standardized questions. The interviewee was given as much freedom as possible to reconstruct their own experiences with
racism and soccer in ways that were meaningful to them. Racism is defined here as social exclusions based on racial, ethnic or religious differences. Following the theoretical framework outlined above, it is considered to be dependent on the racialization of practices and discourses in soccer culture. This meant that we focused not only on the overt expressions of racism but also on the racializations of interactions and personal narratives of the people we interviewed. We also looked at the wider context of soccer culture and its masculine codes of conduct, in order to understand the ways people experience and narrate their experiences of soccer racism. This focus on discourses and practices allowed us to focus on both fans and players simultaneously, as differently positioned actors within the same cultural field, and to investigate the dynamics that ensued from these different discursive positions.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed with the help of computer software for qualitative data analysis. The analysis was carried out in three phases. In the first phase of analysis, the interviews served to develop insights into the different forms of racism that were expressed in local Amsterdam soccer culture. In a second phase, our analysis focused on the discourses of racism that were used to describe different kinds of racism and on the kinds of racialized practices these forms of speaking ignored or silenced. In the third phase, a synthesis was made of the ways the results of the first two phases positioned soccer fans and players differently in relation to expressions of racism in soccer culture. We will first discuss the different forms in which racism presents itself locally in local Amsterdam soccer and the dominant discourse with which our respondents reflected on their experiences with these phenomena. Then we will discuss the ways fans draw on this discourse and take up a particular position within it when discussing their participation in racist abuse. Finally, we briefly discuss the ways soccer players deal with different forms of racism while drawing on the same dominant discourse as the fans.

**Forms of racism in Amsterdam**

Despite the common assertion that racism in Amsterdam is rare and insignificant, our research showed that it is frequently expressed in many of the complex and contradictory forms that are reported in the literature. An example of this contradiction is found in the following quote by a young black player from a soccer club with a white upper class history.

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2 These interviews were conducted by David van der Leij (see also Van der Leij, 2005).
We had to play another team, who had a Surinamese striker, and then [my team mates] just go like um… well, ‘break that nigger’, and what did they say again, um, well, ‘that fuckin’ nigger, I’m going to stand on his head’, you know, that kind of stuff […] but I also have that colour, so basically it’s also about me. Because he makes that remark about him means that he really thinks that way about me and he makes those remarks about me when I’m not around. But to my face he hardly ever says it.

As this quote illustrates, it was possible for white teammates to express overt racism towards a black player on the opposing team without it immediately constituting, for them, an attack of the black player on their own team. This particular experience, however, did offend the black player on their team and led him to question their loyalty and respect for him. The contradictory nature of contemporary racism also means that it is not restricted to expressions made by white people. Our respondents explained that racism was also expressed between ethnic minorities or even within the same ethnic group. As the following quote illustrates, in particular contexts racist hierarchies are even inverted so that, as in this case, a black player can be accused of being white by his black opponents.

Another thing I’ve encountered a lot, is that when we played a team with many people of dark skin, they insulted me for being white, and being a bounty, those kind of remarks, so it works both ways, I don’t mean to say that it is only them, I was insulted by everybody, so actually there is no difference between white and black. They all do it.

The term bounty in the above constitutes a racist metaphor of a chocolate candy bar with white coconut filling. To call a black person a ‘bounty’ effectively accuses them of excessively assimilating to white culture and betraying their ‘roots’ in the black community. The quote therefore illustrates that racism behaviour may be found even within ethnic groups that have traditionally only been accorded the role of victim within discourses on racism.

*Racialized soccer culture*

When discussing their experiences with racism, most interviewees only considered overt racist abuse to be ‘racism’. Their experiences with racialized soccer culture in general were thus usually absent in their discussions of racism. In many cases, processes of racialization were simply not immediately recognized as such because they occurred in the context of friendly and joking interactions. This finding is illustrated by the following quote in which a black soccer player can
be seen as struggling with calling a racist joke ‘racist’ because it was expressed without the intention to hurt.

[At that soccer club] There were more jokes about me being dark skinned. I mean not hateful, or not being racist, but um… well I know a joke which is really stupid, which I’ve known for a long time, which actually is pretty racist, like why are my hands so white? Because I stood like this [making a gesture of standing with his hands against the wall, FM] when they painted me black. So yes, that kind of stuff […] and when I said something about it, then sometimes people listened, but they were always jokes that referred to the colour of my skin.

Apart from this issue of recognising racism illustrated by the quote above, discussions of racialization are further complicated by the fact that, in some contexts, racialization can be accompanied by friendships, inter-cultural exchanges and carry unexpected benefits in a masculine culture. For the black player quoted above, the racialized masculine context of the locker room did not only result in ‘stupid jokes’ but also opened up an enjoyable position of a hyper-sexual black male.

Well you’ve got jokes about the genitals. Those are also flattering (laughs), and, yes, well I find that, yes, there is kind of more interest in the sense that I am also asked how I’m doing, in my culture, like, hey, how does that work, how do you do that?

For Muslim players such positions of hypersexual racialization are unavailable. Instead, they are faced with new emerging forms of racism in the growing anti-Muslim climate in the Netherlands. Much of this racism took the form of overt derogatory nationalistic remarks such as ‘shit Moroccan’, ‘dirty Turk’, etc. This repertoire of racist abuse has become so common that it is even directed at players who merely look like they are from Morocco or Turkey. One Turkish respondent reflected on this phenomenon in the following way:

We’ve had […] a game lately, last week, our goalkeeper got insulted for being a fuckin Moroccan and things. He isn’t a Moroccan, but he looks like it, so they threw that at him.

Much anti-Muslim racism is coded in such a way that it may not be immediately recognized as such. For example, a collective chant about the facial hair of a players’ mother (‘Boussatta, your mother has got a moustache’) signifies as an anti-Muslim abuse specifically, because it is read as a marker of deviant Islamic gender norms for appearance in the Dutch
context. Other coded forms of racism are contained in references to sheep and shoplifting. These relate to the image of the ‘backward Muslim immigrant’ made popular through the assassinated Theo van Gogh’s use of the term ‘goat fuckers’. Generic insults directed at family honour can also be perceived as specifically anti-Muslim racism by soccer players with a Muslim background, as is illustrated by the following quote from a 19 year old Turkish soccer player who ignores biological difference altogether when giving his definition of racism in soccer.

Yeah, [racism] is when they just try to antagonize you and then it’s about where you’re from or about your family.

Apart from explicit forms of racist expressions, processes of racialization also seem to result in practices that are often too subtle to brand as racism. For example, discussions about ‘where you’re from’ was read by one of the black soccer players as offensive if he was asked for the wrong reasons.

I am Dutch, I feel Dutch sometimes, sometimes not; that’s mostly because of remarks, then you think like…, like that question ‘where are you from’. That’s just a nasty question I think, because basically I am… and then they say ‘oh you speak Dutch so well’ and I’m like ‘yeah, hello, I was born here, and have grown up here’.

This quote illustrates the breath of practices in which the difference from the Dutch white norm can be emphasised and can function to exclude certain participants of soccer culture. Under certain circumstances, such insidious and innocent practices as discussing your heritage at the soccer club may thus be linked with the reproduction of racism. However, many seemed reluctant to put such experiences into words, let alone to challenge them. Our analysis showed that one important reason for this was the general discourse with which both fans and players made sense of their experiences with racism.

**Discourses of racism**

Our analysis showed that the dominant discourse in local Amsterdam soccer culture constructs racism as an expression of individuals who stand outside the decent morality of reasonable and tolerant people. Such ‘racists’ are assumed to have a fixed and coherent ideological racist belief system that is impossible to challenge or change within the confines of the soccer stadium. This
discourse corresponds to what Back et al. (1999) have called a discourse of the ‘racist/hooligan’ folk demon. In many racist incidents it leads to the conclusion that, since it is a problem caused by an extremist minority that will never change its ways, the best strategy is to simply ignore it. As one of the respondents said:

Um… I think that time is wasted on a person with this kind of opinion. Because you just don’t change anymore when you’ve reached a certain age and still have an opinion like that. I wouldn’t know what might trigger you to get a book or something and just change all of a sudden and then think like, well, all of a sudden I’m interested in all the other cultures here.

Since this discourse of the ‘racist/hooligan’ folk demon holds that racism is an expression of a coherent set of racist values and beliefs, it cannot deal with the myriad of coded and contradictory expressions of racism within soccer culture that we discussed earlier. As a result, it becomes possible for those expressing and experiencing racism to deny its importance by claiming that the perpetrator is in fact, not a ‘real’ racist, because he or she does not adhere to a racist ideology, but is swept away by emotions or the atmosphere at the stands.

Well soccer is ummm, two things I think, you’ve got emotion, as a result of which you just say stuff you don’t mean and there are those guys that really hate foreigners, who really are racists. Look, in the heat of the moment it is hard to distinguish one from the other.

As this quote illustrates, the discourse of the ‘real racist’ at first seems to distinguish only between ‘innocent’ people and racists. However, it also opens up the discursive position of the person who is not really a racist but nevertheless engages in sporadic racist activity. The distinction between the two lies in the intention and ‘true’ values and beliefs of the offender, which are usually very hard, if not impossible, to determine in the context of soccer culture.

Both fans and players discussed many contextual factors that may cause a person to express themselves in racist terms while they actually ‘didn’t really mean it’, such as emotionality, stupidity, group pressures or the need to affect the outcome of the game. This discursive position was very common in the accounts of both fans and soccer players. We call this the position of the ‘accidental racist’, since it involves admitting to past racist behaviour while simultaneously claiming that it was never intended as such. When the person committing a racist act is perceived as an accidental racist, the act is emptied of its political meaning and reduced to an expression of abuse that is no different from other common forms of abuse in
soccer culture. The offender thus manages to avoid the stamp of a ‘real’ racist and the moral consequences that would have occurred. In the following quote, a Turkish soccer player constructs racism directed at Turks as insults that ‘don’t matter’ to him and his teammates because they are mere emotional expressions.

   No, I mean, they say fuckin’ Turk occasionally, but you might as well say fuckin’ redhead. This is how we all see it, you know. It’s all, yeah, it doesn’t matter. And, yeah… it’s all just emotion.

   To this particular player, racism need therefore not be seriously and systematically challenged if it was the product of emotional involvement in the game. As such, his account opens up discursive space from which to claim innocence but simultaneously engage in racist behaviour. As a result of this shared discourse on ‘true’ racism, offenders and victims take up complementary positions in relation to racist behaviours based on whether it was perceived as ‘real’ or ‘accidental’. These positions have different consequences for soccer fans and soccer players, which we will now discuss in turn.

Fans and racism
Before discussing the ways soccer fans talked about their experiences with racism, it should be emphasized that we will be discussing those instances in which racist expressions of soccer fans were openly discussed. We have done so to illustrate the dynamics of the positions that soccer fans take up in relation to soccer racism in dominant discourses about its meaning. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that such open discussions are part of everyday interactions. One of the most common responses to explicit questions about soccer racism was therefore, unsurprisingly, to downplay its frequency and significance, despite the fact that all of the fans and players interviewed for our research at some point argued that they had witnessed, experienced or engaged in racism personally in various intensities and locations. One typical comment is listed below, which was made by a black respondent before he went on to discuss a wide range of experiences he had had with racism at his local soccer club.

   All of us had the same experience- that it occurred occasionally, but it’s only two or three people, so basically it isn’t really that bad.
The dominant position of soccer fans talking about racism is therefore still that of the ‘innocent’ spectator who abhors racism, hardly ever encounters it and never partakes in it himself. Nonetheless, many of the Amsterdam soccer fans we spoke to did openly discuss their own participation in racist behaviours at the soccer grounds. Most were acutely aware, at least in the context of interviews, of the fine line they were treading when participating in verbal abuse in the stadium. Many of the fans went to considerable lengths to maintain a discursive position as an accidental racist when discussing their occasional and contradictory recourse to racist abuse in the stadium. Two common arguments were repeatedly put forward by the interviewees to justify this position.

First of all, fans describe the sometimes racist excesses of their ‘supporter’ behaviour as mere instrumental acts to influence the outcome of the game. This argument also asserts that soccer players know this too and that the stadium is a context in which all participants are aware that abuse is meaningless and should not be taken personally.

It’s […] meant to put them off their game. And when you manage to do that by using [offensive] chanting then you’re doing it well. I don’t think that all of it is always insulting. When you’re at home sitting on your couch and you hear it, you think ‘that’s bad’. But when you’re having an experience in the stadium, those words are experienced entirely differently.

Second, shouting abuse is often constructed by the fans as an individual emotional release that has meaning only in form but not in content. The following quote illustrates how fans de-politicize their abuse by claiming that it is merely an expression of their emotional state of mind.

[I don’t abuse players] to hurt them, I just do it because I’m frustrated. And then you, like, shout away the frustration. You lose your aggression. That’s why you do it. Not to hurt them.

In these accounts, the emotions evoked by the game and group processes on the terraces can sometimes cause a self-proclaimed non-racist soccer fan to partake in racist abuse by accident.

Usually I don’t really care what I sing. Mostly you just find out afterwards if it was a smart thing to do or it wasn’t.
Against Van Gobbel [a Surinam-Dutch player] I've yelled all kinds of things […] ‘Van Gobbel was an illegal immigrant bastard’ […] In general I think about it, but sometimes there are emotional moments in which you just forget to think straight.

In many instances, moreover, racism was expressed in the form of joking remarks that were intended in the first place to amuse and not to offend. Our respondents indicated that in such a situation, it was unlikely to be interpreted as a reflection of a serious racist ideology at the same time. However, the fans were aware of the fact that there is a ‘line’ even an accidental racist should not cross. The ambivalence of their position is exemplified in the following quote, where a fan discusses his participation in chanting a racist slur against Moroccan player Bousatta.

I can remember the story about Dries Boussatta very well. I sang along joyfully. Yeah… you could have a discussion about that too. Is it okay, is it racist, or is it soccer humour? How do you see it?

Because of their perceived humorous qualities, the slurs against Bousatta were therefore constructed as, at most, only ambivalently racist. During the game, such ambivalence resulted in a situation that allowed for this soccer fan’s participation in racist expressions without risking the accusation of being a ‘real racist’ – although the ambivalence of the act, as this quote illustrates, did require some narrative work during the interview.

Soccer players

While it might be expected that the notion of the accidental racist is a particular position taken up only by fans that try to account for their own problematic behaviour, our research showed that soccer players who suffer racist abuse discuss their experiences in the same way. Soccer players’ accounts of their experiences reflected the same tripartition between an innocent majority, ‘real racists’ and those people who do engage in racist behaviour but don’t ‘really’ mean it (i.e. accidental racists).

However, whereas the notion of an ‘accidental racist’ constitutes a safe position for fans that occasionally express themselves in racist ways, it presents soccer players with a major obstacle in confronting racism. The contradictions and incoherence in the expressions of racism, coupled with a discourse which defines racism through the ideological intentions of the perpetrator but leaves room for ‘unfortunate’ meaningless expressions of racism, result in a
situation where many racist expressions either go unrecognized or are discounted as mere attempts to influence the outcome of the game by emotionally unsettling the player.

When people say those things to me I think, let them talk, it’s just because they feel powerless, because you can’t win you start talking to me. […] When you’re behind they don’t start jabbering. Then it’s just quiet. But when you’re ahead, then it’s all frustrations, they want to put you off your game, and stuff like that, and yeah, they say that when they really can’t win any more. I let them go […]

The quote above illustrates how the intention of the person committing a racist act is essential to determine its meaning. When players are unable to ‘let it go’ and do get offended by racist abuse and take it personally, they are faced with the challenge of assessing motives and beliefs of the offender, and thus to determine whether they are dealing with a true racist or a mere ‘accidentally racist’ fool. As the following quote shows, victims can thus fail to challenge the racist act simply because they are not sure enough about the intentions of the person who offended them.

[…] often there is a verbal aspect by which you know. Or else I don’t know it and I just let it go. That’s why I don’t respond most of the time, especially with my own team mates. I find that difficult, how to asses that. To what extent does someone mean what he says?

In practice, the task of determining the ‘true’ motives of an offender often turns out to be an exceedingly difficult task within a masculine soccer culture where ‘not making a fuss’ about your personal grievances is valued highly. This translates into some remarkable and again intrinsically highly contradictory social practices in which experiences of racism are reworked and, to some extent, rendered meaningless.

It is really… during those 45 minutes, you almost want to kill him, you say almost everything, but some people rattle on and say these stupid things, like these racist remarks, but outside the stadium it’s like ‘hey mate, get a beer on me’ and then it’s over […] you just go along with them and it’s forgotten.

However, even experiences with racism that can’t be shrugged off so easily were difficult to discuss within the masculine culture of soccer. In the following quote, a half Pakistani-half Dutch player exemplifies these norms when he gives an example of the way his team would react to a black player who has been offended by crowds making monkey chants.
Well… then they would say in the dressing room ‘but you ARE a monkey’ or something like that. You know, and then they laugh about it. It’s sort of a mentality in soccer culture, you know, actually it isn’t important, it’s just professional, it’s about winning the game. When someone starts to argue against that culture, it’s instantly silenced.

Within such a masculine context, accusations of racism are thus constructed as ‘making a fuss’ and being preoccupied with your individual needs and emotions. The individual who still feels offended by such meaningless racist banter is constructed as weak, unable to resist the temptation of reacting to abuse and therefore endangering the victory of his own soccer team.

When you just shut your mouth and score a goal, [the racist] will start to see it differently. He’ll start to think, ‘[racist abuse] doesn’t work on him’. But there are some players that do react to these kinds of things. And this usually results in a fight. That happens so often, but it’s up to the one that can’t control himself.

Thus, the only generally accepted reactions to racism are either ignoring it altogether or improving your playing performance to win the match and ‘shut the racist up’. Our analysis indicates that these views of racism are not a matter of white versus black or Dutch versus non-Dutch individuals. Many non-Dutch players also expressed the belief that emotions aroused by racism should be used to motivate yourself to perform better and that to spend too much time dwelling on experiences of racism is undesirable and a sign of weakness. Accusing others of racism in this context was therefore sometimes read as an indication that the accuser is unwilling to put in more effort and, sometimes, even trying to abuse anti-racist regulations to his own advantage.

Conclusion

Amsterdam soccer culture in many ways reflects the old and new forms of racism that have been documented in other parts of the world. The same puzzling contradictions can be found in the expression of racism, as well as in the racialization of wider soccer culture. Our analysis indicates that the dominant discourse of what constitutes ‘racism’ makes for a very poor tool to address this multilayered kaleidoscope.

Nonetheless, both fans and players drew on this discourse to make sense of their experiences with racism. On the one hand, those who engage in racist behaviour may receive some benefit from it. Because their shared discourse only recognizes racism as such, when it is expressed with the clear intention to injure and to reflect ideological convictions, those that
commit racist acts are left with a discursive space through which they can avoid accountability. By denying any racist intentions and convictions, their behaviours are constructed as an innocent joke taken the wrong way or an unfortunate by-product of harmless emotional involvement in the game. They thus take up the position of an ‘accidental racist’ whose abuse does not qualify as ‘real’ racism and therefore should ‘not be taken too serious’.

Those who suffer racism also understand their experiences through the lens of this discourse. As a result, they are confronted with the task of establishing the ‘true’ racist intentions of their offenders. They may spend much time and effort trying to prove that the abuse they suffered was ‘really racist’. In most cases, however, the result is inconclusive and the racist act cannot be adequately challenged. As a result of both the efforts required to ‘prove’ racism and the slim chances of success, many instances of racism are accepted as a regrettable ‘part of the game’.

These results confirm that a common reaction to experiences of racism in soccer culture is one of ignoring and silencing (Back et al, 1999). This research contributes to the understanding of this phenomenon by explicating a number of the discursive and cultural processes through which these reactions are (re)produced. Apart from the central role of the discursive position of an ‘accidental racist’ as described above, more general dynamics of racialized masculine soccer culture also need to be taken into account. The accusations of racism in soccer tend to be read as ‘making a fuss’ because of the ensuing claims and counter claims about the intentions and convictions of the offender. Moreover, an accusation of racism may backfire and result in accusations of being over sensitive and, for example, failing to appreciate racist jokes for the harmless tease they were intended to be. Within a soccer culture in which masculine codes of honour and team spirit are central, such accusations may also be read as setting your individual problems before the interests of the team. Consequently, addressing racism through official anti-racist channels may simply be a bridge too far for many players who may first and foremost be looking to be a part of the team and ‘one of the lads’ (Burdsey, 2004). Instead, the more viable response is to retaliate personally and anonymously. These kinds of retaliation range from playing better and winning the match when the abuse is coming from the terraces to committing verbal or physical abuse against the perpetrator directly. To react in any other way is read as a sign of weakness for which there is little room in soccer culture, let alone in the context of a soccer match.
One important step forward in the eradication of soccer racism would no doubt be to assure that racism is no longer defined by the identity and intentions of the perpetrator but by the behaviour itself in order to make public redress of racism more accessible. Moreover, our analysis points to the importance of the cultural context through which practices of ignoring and silencing are reproduced. It is essential that the focus is also directed at the problematic masculine codes of conduct and processes of racialization, which contribute to the salience of particular constructions of racial, ethnic and religious groups as the ‘other’ in soccer culture. These processes limit the progressive internal dynamics of soccer culture. They are responsible for the reproduction of the potential for racism in soccer culture and need to be challenged as well. The relative lack of official complaints about overt racist expressions in Amsterdam soccer culture, for example, might actually in part be explained by the fact that racialized relations and practices may not even qualify as ‘accidentally racist’ because none of the participants recognizes them to be structured by racist discourses at all. Therefore, a critical change in soccer culture requires both a redefinition of the kinds of racism that ‘count’, as well as a sustained critical discussion about the racialized, masculine culture of soccer that partly constitutes the potential for racism. Such an endeavour involves a critical assessment by all actors involved of the role of racial, ethnic and religious differences in soccer culture. In other words, it requires a more extensive performance of cultural citizenship within soccer culture.

Given soccer’s increasingly global character, it is evident that many of the studies on soccer racism that are currently being carried out from a cultural perspective will be applicable to a broad range of national contexts. However, it needs to be kept in mind that the situation of racism in local Amsterdam soccer is best characterized with the neologism ‘glocal’. While the racist discourses in the Netherlands are similar to those in countries like England, the positions and background of the ethnic minorities in Amsterdam soccer are different, with the most notable being the large groups of second generation immigrants from increasingly problematized Muslim ‘guest worker’ communities. Not only are the forms in which racism presents itself to these groups to some extent peculiar to the Dutch context, the processes of racialization through which this racism is reproduced can also be traced through the history of the socio-political Dutch context (Rath, 1999). Any attempts to engage with racism in a specific locality will thus require attention to the global and local aspects of racism and the ways in which they find expression within any particular soccer culture. Nonetheless, it pays to be on guard in any local context for
the discourses and practices we encountered in Amsterdam. As the universal proverb goes, “accidents happen”.