

STUDENT ESSAY**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE VALIDITY OF SPORTS HISTORY AS A LEGITIMATE FORM OF HISTORY**

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I will first suggest a working definition of legitimate history, then assert the historical centrality of sport in Australian society, emphasizing the historical development of sport and its evolving social purposes. This involves examination of a number of specific areas: the transformation of sport from community-based recreational pastimes into an entertainment industry; the incidence and nature of sport-based myths, especially those relating to classlessness and sexual stereotyping; the role of the media (newspapers and magazines especially, and radio and television) in sport; the significance of sport for national identity; and the significance of sport in the everyday lives of participants and spectators.

In a short essay it is not possible to discuss all these issues in depth. I have attempted to indicate why these issues are important and to assert the legitimacy of historical inquiry into sport. Most available sources concentrate on spectator sports in NSW and Victoria and this essay does likewise.

A legitimate history needs to "provide an insight into the nature of the society under analysis".(1) For sports history to approach legitimacy it needs to locate historical developments in sport within the broader historical developments in Australian society, thereby widening the narrow focus of sport into an interpretation of the nature of the society in question. The major assertion in this essay is that Sports History is legitimate. This legitimacy will be demonstrated by showing the centrality of both sports practice and its associated values in the evolution of Australian society.

Early NSW was a task-orientated, agrarian society with a social structure and work practices closely resembling those of pre-industrial England. The early settlers, when devising their recreational activities, drew on those pre-industrial traditions; horse racing, cock fighting and pugilism were supported by the labouring classes but relied on the patronage of the gentry. Gambling, a common practice associated with recreational activity, was a source of amusement for the gentry but a potential means of material improvement for labourers, and has remained so throughout Australian history.(2) Governor Macquarie promoted an annual race meeting at Hyde Park in Sydney from 1810 onwards which he intended "would play a role similar to that of pre-modern rural wakes and fairs".(3) Thus, social and political values of the pre-industrial gentry were transplanted to NSW and "accordingly the gaming and betting and other recreational practices of the old world were part of the colony's inherited traditions".(4)

Recreational pursuits in early NSW show the close relationship "between community construction, social need and the emerging forms of Australian sport"(5) and this complex relationship continued through the nineteenth century. After the 1850s, values associated with sport were regarded as appropriate in the wider society; at the same time, sport began to develop as an entertainment industry and uniquely Australian forms of sport emerged. The English middle class concept of sport, especially cricket, as a socially educative activity achieved greater

prominence.(6) Private schools and, particularly, sports journalists fostered this concept, using sport to entrench a general patriarchal bias in colonial society.

In Victoria in the 1860s and beyond, Bells magazine, a sporting journal based on a similar middle class English magazine, constantly referred to the "classlessness" of Australian sport and society.(7) The formal absence of the amateur/professional distinction in Australian cricket stoked the egalitarian fire and was accepted as evidence of the egalitarianism of wider society.(8) Egalitarianism was accepted as a central characteristic of the colonial society, and was no better expressed than in sporting activity. Sport was supposedly "open and accessible to all".(9)

The reality, however, was that accessibility to sport was determined by wealth and status. Different social groups claimed different sports as their own and have continued to espouse associated nineteenth century values. The wealthy have retained control of horse racing and yachting clubs, and tennis has been a predominantly middle class sport. Among other sports, horse racing is characterised by master-servant relationships and reflects both work relationships and social structure in the wider society.(11)

The class-based nature of Australian sport and its influences in disseminating appropriate social values was maintained throughout the nineteenth century (and beyond). At the same time, sport was gradually transformed into an industry exhibiting similar structural characteristics to other industries which developed in the wake of the social and industrial effects of the 1850s gold rushes. Population increases and technological advances throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century saw Australian society undergo a process of change which created movement from a basically feudal society to a class-based semi-industrial state. Australian sport adapted to those changes.

The transformation of sport into an entertainment industry created financial opportunities for players, administrators, entrepreneurs, newspapers and sporting magazines.(12) In 1861, for example, the first English cricket tour to Australia was organised by two Melbourne restaurateurs, who offered to finance the tour in return for exclusive catering rights. They made a profit in excess of £10,000.(13) Bells magazine flourished and helped forge an uneasy relationship between sport as an industry and as a metaphor for social values.

The establishment of working class football clubs in Melbourne suburbs in the late nineteenth century confirms the class-based nature of Australian sport.(14) Australian football was originally devised to keep cricketers fit during winter, but the lower classes quickly recognised the value of football clubs as a focus for community identity, as a source of income for players and as entertainment for the community. The ongoing middle class mistrust of professionalism, however, forced clubs to pay players illegally.(15) However, participation always depended on the ability to pay membership fees and/or buy gear, thereby excluding the poorest members of the lower classes.

Historical inquiry into the roles and nature of sport in the latter half of the nineteenth century helps us to understand and clarify changes which were occurring in the wider society, thus establishing the legitimacy of sports history. Sport is not, and has not, been a phenomenon unrelated to wider society but has been a central factor in

the evolution of a class-based Australian society.

Nevertheless, the myth of classlessness persisted, and sports journalism has been largely responsible. Sport has been projected by the press as a static phenomenon unrelated to wider social changes, but historical inquiry shows that sports journalism has been central to forming and maintaining conservative social attitudes in Australia. Controlled largely by conservative males with a vested interest in maintaining their power, the sporting media has promoted not only the myth of classlessness(16) but also the middle class concept of manly sports, a concept which has relegated women to a secondary role in Australian sports history.

The role cast for women in Australian sport has been supportive, soft and feminine. In the 1870s and '80s women's sport "was avowedly middle class and genteel".(17) The sayings "played like a girl" and "played like a pofter" . . . suggest that there is a recognisable core of attitudes and behaviours which constitute manly values; and that sport is a major institution for the learning and preservation of such values".(18)

The gradual increase in the twentieth century in the incidence of organised women's sport and women's more active participation in the Second World War weakened the supportive stereotype; the post-war success of women in international competition, especially in athletics, swimming and tennis (all non-combative) gave further emphasis to the change. Despite the advances, the power relations of sex in current Australian sport, as in Australian life generally, are still largely governed by nineteenth century middle class values.(19) Sport and sports journalism have played major roles in the social subjugation of Australian women; historical inquiry into the role of the media generally in the creation and propagation of the myths of classlessness and sexual stereotyping, and into the relationship between sport and myth, will unravel much of the obscurity about the nature of Australian sport and society.

Sport has also been central in the historical development of Australian nationalism and national identity. The willingness to measure national worth by sporting performance was a nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon characteristic (20), and success in cricket in the 1870s was, therefore, vital in encouraging self-confidence in the emerging nation. Success against England allayed fears that the inauspicious foundation-stock and the climate in the colonies had caused a degeneration of the Anglo-Saxon race.(21)

Australian cricketers, like the surf lifesavers in the twentieth century (22), were seen as dashing, exciting and bold, prepared to experiment and take risks in contrast with the blandness of English cricketers. Cricketers were considered the flag-bearers of the gold-fields tradition of courage, mateship and solidarity which the nationalist literature of the 1880s and '90s religiously conveyed to a mass readership. Australian cricket also produced the male barracker; loud satirical, aggressive, fiercely partisan and decidedly anti-British.(23) In a land of class-bound urban-dwellers, these journalistic creations, which did have some basis in fact, quickly became largely mythic symbols of national identity, providing substance for a durable tradition in Australian sports journalism and in the Australian national consciousness.

The significance of sport in Australian national life has continued throughout the twentieth century. The test cricket series of 1932-3, in which Don Bradman was the main target of Douglas Jardine's decidedly ungentlemanly tactics, caused an international furore, greatly intensifying the anti-British feeling which had become a part of Australia's cultural heritage.(24) The proliferation of sporting heroes, especially from 1930 onwards, was overwhelmingly regarded as a metaphor for national development(25) and gave new emphasis to the nineteenth century nationalist chauvinism, the current prime minister being particularly indulgent in identifying himself with national sporting heroes. A small number of Australian Aborigines, most notably Lionel Rose and Evonne Goolagong, have received international acclaim and have been feted in Australia as stereotyped examples of a supposedly racially tolerant society.(26)

While sport in the twentieth century continued to be seen as a metaphor for social development, it continued to develop as an industry. In 1930, Don Bradman threatened not to play for Australia unless he was allowed to honour contracts he had made with a newspaper, a radio station and a sporting goods organisation.(27) These contracts highlight the commercial dimensions of sport. Governments have benefitted from gambling taxes and horse racing is one of the most regulated industries in the world. It is clear that sport in Australia has been and still is an industry, and as such is attracting the interest of economic historians.(28) The application of concepts from economic history will help legitimize sport history further.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of the relationship between sport, national identity and commercialism occurred during the 1986 VFL Grand Final. At half-time in this event, a flag at least 20 metres by 15 metres depicting the Fosters Lager emblem was horizontally revolved over the centre of the ground by at least 100 children, then shortly afterwards the procedure was repeated using the Australian flag, which still, of course, retains the Union Jack. This expression of Australian national identity was beamed by satellite to a world-wide viewing audience of 70 million people. Any historian seeking to understand the historical development of Australian nationalism ignores at great risk the role of sport. Sport has been and continues to be central in Australian national identity.

In addition to its wider social and economic implications, the private significance of sport needs to be examined if sports history is to approach a wider interpretation of Australian society. Many Australians, enclosed in restrictive suburban environments, have vigorously embraced roles as spectators and consumers of both sport and sports journalism, perhaps hoping to infuse their lives with meaning, colour and a sense of community in an otherwise alienating existence.

Moreover, the dramatic unpredictability of sporting events further enhances their appeal and this perspective offers an interesting source of inquiry for social history. Sport remains a major vehicle for private (as well as public) mythologizing and the significance of sporting heroes and clubs for private mythologizing is a further area for inquiry. The role of sporting clubs, both major and minor, in constructing suburban and regional communities is also worthy of study as is the significance of sport for the participants in the major spectator sports.(29) When sports history embraces these areas more fully, its ability to widen our understanding of the wider society will be greatly enhanced. So, too, will be its legitimacy.

There are several important reasons why sport ought to be a topic for serious historical study. From the earliest days of white settlement sport has been a major activity in Australian life, on both public and private levels. The mid-nineteenth century idea of sport as an inculcator of manly values has persisted despite the widespread commercialisation of sport. Sport has assumed significant roles in forming and reinforcing class divisions in both sport and society and in firmly entrenching conservative attitudes about the role of both men and women in Australian sport and society. International sporting success has been accepted as evidence of social progress and has proved a fertile source of widespread mythologizing about the nature of Australian sport, national identity and society generally.

Despite its ideological significance, sport has been an entertainment industry, especially since the late nineteenth century, encompassing players, spectators, administrators, the media and advertisers. This apparent dual purpose of sport has precipitated an ongoing class-based conflict about the purpose of sport in Australian society; only in recent years, in particular during the acrimonious struggle for control of Australian cricket, has this debate begun to climax.

Historical study has the potential to penetrate the relationship between Australian sport and society, in the process widening the interpretation of the complex nature of the wider and often paradoxical Australian society. It is the ability of the historical study of sport to broaden our interpretation of the wider Australian society which gives sports history its legitimacy. Sport has played such a central formative and substantiating role in the evolution of Australian society that there is no doubt that sports history is a legitimate form of history.

Notes

1. J. O'Hara, "An Approach to Colonial Sports History", p.4.
2. Ibid., pp.6-7.
3. Ibid., p.12.
4. Ibid., p.14.
5. B. Stoddart, Saturday Afternoon Fever, p.16.
6. ibid., p.22; W. F. Mandle, "Games People Played", p.523.
7. Sandercock and Turner, op.cit. Ch.1.
8. W. F. Mandle, Going It Alone, p.31.
9. Stoddart, op.cit., p.33.
10. Sandercock and Turner, op.cit., pp.8-9.
11. Stoddart, op.cit., pp.34-35.
12. W. F. Mandle, op.cit., pp.511-12.
13. L. Sandercock and I. Turner, Up Where, Cazaly, pp.9-10.
14. Stoddart, op.cit., p.37, pp.46-49.
15. Mandle, "Games People Played", pp.528-533.
16. Sandercock and Turner, op.cit., pp.8-9.
17. Stoddart, op.cit., p.139.
18. Ibid., p.141.
19. Ibid., Ch.6, A. Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police, pp. 79-85.
20. W.F.Mandle, "Cricket and Australian Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century", p.49.
21. W.F.Mandle, Going It Alone, p.30., and "Games People Played", pp.88-91.
22. W. F. Mandle, in Osborne and Mandle, New History, pp.88-91.
23. W.F.Mandle, Going It Alone, p.30.
24. B. Stoddart, "Cricket's Imperial Crisis: The 1932-33 MCC Tour of Australia" in Cashman and McKernan, Sport in History, pp.124-5.
25. Stoddart, Saturday Afternoon Fever, p.20.

26. Ibid., pp.164-5.
27. Ibid., p.24.
28. See W. Vamplew, "Late Kickoff: Economic History and Sports History".
29. Sandercock and Turner, op.cit., pp.230-5; and I. Turner, "A Comment", Historical Studies, following W.F.Mandle, "Games People Played".

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