

# **A MOST MEMORABLE CONFERENCE – THE INAUGURAL 1977 SPORTING TRADITIONS CONFERENCE**

**Richard Cashman**

The first Sporting Traditions Conference, held at the University of New South Wales from 1-3 July 1977, was a most memorable conference – probably the best I have ever attended. This assessment is shared by many others who were there.

The Conference scores well on a critical retrospective test which can be applied equally to conferences, sporting events and plays. How much can be remembered more than a decade later? Recollections of many past events become blurred over time and it is only the few outstanding occasions that can be recalled in fine detail. 1977 was one such time. I can remember much about the people, the papers, the discussion and the context, ranging from the trivial – Frank Crowley playing the piano at the Coogee Bay Hotel; Barry Andrews losing consistently at Harold Park and his celebrated and much-published after dinner speech – to the more substantial, the many important debates during the Conference.

Some later conferences have had a greater galaxy of talent – in terms of local and international speakers – and a wider range of papers but none has, in my opinion, generated the intellectual excitement and created the stimulating atmosphere of this Conference.

The idea for a conference surfaced in a conversation in a taxi (probably to or from a pub) in 1976 when either McKernan or myself stated (rather suddenly I recall) that it would be a good idea to hold a conference on sports history. The other was sufficiently impressed with the concept so that we decided – more or less on the spot – to proceed with a gathering.

Interestingly enough, we thought what we were doing was unique. We were blithely ignorant that the North American Society for Sports History (NASSH) had started in 1973 though we were aware of the improving atmosphere for what was called 'new history'. There were some Australian stirrings in sports history with several important articles by Mandle in 1973, Scott Bennett's biography of Henry Searle in 1973, and the first of the many Dabscheck articles appeared in 1975, to name but a few.

One of the first tasks was to secure a patron. Frank Crowley, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, was supportive from the very beginning and provided funds for the undertaking (and the book) from the Faculty's Special Projects Funds. Crowley's willingness to take a punt on a new area of history (this and many others) played an important role in building up an innovative and productive School of History at the University of New South Wales.

Writing around the country we were quickly encouraged by the groundswell of support. There were a number of other historians coming to a view similar to our own that sports history was an interesting and promising new area for research. We contacted a number of historians with a known interest in the field such as Bill Mandle, Ken Inglis and Ian Turner. We soon discovered that there were many others who were interested. We made contact, really for the first time, with other academics including new - 'choom' Wray Vamplew, who published *The Turf* (in England) in 1976 and had recently arrived at Flinders, John O'Hara writing his Ph.D. on gambling, and Ian Jobling from Queensland.

Many people later commented that this Conference was unique in that it represented a 'coming out' (from the closet) – to use the parlance of this decade – of sports historians. Person after person declared that 'I would have really liked to have written this history years ago but ...' or 'This is really what I want to work on... and now feel more justified in doing so'. It was certainly an exhilarating and encouraging experience to find that so many others shared this perspective. Interest

in 1977 was certainly heightened by a confessional element: I can remember Bill Hudson talking about how he felt physically sick after a Carlton loss.

But 1977 represented something far more than a 'celebration' of sports history mainly because of the calibre and diversity of the audience of about 80 persons. It consisted of a number who were to become, or in the process of becoming, future sports historians, a number of 'oncners' or 'twicers' who had a passing interest in this emerging field (but not necessarily a commitment to its future), but there were also the critics who were sceptical about this new historical endeavour and then there were others who might be referred to as interested spectators. Many areas of history were represented: social history in general, labour history, women's history, Irish/Catholic history to name but a few. There was also a wide cross-section of area expertise: Australia, Asia, Britain, Ireland and Europe and North America.

There was in 1977 no certain future for sports history. While many expressed an interest in writing more in the area, there was no consensus or certainty about whether it was advisable to devote a substantial part (if not all) of one's professional future to this enterprise. There was no one around in 1977 who had the temerity to define him/herself as a sports historian. Bill Mandle, who in a sense was one of the leading exponents of sports history at the time, warned about overstating the future of sports history. Mandle was unsure whether sports history might ever carry sufficient weight to become a viable field of social history capable of producing outstanding student theses and continuing worthwhile monographic research.

Defining the enterprise added to the interest in the Conference. It was not clear in July 1977 whether this gathering was a one-off occasion or whether it might lead to more occasions. The decision to hold a second conference was not made till well after the Conference. No one yet dreamed of a society or a journal.

The diverse audience and the uncertainty of the future of this endeavour combined to provide the Conference with what was its outstanding attribute – it provided a forum for an extended debate on the historiography of sports history: what was the enterprise? what was its justification? what were its boundaries? should it take on leisure and recreation as well as sport? what was its future? what was its relationship to other areas of history and ‘new history’? There was also extended discussion concerning the nature of sporting traditions. This discussion was given added spice with the advent of World Series Cricket in May 1977. Interestingly, the discussions of papers contained an obligatory comment on World Series Cricket, with almost everyone offering hostile comments.

The debate was an intense one – which continued in sessions, at breaks and late into the night – as the majority of those at the conference were young (in their 20s and 30s) and on the threshold of their professional careers. It was also a vigorous one in that there were sceptics there as well – unlike most specialist conferences which attract the converted and the committed. I remember Jill Roe asking somewhat irreverently whether we should take on board that sport which went on between ‘four bed posts’.

There were a number of other factors which contributed to the success of the Conference. With only seven papers per day there was plenty of time for discussion – 30 minutes a paper and 30 minutes discussion I seem to recall – and it was the discussion after the papers which made the Conference work. Too many conferences neglect this admirable practice presumably because of the larger numbers who want to read papers. Given that this was the first extended presentation of historical papers on sport, the quality was remarkably good and a number of books and articles emerged from conference papers in addition to *Sport in History*.

We also had an advantage in 1977 that the vast majority of the presenters and audience were historians with a few notable exceptions

such as Andrews and Dabscheck. The debates which took place were within the framework of an established profession. While ASSH has become stronger since 1977 and benefited from the greater representation of many disciplines – law, human movement, politics, sociology and geography, to name a few – the focus of many subsequent conference discussions has not been as tight as it was in 1977.

Another factor contributing to the success of 1977 was the presence of a number of characters. No one who was present could forget the booming voice of Mandle with his penetrating questions from the back of the theatre. The whimsical contribution of Barry Andrews is also indelibly etched in the mind – Barry played an important role in ‘bringing the Conference together’. Our Patron, Frank Crowley, began a tradition taken up later by a more recent character, J Neville, of providing pianistic entertainment at the banquet.

### **After the Conference**

The idea of publishing a book emerged during the Conference or shortly afterwards. We took a little longer to decide to hold another conference in 1979 at the University of NSW. The thinking was that the first conference had been such a success that it was worthwhile repeating. There was as yet no commitment to a sports history movement, rather the second conference was to be another one-off (or twice-off) occurrence.

It is surprising (and impressive) how many of those who presented papers at the conference remained within sports history after 1977 – Dabscheck, Vamplew, Stoddart, O’Hara, Cashman and Jobling, have devoted most of their professional career to sports history. Others such as Broome, Parsons and Cunneen, continue to have a sympathy for and some involvement in the area.

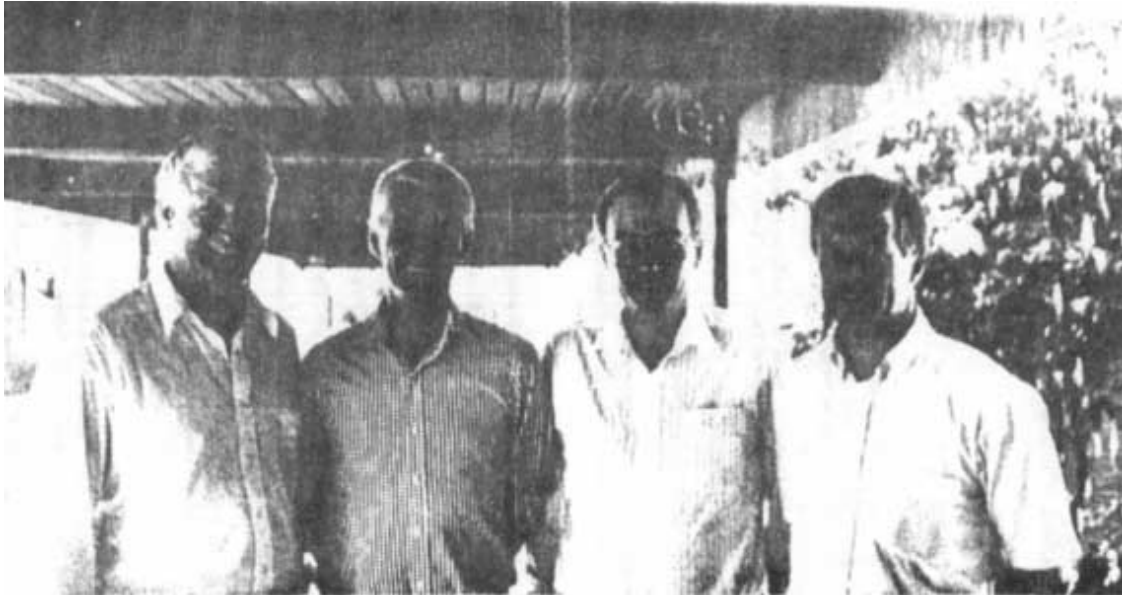
I believe that 1977 provided the inspiration and encouragement for a number of us to strike out in a serious way in this new and challenging area of history. The friendships made in 1977 have played an important

role in sustaining our commitment to this area and in providing essential support, despite direct and indirect criticism of sports history during its first decade.

Although it was some time before I referred to myself as a sports historian, the bulk of my sabbatical leave in 1978 was spent on a sports history project, converting my 1977 paper on Indian Cricket into *Patrons, Players and the Crowd*, which was published by Orient Longman in 1980. I introduced an undergraduate course, 'Leisure and Popular Culture', which included sports content in the same year.

The initial conference provided the incentive, the vision, and the peer encouragement to strike out in a new career direction. That was my experience and I'm sure that a number of others reacted in a similar fashion...

It was a most memorable conference.



**Four (old!) Stayers: Believed to be the only ASSH Members to attend all SPORTING TRADITIONS Conferences. (From left) Ian Jobling, Wray Vamplew, John O'Hara, Richard Cashman. (Photograph: Katharine Moore).**

# The Making of Sporting Traditions

July 1—3, 1977

University of New South Wales

Central Lecture Block, Theatre 1

Friday, July 1

8.45 Registrations

9.15 Opening **Frank Crowley**, U.N.S.W.

9.30 **Peter Shergold**, U.N.S.W. 'Sport and Technology: A Historical Perspective'

**Bill Mandie**, A.N.U. 'Sport as Politics: the Gaelic Athletic Association 1884-1916'

11.00 Morning tea / Registrations

11.30 **Michael McKernan**, U.N.S.W. 'Sport, War and Society: Australia 1914-1918'

**Brian Stoddart**, Western Australia Institute of Technology, 'Cricket's Imperial Crisis: the 1932-33 M.C.C. Tour of Australia'

2.30 **Ken Inglis**, A.N.U. 'Imperial Cricket: Test Matches between England and Australia 1877-1900'

**Richard Cashman**, U.N.S.W. 'The Phenomenon of Indian Cricket'

4.00 Afternoon tea

4.30 **Ian Tyrrell**, U.N.S.W. 'The Origins of American Baseball c. 1850-1880'

8.00 Films. **Bruce Petty**, 'Leisure' and a number of historical films on sport

Saturday, July 2

9.30 **Braham Dabscheck**, U.N.S.W. ' "Defensive Manchester": a History of the Professional Footballers Association'

**Ian Turner**, Monash 'The Emergence of Australian Rules Football'

11.00 Morning tea

11.30 **Michael Pearson**, U.N.S.W. 'The End of Innocence: the 1956 Springbok Tour to New Zealand in Perspective'

**Chris Cunneen**, A.N.U. 'The Early History of Australian Rugby League'

2.30 **George Parsons**, Macquarie 'The Birth of the Dragons: the Foundation of the St. George Rugby League in the 1920s'

**Ross Topham**, Matthew Flinders Girls High School 'The Collingwood Football Club and the Collingwood Tradition'

**Wray Vamplew**, Flinders 'The Sport of Kings and Commoners: the Commercialisation of British Horse Racing in the Nineteenth Century'

4.00 Afternoon tea

4.30 **Barry Andrews**, U.N.S.W., Royal Military College, 'The Willow Tree and the Laurel: Australian Sport and Australian Literature

Conference Dinner

Sunday, July 3

11.00 **Jim Fitzpatrick**, A.N.U. 'Cycle Racing in Australia 1890-1900'

**Richard Broome**, La Trobe 'Jack Johnson in Australia 1907-1909: Pugilists, Wowsers and

2.00 **Helen King**, U.N.S.W. 'The Sexual Politics of Sport: an Australian Perspective'

**Jürgen Tampke**, U.N.S.W. 'Politics Only?: Sport in the German Democratic Republic'