

## **BARRACKER'S CORNER**

### **ROAR METER OR RAW MEATER?**

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The late historian, Ian Turner, who wrote the first great book on Australian football, *Up Where Cazaly?*, once recalled hearing the following outburst at an opposition player from a no-doubt diehard footy supporter.

You dirty, stinking, commo, Abo, mongrel, poofter, bastard! A raw meater!

Unsavoury as such comments might be, prejudices notwithstanding, at least one might say it was a natural outburst. I'm not sure whether such outbursts (or perhaps one should call them sustained verbal fans) are not to be preferred to another type of roar meter.

As I understand it, this roar meter, introduced by the AFL this season is the latest bit of useless technology to be foisted upon us. Apparently it registers lung capacities of footy followers in various parts of a ground so that some sections will be measured on whether they are letting their side (or sides) down. But what is the purpose of such an invention? Is it a vocal equivalent of the Mexican Wave, which has bugger-all to do with the state of any game? Will it encourage roaring when there is nothing to roar for or at? Is it a contrivance for manipulating the crowds? Is it one more example of dumbing down that is taking place in Australian sport?

The Mexican Wave can seem harmless enough. No-one can deny that there are not boring moments in cricket, and it can enliven dull passages of play. But it is acquiescent. Numbing. The old cry of 'Ave a go, ya mug' was at least (in a small way) subversive. Nothing follows a Mexican Wave. It just peters out.

We have had other contrivances. It is tempting to link some of them to the Packerisation of cricket. And I will do so with one. *C'mon Aussie C'mon* was for the new feel-good spectator an 'experience' at the cricket while watching a bastardised version of a greater game. It is not barracking for; it is not barracking against. For the new wave cricket followers of the late 1970s and early 1980s it was a jingoistic jingle and a sort of soda pop equivalent of Sherbet's *Howzat* and Mike Brady's *Up There Cazaly*. Australian sport was losing its edge.

*Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi* is a chant not a song. It has neither edge, nor attitude. It may be more punk than pop but it truly can be said it lacks wit. It's dumb. Dumbing down is part of a pernicious trend. Let us think of other examples. The speedometers used for measuring tennis aces and

bowling speeds have merely given the opportunity for television commentators to drown their viewers in useless sludge. If Mark Phillipousis or Greg Rusedski cracks down a serve at 240kph we know it's a bomb. If it went at 220 or 200kph it would still be a bomb. We knew that when Gabriella Sabatini served twice for the Wimbledon title she was serving powder puffs which Steffi Graf returned with the contempt they deserved. Were we deprived of anything important by not knowing the actual speed of the ball?

We get more information but we know less. What would Marshall McLuhan have made of it all? He divided media into hot and cool mediums. From memory, radio was hot and television cool because radio required greater use of imagination, it got us to engage our brain more, to go a bit scientific, it created more dendritic action.

What is happening to our brains now when we watch or attend sport? Probably something like H.G.Wells prophesied for the human race generally in *The Time Machine*, written in the 1890s. That human beings would be so swamped by technology that their brains would shrivel up and they would be replaced by the nearest species in the biological chain, a ruling class of monkeys. If we look at our major sports, the AFL and cricket, and the television stations broadcasting sport, the monkeys are definitely in control.

The Melbourne journalist, Martin Flanagan, wrote recently that Australians 'know what good sport is' and 'don't need our senses being blotted out by second-rate effects from the entertainment industry'. Think about when you used to go watch sport to enjoy it and discuss it. When intelligent thought wasn't drowned out and you didn't mind getting your head wet. When for the footy (in Melbourne) you grossed out on half a dozen jam donuts before play. When (in Adelaide) the best pies and pasties were sold from canvas bags on the way out of the ground at the end of the day. And if you went to the dogs at Angle Park you got a similar deal.

Australians have known their sport but their knowledge is being diminished at the grounds, and increasingly but those who report on TV and radio. At lunch and tea breaks at the cricket do we need some commercial radio jerk pumping up excitement for some dim-witted equivalent of Have-A-Go cricket played by ex-Crow Andrew Jarman or any collection of shaven headed footballers? Haven't we seen enough sky divers to last several lifetimes? And since we have, do we need a raucous commentary to accompany them? We don't mind action replay screens but do we need to be blasted by incessant advertising at blaring decibel levels? The commentators don't pick up on this environmental pollution of Adelaide Oval aesthetics during Test match or One Day International time.

Our sports used to be democratic. No longer. Our footballers are cosetted. And we can't go out to inspect the pitch at the end of a cricket match. After the 1969 Adelaide Oval Test I stood on Lance Gibbs' giant hop and couple of strides to the bowling crease. It remains a marvel that has informed my thinking about cricket. It explains a different era of a bowler who was at the batsman. How getting through overs quickly used to be seen as an attacking measure. Paradigm lost. That sort of cricket writing apprenticeship is now lost

with it. Or at the footy, listening to the coaches addresses at quarter and three-quarter time. To Barry Goodingham, the ex-North Melbourne ruckman (the epitome of a Shinboner) tell the young Woodville troops he was one the way to raising to their first final series:

I know you're fuckin' rooted fellas. But I want you to be well and truly fuckin' rooted.

A working class club. A basic message. They lost (on the day) but made the major round. Another apprenticeship.

Now we are removed, the images conveyed second hand. Dipper and his posse of boundary riders spelling out the same inanities. Who wants to know?

Sport has been called a secular religion but it appears that there is something of a paradox between newer approaches to religion and sport. While the fundamentalist religions promote direct experience between the worshipper and a God or gods, sport has replaced our freedom to make our own judgements. Intermediaries fill priest-like functions which get between the viewer/listener/watcher and the action. Whatever does Ken Sutcliffe, Tim Webster or Sandy Roberts add to what we are seeing? As one critic of Roberts described it, he provides the 'whoa, whoa' factor in tennis.

In a similar way direct experience is being interfered with at the grounds. Spectators are not allowed to have thinking time and even ground announcers interrupt with messages stating the obvious. Before I started working for the South Australian Cricket Association and was a mere SACA member watching the South African Test in January 1994, the ground announcer told me that Gary Kirsten had just bowled a maiden over to Allan Border. Polite applause broke out. I yelled out: 'He's not Hugh Tayfield you know!' but no-one else said anything. How much cricket appreciation was going on? Kirsten, in fact, bowled about eight overs for 12 runs but until that game he had taken just one first-class wicket in his career, and took his second in the match. Border was supposedly a great player of spin bowling but we were being asked to assume that we were watching a quality contest. 'Ave' a Go' would have been an appropriate cry. I was the only person to make a sort of roar but there was no meter there to record it.