

## **Sports Mad Nations? A Call For Research by Sports Historians**

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As I sit here readying for the pre-Olympic conference onslaught, and four weeks out from the opening ceremony, I am amazed at the constant references in the media describing Australia as a sports mad nation. One wonders if this isn't a bit too exaggerated, meant to pump us up for 'our' Olympics, for if we really were so obsessed with sports, would we have to be told so often? Americans don't have to be reminded they are a sports mad nation. By the millions they make their pilgrimages to the Baseball Hall of Fame; the Field of Dreams; attend football games, among many other sporting pursuits. The evidence of sports madness is omnipresent.

It frequently is asserted by commentators writing about Australian sport that Australia is a 'sports mad' nation. This truism is rarely tested, however. It is time to put this myth to rest and launch research projects that test this assertion against the sports consumption and participation in other countries. Since the mid 1980s scholars have begun to unpack this myth, however there remains little contribution from sports historians in the deconstruction of this myth. We need solid historical evidence, not just contemporary analyses.

I suggest that four areas of consumption need to be explored: fan consumption through attendance at matches and the related revenues that are generated: consumption and funding via television; through a comparative analysis of finance, marketing and consumption of sporting goods: and finally discussion of participation rates in sport. Comparative ethnographic studies will also add a deeper level of social analysis in examining fan cultures. Despite obvious differences between Australia and the United States, there are relative comparisons that can be made based on examination of the above issues scaled for population and economic difference. A cursory glance at stadium figures suggests that Americans sustain a much larger capacity to attend sporting fixtures than Australians:

Table 1: University football stadia in the USA and local population:

Location	Stadium capacity	Local population
University of Tennessee Knoxville, Tennessee	107,000	300,000
Clemson University Clemson, South Carolina	82,000	15,000
Auburn University Auburn, Alabama	86,000	40,000

Table 2: Largest stadia in Australia and local population:

Location	Stadium capacity	Local population
Stadium Australia Sydney, New South Wales	110,000 (80,000 post-Olympics)	4,000,000
Melbourne Cricket Ground Melbourne, Victoria	95,000	3,300,000
QEII/ANZ Stadium Brisbane, Queensland	60,000	1,200,000
Docklands. Melbourne, Victoria	52,000	3,300,000

While this is only very preliminary information, it suggests that deeper analysis of sporting cultures in different societies must be made. Having recently watched an AFL elimination match in Brisbane where several thousand seats were vacant, I wondered if such an important match would be so sparsely attended in professional leagues in other countries. Some may well resort to another untested argument, that Australian football is relatively weak historically in Queensland, yet in the heart of rugby league territory, the Brisbane Lions fared better in attendance in 2000 than the flagship rugby league club the Brisbane Broncos. It appears that the Australian entertainment market is volatile indeed and that many sports fans in the 1990s may be turning to other pursuits as competitions go national and corporate. It is at this very moment where the stakes for sport are so high that historians need to make a contribution as to the relative significance of sport in Australia as well as in tracking trends in participation and consumption. Then informed debate could be held on these issues rather than listening ad nauseum to untested assertions. In addition, when one examines the figures that do exist, we are left to wonder why the majority of Australians are not 'sports mad' if we are indeed such a sport obsessed nation.