

SPORTS MAD NATIONS? SOME RESEARCH ALREADY DONE

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In Bulletin 32, John Nauright calls for research on sports attendances and culture in Australia in a comparative context. While applauding the notion, this is no new area of research. More than twenty years ago at the second Sporting Traditions Conference, I explored soccer and social control in Scotland, 1873-1973. That paper explicitly addressed the questions of sports attendance rates in Scotland and Australia and their implications in the context of notions of social control. I concluded then that the Australian experience was not unique, though it did have some distinctive features. Since then there has been a fair amount of work on participation rates in sports, bedevilled as it is by statistical problems. My friend, Steve Darby, when he was at the Australian Soccer Federation, used to keep his participation rate data in a file on his computer labelled 'forgery'.

A simple-minded comparison of stadium sizes and 'local' populations does not get us very far. Stadium sizes change, sometimes quite radically. Most of the great world stadia now have much smaller capacities than their peak attendances in the early post-war period as safety standards rise. See Table 1 below for some data. In 1964 Reg Padey designed VFL (later Waverley) Park in Melbourne to cater for 157,000 spectators, which would have made it the second largest stadium in the world, behind the Maracana in Rio de Janeiro at 220,000. Waverley was 'completed' with a much smaller capacity, though 92,000 did squeeze into the ground in 1981. With the finishing of the Colonial Stadium at Docklands in 2000, Melbourne has three stadia capable of holding crowds of over 50,000 and several more with multi-thousand capacity.

What gives Melbourne its comparative distinction is that it can produce crowds to partly fill several of these stadia at the same time or over the same week-end for Australian Rules Football. Until the 1980s it supported a whole competition, if you include Geelong as part of the Melbourne conurbation. It can also fill large grounds for a range of sports. For example three of the largest crowds to watch soccer in Australia have been 105,000 at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in 1956 for Russia versus Yugoslavia in the Olympic final (also the closing ceremony!), 93,000 for Australia v Italy in the 2000 Olympics and 85,000 for Australia v Iran in 1977 in a World Cup qualifier. The average crowd at the Olympic soccer at the MCG in 2000 was 47,000, even though Australia only played one game there and the competition was restricted to players under the age of 23, plus a maximum of three over age players. When Chile played Spain in the men's competition after the United States met China in a women's game, the atmosphere inside the stadium was extraordinary with four groups of spectators attached to the

teams and a huge number of uncommitted fans becoming caught up in the excitement. This despite the fact that there was no Australian team in sight. There were capacity crowds at other Olympic venues for soccer in 2000. The total attendance for the competition was 1,069,250.

In the case of Melbourne a similar tale to soccer can be told for rugby union and to a lesser extent for rugby league. Then there is the Australian tennis open at Flinders Park and the Formula One Grand Prix at Albert Park. Next there is horse racing at Flemington, particularly, though not exclusively the Spring Carnival and the Melbourne Cup. Cricket at the MCG for test and one-day matches produces huge aggregate attendances. Does this range of sporting activities which are sustained by a population of 3-5 million, depending on whether one takes Melbourne or Victoria as the denominator, make Melbourne the sporting capital of Australia or the World? What are we to make of the participation in other sports such as golf, fishing, and netball where numbers claimed dwarf the attendance data mentioned above.

One might put some of the attendance data down in part to the availability of the facilities. Sydney has lacked these huge venues until 2000. Now that the Olympic Stadium at Homebush exists we have seen some very large turnouts there, but will these be sustained in future? The stadium operators do not think so, and downsizing to 80,000 capacity is taking place now that the games are over. Soccer had a close to full house of 98,212 for its final at Homebush between Cameroon, the eventual winner on penalties, and Spain. Rugby Union attracted 109,487 for an Australia versus New Zealand Rugby Union match, but some doubt has been expressed about announced crowds for Olympic events. The 112,524 given for the night of Cathy Freeman's 400-metre run has been claimed to be closer to 104,000. Even so this is a stunning figure in a comparative Olympic context, given that this is the largest stadium constructed for an Olympic Games. Many of the attendees will be 'theatre goers' rather than sports devotees and any account of sports mad nations has to take account of the different types of audiences which attend sports matches. One would be fairly confident in asserting that the proportion of 'theatre goers' would be higher for the Olympic Games than for regular matches at Sydney and Melbourne venues.

Instead of focussing on stadium capacities and attendances at blockbuster games, what is essential if serious comparative work is to be done is to develop good statistical data on average attendances and participation over long periods. This is available for most major codes of football and Richard Cashman has published excellent series for cricket. The denominator to be applied to such data requires to be established. Proportions of some potentially relevant populations were discussed in my article on Scotland, and related to other forms of activity, such as work.

Then there are questions about the social composition of crowds, first addressed by John Hutchinson in the case of football (soccer) in Scotland and Tony Mason and Jim Walvin in England. Rob Hess has begun to explore the gender composition of crowds in Australia with an eye on international comparisons. The ethnic dimension to sporting activity in Australia is

significant in some areas, but relatively unimportant in others. The biggest crowds tend to occur when the core support for a sport is supplemented by significant numbers from outside the normal spectating community for that particular sport.

In comparison with the USA where the predominance of home supporters in venues is the norm, in Australia and the United Kingdom, fans of home and away teams congregate at the venues. Australian soccer has regularly drawn crowds for international matches in which a proportion of those present support the 'away' team. Rugby union international matches against New Zealand also have a generous 'away' support. The transformation of Australian Rules Football into a national code with teams in five mainland states means that 'away' support has diminished for matches between interstate teams. Some spectators are highly club or team specific, others will watch a range of different teams. Some are sports specific, others watch a range of sports in seasons. In the USA this is catered for by defined short seasons for each of the major sports. In Australia and much of the rest of the world seasons overlap, especially where games are played in northern and southern hemispheres. FIFA is currently engaged in establishing a common calendar for football (soccer) but is finding it extraordinarily difficult to do so.

Nauright makes another set of suggestions about the consumption of sports in Australia. Such a notion derives from the popular academic fad about the commodification of sport. But there are many people in Australia and elsewhere who do not believe that sport is a commodity, indeed there is a huge battle going on between those who have never accepted that sport can be a commodity and those who pretend that it is. A radical critique of the notion of sport as a commodity is required. Too many recent writers take the notion of commodification for granted, rather than treating it as a site of contestation. Sports historians ought to be very wary of assumptions that sports can be treated as simply a branch of the entertainment industry as many corporatised sporting and non-sporting groups insistently wish to do.

Attempts to manipulate the size and composition of crowds are probably increasing, as witness the reconstruction of football stadia in England following the Taylor Report and the intervention of the Murdoch and Packer groups in rugby league and cricket. Hence modern attendance data may not be directly comparable to those of previous eras. The availability of 'live' matches on television must have had some influence on the willingness of people to attend games in person. This may have changed over time. Some observers point to increased attendances at top games in major leagues, but the net effect on total live attendances for the sport across all levels may have declined.

In England all-seater stadia have been required for Premier League soccer matches since Taylor, but there is strong evidence that this has met various forms of resistance from spectators, a proportion of whom continue to stand in seated areas for most of the match. This sometimes gives rise to conflict with seated fans. Stadia which are designed for seated audiences

may suffer structural problems when fans start swaying or jumping.

Turning once again to participation rates, those sports which seek commercial or public funding are now required to justify these subsidies by audited participation rates. Those sports which do not, tend still to rely on vaguer guesstimates. The Victorian Soccer Federation used to propound information about participation in terms of the numbers of registered players which was wildly at variance with evidence of the numbers of teams taking part in competitions under their auspices. Anyone who had ever been registered tended to be counted. This has been rectified in the last decade, though there are still opportunities to exaggerate by referring to youngsters taking part in school soccer, when the involvement in the game may be very ephemeral. Attempts to reduce gender balance and discrimination seems to have had a significant effect on participation rates for girls in sports in Australia and in the United States, where the impact of Title IX has been the subject of much research and controversy.

So much research remains to be done as Nauright suggests, but it should begin from the basis of what is already known and it needs to take account of more sophisticated measures of attendance and participation than is implied by comparisons between stadia sizes and populations of the cities in which they are located.

ENDNOTES:

1. John Nauright, 'Sports mad nations: A call for research by sports historians', *Australian Society for Sports History Bulletin*, Number 32, August 2000, pp. 30-1.
2. Roy Hay, 'Soccer and social control in Scotland, 1873-1973,' in Richard Cashman and Michael McKernan (eds) *Sport: Money, Morality and the Media*, Kensington, New South Wales University Press, 1981, pp. 223-247.
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Participation in Sport and Physical Activities', *Year Book Australia*, 1998 (ABS Catalogue No. 1301.0) for an electronic version, see <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3110124.NSF/14e59eeb4d4c9c94ca25670400073e4f>
4. This data was compiled for the City of Greater Dandenong's successful nomination of Waverley Park to the Victorian Heritage Register. I am grateful to Colleen Lazenby, Heritage Co-ordinator for the City for her assistance and encouragement of the research involved.
5. Roy Hay, Marnie Harg-Muir and Peter Mewett, 'A stadium as fine as any on earth' or 'Arctic Park'? — The tortured past and uncertain future of a cultural icon, *Journal of Australian Studies*, December 2000, in press.
6. Bill Murray and Roy Hay, 'Australia and Olympic soccer', *The Cauldron*, a special issue of *The Yorker*, Current Awareness Bulletin of the Melbourne Cricket Club Library, Number 27, Spring 2000, pp. 2-8.
7. Michael Lynch, 'Free kick for round-ball game in Australia rules cauldron', *Age*, Olympic Supplement, 28 September 2000, p. 16.

8. Keith Austin, James Nicholson and Jonathon Cook, 'And the winner is ... Brisbane, Canberra and Adelaide', *Age*, Olympic Supplement, 27 September 2000, p. 17.
9. *Sunday Advertiser*, Geelong, 1 October 2000, p. 64. For comparison, attendances at some other Olympics were: Moscow 1980 1.8 million; Los Angeles 1984 1.4 million, Seoul 1988 743,000. *Rothmans Football Yearbook, 1989-90*, p. 880.
10. *Sunday Advertiser*, Geelong, 1 October 2000, p. 64; At the Sydney Football Stadium, where the rest of the Olympic soccer was played, the Australian games were sell-outs, and most other games near to the capacity of 41,000. *Football*, Official Olympic Games Sport Program, 2000, p. 50.
11. *Age*, 30 September 2000, Olympic Supplement, p. 23.
12. "The MCG and VFL Park are popular grounds for all football supporters -members and 'theatre-goers' - almost without exception, with their combination of facilities and lower public admission price for seating. In addition, they hold any size of crowd. It is therefore recommended that matches involving top drawing teams be scheduled (and at times rescheduled) at these venues, to maximise attendances. To facilitate this, it is proposed that teams are guaranteed seven home matches each year, rather than the current nine." VFL Football, *Establishing the basis for future success*, A report presented by the VFL commission to the VFL clubs, Melbourne, 1985, by Pappas, Carter, Evans and Koop (PCEK), p. 9. I am indebted to Bob Stewart and David Nadel for a copy of this report.
13. See for example, Wray Vamplew, ed., *Australians: Historical Statistics*, Broadway, NSW, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, 1987, pp. 384-5: For Australian Rules Football there is also the excellent compilation, Kevin Taylor, *Football Footystats*, Oakleigh, ACP Action, 1999.
14. Richard Cashman, *'Ave a go, yer mug! Australian Cricket Crowds from Larrikin to Ocker*, Sydney, Collins, 1994.
15. Hay 'Soccer and social control', pp. 231-8.
16. John Hutchinson, *The Football Industry*, Glasgow, Richard Drew, 1982, pp. 49-64; Tony Mason, 'Football and the workers in England, 1880-1914', in Cashman and McKernan, eds, *Sport: Money, Morality and the Media*, pp. 248-271; James Walvin, *The People's Game: The History of Football Revisited*, Edinburgh, Mainstream, 1994, pp. 52-71, originally published by Allen Lane in 1975.
17. Rob Hess, 'Women and Australian Rules Football in colonial Melbourne', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 13, Number 3, December 1996, pp. 356-372; Rob Hess, "'Ladies specially invited": Women in the culture of Australian Rules Football', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 17, Number 2/3, June/September 2000, pp. 111-141.
18. David Halberstam, *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made*, London, Yellow Jersey Press, 2000, pp. 23-48, has some brilliant insights into the collision between 'the dream world of sports and the cold world of business'.
19. Dave Nadel's recent Monash PhD thesis has some interesting arguments on this issue. David Mark Nadel, *The professionalisation and commercialisation of Australian*

20. Even those highly critical sports historians Douglas Booth and Colin Tatz seem to be infected by this. See their discussion of 'Market sport and the politics of restructuring' in *One-Eyed: A View of Australian Sport*, St Leonards, NSW, Allen and Unwin, 2000, pp. 192-200.
21. See Nadel's thesis for a good discussion of the effects of the expansion of the AFL on attendances in Victoria and other states.
22. Kenneth Tolo, *Gender Equity in Intercollegiate Athletics: The inadequacy of Title IX Enforcement by the U.S. Office for Civil Rights*, (Working Paper, No 69), 1993; *Intercollegiate sports*: hearing before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives, One Hundred Third Congress, first session, on Title IX impact on women's participation in intercollegiate athletics and gender equity, February 17, 1993.

**Table 1: World Football Stadia in the Twentieth Century
Early Classics**

| Stadium | Country | City | Built*** | Capacity | Record Attend. | Date |
|-----------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|----------|----------------|------------|
| Maracana* | Brazil | Rio di Janeiro | 1950-65 | 220,000 | 199,850 | 16/07/1950 |
| Hampden Park | Scotland | Glasgow | 1903-37 | 150,000 | 149,547 | 17/04/1937 |
| Wembley** | England | London | 1922-23 | 126,500 | 126,047 | 28/04/1923 |
| Bernabeu | Spain | Madrid | 1944-82 | 120,000 | 124,000 | 30/05/1957 |
| MCG | Australia | Melbourne | 1954-6 | 120,000 | 121,696 | 26/09/1973 |
| Crystal Palace | England | London | 1895 | 120,000 | 120,081 | 19/04/1913 |
| Ibrox Park | Scotland | Glasgow | 1887-1939 | 110,000 | 118,567 | 02/01/1939 |
| Soldier Field | USA | Chicago | - | 100,000 | 105,840 | 22/08/1947 |
| Rose Bowl | USA | Los Angeles | - | 100,000 | 103,985 | 20/01/1980 |
| Stadio Olimpico | Italy | Rome | 1928-53 | 80,000 | 80,000 | 17/05/1953 |

* Estadio Mario Filho

** 200,000 are said to have besieged the ground in 1923

*** Dates of construction of the UK grounds do not include post-1960 developments. Most of these have resulted in reduced capacities but better amenities

**Table 2: World Football Stadia in the Twentieth Century
Later modern or other large stadia**

| Stadium | Country | City | Built | Capacity |
|-------------------|-------------|----------------|---------|----------|
| May Day stadium | North Korea | Pyong Yang | - | 150,000 |
| Mineirao | Brazil | Belo Horizonte | - | 130,000 |
| Azadi | Iran | Teheran | - | 128,000 |
| Salt Lake | India | Calcutta | - | 120,000 |
| Estadio da Luz | Portugal | Lisbon | 1954-70 | 120,000 |
| Nou Camp | Spain | Barcelona | 1944-82 | 115,000 |
| Azteca | Mexico | Mexico City | - | 114,000 |
| Utama Senayan | Indonesia | Jakarta | - | 110,000 |
| Stadium Australia | Australia | Sydney | 1999 | 110,000 |
| Nasser Stadium | Egypt | Cairo | - | 100,000 |

Sources:

Simon Inglis, *The Football Grounds of England and Wales*, London, Willow Books, 1985.

Simon Inglis, *The football grounds of Europe*, London, Willow Books, 1990.

Richard Henshaw, *The Encyclopedia of World Soccer*, Washington, New Republic Books, 1979.

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