

BARRACKER'S CORNER

LOOSE MEN EVERYWHERE

Roy Hay
Deakin University

John Harms was in town this week to launch his third book, a marvellous evocation of the life of a long distance Geelong supporter. Descended from a German Lutheran family of pastors who combined their religious calling with barracking for the Geelong football team, Harms has been a life long devotee of the club, even though he has never seen them win a game at Kardinia Park and can count on the fingers of one hand the number of home games he has attended. The title comes from a Tim Lane footy commentary any week of the season and is typical of the wit and insight, which suffuses the book.

Though Geelong is the heart of the book, this is much more than one fan's life story. It is an exploration of what sport does for us as human beings, for good and ill. John Harms makes a **good** fist of describing the quintessential sporting moment. That brief interlude of suspended time when the ball drops sweetly on the foot and spirals away towards its goal, producing an involuntary rush of internal bliss as it surprises by its length and accuracy. When the club head produces that crisp thwack and the ball splits the fairway and rolls an impossible distance straight and true. Tennis and cricket players know the feeling as the ball comes off the sweet spot in mid-stroke and flashes past despairing opponents for a critical point or a boundary. For the amateur player, I suspect it is these rare moments that keep us in the game rather than the even more infrequent trophies or glory.

Such moments are usually individual and private, though occasionally they meet the approbation of the crowd as with one rugby league tackle that John describes, which put a rampaging forward into touch preventing a certain touchdown. They can also be tactical.

At Deakin University we had an indoor soccer competition in which an assorted bunch of academics and general staff rejoicing in the team name of the Mongrels took part every year against the cream of the students. In the late 1980s we were hammered in the round robin competition by a student outfit consisting virtually entirely of state league players. The score was six-nil and we were lucky to get nil. Somehow, thanks in part to the ineptitude of the other teams, the Mongrels reached the grand final. When we turned up, our opponents were already there demonstrating their skills, scoring goals from impossible angles and generally intimidating by their physical presence. They had brought their partners and girlfriends along, who had boxes of M and Ms to present to the winners. All that remained was to pick up the trophy and head for the party.

I gathered our motley mob of geriatrics, has-beens, never wases and wannabes together and said, 'This must not happen, here is what we will do.

We will fluke a goal early on and then pack the defence. (This was long before flooding had been invented). I will not move from a position in front of the goal. They will get frustrated, start fighting among themselves and we will win'. The game followed the script. We got the goal. Our opponents played brilliantly early on. They hit the frame of the goal repeatedly. Our keeper had a blinder. Then they fell into individualism and petulance through frustration. We won four-one. It was taking candy, quite literally, away from kids. In a moment of appalling hubris at the end I said, 'Maradona will not get as much pleasure from holding up the World Cup soccer trophy as I do from picking up this golden boot'. John Harms would not be guilty of such behaviour, but he would understand.

This is Nick Hornby for Australian conditions. Hornby's fever Pitch was built round his obsession with Arsenal football club in England. John's love affair with Geelong is gentler, sometimes funnier, but sharing equally in the one-eyed and unconditional love for the team, the club, its heroes and what it means to its fans and its community. The Geelong ambience is something special. It is hard to describe to outsiders, but having supported Ayr United, a Scottish football (soccer) team whose major trophy drought exceeds even that of Geelong, all my life, I have no problem with barracking for the Cats. There is that curious mixture of desire to win the premiership coupled with a belief that somehow we will manage to snatch critical defeat from the jaws of victory, usually with the aid of nefarious forces including blind and malevolent umpires, injuries to key players or cheating by opponents. And we somehow accept that this how it is ordained to be and that therefore that is enough. Frank Costa said candidly at the launch, privately, not in his speech, 'We aimed to finish eighth this year with this group of youngsters'. Typical Geelong modesty and ambition, it struck me, but also the culture that our new young coach Bomber Thomson is trying valiantly to eradicate.

John Harms was described by fellow writer and *Age* columnist Martin Flanagan as one of Australia's best sports writers. He has that eye for the pivotal moment in a sporting occasion and the sense of context in which to place it, whether it be backyard kick-to-kick or Buddha Hocking's last game for the Cats. John is even funnier, more sophisticated and more-wide ranging than appears in this deceptively simple love story. He is a craftsman of rare skill, a national treasure in the making. On the fly leaf of my copy of *Loose Men Everywhere* he wrote, 'If you try very hard you can imagine that the ball is nearly round'.