

EXTENDING HIDDEN CULTURES

Bernard Whimpress

I was engaged by Bryan McCoy's article, 'The Hidden Culture of Indigenous Football' in *Overland* 166, Autumn 2002.¹ How the author's too strong tackle in a game of Aussie Rules launched a chain of personal philosophical realisation. Overstepping an 'invisible boundary' led to 'wonder' about the culture of Indigenous football and this in turn led to recognition of the failure of the dominant white culture to understand and appreciate the nature of Aboriginal football skills. As McCoy points out, using stereotypes such as 'exotic' and 'different' to describe their play is one example of this, and appropriation and assimilation are others. He suggests that the 'how' and 'why' questions relating to an Indigenous football style are rarely addressed.² I agree, and aim here to assist that process not only with respect to Australian football, but by widening the debate beyond it. Hopefully, some missing pieces can be added to the jigsaw.

McCoy argues that Colin Tatz and Martin Flanagan are exceptions but I am not so sure about Tatz. I am also not convinced by some of McCoy's explanations, which may sit well enough with his discipline of anthropology but do not necessarily bear historical scrutiny. Allow me to give one and a half examples.

First, take the quoting of Chris Lewis's remark in a radio interview about the perceptual abilities of Indigenous footballers: '. . . there were mobs of us kids and we only had one football. You had to learn where the others were if you wanted a kick'.³ This surely, is insufficient evidence. Lots of white and Aboriginal children learnt the game kicking end-to-end with one ball. To get it one either had to outmark the pack or be able to read it off hands. The latter skill supports Lewis's comment but McCoy errs in linking Lewis's remark directly to Tatz's more generally held position of Indigenous deprivation in sport being part of the wider social and political picture. The need for ovals to 'require enormous maintenance and cost if they are to be established, grassed, watered and mown' bears little connection with Aboriginal reality where games are often played on rough surfaces in outback towns. Furthermore, it would represent few of McCoy's own experiences of playing football in the Northern Territory and the western desert of Western Australia.

The second half-example is the implication that Aussie Rules originated from the Indigenous game of *marngrook*, a feature of which was leaping high to catch a ball made from stuffed possum skins. Although some of Geoffrey Blainey's interpretations of Australian history might cause disagreement, his argument for the diffusion of Australian Rules from English public-school-Oxbridge roots in his 1990 book, *A Game of Our Own*, more than adequately discounts the origin myths associated with Gaelic football and the Aboriginal game.⁴ It is odd that McCoy ignores Blainey and yet cites Robin Grow's chapter in Rob Hess and Bob Stewart's *More Than A Game* (1998) despite the fact that Grow maintains Blainey's scepticism.⁵ I call this a half-example

because I want to allow my historian's cap to slip a little.

The one real advance to the *marngrook* argument was put forward by Martin Flanagan in his 2001 Alfred Deakin Lecture when he suggested the possibility that Aussie Rules' most influential founder, Tom Wills, had played it in his youth in Ararat. Flanagan said:

People ask me – is Australian football an Aboriginal game? A lot of Aboriginal people certainly think it is, but the claim I make for Tom Wills is not that he persuaded a sub-committee of the Melbourne Cricket Club to adopt an Aboriginal game. Rather, when the subject of selecting a code of football arose, Wills declared, 'We shall have a game of our own'. In the context of the 1850s, with the new-sprung colony of Victoria bursting to demonstrate its Britishness, this was a radical proclamation. Clearly, Wills had played the famous game of the Rugby school. What I would like to think is that his familiarity with Aboriginal football told him that not only were there different ways of playing such a game but also that the different ways brought into play completely different skills. Sportsmen and women of vision note such things⁶

In this quotation Flanagan discusses some very exciting possibilities as well as making important imaginative leaps. Of course, there is a big difference between possibility and fact. A flaw in the argument of Aussie Rules deriving from *marngrook* has been that its most distinctive element, the high mark, did not appear in football for twenty years after the game's foundation although this delay does not necessarily destroy the argument. As historians know, good ideas and processes often lie dormant. Moreover, Flanagan is not talking about the substance of the original rules, or the form of the game, but the spirit that underlay it. It is no surprise that McCoy has picked up on some of this in his discussion of the origin of the free-flowing game. Unfortunately he does not build on it.

McCoy's comments on the culture of pairings and on non-verbal communications are particularly significant.⁷ They are often retained by Aboriginal players when they get to the Australian Football League. One can certainly understand the advantage of non-verbal communication over shouting, which not only lacks subtlety but loses the vital element of surprise in which some of the best attacking initiatives are created. The communion between the Krakouer brothers at North Melbourne in the Victorian Football League in the 1980s is a case in point.

McCoy devotes a lot of attention to parallels between hunting skills and Australian football but one has to query whether such parallels do not also to apply to other sports.⁸ Certainly, in my work on Aborigines in Australian cricket, there is evidence in the nineteenth century at least, that when Aboriginal teams played together, they co-operated as a group, particularly when in the field. Indeed, in some respects it could be argued that a fielding

team organised to dismiss a batsman is a more obvious form of trapping a prey, a major element of hunting, than chasing a football.

McCoy raises some interesting issues under 'men's business' regarding 'respect' and being able to play hard and fast while avoiding physical confrontation. He makes a valid criticism of Dermott Brereton's analogy between Gallipoli diggers and modern footballers, including the claim that confrontation is more commendable than avoidance. McCoy's retort is that: 'This view of the game of Aussie Rules is a construction of a very different game to that which is played in parts of Australia by Indigenous men.' He then concludes:

Without a more reflective sense of what is being enacted in this game of Aussie Rules we run the risk of carelessly assimilating Indigenous footballers into the game without appreciating what it is they bring and how their cultural strengths can enrich our game and ourselves.⁹

Unlike McCoy I do not think this should be a concern as I hope to illustrate with some wider points. Ashis Nandy, in his ground-breaking book, *The Tao of Cricket*, developed the startling thesis that 'Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English'.¹⁰ Nandy did not mean that cricket originated in India but that it became Indian in spirit.

The champion Indian batsman Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji was viewed as 'exotic' when he played in England (and Australia) in the 1890s and 1900s and his invention of the leg glance by moving inside the line of the ball could be seen as 'avoidance'. There is little question that the 1868 Aboriginal cricketer Dick-a-Dick used avoidance techniques in warding off cricket balls thrown at him simultaneously and I have argued that he might have been adept at dealing with Bodyline by dodging and weaving out of the way.¹¹ One can even suggest that Don Bradman in stepping away to the leg-side in his counter-attack against Bodyline used an avoidance technique.

The first rules of Australian football might have put more of an emphasis on a free-flowing game than rugby but the early years often involved brutal contests, and the strong physical element continued. Henry Colden Harrison, one of football's founders, never avoided the tough clashes and in 1872 declared that football was 'not suitable for menpoodles and milksops'.¹² Similar remarks have been echoed for more than a century and a culture of violence has contributed to casualties. In a match against Victoria in the 1921 Perth Carnival, for example, the legendary South Australian ruckman Tom Leahy observed that he received such a severe buffeting that at half-time a doctor operated on his shins and 'cut away a handful of flesh'.¹³ As we know thuggery continued into the 1980s when players dispensing punishment were often euphemistically described as 'doing a lot of good work in the packs'.

The origin of Aussie Rules football might not be Aboriginal but hopefully McCoy need not fear the Indigenous style being subsumed within the modern game. The spirit of present-day football is attuned more to their way of

playing. The fast transference of the ball, often through 360 degrees, emphasises space and movement, and elusive running players are highly valued. Even the advent of flooding has not rendered football confined or immobile. Despite the assertions of a former football star (Brereton) modern football has nothing in common with the day-to-day hell experienced by the ANZACs.

NOTES:

1. The issue subtitled *more than a game* contains several splendid pieces on sport. McCoy's article is on pp.30-35.
2. McCoy, 'Hidden Culture', p.30.
3. Quoted in McCoy, p.31.
4. G. Blainey, *A Game of Our Own*, Melbourne, 1990, pp.95-96.
5. R. Grow, 'From Gum Trees to Goal Posts, 1858-1876' in R. Hess and B. Stewart (eds), *More Than A Game*, Melbourne, 1998, p.13.
6. M. Flanagan, 'Sport: Touchstone of Australian Life', Alfred Deakin Lecture, Melbourne Town Hall, 16 May 2001.
7. McCoy, p.31.
8. McCoy, p.32.
9. McCoy, p.33.
10. A. Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket*, New Delhi, 1989, p.1. This is the opening sentence of the first chapter.
11. B. Whippress, *Passport to Nowhere: Aborigines in Cricket 1850-1939*, Sydney, 1999, p.38.
12. A. Mancini and G.M. Hibbins, *Running With The Ball*, Melbourne, 1987, p.48.
13. B. Whippress, *The South Australian Football Story*, Adelaide, 1983, p.106.