

Book Reviews

Rob Hess and Bob Stewart (Eds), *More Than A Game: An Unauthorised History of Australian Rules Football*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1998. 320 pp. A\$29.95.

Knowledge and understanding advance most rapidly where the views of individuals are subject to, and disciplined by, an ongoing process of critical discussion and debate. In Australian sports studies, there is no better example of this than the community of Melbourne-based intellectuals, both academics and journalists, committed to unravelling the social history of Australian Rules football. This community began to take form in the early 1980s in the wake of the publication of Sandercock and Turner's pioneering work *Up Where, Cazaly? The Great Australian Game* (1981). Since then, it has grown steadily, and collectively its members have produced a body of research that compares favourably, both in terms of quantity and quality, with the available literature on other football codes and sports in Australia.

More Than A Game represents the culmination of some of the latest research undertaken within this community. As the subtitle declares, it is a self-consciously 'unauthorised' work, with the stated purpose being to provide a history that is 'analytical and critical, rather than mythological or celebratory' (p. 2). An, the edited collection, it is comprised of eight chapters, written by six different authors. The challenge of continuity is met by the authors returning to a series of 'interlocking themes' (p. 2) – spectator and player violence; the gender dimensions of the game; the impact of corporate interests and the mass media; and the tension that exists between the economic restructuring and cultural traditions of the sport. The contents span the entire history of the code, including its origins in the, 1850s; the formation of the Victorian Football Association (VFA) in 1877; the breakaway of the Victorian Football League (VFL) in 1897; and the subsequent history of the VFL, right through to the 1990s by which time it had expanded nationally, and been renamed the Australian Football League (AFL).

For students and scholars seeking an introduction to the social history of Australian Rules football, *More Than A Game* stands as the best available source. The chapters are thoroughly researched, clearly organised and highly readable and provide the most rigorous and up-to-date narrative of the game's origins, and of its flagship competitions in Victoria. However, the claim to provide a wide ranging history of the game is overdrawn, as the focus is clearly on the elite level of football in Melbourne. The lower levels of the code, as well as regional and interstate football, are only addressed in passing and mostly in relation to their significance for the VFL/AFL. For the newcomer to the field, there are also two structural oversights: the absence of a chronology, and the

omission of statistical appendices. Had these been included, they would have served to make the work (even) more 'user friendly', and more self-contained.

For the seasoned Australian Rules football researcher, the value of *More Than A Game* is a complicated matter. On the positive side, Nadel provides succinct and provocative accounts of some complicated recent episodes in the game's development, including the national expansion of the VFL/AFL during the 1980s and 1990s and the associated private ownership debacles. Several chapters also have the merit of emphasising important themes that have previously been ignored or downplayed. A case in point is Hess's brief but suggestive discussion of women's involvement in the game (pp. 102-105). Finally, the book poses a number of pertinent questions about the development of the VFL/AFL, key amongst them being the complicated relationship between its economic restructuring and cultural traditions (p. 2).

Despite these strengths, however, *More Than A Game* fails to fully live up to its promise of advancing 'fresh and original perspectives' (p. 2) on the development of the game. Perhaps this is a consequence of the broad target audience alluded to by Martin Flannagan in the foreword (p. vi). Regardless, it prevents the book from fully realising the above mentioned analytical and critical aims, and ultimately it seems that in these areas little progress has been made since the publication of *Up Where, Cazaly?* in 1981. The problem here rests at the theoretical and conceptual levels, which receive scant attention throughout the work. For example, terms like 'community' and 'identity' are repeatedly used *as though* their meanings are self evident, when in fact they are highly complex and problematic. Such lack of conceptual clarity makes it difficult to be precise about changes in these areas over the history of the game. Similarly, the issue of structure (social forces) versus agency (human intervention) in social change is never satisfactorily thematised, and at points this results in a form of 'VFL/AFL bashing' that is typical of press reports on the game. For example, on page 205 Nadel remarks that 'the VFL was about to demonstrate just how big, greedy and selfish it could be', and in the conclusion Hess and Stewart claim that '[t]he VFL created its own demise' (p. 258). Whilst it is important to critically assess the role of particular administrators in the game's development, comments like these tend to mask or understate the impact of structural forces. The latter place very real restrictions and exert very real pressures, on those charged with administering the game.

These reservations should not detract from the fact that *More Than A Game* represents a welcome addition to the 'serious' literature on the history of Australian Rules football. Furthermore, they stand more as criticisms of the field in general, than of this work exclusively. In this sense, the collection's shortcomings should serve as signposts to much needed future research. Indeed, the express wish of the editors is that the book 'will act as a springboard from which others can dive into the intellectually bracing but often murky pool of Australian football history' (p. 3). Crucially, however, we must remain

mindful of the fact that this ‘murkiness’ is not only the result of a shortage of empirical detail or of gaps in the historical narrative. Instead, the more striking underdevelopment resides in the theoretical and conceptual realms. One major challenge confronting publications like *Football Studies* is to advance our knowledge in these areas.

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Robin McConnell, *Inside the All Blacks*. Auckland: Harper Collins, 1998. 279 pp. \$NZ 39.95.

The ambiguities and contradictions of this book are enormous. At the heart is the question of audience. The audience for rugby books in Aotearoa/New Zealand is a hard one to identify. McConnell seems to have recognised this problem of audience in preparing this book, but he has not, alas, cracked the issue. As a result, *Inside the All Blacks* is a wasted opportunity. Instead, in trying to address the contradictions of the audience for rugby books, McConnell has responded by writing in a style that complicates the contradictions. Equally importantly, McConnell appears as a beholden and unwilling to offend interloper in his own text.

The ‘blurb’, obviously written before the 1998 season, promises ‘a unique insight into how the All Black tradition is handed on and why the All Blacks have become the world’s greatest rugby team’. Scepticism about publishers’ hyperbole shifted to concern when former All Black Colin Meads opens his foreword by stressing the need to respect the traditions of the All Blacks, and closes by commending the book as ‘realistic’ but non-sensational. Enough words there to trigger worries before the first three pages are concluded.

McConnell lived and toured with the All Blacks for three years as part of his PhD research in sports management. He got places no other non-player has been: the Captain’s night-before-the-test team talk (from which even the Coach and Manager are excluded); the pre-match dressing room; nearly the back seat of the team bus – mythologically, every boy’s dream. He is in a unique position to provide some serious and significant insight into the way in which an elite rugby team is managed, organised and lead to sporting success. As he teaches sports management, this is not an unrealistic expectation.

There is certainly some of the expected team dynamic and management material included, but it is often poorly developed and inadequately illustrated. It is almost as if McConnell was scared of seeming too pointy-headed for the rugby book audience as perceived either by him or by Harper Collins’ editors. From time to time a table or series of bullet points is used to identify a series of