

Tatz, Colin. *Aborigines in Sport*. Bedford Park, South Australia: Flinders University, 1987. Pp. 151. Index, notes, glossary, illustrations, appendix.

Born and educated in South Africa, Colin Tatz came to Australia in 1961 and, following the completion of his doctoral studies at Australian National University, founded and directed the Aboriginal Research Centre. Currently, he

occupies the chair of politics at Macquarie University and he has written extensively about Aborigines in Australia with studies on Aborigines and the economy, Aborigines in education, and the topic of uranium mining on Aboriginal land.

The Australian Society for Sports History and founding member Wray Vamplew are to be roundly cheered for providing the publishing support that sees *Aborigines in Sport* as their third volume in the Australian Society for Sports History "Studies in Sport" series.

For too long the massive outpouring of Australian sporting biographies and "ghosted" first person accounts of sporting success, replete with juicy morsels of gossip and "warts and all" characterizations, have created a national mythology. While acknowledging the phenomenal cricketing feats of Don Bradman, the youthful excellence of Olympic gold medal swimmer Shane Gould and the contemporary exploits of golfers Greg Norman and Jan Stephenson, is the real Australia a sunny continent full of Paul Hogan clones who swig beer, enjoy hearty camaraderie as sport consumers and who, in an egalitarian setting where everyone gets a chance to get ahead, create a legion of folk heroes?

A major contribution of Tatz's book is that he exposes (as Stoddart and McKay have done before) the historic myths associated with Australian sport. For many Aboriginal sportspersons, the concept of Australian mateship has been an illusion and social mobility an impossibility. Tatz describes the magnificent success enjoyed by Aboriginal bantamweight Lionel Rose who defeated Fighting Harada of Japan for the world crown in 1968. A nation exulted in a "Hercules, Charles Lindbergh and the Messiah all rolled into one" (p. 50), yet a decade later following a "downhill slide," (p. 50) Rose was bankrupt and in poor health. "Sport has hardly been fair. There has been discrimination in motive, in behaviour, in conscious and non-conscious attitude, even among those considered enlightened and well-disposed" (p. 124). Tatz, nevertheless, stoutly holds to the opinion that sport has done much for the Aborigine. He describes Rose's triumph as a "moment of glory, perhaps the greatest boost they [Aborigines] have ever had" (p. 50), and, in a well balanced yet forceful conclusion to his book observes that, "Aboriginal sporting success, no matter how brief or tragic, has given Aborigines more uplift, more collective pride, more kudos, than any other single activity" (p. 128).

Tatz's book is a significant contribution to the socio-cultural study of Australian sport for three major reasons. First, he draws on the work of American researchers who have examined the black athlete within their milieu (for example, Edwards, Eitzen, Sage and Wiggins), he relates their findings and suggests possible applications for the complex weave of an Australian culture that touts itself as classless but is, in reality, very differentiated: "Australian society is racist. It also worships sport. What happens when these two values intersect?" (p. 4).

Second, Tatz gives us critical numbers and a useful beginning data base. He points out, for example, that the impact of Aboriginal sport is traditionally reduced to the contribution of "half a dozen boxers, a tennis player, and three

rugby brothers” (p. 3); that there are only seven works on Aborigines in sport—contrast this with the number of sport books on white Australians!; the stark statistic that of 7076 Australian first-class cricketers since 1850 only six have been Aboriginal.

Third, Tatz in his material on 230 Aboriginal sportsmen and women shows that sport representation is relatively high in such sports as boxing, Australian Rules (a vigorous collision-type team sport with the triple dimension of running, catching and kicking) and rugby league. However, there is no Aboriginal participation in archery, bowls, equestrian sports, fencing, golf, gymnastics, motor sports, polo, rowing, swimming, or yachting. As a result of his findings Tatz suggests possible reasons for the popularity of boxing, rules and rugby league. There is “a different racism: not exclusion because of blackness . . . but inclusion as a special black breed of gladiators and entertainers” (p. 5).

The profusion of fifty-eight black and white “action” photographs that illustrate the book imbue the book with a flavour of muscular athleticism and grace. There is a magnificent photograph of Manly rugby league player Cliff Lyons clutching the ball protectively against a jarring crash tackle.

Some minor criticisms. What of the Aborigine and pre-colonisation? Was there a play/recreation/sport aspect to their culture? While Tatz does point out that between 1824 and 1908 some 10,000 Aborigines were killed by white settlers who considered them “wild animals,” what there is contains little on the Aborigine circa 1788. The fact that they had poor technology but great manual dexterity, were intensely territorial and superb stalkers, trackers and mimics (see Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*) could be revealing and, historically, of significance.

Although the index has an extensive classification of sports from “athletics” to “wrestling,” including within each of these categories the names of Aboriginal participants, the absence of a standard index reduces the accessibility of a most important book.

Would cross-cultural analyses using the New Zealand Maori reveal interesting contrasts and similarities? The 1987 New Zealand World Cup champion “All Black” team had a number of Maori players. Although the fabulous rugby playing Ella brothers are discussed in detail and, in particular, Mark Ella [“a prodigy, with God-given gifts . . . a brain moving at shutter speed,” (p. 93)] why they emerged and the sociological implications of their stardom could have been explored further. After all the three brothers who represented their country at rugby made it to the top in the face of real deprivation—“twelve children in the tumble-down shack in Sydney’s La Perouse” (p. 90). In a similar fashion the career of the most famous internationally recognized Aborigine, Evonne Goolagong-Cawley, Wimbledon Singles Champion in 1971 and 1980, could have been examined more comprehensively.

With *Aborigines in Sport* Tatz argues persuasively that “there is much we need to know—about their lives as athletes, their circumstances, frustrations, their experiences on the way to the top” (p. 120). His contribution is substantial, thought provoking and long overdue. The inclusion of the song lyrics by Ted

Egan on the fall from grace of an Aboriginal boxer is both moving and an expression of a universal path followed by a Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali.

In 1981, Pearson and McKay in a review of the sociology of Australian and New Zealand sport, noted that the existing literature “lacks contextual analysis-text without context-or involves generalizations which are not well supported by data-context without text” (*Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 17:2, July 1981, 73). Tatz and the Australian Society for Sport History have valiantly redressed this omission and hopefully *Aborigines in Sport* is the prelude to sustained future historical analyses of sport, race and culture in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See, for example, J. McKay and D. Huber, “Artdating the Ideology of Swan Sport,” a paper presented at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport Meeting, Edmonton, Alberta, 1987.