
FITZGERALD, ROSS, AND ANDREW BERKMAN. *The Footy Club: Inside the Brisbane Bears*. St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1996. Pp. ix, 165. Notes, photographs, appendices, no bibliography, 1995 game player statistics, no index. \$16.95 pb.

In the early 1980s during a visit to Australia, I planned a visit to the Olympic Stadium in Melbourne, the site of the 1956 Olympics. My major goal was simply to get some sense of “feel and place” at the arena that, in 1956, showcased a

dazzling array of Australian female track athletes led by the dashing Betty Cuthbert. Much to my surprise when I arrived in Melbourne, I found that the only way to enter the stadium was by watching a sports event. As a result I ended up watching my first game of Aussie (Australian) Rules football.

Aussie Rules football may eventually come to be categorized as the most exciting, dynamic, and all-action contact/collision sport in the sphere of international sport. In the game that I witnessed, there was the flavor of Americanization in terms of the staging, packaging, and promotion of the activity, but the basic hustle and the soaring, crashing spectacle of airborne bodies seeking to grasp the oval-shaped rugby ball was a unique aspect of what is a singular sport. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport* notes: “[The game has] the usual Australian method of hand passing, where the ball is held in one hand and punched with the closed fist of the other. The key innovation that made Australian rules unique was formalized in 1866 when a new rule. . . allowed running with the ball. . . However, the runner was required to touch the ball to the ground or bounce it every five or six yards.”

The Footy Club: Inside the Brisbane Bears has as its senior author Ross Fitzgerald, an associate professor of history and politics at Griffith University. He is a prolific writer and has authored nineteen books, including a two-volume history of Queensland. He coedited *The Greatest Game: Writing on Australian Football*. In his introduction, Fitzgerald (“a 50-year-old, 15-stone academic, wearing a huge white Panama hat”) outlines his participant observation methodology: “. . . independent witnesses (in the form of myself and my 21-year-old assistant Andrew Berkman) had open and unimpeded access to all aspects of the club for a 12-month period. The sole limitation was that we could attend the coach’s addresses on match days only with his permission” (p. ix).

The chapter opening quotations are promising. Some examples include “And the Bears shall inherit the Earth” (Elle McFeast); “In peace we should train for war; everything else is bullshit” (General George Patton); “Nothing surprises me in football” (John Northey); “In top-class sport, a good loser is a dill” (Harry Reardon); and “It is in games many men discover their paradise” (Robert Lynd). Sadly, the subsequent chapter material never lives up to such telling and eye-catching quips on the interweaving sport and society.

In terms of energetic and enthusiastic prose, *The Footy Club* charges on with the momentum, but not quite the magic, of the sports pages in a fat Sunday newspaper. Fitzgerald knows what he is talking about and is a convincing narrator. The disappointment is that substantial issues and compelling, significant themes seem ignored. Do we care that senior coach Robert Walls, in the build-up to a game, eats “homemade Vegemite and cheese sandwiches alone in his office” (p. 51)? More could have been teased out of such notions as fans and their “faithful trek” (p. 51). There is also verbal flotsam in need of connections, such as: “In front of them is an elderly ambulance driver and amateur philatelist, Brian Berry, who leads the chant: BRIS-BANE, clap, clap, clap, BRIS-BANE, clap, clap, clap. . .” (p. 51).

Such critical, analytical connections have been tapped wonderfully by other Australian writers, such as sociologist Jim McKay and historian Richard Cashman. The latter, in his *Paradise of Sport: The Rise of Organized Sport in Australia*, discusses a variety of key sports history issues in relationship to Aussie Rules football. He looks at notions of a working-class suburban sports culture, tribal loyalty, and the game as “social cement,” among others. Such matters are touched upon in *The Footy Club* but demand more sustained analysis.

While *The Footy Club* will give sports historians some colorful morsels to use in contemporary Australian social history, the absence of an index and bibliography reduces the impact of this book. However, the many photographs highlight the magnificent muscularity of the sport. There is no gridiron protection equipment. Here is a game where, week after week, “both teams slug it out” (p. 8), and players are simply and laconically described as “hare men” (p. 9). All in all, for readers with no background in Aussie Rules football, this book is highly recommended.

—Scott A.G.M. Crawford
Eastern Illinois University