

HESS, ROB, AND BOB STEWART, EDS. *More Than a Game: An Unauthorised History of Australian Rules Football*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998. Pp. 304. Illustrated. Bibliography, index. A\$29.95 pb.

Most people outside of Australia do not know that Australian Rules is the oldest codified form of modern football in the world. The sport was first played under its newly devised rules in 1858 in Melbourne, and has been variously known as Melbourne Rules and Victorian Rules. From its origins in Melbourne it spread rapidly throughout Victoria and to other Australian states, but it failed to become the dominant code of football in New South Wales and Queensland, though in the latter it has always had a core of followers.

Unlike most other countries, Australia, with its large landmass and small population concentrated in large, relatively isolated centers, only developed truly national competitions in football in the 1980s and 1990s. The two dominant codes, Australian Rules and Rugby League, have attempted to become truly national football codes since the 1980s. What has happened in reality is that the Melbourne-centered Victorian Football League and the Sydney-based New South Wales Rugby League have colonized other Australian states to the detriment of competitions in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. The Tasmanian and Northern Territory markets have escaped, as they have been seen thus far as too small to sustain enough support.

The account edited by Hess and Stewart (and four other authors), while subtitled as a history of "Australian" Rules football, is about the history of the game in Victoria, and almost entirely focused on Melbourne and its leading historical competition—the Victorian Football League. *More Than a Game* is the third detailed attempt by academics in Australia to undertake a major history of Australian football. While the book is a vast improvement over Robert Pascoe's mistitled *The Winter Game: The Complete History of Australian Football* (1995), it does little that surpasses the initial effort of Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner in their 1981 book *Up Where Cazaly? The Great Australian Game*, except that it covers the period since 1981 as well. *More Than a Game* will provide international readers with a good introduction to many of the key issues in the historical development of the Victorian Football League and the Victorian Football Association and the role of football in the popular culture of Melbourne and Victoria, though Australian readers may come away less than satisfied.

Robin Grow, who knows more about the early years of Australian football in Melbourne than anyone, opens the account with a solid discussion of the early history of football and the Victorian Football Association (VFA) including the increasing commodification of the game in the 1880s and 1890s that ultimately resulted in leading clubs breaking away to form the Victorian Football League (VFL) in 1897. He also discusses a range of issues including the role of violence, which Grow claims was one of the major reasons for the sport's popularity in the 1870s and beyond (27). There are some weaknesses, such as the failure to explain adequately why rugby came to dominate in Queensland by the end of the 1880s at the expense of Australian football, which was played in Queensland prior to rugby union. The third chapter, by Rob Hess, is the most interesting chapter in the book; he follows on with

explorations of gender, expansion, development of professionalism, and the competition between the VFL and VFA for dominance in Melbourne. The analysis in the middle chapters is uneven, with some periods getting far more coverage than others.

The VFL went from strength to strength during the middle decades of the twentieth century. As Bob Stewart shows in his discussion of football between 1946 and 1975, VFL football became a, if not the, central element in Victorian winter popular culture. Stewart also nicely analyzes the initial distrust VFL officials had for television and how they refused to allow matches to be broadcast live for many years; live broadcasts of the Grand Final only began in 1977 after massive public pressure (205). The VFL only allowed live radio broadcasts of finals matches in 1946. In the year that television began in Melbourne in 1956, the Grand Final match between Melbourne and Collingwood drew 115,082 to the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Football was so popular that the VFL drew up plans in 1964 for a 157,000-seat stadium, as they wanted independence from the Melbourne Cricket Club, which owned the Ground. Stewart discusses several other issues, such as problems caused by strong and weak clubs, zoning, attempts to form player unions, and the rise of corporate sponsorship in the late 1960s. In 1968 senior officials from the VFL undertook a study tour to the USA, and came back with the idea of establishing a properties division to sell the VFL logo and image to the highest bidder (198). This began a growing fascination in Australia with trying to emulate the marketing successes of North American professional sport, even though Australian sporting clubs were not structured as privately owned enterprises. Indeed, in the mid-1990s, the renamed Australian Football League banned private ownership in its constitution.

Changes to the game brought on by sponsorships, television, and national expansion form the basis for the last two chapters of the book, written by Dave Nadel. Well known in Australian sports history circles for his passionate critiques of the VFL/AFL, Nadel analyzes dramatic changes beginning with the arrival of color television in 1975 alongside North Melbourne's first premiership won as a result of the club becoming the first to use a "reformed commercial structure, fund-raising and recruiting policies" that "raised the future financial stakes for all clubs, setting new standards of professionalism that other clubs would have to follow" (200). Nadel provides much insight into the key debates between personalities and philosophies that led to the VFL becoming more corporatized, and eventually to national expansion. In the process the VFL ran roughshod over some of its traditional clubs and fans. South Melbourne was relocated to Sydney in 1982 over the protests of the majority of its supporters (215-16)—some still refusing to refer to the team as "Sydney." In perhaps the VFL's worst public relations moment, it attempted to force a merger between Footscray and Fitzroy in 1989 that led to a massive resistance campaign by Footscray supporters, assisted by supporters of other clubs. Ultimately the merger was foiled, only to see Fitzroy go from weakness to weakness and eventually merge with Brisbane, some 1300 miles away, in 1997. In the 1980s, many clubs reported losses and by the end of the decade Footscray, Fitzroy, St. Kilda, and Richmond had also faced massive financial crises that threatened their future existence. Nadel explores all these issues, which forced the VFL/AFL to cope in a matter of twenty years with what many other professional competitions internationally faced over several decades. No fan of the corporatized AFL, Nadel at times substitutes his own moral outrage for sound analysis, as his conclusions

occasionally contradict his data. If, however, one wants to understand diehard fan resentment to national expansion and corporate footy, Nadel provides the bellwether.

This book encapsulates the oft-simultaneous strengths and weaknesses in the writing of Australian sports history. To date, the bulk of the published work has concentrated on Melbourne and Sydney, and has focused on the major male team sports or the Olympics; while often well documented, the studies are frequently nostalgic in tone. Certainly Nadel is guilty of the latter in this volume. While this book offers little insight that is new for the Australian sport history scholar familiar with the history of Australian football, it does provide the best introductory history of the rise of Australian football as a mass spectator sport, central to the cultural life of hundreds of thousands of Victorians. It should be essential reading for anyone beginning to examine the history of sport in Australia.

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ADAIR, DARYL, AND WRAY VAMPLEW. *Sport in Australian History*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997. Pp. xiv + 169. Notes, index. \$29.95 pb.

Sport in Australian History addresses the global view—fact or fiction, stereotype or truthful portrayal—that Australians are obsessed with sport and that playing and watching sport are national pastimes. Chapter 1 (“Sporting Belief, Historical Record”) opens with a wonderfully graphic quote from a 1989 issue of the *Bulletin*:

The image of the bronzed Aussie may be a myth. But there is nothing fictitious about the importance of sport as a way of life in Australia: it promotes health as well as competitive spirit. We must stop short of obsessed, but sport is as available to all Australians—and as necessary—as meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars (1).

Adair and Vamplew adeptly portray the rich tapestry of the interdependence of culture, sport, and society. Their eight chapters do a nice job of spotlighting key elements in the athletic mosaic.

Chapter one examines the theme of historical record, and is especially effective in debunking the many myths and fallacies that have all too frequently obscured the real picture of Australian sport. For example, the authors mention that the *Sports Illustrated* claim that Australia was one of the leading sporting nations in the world was based on the sensational Australian performances at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics and on a retinue of stellar Davis Cup performers. “If the same survey had been conducted in 1976, it would have shown that Australians did not win any gold medals at the Montreal Olympics and that tennis players from the United States and Sweden were dominating major tournament” (13).

Chapter two is entitled “The Sports Industry,” and again the authors are to be congratulated on their analysis and critical focus. They note that rugby league players among “the best in Australia” (32), were paid less than \$70,000 in 1994. Adair and Vamplew also explore the notion of union solidarity and its effectiveness “down under.” They point out that up to the beginning of 1995, there had been 27 attempts to form unions to protect Australian sports persons—only five survive!