

Sportswriting in the Sydney Daily Press, 1850-1900

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Researchers who have examined the relationship between technological changes and the rise of sport have highlighted the need to continually see sport, not as existing in a vacuum, but as a response to many societal influences. one of which is the press. Historians use newspapers as sources but, in many cases, have not studied them in their own right. In this paper, the coverage of sport by the daily press in Sydney, the largest city of the colony of New South Wales, Australia. over three decades (1850-1860, 1870-1880 and 1890-1900) is examined with particular attention being given to the stylistic changes in the presentation of sporting news within and between decades.

Sporting contests during the 1850's were more spontaneous than regular and. stylistically, the press of this decade reflected the non-specialist beginnings of the coverage of sporting activity in the colony, which had a population of 350,000 by 1860. The daily newspaper had no "sports-section" and the reporter's accounts conveyed general impressions of the day's events. ignoring technical aspects of competition and performance.

Although coverage of sport had been parochial in previous decades. the growing awareness of the entertainment value of sporting news led to the telegraph and cable link with Europe being liberally used to report on foreign sport throughout the 1870's. The greater degree of organization in colonial sporting life also provided newspapers with an increasing supply of sporting news. Although columns such as "Sporting Intelligence" appeared frequently, they were on different pages in different issues, so it cannot be said that there was a "sports-page." The emphasis in style was away from descriptions and match results in favor of depth of explanation, with journalists demonstrating the ability to analyze and differentiate technically between sporting performances. By the end of the 1870's there were glimmerings of sports journalism written by reporters with a knowledge of particular sports and familiar with previous performances and current form of participants. An example of the latter is provided in this excerpt of a report of a sculling match in 1878:

The result of the race was no surprise to the New South Welshmen, for Laycock had been displaying such form of late that no one but an extraordinary good sculler stood the slightest change with him. From start to finish he had the race in hand with him.

The glimmerings of sports journalism of the 1870's had become most evident throughout the 1890's. It was clear that the New South Wales public was sufficiently sport conscious to want to read more than just the final reports and results of athletic performances. Coverage of events began many days before the competition as journalists reported on form and made tentative predictions. It was clear that many journalists knew both the sports and the participants very well.

A significant feature to emerge with the nature of the "sports-page" during the 1890's was more colorful and exciting journalistic style. Sydney journalists were

allowing the natural excitement of sport to come through in copy without deliberate embellishment, as can be read in this segment after a cycling event in Melbourne in 1900:

When the third mile was entered on, and the field moved towards the back of the track, the riders were bunched like a mob of sheep. All at once there was a hard rasping sound, simultaneously with which came a cry of horror from the spectators. Then the scene became almost indescribable, a rider wobbled and shot over his handle bars, and immediately afterwards another competitor came down There on the track lay riders and cycles in a hopeless fantastic tangle

Journalists also sought out sporting personalities for interviews – a technique not found in earlier decades. The sports reporter began to act as a conduit between the athlete and the reading public.

On the basis of the research undertaken, it would appear that the origins of modern sportswriting in Australian daily newspapers are to be found in the coverage of sport during colonial times. The historical significance of such journalism perhaps formed the basis for visiting American journalist, William Sprague Holden, to state in 1961:

Australian sports [journalists] are not merely reporters, heralds and chroniclers of muscular events; they are high priests of a national cult.