

Sports History for the Public: The Making of an Australian Television Documentary

Richard Cashman

University of New South Wales

During 1987 and 1988 six Australian sports historians were engaged by a television producer as a “think tank” for a thirteen one-hour programs on the history of Australian sport. The paper outlined the chequered relationship between the six historians and the producer and the many issues which were canvassed along the way about the advantages and disadvantages of being involved in consultancy.

We learnt some simple and perhaps very basic lessons in how to deal with high-fliers in the media. Always get everything in writing. Don't underestimate our worth in terms of the money involved. Tough bargaining is essential as is an agent, a buffer between “us” and “them”.

Our experience raised many tricky questions. Could we live with the end result? Could we get on with a producer who has a different scale of priorities? Was it worth it?

Despite some major disappointments we thought that the arguments in favour of sports consultancy were stronger than those against providing any would-be consultants go in with their “eyes open”. Arguments in favour of consultancy include:

1. The financial returns are much higher than what are paid to professional historians in universities;
2. Involvement in such projects will help to put sports history more on the map and give it a higher public profile;
3. Sports historians may also help to upgrade the quality of some of the material produced for television and other media outlets;
4. Sports historians should not at all be reticent in proclaiming their areas of expertise;
5. Consultancy projects will provide more employment for graduate students.

The group has contracted an agent and six academics are in the process of forming “The Sports Consultancy”.