

# Sports Violence in Australia: The Colonial Experience

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Sport is a health hazard. If you play sport you can expect to be hurt. This has always been the case: the important question is whether sport today is more or less violent than it used to be. This paper is part of a research project designed to compare the sporting scene of colonial and modern Australia in order to “test” the general thesis that “society” determines what level of violence is acceptable in all facets of life *including sport* and that, more specifically, the level of overt violence in life—homicides, criminal assaults, industrial accidents etc.—will be reflected in a society’s sporting activities.

One major problem to be faced was the definition of sports violence to be employed. Foul play alone was considered too narrow a definition and the concept of sporting violence was broadened to encompass such aspects as animal cruelty, the physical and psychological abuse of children, the inherent danger involved in the activity such as the degree of legitimate roughness in the game or the injury risk through technological failure and human error, self-inflicted violence through drugs, diet and strenuous training, and crowd disorder.

Another difficulty was the lack of quantified data on sports violence, however defined, for both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To date attempts to measure comparative levels of sports violence have not been successful and reliance has had to be placed on contemporary descriptions of events on and off the field and the discernment of attitudes towards sports violence as depicted through government legislation, rule changes, the development of protective equipment and the punishment of offenders. Fortunately quantified information was more readily available regarding other forms of violence, particularly that designated as criminal.

Although much of the detailed work remains to be done, the preliminary conclusion is that life in colonial Australia was harder and more violent than it is today. Transportation, in operation till 1868, was not a pleasure trip and convict servitude was decidedly unpleasant. Even for free settlers life was far from easy as they struggled first to survive and then to establish themselves in Australia's vast, harsh continent. Blood, sweat and tears made Australia and in the process brutalised many of its inhabitants. There may be a law and order problem in modern Australia but historically the situation has been far worse: homicide and assault rates were proportionately substantially higher in the nineteenth than in the late twentieth century. It is doubtful too if sport today is more violent than it was in the nineteenth century. Boxing might appear brutal with its cut eyes, concussion and occasional fatality, but it seems positively wimpish alongside the gladiatorial gore of its prize fighting predecessor. The suspicion is that sports violence today is simply more recorded and reported than it used to be.