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Back to the Future: Australian Sport at the Cusp of the New Millennium

The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games provides Australia with more than simply a sporting event. It is a moment, at the cusp of the new millennium, that allows Australians to gaze back at a century of sporting achievement in preparation for a grand sporting celebration. The golden days of the 1950s when Australia believed itself to be on top of the sporting world are being recreated in 1999, in preparation for the Olympic extravaganza and the advance into a new millennium. Yet, at the end of this century, Australia is not advancing far into the next and has instead chosen to retain ties to its colonial past. In late 1999, Australians voted overwhelmingly against establishing a republic, choosing instead to retain the Queen of England as Head of State. Significantly, a foreign monarch will not open the Sydney Olympic Games, the Prime Minister initially favouring himself and now the Queen's Australian representative, the Governor General. At the same time, Australia

has become world champion in rugby union, netball and cricket. These events, coupled with successes at the 1998 Commonwealth Games position Australia as a leader, not in the world of sport, but rather in the Commonwealth of Sport.

This paper critically examines media reports that have labeled Australia a unique sporting nation, and reveals the link between Australian identity and those cultural practices, such as sport, that emerged during its colonial past. Yet, in the late 1990s the historic basis of Australian identity has come under threat from new interpretations of what it means to be Australian, culminating in the referendum on the republic. Thus, the celebration of Australian successes in those sport promulgated by the British colonial elite reveals a dominant national identity that rests upon and is returning to its colonial roots in the lead up to the nation's third century. This paper further analyses contemporary uses of the historical discourses that have underpinned the concept of continuous sporting success. Finally, it discusses the links between Australian sporting expectations, the nation's sporting past and the resurrection of former athletes for political, ideological and marketing purposes in the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games.