

AUSTRALIAN SPORTS REVIEW 1983
— A PERSONAL VIEW*

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National sporting pride hit a new high in 1983 thanks to Alan Bond spending his millions more effectively than did the New York Yacht Club syndicate. Australia found a new sports heroine - no concessions to fem-fresh language in the nautical world - when *Australia II* broke America's 132 year grip on its self-titled trophy. Sports nationalism has its ugly side when xenophobia breeds a win-at-any-cost mentality, a sort of McEnroism on a macro-scale, but it can have positive benefits in promoting community solidarity - dare we say consensus? - as it did that September morning when *Liberty* failed to clip the winged keel. Even my research assistants were allowed the day off: well part of it.

Yet why should this particular event have sparked off such fervour amongst many who would have been hard pressed to distinguish the sharp end of the boat from the blunt? Australia also had world champions and world record holders in several other sports, but they remained unsung and relatively unrecognised save by the cognoscenti. Just ask yourself what sports are pursued by the following Australians:** Jeanette Baker, Steele Bishop, Vicki Cardwell, Chris Cairns, Carolyn Connors, Sue Cook, Jenny Gill,

* The first in an annual commissioned series which it should be emphasised present the personal views of the author which are not necessarily endorsed by the Society or the editorial board. It is not intended to be comprehensive, but merely highlight those features of sport in 1983 which the author felt to be of interest. Comments and criticisms are welcomed.

** Respectively they are ten-pin bowling, cvcling (5000m professional pursuit), squash, yachting (Tornado), swimming (disabled sports!), walking (10 kilometres), surfboard riding, yachting (Fireball), wind-surfing (mediumweight), diving (world age championships), shooting (disabled sports), wind-surfing (heavyweight), 200 metres, 400 metres (disabled sports), cycling (BMX - 8 y.o.), hang-gliding, gliding, water skiing (jumping), hot air ballooning, and wind-surfing (light-weight). Additionally Australian women's teams won the world netball and small-bore rifle championships. I am grateful to Dick Mason, A.B.C. Sports Programs Supervisor, for supplying this information.

Stewart Hamilton, Greg Hyde, Julie Anne Kent, Elizabeth Kosmala, Tom Luedecke, Peter Marsh, Cameron Mitchell, Steve Moyes, Inge Renner, Glen Thurlow, Peter Vizard and Bob Wilmot?

The reason for the rapturous reception given to Alan Bond's successful investment perhaps lies outside the sporting arena and has less to do with what *Australia II* did and more with whom she beat. Australia is a political nonentity, save perhaps in an Asian context, but in sport they can challenge the superpowers. Australia's historical experience means that beating the Poms will always have the highest priority, but knocking off America on its own territory, so to speak, runs a close second. Associated with this is the intense desire of Australian sportsmen to be recognised by Americans: witness the fuss when some minor American television station took up Australian Rules as a filler on its sports cable service.

There were, of course, other factors which heightened the appreciation of the America's Cup contest. First, it hadn't been done before: even Heather McKay's squashing of opponents for two decades or so pales by comparison with the New York Yacht Club's unbeaten run. Second, it was a fighting comeback. Although *Australia II* had easily won the elimination series, she had trailed *Liberty* in the finals and not only had to win the last three races straight but was twice behind in that heartstopping last encounter. Third and perhaps most important, is that the Americans are poor losers: probably because they are unused to losing. The overt and devious attempts of the New Yorkers (for whom read Americans) to have the Australian boat disqualified angered the traditional "fair-go" attitude of the average Aussie and led to a collective recall of what the Americans had done to Les Darcy and Phar Lap.

At this stage the sports historian must step in and point out that, although the Americans could not poison a yacht, neither did they feed noxious substances to Phar Lap. However intestinal tympany caused by damp Californian grass does not inflame Australian sensibilities to the same extent. Too often the influence of history is what people want to believe - and are encouraged to believe. Nevertheless, although facts alone may not always win hearts and minds, it is up to members of this society constantly to

correct myths by letters to sports editors, by statements in book reviews, and by risking life and limb in pub arguments.

The previous discussion helps explain why there was no dancing in the streets following the Davis Cup victory. Who, apart from the tennis freak, cared about beating Sweden, a country whose closest association with a political heavyweight is submarine surveillance; in matches played at home and on a favoured surface; and in a competition recently won by Australia anyway?

One other world champion who was adequately honoured was Robert De Castella (any medals for correct spelling?) whose marathon victory in Helsinki paved the way for another Sportsperson of the Year Award - at least it wasn't a yacht or Bart Cummings - and an income from amateur athletics which even W.G. Grace might have queried. But, ultimately, will his health food enable him to perform as well as Cliff-not-so Young whose Melbourne to Sydney run resuscitated the tortoise and the hare fable.

National sporting pride may have been dented by yet another voyager from across the Tasman winning the Melbourne Cup. At least this race gives open acknowledgement to the fact that betting is the *raison d'être* of horse-racing. There is no pretence that good breeding matters anywhere outside the parade ring for, thanks to the handicapper, the best horse need not win; though the book-makers and state governments certainly do. People who say 'keep politics out of sport' never seem to mention that, because of its yield to government coffers, racing is one of the most regulated industries in Australia.

Kiwi's victory at Flemington was ample revenge for Australia setting a record World Series one-day cricket score, 302-8, against a Hadleeless New Zealand team which earlier had performed quite creditably, not least at the Sydney Cricket Ground where Lance Cairns' bowling performance of 10-4 16-4 must have made non-Australian bowlers wonder what they had to do to become man-of-the-match, though this is a somewhat anomalous award in a team game. Some months after their World Series' triumph Australia's world cup performance against Zimbabwe caused me to check my midnight radio for a broadcasting fault. They were almost as bad as England's antipodean tourists who had given the distinct impression

of coming down under for a holiday. Can ever such English ineptitude have been compounded by such a lack of effort or by such dismal captaincy? If captaincy is to be done from the boundary then a skilled non-playing selection should be made and runners employed as in Aussie Rules. While on the subject of captaincy, once England had surrendered the ashes, Greg Chappell stood down for the one-day series. He had captained Australia for a record forty-seven tests of which only thirteen had been lost. Despite media pressure, or perhaps because of it, the Australian Cricket Board remained loyal to Kim Hughes who had an understandably less impressive record as captain, though perhaps the best test of a general is when his army is in retreat. Less loyalty was shown to umpires who, in addition to trial by television and video screen replay, found a lack of support from both players and administrators, who, of course, never make mistakes. Perhaps if players were willing to walk, Rex Whitehead and Robin Bailhache would have remained on the test scene. Staying with cricket, 1983 saw the inaugural play-off for the Sheffield Shield, an innovation designed to obtain more money from a declining sports sector. There is a danger that, with the advantage of both the home ground and a drawn result going to the minor premiers, curators might live up to their museum-like title and prepare a dead strip ... just in case. Fortunately this was not true of the W.A.C.A. where New South Wales were able to win the Shield for the first time in seventeen years. Reinforcing the view that cricket is a team game was Victoria's dismal last position, despite Graham Yallop's record aggregate of 1,254 runs.

Another depressed sports industry is rugby league. Not so much on the field where the Kangaroos had an unbeaten twenty-two match tour of Britain and France, but in the clubrooms where serious financial problems hit several clubs and caused the demise from first-grade competition of Newtown, John Singleton being unable to imitate Elton John, and almost of Western Suburbs who were saved only by some legal sidestepping. Virtually every club was caught in the pinchers of reduced revenue via falling attendances and reluctant sponsors and rising costs caused by inflated player payments. Whether economic salvation will be found in further decentralisation is questionable, but early results in both rugby league

and in the emigration of Sydney Swans from Melbourne are promising. However, in real football the national soccer set-up proved a financial disappointment and has been replaced by an American-style conference system.

In football, Australian style, the Hawks flew higher than the Bombers, who had risen from fifth spot on the ladder, and registered a record V.F.L. grand final margin of 83 points in what the League proclaimed would be the last final to be played at the M.C.G. Few in South Australia cared about this as the mighty Vics had been thrashed by the home state to the tune of fifty-six points. However, the integrity of the V.F.L. cartel was protected by a refusal to arrange interstate games anywhere near Melbourne and by limiting the number of players selected from any one side. Defeat of a fully representative V.F.L. team in Victoria would be economically dangerous - and probably impossible!

A final point which will emphasise how ephemeral is sporting fame. I confidently challenge any reader, save for the yachting fraternity, to name any two members of the *Australia IX* crew. John Bertrand doesn't count; he was captain not crew.***

*** For the record they were Treharne, Simmer, Beashel, Lissiman, Judge, Brown, Baillieu, Richardson, Longley, Smidmore Costello and Fewster. Deduct marks if you mentioned Ben Lexcen, Alan Bond or Bob Hawke.