

Bob Stewart, *The Australian Football Business: A Spectators Guide to the V.F.L.* Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, 1983. Illus., Appendices, Annotated Bibliog., pp.160. \$6.95 paper.

Australian (rules) football is the most popular spectator sport in Australia. The twelve team competition organised and promoted by the Victorian Football League attracts in excess of 3.5 million spectators each season. The trials and tribulations of clubs and players, and the various machinations behind the game are extensively reported on and analysed by hordes of reporters from the various sections of the media. Feelings of intensity for the game are so strong that many Melburnians dread the warmer months, not because of their heat and humidity, but because their life lacks meaning in the absence of football.

Stewart's aim in *The Australian Football Business* is to take his readers behind the running of the game, to provide an understanding of the economic and/or commercial underpinnings associated with the organisation and operation of the VFL. Being a former player (and a regular radio commentator) Stewart combines the knowledge of an insider with the skills of the economist and has produced an excellent and clearly written analysis of the economics of Australian football. In a relatively short work he covers a wide range of topics and provides readers with a wealth of detailed information.

Early chapters are concerned with establishing the popularity and spectator appeal of the national game. Stewart then examines the rules of the game (providing a clear account of the problems umpires and fans experience in interpreting the holding the man-holding the ball rule), provides thumbnail histories of the respective clubs, describes the evolution of patterns of play, and the precarious and insecure position of the team coach. Two chapters are devoted to the VFL's administration and structure and its domination over other Australian football leagues. The best chapters of the book, however, are the seven which examine the economics of the VFL. In these chapters Stewart examines the finances

of the VFL and the clubs, the zoning and transfer systems and various wage payment systems adopted by the VFL which have limited the economic freedom of players, the far from cordial relationship that has developed between the VFL and the players association, since the latter's formation in 1973, the rationalisation of grounds, Sunday football, and the projected or hoped for development of an interstate or national league. This book is worth purchasing for these chapters alone. Finally, Stewart offers predictions concerning the future development of Australian Football, using the recent experiences of North American professional sports as his model. The only eventuality that he does not cover is that of a Kerry Packer style take-over of the best VFL and interstate teams in a national, night-time, television competition!

One criticism of Stewart is his analysis of the development of an interstate/national league and/or the relocation of VFL teams interstate, even though he was writing before the Victorian Supreme Court in the *Foschini* case found the VFL's employment rules to be an unreasonable restraint of trade. While Australians north of the Murray may be prepared to watch VFL football on television in the comfort of the lounge-room it is another thing to expect them to pay money regularly to go and watch a game. In fact interstate viewers have been spoilt over the years by being able to watch the VFL match of the day live on television each Saturday afternoon. The only teams that are likely to be moved interstate are those which have experienced limited success. If a team cannot attract crowds in Melbourne, why should it be able to attract them in another capital city? Since moving to Sydney, the (Sydney) Swans have not performed well on the field and have attracted less spectators in Sydney than they did in (South) Melbourne. Moreover, many of their Sydney supporters are expatriate Victorians who are refugees from another VFL club - and when one's former club plays in Sydney it seems so much wiser to sit with the small band of away supporters who have travelled up from Melbourne than with supporters of the Sydney Swans.

Despite this criticism the book is a most accomplished piece of work. Not only is it an invaluable guide for VFL spectators but also an important reference for those with an academic interest in

sport generally, and the great Australian game in particular.

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