

AUSTRALIAN SPORTS REVIEW 1985: AN OPTIMIST'S VIEW

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A review of Australian sport in 1985 could begin with description of Australia's defeat in the cricket series against the West Indies and mention of the widespread disappointment with the inaugural Australia Games; and it could end with discussion of the cricket series loss against New Zealand and the draw with India, which led one newspaper to declare (when defeat at the hands of India seemed imminent), "We are the World's worst". Somewhere in between these discussions could be slotted further evidence of that headline's validity; for example, a note on Oceania's performance in the athletics World Cup and reference to the disappointing performances of those rising stars upon whom the media have prompted us to pin our hopes for international sporting success, such as Pat Cash and Greg Norman.

However, when it comes to sport I tend towards a more optimistic view. My touch team colleagues might suggest that sometimes my optimism is overdone. They might even quote from my half-time talk in a game which we were losing 5-0, and went on to lose 10-1 (but at least we did improve a little in the second half). It is true that 1985 was not a great year for Australia in the traditional high-profile sports. We didn't win Wimbledon, the US PGA, or any of the four cricket test series completed during 1985. Nor did Oceania win the athletics World Cup or the Soccerroos qualify for the finals of their World Cup.

Nevertheless, in all these sports Australia had something to cheer about. Golfers, Norman, Marsh and Graham did combine to win the international teams championship, the Dunhill Cup. The Soccerroos were prevented from heading to Mexico only by a change in the structure of the qualifying rounds, which pitted them against one of the powers of world soccer, Scotland; and the Australians were hardly disgraced by their performances, which included a scoreless draw in Melbourne. In tennis our young players still hold out plenty of promise, though they are unlikely to develop into Hoads

and Rosewalls. Yet we must also remember that when those tennis twins were winning Davis Cups and Grand Slam titles, the McEnroes, Lendls and Connors of their era were considered too good (or too professional) to play against the rising stars. Even cricket fans could cheer when, in January, Australia ended the West Indies' run of 27 tests without defeat. We also cheered the Australian victory over the West Indies in the first of the WSC finals and the one-day (Texaco Trophy) series win over England, prior to the test series defeats.

In numerous other sports we could have found things to cheer ourselves hoarse about, if only we have known about them. Adair Ferguson's victory in the lightweight sculls world championship, and a plethora of world titles and records by Australians in yachting, windsurfing, water-skiing, hang-gliding, kiaking, BMX and women's power lifting were all significant achievements, if not "media events". Dean Lukin's Commonwealth clean and jerk record (240.5 kg), Tom Carroll's second successive world surfing championship, Merle Richardson's dominance of women's lawn bowls (world championship in both singles and pairs), Jon Sieben's repeat victory over Michael Gross in the World Student Games, Australia's victory in the Hong Kong Sevens tournament, the world championship for the most exciting form of football, and of course David Foster's 1985 tally of 12 world woodchopping titles (giving him a career total of 55 world championships), all demonstrate that Australia has not hit rockbottom in world sporting competition.

In one high-profile sport Australia had arguably its best year ever in 1985. Three boxers reigned as world champions during the year, though Barry Michael's achievement came only at the expense of Lester Ellis. Critics have been quick to suggest that the International Boxing Federation titles held by Ellis, Michael and Jeff Fenech are only third-rate titles and that the three men should not be accepted as real world champions until they win WBC or WBA titles. However there can be little doubt at least about Fenech's claims for recognition after his defeat of the US contender Jerome Coffee. The success of Australia's boxers has done much to return boxing to the status it held last in the Rose/Famechon era, though it has also led to a raising of voices against

the sport.

A further sporting development which flourished in 1985, and which has resulted in nothing but praise for the organizers/administrators and admiration for the athletes, is the development of disabled sports. Australian participation in and dominance of disabled sports has been phenomenal; with one of the most outstanding performers being swimmer Rosemary Eames, the holder of three world disabled titles (in freestyle, backstroke and breast-stroke). Developments in this area have been matched by the development of international competition for "masters" or veterans; with Australia's outstanding participant in 1985 being to legendary golfer Peter Thomson.

Whilst Thomson and Eames might both have difficulty competing against younger/fully able athletes, the development of national and international sporting contests which cater for more than the elite few in their second and third decades of life, is something to be encouraged. It serves as a reminder that sport should foster wide participation and offer rewards for dedication (and talent) on a wider basis than has become traditional. Australia's position as a world leader in both veterans and disabled games is probably due to the combination of increasing leisure time in our society and the relatively widespread provision of facilities for the disabled. We are able to dominate these fields just as we did in swimming and tennis before the rest of the world matched and then surpassed our provision of facilities and copied our techniques. That story will no doubt be repeated in these new fields.

In some areas however we will continue to remain world beaters. Essendon is the undisputed world champion in Australian football. Even the Irish would probably agree with that. Whether Essendon's memorable 78 point grand final win over Hawthorn entitles them such accolades as "possibly the greatest team of all time" (Norman May) can be left to the journalists and Victorian pub-goers to debate. Similar accolades were accorded Steve Mortimer for his leadership of Canterbury-Bankstown to a Sydney Rugby League premiership, and NSW to a win over Queensland (at last) in the annual state-of-origin series. At the very least Steve and Canterbury can be acknowledged as the world's best, south of Coolangatta.

In the long term perhaps the most significant aspects of Australian sport in 1985 will prove to be related to the development of increasing professionalism and sporting entrepreneurship. It has long been a sporting adage that the provision of top class facilities and the staging of international events are both crucial to the development of world class athletes. Australia is at last beginning to accept these points. The Australian Games did not attract all the super stars we were promised; and those who did come generally performed well below their capabilities; but they did provide the opportunity for Australia's younger athletes to compete, for their country, against international opposition.

New international standard facilities, even in Tasmania, where the rowing course at Lake Barrington and the cycling velodrome in Launceston are rated among the world's best, not only attract top level competition but they also inspire athletes to new heights. Dean Wood's smashing of the cycling world record time for 4,000 metres would not have happened on a lower standard track. Even the staging of Grand Prix motor racing in Adelaide should be supported, not for the influx of tourist dollars or its value as an electoral tool, but because of the inspiration it will provide for Australia's aspiring motor racers.

Entrepreneurship and professionalism also reached new heights in other areas of Australian sport in 1985, notably in cricket and football. In cricket the promotion of the WSC competition has enabled the Australian team to achieve a level of performance consistently higher than we have become accustomed to witnessing in test matches; probably because the, Australians now have more experience of the one-day internationals than anyone else. However, the most controversial aspect of professionalism in cricket in 1985 concerned the rebel tour of South Africa. A tour which resulted from the emergence of the full-time cricketing professional who recognizes that he has a career of only a few years, in which to earn a high income.

The rebel tour returned sport to the newspaper front pages and again revealed its political dimensions, and its potential as a divisive force. No doubt most readers have their own views about the morality of the rebel tour, and this is not the place for

polemics. Suffice it to say that I was opposed to this particular tour.

Nevertheless I am not against professionalism in sport, nor do I condemn entrepreneurial initiatives. In fact I would suggest that most of our major sports receive the level of spectator support they do, largely as a result of reforms made by entrepreneurs (or at least in their interest). Few of us would be able to maintain our passion sufficiently to bear us through a Carlton/Collingwood match played over five or six days; (or even a Rangers/Celtic match). Horse racing would have little appeal to spectators or punters if races were still run over 10 or 12 mile courses along the highways; (though TV coverage of marathons has demonstrated that I could be proved wrong). However entrepreneurial initiatives do not lead necessarily to improvement.

The sale of the Sydney Swans to Dr. Geoffrey Edelsten (and friends) is one initiative which could have implications far beyond the future of the VFL, including providing a precedent for sports fundraising. Perhaps future Olympic teams will be listed on the stock exchange and investors will collect a percentage of post-games commercial endorsement payments. It is certainly premature to cast judgement on the VFL's decision at this stage, but I am confident that the decision will prove to be the most significant event in Australian sport in 1985, for better or for worse. As a New South Welshman exiled to a land of highmarks, handballs, and consolation goals; and as an optimist, I am equally confident that the VFL's decision will mark the end of the era in which the Victorian Football League Premiership was won by Victorian teams.