

Garry Egger, *The Sport Drug*. George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981.
Bibliog. pp. 129. \$7.95 paper.

Garry Egger's enjoyable and stimulating book is written by a research scientist 'stepping from a world of rigour and caution to one of subjectivity and anecdote' (p.12), in the hope of generating verifiable hypotheses for future research. The author has clearly brought together his work as a psychobiologist in drug research, and his personal interest in, and love of, sport, to produce a speculative thesis which he hopes might result in different directions for both sport and drug rehabilitation.

From a simple observation Egger has developed a complicated argument. The observation is that certain experiences ('highs') reported by some athletes, are similar to those reported by drug-takers. This observation he supports with many quotations from both groups, giving a list of characteristics which seem to be common: merging of action and awareness, acute well-being, peace, calm, stillness, ego awareness, floating, flying, weightlessness, ecstasy, power, control, and mystery, awe and feelings of immortality.

He then proceeds to argue that the athletes, and drug takers, seek these highs as an expression of a basic need for man to alter consciousness to escape the mundane reality of everyday life. The possibility of these experiences is presented as the attraction of both sport and drug-taking, and Egger suggests that this provides a likely answer to the question, 'Why is sport of such widespread and intense interest?'. The link between the two sets of 'highs' is strengthened in the argument by the claim that 'sporting highs' are possibly associated with the presence of the body's endogenous opiates (p.90).

The thesis for Egger is complicated, however, by the fact that sport has developed in a way which shuts significant numbers of people off from the likelihood of experiencing these valued, needed and motivating 'highs'. The villain is the emphasis on competition and winning. 'So who took the fun out of sport in the last part of the twentieth century?', (p.29). Egger's answer: 'competitiveness, aggressiveness, machismo, and bravado' (p.123). So sport must be re-oriented more towards the experience of 'flow' which characterised play. We must remember that sport is a psychological as well as a physical activity.

Re-directed in this way, sport can be proposed as a possible therapy for drug-abusers, because it might provide them with similar but self-enhancing 'highs', in place of self-limiting 'highs'. By substituting sport 'highs' for drug 'highs', treatment will be in accordance with the principle of 'satisfying rather than denying basic human drives' (p.122) and therefore much more likely to be successful.

With such a widely ranging argument in such a small book it is not surprising that there is much that prompts discussion, as

indeed the author hopes. It is just not possible in so few words to argue each contentious premise fully. In the end Egger's central point probably stands as tenable; it is in the more peripheral strands of his argument, where he is more self-indulgent, that there is more room for disagreement. Some of these are discussed below.

Egger's view of sport is consistent with a large body of literature which urges less emphasis on competitiveness and winning, and a greater openness to the rewarding experiences of participation. Apart from linking the peak experiences of sport with the presence of the body's opiates, he does not really say anything new about sport, merely repeating the rather unhelpful and probably ultimately untenable contrast between competition and participation. At the same time, perhaps because of this untenability, he seems somewhat ambivalent about competition and the pursuit of excellence. At one point he maintains that: 'totally ego-involving competition on the other hand moves sport from the instinctive and reflective level to the cognitive level. At this level it is no longer sport or play in its true sense' (p.58). However, at another point, 'higher competitive levels presumably lead to more intense flow sensations' (p.60). Many examples of the desirable flow experiences come from the best performers who have dedicated themselves to trying to win, or in other words, playing the game. Surely one thing such people learn is that the great performances are possible only by going beyond (or behind) the cognitive level, which may characterise training or the self-conscious beginner, but which destroys both the ultimate performance and certainly the 'high'.

It is more likely that the way to counter the emphasis on competition, which bothers Egger because it shuts so many people off from the access to the highs which constitute the joys of sport, is not to diminish competitiveness, but to teach people to compete properly. Competition can be a mechanism in both the quest for excellence and the quest for fun, and more intense competition can enhance *both*. The difficult task of coming to understand the relationships between playing a game, trying to win, winning, and an intense desire for competence remain to be explained.

Egger gives to sporting 'highs' perhaps a somewhat greater emphasis, both in frequency and function, than might be justified, probably because they are so significant in his program of drug rehabilitation. It seems to be stretching things a bit to group together as 'highs' the euphoria of the practised runner, the necessary detachment that characterises supreme skill, the exhilarating experiences of the performer in 'sensation sports', and the occasional periods of total concentration, and then to claim that achieving these is the basic purpose in sport. I suspect that many people play sport all their lives, loving it and being successful, without the benefit of such experiences. Similarly, the evidence for relating them to a need (for consciousness-changing needs strengthening). There is a great temptation to postulate the existence of needs to give force and respectability to some desires people have. The same transformation is done when discussing Caillois' four categories of games; Egger relates them to four kinds of basic human need. It is by no means clear that Caillois saw them thus, and anyway, the independent evidence for the existence of such needs is not obvious. This is not to deny their importance of course; many parts of human behaviour have little to do with needs.

The book is least satisfying when Egger, the psychobiologist is playing the philosopher. In one passage he asks: 'So what is the value of sport? Does it have anything to recommend it, and if not why do we spend much time and effort in promoting and encouraging sport in the young' (p.37) then adds that 'the answer to these questions come from looking at the real reasons why people involve themselves in sport...' (p.37). This is to confuse the value of sport with the values people hold. Perhaps the word 'real' is very significant here. What are 'real reasons' in contrast to 'reasons'? How will we know what are real reasons as opposed to false reasons?

In a way Egger seems to have courted difficulties such as these for no good reason, at least as far as his main point is concerned. What he has to offer that is different is the idea that sporting highs, which clearly exist, may be of significance in drug rehabilitation. The rest seems incidental, and more contentious, and obscures the main point. In the end, this is probably

a book more about drug rehabilitation than about sport. But if it gets people to think about sport too, that would not be a bad thing because, as the author says in the preface, this is a field 'in which too much has been said and not enough has been thought'.

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