

Percy Mason, *Professional Athletics in Australia*. Rigby Publishers, Sydney, 1985. Appendices, Bibliog., Illus. pp.xii + 243. \$19.95 paper.

The place of professional as opposed to amateur sport in Australian society is a subject that is clearly worthy of attention

in that it has the potential to give us fresh insights into the social and cultural history of this country. Yet, apart from the football codes, cricket and tennis, professional sport has been very little researched. For this reason alone, *Professional Athletics in Australia* is a welcome addition to the literature of sport.

Written very much from an insider's perspective, this book covers a fascinating range of topics. It shows that while professional running was essentially imported from the United Kingdom, it developed a life of its own in Australia in the nineteenth century. One of the more interesting features of this development was the prize money which could exceed \$1,000 and the betting plunges of anything up to \$20,000.

Its defining characteristic in terms of the history of Australia, however, was its association with the gold mining industry; for the newly emerging gold mining towns provided professional running with its greatest impetus, especially in the state of Victoria. Certainly, this is reflected in the establishment of the home of professional running in the Victorian mining town of Stawell. It was here that the now famous Stawell Athletic Club was founded and where the even more famous Stawell Gift has been held each year at Easter since 1878 (except for the war years 1942-1945). Indeed, although professional running is found in the other states of Australia, and although larger state and national bodies subsequently emerged to control the sport, Stawell remains the centre of professional running in Australia.

Other topics taken up in this book include the role of Aboriginal runners in professional athletics, the influence of overseas runners (especially from the United States and Scotland) on the sport, the link between professional athletics and Australian Rules Football, amateurism and open-athletics, coaching, drugs, the distance boom, and the entry of women into the sport. Of these I found the chapter on Aboriginal runners particularly interesting. Why their presence has not been similarly felt in amateur running is a question worthy of investigation.

Generally then, this book is a mine of information about professional athletics in Australia. It is enhanced by a comprehensive set of appendices, and would have been further improved had it also contained a bibliography and key references. Another, minor

reservation is that many of the issues with which the book deals might well have benefited from being placed more clearly within the changing socio-cultural context of nineteenth and twentieth century Australia. To be fair, however, *Professional Athletics in Australia* was written for a popular audience and in this respect it succeeds admirably.

John McGuire
School of Social Sciences
Western Australian
Institute of Technology