

REVIEW ESSAY
STODDART ON SPORT

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Brian Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever - Sport in the Australian Culture*, Angus and Robertson, 1986, pp.232. \$9.95 (paper).

I

Brian Stoddart has written an absorbing and provocative account of the place of sport in Australian society.* In doing so he has both identified many significant changes in our sporting culture, and demystified some widely held views about the functions that sport is supposed to serve.

Stoddart establishes the aims of the book in the introductory chapter. The first is to contradict the view that sport can be set apart from other areas of social life; the second is to show that sport is a conservative institution which is used to sustain established social and economic relations; the third is to identify the forces for change which have impacted upon sport; and the final aim is to sketch out some possible future trends. While the first three aims were comprehensively dealt within chapters 1-7, the final chapter only faintly sketched out the future possibilities. Stoddart posed many interesting questions, but did not establish any alternative 'scenarios'.

II

The introductory chapter could have become a book in itself. Stoddart, having set the scene by saying how "Sports mad" Australians are (which every Australian sports book does, usually by quoting Donald Horne, John Hallows or Craig Macgregor - Stoddart quotes Patrick White and Ronald Conway), proceeds to establish a framework in which to set his subsequent discussion.

* I would like to thank Wray Vamplew for his comments on a draft of this review.

Stoddart's approach is to categorise writing on sport as follows:

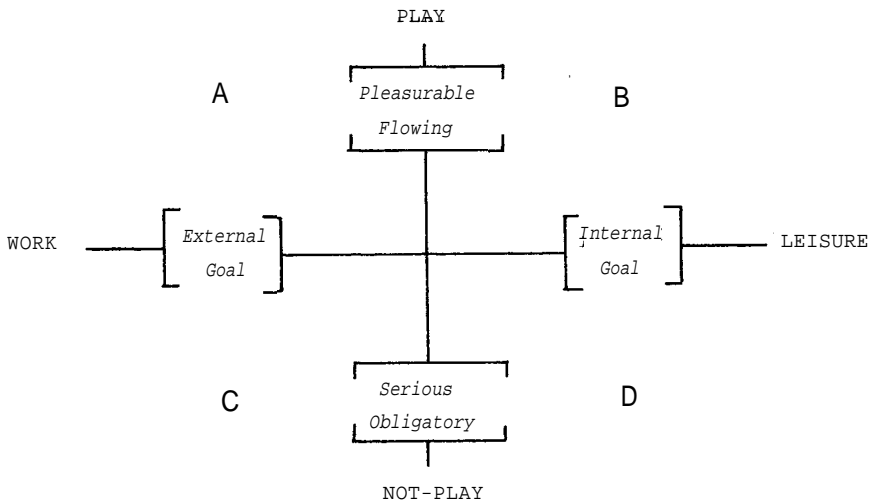
- i. The heroic view - which seals off sport from the rest of life, and focuses on the hero, potted biographies of the star players, charts, statistics, and other one dimensional matters.
- ii. The mirror view - in which sport is a reflection of the wider society with all its racist, sexist and corporatist tendencies, but has minimal impact on other social institutions.
- iii. The conservative cultural critical view - which considers that sport has unique social features which make it a positive social force. At the same time this view contends that the social value of sport has been corrupted and undermined by the intrusion of other agencies and practices, and by implication, that there was a "golden age" for sport in which it was "pure" and "deal".
- iv. The progressive cultural critical view - which emphasises the role of sport in reproducing social relations of power, and in maintaining patterns of social domination. This view implies that sport has never been "pure", and that the reform of sport requires a concomitant change in its political and social milieu.
- v. The radical Marxist view - which contends that sport is a vehicle for the playing out of all the excesses and repressive values of capitalism, and that sport constitutes a huge blind spot for social consciousness.

Stoddart decides to use the progressive cultural critique, and then proceeds to justify the focus of his analysis on the major spectator sports (in Stoddart's words, the professional, or world standard amateur activities). It is this transition from theory to practice that created some confusion for me, and sometimes left me unsatisfied.

Stoddart, for instance, in explaining the link between elite

sport and sport as leisure, uses touch football as an example of how a fun based leisure activity can easily become a "sport rather than leisure" (p.10). In the same context he contrasts the "leisure orientation of indoor cricket with its excellence orientation (p.10). I would have thought that sport is for most players and fans, a *part of leisure*, even where the "excellence" dimension dominates. This leisure/excellence dichotomy is pursued by Stoddart when he suggests that sport at the "excellence" level can create models for emulation at the "leisure" level. My confusion was compounded by Stoddart's definition of sport as the "playing or watching of organised games by individuals or teams who recognise sets of rules and conventions...this activity mostly takes place outside work hours...for a minority of people it might constitute work hours themselves...the noncompetitive playing of the activity need not necessarily debar it from recognition as a sport". While sport can be classified as either work or leisure, it doesn't follow that "excellence" sport is not leisure, particularly for spectators. Also, to be good at sport may not make it work.

In the *Anthropology of sport*, Blanchard & Cheska (1985) constructed a useful alternative model which provided a two dimensional analysis of human activity and sport, and showed that while work and leisure were mutually exclusive, work and play were not.



Stoddart's leisurely touch football or social tennis would fit into quadrant B, while his excellence football or tennis might be part of quadrant A (in the case of a professional who experiences a spirit of play) or quadrant C (another professional who is playing through obligation or in spite of injury). For Stoddart, "sport is no longer exclusively a leisure category" (p.13). The implied assumption that it ever was is denied by his own analytical model of progressive cultural criticism (p.8).

III

In Chapter 2, Stoddart wants to dispel the myth that sport is open and accessible to all, and a vehicle for social mobility. He demonstrates that much Australian sport has a class basis, with horse racing, polo, sailing, rugby union, golf and tennis the province of the upper and middle classes, and boxing, rugby league and cycling being dominated by the working class.

When discussing the class basis of the Victorian Football League, Stoddart is on softer ground. While he is correct in identifying the North Melbourne Club as originally a vehicle for the expression for an Irish, working class consciousness, and that Collingwood's roots were working class, he is less persuasive in his claim that many of Melbourne's football clubs have been an "integral part of the class and status changes within the communities that both form and are formed by them" (p.50). In the first place, over the last 30-40 years, most of the supporter base for V.F.L. clubs has come from outside the inner suburbs in which these clubs are located (Geelong, Footscray and Essendon may be exceptions). Second, most club memberships have always had a mix of middle class and working class, irrespective of their surrounding community mix, with the middle classes usually occupying positions of influence. Third, most of the clubs have been usually indifferent to class and status changes in the local community. While Carlton attracted a modicum of support from its local Italian community, the Footscray, South Melbourne and Richmond clubs were less successful in gaining support from the local Yugoslav/Maltese, Greek and Vietnamese communities respectively. Indeed, the difficulties faced by Sydney's inner suburban Rugby League clubs in attracting 'ethnic support', which were succinctly identified by Stoddart (p.50), were replicated in Melbourne.

Stoddart effectively argues that success in sport has never guaranteed players an escape from poverty or discrimination. At the same time, however, Stoddart demonstrated in Chapter 1 that enough players have been able to climb the status ladder to perpetuate the *belief* that sport is a vehicle for social mobility, a belief that sustains and justifies the existing social system.

IV

It has almost become a cliché to say that sport and politics are inseparable. Stoddart is no exception, but does it with insight and knowledge. He roams far and wide, drawing upon tennis (consideration of the re-entry of Japan into Davis Cup Competition in 1950), the Olympic Games (Hungarian-Soviet encounters at the 1956 Games in Melbourne) and Rugby (the 1971 Springbok tour of Australia). The international mix of sport and politics is one of a number of political arenas covered by Stoddart, and he deftly highlights the political games played within sports themselves (soccer and cycling for example) and at the various levels of government.

When it came to a consideration of the politics of Australian football at the civic level, Stoddart was strong on conceptual analysis but shaky on example. In reviewing the relocation of the North Melbourne Football Club to Coburg Oval in 1965, Stoddart notes that the "governing council" (presumably the Coburg City Council) was anxious to secure *Rugby League* football for its area (p.61). He goes on to say that neither North Melbourne nor Coburg citizens entirely accepted this. Neither would have most fans if it was ever the case. While Stoddart uses North Melbourne Club only as an example of how decisions on the use and control of grounds can arouse strong local passion, he might also have used both the North Melbourne move to Coburg oval (which was occupied by the local Victorian Football Association club) and the St. Kilda move to the Moorabbin oval (which was also occupied by the local V.F.A. club) as an example of the Victorian Football League's attempt to tighten its political leverage over the V.F.A.

Stoddart's discussion of the ways in which politicians exploit sport for their own interests (at both the party political and personal level) is particularly interesting. His treatment of

Menzies, Fraser and Hawke, while highlighting their different sporting interest, also underscores their common view that sport could be used to establish them as populist leaders. Yet, Stoddart has less to say about Whitlam's lack of interest in sport. I would dispute though Stoddart's claim that Whitlam transferred his Melbourne football support from working class Collingwood to middle class/rural Geelong. I thought he followed Arthur Calwell as the number one ticket holder at North Melbourne. As for Stoddart's claim that Victorian Premier, John Cain's affiliation with the community based V.F.A., rather than the "trendy" V.F.L. "touched a political cord with many people", it should be noted that his election as Premier coincided with record crowds at V.F.L. matches. In any case, Cain has turned out to be as corporatist as any preceding State Premier.

V

In reviewing the role of the media, Stoddart argues that it is "amongst the main conservative forces in Australian life" (p.84) and has been "foremost in opposing social progress in Australian sport" (p.85). He goes on to suggest that the quality of media sports output has, in the main, been directed at the lowest common denominator, commencing with popular journalism in the 1910s and 1920s, radio up to the 1950s and television from the 1950s. Stoddart laments the lack of any critical, inquiring commentary and reporting service through the media, and cites the lack of media concern about football violence in the 1950s as evidence of this. As he rightly suggests, "writers and broadcasters were reluctant to antagonise sports authorities for fear of reprisal that might damage their income figures" (p.93).

Stoddart succinctly documents the impact of colour television on sports broadcasting, and includes two case studies which exemplify the growing influence of television broadcasters on sport; first the Packer take-over of first class cricket, and second the plan by the V.F.L. to re-locate the South Melbourne Football club in Sydney. While these dramatic events were viewed by Stoddart as "highlighting the conservative role of the media in accounting for the social place of the Australian sport", (p.106) (the Melbourne press, in particular identified the V.F.L. and H.S.V. as co-

conspirators in a villainous drive to monopolise all football), an alternative view is to see the electronic media as the prime vehicle for the modernisation of sport. It might be more appropriate to view television as an agent for change and the older press and radio as the bastions of the status quo (modern populists versus romantic traditionalists).

VI

Stoddart's discussion of commercialism includes an identification of the new sources of funds for sport (e.g. corporate sponsorship), a review of the growth in player payments (cricket and athletics in particular) and a collection of good evidence to show that entrepreneurial, professional sport was not uncommon during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. horse racing, boxing and Australian football).

His most interesting analysis of commercialism in sport covers the rampant shamateurism in tennis, which is viewed as symptomatic of the conflict between the conservative view that sport should be essentially serving social ends, and the modern view that elite players should be able to maximise their economic rewards. It is made clear that sport in Australia always had difficulty balancing the contradictory demands that while sport should have a strong economic base, it may not be appropriate for players to use it for personal gain. Stoddart explains this contradiction by arguing that sports authorities feared that professionalisation might "provide an avenue for upward social mobility" and threaten the established order (p.126). This could be a field for further research.

Stoddart spends some time reviewing the critiques of commercialised sport by Tatz (Australian) and Lasch (American) and describes the "aesthetic decline" that is supposed to have taken place in modern sport. He does a good job in detailing specific criticisms - the modification of rules, the intrusion of television, the loss of club loyalty, and an undue concern by players with money. It is not clear, however, if the criticisms are Stoddart's, or those of Tatz and Lasch. By the end of the chapter I am unsure if Stoddart himself prefers the less commercial sports environment

(thereby adopting the conservative cultural critique model), whether he views the modern sports world as preferable, or whether he merely wants to highlight the conflict between the conservative sports creed ("sport as recreation and moral training") and modern view ("sport as business and occupation") (p. 133).

Stoddart claims that the concomitant "drive toward entertainment in Australian sport is inexorable" (p.132). However, he neither defines entertainment nor identifies the source of the drive. Is it for example a term appropriate only to modern sport; is entertainment a concept marketed by the sporting entrepreneur, or is it a feature of sport demanded by spectators? The "sport as entertainment" model raises many interesting questions about the meaning of sport to its fans. For example, does the "sport as entertainment" supporter value an "even" contest, aesthetic display and comfortable viewing conditions over parochial loyalty, and game quality over the tribal concern for winning?

While Stoddart is sympathetic to the Tatz and Lasch view that "traditional sport" was superior to modern sport - reflective rather than sensational, aesthetic rather than superficial and crass, and humanistic rather than materialistic, a close reading leads me to think that Stoddart is de-mystifying this belief too.

VII

Stoddart's discussion of sexual discrimination in sport contains a fascinating account of the introduction of women's tennis, croquet and golf into Australia, and the stringent dress requirements for womens sports. In both cases he convincingly demonstrates how rigid sex role stereotyping has segregated sport on sex grounds and established appropriate patterns of sporting behaviour for female athletes.

On balance, though, I found Stoddart's treatment of women in sport unnecessarily negative. While he justifiably detailed the numerous instances where outstanding female sporting performances were at best devalued, or at worst ignored, it would also have been appropriate to identify those areas of womens sport which have obtained wide public support, even if they re-inforce social expectations about women's role. Clearly in swimming, tennis, and track

and field, some of the most notable and recognisable achievements came from women.

Stoddart mentions Fraser (who in many peoples minds is the classical sporting hero) Boyle and Gould, but equally heroic and popular were Cuthbert, Cawley and Court (and currently Flintoff and Martin). However, as Stoddart perceptively argues at the end of his chapter on sport and sexual stereotyping, the major barrier to sporting equality between the sexes is society's continued acceptance of the nineteenth century English Public School view that sport's major role is to train young *men* for their adult roles as loyal, strong disciplined leaders who are able to manage adversity, and stoically meet all of life's challenges.

VIII

In his chapter on multi-culturalism and sport, Stoddart identifies a number of contradictions. First, Australia's anglo-saxon sporting heritage sits uncomfortably within a population whose cultural origins are becoming increasingly diversified. Second, migrants who use sport as a vehicle for integration into the social fabric of Australia can risk exclusion from their ethnic sub-culture. Finally while sport for many ethnic and minority groups is one more agent for exclusivity and divisiveness, others see it as an avenue for social mobility and acceptance.

Out of the pot-pouri of Australia's sporting subcultures Stoddart extracts some excellent case studies. The sporting success of aboriginals in boxing and Australian football is well documented, and Stoddart tentatively suggests that much of it results from their position on the "cultural fringe" (p.166) and their ability to translate traditional aboriginal activities which emphasise "individual development" into outstanding sporting prowess (p.169). At the same time, Stoddart shows that the sporting prowess of aborigines has neither given them subsequent economic security and social status, nor eliminated the public stereotype of aborigines as physically adept, but unable to handle success, alcohol or money.

Stoddart's explanation of why many migrants failed to participate in anglo-saxon sport is novel but not persuasive. After

having indicated that most migrants felt more comfortable with sports traditionally associated with their own culture (like soccer) and that often they could not afford expensive sports, Stoddart suggests that Australian games were seen to take too long to play, and cites Pascoe and Wiener as the only examples he could find of non British stock who played international cricket for Australia. The evidence for this final point is flimsy.

While Stoddart has concisely described the development of Australia's multi-cultural sporting milieu, and the dilemma it poses for many ethnic groups, he could have given greater emphasis to the positive role that these groups have played in improving the quality and breadth of Australian sporting achievement. While migrant groups have been often constrained by narrow base of sporting opportunities available to them, older Australians have been educated in the finer points of the "new" sports like weight lifting, volleyball, soccer and snow skiing.

IX

In his final chapter Stoddart notes that Australia's recent international sporting successes resulted from not just enormous personal commitment but also from the provision of a comprehensive sporting infrastructure comprising direct financial assistance (capital), research and development (science) and sophisticated equipment (technology) (p.188).

This infrastructure has been developed by both the public sector and private sector, and Stoddart is concerned that in each instance there are likely to be unsatisfactory consequences. First, as the government increases its funding of sport, it is likely to increasingly use it for its own political ends. Second, the growing intervention of private enterprise may lead to a separation of elite sport "from its traditional base" (p.191). In support of his claim he cites the 1984 Michelle Ford swim affair, and PBL Market-ing involvement in first class cricket respectively.

The Ford affair merely confirms the thrust of his argument in Chapter 3 that sport and politics will always mix. The intervention of private enterprise, while clearly assisting elite athletes, whether they are using the Institute of Sport facilities or foot-

ballers being assisted by corporate sponsors, has also enabled sporting associations to fund coaching and development programs at all levels of the sporting pyramid. Stoddart's concern that the "heartland of Australian sport, the junior and local competition, will not be catered for so well" (p.194) as additional funds come from corporate sponsors and the media, will not necessarily follow so long as sporting associations have control over the distribution of funds. Sports associations are acutely aware that it is only through junior development and the maintenance of a large base of players that Australia's international sporting reputation will be maintained. It could equally be argued that the growth in corporate sponsorship for sports like gymnastics and basketball, have been correlated with an increase in community participation as players.

I felt Stoddart could have spent more words extending his model of Australian sport into the future, and indicated whether he, like Tatz and Lasch, believes that the more the corporate sector intrudes into sport the more it will degenerate into a corrupt spectacle, devoid of all intrinsic worth. Stoddart could also have usefully provided the reader with a detailed description of the "ideal" sporting environments constructed by the various schools of sports analysts to which he refers, by which the reader could have then evaluated contemporary Australian sport as well as its analysts.

I would also have liked Stoddart to apply his extensive skills to an analysis of the 'low profile', and community based sports. While he succinctly reflected upon the connection between elite sport and its community, suburban equivalent (pp.9-10) he did not say much about the organisation of local sports competitions, and the role of regional and state authorities in the minor sports.

X

I have two final, if self interested comments, to make about Stoddart's book. First, much of his argument followed from anecdote and example, rather than from quantification. While few would disagree with his analysis of structural change in Australian sport he could have provided statistical support for his statement that

"much Australian sport has changed from a recreational to a business activity" (p.114). Similarly, in Chapter 8 when discussing funding arrangements he does not indicate the changing importance of funding sources, nor the changes that have taken place in the distribution of funds.

Second, the absence of footnotes in the book constitutes a major obstacle to its use as a tool for research. I can understand Stoddart's dilemma. Extensive documentation of text can deter the general reader from purchasing books, particularly in the field of sport. The experience of publishers with sports books has shown that both sports writers and readers are most comfortable with the heroic sports model described by Stoddart in Chapter 1 (p.6). Stoddart was apparently persuaded that "marketable" sports books are not complicated by footnoting. By complying with the publisher's request, Stoddart has adopted part of the sports writing model he finds the least interesting. Stoddart partly compensates however, by providing sports scholars with a close to definitive sports bibliography. However, I would like Stoddart to explain why he did not include Morris's *The Soccer Tribe* (1983).

XI

While Stoddart's book did not tell me a lot about why people devote so much of their time and energy playing and watching sport, and what sport means to them (which seems to be a function of his analytical model), it did provide a highly readable and comprehensive account of why particular sports are played in preference to others, why some sports are played by particular social groups, how sport is used to maintain existing social structures and power relations, which forces for change have impacted upon sport, and how sport supports so many myths about the structure and function of Australian society.

This essay skims the surface of Stoddart's book, which contains numerous thoughtful and provocative ideas and views about Australian sport. It should become essential reading in all sports studies courses.