

A DEBATE IN SPORTS HISTORY: THREE VIEWS ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON FEVER

THE AUSTRALIAN SPORTING OBSESSION

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We have, at long last, a critical examination of sport in the Australian culture. Brian Stoddart, author of *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, deserves praise for the systematic way in which he has demolished many myths about Australian sport relating to sport and class, politics, women, ethnicity and a number of other themes.

But I wonder whether one long-serving 'myth', that Australians are obsessed by sport in a unique manner, has been allowed to slip through his otherwise tight analytical net. This 'myth', it should be noted, is a very minor part of Stoddart's argument, but it has endured so long as a cultural axiom that it is worth exploring. Stoddart argues at the outset that whereas the fans in other countries are preoccupied with one or two sports, such as baseball and football in America, rugby in New Zealand and sumo wrestling in Japan, Australians are besotted with sport as a whole much to the chargin of other Australians involved in art, literature, dance, music, education or the professions. 'The achievements of Patrick White in literature, Brett Whitely in art and Joan Sutherland in opera have generally taken much longer to gain recognition at home', he suggests, than those of Greg Chappell in cricket, Greg Norman in golf and John Newcombe in tennis. While devotion to sport is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon, because this would deny the 'sports passions' of the people of the German Democratic Republic, Barbados, South Africa and many other countries, nowhere else, Stoddart seems to imply,¹ is sport such an 'integral part' of 'general social formation'.²

Stoddart's argument at this point is not new: he is reiterating to a certain extent the established wisdom already well aired by Dunstan, Cumes and numerous other journalists and-academics.

Dunstan's whimsical book, *Sports*,³ proceeds sport-by-sport to identify one 'passion' after another and to mock the serious way in which sport is treated in this country. Dunstan continued this seemingly hopeless campaign by organising the anti-football league in Melbourne of all places. Cumes traces the 'surging passion' for sport back to the colonial era and argues that sport flourished because of the weakness of high culture in a culturally-deprived society.⁴

The argument then rests on several premises. Australians, it seems, are obsessed about sport in a different way from the people of other societies. Next, this passion for 'low culture' is at the detriment of a commitment to 'high culture', it reflects 'the immaturity of a young country...the Australian distrust of the intellectual, or the desperate search for identity and recognition'.⁵ No-one has elaborated this argument more boldly and starkly than Cumes:

It was against the background of a predominantly male society that leisure-time activities developed in early Australian settlements. Many of those activities were for men living alone - or living without women. They were activities suited to immature boys in a segregated public school or to men in the army or convicts in a segregated gaol. Often, therefore, they were activities which placed their greatest emphasis on physical endeavour, on athleticism, on male forms of competition, on the rougher more obvious manifestations of art forms, on booze and the general (not necessarily individual) male recklessness of gambling, everything because everything consisted of nothing but a footloose bachelor's own.

So many people have made similar statements over the past century that they are taken as self-evident. But do these sweeping cultural generalisations rest on subjective opinion or established and documented fact? Are they true of Australians as a whole at all times and in all places?

Having lived in America for the best part of a decade, during the 1960s, I am far from convinced that Australians are (say) far more besotted by sport than Americans. In fact I would be inclined towards the opposite view. Americans in this era appear to have played and watched more sport than Australians. There were 162 days in the baseball season not counting the World Series Play-offs. Americans could virtually watch baseball every day of the summer: Australians are now only approaching this situation with

the greatly expanded cricket program since 1977. Pro football occupied all the weekend, from Friday night to Monday night, in America in the late 1960s long before it was extended beyond Saturday afternoon in Australia. College sport, football and basketball in particular, was a huge almost semi-professional concern whereas it is still of no account in Australia. The Little League movement as James Michener has shown, was a huge operation in America whereas there is still no equivalent in Australia. Such contentions can be backed up by statistics. An Australian publication boasted that there were 206,838 young people, between the ages of 5 and 19, involved in sport in Victoria in 1985, which presumably meant that nationally there may have been close to one million young people, roughly one fifteenth of the population involved in sport. But in America it was reported that in the narrower youth bracket of 6-16 years there were approximately 20 million participants, not too much below one tenth of the population.⁷ The American magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, which covers a wide range of sports, is a long-established and successful enterprise whereas efforts to produce an equivalent Australian magazine have consistently foundered.

It is also doubtful whether Australians can claim to be a unique sports-watching country. It is true that the Melbourne Cup and the Victorian Football League Finals always draw bumper crowds and, these days, a huge television audience. However, in America large crowds turn up not only to watch the major events of one code or another but are also very much in evidence at college football home-and-away games: crowds up to 100,000 at these games are not uncommon. Sport also occupied 15 per cent of television time in North America by the mid-1970s whereas it had not reached 10 per cent of TV time in Australia by the mid-1980s.

The American case alone must throw some doubt on the case that Australians are unique in their passionate attachment to sport. What, then, is the nature of our sporting obsession? A convenient starting point is to examine the case presented by those who argue that we have a unique sporting passion.

It is based, first of all, on qualitative evidence; on the opinions of visitors, such as Trollope and Twopeny in the 19th century,, who noted the preoccupation with 'outdoor sports' and added that 'if the interest taken in them proportionate to the population be the

criterion, this [Australia] may fairly claim to be the most sporting country in the world.' Such comments continued to be made regularly in the next century such as the much quoted observation of Mrs Ed Clark, the wife of a former United States Ambassador to Australia, who wrote in the 1960s that 'living in Australia is like living in a gymnasium - there's always somebody practising something.' ⁸

While there may be some truth in these perspectives, there is a danger in making a case on the subjective impressions of visitors who may have wanted to perpetuate some convenient flattering or un-flattering myth about the country. Australians, it seems, have always accepted too uncritically the favourable or unfavourable comments of visitors and have not examined the credentials of the visitor, such as the wife of an American official, to make informed and objective comments on our culture.

The case for a unique sporting passion is on sounder ground when it rests on more objective factors such as the impressive number of sports champions produced particularly in the period after the Second World War. There is no doubt that during the 1950s and 1960s, a golden era of Australian sport, that the performance of Australians in athletics, cycling, swimming, tennis and a number of other sports was outstanding. The American magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, a more reliable and hard headed source than some of the visitors, conducted a survey in 1962, of sporting performance by country, and concluded that on a per capita basis Australia was one of the leading sporting countries in the world.

It is highly likely that Australia, along with America, is one of a select band of industrialised societies which place a high premium on sport, that is, modern organised sport. There may well be a significant comparison to be made between societies, like Australia and the United States, with a highly developed taste for modern sport and societies, like India, which are still developing an appetite for modern sport. In a recent book on Indian cricket journalist Mihir Bose has argued that the roots of sport in India are still comparatively 'shallow': cricket is much stronger in some regions and among some social groups, than others and the literature produced by the game is relatively slight. Bose includes an interesting quote from controversial sports commentator, Ashwini Kumar,

whom he refers to as 'the Brian Clough of Indian sport'

India has no base for, sports despite its enormous population. India does not have the wherewithals. Sport in our country is khel-khud (just a bit of fun). It goes against the grain of our country, against our tradition to play sports the way they do in the West. If a child in our country returns from the playground he is not asked by his parents how he fared, but slapped for missing his studies and wasting time in Khel-khud. Sport is against our Indian ethos, our entire cultural tradition.³

It is also true that in certain eras, notably in the 1950s and 1960s, Australian sporting performance was exceptional by any standards and the country gained a reputation as one of the great sporting nations. However, there have been other eras before and since when Australia has been far less successful at sport. It is also true that Australia has been ahead of other countries at some times and in other sports. The development of the surf-bathing craze in the 1900s and surf-board riding in the 1960s and the 1970s would be a case in point.

Perhaps, too, a case could be made that Australians became more obsessive about sport than the British, who gave us most of our sports. England was far superior to Australia in cricket when cricket tours first began in the 1869s, however, in Test competition since 1877 Australia still has a superior record (though the margin has been dwindling lately) despite a much smaller population. One reason, suggested by cricket historians, was 'our' greater determination to win, to thrash the motherland. Other reasons point to the more favourable Australian climate and the fact that cricket became more of a mass game in Australia than it did in Britain. But due caution needs to be exercised before we accept any generalisation that Australians are more sports-minded than the British in general. For, in some areas, Australia was probably behind Britain. Football became a mass spectator sport in England much earlier than any of the Australian codes, and professionalism had advanced sufficiently in Britain for the Professional Footballers Association to emerge in 1907 long before any similar associations were formed in Australia. The rugby split in Britain took place twelve years before the Australian split.

Until someone works out a more objective method of comparing

the sporting participation and commitment of one population with another broad cultural generalisations should be advanced with due caution, or perhaps, we need to find ways of comparing 'obsessions' from one society to another. There are even significant problems in generalising about Australians as a whole, ignoring or smoothing over class, gender and regional differences.

Let us assume at this point, for the point of view of dealing with the second premise, that Australians are one of a number of modern societies with a significant sporting passion and ask whether this obsession is at the expense of high culture. For, if it is so, it differs from America which is a society where 'low' culture (such as sport) and 'high' culture (such as opera, ballet, classical music, literature) both seem to flourish. Sport, in addition, is not cut off from intellectual discourse: sport has been the subject of much fine literature by novelists such as Hemingway.

The argument has probably been advanced more by J. W. C. Cumes, in his study of leisure times in early Australia, than anyone else. Cumes has argued that in the deprived environment of a convict society high culture had little opportunity to take root and develop. The abnormal conditions favoured rather more the strong commitment to low culture, sport in particular, which took strong root and has flourished ever since. The growth of a sporting obsession in this period has established the pattern which contemporary society has followed in which sport is preeminent and high culture comes a poor second. This is a perspective which seems to have been echoed recently by Donald Horne who has suggested that there is not enough column space and time slots for intelligent discussion on culture since so much of the media time and space is taken up by sport.

There are two important assumptions in the Cumes argument. One, is that Australians developed a sporting obsession for negative reasons because of the lack of alternative cultural pursuits. Secondly, Cumes tends to look at the choice of low versus culture as an either/or situation. By choosing to pursue low culture Australians opted out of the high cultural road.

Both the above assumptions are open to criticism. John O'Hara, in a recent study on gambling in Australia, has suggested that there is another way of looking at the commitment to sport in Australia's

colonial era.¹⁰ Unlike in Britain, where there was strong middle-class anti-sport lobbies in the era up to the 1850s, Australian colonial elites, like the English gentry, were far more tolerant of the rougher sports, including blood sports and sports linked with gambling, and sport in general and the thrust to promote 'rational recreation' as an alternative to sport was relatively weak. So it could be argued that the population of Australia was far 'freer' (within the constraints of work and money limitations) to opt for sport (and gambling and drinking for that matter) than their English counterparts. The interest in sport then may not then have been a negative choice, due to the deplorable lack of (high) culture in the colonial setting.

More importantly, concentration on the sporting obsession overlooks the fact that Australians pursued other aspects of culture with great relish. Given the greater problems and expense of developing institutions of high culture, such as opera, the growth of serious music in Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century was most impressive, and the era leading up to Melba has been referred to as the golden era of Australian opera. The astonishing reception given to Melba, who had a number of tours of triumph in the 1920s, suggest that Australians craved just as much for a Melba as a Bradman or a Phar Lap.

It could also be argued that a commitment to sport need not be at the expense of a commitment to high culture; in fact the either/or high versus low cultural dichotomy is something of a myth as Alan Swingewood has argued.¹¹ It was a myth perpetuated long ago by cultural pessimists and conservatives such as Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot who feared that the expansion of popular culture, including sport, must undermine high culture. But while popular culture has benefited from the rise of mass communications so too has high culture: more people are exposed to theatre and opera today than ever before whether it be in a formal theatre, a Park, on television or on videocassette. High and low culture also overlap at many points: in America and England, for instance, there have been many intellectuals who have had a deep appreciation of both such as novelist Hemingway in America and Neville Cardus in England.

It is probably true that Australia has had more sporting heroes than in any other arena. It is also probably true that Australia is one of the more sport-obsessed countries in that a highly-developed sporting passion is more of the luxuries enjoyed in more affluent societies where the sport product is more highly developed and packaged. Undoubtedly Australia has demanded heroes in the past in part to bolster the national ego. Sporting heroes/heroines have been easier to produce than a Melba or a Sutherland. But when Sutherland took La Scala by storm in the 1950s Australians, as a whole, reacted with great enthusiasm. Heroes and heroines have been embraced enthusiastically whether they sing, dance, chase or hit a ball, make a film and even write.

When he took over as General Manager of the Australian Opera Patrick Veitch expressed the hope that he might be able to persuade some cricket fans to attend opera. Veitch, like many Australian intellectuals, seemed to believe that there is a separate audience for sport as distinct from high culture. I suspect that North American Veitch may well be surprised to discover that many cricket followers were already in the opera audience, that the audiences for sport and high culture overlap. I happen to derive just as much inspiration from the world-class performance in a various fields of cultural endeavour; whether it be a fighting Allan Border century over six hours or Rita Hunter singing Brunnhilde (over about the same time span) or John Bell in the role of Hamlet.

Having argued a point of view at some length I still cannot disagree with Brian Stoddart's central argument that sport has played a very significant role in the formation of Australian culture. What I am suggesting is that we need to know more about the nature of our 'obsession', when and how it developed, what was inherited, what was adapted and why? Who was it that promoted the ideology of sport and why was the message so readily accepted? Some of the answers may be found in a closer analysis of the era, 1820-70, a crucial period in the rise of modern sport in Australia. Cumes has scratched the surface but we now need to dig a little deeper. There is also a need to look again, and more closely, at the era of the 'games revolution', from the 1870s, when sport and Australian cultural formation were even more closely intertwined.

NOTES:

1. There is some ambiguity in the development of this argument. On p.3 Stoddart seems to suggest that the Australian passion for sport is different in that it is a passion for sport as a whole. On p.4 he seems to argue that many people in other societies have just as strong a passion for a sport or possibly sport in general but he seems to imply, though the language is not clear, that Australian sport plays more of a role in our cultural formation than it does in other societies. Stoddart, however, does not disassociate himself sufficiently from the long-established wisdom, of Dunstan and others, aired in the volume by Jaques and Pavia (1976) and even echoed in *Australian Sport: A Profile* (1985). He includes, for instance on pp. 15-16, the views of the visitors on Australian sport, from Twopeny to Mrs Clark, which have been quoted by many of the above writers.
2. Brian Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in the Australian Culture*, Sydney, 1986, pp. 3-4.
3. Keith Dunstan, *Sports*, Melbourne, 1973.
4. J.W.C. Cumes, *Their Chastity was Not too Rigid: Leisure Times in Early Australia*, Melbourne, 1979.
5. Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, p.4.
6. Cumes, *Their Chastity was not too Rigid*, p.86.
7. Department of Sport, Recreation and Tourism and the Australian Sports Commission, *Australian Sport: A Profile*, Canberra, 1985, p.90.
8. A. Clark, 'Australian Adventure', *Letters from an Ambassador's Wife*, Austin, 1969.
9. Mihir Bose, *A Maidan View: The Magic of Indian Cricket*, London, 1986, p.18.
10. John O'Hara, 'Gaming and Betting in Australia 1788-1983: A Social and Cultural Analysis', unpub. Ph.D., University of New England, 1985.
11. Alan Swingewood, *The Myth of Mass Culture*, London, 1977.