

# AUSTRALIAN SPORTS REVIEW 1986: AN ECLECTIC VIEW

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One of the most attractive features of sport is its infinite variety. While most of us may participate in only a few sports, we can empathise with and glory in many. This applies both nationally and locally. If it were not so, following sport would be a depressing pastime. Thus while 1986 was in some quarters a bad year for Australian sport, one only has to be a little selective to find some glorious highlights. In addition, in one or two areas, twelve metre yatching and cricket, the expected *coup de grace* was to be delivered in early 1987 and therefore can be happily left for my successor.

These reviews are intended to be highly personal. As such, I am prepared to say, as a non-golfer, that probably the Australian sports highlight of the year was the emergence of Greg Norman as undisputably the world's best golfer. He epitomizes the modern professional businessman/sportsman in a sport which is highly international, highly financed and highly televised. (More about this later). In a very competitive sport, he earned close to \$2 million in winning ten of the thirty or so events which he entered. The story is the more poignant because Norman had a history of coming second and thus could until recently qualify as an habitual bridesmaid. His potential has been clear for some years, but in the latter half of 1986 it was almost fully realised, though he still failed to win any of the American majors. The year was something of a fairy tale and may be difficult to repeat. He even 'led' Australia to victory in the Dunhill Cup teams' golf championship in September, thus retaining the trophy won in 1985.

While no other individual Australian sports person could contend with Norman, there were some notable successes in team events. Even

in benighted Adelaide we were aware that our respective Rugby League (Kangaroos) and Rugby Union (Wallabies) sides rampaged victorious around Europe and the British Isles. Both teams bear comparison with the 1982 sides. Whatever the financial problems of Australian Rugby, it certainly is successful in the international arena. In Rugby Union, beating the N.Z. All Blacks in New Zealand is comparable with beating the Poms in other sports, and has often proved much more difficult; but the Wallabies cleared this hurdle.

For some years Australia has had high pretensions in Hockey, particularly in mens's hockey. Rated as one of the best two or three teams in the world for a decade, they had never won an Olympic Gold medal or the World Hockey Cup. In October they defeated England (the Poms!) in the final of the 6th World Cup and in addition the veteran Rick Charlesworth was made captain of the World Eleven—a richly deserved honour.

Perhaps the major world sporting event of 1986 was the soccer World Cup in Mexico City. Unhappily, courtesy of Scotland, the Soccerroos were not there. However, Australia did have an impact through referee Chris Bambridge who early on disallowed what appeared to be a good goal by Spain against Brazil. It is only fair to say that his critics had the benefit of slow motion replays and that his linesman, who should have had a better view, agreed with him. (Anyway superstar Diego Maradonna later upstaged Bambridge, by scoring a *bad* goal which was allowed). More seriously it was sad for the progress of Australian soccer that we were not there, though realistically one doubts if the present Soccerroos would have progressed far, such is the standard in this truly world-wide sport.

The other great world event of 1986 was the Edinburgh Commonwealth Games in July and August. No one denies that the Commonwealth Games are second-rate to the Olympics and with a greater than normal crop of inane boycotts, these games were even weaker than usual. Nevertheless, Australians acquitted themselves well and Lisa Martin and Robert de Castella completed a notable double in winning their respective marathons. Debbie Flintoff also won a gold medal in the 400 m. hurdles and also proved her *absolute* ability when she went close to the world record in Oslo in July. The American *Track and Field News* was pretty well on the ball when it placed De Castella,

Martin and Flintoff, together with Darren Clark, as the only Australians in the top ten in their respective events.

Cricket is not a world sport, but it has a special place in Australian hearts and certainly in this reviewer's! Previous reviewers have recognised this special place, and probably none have been confronted with any more disastrous year for Australian cricket. Indeed it is difficult to find very much good to say about it. In January Australia was dismissed for 70 by New Zealand in Adelaide, the incomparable Hadlee taking 3-14. The unpredictability of the 'pyjama' game or perhaps the wisdom and capriciousness of the selectors was illustrated a fortnight later when Australia defeated the World Champion team India, 2-0 in the finals. After this it has been mostly downhill in Australian cricket, both on and off the field. Batsman-wicketkeeper Phillips called the selectors 'idiots' and received a \$2,000 fine and one suspects continuing opprobrium. Throughout much of the year, former Test Captain Kim Hughes battled in the Federal Court for the right to play in local cricket. He finally won, though one feels that almost everyone involved was a loser. Like my 1984 predecessor, I have more than a little sympathy for Hughes in what seems to have been an unnecessarily ill-starred career.

One of the great Australian cricketing memories of 1986 was the magnificent 210 by Dean Jones in the Madras Test, which eventually led to only the second tied test match in cricket history. If I may trespass into 1987, and please one of my daughters, Jones in this innings gave notice of the abundant talent which he displayed in early 1987.

In the latter part of 1986 Australian cricket did little right internationally. Unforgiveably it started badly in the bid to regain the Ashes from what even the Poms described as a woeful England team. It *Will not* placate most cricket followers to know that our women's cricket team is the world's top one-day side and that we beat the Poms in the last test series played in Australia. This is a statement largely of fact *not* of prejudice!

One of the great achievements of 1986, and one which recalled a glorious past, was our twenty-sixth winning of the Davis Cup in the last week of the year. With our love of stardom it was hailed as an

individual achievement by Pat Cash, but in reality it was a team effort, led by Cash who is perhaps our only world class player. The final against Sweden had everything, as the cliché goes including the fact that in all probability it will be the last Davis Cup tie played at the Kooyong Courts. For sheer drama the final just after Christmas would take some beating!

There were several other notable achievements in international sport, some of which were almost ignored either because they involved women or veterans, or because they were in relatively less popular sports. For example, how many of us enthused in August when our womens' polo team beat the mighty U.S. to take the gold medal in the World Swimming Championships. A few days later the Australian mens' eight won the gold medal in the World Rowing championships and a little known sculler Peter Antonie likewise won a gold medal in his weight class. Even less feted was nineteen years old Gary Neiwand, who won a gold medal in sprint cycling at the Commonwealth games and then confirmed his enormous promise by being the fastest Westerner in the World cycling sprint championships a little later. Indeed, cycling which seems to surface mainly at Commonwealth and Olympic Games times is a sport in which Australia excels, but relatively few Australians know this.

In the middle of the year, there was a flurry of interest in boxing, as Barry Michael and Jeff Fenech retained their respective IBF titles. Few of us can understand boxing accolades, since there are two or even three quite separate circuits, but most of us knew that these two had done well.

Much of the emphasis so far has been on international sport and indeed it does seem that parochial sport is increasingly ignored or merely seen as a training ground for international competition. It is not always clear why there should be this dichotomy on why beating foreigners is preferable to beating ones country men or women. Nevertheless it is so. So far I have said nothing about that most parochial of all sports, Aussie Rules! Not that it did not have an eventful year. Much was said and written about it and much of it was more akin to business than to sport. In this sense it perhaps provided the 'type specimen' of modern sport, riven with business intrigue. Early in the year we were treated to daily analysis of the ownership of the Sydney Swans and the affairs of

Dr. Edlesten. Later in the year, and under pressure from falling attendances and with several clubs in financial crisis, the all powerful VFL began to float its expansion plans. At one stage these negotiations were about as complex as the BHP takeover or Herald and Weekly Times affair. After many weeks of rumour, innuendo and bad feeling, we (outside Victoria) were finally told that there would be an expanded VFL competition, not a national league in any real sense. Such is business!!

My immediate predecessor, John O'Hara, in his Australian Sports review 1985 spent some time discussing, '...increasing professionalism and sporting entrepreneurship', and indeed singled out the sale of the Sydney Swans to Dr Geoffrey Edlesten, or whoever it really was, as perhaps the most significant event in Australian sport that year. Normally it would be inappropriate to pick up the same theme just a year later, but this trend is so persuasive, fundamental and has developed so rapidly, that it bears a second look. It also allows the reviewer unbridled scope for displaying his or her prejudices, and don't we all like to do that?

The issues are immensely complicated including among others the following. Can sport survive without being professional? If it does survive, does it do so at the expense of its very essence? Does television increasingly shape the evolution of sport? What is the real criteria for judging the success of sport in general, rather than of particular interests? Perhaps the most fundamental question concerns the nature of sport and whether it has characteristics which are in any sense absolute and whether these characteristics are compatible with professionalism and commercialism.

I am attracted to definitions of sport which stress its role as the manifestation of humans basic urge to play. As Egger has said in *The Sport Drug*, 'sport is an escape from life'. Herein lies a problem because commercialism and professionalism, in advanced economies inevitably mean that sport becomes *part* of ordinary life, very much like work, business, etc. As such it may no longer provide both for spectators and participants, those rather special features of true play. This is not to deny some of the benefits of commercialisation of sport, but simply to realise that there are costs and unless one believes in the instantaneous and complete beneficence of market forces, one should certainly at least question rapid change, especially when it appears to be serving rather

sectional and concentrated interests. We all know that the special needs of T.V., have subtly and sometimes not so subtly changed the rules of games, witness the sudden love affair with the six ball over in cricket. More 'serious' however, in the long run may be the demise of sport as play. Of course, we have a whole new multi-million dollar industry, which employs a lot of people, earns foreign exchange both directly and indirectly, and undeniably gives pleasure to millions. What we must do is to recognise that we have lost something, probably not purposefully, and that there may be a good argument for trying to retain some of the traditional aspects of sport in the face of such juggernauts as T.V. and big business. To deny this, is to be unthinking and/or to have blind faith in market forces.

What is interesting is that commercialism seems at times to kill the goose that lays the golden egg. I say seems, because it is a counterfactual proposition. Certainly the highly professional and commercial sports seem to be losing ground in the broad and in the longer period, to other leisure activities, which may provide those lost characteristics of true play or sport.

Nothing illustrates this better than cricket, where what seems to be excessive pursuit of short term profit has led to too much cricket even for devotees. Spectators, whether of the live game, or on T.V., sense that players are often bored and stale; and no occasion is really special any more. If you lose the Ashes, you get another chance almost immediately. Playing almost endlessly may be professional, but it does not foster joie de vivre or romance!

Similarly the VFL seems to be losing its crowds. Its solution seems to be to become more and more a business; but business is still bad and football has lost some of its engaging foolishness - play!

What happened on the footy field? Hawthorn trounced Carlton in the Grand Final, but in interstate games Western Australia once again suggested that they are really the best football state, in terms of producing the best players. Certainly, on the basis of population, they and South Australia do very well against the mighty Vics.

What of our other parochial competitions. Being parochial squared, I must record that Adelaide City and the Adelaide 36ers in one glorious weekend in October won the national mens' soccer and

mens' basketball titles. NSW won the Sheffield Shield; once again Queensland failed to land its first title, At Talaq a New Zealand horse, won the Melbourne Cup, though this reviewer scarcely considers that sport. Somebody won the Rugby Competitions in Sydney and in Brisbane? Happily there were lots of winners and near-winners all over Australia in all sorts of sports. Few of them were on T.V., few of them sold more beer, or cigarettes or tooth-paste for anybody!

To return to the beginning. The glory of sport is that it is self-contained, and of trivial and spontaneous nature. It comes from humanity not from the business meeting. Finally and in the spirit of eclectism, but with human failing, I must apologise for my neglect of many worthwhile sports. This was caused by ignorance and/or my inclinations. Such is the variety and diversity of sport and its followers that no doubt future reviewers will redress this balance.