

BARRACKERS' CORNER

This section considers barracking in both the Australian supportive and the English critical senses. We invite comments on articles or reviews in *Sporting Traditions*; but this corner is also open for readers' views on issues in sports history or contemporary sport.

"BORG WOULD'VE MURDERED THE MUG" (Wimbledon 1987, the day after)

It was the day after Wimbledon and not the sort of comment an Australian should make as the 'mug' referred to is Pat Cash who had just won the coveted men's singles championships.

Stupid yes, inappropriate yes, irrelevant you agree, but as someone once said in the back of a cab "arguing with people is useless unless you have some chance of changing their minds". When you can't its appalling to find that you frequently adopt the verbal push-and-shove, become a metaphoric bar-room brawler.

Nationalism is not the issue here, tennis is. Your favourites come from all around the world but in particular, you admire the grim, skull faced Czech, Ivan Lendl, epitome of the self made man and ardent disciple of a four lettered fact known as work.

Going into the match Lendl has won 64 singles titles, Cash three; Lendl has been the world's top ranked player in 1985, in 1986 and in the first half of this year but his dominance of tennis has never been complete. McEnroe's rapid decline has been matched by the almost indecent ascent of Boris Becker. Though Lendl won junior Wimbledon in 1978, he has never won a senior tournament on grass, he's not a natural volleyer (the commentators drone on interminably) though he's worked damned hard to make himself as good as he can be and the commentators tell you that as well.

Prior to this event Lendl declares he'd trade the title at Wimbledon even if it meant losing every other match for the next six months. He relaxes and smiles after beating Leconte but you prefer the mask, think he looks goofy without it, reckon he shouldn't expose the heart on the sleeve, reckon he's better as the killer who

steps on his opponent's throat. Lendl's problems are the question marks, ever the champion in search of the ultimate crown, he has a lot to lose.

Cash has everything to gain. The man who came from nowhere last year to reach the quarter finals and has spearheaded Australia to two David Cup triumphs in 1983 and 1986, has had a ruptured and strangely topsy-turvey career. He beats the world's best one day and falls to struggling also-rans the next.

But Wimbledon is Cash's second home, grass his surface and the Poms, who haven't looked like producing a home grown champion since Fred Perry in the 30s and keep dreaming of a Yorkshireman emerging from the coalface with a black and fierce desire and a thundering serve, get all maternal about their favourite colony and plump for Pat. Aussies (often pronounced Ossies) are 'cool' in the States we are told and the Yanks like a man with the street scrapping qualities of Connors and the Irish fire of McEnroe - they're rooting for Pat too. Some Europeans you presume have the thumbs up for Lendl.

You're prepared to discuss the match with a friend: how you reckon Lendl was tight from the beginning, couldn't get any rhythm or return of serve, couldn't begin to threaten Cash. Okay, you'd be prepared to grant Cash took the initiative, he was calmer, controlled, he shell-shocked Lendl in his first service game with brilliant returns on both wings. But you wanted to say that was because he was calmer, because he was the underdog, because he could lose without losing in a way.

You wanted to examine the psychology preceding the match, the inner feelings of each man because when the play unfolded two players hitting the ball over a net seemed only a small part of the game, the die had already been cast.

But your friend wanted to talk about what he saw: Lendl's volley cracking under pressure, his serve falling apart, Cash's ability to run balls down and retrieve anywhere in the court. All perfectly true, but all perfectly obvious.

When it was over and the statistics spelt out the score 7-6 6-2 7-5 Cash's magnificent spontaneous action of clambering into the crowd to hug his family and coach was the stuff to knock the stiffness out of Wimbledon. Oh! How you'd wished that champions like

Connors or McEnroe from the world's greatest republic or one of the European Commies, who deep down must believe in the equality of the common man, might just once have bared a bum at the Royal Box. Or that just once the Duke and Duchess of Kent, ball boys and officials might be rolled up in the giant carpet rolled down for the final presentations and whisked away so that the players; true kings and queens, princes and princesses can experience their glory unfettered at the time which matters most.

There are many dimensions and ways of seeing and you felt you had fine observations to offer, subtle elements to discuss but your friend didn't want to hear them. He crushed you against a wall with an avalanche of cliches. "Lendl's never won on grass, he's not a natural volleyer, he cracked under pressure...never won on grass... not natural...cracks". Anyone could say that, keep on saying it but fortune gave you a chance as your friend paused to take breath for another flurry. You were offered an opportunity and you took it. "Borg" you said, lurching a little. "What?" "Borg wasn't a natural volleyer". You'd hit back with a straight left jab, striking him on the jaw. He was stunned, moved to consider something else. "I wonder how he would have gone against Cash?" he contemplated aloud. "Borg would've murdered the mug" you said, and immediately regretted it.

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MORE ON KILL FOR COLLINGWOOD

My main objection to McConville's review was its lack of professionalism, and his belated efforts to cloud the issue with woolly references to social anthropology are plainly at variance with the facts and cannot restore his credibility. McConville was clearly irritated by the importance accorded to Collingwood in this first serious history of an Australian Rules football club, yet still tries to deny it even though he wrote three years ago that he had "an ingrained prejudice against Collingwood". McConville's attempts

now to dispense left-handed compliments are no substitute for objective analysis. Since he originally claimed that my book was only "a history for those who live inside the CLUB", one has to wonder why he placed it on his reading list.

McConville, like a number of people involved in writing sports history in this country, seems obsessed with pursuing newspaper accounts of what sport means to the barracker in the Outer. If he had merely directed his original critique to my lack of a similar obsession, his subsequent reply that he was simply suggesting "a different way of doing things" might ring true. But, of course, that was not the main thrust of his original commentary.

More importantly, a reviewer must first analyze an author's argument before suggesting an alternative possibility. McConville's superficial comments suggest a superficial reading of my book. He remains oblivious to my explanation of why the Collingwood Football Club became more important than its suburb and how this affected its development. Ironically, McConville still asserts that my methodology only enables me to tell how Collingwood became great; everyone else who has read the book realizes that I also explained why.

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