

AUSTRALIAN SPORTS REVIEW 1987

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Early in May of 1987 Australia's latest boxing hero, Jeff Fenech, knocked out Thai fighter Samart Payakarun on the way to becoming the first Australian to hold two world titles en route to a possible three or four or more, depending on how many federations there are at any given time. Fenech was the classier part of a 1987 boxing revival which sickened those of us convinced about the incontrovertibility of medical evidence concerning brain damage, but, on this occasion as so often before, boxing provided an opening for social and historical reflection. At the conclusion of the contest Fenech seized the microphone at the Sydney Entertainment Centre to deliver an impromptu speech;

I love youse all! With 12,000 of the most beautifullest people in the world cheering me on, it's hard to feel pain. I know youse paid to see me and there's no way in the world I'd let youse all down. Thank youse all very much.

It was a telling sign of modern sport when the next morning, as reported by Janet Hawley of the *Age*, a public relations firm offered to teach Fenech how to make a "proper" speech.

I watched that fight having just left my mate Barry Andrews in Royal Canberra Hospital where he died a week later on May 15, and I remember hoping at the time that someone had recorded the speech because it was the stuff from which BG would have produced a great paper. This is not the place for a lengthy valedictory to Barry - that will come in the next volume of *Sporting Traditions* which will be a special issue dedicated to his memory. But it is worth recording here that many of us in sports history lost a very great friend when Barry died, a very great contributor to the cause of sports history, not to mention a fund of cricket stories (about himself and others), an encyclopedic source of information, and a very sharp sense of humour.

I miss Andrews a lot, and May 15 was for me the distinct low-point of 1987. And since then I have thought frequently about what a great shame it was that Barry never did hear and comment upon the Fenech oration, because I suspect that the man who analysed the humanity in Ginger Meggs would have made some shrewd comments in relation to the human side of sport, particularly about its contemporary and historical writing.

Through all of 1987, for example, Australian golfer Greg Norman underwent what must be one of the most publicised and prolonged agonies in sports history. Having won the 1986 British Open championship (one of my most enduring memories will be of his opening round 74 in the gales and lashing rainstorms of Turnberry, a display of strength and skill to those of us who could scarcely stand up in the storm) he later lost the USPGA title to Bob Tway who holed out from a bunker at the final green and then, a few months on, the Masters at the second hole of a playoff when Larry Mize holed an impossible pitch-and-run from 140 feet. Even though Norman then completed the longest tournament winning streak in over 40 years the critics were after him - he "choked" in the majors, they said, his marriage was breaking up, he was making too much money to really care, he lacked real class.

It was a remarkable attack but not, of course, an unusual one in Australia where the national habit of turning heroes into villains is particularly developed. Golf being what it is, Norman endured all of this with a largely good grace, pointing out gently at the end of one tournament that no-one had lost a war "out there" and that it was, in the last resort, still just a game.

Yet much of this human drama was overlooked by the bulk of writers. Certainly they recorded the circumstances and made a few predictable pronouncements about "choking" and the suchlike, but it was difficult to see Norman as a person in the midst of intense inner and competitive pressure. It could well be because much of the copy was written from in front of the monitor in the press tent rather than from out on the course or the practice tee, or between tournaments. Because as Norman's book *Shark Attack* reveals, the butt of all the amateurish psychology and superficial assessment has a very keen mind along with deep ambition and pride and whose 1987 was a year of

personal disappointment.

An aside. In thinking about this piece I re-read Barry Andrews' review of 1984 in *ST* 1.2 and rediscovered his delightful blend of the personal and the analytical - *he did* make a lot of runs after Xmas that year. So I can reveal that my preoccupation with golf thus far stems from a return to that game early in 1986 after an absence of almost twenty years and following a season of playing club cricket in Barbados to finish my career in the sport BG loved so much. Like Norman, 1987 turned out to be a year of frustration and effort spent on eliminating a couple of glitches from my swing. Norman's heart-ener came at Palm Meadows early in 1987, mine at Federal shortly before Xmas when two great rounds cut my handicap by 5 strokes and created great ambitions for 1988. So the Shark and I have this affinity.

Anyway, in the midst of all this reflection it struck me that along with impersonalised sport has come a lot of impersonalised writing both contemporary and historical. We were warned about the signs a long time ago when *Canberra Times* columnist (and CAE colleague) Maurice Dunleavy reviewed *Sport In History* to find it lacking in real people. In my own work there is an inherent contradiction : while I'm possessed in the research phase to follow every quirky detail, in the synthesis I often overlook the detail in search of the analytical sweep and consequently have to force at least a bit of the colour back in. In some senses living and playing and researching West Indian cricket helped reorient me with a host of characters inevitably barging their ways in.

Not that I'm advocating a sort of cuddly koala approach to writing about sport or a retreat into antiquarianism at the expense of analysis. Out of that analysis comes debate, and out of that comes a literature, some of which we like/agree with, some of which we do not. Which is the point at which I am not going to reply to the reviews of *Saturday Afternoon Fever*. As Barry once remarked, reviewing is often the art of saying "this is not the book I'd have written if I'd written this book"; all food for thought but not, mostly, for prolonging, even where Collingwood is concerned. But it is nice to note the different labels which the one book can attract - where one leftist can find a flowed, formless mass another can find a fine

materialist account. The great thing about reviews is that they encourage people to keep thinking and writing, but no-one mentioned characters or humanity.

Of everything I read in 1987 it was probably Elliot Gorn's *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting In America* which came closest to the humanistic analysis which will show us a way forward. Not that it is as unblemished as many of the reviews would have us believe. With its emphasis on prize-fighting as a masculinising force in early America it is almost as much a tract for the 1980s as a work of history. But it does have a sense of warmth for its characters. Given the Fenech speech, of course, it is striking (sorry) that Gorn's subject is boxing and that the sport will soon produce two other works of great promise: Dennis Brailsford on British prize-fighting and Jeffrey Sammons on the twentieth century fight game.

Looking back over 1987 the opportunities for such writing simply pile up. Pat Cash went through a Norman-type trauma, winning Wimbledon against Ivan Lendl (whose only real weakness seems to be an inability to alter the game plan when it doesn't run to plan) then succumbing to a series of early-round defeats which brought the dismissal of his English triumph as a flash in the pan. In Australian eyes he was redeemed by winning the Davis Cup and almost the Open. It would have been nice to have had the American writer Frank Deford get to work on Cash because the biography of Bill Tilden is still one of the better books on sport,

Much of 1987 provided the stuff of genuine tragedy to inspire even the dullest of us. Personally I shed no tears for Australia's demise in the World Cup rugby union tournament, a state brought on by anathema for coach Alan Jones' bombast (and views on South Africa) along with a residual respect for my New Zealand rugby upbringing all those years ago. Now you know why I regard with deep suspicion the Gareth Williams-David Smith account of the 1905 New Zealand-Wales match! Of course Bob Deans scored the try.

Having witnessed at least some of the America's Cup drubbing in Fremantle it was easy to feel sorry for Chris Dickson and Iain Murray, if only because it was quite evident that Big Bad Dennis was very keen to win whatever happened. With the current debacle, it is clear that some sports historian will have a boatload of material for an inside story on sailing and the Cup.

In a different vein there is a great story to be written on Australian women's sport through the World Netball championships. Australia's 1987 demise in Glasgow was one of the real but untold shocks of the year which somehow sums up the status of women's sport in Australia.

I suppose what I'm looking for is a more ethnographic approach (it's my turn to tell everyone else what to do). Take cricket, for example. Having gone winless for so long Australia won the 1986-7 and 1987-8 World Series Cup, the World Cup then, wonder of wonders, a test series. Come the Bicentennial Test against the Poms, though, the rot returned with the commentators (Norm O'Neil and Neville Oliver, I think) seriously opining that the only area of the game in which Australia excelled was running between the wickets. Thank God Norman May did only one session because we might have had a "running between wickets" reminiscence. What we did not learn, though, except from an unguarded Dirk Welham, was the organisational lunacy which the Australian players had to put up with behind the scenes.

It is said that the team bus, driven by Dean Jones, could find no place to park because the scorer had to be let in, that the team then had to troop from Moore Park to the Sydney Cricket Ground, that Alan Border's wife and David Boon's mum had a lot of trouble convincing authorities of their desire to see the game rather than stand in the general queue. Barry would have loved it, because out of humour comes both fun and analysis. (Quote of the Year. Jack Gibson. Rugby League. "Pain only hurts if you start to feel it"). I wonder how much of this we miss in our research either by ignoring it, not knowing what to do with it, or not even looking for it?

Which brings us to a problem, I think, especially evident to those of us who have been knocked back for big things on the largely unstated but made clearly obvious grounds that sports studies are still considered trivial. While there is no doubt that progress has been made, sports history is still a poor relation as evidenced by its treatment in the historical profession's "official" Bicentenary *Australians* series. Sport flits in and out, at best, and as one lay reviewer noted it is ridiculous that Australian Rules rated just seven lines in the *Dictionary*. Even rugby league supporters have to admit that Australia's principal autochthonous game deserves

more than that. Sport is still largely dismissed as fun and frivolity even if lip service is paid to it (Richard Stremski will be heartened that at least John Molony likes *Kill for Collingwood*). For a major Australian social institution sport is still taboo for "serious" historians, it seems, in the eyes of the establishment.

Which is where the problem comes in. As Barry Andrews recognised quickly and early, a lot of the inner meaning of sport is best reached through its characters and its humour, both on and off the field, which highlights the ridiculous, reveals the not-so-obvious and makes sense of stupidity - why did Australian cricketers award the nickname of "Dave" to Javed Miandad? Me-and-Dad, Dad and Dave. Why do Australians drink out of saucers? Because all the cups are in New Zealand (or were until Australia's 1987-8 cricket series win). But if we start taking that track into our material we will be considered even more marginal than we are already by the mainline academics.

It has been said before but it will do no harm in print. We have had no appointments of sports specialists to university history departments, there are still only a couple of completed Ph.D. theses through such departments, most of us who are sports specialists come from other areas and with the trend towards early retirement we might soon be playing rather than teaching about sport. Hence my concern for golf. Over ten years on and we are still struggling to create a sub-industry. We do not have it on our own because, if anything, the Americans and the British are as badly off. The point is, once we disappear, who will interpret Jeff Fenech-type speeches?

So the professional choice is clear, to me at least. Either we keep going the way we have, trying to gently ingratiate ourselves to our alleged superiors by way of serious, timid works, or strike out in some new directions and see what happens. As I keep discovering, there is a lot of material out there on sport all over the world which no one has touched - maybe we need to talk to SBS.

Which brings me to Wayne Gardner. A lot of old petrol-heads must have been delighted at the rapid rise of bike racing from the cause of Bathurst riots to media respectability as the ubiquitous Will Hagon popped up on yet another media outlet to seriously ponder the state of affairs at a wide range of circuits. Why is

it that leading debtor nations such as Argentine and Brazil are mixing it with the likes of Japan? Andrews would have loved Gardner, the Wollongong battler sacked from a factory for spending too much time on a bike only to find fame, riches, a Swan ad and a home in Monaco (along with Bob Cowper and other Elders refugees) by beating a couple of Americans. For once, the Sportsperson of the Year people got it right. And it was exciting, which is what we need to get.

Take cricket. Instead of looking at it in the way we have done we need to look laterally, if you like. A social history of umpires could not fail to turn up all sorts of exciting possibilities. For me, perhaps the most outrageous of the year's happenings concerned the unfolding drama of Mike Gatting versus Shakoor Rana. By the time Gatt The Pratt (his own sobriquet) arrived in Australia he was, declaring quite openly that *all* cricket tourists to Pakistan in the past 37 years had been cheated. What with that and the Test and County Cricket Board's poor handling of the whole affair it was as if the Empire had never ended. Underlying it all was a very nasty and unmistakeable streak of racism. Post-colonial Commonwealth relations through the medium of cricket umpires. And the stories are there. I once heard Brian Hastings (former New Zealand batsman) tell how on a tour of India he took a new bat out in a test innings, faced two balls, got given out LBW and retreated to the pavilion holding his bat aloft to display the two bright red blobs on the blade. But he did not stick his fingers up the umpire's nostrils.

And there is surely getting to be a great book in New Zealand-Australia relations as seen through sport? Being in New Zealand at the time of the Dyer Catch/non-Catch (depending on your allegiance) was highly instructive, because their media became even more vitriolic than the worst Australian tabloid. One media moment came during the third test with former New Zealand 'player John Morrison commenting on television (ironically, they took the Channel Nine feed). Danny Morrison (no relation) hit Craig McDermott "very adjacent" (whatever happened to Frank Tyson?). Morrison slammed the umpire's negation of the appeal as an "appalling" decision, safely 200 metres away from the action at the MCG. His eye was never that good- when he was playing.

The thing is, comrades, fifteen years on (in my case) I'm more than ever convinced that we are onto a good thing. The more you look at a lot of the so-called new social history the more self-defeating a lot of it is. No-one has yet explained adequately to me why madness and prisons and labour unions and hospitals and medieval French villages and Melbourne suburbs are inherently more acceptable professionally than sport. Yet to read the journals they are. I find all those subjects fascinating, but I know that sport can say as much if not more about the human condition. If nothing else, then, we still need to bombard the non-sport journals and the non-sport conferences.

So there it is, my 1987. You will divine that it was sometimes funny, sometimes frustrating, sometimes successful, sometimes traumatic, but always instructive. And in the black moments, of which there are always a few, the Greg Norman philosophy of "it's only a game" was always heartening, and I'm not talking just about my golf for I often hear people talk about the "playing games" aspect of our profession. There's always more fascinating research to do, another piece to write. After all, it's not a bad way of making a living. During the year I watched on-the-spot the America's Cup in Perth, Australia score 274 then lose a one-dayer to Pakistan at the WACA (in the Sheraton bar later Tony Crozier and Des Haynes couldn't believe it), baseball at Parry Stadium, the Eagles get massacred by the Swans at the SCG, harness-racing at Scioto Downs (as James Thurber said, you can look it up), the first tennis at Melbourne's new centre, and played golf in Australia, New Zealand and Samoa.

To borrow Jeff Fenech, to see all that and to get to write and broadcast about it as well might be the "most beautifullest" thing in the world. But we need to think about growing in it as well, which is why I still think it a shame Barry didn't get to hear the speech.