

REGIONAL SENTIMENT AND AUSTRALIAN SPORT

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I

The political geographers tell us that the identification of people with particular territorial communities is an important part of their existence. We must note, however, that men and women identify not only with a particular piece of territory, but they also feel empathy with the territory's "political and economic system, its methods and goals, and with its history and its destiny". For the inhabitants of any area, there is a bonding brought about by the sharing of this common heritage, largely through the socialisation which occurs within the society. This socialisation confirms the virtues of the territory and its residents, but it also induces hostile attitudes towards outside groups and individuals, as well as to the territories they inhabit. The best-known of all territorial sentiments, of course, is the love of the nation-state, and nationalism has long been understood to be a major political attitude.

Local patriotism must not be forgotten, however, and the love of a sub-national region can also be an extremely important factor in accounting for certain political development. For our purposes, the word "region" refers to a geographical area which may well have distinctive physical and cultural features, which are distinct from those of neighbouring areas. It may be an area on one side of a mountain range, or may be an island off the mainland, while cultural distinctiveness may be seen in language, customs or dress. Such characteristics can be seen easily by outsiders - the many regions in the Soviet Union, for example, are often demarcated by geographical features, but are also based on quite separate racial and cultural characteristics. In other cases, however, differences between particular regions may by no means be apparent to outsiders, yet are very real to residents, as in the case of the suburbs north and west of the River Yarra which traditionally see themselves as distinct from those

residents from the other side of the river, a factor of great relevance to explaining ALP electoral performance in Melbourne. A region is therefore not only to be found on a map, but it is also to be found in the minds of its residents, for it is their perception of their distinctive and separate identity from the rest of the population that makes a region a political manifestation. "Regionalism" grows from this awareness, being an attitude which sees the love and protection of a home area as an important part of an individual's political attitudes.

It is also important to note that an individual can hold many "regionalisms" within himself. In Australia, there can be loyalty to the nation, the State, a part of a State, a town or city, a suburb, even the street in which an Australian lives. A country resident can see differences that exist between himself and a city dweller, while a resident of Gippsland regards himself as different from a resident of Victoria's Western District. To possess a number of such loyalties does not in itself mean that one cannot respond to each at different times, and at times one can give one greater prominence than another: New South Wales Premier Greiner can call for the national flag to be flown in New South Wales schoolyards, but can also assert his determination to protect his State's 'sovereignty' from attacks made by the "centralist" Commonwealth Government.

Sub-national regional sentiment thus can manifest itself in various ways of relevance to politics, and examples might include a pride in local affairs that are seen as of more importance than matters affecting the wider community, the resentment shown at central government "ignorance" of local attitudes and needs, and the age-old rivalries of the city-country cleavage that helped spawn the Country Party in the 1920s and the National Farmers' Federation in the 1970s. It can also be seen affecting the government of the nation, for the federal system not only protects the substantial powers of the regional (State) governments, but it also gives the States many opportunities to block the aims of the Commonwealth; in relation between the States it can give strength to the smaller States in their battles with New South Wales and Victoria.

II

Whenever I talked about sport with Barry Andrews, it would not take him long to hark back to my Tasmanian origins: it was a part of the country about which he knew little, and its sport was a relative mystery to him. What, he would ask, was distinctive about sport in that part of the Commonwealth? Were there Tasmanian variations to familiar sports? Were there any sporting terms used that were unique to the State? what were the team names, nicknames, colours and emblems? Were any sports distinctive? What did sport mean for the island State? Who were its heroes? Throughout our discussions, there lurked his ever-present belief that the regional differences that existed in our sport were very important for many people, and that we should remember this when making any assessment of the place of sport in Australian society, for Barry was a scholar who was seized of the essential truth, expressed recently by Brian Stoddart, that

sport is an integral part of the Australian social fabric and plays a significant role in constructing that fabric.

In this essay I want to explore Barry's concern with the regional differences, as well as to remind sport historians of the importance of regional sentiment both for sport as well as for Australian society, for in this, as in so many other areas of our lives, sport reflects the society in which it is played.

III

PRIDE...

The best-known and most-written-about manifestation of regional sentiment is obviously the pride in the performance of locals: politicians and local newspapers have long appreciated the value in boosting the local product, and in sport, we are well aware of the pride in the performance of sportsmen and sportswomen who represent particular parts of Australia. Of course, to a large degree, this regional pride can be seen as simply a case of "us against them", which has been described as a natural part of people's make-up, though local socialisation may operate to reinforce this. An important aspect of country sport is the continuing rivalry between towns which reflect the nine-

teenth century rivalries which grew over the placing of such government facilities as courthouses and railheads, and which have never died. The old rivalry between the towns of the LaTrobe Valley in sports like Australian football and basketball is an example, as is the rugby league rivalry between towns throughout the different regions in New South Wales. Another aspect of this is the regional sentiment that is obvious when the smaller community is able to take on and beat the "big boys" in the larger and usually more established area - Western Australian and South Australian response to defeating the Victorians in Australian football, and Queensland victories over New South Wales in the rugby codes are among the best-known, but there have been countless others that have been far less obvious but no less important for the communities involved, including the excitement in Canberra at winning two National Basketball League titles, or the pride in Ulverstone over the town's dominance of Tasmanian club basketball for a period.

Within some states, regional teams have played a very important part in the development of sport. In Tasmania, for instance, the existence of sizeable populations in the North (Launceston) and North-West of the State has seen a great deal of competition on an inter-regional basis: as a boy growing up in the 1950s I was well aware of the depth of feeling in the annual Australian football matches between the TFL (Southern), NTFA (Northern) and NWFU (North-West) teams. In North Queensland the organisation of North Queensland teams in many sports is a long-standing practice: even to the extent of having North Queensland representation at some interstate competitions. Partly, such regional organisation is designed to enable small centres of population to compete with the capital city, partly it is to overcome perceived neglect, as when the North Queensland Soccer Federation broke away from the Queensland body in 1983, and it is partly designed to build on regional pride: "Proud to be North Queensland" was the slogan of the first North Queensland Games, held in 1984.

Giving added point to this regional pride can be the way in which the locals may well see sport as a means of gaining revenge

for the region having suffered in some way at the hands of outsiders. The local can take comfort as the local sportsman asserts his or her superiority on those outsiders, and in so doing indicates the obvious virtues possessed by the region. There is pride also in the local's performance having put his or her region "on the map": the effort to secure a New South Wales government grant of 500 for Ned Trickett, and the claims that Bill Beach brought fame to the Illawarra district, are nineteenth century sculling examples, but a hundred years later the Western Australian success in sport helped make people more aware of his State. In another context, we can see similar views giving strength to the major city football clubs that came from the "wrong side of the tracks": the Collingwoods, the South Sydneys, the Port Adelaides. The delight in defeating the "silvertails" of North Sydney and Manly-Warringah in the Sydney rugby league, for instance, has long been a great motivating argument for rugby league coaches, while former Footscray Football Club captain-coach, Charlie Sutton, claimed that Australian football was, for the people of Melbourne's western suburbs, "their caviar". When writing of the development of the Canberra Cannons basketball team, I referred to the development of such attitudes in the much-reviled "bush capital", and similar attitudes have been important in the brief histories of the rugby league teams from the Illawarra and Newcastle: "[admission to the Sydney Rugby League has] got to be good. The city's [i.e. Newcastle] been on a downer, and we believe this is one way than can help build up the place". Perhaps the area with the biggest regional chip on its shoulder is the Northern Territory, and it does not surprise to read a Territory journalist listing the visiting Australian football clubs beaten by the Northern Territory (Glenelg 1985, Essendon 1986, Sydney Swans 1987), and making the claim that this record had "become a rallying point for parochial Territory sports fans who love nothing better than to see big names from the big States get a hiding".

A factor about which much mythology has developed, is the home-ground advantage a team gains by playing in front of a parochial, one-eyed home town crowd. The once-dreaded trip for VFL

teams to Kardinia Park in Geelong, the fierce rugby league crowds at Redfern (South Sydney) and Kogarah (St George) Ovals in the Sydney Rugby League competition, or the loud anti-New South Wales roar of the Ballymore or Lang Park crowds at interstate rugby games in Brisbane, are the stuff that legends are built on - the malign influence of the Kardinia Park mob was talked about with dismay long after any apparent effect had waned markedly in the 1970s. A recent addition to this folklore are the claimed advantages gained by the home team in NBL matches at Hobart, Canberra or Newcastle, with Wollongong's notorious "Snakepit" described by one observer as "the League's most intimidating stadium".

The political importance of the pride that is based on regional sporting performance can be seen in the way politicians seek to capitalise upon their supposed links with this regional prowess. Politicians, who may also be prominent members of local sporting committees or booster groups, will invariably be seen associating themselves with successful regional teams, while Members of Parliament are not averse to singing the praises of their local teams in the parliamentary forum itself: the use of the Senate in 1988 by a Tasmanian Senator to praise a Tasmanian axeman is typical, as was the lavish praising of Melbourne's Chelsea Football Club in the House of Representatives in 1987 by the Member for Isaacs, or the reminder to the House by a Queensland MHR that the Canberra Raiders rugby league team's 1987 success was due to its domination by Queenslanders: In 1981, Tasmanian MHR, Michael Hodgman, organised a campaign seeking to "give a Tasmanian a game", in protest at the claimed injustice done to Tasmania because of the Australian cricket selectors' refusal to pick Tasmanian cricketers for Test matches.

This effort to make a connection between politics and regional sport can occasionally be seen in elections. The Queensland cricket captain's presence upon stage at the opening of the National Party's 1984 State campaign can be pointed to, while a party's use of a sporting hero as a candidate is often tied with that hero's links to a particular town or suburb: former Randwick rugby union player, Mike Cleary, standing for

Coogee, for instance. Here, the parties are attempting to take advantage of what some analysts of voting behaviour call the "friends and neighbours" effect, where a voter will support a local candidate irrespective of party affiliation. If the local candidate is a well-known sportsman, so much the better. Such a phenomenon can be seen in the case of Australian football star, Darrel Baldock, MHA for the Tasmanian division of Wilmot between 1972 and 1986. After a brief playing career in his home town of Latrobe in Tasmania's North-West, "Dashing Darrell" earned fame as captain of St Kilda's only VFL champion team in 1966, followed by success as a coach in Latrobe as well as New Norfolk in the South of the Island. The "friends and neighbours" effect seemed to be an important factor in accounting for many of his votes, and we must suppose that this was magnified by his prominence as a local football hero in each town. The 1976 Tasmanian election figures are illustrative. In that election, where Baldock secured 13.2% of the vote (there were 23 candidates) and was the second-highest ALP candidate, the sub-divisions of Latrobe and New Norfolk gave him 47.4% of his total vote, while the 15 other sub-divisions gave him 45.2% (the remainder came from absentee votes). In Latrobe he won 31.8% of all votes, and in New Norfolk his vote was 29.3%, the latter figure higher than the combined total of nine Liberals. Of seven ALP candidates in the division, Baldock won 53.4% of the party's Latrobe vote, and 42.2% of the New Norfolk return, topping the Labor list in each.

Of course, the Baldock story reminds us that the home-town hero has a special place in a region's view of itself. I have already referred to Bill Beach, but a perusal of the *Illawarra Mercury* over 50 years is revealing, for the newspaper always revered him as a local hero, and so, apparently, did many residents of the Illawarra region. The local boy or girl taking on the rest of nation is implicit in the term "The Boy from Bowral", as was a recent NBL programme reference to an Illawarra Hawks player who was described as "a basketball legend in his home town of Wagga". An intriguing twist to this, is that the Wagga boy can also be a hero in Wollongong - the preparedness to wear the local team's colours outweighs the factor of his being an out-

sider. Brian Taylor can move from Richmond Football Club to Collingwood Football Club, the latter a club with a long history of preferring the home-grown product, yet he is accepted immediately as a local. The previously-mentioned Queensland contingent in the Canberra Raiders are just as much 'locals' as are the residents of Canberra-Queanbeyan where the club is situated. Another basketball example is the procession of US imports that fly in and become home-town heroes overnight: Herb McEachin with the Canberra Cannons, Mark Davis with the Adelaide 36ers, or the peripatetic Cal Bruton with Brisbane/Geelong/Brisbane/Perth, are just three of the best-known. In the case of Eric Cooks of the Ballarat Miners, a Melbourne *Age* journalist puzzled over the Victorian country town's lionising of a Negro from Gary, Indiana, surmising that it was because he was a good player and was good-looking into the bargain - perhaps neither was as important as the fact that he was prepared to cross the Pacific to throw in his lot with Ballarat.

The other side of this local pride can be the depression and anger that can become evident if anticipated success is not forthcoming, for just as a town or region can see a sports team as representing the virtues of its citizens, so can defeats be taken very personally, for there seems to be more involved than just the loss of a few matches. The agonies within the Collingwood Football Club that have built up since its last VFL title in 1958, well illustrate this, but one can perhaps see it more clearly where the regional boundaries are clearer, as in the case of another VFL team, Geelong Football Club. Over the years, the city of Geelong has been notorious for its heavy emotional investment in its team's performance, and one suspects that not the least of the reasons for this is the rubbishing that Melbourne journalists have given to "Sleepy Hollow" for much of Geelong's history. Former Geelong player, Gareth Andrews, has pinpointed Geelong's isolation from the Melbourne centre of the VFL, plus the smallness of the city, as causing problems for the club:

It's a very isolated down there. Even if you're the 35th man in the club, people know you when you're walking down Moorabool Street,

For Geelong, then, every VFL match is a chance for the regional city to prove its worth in the wider Australian community, and especially in relation to metropolis 50 miles up the highway. All of this means that the city can find it hard to excuse defeats, and in 1980 the Geelong City Council, dismayed at the club's semi-final loss to Richmond, debated whether the Geelong street names, Richmond Place and Richmond Court should be expunged from the map. A player has noted the strength of feeling: "If you're not playing well, then you cop a fair bit of shit [in the town]". Such a response, so obvious in a high-profile competition as the VFL, can be multiplied many times in many other competitions, right across the nation. In the early years of the National Soccer League, for instance, very large crowds turned out in Newcastle and Canberra for matches featuring local sides, only to dissipate as the teams performed patchily in the national league. We may love our locals to win in the big time, but we can find it hard to swallow any failure on their part, though, paradoxically, years of gloom can be forgotten in a twinkling of an eye: when, in 1985, Hepburn Australian football team won its first premiership for 39 years, the Daylesford City Council held a civic reception for the Hepburn players and committee. According to the Club Secretary, the win was of great -emotional importance, having enormous "significance for the town".

IV

...AND BITTERNESS

Local pride can therefore be tinged' with much local ill-feeling, and one important factor affecting the political impact of regionalism is the development of bitterness caused by what is seen as a legacy of slights perpetrated by an administration/government that is centred elsewhere: the Western Australian move for secession in the early 1930s is the most serious example in our political history, but New State movements have also been prominent, most recently in North Queensland in the late 1970s. In sport, also, such political factors are mirrored in the history of particular areas. Could a reputable history of sport in

Queensland ignore the anguish over selection "bias" in regard to the continued overlooking of cricketers such as Ken Mackay, or the resentments over "favoured" treatment given New South Wales in the selection of players for national rugby league and rugby union teams? For national soccer coach, Frank Arok, to be criticised in early 1988 for his "failure" to heed the quality of Queensland players, is merely the most recent in a long line of such claims. For the sports historian - just as for the political scientist - the accuracy of such claims is irrelevant, for it is the existence of the belief and the depth of the feeling that are the important factors in our analysis.

One aspect of the Arok controversy was the associated claim by a Brisbane Lions official that Arok's attitude meant that Queensland players "had to go down south if they wanted an international career", the kind of belief that has soured sport in many areas throughout our history. The movement of cricketers like Bradman, Simpson and O'Neill to play in States other than their home State, has always caused bitterness, as has the movement of players from all States to the VFL. In basketball, the movement of basketballers to Melbourne once caused anguish and resentment, though now, ironically, the movement of basketballers away from that city in recent years, has seen much adverse Melbourne comment.

Political geographers have long been aware of the effect on regional sentiment that is caused by the creation of an administrative centre, such as a capital city, "London", "Washington" or "Paris" will be blamed for any number of sins, and the occasional transfer of a capital, such as from the former St Petersburg to Moscow, merely sees the transfer of the regional, anti-capital feeling to the new city. It is a political phenomenon well-known in Australia, and its effect can be seen also in sport. The most common instance is the resentment caused by a claimed "capital city bias" held by a sport's administrators. The history of sport in all States is littered with claims of capital city players being favoured at the expense of their country counterparts. The old bitterness of ACT rugby union representatives over the loading of NSW teams with Sydney

players, yet for so long ignoring the ACT claims for rugby "statehood", was a nice example of people in one capital resenting activity in another. More recently, all that "Canberra" stands for in the general community has helped condition regional attitudes to the Canberra-based Australian Institute of Sport, attitudes not at all mollified by the latter-day placing of some AIS sports in State centres. An associated factor has been the feeling that the State associations have nurtured particular talent on to to see it "grabbed by Canberra? In such an argument, it makes little impact to speak of the future benefits for Australian teams, for the immediate loss of "their" stars to Canberra is what is felt most keenly.

Abuse of the capital is often used as a spur to local performance, especially when a regional team is opposed to a team from the capital. The colourful description by former Northern Tasmanian footballer, Bob Cheek, of his coach's attempt to capitulate on this nicely indicates the depth of feeling:

Tasmanian parochialism is ingrained and incurable...Hatred runs deep. From the time I pulled on a pair of boots in the North I was brainwashed. John Coughlan said at my first night's training with the NWFU team to play the TFL that Southern footballers dined on caviar at Government House before a game and went to the ground in chauffeur-driven Rolls Royces.

We'll get bloody spuds and a broken down bus!" he roared.

Sure it was an exaggerated build-up to beat the South - but there was never the same feeling in TFL teams.

At one time, NBL teams were nurtured on the belief that Canberra players, sponsored by Mazda, all drove Mazda RX7 cars.

Such anti-capital feeling can sometimes be accounted for by the high handed attitude of administrators, and there are certainly instances where arrogant attitudes held in the capitals or in particular States have affected sporting relations between different regions. The obvious arrogance of the VFL in its preparedness to allow the poaching of interstate players, or in its ignoring of efforts by the NFL to make rule changes, is one of the best-known examples. Sydney scorn for Queensland rugby league referees in State of Origin matches, and Victorian Bill Lawry's suggestion that Tasmania was not good enough to maintain

a Sheffield Shield side are other examples which have caused much regional gnashing of teeth.

This arrogance by those at the centre of things has another twist, for while regional sentiment can obviously be related to a specific town or region, it also has another manifestation, namely in the old town versus country antagonism, described by Donald Horne as politically more important than the better-known differences between the States. This has had an extremely important impact on our politics, particularly in the way rural ideology has developed to portray the rural resident as inherently superior to the city-dweller. Around Australia one can soon find sports examples which unite the country in their opposition to, and cynicism about, the cities. The mythical batsman who would walk into the Test team if he bothered to leave his country roots, the footballer who is lauded for living in the bush while electing to travel hundreds of kilometres to play with the city team, the never-ending resentment at the refusal by city-based selectors to add country representatives to their teams are well-known. In New South Wales, Gerringong rugby league star, Mick Cronin, was hailed as one who refused to succumb to the city's bright lights, but when he moved eventually to Parramatta Club, the shocked response was quickly changed to one of pride that the country boy was "showing them how to play football".

Country hostility is not always directed towards the city, for it can also be directed at enemies within, particularly when there is money to be spent. The harsh words spoken when towns compete for government installations can be heard in sports matters as well. This can especially be seen in Tasmania, as in the widespread resentment over Launceston's gaining of a cycling velodrome in the early 1980s. In 1979 the Tasmanian Trotting Control Board visited North-West Tasmania to hear opinions on the best location for a proposed regional trotting complex, only to be met by officials from Devonport, Penguin and Ulverstone, who were only interested in pushing their own towns at the expense of the others. The Burnie Advocate took the towns to task for their failure to see benefits for the whole region: "while the North-West remains divided, the North and South will gain the benefit".

Twenty-five years before, the Hobart Mercury had spoken of similar rivalries ruining the efforts of rowing officials to achieve the betterment of the sport across the State. The longest-running Tasmanian saga, however, has involved Australian football. Regional resentment at the power and influence of the Hobart-based TFL saw the deliberate crippling of a bold attempt to establish a State-wide competition in 1980, but when that brief experiment failed, the failure of the North and North-West to come to terms with the renamed TAFL, saw the establishment of the present State-wide competition where the original six Southern teams compete against two new teams from each of the other regions. The old regional competitions were thus left behind, finally being forced to amalgamate to form a Northern Tasmanian competition. The crowds, however, have gone with the Southern-dominated competition.

A key factor in the explanation of much of the politics of this country is the existence of the federal system. Political parties are organised as federal bodies, where the State branch can wield a great deal of influence, the election of office-holders in many organisations is often the opportunity for deals between States, while in many bodies the States are given equal representation. Federalism makes for government complexity, legalism and divided responsibility, while giving many opportunities for political wheeling and dealing, all of which is reflected in sports administration. Typically, the administration of a sport reflects the existence of a strong State administration, and where the protection and maintenance of the power of the officials often seems to outweigh the desire to push the best interests of the sport and its participants. Not surprisingly, the delegates from the States often come into conflict with those who may have rather more central/national concerns, and the outcome can often be frustrating for both points of view. In May 1988, within days of each other, the executive director of the Australian Soccer Federation and the head Olympic swimming coach announced their pending resignations and they outlined similar reasons for doing so. The swimming coach, Bill Sweetenham, complained of the difficulty in getting specific

plans and proposals accepted by the swimming authorities because of the need to satisfy all States. Inevitably, he complained, the best-intentioned plans are watered-down to meet all the objections:

Australian swimming can never [be] and will never be successful until it has everyone heading in the one direction. Until the States give a little, until they all bury their hatchets, our success [as a nation] is going to depend on other nations' weaknesses.

A controversial example was the election of the little-known Tasmanian, C.A. Wise, in the ballot for the position of athletics coach in the 1968 Olympic Games team, a vote that reflected the ability of the smaller States to block the larger. In a federal system, such problems are extremely difficult to eradicate,

V

All of this is very well, no doubt, but of what relevance is it to sports historians? This brief essay is designed to remind us that our investigation of sport in this country needs to pay heed to the regional dimension, whenever it is appropriate to do so. At the most trivial level, the determination of some sports-people to defeat teams from particular regions is well-known and belongs in the histories written of some sports clubs, while at a higher level, it is surely important in any analysis of sport outside the major cities. It might also be important in the history of the States themselves. We need not go as far as Hugh Lunn's claim that "sport plays the most important role in shaping the character of a State", but in regard to Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania, at the very least, sport seems to play some role in accounting for the view that the State residents have of themselves: as an eleven-year old Tasmanian, my main interest in the 1954 Vancouver Empire Games was not the Landy-Bannister mile clash, but rather the question of whether Tasmanian, David Lean, would win the 440 yards hurdles. Finally, the regional dimension has undoubtedly played a very important part in the administration of Australian sport, for the regional loyalties of the administrators clearly colour the performance of their duties.

I do not want to overstate this, but I suggest that when we analyse sport in this country, if we ignore the regional element, we run the danger of introducing distortion into our story.