

Wray Vamplew, *Sports Violence in Australia: Its Extent and Control. A Report for the National Sports Research Program, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, 1991, pp. 79. \$12.00 from the National Sports Research Centre, PO Box 176 Belconnen ACT 2616*

Some *weeks* ago, the *Sunday Age* printed a testimony to the Australian Test fast bowler, Rodney Hogg, on the occasion of his retirement. Paying tribute to his competitive spirit, this article concluded that Hogg possessed 'that hatred of batsmen without which no fast bowler can really succeed'.

Apart from its historical inaccuracy (consider, for instance, Brian Statham and Graham McKenzie), that sort of glorification of bellicosity is a paradigm example of the acceptance of a degree of violence in cricket which would have been unthinkable in its golden age.

It is therefore timely that a distinguished historian of sport, Wray Vamplew, should have been invited to report on the level of violence in Australian sport. This study represents-an attempt scientifically to test the veracity of the common perception that violence in sport is increasing. It is based on a survey sent to participants, spectators and members of

the media, who were asked to complete a detailed questionnaire relating to the sport or sports which they practised.

Sportspersons are frequently tunnel-visioned when subjected to any judgment from outsiders. When I appeared on a Peter Couchman show some two years ago, the famous Australian Rules football coach, Ron Barassi, when asked an opinion on the adverse findings of the National Committee on Violence, simply replied, 'I've never heard of them. Who are these people?'. Which, being interpreted, implied: 'Who are these wimpish non-footballers who dare to trespass on my preserve?'

This survey avoided all such potential criticism by concentrating on the practising sector. But by doing so it risked the censure of partiality. Self-serving declarations of participants were inevitable. A professional boxer is hardly likely to concur with the judgment of civilized humanity that boxing is barbarous!

Accordingly, one finds what appear to be astonishing anomalies. On page 27, lacrosse seems to be regarded as more violent than Rugby League, and female soccer more violent than Australian Rules. Squash is the seventh highest in the ladder of violence. These statistics must be regarded with the utmost caution. One must refer to page 19 to see that only five questionnaires dealt with lacrosse and only two with squash! Surely, these samples are too small to be of great value. Moreover, it is patent that participants in some sports are conditioned to accept an intolerable degree of violence as part of the ethos of their sports.

It is pleasing to see that Vamplew identifies 'verbal abuse' as a form of violence. And it is disturbing to note that it is prevalent in all sports. It is disturbing, though not perhaps surprising, that responders under 21 years tolerate it much more than those over 50. The increased acceptance of foul language is surely one of the blights of the age in which we live. Nevertheless, Vamplew is absolutely right to point out its capacity to incite physical violence.

One's faith in democracy is greatly challenged when one reads that 36.2% of all respondents considered that a civil action against an offending player is an inappropriate 'punishment' for violent play. I cannot imagine that any of the remaining 63.8% have had to incur the medical expenses, loss of work and pain associated with a serious sporting injury. These views are founded on complete ignorance and insensitivity. A society that failed to provide damages for a deliberately caused injury in any walk of life would be anarchic. Such an incredibly perverse appreciation of the law's role confirms my own opinion that sport is far too important to be left to sportspersons.

The Report is to be highly commended for providing a catalogue of suggested remedies for violence in sport. All of these are sensible, and most of them are practical. But experience suggests that the remedies will have to come from the legislature and the courts. Controlling organisations of sports seem either impervious to violence or impotent to prevent it. The outcry of the cricket world against the recent I.C.C. ruling on 'one bouncer an over' was completely misconceived. Pertinent criticism should have been that the change did not go far enough. One bouncer an over is one too many, and this will certainly be the view of the first court that has to deal with a charge of manslaughter of a batsman!

Finally, as President of the National Children's Bureau of Australia, I applaud this Report's careful attention to violence in children's sport, and particularly its outright condemnation of the ugly parent. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child contains an article placing an obligation on signatory countries to provide conditions for appropriate sport and leisure for children. It is surely arguable that it is a breach of this article to require children to play sports which contain within them an element of undue danger, or expose children to the incitement of verbal contempt and indignity.

If the recommendations of this Report are taken seriously, debated and implemented, they will do much to ensure that sport is a healthy, uplifting and joyful activity for children. Then, I feel, the Australian Society for Sports History will be able to take credit for a telling contribution to a significant social problem.

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