

BARRACKER'S CORNER

In the previous issue of *Sporting Traditions* I suggested that our **Barracker's Corner** was an institution worth preserving. My plea resulted in the two responses which follow. Both are concerned with the question of sports commentary, but from different perspectives. Together they demonstrate the validity of my suggestion.

The opinions expressed, are of course, those of the authors not of ASSH or its editors. Nevertheless ASSH is pleased to provide an opportunity for their expression.

Ed.

DEAD AIR

It's early on a winter Sunday evening and ABC radio's seemingly interminable *Grandstand* programme is over for another weekend. After the Aboriginal programme *Speaking Out* and the news, and before roundtable religious discussion, comes *The Coodabeen Champions*. Sprawling over almost three hours of a somnolent slot, the national programme ranges lazily and idiosyncratically over current sports topics and arcane aspects of (usually seventies) pop trivia. In spite of the live music session and the coverage of different areas of popular culture, *The Coodabeen Champions* is mainly a sports programme. It is sport that is usually mentioned first, that supplies most of the running gags and which is the major point of reference for the programme. In itself this focus is unobjectionable. Perhaps *The Coodabeens* could provide a radio antidote to the sports coverage that has preceded it on the ABC and the commercial stations, some relief from the hype, freneticism, unreflectiveness and gung ho politics that typifies much of what has gone

before (with honourable exceptions, such as *Grandstand's* coverage of Wray Vamplews report on violence in sport).

The emphasis in *The Coodabeen Champions* is on whimsical light entertainment, informally transmitted by its floating ensemble of presenters, but loosely held together by MC Jeff Richardson. The atmosphere of light heartedness is maintained by a good deal of impromptu banter between presenters (and, on occasions, phone-in listeners), signalled by much on-air laughter at each other's quips. *The Coodabeens* try to construct a radio space for lovably eccentric sports and popular culture fanatics, presenting an apolitical and benign public face. This image is in sharp contrast to the tenor of my own encounters with representatives of *The Coodabeens* on radio and in print, where my own and like-minded contributions to a critical sociology of sport have been fingered by them as 'bizarre' and 'derivative theoretical constructs', 'rendering the obvious into some kind of deconstructive revelation' and lacking 'any real interest in sport or people involved in it as either participants or spectators'. This split Coodabeen personality, by turns affable and vitriolic, warrants further examination, as it is the key to the hidden politics of *The Coodabeen Champions*.

To talk of politics in a show pitched as harmless entertainment may incur the accusation that too much is being read into a bit of fun. Yet, this is precisely how politics operate in the non-news media. The *Coodabeens* create a world so devoid of political discourse and so naturalistic in its cheerful camaraderie that it seems churlish to do any more than chuckle knowingly at their ad lib burble. There is a politics of inclusion and exclusion, hinging on commitment to sport - fandom - and a consequent fascination with its minutiae. Listeners are either 'in' or 'out' according to their disposition to celebrate or to question sport. *The Coodabeens* are a kind of club for die hard sports fans in much the same way as the sentimental ABC radio programme Ian McNamara's *Australia All Over* is a forum for lovers of the rural idyll. Both

programmes speak to and on behalf of an imagined community - either the country-minded or the sports mad.

The Coodabeen Champions' appeal is mainly on the basis of self congratulation. The presenters invite congratulation for making it onto radio in the first place and the audience is congratulated for its discernment in being 'on the team'. The team wants to be left alone to swap in-jokes, to conjure up sporting memories and to jibe at each other's club affiliations. On the outside, incurring the *Coodabeens'* ridicule, are those who see sport in a different way, who want to do something other than to celebrate sport and to celebrate their own celebration of it. These apostates are condemned above all because of their failure to display the requisite degree of commitment to sport and of deference to its cogniscenti.

The *Coodabeen* ethos is a specific form of Victorian (both by state and by history) male bonding through the conduct of their favourite hobby in public. Difference and contradiction are present only in the ritualistic badinage between barrackers for different teams, but who under the skin are buddies in sport. Alternative approaches to this orthodoxy must be quickly subdued and repelled. Attempting to examine male sexuality and sport is regarded as 'bizarre'. Critiques of racism and sexism in sport or of its commercialisation are treated as far-fetched or banal. Application of newfangled (especially overseas originated) theories to tease out the meaning and significance of modern sport is seen to be pretentious and contrived, affronting the *Coo&been* version of populist Australian nationalism.

The Coodabeen Champions, at least in their current line up, only regurgitate sport's most banal myths of mateship, suppress its politics and gloss over its oppressive aspects. I am not suggesting that the programme be turned into a joyless and sanctimonious expose, a *Sports Watch* to match ABC television's *Media Watch*. Fellow radio comics and commentators Roy Slaven's and H. G. Nelson's *This Sporting Life* (and Andrew Denton's *Live and Sweaty* on television) manage to parody,

analyse, satirise, and illuminate and savour many dimensions of sport in an entertaining manner. They take us beyond mere myopic obsession with sport and unreflective fan worship, but never lose touch with its manifest appeal to a large section of the Australian and global population. It is also incumbent on comedians actually to be funny, to avoid smugness and conceit, and to leave any noisy mirth to the audience rather than to generate it themselves. *The Coodabeen Champions*, for this listener at least, shape up badly on these criteria.

[Radio] talk, however, is cheap, and *The Coodabeens* inexpensively fill up a great deal of air time. It is unfortunate that so many other voices are shut out by such vapidness. Perhaps ABC programmers could be persuaded to give *The Coodabeen Champions* half an hour after *Grandstand* to indulge themselves, and to hand over their precious platform to the Aboriginal voices in *Speaking Out*. There is, after all, little justification for yet another weekend radio sports programme that strokes rather than challenges an already handsomely served select audience of sports enthusiasts. On the other hand, a wider audience of those committed to, indifferent towards, or ambivalent about sport could well be found by a radio sports programme that moves beyond the restricted conventions of romantic sporting attachment imposed by *The Coodabeen Champions*.

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AFTER ECO, A LITTLE BIT OF CHAT

Eight years before the first of the *Sporting Traditions* Conferences got under way Umberto Eco wrote an essay called Sports Chatter. In it he said something like this.

If you are outside and you pick up a rock and hurl it that action is energy wasted but such a waste of energy can still be O.K. because to hurl that rock is playful, it may fulfil a psychic need, it may bring its own intrinsic reward.

If somebody else comes along, stands alongside you and also hurls a rock the element of play disappears as the action becomes a contest.

Hurling a rock overarm can teach us a number of things and it is certainly useful for a tennis serve, baseball pitching and fielding in cricket. Hurling a rock underarm or at least sidearm may be useful as a base skill for a squash forehand and the lower forward motion of the golf swing. But let us forget what is useful for the moment.

Our first innocent rock hurler we presume got some joy out of what he or she was doing. Even a second rock hurler won't necessarily diminish the joy of the first if he or she hurls a bit further or a bit straighter provided the hurler who hurls least well can admit the superiority of the other in a friendly manner.

At this point we suppose we have what might be called 'friendly rivalry' without reward and without rancour and the hurler with the most natural ability/most strength/best eye will be likely to defeat the other. All healthy stuff so far but as Eco points out there are some pretty perverse players to enter the scene.

The hurler who is driven so hard to hurl that it becomes all consuming is one such. All mind, soul and energy is put into the act of hurling so our hurler becomes so focussed, so drugged that he or she will do anything to stand one block higher than anyone else for a little bit of glitter. In short our hurler has become a monster.

Interestingly though the monster doesn't get there by itself. People feed it special food, train it, supervise it, gee it up, and report on its activities, not all of them amazingly enough to do with the act of hurling.

Eco writes that people who watch others hurling rocks, or more especially others who are involved in a contest of hurling rocks, are like voyeurs and such people are weird.

But these are not the weirdest. Since the so-called organised sports began we have had people write about rock hurlers for those who can't be there to play voyeur; and then we have had people speak about it for those who want to hear about it; and more recently we have had the picture of rock hurlers brought into our very own places of abode. These people you might think are weird but what they write about is even weirder and refers not only to what happens in the way of rock hurling but what might happen, how the rock hurlers are feeling in their innermost thoughts, what might happen, how it might happen, what did happen, what might have been expected to happen but didn't, what happens if it happens again and so on.

When the special rock hurling event is on and we are acting voyeurs by proxy we can't even as non-consenting adults be allowed to make our own judgments in our own abodes. Instead we have to have these weirdoes tell us what we are seeing and that this is the nth time that one rock hurler has met the other rock hurler on the fourth parallel of latitude and the 117th meridian of longitude in the last five years.

I know this is all getting complicated and such detail whether it be on TV, the radio or the press can all get a bit ho-hum and that anyway all these media people as they are called are a bunch of nerds and some of us know better.

But I want to come back to Eco and put it to you that there are some stranger types still. There are people who actually read/listen/watch what these nerds put together and they do it first thing at breakfast, discuss it all day at the factory/office/campus and down at

the pub at night. They linger over the slow motion replays replayed and then video a lot of it to watch again later.

This is a fair sort of industry for something that started so simply but then rock hurling is not as simple as it was. The most definitely weird sort of people, however, are those who elevate their discussion and examine rock hurling from all sorts of perspectives - political/racial/social/economic/sexual - and so on.

These people put every person and thing under a microscope to discover what rock hurling for example can tell us about ourselves. In my own case this year for example I have been examining how Australians responded to W.G. Grace (incidentally, not a rock hurler) on his two Australian tours of 1874 and 1892. This as you can imagine is pretty riveting stuff and I have felt so close to the Old Man that I have even suggested to my wife that we set an extra place at the tea table. Only the fact that some of my friends keep referring to him as 'W.C.' brings any relief.

But there are worse examples and I have been marking some of them, where university students are being asked to comment on what the people I called nerds a little while ago have said about particular rock hurlers or rock hurling events in what is supposed to amount to critical analysis. And in some cases where some students have taken on the task of trying to make something meaningful of Andrew Denton taking the mickey out of some poor hurler down on her luck. I mean, how far have we come?

I'm not going to do a Fred Dagg and say here comes me bus but what I do suggest is that we all go outside and find a rock, look at it, and take it home. It might even make a nice pet.

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