

NSW Basketball Association Limited, *Basketball in New South Wales: A History, Fifty Years of Achievement and Development 1938-1988*, Flemington, 1990. pp. 512.

I came to this book keenly interested in the subject, for I am writing a social history of basketball for the University of Illinois Press 'Sport and Society' series. I fully intend to devote at least one chapter, perhaps more, to the global diffusion of the game beyond the confines of its North American origins. After witnessing the spectacular performance of Aussie Andrew Gaze in the NCAA finals three years ago, I assumed the history of basketball in Australia to be both solid and interesting.

Perhaps that assumption was at least half true despite my ignorance of the regional differences in Australian sport, but one has a hard time sorting it out from this book. In the usual style of historians, I first sought information on the origins of basketball in New South Wales only to learn that although 'it is considered' that the game was introduced in NSW 'and possibly some other states of Australia' between 1900 and 1910, a recent fire in the Sydney YMCA destroyed the early records. Not until the mid-1930s are records anywhere near complete, it seems.

This book is a collection of many of those records: names of club directors, presidents, secretaries, treasurers, and members, and of coaches and athletes from 1938 to 1988; team champions and playoff scores for women and under-sixteens as well as men; and biographical sketches of today's club officials complete with addresses and telephone numbers. So here is an in-house sourcebook of information. It is the stuff of antiquarian documentation, and potentially the stuff of good history.

But is it history? The dictates of chronology are roughly brought to bear on various topics such as finance, women's basketball, publicity, coaching, and South Pacific competition. The specific administrative history of basketball in NSW is told in about 135 pages, but in the most unsatisfactory fashion imaginable: a year-by-year recalling of the

basketball events that were supposedly important. The narrative is choppy and repetitious, amateurishly conceived and poorly edited. Several different old players and coaches have contributed to this volume, and to the muddle. One is reminded of the memorable admission of the ancient British historian, Nennius: 'I have made a heap of all I have found'. At least we are spared the pretension of an index.

Could not the NSW authorities have cajoled some trained historian to have given shape and substance to this volume? As it stands, there is absolutely no social, economic, or national context, not even any sense of basketball's relation to other sports or NSW's developments in relation to Melbourne's and Brisbane's. As one damn thing gives way to yet one more damn thing, trivia competes with pedantry for space.

Still, three interesting themes keep bobbing to the surface of this story as constants in the history of NSW basketball. The first is a chronic lack of proper facilities: courts too small, too few, and ill-kept. In one of the earliest Sydney YMCA courts, the backboards were painted on the walls and the baskets secured on pieces of wood that could be removed easily for handball games. In shooting lay-ups, players learned to take a step or two up the wall. Similarly, much of the history of NSW basketball has been an uphill climb – right up to the recent repair of the 'Old Snakepit' at Illawarra.

A second theme has been the need of NSW enthusiasts to sell the game as an authentically manly enterprise. Like Britons, Australians first identified basketball as a mere male version of a girl's game, netball, long tainting it for any self-respecting male. Granted, Dr. Naismith failed to make his 'new game' from the macho stuff of Rugby League. Thus NSW promoters protested too much in 1939 when they plumped for basketball as 'the "tough" game for "he-men"'. Amidst a gang of dreary photographs is a gem of an advertisement (p.475) that shrewdly presents a recent Soviet-Australia clash in wonderfully rough-guy terms. A well-muscled, ferocious-looking kangaroo has ripped the basket off the board, and is confronting a snarling bull-necked Russian thug with a

pea-size basketball in hand. The message is effectively unobtrusive: Real men clench their teeth, flex their muscles, and play basketball.

The third dominant theme is the presence of the Yanks in the story of NSW basketball. As early as 1927, two American warships docked in Sydney Harbour, providing teams for an exhibition game of basketball at the Sydney YMCA. That incident got repeated again and again, right up until the 1970s. Mormons especially proved to be good basketball ambassadors, as did the Harlem Globetrotters and innumerable college and semi-professional teams visiting Sydney. Well could an advertisement for a game in the Sports Arena on Riley Street provide no explanation when referring to the arena as 'the Madison Square Garden of Australia'.

These three themes are probably more or less dominant for the history of basketball in all of Australia. For the writing of that history, *Basketball in New South Wales* will be a most useful source. The very lack of discrimination and polish that make it a weak piece of narrative history make it a fine compendium of information.

William J Baker

University of Maine, USA