

THE VALUE OF FACTS IN SPORTS HISTORY

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As a small boy I might have been thought to have had some peculiar hobbies: drawing freehand maps of the world; delving into population statistics of countries and cities; and then following the enthralling matches of the 1960-1 test series between Australia and the West Indies, taking up cricket statistics. When Australia toured England the following winter I huddled in front of a roaring fire while recording over after over in the first of my ABC scorebooks. Because he was a new player in the Australian side, and no doubt because he was also successful, I made a hero of Bill Lawry and for some strange reason committed his scores to memory: 57 at Edgbaston; 130 and 1 at Lords; 28 and 28 at Leeds; 74 and 102 at Manchester; and a duck at The Oval. Thirty years later they still have a significance I have not been prepared to discard and the only reason I can think of is that they have underpinned my knowledge of sports history. Such facts provide a confidence in the way a knowledge of maps can provide a sense of place, and the way chronology provides a sense of time.

A common meaning of facts in history is that they are a reliable record of what happened. History itself is generally concerned with the written record of what occurred, often arranged according to periods or kinds of history. Sport can be taken to be a physical activity involving competition within a prescribed set of rules. This paper will be concerned with what I term self-contained and connected sports history and facts which are isolated as well as those which may be used as evidence.

Broadly speaking, it seems that sports history comes from three different sources; sports journalism, physical education and history. Of

these, the sports journalists were the first to 'seize the day' (as John Keating might have said)¹ when many organised games were getting off the ground a hundred years ago, and so journalists have been chiefly responsible for recording the history which followed. The second source was from physical education which developed an interest in sports history as part of its curriculum. The last source was history and the reason for it lagging behind had a great deal to do with academic snobbery as a number of observers have commented.²

From the three sources it appears that two types of sports history have emerged: self-contained and connected. The type of sports history written by journalists and physical educationists is descriptive rather than analytical. As Park noted, it was written by insiders who viewed their subject as complete and were not looking to making linkages beyond it.³ Such history at best maintained a narrative but frequently they were a mere chronicle of events such as Cavanaugh's *The Melbourne Cup* and Taylor's centenary history of the Melbourne Football Club which are histories of only the most superficial kind. Academic history on the other hand ignored sport and it took essays like Mandle's 'Sports History' to address the issue within the history profession in this country.

What Mandle pointed out was that the lack of well researched sports history in Australia was 'a paradox for so sports minded a country'. He forwarded a couple of themes which might allow the exploration of a connection between sport and society: sporting heroes and the beach. His proposition was that the sporting hero has passed through several phases of development from the time in the nineteenth century when the Australian colonies took their sporting values from Britain to the 1970s when they become ugly Australians and he saw this as a means for understanding Australian identity. Australians' relationship with the beach, he claimed, was also worthy of scholarship with the sun-bronzed surf life-saver as important a symbol of Australian manhood as the Anzac.⁴

The writing of sports history from a social history perspective has as its main aim the establishment of connections with society, in Particular those which involve political, social and economic considerations. This is evident in the relationship between sport, money and the media; in the political pressure applied to athletes to boycott the Moscow Olympics and also sports contacts with South Africa; and the social claims made on behalf of sport from being a character builder to a social leveller. There are other approaches, however, which might be applied to sports history. Commager's chronological, biographical, institutional and geographical approaches⁵ might all enhance discussion of sport and cause questions to be framed in different ways as might discussions of adaptation to migration and gender.

By looking at the early historical development of sport we can determine many of the social priorities of our ancestors. How long for instance it took for ovals to be cleared and pitches to be laid, and whether this occurred before other social institutions such as churches or mechanics institutes were built. By using a geographical perspective we can examine how the natural environment has been used and think about how the vast amount of space occupied for the first football matches shrank as land became scarcer and sports like Australian Rules football began to utilise cricket grounds during the winter. The example of the adaption of British behaviour to Australia is also an interesting case. The British brought many of their practices here: the early cricket clubs had county names; they brought out their own hunting birds, guns and equipment and worst of all, rabbits. In golf, the early clubs adopted the Scottish traditions of red jackets, tam 'o shanter and knickerbockers reminiscent of St. Andrews. On the other hand, a number of changes were adopted with Australian football being the prime example of Australians being prepared to go their own way. Sport was also organised here on an electoral basis in the capital cities, a response to the huge distances between them.

Exploring these and other aspects of sport unveils some interesting information about the workings of Australian society far beyond the usual winners and losers on the course, track, field or oval. Spending on the *America's Cup* defence in 1986-7 cost over \$500 million illustrating the extent to which big business is involved at the elite end of sport⁶ and it has been reported that well over \$1 billion could have been injected into Australia through tourism and investment for the Cup defence in 1995 if we had won the most recent challenge.⁷ Special state of emergency legislation which was introduced in Queensland by the Bjelke Peterson government at the time of the South African rugby union tour in 1971 was described as being the only occasion in which a democratic state had done so in peace time and the first for the purposes of playing football; while another government under the same leader nine years later enacted the *Commonwealth Games Act*, as Tatz put it: 'to keep Brisbane free of Aborigines and their "friends"', a shameful reflection of the blend of race, politics and sport in this country at the time of the Brisbane Commonwealth Games.⁸ The first Australian cricket tour of England was by an Aboriginal team in 1868 but there have been only a handful of Aborigines to have played first class cricket since and the greater proportion of those have had their careers marred by racism.⁹ These are all examples of facts as evidence. With racism there is an overlap of political and social considerations. And both politics and economics are involved in the founding of the Australian Institute of Sport which, it has been argued, was formed as a knee jerk reaction to Australia failing to win any gold medals at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. The question we must ask of course is whether millions of dollars should be injected in the hope of producing elite sportspeople but which results in spending cuts to recreation and at the expense of the health of the community at large.

Sports history, as Mandle has said, may be as 'closed or open as any other kind of history'¹⁰ but its worth is measured by how much it is related to the real world. What I want to suggest is that the type of sports

history that is written may affect the way facts are employed and vice-versa.

Facts are often presented as straightforward statements of truth. In 1955 the Earl of Iveagh wrote in his foreword to the first edition of *The Guinness Book of Records*:

Wherever people congregate to talk, they will argue, and sometimes the joy lies in the arguing and would be lost if there was a definite answer. But more often the argument takes place on a dispute of fact, and it can be very exasperating if there is no immediate means of settling the argument.¹¹

This signals some useful points I wish to develop later in this paper: that facts are the basis of argument, and can be used to settle disputes. Facts can be slippery, however, and as David Thomson has warned, isolated facts should be distinguished from those used in evidence.¹²

Isolated facts exist in abundance but most of them do not become historical facts. Instead they remain obscure because of the lack of a sufficiently important context. They have what might be termed a short shelf life. It is for instance unlikely that even the most ardent Hawthorn fan would know how many uncontested possessions John Platten had or how many tap-ons Dermott Brereton gave in the 1991 AFL grand final and the majority of people who watched the match at the ground or on TV would be unlikely to remember the final score three or four days later. Yet all these 'facts' have been recorded and we were told by promoters *before* the game that it was a *historic* grand final.

Isolated facts satisfy a basic form of knowledge for people who may not have the training, the intellect or the desire to make wider connections between pieces of information, or they languish as trivia. That is not to say they are not popular and many of the best selling sports books such as Graeme Atkinson's *Everything you ever wanted to know about Australian Rules Football but couldn't be bothered asking* have resurrected such facts. Certainly the value of facts as fun should not be overlooked even if they do not serve any useful purpose beyond party games and quiz nights.

Facts as evidence also underpin history, however. There can be no argument or description without evidence but facts are not sacred or immutable. They are not mere givens which we pick off trees or find in history books. They are subject to revision as fresh evidence comes to light and there is a quick turnover in Wimbledon champions, AFL premiers and (sometimes) prime ministers. History deals in events and investigates what happens.¹³ Sometimes a lot of work goes into the making of a fact. Bernard Williams in the recent television series. *What is Truth?*¹⁴ showed us that facts can take several forms: events, actions, trends and statistics and that what is a fact in one society or generation may be unknown or forgotten by others. In a sense, facts have to be useful to survive although undoubtedly certain facts outlive their usefulness.

A fact may be an event but it can also have significance. Crossing the Atlantic, climbing Mount Everest and putting men on the moon may be judged as being important for humankind but the significance of events in sports history such as inviting W.G. Grace to tour Australia; winning the Ashes, the Davis Cup and the *America's Cup*; and staging the 1956 Olympics and the Adelaide Grand Prix have been identified as boosting national pride by helping to put Australia on the map.

Significance is also crucial to Williams' other categories of facts. Facts might also be action. Phil Carman's action of headbutting a boundary umpire in 1980 resulted in a twenty match suspension by the Victorian Football League. It may be significant because it pointed out the sporting body's and society's emphasis on lawful behaviour although the historian has to be aware of exceptions to the rule. In the 1980s a number of sports may have protected their umpires but others such as tennis left them open to abuse. One of the unasked questions in world tennis is why umpires and linesmen have not taken defamation actions against John McEnroe when they have been publicly humiliated.

Facts might also be trends. Remaining with tennis, the double-handed backhands employed by Bjorn Borg, Jimmy Connors and Chris Evert with great success from the mid-1970s were then succeeded by the all-court games of McEnroe and Navratilova, and the power games of Lendl and Graf. What should be noted in this is that sport like many other aspects of life whether it be clothing, automobile or house design, progresses by trends. Chris McDermott's handballs may not be interesting in a given match but the total number of handballs by teams in the 1990s is significantly different to those in the 1960s, evidence and a sure indicator of a change in the style of game played.

Statistics are facts but they are not worth much unless they show relationships. The fact isn't the story by itself, it has to be placed in context. To give an example: I carry around in my head the fact that 113.1 eight ball overs were bowled by the West Indies on the final day of the Fourth Test at Adelaide in 1961. By itself this might seem a useless bit of information but within the context of cricket history it is useful to show that time-wasting is the bane of the modern game. The 905 balls were delivered that day by an attack comprising one fast bowler (Wesley Hall), one medium pacer (Frank Worrell), one fast medium and spin (Gary Sobers), and two spinners (Lance Gibbs and Alf Valentine) By contrast, on the third day of the Third Test at Adelaide in 1984-5 the West Indian attack comprising four fast bowlers delivered 69 six ball overs (414 balls). Even taking into account the difference in the composition of the attacks, the difference is staggering.¹⁵

A problem with facts is that there may be too many of them and they are not neatly organised. As E.H. Carr has suggested the bits and pieces of evidence we are seeking are like millions of fish in the sea. On the other hand there may also be too few of them so that evidence is necessarily impressionistic. According to Carr and Commager historical facts are subjective and exist in the mind of the historian and it is suggested that documents often speak with a range of voices depending

on who is asking the questions and doing the interpreting.¹⁶ As Thomson has added:

The facts speak only when they are spoken to and when asked the right questions. Then they become evidence for or against the contention of the historian.¹⁷

The significance of the previous cricket statistics can be read at a number of levels; as evidence of a dramatic drop in over rates as I have done; as an indication of sport taking on the values of work; or as evidence of changing power relationships in the game with the West Indians no longer Calypso entertainers (somewhat like the Harlem Globetrotters) but disciplined professionals. The problem is frequently not what is missing from the jigsaw but what is selected and emphasised. As Carr points out, the facts are processed in different ways by different historians.¹⁸

Facts as the 'record' are a major headache which Guttman describes as 'the child of the modern mania for quantification'.¹⁹ Quantification can provide guides and clues but is never the whole story. The Australian Football team with the most possessions doesn't necessarily win. In a close game the quality of the touches can be the deciding factor. Where quantification runs awry is where it is used to score qualitative performances such as in gymnastics, diving and synchronised swimming. Guttman goes on to say that the 'record' - the number in the 'record book' - permits competition against other athletes across time and space²⁰ but the sports historian must ask how realistic are the comparisons. Improvements in coaching, training, technology, diet, sports medicine and sports psychology are just a few of the variables which need to be considered. The 'record' is a veritable minefield: the Victorian Football League boosted attendances a few years ago by admitting children free. How honest is such a fact? John Fitzgerald is currently touted as Australia's top money earner in tennis although obviously no mention is made of inflation. Such a fact may be true but it

is not an indicator of Fitzgerald's singles play in recent years. Other 'records' are stupid. In this country Fitzgerald in 1991 was promoted as the world's number one doubles player, a ludicrous idea but one wonders whether Anders Jarryd was accorded a similar honour in Sweden.

The historian's processing involves interpretation. Interpretation is the 'life blood' of history according to Carr because this is when the historian becomes actively engaged with his facts, reflecting, thinking, writing and moulding them in an unending dialogue.²¹ Let us see how the sports historian might begin to interpret the effect of technology on sporting performance. Sports goods manufacturers are continually looking to improve their goods from enlarging the sweet spots on tennis rackets and gold clubs, to designing protective gear to minimise injury, to designing winged keels for yachts. What is the sports historian to make of this and comments by players at the elite level of sports who have complained that such improvements have had a levelling effect? In tennis for instance, John McEnroe has stated that the old wooden rackets were better for finesse players like himself whereas the newer styles put the premium on power at the expense of all round versatility. In golf, Seve Ballesteros has made similar remarks about square grooved clubs while Peter Thomson has suggested that

Championship courses in this day and age have horror stretches of deep rough, with prepared playing surfaces pathetically inadequate in dimension for the purpose of bringing the best players to the top.²²

Quantification is one method the sports historian might use: measuring performances of the same athletes over time, using scores or finishing positions, or head to head results. It is obvious that technology enables the records of an earlier era to be surpassed by those of a later one, but within eras and even single seasons technological advances both bring competitors closer together or separate them by infinitesimal but significant margins. In tennis and golf for instance it has been held that

technological advances in racquet and club design has narrowed the gaps between players although in motor racing joining the team which has the edge has produced a turnabout in fortunes for Nigel Mansell and Ayrton Senna in 1992.

The problem of interpretation continually confronts the historian. As Kitson-Clark noted 'facts have a degree of uncertainty but interpretation is speculative'.²³ At the time of writing, Greg Norman is the subject of sneering newspaper remarks about his mediocre performances on the American tour and a statistic which is often quoted (more recently against him) is his one 'major' tournament victory - 1986 British Open. Of all types of facts, perhaps statistics are most prone to bending. For Norman, the fact that he has won over sixty, four round tournaments around the world in the last fifteen years has been ignored. What I am suggesting here is that statistical facts in sport no less than in politics can be used selectively to suit one's point of view. If one is trying to support Norman's claim to greatness one would certainly build on his total tournament wins and question the concept of the 'major' which it can be argued has been part promoted by Jack Nicklaus to substantiate his claim, ahead of Bobby Jones and Ben Hogan, to being the best golfer of all time. In many respects Norman represents a major problem because if Vamplew is right 'that sport is often the yardstick by which communities judge themselves' he has built up expectations which he has not fulfilled. Norman might be the unluckiest golfer of all the time but those who like to live vicariously are restive. The facts of his losses remain the same but the interpretations have changed so that he is increasingly being seen as a choker. What does this say about us as a society? Is lopping the tall poppy too simple an explanation or is the sporting hero who falls from grace as vulnerable as many other victims? Perhaps like rape victims and the unemployed he or she may be blamed for bringing their current individual circumstance upon themselves.

According to Vamplew, 'setting the record straight and preventing myths becoming reality' is an important consideration for

both professional and amateur historians²⁴ although this is often difficult when mass media sources assume too great a significance in perpetuating the myth. Richard Stremski for example seems to have had difficulty convincing Victorian radio commentators that the Melbourne-Collingwood rivalry is not traditional²⁵ and my 87 Myth²⁶ also seems to have fallen on deaf ears with cricket commentators. The resistance to change is not hard to fathom as myths often have a sense of wonder about them which hard facts will deny and the historian can appear as something of a spoil sport.²⁷

There are some successes to be had on occasions though, and it was pleasing to be able to correct a misapprehension that the year 1907 was significant in South Australian football history. Around 1981 I was working for the South Australian National Football League as editor of the *Football Budget* and researching my book, *The South Australian Football Story* when I came across details of a South Australian Football Association committee meeting which resolved that the body should change its name to League.²⁸ By itself, this may not sound like much of a find but the implications were large since much of the game's record keeping was based on league football beginning in 1907. At some stage thirty years of endeavour including thirteen premierships by Norwood, six by South Adelaide during the 1890s, the first Adelaide Football Club and the introduction of electorate football had been largely obliterated by the substitution of one word for another.

These myths might all be said to apply to straight sports history but there are a number of others which overlap into wider society. The phrase 'its not cricket' coined by Pycroft in 1851²⁹ and which has been supposed to represent sportsmanship and high moral purpose has always had a shady side. Gambling was banned by the Marylebone Cricket Club long before Dennis Lillee and Rod Marsh placed a wager against their own side; the amateur/professional distinction divided the game socially, politically and economically in England until 1962; Bodyline was not only unsporting and a threat to cricket but to the British Empire, and so on.

Lillee and Ian Chappell were far from the first cricketers to display petulance: 'W.G.' Grace had his moments too.

Sport, it has been suggested, builds character but what type of character? Sport was supposed to teach leadership, initiative, teamwork, self reliance, dependability and courage, and in 1908 Prime Minister Deakin addressing visiting teams for the inaugural Australasian Football Carnival in Melbourne predicted that footballers would be the first to acknowledge the call to arms and make the name of the nation.³⁰ Unfortunately sportsmen died just as pointlessly as their comrades at Gallipoli and on the Somme. Sport has often been treated by other competitors as a mock battle where strength has given way to thuggery and defeat, instead of being acknowledged squarely, is expressed grudgingly as being beaten by the better side or opponent 'on the day'.

Sport has often claimed to be egalitarian but this is another myth. Twopeny wrote of cricket in Australia in 1883 that 'no class is too poor to play'³¹ but the place where Jack was reckoned as good as his master was true in relative terms only, and did not apply to Jill. Swimming was open to all classes but polo is restricted by economics. Yachting and motor racing have also tended to be the prerogative of the rich but tennis has been accessible because of the large numbers of courts maintained by schools, local councils and churches. The importance of facts in sports history is to reveal information such as this but also to show that many clubs use a variety of exclusionary practices and have long waiting lists for memberships, as well as to point out that it is only in the 1980s that women began to gain more equal opportunities in sport. As Anne Summers has said in her chapter, 'The Sporting Wife' in *Damned Whores and God's Police*, too many assumptions are made about Australian sport in linking it with the Australian way of life but ignoring Australian women, many of whom, play only a passive role in it.³²

Sport does not and cannot exist apart from society. The corporate cowboys who have been mucking around in financial markets both here and overseas have not left sport alone. Senna, Prost or Mansell

might win the Australian Grand Prix but Fosters' look at exposing their product to 500 million beer drinkers.³³ Numerous 'Dodgy Brothers' have been staking out development sites on the eastern seaboard in recent years but, as the *Four Corners* documentary 'Shady Links' exposed, the vast number of golf course developments on the Gold Coast has seen the white shoes brigade dealing with the grey people of Japanese business.³⁴

In summary, what I have tried to show is that as in other forms of history, facts in sports history are subject to revision and the interpretation of facts is treated the same way. Sports history, like all history, depends on facts, and they have value, but for them to have the greatest value they must be put in context. It is up to the sports historian to select the context.

NOTES

1. The main character in the film *Dead Poet's Society*
2. Walvin, J., 'Sport, Social History and the Historian', *British Journal of Sports History*, (1984), p.5.; Vamplew, W., *Late Kick-Off Economic History and Sports History*, (mimeo). Mandle, W., 'Sports History' in Osborne, G., and Mandle, W., (eds.), *New History: Studying Australia today*, (Sydney. Allen and Unwin, 1982) p.83.
3. Park, R., 'The Use of Hypotheses in Sports History' in *Sports History Methodology* (University of Alberta, 1980), p.27.
4. Mandle, W., *op.cit.*, 82-93.
5. Commager, H., *The Study and Teaching of History* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill, 1980), pp.15-26.
6. Sleeman, R., 'Bought Sport' in *Blood, Sweat and Tears* (Melbourne: Lothian, 1988), p.209.
7. *The People's Challenge*, 6 October 1991, p.6. News Limited supplement to Sunday papers.
8. Tatz, C., 'Race, Politics and Sport' in *Sporting Traditions*, 1 (1) 1985, pp.26-28.
9. Tatz, C., *Aborigines in Sport*, (ASSH Studies in Sports History, 3,1987), pp.29-34.
10. Mandle, W., *op.cit.*, 91.
11. *The Guinness Book of Records*, (London: 1955 edition), foreword.
12. Thomson, D., *The Aims of History*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969) p.37.
13. Elton, G., *The Practice of History*, (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1967), p.10.
14. Williams, B., *What is Truth?*, Second of three programs devoted to historical truth, screened on SBS August, 1991.
15. Whimpress, B., *Understanding Cricket*. (Sydney: Rigby, 1985). p.75.

16. Carr, E., *What is History*, (London: Macmillan, 1962), p.10; Commager, H., *op.cit.*, p.16.
17. Thomson, D., *op. cit.*, p.39.
18. Carr, E., *op.cit.*, p.10.
19. Guttman, A., *From Ritual to Record*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p.51.
20. *ibid.*, p.52.
21. Carr, E., *op.cit.*, p.24.
22. Thomson, P., quoted in Ramsey, T., 'Golf is my game', *Weekend Australian*, 30 January 1988, p.63.
23. Kitson-Clark, G., *The Critical Historian*, (London: Heinemann, 1967), p.46.
24. Vamplew, W., *Time to get a guernsey: sport in local history* (mimeo), p.1.
25. Stremski, R., 'The Myth of the Melbourne-Collingwood Rivalry' in Fitzgerald, R., and Spillman, K., (eds.), *The Greatest Game*, (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1988), pp.183-194.
26. Whimpress, B., 'Exploding that 87 Myth', *Cricketer*, March 1988.
27. Keith Miller has given an explanation of sorts in his piece, 'Unlucky87' in Mullins, P., *Bat and Ball*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984) p.135.
28. *Adelaide Observer*, 20 April, 1907.
29. Oxford English Dictionary refers to the expression in James Pycroft, *The Cricket Field*, 1851.
30. *Adelaide Observer*, 22 August, 1908.
31. Twopeny, R.E.N., *Town Life in Australia* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1973 Facsimile of 1883 edition), p.204.
32. Summers, A., *Damned Whores and God's Police*, (Melbourne: Penguin, 1982), p.69.
33. Sleeman, R., *op.cit.*, 209.
34. 'Shady Links', *Four Corners*, ABC Television, screened 30 September. 1991. Reporter, Jonathon Holmes. The expression 'grey people' suggests criminal connections and the program brought evidence of possible yakuza (Japanese mafia) involvement.