

**Peter Fitzsimons, *The Authorised Biography of Nick Farr-Jones.*  
Random House, Milsons Point, 1993. pp. 285.**

The sports collector in Australia is agog with the sudden profusion of books on sport. Biographies in particular have hit the stands in recent years: in the rugby codes alone books have been written on and/or by Peter Sterling, Simon Poidevin, David Campese, Greg Alexander, Paul McLean, Wally Lewis, Alan Jones, Peter Fenton, Wayne Pearce, Ray Price, Steve Roach, Gary Freeman, Mario Fenech, Bob Dwyer etc.

It is difficult to put a new slant on a sporting biography, but this one on Farr-Jones has an interesting twist, in that it is *about* a player and *by* a player. The author, the extroverted Peter Fitzsimons, is best known as a garrulous and loquacious television and newspaper personality, but he was also one of the first rugby nomads, selling his talent in the 'amateur' game in far-off lands like Italy and France. Other books have come from his pen such as *Basking in Beirut* and *Little Theories of Life*. He was also a Wallaby, touring and rooming with Farr-Jones in 1984, and in all playing seven Tests with the subject of this biography. Fitzsimons, then, can provide insights that no journalist ever could – he broke his nose for the green and gold, and he understands through experience the fear and ecstasy of victory and defeat.

This reviewer of all people has sympathy for the athlete-writer, but I have to admit – as a poor 'country' boy from Randwick who emerged through the state school system – that I experienced a certain uneasiness, indeed queasiness, as I was led through the exploits of a graduate of Newington College by a product of Knox Grammar School. Class factors have never overly concerned me in Rugby Union, but somehow Fitzsimons turned me off in the early pages, by class-related comments.

As the book is an 'authorised' one, it is reasonably safe to assume that Farr-Jones read and approved it. If it were of me, I would have asked him to delete or to tone down certain sections. If Farr-Jones had been my

son, I would early on have given him a kick in the backside and told him to be a good sport. His father's philosophy is proudly put forward: 'life is all about winning. I want them to know that that's what counts – to be competitive, to get better, to succeed' (p. 14).

Let's go on: 'As a Wallaby, the theory of his fellow players was that if you were to draft Farr-Jones out of a London casino at 3 a.m., take the plaster cast off both legs, the drink out of one hand and the cigarette out of the other, then get him out to Twickenham for the Test, he would be ready to play (p. 15).' As a former Wallaby myself, I would not have been amused, and frankly, using one of his own expressions, would have told him to 'nick off.

I was overjoyed to get away from the growth of an obnoxious child, and the juvenile behaviour of his college life at St Andrews which fellow yuppie Fitzsimons obviously relished. For example: 'Beneath their black academic gowns and ties they were just as likely to be wearing a torn shirt and jeans. They were waited on hand and foot at the long wooden tables by older waiters wearing black ties – who came into the college via the Tradesmen's Entrance – but it wasn't out of the question to throw food at each other on certain celebratory occasions (p. 51).' Ugh!

Frankly, I would recommend passing up the first seventy odd pages and getting into the meat of the book. What however is amply demonstrated up to that point is that champions come in all shapes and sizes, and from all kinds of backgrounds. What is for certain, despite my previous remarks, is that Farr-Jones is a champion, who got his opportunity after only playing in the second team at Newington and turned into one of the great players of his era. Whether he is better than Cyril Burke or John Hipwell is irrelevant: he was dominant, playing like an extra breakaway, throwing a pass that 'blind Freddy' could handle, changing direction, tackling ... yes, that is the Farr-Jones I want to know, and he was brilliant, not this twerp of a child and adolescent.

Fitzsimons is more at ease in the Wallaby part of the book rather than dwelling on his own yuppieness. Maybe it is my own bias, but his writing improves as the book goes on. The real insights come out then – the Dwyer-Jones controversy, the strength and weaknesses of the coaches, and how Australia became a world power in Rugby Union.

For the rugby fanatic, and the sports historian, the book is a must. When Farr-Jones becomes a Wallaby – and Fitzsimons is with him – the book has the authentic smell of lineament and jock-straps. Farr-Jones emerges as a real leader, though elements of his childhood can still be seen at certain moments. Overall, it is a good read.

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