

ABORIGINES AND CRICKET: SOME NEW PERSPECTIVES

In recent years there has been renewed interest in the topic of Aborigines and sport and there has been a burgeoning literature on the subject. Colin Tatz,¹ John Mulvaney and Rex Harcourt,² Richard Broome,³ Genevieve Blades,⁴ Max Howell,⁵ Dave Nadel⁶ and Vicky Paraschak⁷ are just some of the scholars who have explored various aspects of this topic. Some of the issues examined have included: racism in sport pre-1788 Aboriginal 'sport'; greater Aboriginal access to some sports; Aboriginal notions of sport and whether sport has been beneficial or detrimental for Aborigines.

Aborigines and cricket is a rich area of research and Mulvaney, Harcourt, Tatz and Blades have drawn attention to some of the many controversies. Their work has focused on three main areas. Why did the beginning of Aboriginal cricket involvement appear so promising with the 1868 tour, the apparent success of teams, such as the Poonindie XI, and the appearance of a number of players in senior cricket? Why has the twentieth century been so barren in terms of Aborigines playing first-class cricket? Why have the careers of three promising fast bowlers -Jack Marsh, Albert Henry and Eddie Gilbert - been cut short in controversial circumstances?

Both Blades and Tatz implied that the three Aboriginal bowlers, who were branded 'chuckers', were victims of a form of overt racism. They produce strong circumstantial evidence, notably the opinions of respected cricket writers and players, that these three were the victims of racial discrimination.⁸ Added to this was the problem of what Tatz referred to as 'institutional denial', the various obstacles that made it difficult for an Aboriginal to progress through the cricket ranks.

While accepting the concept of 'institutional denial' as a useful one, Bernard Whimpress has explored whether discrimination against Aborigines in sport can best be explained in terms of overt racism or whether there are other possible explanations: such as covert racism or

even an Aboriginal 'disinclination to play cricket' on some occasions. Whimpress, in another and larger work, has set out to explore the nature of prejudice by examining a number of key indicators such as selection policy, accusations of 'throwing', the place in the batting order and the evaluation of fielding.⁹

In the first of three articles that follow Whimpress unravels a critical series of events in the career of Jack Marsh in 1902 that seriously affected his career. He concludes that discrimination against Marsh occurred for a complex set of reasons: while race was certainly an issue, it was compounded by other issues such as class and even personality clashes. The notion of covert racism, which suggests that racial issues intersected with other factors, best explains what took place in 1902.

The other two articles place cricket at the Poonindie Mission in its wider context. Both Daly and Whimpress question some of the conventional wisdom about the success of the games ethic at Poonindie. Whimpress argues that cricket historians have made too much of too little dwelling on a few references in the initial years that suggest that cricket was viewed as a powerful civilising agent. The game was probably far less central. While the Mission lasted from 1850 to 1894 the ten known recorded cricket matches only occupied a fraction of the time. It is also true that one of the advocates of the games cult at the Mission, Archdeacon Hale, left Poonindie at an early stage, in 1856, to become Bishop of Perth. Both articles explore how cricket fitted in with the wider mission life and the eventual failure and dismantling of the Mission. By that time the ideals articulated by Hale had long been forgotten and the Mission became another gross example of 'white' greed and inhumanity.

While conceding that Hale achieved some success using cricket at Poonindie, Daly argues that the very success of Aboriginal cricketers there inflamed racial attitudes of the 'white' community. Games did not, as Hale hoped, 'soften local prejudice' against Aborigines. Whimpress contends that the games ethic was only introduced to a very limited extent at

Poonindie and the uncritical acceptance of rhetoric about ticket as a civilising agent may be something of a trap for sports historians. Tom and Tim Adams, who both captained the Poonindie side in the 1870s, had good grounds for believing that this rhetoric was decidedly hollow.

NOTES

1. Colin Tatz, *Aborigines in Sport*, ASSH Studies in Sports History, no. 3, Adelaide, 1987.
2. John Mulvaney and Rex Harcourt, *Cricket Walkabout: The Australian Aborigines in England*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1988.
3. Richard Broome, 'Professional Aboriginal Boxers in Eastern Australia 1930-1979' *Aboriginal History*, vol. 4, nos 1-2, June 1980, pp. 49-71.
4. Genevieve Clare Blades, 'Australian Aborigines, Cricket and Pedestrianism: Culture and Conflict, 1880-1910', BHMS Hons thesis, University of Queensland, 1985.
5. Max Howell, 'Aborigines and Wrestling', unpub. paper, ASSH-NASSH Conference, Hawaii, Jan. 1993.
6. Dave Nadel, 'Aborigines and Australian Football: The Rise and Fall of the Purnim Bears', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 9, no. 2, May 1993, pp. 47-63.
7. Vicky Paraschak, 'Aborigines and Sport in Australia', *Bulletin of the Australian Society for Sports History*, no. 17, Sept. 1992, pp. 15-19.
8. Tatz, *Aborigines in Sport*, p. 32; Blades, 'Australian Aborigines', p. 79.
9. B Whimpress, 'Few and Far Between: Prejudice and Discrimination among Aborigines in Australian First Class Cricket 1869-1988', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of South Australia*, vol. 30, nos 1 & 2, Dec. 1992, pp. 57-70.