

## Review Article

# Sports History and Social History: The Current State of Australian Sports History

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Wray Vamplew and Brian Stoddart, eds, *Sport in Australia: A Social History*. Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1994. Illus. pp. xiv + 346. \$49.95.

*Sport in Australia: A Social History* demonstrates both the strengths and shortcomings of Australian sports history as it stands in the mid -1990s. On the one hand, the study of sport in Australian society has come a long way in the past twenty years, while on the other, as Brian Stoddart argues in the conclusion, there are many issues demanding further research. Nevertheless, the volume is a welcome and valuable addition to the rapidly expanding body of historical literature on Australian sport.

Modelled on the Cambridge social history of sport in Britain edited by Tony Mason, *Sport in Australia* takes a sport by sport approach in examining the 'social' history of thirteen Australian sports or groups of related sports over the past two centuries. The volume contributes to the increasing move to analyse sport as social history developed in works such as Richard Holt's *Sport and the British* (1989) and Dennis Brailsford's *British Sport: A Social History* (1992) among others. Whether the book is entirely successful as a social history is debatable with some contributions being some of the best social history of sport available while others provide almost no social analysis.

While one could argue for the inclusion of other sports, especially hockey, or even baseball and softball or basketball, the ones chosen all have a long history and are mostly sports in which Australia has enjoyed success on the international stage. *Sport in Australia*, along with the two

editions of the *Oxford Companion to Australian Sport* (1992, 1994) and Richard Cashman's soon to be published *Paradise of Sport: The Rise of Organised Sport in Australia* (1995), demonstrates that the academic historical literature on sport in Australia has reached a stage where broad syntheses are possible. All of these works provide a great point of departure for the next generation of study on the history of sport in Australia. Many of the issues extensively covered in previous studies appear here - from the role of sport in Australian nationalism to regional and ethnic identities resulting from the various football codes.

As Stoddart's conclusion cautions, however, Australian sports historians cannot yet be too self congratulatory. What we know about the precise role of sport in the creation of national identity and the impact of international interpretations of Australian sports and sporting success is still limited. Assertions like that of Vamplew in the introduction that sports nationalism has played a key role in unifying Australia 'in sublimating albeit temporarily the inequities of race and gender and the rivalries of internal geography' (p. 5) need to be tested. For as Murray Phillips reminds us in his analysis of rugby codes, many commentators have argued that regional rivalries between New South Wales and Queensland have adversely affected national expansion and national identification (p. 206). Australia is quite unique in having four football codes with relative popularity, none of which can claim to be *the* 'national' winter sport. Cashman suggests that cricket has the best claim to being the 'national' sport, however cautions that earlier analyses by Mandle and others about cricket's role in unifying the nation have been overly optimistic as David Montefiore posits (p. 63). Beyond national identity, we still do not have nearly enough studies on the role of sports in the creation and maintenance of community identities throughout the country. In addition, we still know much more about sport in Sydney and Melbourne than in the other large cities or in regional towns throughout Australia. What we know about women in sport, including the mass participation sport of netball, is still far too little. As Stoddart reminds us

again in his conclusion, sport is ultimately about power, though many who are involved in it understand little about its meaning. Much work still remains to be done on the administrative history of Australian sports and power relations within sports as well as between sports and sponsors and politicians.

Nearly every author (all male except for one) tries to examine the role of gender differences in each sport from women in rugby codes to men in netball. This is certainly a welcome improvement and follows from an increasing awareness of women in Australian sport as Marion Stell's *Half the Race* (1991) and Richard Cashman and Amanda Weaver's *Wicket Women* (1991) have begun to do. Despite, such an awareness, it is still frustrating to see discussions like that of Vamplew in the introduction. For example, in mentioning current Australian world champion teams (p. 5), he neglects to mention netball, arguably the sport Australia has dominated more than any other in international competition. In fact, Vamplew neglects to discuss netball at all, while women appear in the discussion of Australians and sport almost as an afterthought once men and horses are discussed. There should be no excuse for failing to record the social significance of netball, for it would be hard to find an organised social activity in which more Australian women participate, or a sport that Australia so completely dominates internationally. In Vamplew's account, women are even blamed for their attitudes about 'unfeminine' sport. While this argument has some merit, without discussion it is distorting and suggests that women are where they are in the sporting world because they have wanted it that way. Vamplew rightly concludes, however, that women have not had a 'fair go' in sports (p. 16).

While many authors perform well in the discussion of gendered differences, which is a very welcome development in the literature, readers may be discouraged by the time they finish the first chapter on a particular sport, Australian Rules Football by Bernard Whimpress. He provides a very patronising interpretation of how girls become involved

in Aussie Rules: 'The position of women in Australian football has been restricted to support roles. For many women and girls, their first exposure to the game was playing alongside their brothers as children. As they have reached their teenage years there has been the *opportunity* to join cheer squads and, from the 1970s, *the brief glamour role afforded* by joining the club dancing troupes which warm up the crowds for the main match ... '(p. 30) (emphasis added) and so on. Whimpress then discusses the use of women as sex objects (p. 31) in club promotions without analysing the social context in which such practices have emerged. He suggests though that women may have gained 'some compensations by engaging in violent acts against opposition players and umpires such as sticking hat pins into them as they left the arena and brandishing umbrellas in the heat of the moment' (p. 31). He then suggests that 'in more recent years' women have been more open in 'their admiration of male backsides in tight shorts' (p. 31). Again this type of general assertion, without any supporting evidence given, demands detailed investigation as to the social context in which such 'admiration' has emerged. To be fair, Whimpress, in this brief account, points to an area which surely demands further research and explanation through interviews, ethnographic research and other methods as to the reasons for the great popularity 'Aussie Rules' appears to have had for women as spectators. He also includes a paragraph (pp. 31-2) mentioning the role of women as players and that equal-opportunity legislation has given girls places in junior football teams under 'modified rules'.

The issue of modified rules is a significant one which has also not received much attention. Richard Cashman and Amanda Weaver in *Wicket Women* discuss various modifications to cricket rules made for female players. Yet, we still do not understand well enough just why so many games were thought to be suitable for women to play, but only once alterations to the rules were made. Netball is a prime case in point as it began as a derivation of basketball when English female physical educators thought the rules should be changed to make a better 'women's game'.<sup>1</sup>

What is needed in research, though, is to explore not just the implications of why women established ‘modified’ sports, but to develop an understanding of the social contexts in which such changes were made. In some cases, women understood that there was nothing wrong with the sports themselves but the excesses of male sports and the values they engendered. Again we need a great deal more research before we can make too many broad assertions.<sup>2</sup>

As with many edited collections, the contributions vary. In this volume, however, there are significant differences of quality and levels of analysis between authors. Some chapters are very descriptive and do very little to increase our understanding of the particular sport as a *social* phenomenon. While some contributions, especially those by Douglas Booth (Swimming, Surfing and Surf-lifesaving) and Louella McCarthy (Lawn Bowls) clearly situate sport within the development of society. Booth, in particular, analyses how regulation of the body through clothing restrictions at swimming baths and the beach was part of a regimen of social control of bodily expression and practices. His level of interpretation and analysis provides a good example of how to discuss sport as a social activity connected to wider systems of power within society. More authors should follow Booth’s lead in exploring the issues of power which Stoddart reminds us are too lacking in analyses of Australian sport. Despite this, there is a tendency to see the strong arm of social control gripping all those who would take to the waters either in the pool or at the beach. Surely, as Booth suggests in discussing the role of Californian Malibu surfboards, there is greater room for theorising on the negotiation of power and the role of resistance through the use of Gramsci’s and Raymond Williams’ writings on hegemony. Booth, however, clearly challenges the conventional wisdom that there was a mass move to the alternative hedonistic lifestyle of the surfer in the 1960s. Rather, he demonstrates that measures were quickly brought in to regulate and spatially control surfing due to the dangers which surfboards washed up on the beach posed for bathers (p. 247).

Some other chapters barely move beyond description of great players or of major events. A descriptive approach can be of great value in illuminating various events of the past as John O'Hara demonstrates in his excellent use of vignettes from the 1867 Melbourne Cup and the annual race meeting of the same year in Grafton, New South Wales. O'Hara also discusses class and gender restrictions at the track as well as the struggles between different clubs and racing forms as they changed over time. Stoddart, McCarthy, Daryl Adair and Phillips also deal with gender and class in exemplary fashion. Graeme Kinross-Smith (lawn tennis), Ian Jobling (netball) and John Daly (track and field), on the other hand, rarely venture beyond description and do not provide the reader with a solid understanding of the social history of their sports.

Important issues of race and ethnicity are well covered in many of the contributions, especially by Vamplew (boxing), Cashman (cricket), Phillips (the rugby codes) and Philip Mosely and Bill Murray (soccer). Several contributors point to the role of Aborigines in sport, especially in Australian Football, boxing and Rugby League. Despite relative success in some sports, Aborigines have had a much more difficult time breaking into top level cricket, though Aborigines have played the game for well over 100 years as Cashman demonstrates (pp. 69-71). Mosely and Murray discuss the way soccer has gone from being a game of British migrants to one of migrants from southern and eastern Europe, particularly Italy, Yugoslavia and Greece, after World War II. It is interesting that soccer with its high levels of participation is still viewed as 'ethnic' and has been less able to transform itself into an 'Australian' sport as have other imported sports. From 1945-65 the Italians were the dominant immigrant group and they produced many of the best soccer teams. Murray and Mosely note, however, that after 1970 Italian teams declined relative to Greek and Yugoslav teams (p. 222). It would be interesting to see a detailed analysis of immigrant groups in other sports such as Australian Football and Rugby League, as well as participation of women from different ethnic groups, to see how much length of residence,

cultural solidarity or relative cultural integration has played a significant role in determining sporting choices. For as Whimpress points out, many players from a non-British background have been successful in Australian Football in the past thirty years.

A few minor specific criticisms must be pointed out. Cashman (p. 67) refers to cricket connections with South Africa without mentioning apartheid. O'Hara refers to 'negro songs' (p. 94) which surely should be put in quotes or rephrased as Mosely and Murray do when they discuss soccer's often quoted nickname of 'wogball'. Aside from a couple of contributions, *Sport in Australia* reflects sports historians reluctance to foreground social theory in their analyses. Despite this, a clear move to integrate sport within the wider social context is evidenced throughout the text.

*Sport in Australia* also demonstrates the nostalgic slant of many historians of sport. Pre-television age sport is idealised in some chapters and laments for older, more community-based sports and values appear occasionally. Perhaps increasing media intrusion into sport along with rising commodification will be bad, but it is difficult to sustain such arguments at this stage. Certainly the national (and now international) expansion of football codes has had an effect on older structures of sports, however, nostalgically longing for the way that things once were does not advance the academic analysis of sport.

Despite these criticisms, *Sport in Australia* is a significant contribution to the social history of sport both in Australia and internationally. In particular detailed analyses of previously overlooked sports (some amazingly so) such as golf and lawn bowls are to be welcomed. Stoddart's chapter on golf leaves one wondering how such an economically and socially significant (and signifying) sport could have been ignored by so many sports historians for so long. *Sport in Australia* will provide a major starting point for researchers interested in the history of specific sports and indeed on the role of sport as a social

phenomenon in Australia past and present. It should be one of the first required readings of any student of Australian sports studies and required reading internationally for those interested in the social history of sport.

Surely after reading *Sport in Australia*, supervisors of postgraduate students and researchers in sports history and sociology should have no trouble identifying topics for detailed analysis. Some of these avenues for further research are suggested in the text and in this article, others will emerge from a close reading of particular chapters in the book. This is the great strength in being able to provide works of synthesis - they show from where we have come, but also demonstrate how far we have left to go before we can more fully understand our field of study.

## NOTES

- 1 For a beginning discussion of netball as a 'woman's game', see John Nauright and Jayne Broomhall, 'A Woman's Game: The Development of Netball and Female Sporting Culture in New Zealand, 1906-1970', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 11, no. 3, Dec. 1994, pp. 387-407.
- 2 Again Richard Cashman is providing a lead in this area. See his 'Defining "Real Sport": The Question of Modified Sport for Women', in K B Wamsley, ed., *Method and Methodology in Sport and Cultural History*, Wm Brown, Madigan, 1995, pp. 88-101.