

Philip Mosely, *Ethnic Involvement in Australian Soccer: A History 1950-1990*. National Sports Research Centre (NSRC), Canberra, 1995. pp.147 paper. \$25 from NSRC, PO Box 176, Belconnen 2616.

Ethnicity is an enduring question in Australian soccer. Many officials and even soccer supporters would like to totally eliminate all ethnic connotations from the game. John Howard's 1987 election campaign, with its anti-multicultural overtones, has its exact equivalence in soccer. For the Liberals then the battle cry was for some vision of an Anglicised Australia. Soccer administrators, too, are frequently keen on a war cry that is authentically Australian. They see no future for ethnicity in Australian soccer. Philip Mosely's report ably demonstrates not only that ethnicity has always been a vital factor in Australian soccer's history. It also shows that it is likely to remain so, at least in the foreseeable future.

In some ways it seems odd that the history of Australian soccer reads very much like a critique of official government policy towards non-English speaking immigrants. When government policy was assimilation European immigrants in the 1940s and 1950s clearly wanted, in general, to display their ethnicity. The creation of the New South Wales Soccer Federation in the 1950s was a clear attempt (which proved successful) to oust Anglo-Australian dominance from the sport.

In the 1960s government policy under Immigration Minister Billy Snedden moved away from assimilation towards integration. Immigrants

could keep their own customs, at least for a time, but would eventually become 'dinky-di' Australians. This was really a 'two bob each way' policy, but many soccer officials began to embrace it. Committees could remain largely 'ethnic', but the sport could benefit by an increasing 'Australian' involvement.

In the 1970s government policy under Labor Immigration Minister Al Grassby and Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser moved in the opposite direction - multiculturalism. Immigrants could not only retain their culture, official policy would encourage them to do so. Soccer moved in the opposite direction, a policy of reverse

multiculturalism or, as Mosely terms it, 'de-ethnicisation'. This meant the removal of ethnic associations, as in the removal of 'ethnic' team names, and required the adoption of an 'ocker' image. Bruce Ruxton, Victoria's Returned Services League President, a powerful opponent of multiculturalism, has been a strong influence on the attitudes of many clubs.

Why should the issue of ethnic (meaning non-Anglo) names excite such passion among many Australians? The answer may be partly historic. Last century Van Diemen's Land was re-named Tasmania. Later, during World War I, many towns with German designations were re-named. Perhaps Mount Kosciusko or the Strzelecki Ranges will be next! Mosely points out that soccer clubs in many non-English countries have very English names. We ought to be more tolerant.

The adoption of district rather than ethnic names, a preferred option for many clubs faced with an imposed requirement to adopt a new name, does not of itself necessarily lead to an increase in support from Anglo spectators unless interest in soccer by particular groups (such as Jews in the case of Hakoah) is declining. Sometimes it merely replaces one ethnic name with another. Heidelberg and Altona, both German district names in Victoria, are also, respectively, Greek and Macedonian soccer clubs. Name changes can also result from a takeover of a failing club by members of a different ethnic group. Hakoah in Melbourne

became Hellas-Hakoah for a time, then reverted to Hellas and subsequently to South Melbourne. Essendon Lions, a Ukrainian club, was taken over by Croatians who subsequently changed the name of the club to Melbourne Croatia, and later to Melbourne Knights. The present attitude of soccer officials that ethnic names are undesirable could be a factor in the failure of recently arrived ethnic groups to make their mark in Australian soccer. Vietnamese, other Asians and even South Americans, have yet to support Australian soccer with an influx comparable to that of Europeans in the period immediately post World War II. In fact their influence has been insignificant.

Interestingly de-ethnicisation of soccer has acted as a model for Victoria's Local Government Board under the Kennett Government's restructuring of local Councils. Three Melbourne Councils with German-ethnic names, Altona, Brunswick and Heidelberg, no longer exist. Their replacements, Hobsons Bay, Moreland and Banyule, are in the first two cases respectably Anglo and in the latter case indigenous Aboriginal. This is surprising in that Premier Kennett claims a commitment to multiculturalism, and even actively supported Italy in the 1994 World Cup, an action clearly politically motivated. There are more Italians than Brazilians or Portuguese-speakers in Victoria, and many more Italians are likely to be Liberal voters.

De-ethnicisation is explained by Mosely as a marketing tool, a way soccer can reach a mass market. Strangely soccer promotion has also been of influence in the Victorian ALP, and for similar reasons. In order to market itself better as a mainstream party (after allegations on ABC Radio National program 'Background Briefing' by journalist Stan Correy about extensive ethnic branch stacking, and later repetition of these allegations on ABC television's 'Four Corners') it will no longer officially list the community language spoken by its ethnic branches. Some such branches, generally with a small membership, have even been forced to amalgamate with a nearby English-speaking branch.

Mosely argues convincingly that the marketers of soccer hold the values of corporate Australia. They ignore cultural considerations so necessary for an understanding of soccer's problems. Mosely suggests soccer promotion should be 'segmented', that 'niche' marketing serves soccer better. Publicity in the ethnic media, community language newspapers, SBS television and radio, and even on the newer community language narrowcast radio stations will help sustain soccer as a mass sport in this country.

Mosely makes several references to competing football codes. In particular he makes comparisons with the dominant codes of Rugby League in New South Wales and Queensland, and Australian Football in the other states. A major handicap for soccer is that both the major print media and free-to-air television concentrate almost exclusively on the dominant codes to the detriment of soccer. Summer soccer in Australia at the national level is an attempt to attract media interest at a time other codes are not competing. It has met with some success, but soccer is yet to attract the mass spectatorship of the other codes.

The mass print media regularly paint soccer in a poor light by sensationalising violence at soccer matches. Some supporters, particularly Croats and the English, are stereotyped in a negative way. Violent incidents sometimes occur in other codes, even in Australian Football, yet they never receive the same bad publicity. Some of the violence, in Mosely's view, is due to extreme nationalism among club supporters, but he clearly points out that these are always in a very small minority. His chapter on violence, using as a case study Balkan nationalism and the successful attempts by both government authorities and even clubs themselves to contain it, is likely to be extensively cited in academic literature.

Issues of sporting culture have sometimes been given an unfortunate ethnic dimension in the media without justification. Professionalism is one such issue considered by Mosely. Soccer, like footrunning and events such as the Stawell Gift, has always been associated with

professionalism in this country, at least since World War II. It is true that the British and even Anglo-Australians are much less comfortable with professionalism than migrants from Continental Europe, but this does not make soccer bad because it is professional. Other codes of football in Australia are equally professional, but soccer has always been honest about it. Not so in the Victorian

Football League (VFL). In 1956 only 'amateur' VFL footballers could compete in a demonstration game at the Melbourne Olympics. In fact the players were as much amateurs as Soviet Army officers who competed at the same Olympic Games. The pay of 'amateur' VFL footballers was banked and they received a gratuity at the end of their football career.

Soccer can claim to be a national code since the other football codes are both regionally based. The Australian Football League (AFL) is in fact modelled on soccer's national league, but is substantially a Victorian product. The AFL, perhaps because of its traditional following in Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, has been able to maintain attendances. It also benefits from television coverage. Soccer has not been so successful, as detailed analysis of Mosely's crowd presence statistics suggest.

The explanation for soccer's failure to develop a regular and substantial crowd presence in Australia may lie in the fact that the game is international. Australian Football is only played in Australia and Nauru, as well as an insignificant presence by expatriates in Denmark. There is therefore no comparison with the standard of play in other countries. Part of Australian soccer's problem is the fact that overseas teams play at a consistently higher standard, and that Australians have access to soccer at an international level. This access is likely to increase with the introduction of pay television. Australian clubs attracted much higher attendances when they regularly 'poached' overseas players, so much so that for several years the international FIFA organisation banned official contact with this country. The lifting of FIFA bans

resulted, paradoxically, in declining club attendances after 1964. Mosely partially attributes this to too much good soccer, with visits to Australia by leading overseas teams, including Everton, Torpedo and Chelsea. This too has its parallels in Australian Football, with the virtual collapse of attendances at state matches in Western Australia and South Australia after the admission of state teams into the AFL. Both the West Coast Eagles and the Adelaide Crows offered spectators Rules football at a very much superior standard than that available in local non-AFL competitions.

Mosely's report greatly contributes to our knowledge of Australian soccer history. As a bonus it is a pleasure to read, and jargon has been kept to a minimum. In the references it lists an impressive number of interviews, and contains a comprehensive bibliography. The presence of a detailed index, which must have been a very time-consuming task for the author, will be greatly appreciated by both researchers and general readers. This is an outstanding report, and it is to be hoped the first of many such publications by the writer.

Lyle Allan
Western Metropolitan College of
Technical and Further Education,
Footscray