

‘A Leso Story’:¹ A Case Study of Australian Women’s Cricket and its Media Experience²

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‘We’re so open with homosexuality now, but it’s been accepted in sporting circles for years (Dawn Fraser).³

Dawn Fraser, Australia’s greatest Olympic athlete, seems to have added another dimension to the myth of the egalitarian nature of sport as well as views of the socially progressive, liberated nature of Australian society. The endeavours of the Tasmanian Government in 1994 to retain laws prohibiting male homosexual activity and the presence of Fred Nile’s ultra-conservatism, intent on cleansing the streets after Sydney’s annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade, would suggest that acceptance of homosexuality in Australian society is far from common place.

Sport, too, despite the rapid shift from amateurism to professionalism, continues to be dominated by the conservative forces associated with the long-established amateur ideal. While steeped in such conservative sentiment, it is not surprising that sport is struggling to come to terms with sexism, let alone heterosexism or homophobia. Although women, on the whole, have gained access to a broad range of sporting and physical activities, they are regularly reminded that participation must be tempered by considerations of proper feminine appeal and activity.

Jeff Wells writing on the performance of Australia’s women athletes at the 1995 World Athletic Championships was reassured by Australian sprint champion, Melinda Gainsford, whom he considered ‘big and strong—while still feminine’.⁴ For Wells, women have taken to sport too seriously and to the extent that ‘our concept of a female physique is out the window. Athletics is now a freak show, a parade of bodies which look like they have come straight out of the superhero comic strips’.⁵ (Obviously superheroism is only available for men). In a similar way,

traditionally male dominated team sports are fiercely guarded to the extent that they are considered 'single sex' sports, and women who dare participate in these sports are treated with suspicion. Maintaining socially constructed sex specific sports, labelling opposite sex participation in those sports as deviant and accepting the notion that homosexuality is deviant, ensure that a sexist and heterosexist sports structure is preserved.

Bryson described this pervasiveness of the sexist situation: 'People tend to accept without question that men are far better at sport than women'.⁶ One could well add to this by suggesting that women who participate in traditionally male dominated sports, such as cricket and the various football codes, are labelled, without question, as lesbian.

Sport provides an unusual site for lesbians, for paradoxically, within sport they gain a visibility which is denied them in other aspects of Australian culture. Lesbianism in sport is discussed, albeit in a discourse which is both homophobic and heterosexist, and which usually focuses on the development of strategies to overcome the 'image problem', or the 'type of player the sport seems to be attracting'.

The emphasis of this article will be on the treatment of lesbians in sport by examining recent developments in women's cricket. Many women's sports have gone to considerable trouble to construct an appearance of emphasised 'heterosexual femininity'⁷ to destroy persistent rumours that women's sport is a haven for 'freaks' or 'man-hating lesbians'. Ann Mitchell, President of the Australian Women's Cricket Council (AWCC), conceded that 'one of the reasons why Australian women [cricketers] opted for culottes rather than trousers was to counter the "butch" stereotype, presenting a more acceptable feminine image'.⁸

Cricket is not alone in expressing its concern over the image it projects. Through a variety of measures designed to improve marketability, sports such as netball, basketball, hockey and touch football have opted to use female sexuality to increase media exposure and public interest. Former Australian Captain cum netball commentator, Anne Sargeant, explained that netball's move to vibrantly coloured skirts and leotards was 'to boost the image of netball' so that players could 'show off their athleticism and flatter their image on court with an exciting mix of fabric, colour and movement'.⁹ Similarly, women's basketball, one of the fastest growing women's sports, recognised the need to conform to standard heterosexual attractiveness and recently changed its uniform to demonstrate that 'women not only play well but look good too'.¹⁰

Women's athletics underwent one of the most controversial image transformations with the release of the *Golden Girls of Athletics' Calendar*, closely resembling the soft pornography of a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition, but designed to raise money and the profile of athletics. The extremely successful calendar provided a good example of what McKay described as 'women being asked to market their sports according to voyeuristic potential'.¹¹ In this case, however, because Jane Fleming initiated the idea and took responsibility for the calendar's production, she became a useful ally for the male dominated sports media and marketing industries. The calendar evoked criticism not only for its use of sex to sell, but also for its elective choice of athlete models who conformed to narrow standards of heterosexual attractiveness. Tani Ruckle, marathon runner and 'golden girl' was unreserved in her comments: 'Too many people think of female athletes as people with hairy armpits, deep voices and mega-kilo bodies. But I can assure you this is not the case.'¹²

Lesbians in Sport

The Australian sporting environment more often resembles a space hostile to a lesbian existence rather than one which is supportive of homosexuality or celebratory of alternate female sexualities. The character of the environment was most clearly demonstrated in January 1994, when, amid saturation coverage of the some of the most devastating bushfires experienced in Australia, the media began to unfold one of the most extraordinary sequence of events in the history of women's sport in this country. Between bulletins on the progress of the fires, it was reported that female cricketer, Denise Annetts, had been dropped from the Australian team and had alleged that her sacking was due to her *heterosexual* preference and marital status. It is not unusual that *cricket* should occupy media prime time in Australia, however, women's cricket is invisible and rarely mentioned.

Cricket has a carefully constructed gender exclusivity and women's participation unsettles this perceived natural gender divide. Balance can be restored by casting aspersions on women participants, by suggesting that the women are 'butch' or by spreading rumours that they may be lesbian. The Annetts' incident had the effect of not only confirming speculation about the presence of lesbianism in cricket, but also served to bring into question the sexuality of anyone associated with traditional

masculine sports. As the national officiating body was the target of Annetts' disappointment, her allegations also managed to denigrate and trivialise the organisation and administration of all women's sport.

The media's preoccupation with the issue of lesbianism exemplified the extent to which heterosexism and masculine hegemonic processes operate and influence which forms of sport and physical activity are appropriate for women.¹³ However, the incident received its potency because the sport involved was *cricket*, an institutionalised Australian activity. The status of cricket ensured that the Annetts' controversy provoked reactions and opinions from an extensive range of sporting and social commentators and that her allegations remained a media issue for an extraordinary length of time.

Cricket and its Importance in Australian culture

Sport, particularly cricket, occupies a sacred space in Australian culture. Cricket is the only truly national sport and come the summer months, Australian television is saturated with hundreds of hours of cricket coverage. Success in the sport, requires mental determination, physical toughness and a competitiveness which still finds room for gentlemanly conduct. Implicitly, commentary on cricket is commentary on men's cricket. The employment of the word 'women's', invariably preceding the phrase, 'women's cricket', seems to indicate that women are not involved in the same game.

The success of Australia's national team, particularly in matches against England has been considered a yardstick by which to measure the strength of the nation. Dunstan and Mandle have demonstrated how the development of an Australian identity has, in part, been attributed to cricket.¹⁴ The earliest victories of an Australian team was evidence that the colonies could put aside differences and come together to defeat the Mother Country. Mandle argued that cricket helped the nation to shake off the inferiority complex acquired from its origin as a penal settlement. The economic and political symbolism of cricketing success has not been lost in 200 years of white Australian history. In 1989, having regained the Ashes in England for the first time in fifty-five years, the Australian team returned from the 'Old Dart' to a ticker-tape parade in Sydney and a motorcade in Melbourne. As Nicholson noted,¹⁵ such attention is usually reserved for war heroes, but in this instance, cricket had restored hope to an Australian population which was struggling through harsh

economic circumstances. The successful and initially unfancied Australian team epitomised the 'little Aussie battler' coming through against all odds and symbolised that better times were ahead.

The Women's Game

Women have been involved in organised cricket since the eighteenth century.¹⁶ It is generally overlooked that women contributed to two of the most significant developments in the game. Overarm bowling was probably a refinement of a roundarm action developed in the early nineteenth century by Christina Willes to circumvent the restrictive women's costume of the day. In 1973 women cricketers took part in the first ever World Cup, a concept developed perhaps out of necessity given the difficulties experienced in raising finances for regular tours. Two years later men's cricket initiated a similar world cup competition which is now, unlike the women's equivalent, a highly successful commercial event.

The pre-eminent status of men's cricket may account for the considerable, although sporadic, media coverage women's cricket has received. Although women's cricket is not generally shown on television, enthusiasts can usually find results in the sports summary section of newspapers. Other sources of information about women's cricket more clearly indicate the cultural significance of the game. In 1987 Film Australia produced *Fair Play: The Golden Eras of Women's Test Cricket*, which included material on the first Australian women's cricket tour of England in 1937 and the subsequent history of women's cricket to celebrate fifty years of Test matches between the two countries. Although the video is commercially available, it was never aired on television. In 1988 the second innings of the women's World Cup final was televised live by the Australian Broadcasting Commission. *Wicket Women: Cricket and Women in Australia* was published in 1991.¹⁷

The documentation of women's cricket is quite remarkable when it is considered that the sport has a player base amounting to little more than 16 000 participants nationally and media broadcasters have consistently ignored or trivialised women's sport.¹⁸ A small participation base together with a sexist sports media ensure that, for most people, the existence and achievements of women's cricket in Australia goes virtually unnoticed. In stark contrast to their male counterparts, the Australian women's team, World Cup champions in 1978 and 1982 and victorious

in a Test series in England in 1987, raised no media interest and returned home to diminished bank accounts and in some cases, the search for employment. Hosting and retaining the World Cup in 1988, while generating some media attention, did little to improve the status of the sport.

In many sports predominantly played by men, women participants are seen as challenging male domination and the popular perceptions of what activities are 'naturally appropriate for women. Women, who choose to participate in cricket even at a social level, are challenging the patriarchal values and position of women in society. Participation may require the neglect of what are perceived as women's duties towards others. For instance, cricket is a time consuming sport and could be seen as an indulgent pastime. The strength and stamina required by the game provides another site for potential conflict with the passive feminine stereotype. Women cricketers have not escaped the rumours and innuendos about this 'masculinising' aspect of the sport. It is as if the development of lesbian tendencies, the final proof of abandonment of the conventional women's role, is seen as resulting from continuous participation in the sport!

Ironically, to develop a higher profile and avoid speculation about the sexual preference of players, women's cricket administrators have attempted to promote an image of the sport compatible with popular conceptions of heterosexual female attractiveness. The AWCC defends this position by claiming that it promotes *female* athleticism. This claim is not consistent with the expectation that Australian players wear skirts or dresses at official functions or the AWCC condoning off-field glamour photographs of Australian players appearing in women's magazines.¹⁹ The AWCC's image promotion can be seen as doing little more than reassuring potential sponsors and parents of future players that cricket does not detract from 'conventional femininity'. By insisting that players wear the trappings of heterosexual femininity the AWCC administration has carefully and naively constructed a situation that is constrictive for lesbians and 'straight' women and consistent with a 'culture of the closet'.²⁰

Griffin, writing about the prevalence of homophobia in North American sports, indicated that the presence of men, especially in coaching and administrative positions has had the effect of 'heterosexualising' women's sport.²¹ The AWCC's situation of having

males in the positions of National Coach and Executive Director could only be considered fortuitous in light of the events which unfolded in early 1994.

'Busted' by a Heterosexual!—The Denise Annetts' 'Story'

On Sunday, 16 January 1994, as the Australian cricket team left Sydney to compete in the annual Rose Bowl tournament against New Zealand, newspapers across Australia were breaking the Denise Annetts story. With its ambiguous front page headline 'Cricket star's sex bias fury' the *Sunday Telegraph* best utilised the fail safe combination of sport and sex.

The Rose Bowl has been played annually since 1985 and yet it was only after the Annetts' controversy that the tournament received any substantial media coverage. Arriving in New Zealand, Australian team members, all of whom now had a questionable sexual status, were besieged by the media. Little interest was expressed in the contest about to be staged, rather reporters were after 'the lesbian angle', continually asking just how many lesbians were in the team. The Australian team manager, Christine Brierley, stated that the team was hounded by the Australian media and of the two journalists who joined the tour, she noted wryly that it 'was the first time since 1937 the Australian Women's Cricket team [had] journalists on tour'.²² Despite the preparatory efforts of AWCC in training representative players to speak to the media, the type of interest and exposure being given to the sport resulted in the team deciding 'not to debate the issue publicly any further'.²³

The media's preoccupation with lesbianism within women's cricket served only to titillate the public, trivialise the game itself and denigrate women's sport in general. On return, an experienced Australian team member, reflected that the team was 'treated like freaks'. Whenever in public, the team was mobbed by reporters trying to secure an interview or footage of 'those lesbians'.

The remainder of this article is devoted to an analysis of the extent and quality of the media coverage of women's cricket in the aftermath of the Denise Annetts' incident. It will be argued that the coverage clearly demonstrated the power of the media in influencing public opinion, that the coverage was not merely homophobic reporting on women's sport, but it also provided an opportunity for a backlash against homosexuals. Sections of the heterosexual community were able to vent their frustrations that homosexuals were not only securing recognition, rights

to employment and an harassment free environment but that the increasing rights of the homosexual had now invaded the sacred site of sport.²⁴

How the Event Unfolded

Since its formation in 1931, the AWCC has conducted annual interstate competitions. Over the years these have evolved into Australian Championships at which the various cricketing states compete against each other to determine which state gains the national title. With the best Australian cricketers on show for the two week Open Championship, it is from this event that the national side is selected.

Denise Annetts had played for her state side, New South Wales, in the national championships since 1983, and had represented Australia since 1985. In 1994, she was not selected in the Australian team to play in the Rose Bowl series, however, Annetts retained her position in the Australian squad.

As usual, the announcement of the Australian squad and the Rose Bowl team was made at the presentation dinner at the completion of the tournament on the evening of Sunday, 9 January 1994. On Monday, 10 January the *Daily Telegraph Mirror* reported on the composition of the Australian team. In an article headed 'Annetts axed from new-look Aussies', apart from the opening paragraph expressing 'shock' that 'veteran batsman (*sic*) Denise Annetts has been dumped by Australian selectors' the report concentrated on a change of captaincy and the inclusion of three new and younger players in the team.²⁵

It is interesting to note the lack of media interest in the announcement of the Australian team, especially that the captain of seven years, Lyn Larsen, had been overlooked for a younger captain though Larsen did retain her position in the team. The axing of the Australian captain and any investigation into why Annetts was not selected became irrelevant in comparison to the controversial allegations of women's cricket's 'gay bias'.

A local Sydney newspaper, the *North Shore Times* broke the Annetts' story on Friday, 14 January 1994. Perhaps it was with good intentions as the newspaper had regularly covered women's cricket on Sydney's north shore, and reported on the performances of Denise Annetts whether playing for her local club, Gordon, or representing her state or country. In its most comprehensive coverage of women's cricket,

the *Times* contained a front-page photographic insert of Annetts with the caption 'Denise Annetts' hits out', a page eight editorial, 'No excuse for sacking', and the lead story on the sports page was an interview with Annetts, 'Cricket star sacked: Discrimination action likely'. Annetts was quoted as saying: 'I will take it to the Anti-Discrimination Board unless they can give some reasonable answers'. Annetts claimed that 'her problems with the national officials started in earnest when she married'.²⁶

The Lesbian Story goes National

The story was then picked up by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's radio division and was the lead story on the following day's 'Grandstand' program. During this interview Annetts refused to indicate why she had approached the Anti-Discrimination Board, stating that she had received legal advice not to comment. It was only through a process of elimination that presenter Tracey Holmes was able to speculate that Annetts' query related to sexuality as the New South Wales' legislation protects against discrimination on the basis of age, race, sex and disability.

Later on the same day the story was televised during the ABC's nightly news. Rather than falling into the category of sports news, it was deemed so significant, because of its lesbian content, to warrant 'headline' treatment. The top item for the evening was the Moscow Summit, followed by the Denise Annetts' story. Coming a poor third was a report on the devastation caused by the Sydney bushfires.

All of the eleven national Sunday newspapers covered the story the following day. Seven utilised 'sex bias' in the headings and one referred explicitly to 'gay bias'. All articles appeared in the editorial sections of the newspapers. Four of the articles contained a photograph of Annetts, hugging her cricket bat and in so doing, prominently displaying her wedding ring.

Australia's other television networks soon picked up the story. Items appeared in news services, although as with ABC television, not as a sports story. Producers of current affairs programs and 'infotainment' shows also saw the marketability of the lesbian scandal, and quickly organised segments designed to fuel the controversy on Channel 7's 'Real Life' and Channel 9's 'Today' shows.

National press saturation continued, with all but one of Australia's twelve metropolitan dailies —the *Financial Review* being the exception—

running with the incident. In the week after the story was broken by the *North Shore Times*, seventy-six articles appeared in Australian newspapers, and newspapers in New Zealand and England also picked up the story. While women's cricket was well in the news, very few newspapers bothered to report on the progress of the Australian team in New Zealand where Australia lost the series by two games to one—which could have been construed as proof of a misguided selection process. This provided a particularly pointed example of the media's lack of interest in the results and performances of women in sport. Instead, regional and country newspapers, also tantalised by the issue of homosexuality, developed a sudden interest in women's cricket. The *Illawarra Mercury* demonstrated this most decisively with its front page headline: 'Women's cricket lesbian row—"Out because I'm not gay"'. The accompanying story occupied most of the front page.²⁷

Once the inference to 'sexual politics' had been revealed women's cricket almost became the envy of other women's sports. The attention paid to women's cricket in the following two week period provoked Keeley Devery, National Media Director for the All Australia Netball Association, to joke 'that she hoped netball could find its own lesbian scandal to generate publicity'.²⁸

The media coverage women's cricket had received in past years, especially in major city newspapers, could be attributed to the persistence and determination of cricket playing journalists, such as Mary Boson and Amanda Weaver, who wrote for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Although neither was a regular sports reporter, they generated some valuable media coverage for women's cricket. Once a 'lesbian scandal' appeared, respected sports journalists developed an interest in and knowledge of the women's game. Cricket columnist, Peter Roebuck writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* called on women's cricket to 'examine [its] conscience' and in the Melbourne based *Age* newspaper challenged the sport to 'face up to prejudice charges'.²⁹ Never in the extensive coverage of the Annetts' issue was the accuracy of the media coverage ever questioned. Rather, by using regular sportswriters, the media previously uninterested in women's cricket freely offered opinions and advice and thereby gave credibility to the perception of 'dubious' selection policies and principles of women's sports administrators.

Talk-back radio shows around the country had a field day. A wealth of armchair experts on cricket and an army of moral crusaders used this forum to support the stance of most sports journalists, press

and television commentators and letter writers. Denise Annetts was given the unwarranted credentials of being the best female cricketer of all time, constantly being compared to Australia's Sir Donald Bradman, arguably the most outstanding male cricketer in the history of the game. Secure in their heterosexual identity, and somewhat distanced from the issue by their anonymity, callers registered their indignation that one of their own could be discriminated against, and demanded justice.

Stories to do with men's cricket also provided a convenient means to both satirise and trivialise the Denise Annetts' issue. Topical at the time was the pending retirement of the Australian men's captain, Allan Border. In their deliberations on when Border should retire, several journalists and a cartoonist made reference to his homosexuality as being an automatic reason for him to now leave the game.³⁰

The magnitude of media coverage given to the Denise Annetts' story, because of its lesbian content, cannot be underestimated. In the month which followed the original article in the *North Shore Times*, over 140 articles, commentaries and letters appeared in newspapers and magazines; all television networks covered the story in either their news or other programs and there was extensive radio coverage, both on news and talk-back programs. There were another twenty-five articles in the print media during the next two months, including references in most unlikely sources such as *Business Review Weekly*.³¹ The significance of these figures is revealed when considered in light of the amount of media space usually devoted to women's sport. Research indicated that women's sport has consistently occupied less than 1.5 per cent of total televised sport and newspaper coverage of women's sport has hovered between 2 and 4 per cent of the total sports coverage.³²

At no stage did any sports organisation, male or female, make any public statement of support for the AWCC. Nor has Denise Annetts ever been officially reprimanded for accusing the selectors of bias.³³ For most other women's organisations at least, it was as if their administrators were breathing a sigh of relief that it was not their sport under the unwanted spotlight. Even the Women and Sport Unit of the Australian Sports Commission, the Federal body overseeing all national sporting organisations, and the Confederation of Australian Sport, the closest thing Australian sport has to a 'union', were silent on the issue. The AWCC was left out in the cold for fear that involvement in the debate would contaminate other women's sports with the taint of lesbianism.

Sport, Homosexuality and Discrimination

While the presence of lesbians in sport was acknowledged, there was a strong degree of denial concerning male homosexual participation in sport. Roy Masters identified 'a previously unwritten assumption—that there are gay female athletes in some sports' and that women's cricket, tennis and hockey have all been labelled 'dyke sports'. He claimed that anecdotal evidence indicated there are more lesbians active in sport than male homosexuals. This was disputed by Sharon Buchanan, a former captain of the Australian Women's Field Hockey team, who competed at three Olympics. She claimed that the incidence of homosexuality in men's sport and women's was equal. She explained that 'because football is such a macho sport, gays hide their homosexuality. There are just as many in football as in women's hockey.' Indeed Masters indicated that many sportswomen asked why homosexuality in men's sport escaped the close scrutiny that was given to women's sport. Australian men were extremely uncomfortable about discussing homosexuality in men's sport but 'show a blatant degree of voyeurism in issues dealing with lesbianism'.³⁴ It is this obsession with lesbian sexuality by 'straight' males which contributed to the media outpourings on women's cricket.

Other anomalies between men and women participating in sport surfaced in the aftermath of the Annetts' incident. An Australian Institute of Sport psychologist is reported to have inferred that a number of professional female athletes may become gay because of the loneliness on tour.³⁵ Unlike male sports personalities who are reportedly mobbed by sex-crazed females, many of whom the athlete feels obliged to service, women sports-stars are depicted as 'dolly-birds', wives and mothers, asexual or 'predatory' lesbians preparing to pounce on younger, innocent and ignorant team members.³⁶

The quality of media coverage suggested both ignorance and prejudice. Several commentators saw Denise Annetts' claim that lesbian participation in women's sport has a 'stultifying effect' on women's cricket as her strongest point. The editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* expressed concern for 'the health of women's cricket'³⁷ and Roebuck saw 'enthusiasts leaving the game or failing to join it' because of what he described as their 'fear of being caught in a world too confined for them'. He suggested that 'only those who want women's cricket to remain narrow in its appeal will resent Denise Annetts' criticisms'.³⁸ It is important to note the language that he has used in this comment.

Lesbianism has a 'stultifying' effect, enthusiasts are 'caught' in a 'confined' world and his claim that Annetts' attack explains why the sport has 'failed to spread its wings'.

Such criticisms from such a respected sports journalist as Roebuck guarantee that women in sport remain divided as he suggested that lesbians are to be blamed for the bad image of women's sports and failure to gain more popularity. The media seem to be either unaware or not prepared to acknowledge the role it plays in constructing and maintaining the overall sports gender order and it is simpler to take a 'blame the victim' approach.

Obviously success of women at international level is not viewed as an indication of 'wing-spreading'. Australian performance in Test matches is impressive, with wins in fourteen of the twenty-one matches which yielded a result. It is in Limited Overs internationals though that Australia's record is nothing short of remarkable, having won all but four series in the past eighteen years. However, Australia's international record was overlooked by all media sources other than the *Canberra Times*. It pointedly noted that 'the [Denise Annetts'] controversy succeeded where countless years of promotion and World Cup victories have failed'.³⁹

The other major oversight was ignorance of the type of cricket tournament taking place. Annetts was not selected in the Rose Bowl team to play a series of Limited Overs matches. She did, however, retain her position in the Australian squad and it would be reasonable to assume that Annetts would have been selected for the Australian Test team. Before becoming captain of the Australian men's team, Mark Taylor was regularly not included in the men's Limited Overs team. Ignorance of women's cricket and its personalities led to unquestioned acceptance that Annetts' exclusion was the result of 'gay plotting'.

The high point of heterosexual indignation occurred when the President of the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board, Steve Mark, stated that the Annetts' complaint of discrimination could not be dealt with through the anti-discrimination law as it 'does not provide for cases of discrimination against heterosexuals'.⁴⁰ The NSW Anti-Discrimination Act of 1977 deals with various forms of discrimination including 'discrimination on the grounds of homosexuality—that is, against homosexuals'. When the Act was drafted it was not envisaged that heterosexuals might one day be discriminated against so they are not covered by this law.⁴¹

This led Piers Akerman to claim that ‘the Board is nothing but a tool for tyrannical minorities’,⁴² Kavanagh to condemn ‘the impositions minorities have forced on the majority under the mantle of political correctness’⁴³ and Marion Groves to cry that ‘the ideal of justice for all has been overtaken by stridently vocal minority groups who seek not just equality, but privilege’.⁴⁴

The NSW Anti-Discrimination Board even indicated that it would consider recommending a change in the Act to cover ‘sexual preference’ rather than ‘homosexuality’ as a result. It was claimed that this would reduce homophobia as it would counter ‘the overwhelming response the Anti-Discrimination Board receives when heterosexuals find out they are not covered’. However, the Secretary of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, Richard Cobden, argued that ‘discrimination and homophobia (pervades) our lives in a way that it doesn’t (pervade) the lives of heterosexuals’ and that there was no need to change the Act.⁴⁵

The Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 was also of no assistance to Denise Annetts as it deals with discrimination on the basis of gender, and her complaint was against a group of presumably gay women. Michael McCormack summed it up as ‘if you’re straight bad luck. This is wrong and just one more instance of reverse discrimination.’⁴⁶ David Clark described what he considered to be a terrible double standard as floats in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras vilify heterosexuals and Christians and are not subjected to anti-vilification laws as the Homosexual Vilification Act of New South Wales 1993 only protects homosexuals.⁴⁷ However, this apparent protection of homosexuals needs to be seen in the light of continuing violence against gay men and lesbians.

The Paradox of Media Coverage

The television and radio exposure of women’s cricket and suggestions of lesbianism within it, began a media frenzy and fuelled a controversy extending beyond the scope of sport, tapping into society’s concern over increasing rights of the homosexual. The reporting of the incident provides evidence of the paradoxical nature of coverage provided to women in sport. International success in women’s sport is generally not newsworthy in itself. A ‘milestone’ for a female athlete (marriage or birth of a child) or a scandal in women’s sport is more likely to generate media interest. The Annetts’ incident, a lesbian scandal, is gossip,

however, as an incident in cricket, the Australian national sport, its worthiness as a sport issue becomes apparent. This was realised by its capacity to evoke comment from 'respected' sports journalists.

The incident did more than reveal the homophobic and heterosexist attitudes prevalent in Australian sport, and indeed, some positive aspects did emerge. Women's cricket reports a greater-than-ever interest from potential players who were previously unaware that women's competitions existed. The most encouraging sign, however, came from an unusual source; ABC Television's popular *Frontline* series, a satire of current affairs shows. The episode, 'Add Sex and Stir' used the Annetts' incident to demonstrate the different media treatment of men's and women's sport:

[Producer, reasoning why a women's sports story cannot be covered]

No way. I'm not having a story on women's sport on this show, it's the natural enemy of ratings.

[Reporter] One of the girls reckons she was dropped from the team because she wasn't gay.

[Producer, explaining why he is now running with the story]

This is not another women's sports story, this is a lesso story.

The story is a ratings success and an enthusiastic producer wants to stretch it over a week. In response, a reporter with a sense of justice, suggests that *Frontline* run a parallel story on a gay member of the Australian men's cricket team. The producer's reaction is one of disbelief, 'but this guy's a Test cricketer, great batsman, great bowler, it could ruin his career'! Not surprisingly, and as the reporter had hoped, the entire story is dropped.

Almost twelve months after the Annetts' incident, women's cricket was again at the mercy of the media. This time the credibility of women's cricket resided with Australian all-rounder, Zoe Goss, who at the last minute had been asked to play in a live television celebrity match, the World XI versus the Bradman XI. Goss' involvement in the unsuccessful and controversial Rose Bowl tour earlier in the year was forgotten as she rescued the fortunes of women's cricket and possibly for other women involved in traditionally male-dominated sports. Goss was admired by

spectators and commentators alike but became an instant hero when she dismissed world number one batsman, Brian Lara. The public warmed to the unsung underdog, who exhibited such enthusiasm and played for enjoyment rather than financial gain and who had a victory over a 'tall poppy' who was an established professional.

Having received intense media and public criticism earlier in the year, it was pleasing that the public so readily accepted and admired Goss. Together with well-known male cricketing personalities, Goss toured sports clubs and coached in cricket clinics across the country. The sustained appeal of Goss and the goodwill of male cricket promoters have combined to obliterate the 'unwholesome' image of women's cricket and create a new profile.

By playing competently in a men's game', Goss has become a household name and a much sought after spokesperson for both men's and women's cricket. Rumours circulate about her appearing on a television cricket show or being offered a position as a television cricket commentator. Sport, and women's sport in particular, was served a blunt reminder about the power of the media in shaping sporting success, as well as being 'on side' with the power brokers.

The allegations made by Annetts are far from resolved. From the outset AWCC vowed to conduct an inquiry into the charges of prejudice, and seven months after the initial allegations were made an independent Special Working Group was established 'to examine all matters relating to conduct and behaviour within the Australian women's cricket community'. Individuals, clubs and associations were invited to make submissions and interested parties also had the option of making personal presentations. It would seem that the Annetts' allegations have been treated by AWCC as an unwelcome opportunity to review practices and investigate areas of inequality, real or perceived, which may be present in women's cricket.

However, in identifying the key issues for inquiry, the Working Group concentrated on developing an understanding of what constituted appropriate behaviour for women cricketers, both on and off the field. The Working Group developed a questionnaire for this purpose, but strangely it omitted any questions on areas of perceived discrimination, although this was the original catalyst for the inquiry. Instead, respondents had the opportunity to comment on such things as the effectiveness of communications between various administrative levels

or rating the importance of the role of a team captain or manager. The word 'discrimination' was never used. Only two questions (out of a total of eighteen), which canvassed suggestions on what activities might encourage or deter people to enter cricket, touched generally on the issue.

The report of the Working Group, handed down on 30 April 1995, and titled 'A Fair Go', suggested that it had ambitiously set out to examine all areas of potential discrimination in women's cricket and that it would offer solutions to assist in overcoming these barriers. Essentially the report provided a set of recommendations to form the basis of a Code of Conduct. While many of the recommendations were straightforward and practical in nature, other comments contained in the report reveal major limitations of the investigative process. Not only did the investigation of the Working Group seem to stem from a naive position that sport is beyond social reality and that equality is just a matter of a 'fair go', it failed to acknowledge any other form of discrimination other than discrimination on the basis of sexuality. The introduction of the report set the tone; the perceived homosexual culture within women's cricket should be addressed and a Code of Conduct relating to sexual harassment should be established to specifically 'eliminat[e] the existence of any overtones of a homosexual culture which may exist in the sport'.⁴⁸ Clearly, a 'fair go' is not intended for everyone.

Conclusions

AWCC expressed concern over longer term damages to potential sponsorship opportunities and the loss of younger players through either their own or their parents' homophobic fears. Of particular concern was the willingness of schools to participate in cricket, as schoolgirl cricket has been a significant growth area in recent times. This can only be assessed over time but indications suggest that the incident has been forgotten, especially since Goss dismissed Lara.

Supporters of Annetts' action believe that she has courageously questioned the administration of the game. In the long term they believe, as Annetts does, that young people and parents previously turned away from the sport will return.

Given that AWCC has previously refused to discuss homophobia within the sport, it is quite ironic that perceived discrimination by a publicly declared heterosexual may lead to such a debate.

Although it would be presumptuous to assume that the Annetts' incident will remain etched in the memory of women cricketers let alone the Australian public, certain segments within women's cricket remain divided over Annetts' actions. There are those who are angry about the personal damages endured through an association with cricket. Others draw AWCC's attention to the fact that heterosexuals are in the privileged position to be able to make claims of gay bias and receive overwhelming support in the media and from the general public. Still others, question whether AWCC's past refusal to confront issues to deal with homosexuality contributed to the current divide, and request that combating homophobia in cricket remain an agenda item, until sport and society is indeed 'so accepting of homosexuality'.

Notes

- 1 Statement made in an episode of the popular ABC Television program *Frontline*, entitled 'Add Sex and Stir'. The episode was based on the Denise Annetts' incident.
- 2 This article is a revised and extended version of "Add Sex and Stir": Homophobic Coverage of Women's Cricket in Australia', which appeared in the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 19, no. 3, Aug. 1995, pp. 265-83. Since copyright of this article is vested in Sage Publications Inc., the author wishes to thank Sage Publications for permission to publish another version of this article.
- 3 Quoted in S Mitchell, *Winning Women: Challenging the Norms in Australian Sport*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1985, p. 24.
- 4 Jeff Wells, 'Cathy the Colossus? You're Kidding!', *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 12. Aug. 1995.
- 5 Wells, 'Cathy the Colossus?' (emphasis added).
- 6 Lois Bryson, 'Challenges to the Male Hegemony in Sport', in M Messner and D Sabo, eds, *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, Human Kinetics, Champaign, 1990, p. 173.
- 7 We have used the expression 'heterosexual femininity' to indicate that women athletes must assert not only their femininity but also their heterosexual orientation to achieve admiration in the sexist and heterosexist institution of sport. While we believe there is an increased recognition that female athleticism can be and is compatible with femininity, rumours and innuendos about lesbianism still persist and remain an effective and powerful tool through which control can be maintained over women's sport.
- 8 Richard Cashman and Amanda Weaver, *Wicket Women: Cricket and Women in Australia*, NSWUP, Sydney, 1991, p 189.
- 9 Anne Sargeant, 'Netball's New Look', *Daily Telegraph Mirror*, 26 Mar. 1993.
- 10 J Huxley, 'Flames Flash Flesh, in a Fashion', *SMH*, 4 Sept. 1993.
- 11 Jim McKay, 'Embodying the "new" sporting woman', *Hecate*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1994, pp. 68-83.
- 12 'Golden Girl Defends Raunchy Calendar', *Sun Herald*, 24 July 1994.

- 13 Lois Bryson, Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony Women's Studies International Forum, vol. 10, no. 4, 1987, pp. 349-60; Lois Bryson, 'Challenges to the Male Hegemony in Sport', Helen Lenskyj, Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality Women's Press, Toronto, 1986; Helen Lenskyj, 'Combating Homophobia in Sport and Physical Education' Sociology of Sport Journal, vol. 8, 1991, pp. 61-9; Helen Lenskyj, 'Unsafe at Home Base: Women's Experiences of Sexual Harassment in University Sport and Physical Education', Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal, vol. 1, no. 1, Fall 1992, pp. 19-33; Jim McKay, *No Pain, No Gain? Sport in Australian Culture*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1991; Michael Messner and Don Sabo, Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives, Human Kinetics, Champaign, 1990; Michael Messner and Don Sabo, 'Whose Body is This? Women's Sports and Sexual Politics', in G Cohen, ed., *Women in Sport: Issues and Controversies*, Sage Publications, California, 1993, pp. 15-24.
- 14 Keith Dunstan, *Sports*, Cassell, Melbourne, 1973; W F Mandle, 'Cricket and Australian Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century', Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society, vol. 59, pt. 4, Dec. 1973, pp. 225-45.
- 15 R Nicholson, *Border's Heroes*, Magenta Press, Scoresby, Victoria, 1989.
- 16 Rachael Heyhoe Flint and Netta Rheinberg, *Fair Play: The Story of Women's Cricket*, Angus & Robertson, London, 1976; Cashman and Weaver, *Wicket Women*.
- 17 Cashman and Weaver.
- 18 McKay, *No Pain, No Gain?*; Brian Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in the Australian Culture*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1986; Brian Stoddart, *Invisible Games: A Report on the Media Coverage of Women's Sport*, Sport and Recreation Ministers' Council, Commonwealth of Australia, 1994; Marion Stell, *Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport*, Collins Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1991; Helen Menzies, 'Women's Sport: Treatment by the Media', in Ken Dyer, ed., *Sportswomen Towards 2000: A Celebration*, University of Adelaide, South Australia, 1989, pp. 220-31; Helen King, 'The Sexual Politics of Sport: an Australian Perspective', in R Cashman and M McKernan, eds, *Sport in History* UQP Lucia, 1979, pp. 68-85; Lois Bryson, 'Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony'.
- 19 'Belles of the Ball', *Women's Day*, 24 Jan. 1990.
- 20 Pat Griffin, 'Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism and Lesbians in Sport', *Quest*, vol. 44, 1992, pp 251-65.
- 21 Griffin, 'Changing the Game'.
- 22 Interview, Christine Brierley.
- 23 'Women's Woes Worsen', *SMH*, 19 Jan. 1994.
- 24 The military ban on homosexuals was lifted in Australia in 1993, and in the late 1993 the NSW Government passed legislation which outlawed homosexual and HIV-related vilification.
- 25 Amanda Lulham, 'Annetts Axed from New-Look Aussies', *Daily Telegraph Mirror*, 10 Jan. 1994.
- 26 Brian Bassett, 'Cricket Star Sacked: Discrimination Action Likely', *North Shore Times*, 14 Jan. 1994.
- 27 'Women's Cricket Lesbian Row: "Out Because I'm no Gay"', *Ilawarra Mercury* 17 Jan. 1994.
- 28 J Kirkman, 'Gay-bias Row Downgrades Image of Sportswomen', *Canberra Times*, 29 Jan. 1994.
- 29 Peter Roebuck, 'Women's Cricket must face up to Prejudice Charges', *Age*, 17 Jan. 1994; 'Women's Game Must Examine Conscience', *SMH*, 17 Jan. 1994.
- 30 'I'm Homosexual Need I Say More.', *Australian*, 18 Jan. 1994.
- 31 A complete listing of the publications which reported the Annetts, story can be obtained from the authors.

- 32 Stoddart, *Invisible Games*.
- 33 It is interesting to compare the AWCC's treatment of Denise Annetts with that of another Australian player, who in an interview with *Cricketer* magazine, made a disparaging remark about other players. The comment provoked an official censure of the player by the AWCC. Although Annetts' comments provoked outrage among AWCC administrators, Annetts was not officially reprimanded as the AWCC feared such action would provoke further public outbursts. Legal advice was sought but not pursued because, among other considerations, such as cost and the likelihood of exacerbating the controversy, the issue was deemed 'too sensitive'.
- 34 Roy Masters, 'Certain Women', *Independent Monthly*, March 1994.
- 35 'Playing it Straight', *New Weekly*, 7 Feb. 1994.
- 36 Bryson, 'Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony'; McKay, 'No Pain, No Gain?'; Griffin, 'Changing the Game'.
- 37 Editorial, 'Discrimination's Other Side', *SMH*, 18 Jan. 1994.
- 38 Roebuck, 'Women's Game Must Examine Conscience'.
- 39 Kirkman, 'Gay-bias Row'.
- 40 Editorial, 'Discrimination's Other Side'.
- 41 F Devine, 'When Laws on Discrimination don't play Fair', *Australian*, 24 Jan. 1994.
- 42 Piers Ackerman, 'Piers Ackerman', *Daily Telegraph Mirror*, 15 Feb. 1994.
- 43 L Kavanagh, 'Let's Sidestep the Politically Waffle', *Courier Mail*, 29 Jan. 1994.
- 44 Marion Groves, 'When Normal Order is Made Deviant', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 23 Jan. 1994.
- 45 Vanessa McQuarrie, 'Conflict over ADB Change', *Capital Q Weekly*, 25 Feb. 1994.
- 46 Michael McCormack, 'Cricketer Bowled Over by Reverse Discrimination', *Daily Advertiser (Wagga)*, 22 Jan. 1994.
- 47 David Clark, 'Freedom to Protect our Freedom', *Financial Review*, 21 Mar. 1994.
- 48 'A Fair Go', Report of the Special Working Group Investigating Behaviour and Conduct in Australian Women's Cricket to the Australian Women's Cricket Council', 30 Apr. 1995.