

Review Article

Paradise of Sport? The Cashman Thesis and Australian Sports History

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Richard Cashman, *Paradise of Sport: The Rise of Organised Sport in Australia*, OUP, Melbourne, 1995. Bibliog., illus., index. pp. xi + 242. \$26.95.

Few people have the experience, skills, or even audacity to write a general history of a nation and its sporting culture. It is a task beset with difficulties of selection and emphasis: the term 'sport' has referred to a variety of contests and pastimes, and the values associated with sport have been put to different uses by educators, entrepreneurs and governments. Perhaps, however, the very fluidity of the term sport and the diversity of physical culture help to make these subjects intriguing—even if complex. This plurality notwithstanding, sports history can only be described as a 'field' of academic study if the disparate research of specialists is supplemented by the integrative work of generalists. An academic discipline (in the case of a sub-discipline) is not simply the sum of its parts—it involves assessments of their relationship. This helps to explain why Richard Cashman's comprehensive *Paradise of Sport* is so welcome—even moreso because its subject is sport in Australian society.

Since the first Sporting Traditions Conference in 1977, and the formation of the Australian Society for Sports History in 1983, there have been numerous historical case studies of Australian sport including valuable entries in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Sport* (1992 and 1994) and chapters on major sports in Vamplew and Stoddart's *Sport in Australia: A Social History* (1994). But no single text has provided a synthesis of this work nor an authoritative critique of the field of Australian sports history itself. There have, of course, been path-breaking sociological studies of Australian sport—Stoddart's *Saturday Afternoon*

Fever (1986), Lawrence and Rowe's *Power Play* (1986) and McKay's *No Pain, No Gain?* (1991). But, with the exception of Stoddart, their main interest has been with sport and society in contemporary Australia—or at least since the late 1970s—and this work has often lacked a convincing historical perspective. It is as if the 'real' winds of change did not arrive until Kerry Packer tried to dominate world cricket. Given these shortcomings Cashman's *Paradise of Sport* is timely: this scholarly and panoramic volume prompts social historians to pose wider conclusions from their sometimes narrow case studies, and it provides sports sociologists with a sound basis for making telling comparisons between the past and the present.

Paradise of Sport is concerned mainly with the development of organised sport in Australia during the period 1850-1914, an era the author describes as critical to the formation of an Australian sporting culture. Before the 1850s formal sport in the colonies was sporadic and loosely organised, largely reliant on initiatives by the self-styled 'gentry', military contingents, and the sanction of colonial governors. The sporting calendar was occasional, revolving around feast and festival days and the unofficial St Monday holiday—traditions harking back to pre-industrial Britain. There were few permanent sporting venues and facilities, although entrepreneurial publicans led the way with skittle alleys and boxing rings on their licensed premises. Cashman concludes that aside from the sunny climate and abundant space Australia was 'an unlikely sporting paradise' by 1850 (p. 33).

However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, Australian experienced a gold rush, the end of transportation, a rapid rise in the number of 'free' settlers, a degree of colonial self-government, improvements in transportation and communication, and increases in both real income and leisure time for many workers. Cashman explains that as a consequence of these new factors there was a growing demand for public recreational space, such as community parks and ovals; while concurrently, major sporting events were staged in enclosed arenas, where entry charged in order to finance stadium and playing facilities. In the meantime leading schools and churches began to organise their own team sports, which they saw as a way of utilising conservative moral values and self-discipline among young people. Sporting competition was thus staged in various ways and at different levels—community, colony, and nation—with local, regional and Anglo-

Australian rivalries helping to generate a widespread passion for sport, particularly as the social importance was heightened by colourful reports of victory or defeat in the popular press.

In considering these changes Cashman concludes that by 1914 organised sport had become 'a very important part of the physical, social, and mental landscape of most Australians, and central to an emerging Australian way of life (p. 53)'. Of this there is little doubt, but Cashman raises the stakes by claiming that 'Australia became a distinctive and even unique sporting paradise' by the early twentieth century (p. 52). This bold statement sets the stage for intriguing discussions throughout the book centering on two main themes: local versus overseas influences on Australian sport, and the features of this sporting 'paradise'.

In discussing the first theme Cashman acknowledged the significance of a British sporting inheritance in Australia, but he argues that this influence was strongest in the early settlement period to 1850, and that Australian sporting culture was not simply imitative or derivative of Britain in the nineteenth century. Among local inventions were the largely plebeian ritual of barracking, Victorian (later Australian) Rules football, and the Melbourne Cup (a handicap event) was the nation's most famous horse race—a stark contrast to the weight-for-age classics of Britain. Cashman highlights three more distinguishing factors. Firstly, he points out that large sporting arenas were located in the heart of major Australian cities, this providing them with a cultural centrality in these developing urban landscapes—a position quite different to sports venues in old-world Britain. Secondly, Australians often had an inflated sense the importance of local victories in international sporting competition—a legacy, no doubt, of the colonies' geographical distance from sporting rivals, and widespread feelings of cultural inferiority as an outpost of empire. Thirdly, sport had special importance in Australian society because, by comparison with other forms of culture—such as religion, ethnicity and tradition—it provided a convenient and generally uncompliated means of social intercourse in relatively new, and spatially disparate, communities (p. 53).

Despite these distinguishing features it is also worth noting that there were strong parallels about the modernisation of sport in both Britain and Australia during the late nineteenth century. These shared characteristics included significant population growth in major urban centres, far-reaching improvement in transportation and communication,

and broadly similar changes to education, work, and leisure patterns. These structural features, in turn, were instrumental to the establishment of sporting clubs and organised competitions in both Britain and the Australian colonies. Cashman could have made such developmental comparisons more explicit in the discussion of the period 1850-1914.

Nevertheless, Australian sporting ties with Britain remain a key theme in subsequent chapters, even though Cashman's main purpose is again to emphasise difference showing how Anglo-Celtic cultural links tended to be broken down or modified according to local needs. He is quick to point out, for example, that Australian cricket never experienced the formal segregation associated with English 'gentlemen' amateurs and working-class professionals. Similarly, he reminds us that manual-labour amateurs were accepted in Australian rowing well before their counterparts in England. These variations are significant since they suggest differences in class structure of the two societies, and the extent to which their sporting cultures tended towards egalitarian or elitist principles. Cashman's conclusion is that, by comparison to Britain, Australia has developed a more inclusive sporting culture, but whether the author's luminous phrase 'paradise of sport' is an appropriate description of the latter is less certain—a point I return to presently.

Cashman also reckons with another major influence on Australian sport—the United States. He rightly points out that an American sporting connection is not new to Australia, but the extent of its import is now unprecedented. Indeed, although Cashman is a loyal barracker of the homegrown product, he expects that the dominance of American sporting influences will compel Australian sport to 'become even more modernised and internationalised (p. 162)'. Nevertheless, he predicts that American sports will not replicate existing Australian games, and he is also confident, that 'there will always be Australian variants of global sports (p. 162)'. Too bad there won't be global variants of Australian-invented sports though: without a cultural empire in which to promote games like Aussie Rules they stand little chance of developing internationally. And this seems to underscore the rather *limited* dominion of Australian sporting culture, quite aside from its ongoing need to reconcile powerful global influences.

Cashman's second main theme of a 'paradise of sport' in Australia is rather puzzling. It is, of course, the title of the book, so the phrase has an immediate centrality. But the author finishes with a chapter entitled

'Australia: A Paradise of Sport?', thereby appearing equivocal about his original thesis. This confusion seems partly resolved when Cashman remarks in the preface that one of the primary aims is 'to encourage a more critical scrutiny of sporting institutions and ideologies (p. vii)'. So the author is certainly not offering a whig version of history by using a theme of 'paradise', and he proceeds to make challenging assessments about Australian sport in chapters devoted to politics, gender, race, ethnicity, media, and business. But given these arresting discussions what could Cashman have intended by using the term paradise; had he introduced the 'idea' of a paradise in order to then question its veracity?

The answer, once again, is equivocal. In the concluding chapter 'Australia: A Paradise of Sport?' Cashman writes (with my emphasis added): There are a number of historical reasons why Australia became a distinctive sporting paradise (p. 205)', thereby contradicting the title of this section. To complicate matters further he then remarks: 'If Australia was a paradise of sport, it was more so for some Australians; for men more than women, and Anglo-Celtic Australians more than other immigrants and Aborigines (p. 206)'. He even offers the unusual line that 'Australia has also become a paradise of sport because it was male-dominated and sport was used to extend male hegemony (p. 206)'. Cashman is no male chauvinist, of course, so he is using the word paradise here in a qualified and critical way. But this is a rather peculiar approach since it suggests that a 'paradise' was created by the dominance of one group and the marginalisation of another. In fact because Cashman points us so vividly towards the flaws and inequalities of this sporting 'paradise', we might still be left wondering why he used the term in the first place.

Unfortunately, Cashman's opening gambit does not clarify matters. He begins, predictably, with the following declaration in the preface to *Paradise of Sport*:

Social commentators ... have long declared that the country is a paradise of sport. They have argued that many Australians have an obsession with sport and that sporting culture is central to Australian life. Some have said that the Australian passion for sport is distinctive and even unique (p. vi).

Cashman then rightly complains that 'these cultural assertions have been taken as axiomatic', so 'few questions have been raised about

Australian sporting culture (p. vi)'. From this remark we might expect that he will be concerned with how and why Australian commentators have declared Australia to be a paradise of sport—otherwise such a cultural assertion might be 'taken as axiomatic', to paraphrase Cashman's words. It seems inexplicable, therefore, that the author fails to address this issue: his guide to previous 'social commentators' is a rather glib footnote message—'See, for instance, Dunstan, *Sports* (p. 209)'. Perhaps, though, we will find that Cashman is more concerned about the *validity* of notions like paradise, obsession, passion, and uniqueness in Australian sporting culture—terms that were central to his opening address. Let us examine the author's treatment of each of these.

A clarification of the term paradise would seem particularly desirable after Cashman's announcement that he has written *Paradise of Sport* from a 'cultural progressive perspective (p. vii)'. This is a position previously championed by Brian Stoddart in *Saturday Afternoon Fever*—although he eschewed an Australian sporting paradise as mythical, and the tone of his book was iconoclastic. Stoddart was, in fact, particularly concerned to debunk widespread assumptions that Australian sporting culture has been a bastion of egalitarianism. Are these two authors therefore really poles apart? No, for when we consider Cashman's concluding remarks it becomes apparent that his 'paradise' is remarkably like Stoddart's earlier depiction of a vibrant, albeit structurally flawed, Australian sporting culture. Cashman stresses:

There is an urgent need ... to take off the gloves and criticise and scrutinise our sporting culture ... While politicians, business and many other leaders have been criticised, sport has been elevated and romanticised. Teams, coaches, individual players have been chastised but not sport itself. The task at hand is to modify this paradise, making it more accessible, equitable and fair to all Australians who wish to participate in it, and less corrupt, racist and sexist (p. 208).

So from this quote it sounds much like the 'paradise' was a myth in the first place—in which case Cashman ought to be proposing the *creation* of a visible, viable, and thus unexaggerated sporting paradise. Indeed, foreseeable alternatives about 'modifying' a sporting paradise seem illogical. On the one hand, how do you modify a paradise that has yet to exist; or, on the other hand, if a sporting paradise is said to exist, why would such a cultural nirvana require critical modifications? Given

Cashman's above mentioned complaint about the 'elevators' and 'romanticisers' of Australian sport, it seems surprising that the apparently triumphal phrase 'paradise of sport' is not equated with, or even attributed to, the encomiastic inventions of uncritical devotees of sport.

A paradise-as-myth thesis would also have been consistent with the major sociological studies mentioned earlier in this article, as well as the volume *Sport in Australia: A Social History—to* which Cashman was a contributor. In this book the editors gave no hint that a sporting 'paradise' was under discussion. In the introduction, for example, Vamplew emphasised that 'class prejudice, sexual segregation and racial discrimination have permeated Australia's sporting history', so sport 'has not taken place on a level playing field (see p. 18 of that text)'. Importantly, though, these critical sentiments are broadly similar to those put by Cashman himself in *Paradise of Sport*. His discussions, for example about the historically shabby treatment of women, Aborigines and ethnic minorities in Australian sport are knowledgeable and powerful—at times even scathing. By this approach Cashman does not seem to have made an especially radical break from recent historical studies of Australian sport.

On the other hand, Cashman seems more determined than his academic predecessors to show that sport can play positive cultural and political roles for historically oppressed and disadvantaged groups. He points, for example, to the increasing importance of sport within gay and lesbian communities, where alternative forms of group physical activity have been organised as a way of bringing such people together. In fact Cashman concludes that 'sport is in itself neither conservative nor radical (p. 207)', for it involves varying political purposes and competing ideological agendas. This pluralistic, even post-modern, perspective represents a distinct departure from Stoddart's assertion in *Saturday Afternoon Fever* that 'sport is amongst the most conservative of Australian social institutions (see pp. 13-14 and 22 of that text)'. Indeed, Cashman further demarcates his ideological territory by railing against academic works that, in his words, 'present a bleak and unrelievedly negative view of the operation of sport in contemporary Australia, which is seen as totally unprogressive and possibly beyond redemption (p. vii)'. Regrettably, Cashman does not name the targets of his disapproval nor, therefore, does he discuss what he considers to be the flaws in their analysis. Nevertheless, he continues by declaring that *Paradise of Sport*:

starts from a different premise. For better or worse, sport is central to the business of being Australian and appeals to many Australians ... Nothing is likely to be achieved by labelling sport as undesirable or politically incorrect; instead something so significant in Australian life deserves all the scrutiny we can give it (p. vii).

Unfortunately, though, we are still left wondering what is likely to be achieved by labelling Australia a paradise of sport. This puzzle seems all the more bewildering because Cashman has attempted to steer something of a middle ground in this book avoiding both the naive celebratory verve of early chroniclers of Australian sport, and the trenchant pessimism of some of its most recent critics. Given this reflective, even revisionist, perspective Cashman really needed to clarify what he meant by 'paradise' from the outset. Indeed, the term seems particularly out of place given the author's persuasive argument that horse-racing carnivals, rather than being 'social-levellers', have actually reinforced existing hierarchies because of the ways in which participation has been demarcated according to status, wealth and gender. He describes this sporting ritual as a 'myth of community (pp. 98-9)'. Ultimately then, it is not a lack of critical awareness, but semantic difficulties that cloud the author's use of the phrase 'paradise of sport'.

It is also disappointing that the terms passion and obsession are not spelled out until the conclusion of the book, where Cashman emphasises:

Nothing is likely to be achieved ... by defining the Australian passion for all things sporting as an 'obsession'. The word implies that passion is somehow unworthy or politically incorrect and that it is better channelled into art, politics, religion or intellectual effort. Such a judgment is elitist and undemocratic. To label sporting passion as obsession is to attach a pejorative label which denies many Australians the satisfaction they derive from sport (p. 208).

So we learn, at last, that it is a passion, not an obsession about sport, that has been central to Australian culture. And Cashman emphasises rightly that this popular interest in sport ought to be taken seriously by Australian academics—who have been largely Philistines of physical culture when compared to their counterparts in the United States and Britain.

Finally, then, we come to Cashman's use of the term unique. In the author's opening gambit he remarked that some social commentators have described the Australian passion for sport as 'distinctive and even unique (p. vi)'. Surprisingly, he does not canvas details of their viewpoints, despite going on to make similar claims of his own. Cashman warns that 'it is immensely difficult to compare sport (and the passion for sport) from one society to another', but he maintains that 'there are grounds for suggesting that the role of sport in Australian society may be so distinctive as to be unique (p. 206)'. This represents a departure from Cashman's earlier position of 1987 when in an article, 'The Australian Sporting Obsession', he warned against insular studies of Australian sporting culture, as well as exaggerated views about Australians being *unusually* sports-minded or sports-active. However, it is not clear from *Paradise of Sport* what has actually changed the author's mind, since he relegates the transformation to a brief footnote, where he rather timidly remarks that he has 'shifted his opinion to accept that there *may* have been some distinctive and even unique features of Australian sport (my emphasis added)(p. 223)'.

Although Cashman does not explain this conversion from scepticism, he has at least suggested ways in which Australian sporting culture developed distinctive local features during the late nineteenth century. These were pointed out earlier in this article: a peculiar style of barracking, the unusual centrality of sports venues in major cities, intense excitement about sporting victory against overseas rivals, and the importance of sport as a means of social intercourse in relatively new communities. These factors, collectively, may well constitute a distinctive sporting culture but, individually, they are not unique. The latter two factors, for example, have also been apparent in New Zealand sporting experience. Furthermore, it is difficult to see that a passion for sport is unique to Australia. There are certainly distinctive local features to this passion, but there no doubt also is in vibrant sporting cultures as varied as Brazil, Sweden, and the United States. And while comparative studies of this kind have yet to be undertaken systematically I would expect them to reveal both differences *and* similarities in the 'sporting passions' of such peoples.

For example, if we were to compare settler societies of the former British Empire, such as those in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada, we would find longstanding passions about sport in each

of these countries. Moreover, what two more fitting recent examples of sporting passion could we have than the 1995 Rugby World Cup win by South Africa, and the 1995 America's Cup victory by a New Zealand crew? Both successes resulted in widespread public euphoria in these countries—as events like this have done previously in Australia—so it is difficult to see that such passions for sport are unique. Rather, excitement about sport is best seen as *characteristic* of a number of nations and cultures, although the nature and the degree of such passions has, no doubt, differed between countries and has been subject to change over time. Without detailed international comparisons, though, the case for a unique passion about sport in Australia is difficult to sustain. Finally, there is also a methodological problem in determining what constitutes sporting passion. Does it revolve around levels of sports participation, sports attendance, or even sports broadcasting? A detailed response to this question is beyond the scope of this article, but if we consider the first of these criteria it is difficult to conclude that Australians are inordinately passionate about *playing* sports: survey figures since 1975 indicate that only about one-fifth of women and one-third of men participate in sport regularly.

While slippery terms like 'paradise', 'passion', and 'uniqueness' have complicated *Paradise of Sport*—largely because they were not sufficiently clarified—it must be emphasised loudly and clearly that Cashman has nevertheless provided us with the most informative and wide-ranging historical study of Australian sport yet produced. The contents of this book are exhaustive, with chapters on key issues in world sport, such as politics, gender, race, and ethnicity, considered in their Australian context. Similarly, other sections of the book discuss the rise of group and territorial identities in Australian sport, the importance of regional differences in this sporting culture, and the role of the state, private enterprise, and the media in promoting sport. There are also brief references in this book to long standing problems in sport, such as corruption and violence. Into this varied historical subject matter the author then contributes insights from sports geography, urban studies, media studies, and women's studies—among others.

The eclectic approach adds considerable value to Cashman's study because, unlike some historians, he does not fall into the trap of borrowing from other disciplines or applying theoretical models in a derivative and non-reflective manner. Instead, Cashman has 'issues' and 'debates' sub-

sections in several chapters, where he surveys the historiographical terrain and questions the veracity of much of this conventional wisdom. By highlighting such problems of method and interpretation Cashman is performing valuable roles as both researcher and teacher—capacities in which he has wide experience. Indeed, since the author has decried a single, all-embracing theoretical approach to the study of sport, his interrogative mode invigorates the historical narrative. Consequently, we find as much discussion about the reasons for social solidarity as we do about the causes of conflict in Australian sporting culture. Cashman has a foot in both camps, or, as we might say, he is willing to barrack for the importance of each of these intellectual traditions.

Cashman also offers some valuable insights into Australian sport. One of the most important, to me, was a telling reminder that despite numerous victories by Aboriginal fighters in the boxing ring this did nothing to change conditions for their people. What is more, many of the combatants died penniless. Another interesting issue was the fears in the 1930s that radio broadcasts of sport would reduce crowd attendance, but the reverse in fact happened—the coverage actually stimulated public interest to ‘be there’ in person. Despite complaints by ‘purists’ that television coverage has made sport more of a stage-managed spectacle than an authentic athletic contest, televised sport has remained extremely popular. In addition to such compelling points, Cashman poses fascinating questions throughout the book. For example, in the introduction to Chapter 6, ‘Community and Place’, the author poses no less than eight problem-based questions for investigation by historians researching sport and locality. He therefore establishes a veritable research agenda for Australian sports history—which is just as well, because much of the enduring value of history is not what we find in pursuing it, but the questions we ask about it.

A final virtue of *Paradise of Sport* is that it should appeal to both general and academic readers. Sport has long been an important part of Australian popular culture, so its subjects—the so-called ‘people’—have every right to expect studies of sport that are both accessible and meaningful. In this respect *Paradise of Sport* has more to offer than some texts on popular culture that have emerged recently from the field of cultural studies: much of the work is burdened by language that is so complex and specialised that ‘the people’ have little chance of ever being able to understand it. Cashman is not hamstrung by fears that his topic

lacks intellectual rigour, so his arguments are not convoluted by 'insider' dialogue. Rather than linguistic elitism, Cashman offers clear and encouraging prose. Which is just as well, because *Paradise of Sport* is without doubt the most ambitious book yet written on the history of Australian sport. Despite the criticisms outlined in this review article, it is surely the standard academic text that novices and aficionados of our sporting culture have long needed.