

Colin Tatz, *Obstacle Race. Aborigines in Sport*. UNSW Press, Sydney, 1995. pp. 408. \$39.95.

I bring a strong personal interest to this review. This is the book I intended to write fifteen years ago after completing my study of Aboriginal boxers—but a lack of tenure, two commissioned histories, several children and other projects blunted the possibility. Then Colin Tatz's book *Aborigines and Sport* (1987) buried the idea. Yet this first effort of his disappointed me as a 'quickie' and one without a firm historical basis. In retrospect it disappointed Tatz also, for he now calls this first edition: 'simply a sketch, and a somewhat hurried one'. His second edition is virtually a new book being expanded 'in form, chapters, photographs, themes, historical dimension, in the number of sports in which Aborigines have achieved, and in the analysis of the issues'. Compared to the first edition it is a giant of a book in size, quality and effort.

Tatz's interest in the theme of Aborigines and sport germinated with his meeting Doug Nicholls in 1961 and the Melbourne sporting madness. He saw how Nicholls was listened to by many white Australians because of his exploits with Northcote Victorian Football Association and Fitzroy Victorian Football League teams in the 1930s. Respect from sporting prowess might be short-lived and ambivalent, but it was the best Aboriginal people received from white Australians until the Mabo era.

Tatz not unreasonably calls this second edition 'a history, politics and sociology of racism in Australia as reflected in the mirror of sport ... It is not simply a celebration of Aboriginal achievement but an analysis of the often mean political, harsh legal and miserable social contexts in which the achievements occurred': hence his title, *Obstacle Race*.

The book is aimed at a diverse audience: academic sports history specialists, sports fans, the Aboriginal community, and those inspired by triumphs over injustice and the odds. The specialists are catered for by some good reflective opening and closing chapters: the sports fans and Aboriginal readers and others by the many statistical tables, potted sporting biographies, and close to 500 sports pictures. There is also the official list (with many pictures) of the 129 people in the Aboriginal and Islander Sports Hall of Fame. The book designer has cleverly separated these different aspects of the book by marbled backdrops to the statistics,

and pictures that bleed to the edge of the page. Tatz has helped the skimming reader as well with many sub-heads and informative photo-captions. All this makes for a handsome book of which the University of New South Wales Press should feel proud. The jacket gives it an authoritative look.

This look of authority is a face well deserved by the text. The book devotes separate chapters to the Aboriginal involvement in such gladiatorial sports as professional running, boxing, and the three football codes. In boxing, Aborigines at times formed about a fifth of the participants, while in recent times they have formed about 10 per cent players in the Australian Rules and Rugby League codes. Their success has been quite phenomenal for a group less than 2 per cent of the population—which Tatz closely documents. And he is adamant that this success is founded on the hunger to win and risk-taking and not genetic factors. The argument seems convincing but a discussion of any scientific evidence against genetic factors being important would have been illuminating. Tatz is convincing on the reasons why Aborigines focused on these sports—mainly easy and cheap entry, promising financial rewards and their mainstream nature. Tatz also has chapters on their involvement in cricket, a growing number of minor sports, and chapters on women players, sport and racism and sport and survival.

It was the latter I particularly liked. In this chapter Tatz journeyed around Aboriginal Australia visiting eighty communities and noting their experiences of sport. He found much inequity of access to sporting equipment, venues and competition which he shows in some very poor quality photographs—his forte is not photography. Tatz argues in a convincing and sustained manner that sport provides a sense of purpose and cohesion for many Aboriginal communities. He becomes a little embarrassed at his own words, but biting the bullet, argues that in the absence of any other cohesive values, sport can mean psychological health and survival to an Aboriginal community. And in his pessimistic mode about race relations, Tatz catalogues just how bad social disorder has become in the 1980s on some reserves—dogged by unemployment, drug addiction and alienation. He argues that communities at Yuendumu, Barunga, Condobolin and elsewhere have found purpose, order and discipline through sport. It is a hopeful message—and one to gladden the heart of any sports historian, for in short, Tatz argues that sport has come to play a more vital role in the lives of Aborigines than white

Australians. Therefore, he argues, sport should be funded seriously by the federal government as a means of steeling Aboriginal self-discipline and thus benefiting all Australians. It is sports history with a strong sense of relevance.

Tatz's chapters all begin with a strong sense of context about the prevailing racial ideas and especially the legislation that shaped Aboriginal life—and sporting chances. However, he handles the distant past less well and in doing so, forgets the main argument of the book concerning the Aboriginal zest for playing sport. In the three early historical chapters his contextualising historical research relies on slim and outdated references, although his sports research is still good. And his natural pessimism about race relations in the colonial framework leads him to see things in very black and white terms. The government and missionaries are invariably oppressive and the Aborigines their victims. To a large degree they were, yet not entirely. There is no sense in Tatz's analysis that Aborigines in the immediate post frontier world enjoyed sport, chose to do it, and used it to manipulate their desperate situations. They had some power and they used it by appropriating colonial sports and turning them back on their oppressors by victories in these sports. Tatz sees this in the 1960s but not the 1860s. Tatz's endnotes are few and he does not always include the sources of his quotations. This will be frustrating to those following his tracks. Occasionally his story became a tedious list of facts, yet he is attempting to set the record straight and much of this is necessary. Certainly he manages to rescue many an Aboriginal sporting hero from oblivion. He also has done the history of Aboriginal sport a great service by pointing to future research needs in a section entitled 'Gaps'. I'm busy filling one of those at the moment.

Overall, the book is a fine achievement and of great value to academics and fans alike. The late Sir Doug Nicholls would have loved to sit in the sun and browse through this record of Aboriginal victories. Because of the bargain price of the book, due no doubt to the support of ATSIC, hopefully many Australians will.

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