

Thematic Reviews

'Big Men' of Australian Football

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Ron Barassi and Peter McFarlane, *Barassi: The Life Behind the Legend*. Simon and Schuster, Sydney, 1995. Illus., index. pp. 208.

Tom Prior, *Sheeds: A Touch of Cunning*. Wilkinson Books, Melbourne, 1995. Illus. pp. iii + 351.

Ted Whitten with Jim Main and friends, *EJ*. Wilkinson Books, Melbourne 1995. Illus. pp. ii + 263.

There have been comparatively few books written on Australian football compared to other sports. In 1995 there were at least twelve books published on Australian football which probably exceeded the number produced in most decades before 1990. They included works about three of the best known figures in Australian football.

Of all the men to coach Australian Football League (or Victorian Football League) teams Ron Barassi is probably the best known. Jock McHale before World War II and Barassi's mentor, Norm Smith in the 1950s and early 1960s, coached more premierships winners, and indeed in the modern period Tom Hafey, Allan Jeans and David Parkin have equalled Barassi's four flags, but Barassi is the archetypal coach.

Kevin Sheedy has coached Essendon to three premierships. He has the reputation as the most innovative AFL coach. In fact very strong claims could be made for Parkin and Robert Walls as innovators but Sheedy's reputation is based on his lateral thinking and his habit of thinking aloud in the presence of journalists.

Ted Whitten's fame is not based on his success or innovations as a coach, although the only time he was able to coach a team into a Grand Final (1961) his team featured the innovative use of the flick pass. While some critics have described Whitten as the greatest player of his generation, his skill is only part of the reason for his fame. Whitten lived all his life in Melbourne's working-class Western Suburbs, played his

entire career with Footscray Football Club and was associated with their limited success—he was a member of their only Premiership side (1954) and Captain-Coach of their only other Grand Final team. As a player he was considered too tough to win a Brownlow Medal although he won several medals representing Victoria in interstate football. Whitten was seen as representative of Victorian Football as it used to be, before everything changed in the 1980s.

Most Australian football books have been written with (actually ‘ghost written’) by one of about six sports journalists. Of the three authors reviewed here, Jim Main has written widely on football both in newspapers and books, Peter McFarlane is a highly respected sports journalist better known for his writing on cricket and Tom Prior is a veteran journalist who for years covered crime and general news for the tabloids while acting as Lou Richards ‘ghost’ in the *Melbourne Sun*.

On the basis of their respective reputations I expected McFarlane’s book to be the most analytical and informative. In fact it is neither. At times it is close to a hagiography. In his introduction McFarlane describes his book as an attempt to show how Barassi developed as a man and a football player, the influences on his life, and the ways in which he has changed Australian Rules football. Apart from the lack of sufficient attention to the role of his second wife Cheryl, whose influence on Barassi seems far more significant than McFarlane credits, McFarlane may have succeeded in portraying the development and influences on Barassi the man, but he has not succeeded in showing the development of Barassi the coach or his role in changing Australian football.

Perhaps I can best illustrate what is missing from Barassi’s book by referring to North Melbourne’s defeat in the 1974 Grand Final. Barassi’s angry and disgusted response to his team’s defeat played a major role in creating their subsequent victory in 1975 which was North’s first Premiership in the VFL. This point is confirmed in Prior’s biography of Sheedy. Sheedy used Barassi’s 1974 response as a model for his own behaviour in 1983 when Hawthorn thrashed Essendon in the Grand Final. McFarlane does not mention the 1974 Grand Final, in fact apart from Melbourne’s loss to Collingwood in 1958 and Carlton’s defeat by Richmond in 1969, McFarlane avoids mentioning any unsuccessful finals’ campaign that involved Barassi either as a coach or a player.

While biographies of successful sports people need not dwell on

failure, Barassi's dismal record as coach of Melbourne is as important to his football development as his triumphs at Carlton and North Melbourne. McFarlane totally fails to explain what went wrong at Melbourne. The closest he comes to an attempt is his quotation of Ron Barassi Junior's explanation that his father's authoritarian approach was inappropriate for the generation playing football in the 1980s. The problem with this explanation is that Allan Jeans won three premierships and John Kennedy and Tommy Hafey coached finals' participants in the 1980s. All three were older than Barassi and Jeans and Kennedy have similar reputations as authoritarian coaches.

There are also some factual errors. Tom Hafey is named as the first coach of the Sydney Swans which will come as a surprise to Ricky Quade, Bob Hammond and John Northey. This should have been checked by the book's editors. Tom Prior could also have used some editing in *Sheeds: A Touch of Cunning*. This is a far more detailed book than McFarlane's. I have never been impressed by Prior's 'macho' right-wing tabloid style journalism and I had few expectations that his book would be particularly informative. However, whatever criticisms one might make of Prior's book, lack of information is not one of them. The problem is rather one of overload and this is where Prior could have used some editing.

Prior's description of Sheedy's family background, childhood and playing career is covered in great detail, far more detail than McFarlane gives Barassi. Unfortunately Prior's method is to interview every living member of Sheedy's large family to describe his childhood and a large group of former team members to cover his playing years. The result is that one reads the same stories and anecdotes two, and occasionally, three times.

The stories themselves are interesting and enlightening. Sheedy's family discuss the effect of his father's early death on the young Kevin; Sheedy and his siblings tell about growing up in a working-class ghetto in middle-class South Yarra (Australia's former tennis captain Neale Fraser, the son of a judge, attended the same church but lived on the other side of the railway line); and Sheedy and various club officials explain how Sheedy ended up at Richmond Football Club in breach of VFA transfer rules and despite the zoning rules.

The interviews and memories of Richmond in the 1960s and 1970s tell a few new stories. Most supporters of clubs other than Richmond

have always had a low opinion of Tiger 'power broker' Graeme Richmond, *Sheeds* provides plenty of information to confirm those opinions. It also gives a real feeling of the strength of Richmond Football Club in its period of dominance between 1967 and 1974.

On the whole, Prior is less successful in conveying the atmosphere of Essendon's success under Sheedy in the mid-1980s possibly because Sheedy's players were less forthcoming in interviews than his teammates at Richmond. The major deficiency in this work is that despite the title Prior does not really address Sheedy's innovations in any detail. The same criticism can be made of McFarlane's book on Barassi. Prior mentions Sheedy's recruitment of Aboriginal players as McFarlane writes of Barassi's recruitment of Irish Gaelic Football players but neither discusses onfield football innovations in sufficient detail. In Prior's case this is because he does not analyse anything, he merely interviews. In McFarlane's case I suspect that he is too in awe of his subject.

Jim Main's book *EJ* is essentially a work of tribute and should not be evaluated on the same criteria as the other two works. It includes some of the memoirs that Main and Whitten had hoped to turn into an autobiography before his death. It also includes collected tributes from team-mates, opponents and colleagues in the media and an exhaustive collection of Whitten's playing statistics. It does help to explain how and why Whitten was loved by his mates and generally in the Western suburbs but it adds little to our knowledge of EJ's football. For this we will have to wait for Jim Main's subsequent biography.

All three of these books provide additional insight into leading figures of the game from the 1960s onwards and as such are valuable reference books for students of Australian football history and for those interested in the role of personalities in sports and sporting clubs. There is still much work to be done on this period, for example, we need a much more in depth study of EJ Whitten, his role at Footscray and the construction of him as a masculine hero. Additionally, we need more analytical biographical studies which go beyond the myths and auras surrounding leading figures of the game.