

Andrew Moore, *The Mighty Bears! A Social History of North Sydney Rugby League*. Macmillan, Sydney, 1995. Illus., index, notes, stats., pp. 592. \$39.95.

At face value, the North Sydney Rugby League Club has had little to cheer about. Since the start of club rugby league in Australia in 1908, the first grade team has the worst record of any of the original clubs that still exist, winning only 623 from 1566 games. In fact, Norths have only ever won two first grade premierships in 1921 and 1922, but to be fair the reserve grade team has been more successful securing eight titles and the third grade team (including Presidents Cup) has won four times. In many ways, North's lack of success at the top level of competition is compensated by Andrew Moore's superb history of their club.

The Mighty Bears provides all the information that club aficionados will cherish. There are interesting stories and anecdotes about players, administrators, coaches, supporters as well as the internal and external political machinations that have shaped the club, its relationship to the local community and the dynamics of its dealings with the rugby league hierarchy. An outstanding statistical section (no less than 137 pages in length) by David Middleton details every game, every first grade player, representative footballers and all the tries, goals, and field goals which have been scored. No doubt there are many players who will value this documentation of their efforts and achievements.

For those interested in sports history and rugby league historiography, the book is a treasure. One of the most endearing features of *The Mighty Bears* is that Moore tackles many pertinent social issues: these include the claims of racism directed toward a West Indian coach; the issue of gender with his analysis of women's membership rights; the link between violence, masculinity and rugby league; the issue of sectarianism at the club and the question of socio-economic status with his portrayal of the working-class and labour movement roots of the North Sydney Club. He is correct when he concluded that rugby league was not revolutionary in its relationship to any of these social issues, it merely mirrored values held in wider society. One area that rugby league did introduce a major initiative was the alignment of social clubs to football clubs. Moore's section on the Gaming and Betting (Poker Machine) Act 1956 is pioneering. Along with his sections on racism, sexism, sectarianism and social stratification, it provides signposts for further analysis of the social context of rugby league.

One theme central to *The Mighty Bears* is the explanation of North Sydney's poor sporting performance. There were two key components: the first related to 'football' issues like the expensive players who turned out to be 'duds', the coaches who did not succeed, incompetent administrators, junior competitions that struggled against entrenched rugby union interests, the establishment of a wealthy and ambitious club (Manly-Warringah) in a neighbouring suburb which pinched several outstanding players, an unforgiving home ground that exacted its price every second week and, of course, the referees who, it was claimed, did North Sydney no favours. The second component—and where this history comes into its own—is that the fortunes of the Bears are shown to be inextricably linked to the social, political and demographic changes. When rugby league began in North Sydney it exhibited a strong working-class culture, a good base to draw on for the physical lumps that make good footballers, but this was eroded by a succession of major events: firstly, the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge which began in 1923 (the year after North Sydney won its last first grade premiership) and demolished many working class cottages; secondly, the establishment of a business district in North Sydney in the 1950s at the expense of an industrial future; thirdly, the construction of the Warringah Expressway (1966) which decimated more workers' dwellings and stimulated further commercial expansion, the construction of office blocks and, ultimately, the gentrification of the district. Not only were there less blue-collar workers to choose from, but there were fewer residents in North Sydney (60 300 in 1947; 48 500 in 1976) and this population was more transient. The symbiotic relationship between community, class and football has been diluted. Only over the last few years has the North Sydney local community become more closely aligned to their football club. Without doubt, Moore achieves his goal to eschew 'the 'quickie' sports history' (p. 19) and, in doing so, he shows that without contextualisation the Bears' story would be incomplete and impoverished.

Moore also avoids the 'quickie' sports history by providing a book that adheres to one of the tenets of social history by drawing on a wide range of sources that include oral interviews, archival research, unpublished manuscripts, parliamentary debates, local newspapers and club records. It is, however, the assiduous use of these sources that ensures that *The Mighty Bears* will sit very comfortably on the shelves of any labour, local, social or sports historian.

Taking into account all the virtues of this book, Moore, like Geoffrey Moorhouse in the United Kingdom, exhibits one additional trait: the ability to write about rugby league for more than one audience. Bears' fans will enjoy this book, while historians will find this a stimulating addition to rugby league literature.

Murray G Phillips
Centre for Sport Studies
University of Canberra