

Sport in Australian History: Recentring Anglo-Celtic Males, Decentring the Other(s)

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Following the appearance of two recent publications that dealt with issues in the history of sport in Australia, Richard Cashman's *Paradise of Sport*, and Wray Vamplew and Brian Stoddart's *Sport in Australia: A Social History*, I wondered what unique insights into Australian sports history a third publication would offer. The Series Forward boldly proclaimed that Daryl Adair and Wray Vamplew 'provide a new overview of the role that sport has played in Australian life, questioning, in the process, the notion that Australians have developed a distinctive obsession with sport' (p. v). Although it questioned the myth of a 'sports-obsessed' Australia through the use of broad historical and contemporary descriptions, this book was not a 'new overview', but rather a rehash of material and arguments that have appeared previously. Oxford's Australian Retrospectives series has produced a number of books of high quality such as Beverley Kingston's *Basket, Bag and Trolley: A History of Shopping in Australia* (1994) which fulfilled the forwards promotion that the books address major questions in an intelligently speculative manner. With this in mind, I hoped for more of the same on Australian sport.

Although the title proclaimed that this book looks at sport in Australian history, after scanning the table of contents, I realised that this book examined more contemporary issues rather than providing a chronology of Australian sports history. Again, I was interested in what this latest publication would add to the landmark analyses of sport in Australian society by Brian Stoddart in *Saturday Afternoon Fever* and Jim McKay in *No Pain, No Gain!* Adair and Vamplew come dangerously close to suggesting that this is the first critical appraisal of sport in Australia when stating that the motivation for writing this book was the fact that 'sport has widely been viewed as a subject neither requiring nor

deserving academic interest in Australia' (pp. xiii-xiv) and that '[a]cademics have often assumed that sport, being a form of play, cannot be accepted seriously as a locus of power' (p. 36). For an area that purportedly has received little critical analysis, the authors draw upon a remarkable wealth of sports research in Australia. Indeed, contrary to the authors claims, the work of Cashman, Vamplew and Stoddart, McKay and the collection of scholars in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Sport*, would testify otherwise. In fact, without these texts, one wonders whether this book could ever have been written. Cashman is referenced over 30 times, and this is indicative of the volumes reliance on academic analyses of sport.

The introduction states that the authors are 'concerned with the place of different social groups in Australian sporting culture', and that the 'book therefore examines the influence of divides such as class, gender, race, ethnicity and age in the history of Australian sport' (p. xiv). As such an approach was similar to that taken by Cashman (also published by Oxford) I anticipated a sports history book that identified and analysed these issues, and examined the commonalities and interrelationships issues between them, perhaps going further than Cashman, but this was not to be. Rather than providing a social examination of these issues in action throughout Australian sports history, each was taken more or less separately which made the influence of, for example, race, class and gender on Australian sport difficult to assess, as they were never treated in accord with one another. It is ironic that issues of race and gender are often dealt wit in isolation in broader analyses of society, perhaps exemplary of the way marginalised groups have been restricted in wider society.

The book is, by its own admission, limited. Adair and Vamplew claim that that the 'focus has been limited to high-profile rather than minority sports, and to performance-oriented rather than recreational activities' (p. xiv), yet obscure events such as rowing and long distance aviation made up many of the examples in this book. While a strict focus on mainstream sports is not necessary, the overuse of a handful of minority sports adds little to an understanding of sport's position with Australian culture. In addition, the book, although purporting to be on Australia, focussed extensively on South Australian examples, to the detriment of more appropriate or relevant examples from other parts of the country. Perhaps this s an advance over the Sydney-Melbourne centred

approaches of the past, but substituting one region for another does not solve the problems of regional examples serving for the whole.

There are many problems with this book, ranging from simplistic and unconvincing, and at times, contradictory arguments, to a patronising tone that quickly becomes unbearable, and this is exemplified on the chapters on women and minority groups. Upon arriving at the chapter 'Sporting Women', I noted that yet again, women are singled out for particular study, the anomaly in contemporary sport. Is it not time that we stop assuming that the history of sport is the history of men's sport with the provision of a neat little chapter to deal with all the obligatory women's issues? It is time we thought about dealing with sport and the social construction of gender — both male and female. Despite this separation, I persevered. The usual homage to the understanding that sport is male dominated ensured — nothing new there — and after a brief history, the authors decided to tackle key issues.

There is some over-pedantic carping about figures used by Marion Stell's *Half the Race*, which suggests that during the 1930s, around a million women were participating in some form of physical activity and the quibbling becomes overbearing when the authors find it concerning that Stell only consults two sources for information on female participation rates. Stell never discusses why we should accept [journalist Ruth] Preddey's estimate, nor does she question the factual reliability of the *Women's Weekly* (p. 54). In fact, the authors attack Stell and demand to know why she believes figures taken from the *Women's Weekly*, a magazine they describe as one that succeeded commercially by pleasing female readers (p. 54). Without defending the figures listed, it is interesting that figures and information taken from mainstream (read male) news publications, such as the *Referee* or the *Australian* are adequate sources of information, yet a women's magazine is somehow unreliable. Many recent works demonstrate that male sports reporting has been the most sensationalist of any forms of journalism (such as Oriard's *Reading Football*, 1993). This is an example of the patronising tone in this book. Later in the chapter the authors, in similar fashion to Stell, whom they are criticising for her historical method, refer to a single newspaper article to support their argument about osteoporosis and elite female athletes. In fact, a vast scientific literature exists on this topic. The scant referencing of this text, perhaps due to publishers dictates, does not put the authors in a position to defend their attack on Stell very well.

Adair and Vamplew begin their analysis of gender in an *intriguing* way and state that: 'While sex differences are a consequence of biological factors, the gender identities associated with being female and male are now widely thought to be a product of socialisation, not genetics' (p. 49), but then quickly add that there is evidence, though inconclusive, that behaviour may be sex specific. Is it always important to add such a biological disclaimer after forwarding theories of the social construction of gender? Again, where is their evidence to support such a claim.

The use of terminology in this section was also of concern. Whilst skimming over health issues concerning elite female athletes, the authors refer to the condition of amenorrhoea as temporary infertility (p. 60). Apart from being a highly value-laden term, it is inaccurate. Amenorrhoea does not necessarily mean infertility, temporary or otherwise, however, despite this inaccuracy, there are greater concerns with this kind of reporting. Although many health risks are faced by both male and female athletes at the elite sports level, in popular works there are repeated attempts to highlight the damage that sport can potentially cause to women's reproductive organs, and reproductive capabilities. Although the authors' point out that they are not focussing on these issues to highlight any 'biological "inferiority"' amongst female athletes, they are, in fact, doing just that. Again, there are the subtle inferences that elite sport is detrimental to women. The authors then provide some alternatives for women, namely 'recreational, non-competitive physical activities, as recreational physical activity ought to be a means of raising women's self-esteem' (p. 61) and then patronisingly conclude that women 'ought to consider what modes of sports participation best suit their individual needs' (emphasis added) (p. 62).

Although the authors are trying to debunk the notion that female athletes are somehow 'abnormal', their discussion of bodies and body images is weak, as Adair and Vamplew do not question the role of sport in the construction of idealised body images. An oversimplification of complex issues such as these only serves to trivialise them. Considering the depth of research on women's sport and on issues surrounding the participation of women in sport, this book provided an overly simplistic account of the issues, without any real critical examination, and the lack of contextualisation made the arguments even weaker.

It is disheartening that minority groups are continually marginalised in publications such as these, by lumping Aborigines, ethnic groups,

people with disabilities (not, as the book suggests, disabled people) and older people, by dumping them into one chapter, 'Groups on the Margins: Minority Experiences in Sport'. When introducing the position of Aborigines throughout Australian history, Adair and Vamplew provide a bleached version of Australian history, as they suggest, for example, that the loss of Aboriginal life was a result of 'violent conflict with settlers' (p. 64), rather than the overt and deliberate attempts to wipe out the 'race'. The authors return to biological determinist notions of race when they suggest that the 'characteristic athleticism and creative ball skills' of 'talented Aborigines' was responsible for the selection of black athletes (p. 67). Adair and Vamplew border on overt racism when they suggest that with respect to improving social conditions of Aborigines prior to the Sydney 2000 Olympics 'Aboriginal people will not tolerate token reforms or cosmetic window-dressing. And neither should whites: that is, of course. If Aborigines are truly our brother and sister Australians' (emphasis in original) (p. 70). This sort of argument represents the tone of the entire book, as it assumes that only whites, not Aborigines or other 'others', are reading this publication. This may not have been the intended effect, but the implication is unfortunately there nevertheless.

The section on sport amongst ethnic communities is highly problematic as Adair and Vamplew make some broad recommendations about the future of soccer in Australia:

It is time, therefore, for soccer dubs to actively welcome all Australians, promoting the game not merely as an extension of ethnic heritage but as a means by which local communities can feel an interest in a club's fortunes. Part of the difficulty is that few soccer clubs have been associated with region; most have been organised around a specific ethnic group. No wonder that many Australians have felt outsiders to the world game in their backyards (p. 76).

These statements are extremely dubious. Adair and Vamplew seem to be arguing that it is not acceptable for ethnic groups to maintain their own culture through sport, that ethnically- based sports clubs must welcome all Australians, and by this I assume they mean Anglo-Celtic, middle-class, male Australians. Indeed, they suggest that it is inappropriate for a culture different from the mainstream to be portrayed through sport and by implication submit that it is acceptable in mainstream sport so that it becomes a reflection of Anglo-Celtic culture. Further, the notion that it is

a 'problem' that soccer clubs are organised around an ethnic group rather than organised by region is hopelessly Anglocentric. Are the authors suggesting that organising clubs along regional lines (devoid of any spatial ethnic divisions), namely the way that British sports are organised in Australia, is somehow a more legitimate means of organising sport? Where does this leave other sporting structures that organise clubs along factory or religious lines? These points demonstrate a limited understanding of the meaning of community. Community must not be understood as simply a geographical vicinity, and ethnic groups not considered to be communities?

In addition, one wonders whether Adair and Vamplew are perpetuating the stereotype of 'wogball' by their inclusion of their discussion of soccer in the ethnic minorities section, and one of their few references to soccer is in a section that discussed ethnic violence in soccer. In fact, it is in this latter section that the authors contradict themselves, as they suggest that migrants can retain their ethnic heritage through sport if 'soccer clubs can persuade their fans that old-world differences should not be made into new-world problems' (p. 131), that is, if they 'behave normally'. Although the authors suggest that they 'have no wish to label such [ethnic minority] groups or their cultural practices as inferior' (p. 70), they imply just that. They suggest that soccer in Australia should become a melting pot for all cultures, and although they state on several occasions that multiculturalism is supposed to teach a tolerance of other groups, their dominant argument is that if you come to Australia, you should act like 'Australians', which is a dangerous assimilationist approach in the current climate.

What concerns me most in this chapter is the notion that victims, if not responsible for their own plight, certainly are responsible for educating mainstream 'normal' Australians about their oppression. The authors suggest that elite Aboriginal athletes should educate the rest of Australia about issues of Aboriginal poverty, health and unemployment, gay and lesbian athletes should teach us how to overcome homophobia and ethnic groups should teach multiculturalism. It is of concern that the marginalisation of these groups is perpetuated by the allocation of only a few pages to each of the issues, however, it is more disturbing that the victims of marginalisation are made responsible for overcoming their own oppression

The colloquial jargon, such as the use of athletes' first names and

the overuse of the jovial description 'sports medicos', and 'scribes', and the weak attempts at humorous quips are irritating characteristics of this book. Further the repetitive use of value-laden, subjective descriptions of people and groups are examples of the lack of critical evaluation in this text, and indicates little understanding of the institutionalisation of behaviour in society. Rather than calling a section of the crowd that resorts to homophobic taunts as juvenile or bigoted, perhaps the authors could have taken this opportunity to understand how this behaviour is considered acceptable in contemporary Australian sport. Again, this is a result of a lack of contextualisation.

There is an overriding message in this book that although sport somehow has all these bad and negative elements, there is a greater ideal, a greater meaning for sport, that must not be forgotten and one of the main themes is that sport SHOULD be doing certain things, for example, it 'should be health promoting and fun' (p. 61). The message is reinforced many times throughout the book, culminating in the conclusion but not before clearly stating that 'although egalitarianism in sport has been illusory it is surely worth pursuing as an ideal, and as a means by which to break down iniquitous social barriers in society generally' (p. 63). This is further reinforced throughout the book, where the authors perpetuate common stereotypes about the sanctity of sport, by commenting that 'winning has come to assume immense social, psychological and financial importance in contemporary sport' (p. 125, emphasis added). If the authors are trying to 'de-nostalgise' our perceptions of sport, then surely they must recognise that winning has always been an important part of modern sport, not just a recent phenomenon. John Hoberman and others have outlined this in some detail. The conclusion reveals the extent of the functional use of sport as the authors disclose that 'sport has provided welcome entertainment' (p. 141), has 'promoted civic pride' (p. 141), has 'helped to develop relationships with others' (pp.141-2) and Adair and Vamplew conclude that 'sport has not been universally or totally discriminatory and many Aborigines, women, and people from ethnic groups have made it to the top in their chosen sports and become important role models for others' (p. 142). Rare anecdotes about exceptions do not disprove the overall oppression.

This book is written under the guise of social awareness, indeed the authors use all the right terminology: opportunity, access, discrimination and marginalisation; to give the impression of a sociological approach to

the study of sports history. The authors even presume in their conclusion that much of this book has been critical of sport in Australia' (p. 141), when clearly it has been a simplistic and unconvincing description. Contrary to the blurb, I did not find this 'a challenging or thought-provoking book'.