

Descriptive History and Passionless Sport in Contemporary Australian Sports History

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In *Sport in Australian History* Daryl Adair and Wray Vamplew convincingly debunk the three great myths of Australian sport: that sport is egalitarian in spirit and structure, that Australians have a unique obsession with sport, and that the sport of our grandfathers was somehow fairer, richer and more meritorious and fulfilling than that which we now play and watch. The pair tackle these myths by discussing a wide range of sporting topics and issues: the class and amateur foundations of Australian sport, the commercialisation of sport, players' unions, drug taking, player and spectator violence, adult mismanagement of children's sport, the law in sport, the development of disabled and veteran sports, discrimination against women and Aborigines, and the marginalisation of ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians.

Readers of *Sporting Traditions* will find nothing new in either these arguments or approach. Both have been thoroughly traversed in the journal and in scores of publications written by members of the Australian Society for Sports History, including Adair and Vamplew. How then should readers evaluate *Sport in Australian History*? The publisher and the authors provide the answer. As part of its Australian Retrospective Series, Oxford University Press sets out clearly defined objectives for the book: to put contemporary issues in their correct historical perspective, to target 'non-specialists' who seek intellectual nourishment, and to address major questions in a brisk and intelligently speculative manner (p. v). To the publishers three objectives, the authors add one of their own: to provide a 'critical perspective... of Australian sport' (p. xiii). These, then, are the four criteria by which readers should evaluate the book.

As one would expect from respected historians, Adair and Vamplew

use the historical approach to good effect. They highlight the continuities and discontinuities in sport over the last century; every theme and issue comes complete with its own mini history. This is the book's strength.

Whether their examples are always appropriate, however, seems certain to become a subject of debate. Given their intention to focus on high-profile rather than minority sports (p. xiv), the plethora of rowing examples struck me as strange. (Rowing or sculling receives sixteen mentions and on eight occasions serves as the key example; rugby league receives seventeen mentions and is the principal example just six times.) Likewise, the media, sports officials and their own families forced many champion Australian sportswomen, including swimmers Fanny Durack and Dawn Fraser, and hurdler Shirley Strickland, to prove their femininity. It seems odd then, that Adair and Vamplew should single out British aviator Amy Johnson to illustrate the defensive reactions of sportswomen accused of displaying masculine traits.

But history is merely the method by which Adair and Vamplew contextualise the structure and nature of contemporary sport. The latter is their primary focus. Indeed, in his foreword to the book, Series Editor David Walker reinforces this point: 'Australian Retrospectives brings a historical perspective to bear on matters of vital concern to Australians in the 1990s' (p. v). I have spelled this out to draw attention to the title of the book, *Sport in Australian History*, which is a misnomer. At the very least it is bland, uninteresting and unimaginative. While it is rare for reviewers to comment on a book's title, in this instance the title is symptomatic of the text.

Sport is about human passion and emotion — the dramatic, beautiful, tearful and ecstatic together with the dastardly, mean and distasteful. Adair and Vamplew convey none of these moods. *Sport in Australian History* is too detached and too solemn. There are no lively, entertaining, perceptive or illustrative quotes; the participants — players, administrators, spectators and commentators — are silent. Perhaps this is because passion and emotion are anathemas to those who want 'intellectual nourishment'. I think not. In several places the authors inject puns to relieve their lacklustre narrative. Rather than adding to the book, I found them irritating. For example, in describing the Olympic Games as 'a "test" of national sporting prowess', the authors suggest that perhaps they are 'a "con"test' given that nations rarely participate as equals (p. 41). When discussing the nationalising effects of Australia II's victory

in the 1983 America's Cup, they refer to multimillionaire Alan Bond's involvement, and ask whether the victory really 'Bonded' the Australian nation (p. 43). On one occasion their whimsical humour oversteps the mark. Calling for a comparative approach to investigate whether Australians' obsession with sport is unique, they argue that 'a passion for sport has been a trait of Americans, Britons, Brazilians, Australians and many others — yes, even New Zealanders! (emphasis added, p. 8).

Shoddy writing compounds the drab style. A profusion of 'buts', 'however's', 'moreovers' and 'indeeds' litter the first six pages. And what precisely might the following sentence mean? 'The purpose of a multicultural society is not to sanction ethnic isolationism or elitism, but rather to foster the development of a *common, enriching diversit* that can promote understanding and co-operation between "insiders" and "outsiders"' (emphasis added, p. 72). It is especially unfortunate that Adair and Vamplew should adopt a patronising tone when discussing race relations: 'Aboriginal people will not tolerate token reforms or cosmetic window dressing. And neither should whites: that is, of course, if Aborigines are *truly* your brother and sister Australians' (p. 70).

Sport in Australian Histor is no feast of 'intellectual nourishment' although there are morsels: 'contemporary sport, rather than tarnishing the lustre of the glorious past, has in some ways helped to create a less discriminatory recreational culture...' (p. 22); 'despite the very public "scientification" of a number of sports... the most popular spectator sports, Australian Rules Football, rugby league, basketball and netball, have appeared to be either unaffected by or on the fringes of performance science' (p. 113); there is a need to contextualise 'the drug-taking behaviour of some Australian athletes... Indeed the daily work ritual of the "smoko" and "coffee-break" do not simply suggest a pause from labour but also signal a time for a nicotine or caffeine "hit"' (p. 120). The best passage in the book stands out like a beacon:

the alleged attributes of corporeal school sport- masculinity, courage, team spirit and obedience — [do not] necessarily translate into social virtue. Manliness can easily spill over into brutality; courage and foolhardiness may be difficult to distinguish, *esprit de corps* can result in arrogance and intolerance; and the unquestioning acceptance of a captain's authority, though essential on the playing field, can produce a mindset devoid of initiative and flexibility (p. 135).

Too often Adair and Vamplew fail to follow their arguments through. In urging their fellow citizens to be more frank in their assessments of Australian sporting successes, the authors point out that Australia has never reached the victory dais in soccer, one of the few truly international mass sports (p. 14). Yet, they also note that nations adopt specific sports as a result of complex geographical, cultural, historical and political factors. Surely, then, categorical statements about Australia's failure in international soccer are premature until *all* these factors have been carefully weighed. The pair also argue that 'most Australians are opposed to discrimination against Aborigines in sport' (p. 69). Here they cite the Australian Football Leagues anti-racism program in schools, its use of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to mediate cases of racial abuse on the football field, and the public outrage against Arthur Tunstall, the Australian Commonwealth Games official who berated gold-medallist Cathy Freeman for carrying an Aboriginal flag during her victory lap at the 1994 Commonwealth Games. But there's no discussion of racial vilification by spectators. What about the blue rinse set who sit in the members stand of the Melbourne Cricket Ground and call Aboriginal footballers 'fucking cunts'.¹ Lastly, their faith in technology to control player behaviour seems overly optimistic. 'If [the "cyclops" electronic eye] had been operational ten or fifteen years ago the boorish antics of John McEnroe and other tennis brats would not have been tolerated' (p. 101). Is there any evidence to suggest that technology would have subdued McEnroe and his ilk? Humans interpret technology and impose penalties. It is worth recalling also that McEnroe's behaviour excited some fans and enlivened many dull tournaments.

Consistent with the publishers insistence that books in the Series 'address major questions in a brisk and intelligently speculative manner', and that 'no book is designed to be the last word on the subject' (p. v), Adair and Vamplew avoid personal judgement. Towards the end of the book they write that 'historians [need] to be frank about what they don't know' and they 'stress that further work is needed on many topics before firm conclusions can be drawn' (p. 142). If the pair intend these comments to signify rigorous scholarship, paradoxically, they also place them in the same camp as conservative traditional historians whose credo is 'our task is not to judge but to understand'.² More to the point, however, their refusal to cast judgement undermines the very approach they claim to champion.

Critical approaches to sport rest on two inviolate assumptions: that the structure of sport (its rule bound, hierarchical and competitive characteristics) reproduces the social relations of power in broader society, and that changes in sport will occur only alongside changes in the social structure of society. As stated above, Adair and Vamplew provide good historical *descriptions* of the relationships between sport and society. For example, they note that ‘what has occurred in Australian society has been replicated in the nation’s sport, so historically Aborigines have been excluded, women discriminated against, and ethnic minorities marginalised’ (p. 139). But there is no analysis of the interrelationships. For example, while they describe hardening attitudes among male sports administrators towards sportswomen in the 1930s (p. 53), they fail to analyse the causes. (Most historians attribute these to social changes during the Great War which freed women from the home and to subsequent attempts by men to force them back.)

These two criticisms, lack of opinion and critical analysis, combine in a particularly irresolute conclusion: ‘What is not confidently known is the extent to which these beneficial features [of sport, its contribution to mass entertainment and the economy, and its role in producing positive Aboriginal and female role models,] have outweighed the downside... ’ (p. 142). Not only does this ‘wishy-washy’ statement reduce the analysis of sport to a balance sheet of social benefits and social liabilities, it incorrectly implies that critical approaches can analyse sport on its own terms.

Sport in Australian History meets the technical requirements of its publisher. Unfortunately for the reader the way the authors address the criteria leaves readers with a detached, restrained book, and one which never realises the authors’ objective of presenting a true critical perspective of Australian sport.

Notes:

- 1 Douglas Booth and Colin Tatz, ‘Disorderly conduct’, *Inside Sport*, Mar. 1997, p. 22.
- 2 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, Abacus, London, 1994, p. 5.