

**Sean Brawley**, *Beating the Odds: Thirty Years of the Totalizator Agency Board of New South Wales*. Focus Publishing, Sydney 1995. Bibliog., illus. pp. 253. \$29.95 plus \$7 postage from the Australian Sports Consultancy, PO Box 1366, Crows Nest, NSW 2065.

The TAB as we have known it, in whatever State of Australia we live, is just about a thing of the past.

In NSW the Labor government of Bob Carr is under intense pressure to follow the Victorian example and privatise the TAB. 'Privatise' is a magic word designed to be said quickly and to avoid scrutiny of the further definition, which is to sell a public asset into private hands so that the new owners can make more money from it, free of irksome regulations — in the short term, at any rate. The government gets the windfall, which helps the budget for a while. Private enterprise gets its hands on the cash flow.

The latest issue (May 1997) of the thoroughbred *Australian Bloodhorse Review* carries a photograph, surely designed to portray him as a chinless wimp, of Carr wilting at the microphone under a hard-hitting interview by Sydney radio celebrity Alan Jones. The article is also adorned with a commentary by fellow guru John Laws. New South Wales racing is said to be in the doldrums while Victoria has been stealing a march thanks to Jeff Kennett ('he's got a bit to answer for but you can't help but like him', Laws decrees). Carr seems unable to accept that the great thinkers have the overnight solution: slash taxation on TAB betting to attract a vastly greater turnover; give racing a larger proportion of the TAB revenue; and then privatise the institution. Carr meekly protests that he is looking into it, that he has a budget to balance and an Olympic Games to pay for, but this is loftily dismissed as so much prevarication.

Carr knows that to slash the TAB's 'take' from 14.25 cents to 12 cents in every dollar wagered in the State-controlled betting shops could be to reduce substantially the value of this cash machine to the private market. The NSW Government seems certain to proceed with its planned sale of the TAB, because of the competitive nature of the Victorian enterprise. The very fact that there are Olympic Games to be paid for makes the move all the more certain.

All these recent developments are beyond the time span covered by Sean Brawley's recent history of the first 30 years of the New South Wales TAB, *Beating the Odds*, but they are enormously illuminated by a careful reading of the book. This is one of the beauties of history, and its great

purpose perhaps, that it shines a light on the present if we have the eyes to see it. Brawley's book shows that the TAB has evolved from what almost qualified as a public service, designed to solve a collection of social ills, into a gambling entrepreneur. For years it was one of the few legal outlets for betting in New South Wales. It offered little in the way of customer comforts or facilities. These days the TAB aggressively looks for new customers, and for ways to increase its turnover and compete with a host of brazen opponents, from lotteries to casinos. Brawley does not draw this conclusion, and perhaps it is more evident now than it was two years ago when he was writing, but the TAB at the end of 30 years, in 1994, had been converted into a very desirable prize for private enterprise.

Over those 30 years the Totalizator Board of New South Wales has not only transformed itself but has also changed the nature of several sports. By the end of that period the TAB had vacuumed more than \$3 billion — say it slowly: three thousand million dollars — from the pockets of punters and delivered this to the revenue of the New South Wales Government, and a further \$1.2 billion (twelve hundred million dollars) to the sports of thoroughbred horse racing, harness racing and greyhound racing.

Sean Brawley is an academic historian with an interest in sports history. In this book — a hefty, heavily-illustrated hard cover volume with large text and generous layout — he retains a fair degree of dignity as he straddles the trouser-stretching divide between historical detachment and the demands of public relations inherent in a commissioned history. Corporate vanity, or the need to put such things on the record, is satisfied by a list of all members of the Board since its inception, while the disinterested reader is given useful summaries of their backgrounds. Profiles of long-serving employees are written in ways to emphasise the changing nature of the TAB. The preponderance of photographs of staff at all levels of the operation reminds us that it has been human beings who have been turning the wheels of what the public has often perceived as an elaborate machine.

Indeed one of the best features of the book is the visual material: there are many marvellously evocative photographs of patient queues of Sydneysiders in crowded TAB's in the 1960s; of tote operators and customers; of the phone betting headquarters with its staff of coiffured telephonists. We can hear the crackle of polyester shirts and ties. How standards of dress had slipped by the end of the 1970s! There is a social

history immanent in these images. Not all of them have been well handled by the book designers, with some photographs printed too large. A blue rinse has been washed through the monochrome pictures, which makes some of the individual portraits of TAB worthies almost frightening. 'Warts-and-all' history takes on a new meaning.

The book's generous layout is used to advantage in giving light and shade to a subject which by its nature could be hard going for the general reader. Brawley uses separate panels in the text to tell us anecdotes or to give more detail on complex side issues. Less effectively, he uses date panel as markers to step us through each one of the 30 years. These provide short lists of major events of the year arranged under the categories of 'History', 'Racing' and 'TAB', but they are useful for the third category only. Those for 'Racing' are arbitrary and often miss the really important events of the year, while the 'History' category throws up some truly bizarre non-sequiturs — my favourite being 1968: 'Australia mourns the passing of Dorothea McKellar while Kylie Minogue is born'.

Brawley confesses that he was required to complete his research and manuscript in under six months, and that some issues could not be explored because they were 'commercially sensitive or could be legally challenged'; but there are few signs of corners being cut. He covers the territory well, dividing the book into four main sections. The first deals with the preconditions for establishing the TAB in 1964. The second stays in the 1960s to examine the formidable struggle of the TAB to establish its operations in a hostile environment. The third concentrates on the shaky steps towards computerisation of the betting network in the 1970s, which was a process of trial and many errors, but which saw the birth of more exotic forms of higher-dividend betting, notably the trifecta. The fourth takes 'competition' as its theme and discusses the way that the TAB repositioned itself in the 1980s and 1990s in the light of threats to its privileged position from electronic lotteries, from betting on sports other than racing, and from the prospect of legalised casinos.

A recurring theme of the book is the degree of opposition, active and passive, encountered by the stalwart bureaucrats of the TAB as they persevered in their efforts to meet their charter and bring respectable betting shops to the public, and in the process to run their illegal opponents out of business. Until 1964 all off-the-course betting on races in NSW was illegal, which had created a flourishing underground economy of starting-price bookmakers throughout the state. These wealthy and politically

well-connected interests went to great lengths in their efforts to prevent the coming of a state-run betting monopoly. The matter was bitterly fought within the Labor Government of Jack Renshaw, and the TAB was finally achieved only by the mechanism of a Royal Commission and a non-party vote in parliament. Yet Brawley points out that the SP brigade was not going to concede defeat lightly. The TAB found impediments placed in the way of expansion. Red tape and municipal intractability allowed many local councils in Sydney to delay the arrival of the betting shops in particular localities for months or years. SP bookies and evangelical churches skipped hand-in-hand to make this so. Nor was the going any easier when Askin's Liberal coalition came to power in 1965. Police continued to ignore TAB complaints and information about those SP operators who were still in business.

The TAB was persistent in its determination to improve services and standards. After all, the illegal bookmakers still held many advantages at that time. Unlike the TAB they could take bets up to the start of each race and could pay dividends as soon as the results were confirmed. The TAB could do neither of these things, partly because of restrictions under the legislation and partly because of the logistics of a totalisator system covering the whole State in the era before computerisation. Brawley takes pains to explain the complicated, almost heroic, procedures used in the beginning when the TAB was very much a manual operation depending on adding machines, telephones and mental arithmetic.

There is much of interest to the social historian, and Brawley ranges widely in passing. His observations, for instance, on the place of female employment in the TAB are pertinent. Right from the beginning, women were attracted to the part-time positions which required concentration and exactitude, and they were soon rewarded with equal pay and promotion opportunities (at least up to the glass ceiling of senior management) ahead of other clerical sectors. In the process they added a kind of domestic respectability to the TAB.

The book casts only occasional glimpses interstate, which is understandable but a pity, since none of Australia's TAB systems has been able to operate as a world entire unto itself. Competition between the various TAB's interstate drove many of the innovations and reforms. Even at the outset it was the opening of Victoria's TAB in 1961 that forced racing clubs in New South Wales to exert the necessary pressure on the State Government to establish a TAB. In the 1950s it had been Victorian

racing that complained of heavy taxation, and of prize money lagging behind the levels offered in New South Wales. After just one year of TAB operations in Victoria it became apparent that the tables would be turned; and as the Carr and Jones debate shows, the rivalry has been a political weapon used ever since to keep the taxing rapacity of governments in check.

Similarly, innovations in the New South Wales TAB such as same-day payout of dividends soon forced the more austere Victorian TAB to ease its rules. There are some excellent graphs and tables at the end of the book charting the growth and development of TAB operations, income and expenditure. It would have been useful to have added a table showing relative growth rates of the different TAB's. Brawley's bibliography suggests that he was unaware of Kay Cohen's *Character and Circumstance: Thirty Years of the Totalisator Administration Board in Queensland 1962-1992*, a work of similar scope to Brawley's and the first (and, to my knowledge, only other) published history of an Australian TAB. The similarities and differences between the two States are instructive.

Two further quibbles: the absence of an index is a major shortcoming in any history book; and the publisher or commissioning body is culpable in omitting the author's name from the front cover. Hard-working historians deserve better than that.

Beating the Odds may be more concerned with administrative than sports history, but it should not be disregarded by sports historians. With the gambling revolution that we are living through at the moment, legal betting on sports other than racing is on of the few gambling outlets with further growth potential. The TAB has wrought huge changes on racing. What effects will legal gambling have on other sports?

Though it was not really part of Brawley's brief to examine the effects of the TAB on racing, he nevertheless touches on them. Mid-week race broadcasts, SKY television, the exponential growth of race meetings, and, perversely, smaller crowds, vast subsidies returning to the sport, new grandstands and facilities — all of these things have flowed directly or indirectly from the TAB. Brawley discusses the TAB's diversification into other sports, starting with FootyTAB betting on Rugby League matches in 1984. This signalled the beginning of aggressive advertising by the TAB and raised a whole lot of new issue including the nexus between sports administrators, the media, commercial interests and gambling entrepreneurs. SportsTAB followed in 1990 with betting on

events such as the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race and the Bathurst motor racing; but, unlike racing, little of the turnover goes back directly to these other sports.

The TAB's monopoly on legal off-course betting has been eased. The dedicated punter can now get access by telephone to licensed on-course bookmakers and by computer networks to interstate bookmakers or competing totes. In racing, gambling has always been at the heart of the sport — some would say it has gnawed away at its soul — but at the same time there have been decades, indeed centuries, to devise strategies to combat malpractice. Further, there has always been the incorruptible horse or greyhound to thwart the best-laid plans of betting manipulators. Sports historians know plenty of other sports where, in various eras, gambling has been allowed to interfere with fair play and clean results. Now the proliferation of sports betting will expand the temptation and opportunities. The next Fine Cotton will not be a racehorse.

Andrew Lemon  
Melbourne