

Manfred Jurgensen, *A Sporting Declaration*. Phoenix, Brisbane, 1996. pp.139.

Manfred Jurgensen who, according to legend, was plucked from a session of kick-to-kick in the parks around the University of Melbourne to begin a celebrated career with the Second XVIII of the Carlton Football Club, has put together a collection of sports writing by sixteen prominent Australian writers. Some of these writers have done their cause no harm, but others may have moved down the rankings after faltering in the first quarter. The quality of writing is as diverse as the subject matter that the writers have chosen.

A Sporting Declaration is introduced with a short and insightful essay which, it can be assumed, comes from the pen of the editor. Jurgensen acknowledges the significance of sport — ‘It is difficult to overestimate the importance of sport in the establishment of an Australian cultural identity’ (p. ii) — and attempts to explain why that might be so. ‘Sport . . . continues to attract much love-and much hate. Both reactions ultimately reflect passionate responses to mortality’ (p. ii). The laws of mortality are somewhat inflexible. Some of the pieces demonstrate the futility of pursuing the sporting life in a hopeless attempt to remain fit and young. Other pieces celebrate the meaning that can be found in sport, and the understanding which these pursuits might elicit.

The contributions vary considerably. Some are full of reminiscence. Robin Wallace-Crabbe remembers tennis in an engaging piece of writing. It includes a lovely lampoon of the superciliousness of some sports studies. I suspect he was hinting that some analysts fail to see the greater realities of life and that, in their attempts to promote the importance of their ‘discipline’, their ground-breaking insights would hardly put a slide-mark on the ant bed tennis court of life. He also astutely observes

that a lot of sport is played for the purpose of representing something. He writes ‘tribe, race, club, party, school, house, church, we had to learn to run our butts off for abstractions’ (p. 93).

Some of the nostalgia is less engaging. Venero Armanno presents us with a rambling account of his experience with tennis in Paris. He tells us that McEnroe’s tennis was magical. Of course it was, and still is, but I would love to know why. Surely the writer’s higher awareness might offer some assistance to the reader. It might also have him check his story. Armanno quotes from *Full Metal Jacket* and not only gets the story wrong (it was a peace badge) but gets the quote wrong as well. It was ‘duality’ not dichotomy’ (p. 12). For those of us who remember that challenging movie, Armanno’s credibility was at least dented.

Nick Earls drags us through a mindless PE program, by using the clever device of creating equivalent agony in the reader. Geoff Quinlan’s story of the fortunes of cricketers in the Department of Foreign Affairs gets, to use his words, a hoinck-a-hoinck-a-hoinck. And I’m not exactly sure why Helen Darville got a guernsey (although she is a genuine crowd-puller). I suppose her story did extend the breadth of the collection by discussing spectators.

Nigel Krauth uses sporting imagery to make a comment on youth and age — a theme also taken up by Jurgensen. Others also pursue this issue of mortality. G V Brady hints at the religious quest in response to such realities and his piece will ring bells with one-time amateur footballers (the code of highest spirituality).

Of the poetry, I enjoyed Bruce Dawe’s ‘The Weak Sister’, and Michael Sariban’s ‘The Vaulter’ and it appears Chris Wallace-Crabbe has a Grimmish understanding of the leg-break. These were nothing more than personal preferences.

Generally, the collection is a mixed bag — more like a spell from Michael Bevan than Shane Warne. There are some ordinary deliveries but there are a couple of gems. The realities of time passing and the need for humans to face death seems a grand theme, but sport generates responses which are passionate because it is about these themes. Phil Brown’s excellent piece, ‘Surf or Die’ is nicely placed at the end of the collection. It celebrates the meaning which can be found in sporting activity and that, in the face of the ultimate human reality, there might be at least a little hope.

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