

**Julie Stanton et al, eds, *Australian Sport Through Time*. Random House, Sydney, 1997. Illus. pp. 511. \$49.95.**

*Australian Sport Through Time* is modelled on the historical anthology *Australia Through Time*, which was first published in 1992 by Random House, then updated annually. The publisher describes that volume as 'one of the most successful history books ever published in Australia' (p. 6). By this statement I presume they mean sales: that measure is, after all, central to how publishers gauge the success of a book. Academic historians, on the other hand, are less concerned about the popularity of a text (unless, of course, they are its author). Success, to academic readers, is measured by factors like originality of thought, quality of argument, and use of evidence. These criteria, which are central to the discipline of history, are scarcely noticeable in *Australian Sport Through Time*. Yet I have little doubt that 'ordinary' readers will find this book appealing. It provides snippets of information about issues that have long captivated sports fans — such as team performances, sporting heroes and villains, outstanding athletes, and sporting triumphs and tragedies. These messages are conveyed via either verbatim or edited versions of newspaper reports, plus an impressive array of drawings and photographs. As part of the research process, the team of writers drew on secondary sources to 'reinforce' the text (p. 11). But their historical 'reports' are presented under uniform headings in the style of a newspaper. In this way sporting events of the past are 'told' by observers of the day.

Without a narrator, though, it is not clear what the overall story might add up to. Even so, novice readers who survey the text in full (rather than simply browsing through it) may well feel they have secured a grasp of the bit picture' in Australian sports history. After all, historian Richard Cashman offers an informative six-page overview of sport in the early colonial era to 1870, while gender studies expert Dale Spender provides two pages explaining the relative absence of women from thousands of Australia's sports pages. Thirty-one pages of oral history supplement this

analysis: they consist of interviews by Kevin Berry (former Olympic Gold medallist) with fifteen distinguished Australian sports performers. These articles focus largely on the sporting experiences of athletes like Betty Cuthbert, Mervyn Rose, and Margaret Court, but they also dwell on the athletes' opinions about issues like money in sport, drugs in sport, patriotism and sport, etc. This testimony provides important insights into top-level sport as lived experience.

Yet *Australian Sport Through Time* is not really a study of the past. It is principally a 'cut and paste' and edit of newspaper reports, reminiscences, and images of sport in Australia since 1870. Admittedly, these 409 pages of archival snapshots also include a yearly 'fact file', where dates of key sporting events and milestones are recorded, as well as basic data about the lives of sporting figures of the time. Also, in keeping with the practice of quantifying performance, mention is made of local or national records in athletics and swimming, while graphs chart their change over time. But this section of the book contains no thematic discussions, such as why sport has been central to the nation's popular culture, or why the 'world games' of soccer and basketball have been relatively minor spectator sports in Australia. A page or two focussing on key themes about the history of Australian sport, written in accessible style, would have done much to help explain the nation's sporting past to ordinary readers. Just as concerning, the book ends abruptly without a conclusion. In this respect the title of the book is a misnomer: *Australian Sport Through Time* implies some kind of assessment of historical change, not simply a chronology of key persons and events.

There are also technical problems in this book. First, citation details for the yearly sports reports are not provided. This makes it impossible for readers to check the origin of the material. They have no way of knowing whether they are reading a verbatim original (which could have been indicated by quotation marks, source, and page), or an edited version of an original (which could have been indicated by source and page). Just as seriously, while the book's writers have used secondary sources to 'reinforce' the strength of the text, readers have no way of knowing what they were. The book contains no references to scholarship in Australian history, and it does not even contain a bibliography. This is not a pedantic point: in explaining the structure of the book the editors emphasised that 'at times' they had 'found conflict between secondary sources, and between primary and secondary sources'. They concluded:

'We followed the source we considered to be the most authoritative' (p. 11). Just what this might mean readers are left to wonder. And, since the editors do not discuss the nature of the 'conflicts between sources' (p. 11), readers are none the wiser about the insights of researchers and writers involved in *Australian Sport Through Time*. If details have been recorded separately they could be valuable to future historians of Australian sport.

I regard *Australian Sport Through Time* as a book with potential. First, it could easily be improved by the inclusion of thematic essays, citation details, and a bibliography. The current format is, in my view, inadequate. Second, the book has potential as a source of contemporary opinion, values, and behaviour in sport. After coming across press accounts of prejudice against Aboriginal cricketers, novice readers might start to question why no indigenous male has ever played Test cricket for Australia. Similarly, a newspaper complaint in 1872 about the preponderance of 'filthy lucre' in sport (p. 56) may serve as an antidote to common assumptions that physical culture has a very recent pecuniary history. This is where the occasional thematic paragraph, or 'mini-history' would have been particularly useful. Overall, though, *Australian Sport Through Time* is rather like a stamp album — full of fascinating data but bereft of a narrator. It does not tell a story.

Daryl Adair  
Sports Studies  
The University of Canberra.