

# 'The End of Sports History?? From Sports History to Sports Studies

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The 1999 conference of the Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) sparked interesting and lively debate before, during and after the proceedings. Some ASSH members appeared uneasy discussing the 'end' of their field which, as an academic enterprise, is younger than most of the participants. Yet, beyond the obvious reference to Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History', the topic is certainly relevant for a number of reasons. Sports historians have not extensively debated the impact of the postmodern assault on 'History' as either a tool of modernist discourse and discursive power relationships,<sup>2</sup> or a set of practices that follow what Appleby, Hunt and Jacob call 'the heroic model of science'.<sup>3</sup> Many postmodern critics have called for, or announced, the 'end of history'. If history is at an end, then surely the implication would be that there is also an end to sports history as we know it.

For those who have been following the 'mainstream' historical literature over the past decade or so, it is readily apparent that the challenges of postmodernism and poststructuralism have been debated extensively amongst historians, and between historians and critics of '(H)history' who do not classify themselves as 'historians' (and who 'historians' reject as members of the historical profession). These debates are perhaps best summarised in *The Postmodern History Reader* edited by Keith Jenkins.<sup>4</sup> Brian Palmer's *Descent into Discourse*, published in 1990, offers the best sustained critique from the left of the postmodernist attack on history.<sup>5</sup> For some, the end of history is to be welcomed; for others the 'descent into discourse' is problematic and serves only to obfuscate the continuation of society and global capitalist development. To quote Ellen Meiskins Wood:

At the very moment when the world is coming ever more within the totalising logic of capitalism and its homogenising impulses, at the very moment when we have the greatest need for conceptual tools to apprehend that global totality,

the fashionable intellectual trends, from historical 'revisionism' to cultural 'postmodernism', are carving up the world into fragments of 'difference'.<sup>6</sup>

It is to the detriment of sports history to ignore postmodernist critiques, although I would also argue that one of the core problems with much of what passes as sports history is its atheoretical, and sometimes un- or anti-intellectual, stance. This is not to negate the substantial advances in the field in the past ten to fifteen years, which I return to below. In sports history, debates about the state of the field in light of applying new (or even old) social theories have focused on whether sports history should stand alone as a distinct or discrete field, or whether there are greater advantages in pursuing a more encompassing and interdisciplinary sports studies that links more to cultural studies than to social history. This has followed debates in mainstream history which is still grappling with the best way to deal with the 'cultural turn'.<sup>7</sup> The challenges from 'sociologists' of sport who think and often write historically, such as Rick Gruneau and Eric Dunning and his fellow followers of Norbert Elias, and the ever closer links between sociologically and historically informed studies of sport amongst the second generation of professional sports historians,<sup>8</sup> have, in some instances, led to a closing of the ranks around some sort of bounded field of 'sports history'.<sup>9</sup>

In Australia, the debates about what should or could constitute 'sports history' have been particularly divisive and have largely been between those who advocate a more inclusive sports studies, of which sports history is a part, and those who see anything sociological or theoretical as a threat. Such reactions were clear at the 1995 Sporting Traditions X Conference in Brisbane where there was strong reaction amongst some in the audience to keynote speaker Joseph Maguire's discussion of how history, sociology and geography of sport could link to form a stronger and more interdisciplinary field of sports studies.<sup>10</sup> In many ways these discussions and subsequent debates encouraged the organisers of Sporting Traditions XII in Queenstown to propose 'The End of Sports History?' theme.<sup>11</sup>

The debate is largely a moot point when we examine the changes that have taken place in the study of sport in Australia and elsewhere in recent years. While there are still those who write heroic 'his-stories' of past 'champions' and heroes, and those whose historical method is limited to citing newspaper sources without any reference to the

ideological content of sources and authors etc., there has been a dramatic shift in *Sporting Traditions* under Richard Cashman's editorship (1992-99). Since 1993 *Sporting Traditions* has developed into one of the most interdisciplinary sports studies journals in the world with contemporary sociological, political and economic articles sitting alongside historical ones. There has also been an expansion to include articles on sport in contexts outside Australia.

Most articles in *Sporting Traditions* between 1984 and 1990 were general surveys of a major sporting issue or a discussion about significant sporting personalities. The overwhelming focus of articles examined the development of sport in Melbourne and Sydney. While most were narrative discussions of the making of sporting traditions, some situated sport within a broader Australian social history.<sup>12</sup> Up to 1990, all articles examined sport in Australia or Australia's role in the development of international sport. During the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a subtle shift towards examinations of sport within Australian culture as articles discussed sport in literature and film.<sup>13</sup> The majority of studies remained concerned with sport as a part of social history, although an understanding of how a good social history of sport might look varied widely. Wray Vamplew and Brian Stoddart's edited collection, *Sport in Australia: A Social History*, demonstrated this.<sup>14</sup> The chapters each concentrated on a single sport or closely related sports. While many of the authors clearly situated their sports in the broad social context, others provided descriptive accounts and made little effort to promote an understanding of sport as a social phenomenon, barely moving beyond great players and major events.<sup>15</sup> Brian Stoddart quite rightly cautioned historians of Australian sport not to be too self congratulatory as much work remained to be done in developing a fuller understanding of sport and the role of sport in Australian society. Richard Cashman's 1995 book *Paradise of Sport: The Rise of Organised Sport in Australia* and Daryl Adair and Wray Vamplew's 1996 text *Sport in Australian History* sparked wide debate over the nature and meaning of sport in Australia and over the best ways to conceptualise sport in Australian history.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1990s historically focused studies of sport started to draw on a range of disciplines and social theories and are now increasingly situated in the broader cultural studies paradigm. Some, such as Michael Oriard's *Reading Football*, Richard Gruneau and David Whitson's *Hockey Night in Canada*, John Bale and Joe Sang's *Kenyan Running* and Jennifer Hargreaves'

*Sporting Females*, are clearly interdisciplinary in focus and illustrate the possibilities of a more inclusive sports studies.<sup>17</sup> A number of other recent historical studies of sport draw significantly on social theories, sociology of sport and attempt to link sport to broader social science traditions. These studies point to a possible future direction for sports history.<sup>18</sup> *Sporting Traditions* has been one of the pioneer interdisciplinary sports studies journals in the general shift towards a broader sports studies field. Over the past five years several new interdisciplinary sports studies journals have emerged including *AVANTE* in Canada; *Culture, Sport, Society; Football Studies; International Sports Studies* (a continuation of the *Journal of Comparative Physical Education and Sport*); and *Sport, Education and Society*. Thus, there appears to be a major shift internationally towards theoretically informed socially and culturally situated sports history. This sits within the broader developing area of 'sports studies' incorporated in the larger 'cultural studies'. These shifts are perhaps more apparent in print than at sports history conferences, however, it is clear that we can no longer isolate sports history behind modernist disciplinary walls.

In opening the debates at the 1999 Sporting Traditions XII Conference, I called for historians of sport to engage with postmodern and poststructuralist critiques while maintaining the political edge brought to historical practice by historical materialism.<sup>19</sup> Only a few papers at the conference accomplished this. Most notable were Malcolm MacLean's analysis of the 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand in the context of social protest movements in the country, and David Rowe's contextualisation of Newcastle's victory in the rugby league Grand Final within a history of capitalist accumulation and downsizing juxtaposed with working-class culture. They were good examples of the possibilities of a more inclusive sports studies that incorporates historical analysis into social and cultural interpretation. Others who incorporated social theory and cultural context in Queenstown were Stephen Alomes, Bill Keane Tara Magdalinski, and Gerd van der Lippe.<sup>20</sup> Brett Hutchins' presentation at the recent Teams and Fans Conference, that analysed the making and meaning of Don Bradman as a cultural icon, also fits in this context.<sup>21</sup>

The 1999 Sporting Traditions conference demonstrated that there is a vibrancy in sports history/studies in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. But the type of work we do, or need to do in the future, is still

open for debate. I would like to end on a word of caution as we race headlong into Sydney 2000, the new millennium, and the centenary of Federation in Australia. Sports historians, and others who study sport, can ill afford to fall into the trap of a nationalistic manipulation of history that contributes to public discursive (re)presentations of Australian history as a modernist progression of how 'we' all came to be 'Aussies'. Similarly, they should avoid populist historicism that produces 'bloke's own larrikin' sports histories, so evident in the histories that target general audiences.

A striking example of how the history of sport can fall into the trap of populist historicising appears in *Staging the Olympics: The Event and Its Impact* (1999), a collection edited by Richard Cashman and Tony Hughes. In a chapter entitled 'Australian Identity', historian Frank Farrell makes a number of sweeping assertions and generalisations unsupported by evidence. Farrell argues that the 'Olympics are probably taken more seriously, and watched more avidly, in Australia than in any other country'.<sup>22</sup> He further links the passion with sport to the 'willingness to try one's luck' on the gold fields and subsumes large issues such as the tension between amateurism and professionalism and the development of women's sport to throw-away, and, at times, demeaning, sentences. The goldfields also provides the link to explain the relationship between politics and sport:

The goldfields experience similarly shaped the Australian political scene, which is recognised by its expert commentators as analogous to 'open air theatre', a 'big picture' or simply a game . . . So also the sporting life of Australia has simply intertwined with the gold fields experience, in much the same way that outdoor barbecues, tents, camping, and public and backyard pools highlight a fundamental tradition which provided freedoms and opportunities based ultimately on a sluiceway, a shovel, and a secluded, shady stream.

By perpetuating myths that Australia is more sporting than many other countries, and that Australians have a special fondness for sport in comparison with other, usually un-named, societies, Farrell does little to advance our understanding of Australian identity in the context of sport.

If the end of sports history as we have known it means the end of unsubstantiated and untested assertions then we should all welcome it. If, however, we take the opportunity of heightened public awareness afforded by Sydney 2000 to critically analyse the history and contemporary

structures of sport in Australian society and culture, then it will be possible to advance academic understanding and create greater public awareness of the interrelated issues of sport, physical education, exercise, health and sport and exercise science.<sup>23</sup> Farrell may be right when he suggests that ‘many Australians have a yearning to experience again the halcyon sporting days of the 1950s when an Olympic “goldrush” added to a sense of national self-esteem’, although the majority of Australians were not alive in 1956. But we need to unpackage the actual levels of past sporting success, the media’s fixation with representing the 1950s as a ‘golden era’ particularly in light of the decline in international sporting performances during the 1970s, and critically analyse the links between the phenomenal amounts of public money being poured into elite sport and sporting facilities while funding for physical education and education generally is cut and hospital wards are closed.<sup>24</sup>

If it is to survive in the twenty-first century, then sports history needs to develop links with those disciplines that seek to analyse the place of sport in society and the role of sport in actively constructing society. As Steve Pope warns, ‘Sport historians can no longer conceive their works in a specialised, narrowly focused fashion and expect wide institutional and public approval’.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Doug Booth for the invitation to be a feature speaker and then to chair the debates on ‘The End of Sports History?’ in Queenstown.
- 2 The work of Syndy Sydnor stands out. She has worked to generate alternative sports histories or alternative ways that sports history might be done that incorporates these different ways of seeing and ways of being. For an example, see Synthia Sydnor, ‘A History of Synchronised Swimming’, *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998, 252-67. Recently there have been special issues of two other sports history journals that have examined current trends in sports history, *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998; and *Sport History Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1998.
- 3 Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1994.
- 4 Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader*, Routledge, London, 1998.
- 5 Brian Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1990.
- 6 Quoted in Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*.
- 7 The current state of discussion is summed up in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999.
- 8 I would define these as a group whose work in sports history began to impact on the field in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many of these scholars were trained in mainstream disciplinary fields rather than within physical education/kinesiology/human movement studies departments, though many have gone on to hold

- academic positions in the latter rather than the former. Most of these scholars pursue a more interdisciplinary line and draw more on social theory than many of the first generation of academic sports historians. Sports history in Australia was advantaged in that many of the early leaders of the field such as Richard Cashman, Bill Murray, Brian Stoddart, Colin Tatz and Wray Vamplew had backgrounds in social, political and economic history rather than physical education.
- 9 Such debates about theory and practice in sports history were held in sessions at the 1995, 1996 and 1997 conferences of the North American Society for Sports History (NASSH), see John Nauright, 'Nostalgia and the Use of the Sporting Past in Periods of Hegemonic Crisis', paper presented to the NASSH conference, Long Beach, California, May 1995; Alan Metcalfe, 'A Reaction to John Nauright: Some Thoughts on the Nature and Use of History', paper presented to the NASSH conference, Long Beach, California, May 1995; Synthia Sydnor and Dwight Zakus, 'Method and Methodology in Sport History: Is There Any One Way?', Session at the NASSH conference, Springfield, Massachusetts, May 1997; comments on the session by Mel Adelman and Steve Hardy. Also, see Sydnor, 'A History of Synchronized Swimming'.
  - 10 Maguire's keynote address has appeared in article form, see Joseph Maguire, 'Common Ground? Links Between Sports History, Sports Geography and the Sociology of Sport', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1995, pp. 3-25.
  - 11 Subsequent debate on this issue has appeared in the pages of the *Victorian Bulletin of Sport and Culture* and *Sporting Traditions*, see David Rowe and Geoffrey Lawrence, 'Beyond National Sport: Sociology, History and Postmodernity', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1996, pp. 3-16; Bob Stewart, 'Notes and Impressions on the Australian Society for Sports History Sporting Traditions X Conference', *Victorian Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, no. 4, 1995, pp. 6-10; Roy Hay, 'Sporting Traditions X: Another Viewpoint', *Victorian Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, no. 5, 1995, pp. 13-14; John Nauright, 'Towards the Next Generation: A Response to Bob Stewart and Roy Hay', *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, no. 6, 1996, pp. 12-14; Bernard Whimpress, 'Sporting Traditions X: The Debate Continues', *Victorian Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, no. 6, 1996, p. 11; Douglas Booth, 'Response to Bernard Whimpress', *Victorian Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, no. 6, 1996, p. 12.
  - 12 For example, Chris McConville, 'Football. Liquor and Gambling in the 1920s', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1984, pp. 38-55; Chris Cunneen, 'An Historical Analysis of Police/Spectator Conflict at the Bathurst Motorcycle Races', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1987, pp. 217-30; Andrew Moore, 'The Curse of the Kalahari: The North Sydney Bears and the Ghosts of 1921-1922', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1989, pp. 148-172.
  - 13 For example, Dave Headon published several articles on literature and sport in the early years of *Sporting Traditions*, also see Toby Miller, 'The Dawn of an Imagined Community: Australian Sport on Film', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1990, pp. 48-59. Two articles in 1993 critiqued the writing on rugby league and the construction of the history of the game and its heroes, see Andrew Moore, 'Testosterone Overdoes: Popular Culture and Historical Memory', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1993, pp. 2-22; and Maree Murray, 'Boys Will Be Boys': The Construction of the Men of League', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1993, pp. 24-34.
  - 14 Wray Vamplew and Brian Stoddart, eds., *Sport in Australia: A Social History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.
  - 15 A more detailed critique can be found in John Nauright, 'Sports History and Social History: The Current State of Australian Sports History', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1995, pp. 103-110.
  - 16 Richard Cashman, *Paradise of Sport: The Rise of Organised Sport in Australia*.

- Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995. A detailed critique can be found in Daryl Adair, 'The Cashman Thesis and Australian Sports History', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1995. Daryl Adair and Wray Vamplew, *Sport in Australian History*, Oxford University Press, 1996. Detailed critique can be found in Douglas Booth, 'Descriptive History and Passionless Sport in Contemporary Australian Sports History', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1997, pp. 111-116; Rob Hess, 'A Thought-Provoking History for "Non-Specialists"', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1997, pp. 109-110; Tara Magdalinski, 'Recentring Anglo-Centric Male, Decentring the Other(s)', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1997, pp. 101-109.
- 17 Michael Oriard, *Reading Football How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1993; Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, *Hockey Night in Canada*, Garamond, Toronto, 1993; John Bale and Joe Sang, *Kenyan Running: Movement Culture, Geography and Global Change*, Frank Cass, London, 1996; Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*, Routledge, London, 1994.
  - 18 Several recent books are grounded in social theory or clearly situate sport in broader social and cultural contexts, see Hilary Beckles and Brian Stoddard, eds., *Liberation Cricket: West Indies Cricket Culture*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995; Douglas Booth, *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa*, Frank Cass, London, 1998; David Black and John Nauright, *Rugby and the South African Nation*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998; Tony Collins, *Rugby's Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football*, Frank Cass, London, 1998; Mark Dyreson, *Making the American Team: Sport, Culture and the Olympic Experience*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1998; Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1995; Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport*, University of Toronto Press, 1996; David Kirk, *Schooling Bodies: School Practice and Public Discourse 1880-1950*, Leicester University Press, London, 1998; John Nauright, *Sport, Cultures and Identities in South Africa*, Leicester University Press, London, 1997; John Nauright and Timothy Chandler, eds., *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*, Frank Cass, London, 1996, rev. repr. 1999; and Steven W. Pope, *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions and the American Imagination, 1876-1926*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997.
  - 19 A recent article points to the continued relevance of class in the development of modern sport, though most sports historians have ignored class. See Douglas Booth and John Loy, 'Sport, Status, and Style', *Sport History Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1999, pp. 1-26.
  - 20 Stephen Alomes, 'The One Day in September and the Invention of Tradition: Change and Continuity, Imitation and Popular Involvement in Australian Football'; Bill Keane, "Ex-pats" and "Poofters" Rebuild the Nation: 1982, Kiwi Culture and the All Whites on the Road to Spain"; Tara Magdalinski, 'Excising the Cancer: Drugs, Sport and the Crisis of National Identity', and Gerd van der Lippe, 'The End of Sport History?'. Papers presented at the Sporting Traditions XII Conference of the Australian Society of Sports History, Queenstown, New Zealand, February 1999.
  - 21 Brett Hutchins, 'The Uses of Nostalgia: Don Bradman and Australian Cricket', paper presented at the Teams and Fans International Conference, Sunshine Coast, Queensland, July 1999.
  - 22 Frank Farrell, 'Australian Identity', in Richard Cashman and Anthony Hughes, eds, *Staging the Olympics: The Event and Its Impact*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1999, p. 59.
  - 23 Doug Booth persuasively argues for the need for sports history to become more relevant to its related areas in the academy and to make broader links with other disciplines that study the body and human movement. See Douglas Booth, 'Sports

- History: What Can Be Done?', *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 2, 1997, pp. 191-204.
- 24 Tara Magdalinski, 'Recapturing Australia's Glorious Sporting Past: Drugs and Australian Identity', *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, no. 14, 1998, pp. 1, 6-8; Douglas Booth and Colin Tatz, 'Swimming with the Big Boys?: The Politics of Sydney's 2000 Olympic Bid', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1994, pp. 3-23; John Nauright, 'Of the ANZAC Spirit, The Don and Phar Lap Hearts: Sporting and War Imaginaries in John Howard's Australia', paper presented to the NASSH conference, Penn State University, May 1999.
- 25 S.W. Pope, 'Sport History: Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998, p. vii.