

History Lessons

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There have been many periods of pain for academic disciplines concerned about who they are, where they are going, or whether their futures are about to end. Political science, from where I stem, agonised about its 'science' before it abandoned all pretences and began to call itself, simply, politics. Then came 'the end of ideology' debate in the 1960s and '70s. Australian sociology was in paroxysms and then decided (for far too long) that if only it did everything mathematically and statistically, it could sustain its legitimacy.

Everything needs review from time to time, and nearly twenty years after the first sports history conference, it is time to do so. I see no sinister motives in the title of this conference. Most universities review centres after five years and departments when the headship or professorship changes. Review every five or ten years is both normal and valuable.

Given my sense of the nature of sport — ephemeral events, transitory theatre, money-spinning entertainment, and, at times, displays of grace, beauty, joy and skill interspersed with the ugly, charmless, niggardly, selfish and brutish — there can hardly be a 'history' that is intrinsically memorable, memorable, one that recalls and evokes what is so fleeting. Certainly there must be narrative and descriptive history: long passages, articles, books, encyclopaedias, records and recordings of what happened in the first Test, the second, the third, and so on. There can be, and should be, chronicles of events, as in the daily and weekly actions that led to *Greig v Insole*, the Packer and PBL cricket affair. There has to be recording of the rugby league split, and now, the unravelling of the cronyism and corruption that has beset most of the post-war Olympic games. There has to be detective history to arrive at the 'facts'. There has to be speculative history, for example, as to whether a Dutch game of *korfbal* became Scottish golf. There has to be some mechanical history — that which illustrates the changes in golf techniques, courses, and equipment over time. There has to be history of scandal, as in the 1919 baseball World Series: who bribed whom, why, with what results? Eliot Asinof's *Eight Men Out*, as book and film, is an important segment of American life after the Great War. That is precisely the way it is presented. Staying with

baseball, one sees pure genius in David Halberstam's *October 1914*, which is essentially a daily diary leading to the World Series that year — complete with minutiae but ever more forceful because of the marvellous inter-play between the sport and the larger society. There is also genius in Ken Burns's television history of baseball, where racism, class war, urban versus rural interests, crass capitalism and exploitation of players, geographic identity and urban decay were but some of the key features — more so than who stole the most bases between the two world wars. These are rare endeavours. So much of what calls itself sports history is merely sports recording for its own sake, uncontextualised, *unrelated* to the society in which it occurs, and in turn, *unrelating* anything, and therefore irrelevant, to the society in which it occurred. Greil Marcus, an American writer, would call much of this 'the smooth surface of history, looking backwards, making everything make sense'.

There is a sense in which there is an inner 'history' of sport: the recording, in word or in film or sound, of the essence of a particular match or event — the emotions, the upsets, a snapshot of an event in a moment of time. One can store those words and images. But in the re-reading or the replay, they become nostalgia, memoirs of a personal nature, rarely history in the sense of crafting a text or imagery that can be, and should be, woven into the fabric of that particular society. Sports history can, perhaps, be best represented by an archer's target. There are layers of rings, each representing levels of insight, perception, seriousness, import, with surface and superficial in the largest outer ring, and the essence in the small epicentre. By examining the ripple effects between each ring, one shows, in varying degrees of detail, the inter-connection between each. The task of sports history, as I see it, is to start with the bull's eye, and work outwards, showing, wherever possible, the linkages, both chronologically and if possible, *contemporaneously*. Or start at the outer, and end with the bull's eye, but always show how each ring is related, and with what significance. Significance doesn't have to mean heavy theory, although it may. Significance can be simply of a political, legal, social, or religious kind. It can also mean meaning for today, even tomorrow. The sooner we learn that theory means contemplation, conception, hypothesis as well as a systematic statement of rules or principles to be followed, the better our efforts will be. But we have all become stuck, or saddled with theory as grand theory, as that handed down from on high by Aristotle, St Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant,

Rousseau and C. Wright Mills. Incessant footnotes and name-dropping as 'authority' for one's ideas soon become transparent. The sooner we dispense with the language templates of those who would imitate the theorists, the sooner sports history will be read, and appreciated, by wider audiences.

We have to develop a model that is 'beyond sports history', 'beyond sports culture'. To do so means we have to give either the discipline or the wider context as much attention, credence and space as our sports topic. The American historian Jeffrey Sammons has done it superbly. His *Beyond the Ring* is neither merely nor simply a history of the world heavyweight championship. He deals with sport, racism, government, law, foreign policy and the great societal issues and values of twentieth century America. There are dozens of chronological and narrative works on the championship: not one stays in the memory, apart from a literal handful of biographies, notably of Jack Johnson which also ventured beyond the ring.

I recently had a disappointment. Eagerly waiting for someone to write about Jewish boxers between the two wars, one finally appeared: *When Boxing was a Jewish Sport*. Instead of examining why boxing became 'Jewish' (or 'Italian' or 'Irish') between the wars, and how discrimination served to produce fighters, how Jews came to overcome what was always believed to be their antipathy to blood sports (or all sports), Allen Bodner simply produces endless lists, with a limpish and somewhat whimpy conclusion that while Jewish boxers won 26 world titles between 1910 and 1940, they weren't really disproportionately represented, because the 16 per cent who became champions came from a base where one third of all professional fighters were Jewish! (He does, however, produce that title-holding list, including such indelibly Jewish names like Artie O'Leary, Jackie Fields, Young Perez and the man who could hardly have been the real one, Al McCoy.)

Bodner didn't come close to doing what John Hoberman will do one day when he comes to write a definitive account of Jews in sport — that is, examine the whole context of Jewish attitudes to games and the body and the entire Gentile world's attitudes to Jews as a people not having the physiques for military service, horseback or anything else requiring physical courage, robustness or dexterity. Hoberman has already written a major piece on Otto Weininger, a self-hating Jew, whose major 1930 work, *Geschlecht und Charakter* about gender conflict, should be better

known. Weininger accepted and used the then prevalent Aryan versus Jew dichotomy, and enlarged on the notion of deficient Jewish masculinity, which dates from the Middle Ages. Racial folklore had excluded Jews from the human drama of the soil, from the whole world of male drama. Jews, it is true, also rejected the ethos of the *miles christianus* (the Christian soldier) — the weapons, the horses and the hunting — on ethical grounds. Self-consciousness about the form and movements of the body, says Hoberman, is a forsaken and largely unacknowledged theme in twentieth century Jewish writing. All the more reason, then, for Bodner to attempt to explain *why* this role reversal of Benny Leonard and Barney Ross thumping hell out of everyone in the inter-war years. But Bodner's book is at least better than those appalling encyclopaedias of Jews in sport, that salivate about every statistic achieved by Sandy Koufax, Hank Greenberg or later, Mark Spitz.

John Hoberman is someone to emulate. His issues are the larger ones: sport illustrates them *further*. The IOC, as he has shown so insightfully, is more weighty a topic when it is examined for what it is, intrinsically, than for what it does and what it organises about a variety of sports.

My creed is that we use disciplinary lenses to focus on major issues that can be better, even best, explored through the medium of sport. To focus on sport *qua* sport, to the exclusion of all other considerations, means that even when heavy-duty disciplinary artillery is brought to bear, we achieve pieces signifying nothing. In one of my fields of interest, racism, sport is a marvellous litmus for the major issue, whether in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa or America. There is a pervasive racist philosophy and ideology built on a variety of myths and belief systems: it manifests itself in geography, politics, education, emigration, employment, human rights, the courts, criminal justice system, even in haematology, and, of course, in sport. Could I construct an adequate representation of the apartheid ideology, policy and practice from 1779 to 1994 *solely* through sport? Obviously not. But I can use sport as a supplement and complement, a considerable one in fact, to illustrate better the wider body of that religio-political creature. One cannot construct a theory of any intellect or substance from a case study of half-a-dozen black cricketers in Australia or in South Africa any more than market researchers can produce scientific validity out of clipboards showing that 'nine out of ten clinical trials show that Rexona Violet reduces pimples'.

There is a propensity for scholars interested in sport to believe that

there is a serious career and a serious market for material that deals purely in and with sport. Despite the ambience of optimism, even euphoria, about sports studies and sports history at Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) conferences, I believe this is naïve, short-sighted and in the end, stultifying for all concerned. Regrettably, nearly all the universities with which I am acquainted are desperately short of funds: they've become money managers and market seekers. If a course on the Olympics in Sydney will get 400 bums on seats, then surely drop Plato with a class of 30. Drop whole departments and disciplines if need be. And so, in a myopic market-driven system, there is enthusiasm for the 'different' and the 'attractive'. Sports studies sounds attractive. But these realities need not mean surrender of every inquisitive precept: it is still possible to teach, research and write about Olympics or rugby splits or gender and race discrimination through mainstream lenses. In short, there is little enough real history, geography, philosophy, physics, ethics, law, medicine, literature, art in sport as it is. Despite the market-forces, the pursuit of a new discipline of sports studies is really a chimera. It has been tried by our betters, whether it was black studies in the United States, women's studies everywhere, Holocaust studies, Aboriginal studies, and now in Australia, of all things, Australian studies. Subjects and areas are not intrinsically intellectual or academic matters. Several British universities in the 1960s were keen on any area focus, getting 'ologists', of every kind to focus on say, Scotland. Fine: they saw themselves as 'ologists' primarily, not as Scottishists. In the end, most of the area or subject faculties, schools and departments have found that sanity lies in mainstreaming, and they have returned to their various folds. The folds at ASSH conferences are numerous: but promotion up the ladder lies in contributing to mainstream disciplines, even, or even especially, through important studies of sport as a facet, as an aspect, as an embodiment. I can reveal, after 35 years in this arena, a terrible secret, which is hardly a secret to those who operate the systems: tenured appointments, very often, and promotions through the ranks, certainly, hinge on, *inter alia*, publications (and latterly more so in refereed academic journals — and there are few enough in sports history) and national and international repute in the field. But the field isn't sports history. For the right hand of the university, the fields for promotion and brownie points remain traditional; while the left hand of the university pursues the market force options of Mickey, Minnie and the other Mice. Promotion won't lie in

chronology or narrative, or even in a marvellous micro piece of *petit-point* which bears no relationship to the larger tapestries.

What we call sports history really needs a new name, or a recasting. I can't help noticing that the excellent second, edition of the *Oxford Companion to Australian Sport* has no separate entry on history, but appropriates and subsumes all and everything (except the biomedical, physical and psychological as history). The bibliography is entitled 'Bibliography on the History of Sport in Australia'. However, that 'history' embraces everything from Wilkinson's *Famous Australian Sports Pictures* under the heading 'General', to specific sports 'histories' ranging from Australian footballer Tony Lockett's *Plugger* as told to Ken Piesse, to the rules of indoor cricket, Norm von Nida's *How to Play Golf*, and league footballer Steve Roach's *Doing my Block*. History is assuredly not everything that has been written, in the past tense, about sport or people who played it. Greil Marcus says that 'our sense of history... is cramped, impoverished and debilitating': because our sense of history lies only in the past. He calls this a 'mystification powerfully resistant to critical investigations that might reveal this assumption to be a fraud'. We live out history, we make and unmake it. History isn't only about 'once': 'once there was Phar Lap', 'once there was bodyline', and so on. The days of *pot-pouri* are over. If 'history' has to be the generic name because we can't find a better term, then let's begin by recognising its worth as a subset of the traditional mainstream disciplines, but also a subset that requires some serious subdivisions.

Sports historians need to devise guidelines based on themes rather than areas. Gender, for example, is far better discussed with reference to all sports than under separate sports. We need holism, not segmentation and microcosmic studies. They can come later, when some principles and standards of value have been established. It won't take long. Thirty-four years ago, when I was writing my doctoral thesis on Aboriginal administration, there were four pieces of writing, and only four, on Aborigines and the law. Today, there are over 4000 items in the bibliography. Aborigines and the law is taught in many universities. But it is better to be taught under the conventional headings of civil law, criminal law, administrative law etc., with the Aboriginal material introduced as part of that mainstream, than to see Aboriginal law as a distinct entity.

I suggest a ten-fold guideline for the subsets or subdivisions of sports

'history':

- Anthropology and sociology
- Contemporary issues (violence, drugs, corruption)
- Criticism
- Culture (including art, literature, material culture, dance)
- Geography (venues, sites, ancient and modern access)
- Histories and biographies of people, clubs, teams, particular sports
- International relations
- Law (criminal, civil, contracts, judiciaries, etc.)
- Philosophy and ideology in sport
- Race, gender, ethnicity, age, handicap, disability.

There may well be debate about which item belongs where. I am not suggesting rigidity but, at the very least, a starting point for mainstream subsets of sport.

As to my own propensities: my Royal Sydney history was as much an essay about the origins and values of the 'silk department' in Sydney as it was about the evolution of golf in New South Wales. Currently I am writing the fifty-year history of Monash Country Club. (This is so that my epitaph can read: 'he was even handed — he did them both'!) The interest is antisemitism in New South Wales in the first fifty years of this century, not who eagled the fifteenth hole in the PGA. *Obstacle Race* is not a sports book as such. It is a political and legal history of the Aboriginal experience since settlement, as told through the metaphor of sport: Aborigines first, sport second.

In varying degrees of intensity and in varying degrees of emotion and language, there must be a genre of sports criticism as opposed to sports writing, sports history, sports culture, sports sociology and the like. Everyone accepts the validity of music criticism, literary criticism, art criticism. Why not sports criticism as an *adversary genre* that examines, assesses, questions, debates, praises quality, denigrates the shoddy — in short, that makes judgements? Why do we take such care to avoid a critical engagement with history? Australian literature and journalism on sport is essentially iconistic and jingoistic in many respects. It is adulatory, for much of the time. It is clubbish and clannish in that diverse people have, and use, 'love of sport' as a kind of Masonic handshake. It is sometimes explanatory, as in an unfolding story. But it often stops short

of analysing the 'story', and rarely takes the next step, which is to evaluate critically. Douglas Booth and I have just finished a social and political history of sport in Australia. Allen & Unwin wanted history. History is what they are getting. But if I were to be a reviewer, I'd say that there is too much history history, too much looking behind us and not enough (space) to judge how much of the past lies in the present and the future. There is a great deal but still not enough critical assessment of the good, the bad and the ugly. Is it an anti-sports book? Heavens, no. But it isn't about sport as the be-all and end-all of life: it doesn't worship, it doesn't bow, and it doesn't kneel.