

Historical Perspectives Of A Sports Broadcaster

Amanda Smith

Who won the second Test between Australia and New Zealand in 1993? Who lost the World Heavyweight title in 1933? I don't know and I don't care. However, knowing the answers to these types of questions means having an 'historical perspective' for many in the sports media. The ability to reel off such facts is impressive, sometimes even useful. Nevertheless, my approach to history, as a sports broadcaster, is different. I try to cover more terrain. My approach is something like what Thornton Wilder wrote about foreign countries in *Our Town*, 'where they don't talk in English and don't even want to'.¹ In this article I will describe what I try to do as a sports broadcaster and why, and how my approach relates to sports history. In addition, I want to suggest that those of us involved in the humanities (including history and public broadcasting) face particular challenges in the present climate. History, ain't what it used to be. Our challenge is to re-make the discipline in tune with the demands of the present.

The Sports Factor

The Sports Factor arose from questions I wanted to ask about sport that conventional radio and television tend to ignore. It was Radio National's first dedicated sports show. Prior to that, the network, which has a mission of delivering specialist coverage of social, cultural, political and economic ideas, wilfully ignored sport, subscribing to the belief that Wanda Jamrozik, the late sports journalist with the *Australian*, once summed as 'if you can read, you can't be into sport'.

The media always seemed to present sport as a closed world, without reference to politics, history, religion, law, arts, and even the media itself. What I wanted to do, in order to understand more about sport and about the world in which we live, was to analyse and debate, and celebrate, sport in its widest possible context. I wanted to understand how sport intersected with other social institutions, practices and attitudes. Of course, the way a particular sport functions in a particular society at a

particular time, produces and reproduces the values of that society. These notions underpinned the kind of program I wanted to create.

Thus, the Sports Factor never gives the scores, or describes particular games or events. It's not that I'm not interested in these details or narratives. Obviously they are central to the practice of sport, but they are well covered elsewhere. On the other hand, the sports media too often ignores broader discussion and analysis. In a way, and without knowing it at the time, I wanted to reproduce the work of sports historians and sociologists.

A lot of the feedback from listeners, in letters and phone calls (here I'm talking about listeners who aren't professionally involved in sport) goes along the lines of, 'I'm not really interested in sport...', or 'I'm not a sporty person, but I enjoy your show'. Most of those people are really saying they don't like, or they don't find very interesting, the media's standard presentations of sport. As a result they don't attribute much value, or cultural or political consequence, to sport. Maybe I've been able to open a window to sport to these people, and perhaps even modestly contribute to social change. That is essentially what I believe to be the historian's task: to tell interesting stories that connect with people and challenge them to think about the past, present and future of the world around them.

I also try not to assume too much knowledge of any particular sport. This is a conscious attempt to resist the 'clubby' nature of so much media sport. I believe that the latter alienates many listeners who find the 'clubby' atmosphere tedious. Thus, I stand outside of my subject as far as possible.

Sometimes I worry the longer I present this program and the more knowledge I develop, that I'll forget the important questions I used to ask when I knew less. I'm constantly trying to re-make myself as a 'born again naïve'. But when I think I might be assuming too much knowledge on the part of listeners, I remind myself of an incident that occurred the first time I played a team sport as a really young child. It was netball — then called basketball — and I don't remember learning anything about this game; I was just on court with some other little girls, throwing the ball around. Someone threw the ball to me, I caught it, and I threw it to someone else. I was really pleased with myself for having worked out what was required, until a team-mate yelled at me: 'You've thrown it the wrong way, you idiot, you've thrown it to the other team'. It was a

confusing, humiliating experience, because I had no experience of team sport. It provides a sobering reminder that broadcasters can easily confuse and alienate their audiences if they don't make them feel included in the conversation.

Radio National broadcasts across Australia and one of the issues I face, which I frequently remind my guests, is that there are still many people in Queensland and New South Wales, albeit football fans, who know, and care for, nothing about Australian football. Similarly, there are football fans in the south who know nothing about rugby union or rugby league, or even that there's a difference. Melburnians often say 'rugby' when they mean rugby league.

What I desperately try to avoid is talking down to my audience. One of the most frustrating things for me as an interviewer is when I feel the person I'm interviewing merely states the obvious; I can almost 'feel' listeners saying 'der...'. I'd really rather not hear anyone say, ever again, 'Well, sport's a business now, you know'. That is, unless they can say something illuminating beyond those truisms that we've all heard a million times before.

Why do people find sport interesting? One reason is that sporting contests involve making history. Despite earlier claiming not to care about scores, the unfolding dramas, milestones and records all make sporting contests historical events. Nonetheless, I'm most interested in the contradictions and paradoxes. Sport is rich with these. Beyond the actual competition on the field, court, arena, pool, sport is often a site of competing ideologies. Sport embraces tensions between amateurs and professionals, between local, national and global identities, between masculine and feminine genders, and between capitalism and communism. Sport involves fabulous extremes of passion, on and off the field. It also tends to the conservative. Yet, in spite, or because of this, sport is a site of many key cultural debates including those around nationalism and ethnicity, racial vilification, and Republicanism which have regularly surfaced in soccer, Australian football and cricket respectively.

Paradoxically, amid all this, sport remains a game, absurdly, magnificently, apropos of nothing but itself. We play and we watch sport like our lives depend on it, knowing at the same time that it's just a game and that life continues when it's over, regardless of the outcome.

Of course, all this affords the broadcaster a treasure trove of

possibilities. Thinking about sport in its wider context means that I can talk to a wide range of people, not just to athletes about how they feel after a match or a race. I talk to politicians, historians, lawyers, engineers, sociologists and so on, as well as athletes and sports administrators. I also talk to ordinary people, who aren't stars, experts or role-models, but whose experiences and stories of playing and watching sport are illuminating and interesting.

This does not mean that I do not have my own political agenda. As much as I try to produce balanced journalism, I, like everyone, have an agenda. In particular, I try to acknowledge sportswomen by 'normalising' their presence. Thus, instead of emphasising, for example, the first woman to race Formula One and asking her, 'how much resistance have you faced along the way?', I presume that women have a role and I try to get them to discuss things beyond the gender battle. One of the dangers of the former approach is that it loads women with the mantle of 'otherness'. Most female athletes just want to be acknowledged and taken seriously as athletes.

Broadcasting History

Journalism is largely about trying to make sense of things in the here and now, quickly. Radio is an ephemeral medium. Both these things mean that there are pressures on broadcasters to be more topical than historical. While I'm personally interested in historical material, unless the past can illuminate the present, it is difficult for me to justify its inclusion. Unless it's a really good yam in its own right, that hasn't been told, or that can be told from another perspective). However, most often the history has to shed some light on present circumstances.

My ideal program is one that offers a range of perspectives on a particular subject or issue, that covers both analysis and direct experience. I completely rely on you, as historians, to be good story-tellers, as well as analysts and interpreters. Journalists often criticise academics for their reluctance to offer firm opinions. Of course, that's because the world is usually more complicated than journalists make it. For me, the joyful interviewee is someone who knows their subject and who can tell it with energy and enthusiasm. Succinctness is always admirable, though not essential; we can edit the long-winded. Examples that illustrate theory are terribly important, because they give listeners something tangible to hang on to. One of the first things we're taught as interviewers is the

value of the question, 'What's an example of what you're talking about?'. What we're really asking for is story-telling and imagery to elucidate the theory.

Let me give an example of good story-telling. I once interviewed Peter Fenton about Les Darcy.² Fenton was completely obsessed with Darcy. In one sense this was problematic because it was hard to limit him to the parameters of the interview. However, he had the ability to create images. The first question I asked him was how his obsession with Les Darcy grew. He described life as a child in the 1930s, growing up in a family where the conversation at the dinner table, or over a game of cards, invariably turned to sport. And more often than not the discussion ended up with how the Yanks had poisoned Australia's two greatest sporting heroes, Phar Lap and Les Darcy. He did point out that he later discovered that these were apocryphal stories, but his response opened up the interview in a lovely way. He made me, and hopefully listeners, conjure up images of a 1930s Australian kitchen, and a young boy listening to grown-ups and being profoundly influenced by half-understood conversations.

I think that academics often feel uncomfortable in radio interviews about providing anything other than analysis. Cold analysis is good, but adding the personal and the anecdotal makes an interviewee better 'radio talent'. It might not be what you'd do for a specialist journal article, but herein lies the difference: a radio interview is not for a specialist audience, and you're being heard, not read. Of course, academics should never compromise on content, but they should think about how they communicate their content.

The End of Sports History?

If this question is more than rhetorical, then presumably we need to understand whether the 'end' constitutes an opportunity or a threat. The objective of the humanities is, surely, to develop and understand cultural and social knowledge. The continuing relevance of any discipline in the humanities depends on its capacity to renew and re-make itself according to contemporary needs. It seems to me that the challenge faced by sports history is to address new ways of thinking about the discipline in relation to a rapidly and radically changing present.

In a world where history is being re-envisioned and re-packaged, both in reality and in fiction, what's the role and place of the sports

historian? Two things recently stimulated my interest in this question. Firstly, at an Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) meeting in Melbourne, I heard Brian Moroney, a sociologist, talk about a new resort he'd visited in Bali, the Hard Rock Beach Café.³ Secondly, around the same time I read Julian Barnes' novel, *England, England*.⁴

Brian Moroney described and analysed the pool at the Bali resort. He observed that it is anything other than a simple place to cool-off in the tropics. It's more like a large and intriguing lagoon spread over 4000 square metres, with an island for live music and activities like volleyball, swimmers' bars, a Buddhist temple, organised sports, and poolside cabanas complete with full internet facilities. In other words, the pool is a tourist construction combining all manner of activities, events, experiences, cultural and religious references, music, sport, and business.

Julian Barnes' *England, England* is set slightly in the future. It's about a resort where all the things tourists want to see in England are transferred to, or recreated on, the Isle of Wight: 'We are not talking theme park...we are not talking heritage centre... We shall offer far more than words such as Entertainment can possibly imply... We are offering the thing itself.'⁵ Visitors to the island can experience Buckingham Palace and the Royal Family, Stonehenge, Sherwood Forest with Robin Hood et al., Biggin Hill and the Battle of Britain, the white cliffs of Dover, Manchester United Football Club, village cricket, and Wembley Stadium. The title, *England, England* describes a place that is more England than England. As I was reading Barnes' novel, it struck me that his fiction was really only a few steps further along the conceptual track than the very real Hard Rock Beach Cafe in Bali.

Brian Moroney used postmodern theory to frame his analysis of the Hard Rock Cafe while Julian Barnes' novel is really a crash-course in postmodernism, although eminently more readable and understandable than the texts from which he draws. Now, I think I'm right in saying that there's resistance to postmodern theory among some sports historians. My sense is that some of the suspicion and resistance amounts to discomfort with the world described by postmodernism. I think it's fair enough not to like that world, but I don't think you can shoot the messenger.

The Hard Rock Beach Cafe and *England, England* alert us to a range of developments in the late twentieth century including globalisation, the erosion of the power of national governments and the nation-state, the

electronic/digital revolution, and the corporatisation of culture. In this world, ideas about 'truth', 'reality' and 'authenticity' are no longer stable or immutable. Given that these shifts emanated from somewhere for some reason, it seems to me that the questions we all need to address are 'how did it happen?', and 'what does it mean?' Similarly with sport: how did it happen that a media baron owns the world's most popular sports clubs, to serve a purpose other than 'sport *gratia* sport'? How is it that there is such ambiguity in contemporary sport about the ethos by which it should be played, that has given rise, for example, to the use of performance-enhancing drugs, as well as betting, bribery and match-fixing scandals? The Hard Rock Beach Café and *England, England* are just two examples of the emerging new world; cricket is about to be played at Disney World, after all. I don't know if the product's the chicken and the market's the egg, or vice-versa. But I do know that people's relationships to things like history and geography are shifting. That affects how people live and think, and how they 'consume' sport.

In a world that is simultaneously fragmenting and globalising, I don't think any of us can afford to sit within the traditional confines of one discipline. Professional survival in the twenty-first century will depend upon flexibility.

Notes

- 1 Thornton Wilder, *Our Town and Other Plays*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979, p.32
- 2 The Sports Factor, *ABC Radio National*, 23 October 1998.
- 3 Brian Moroney, De-centring sport at the Hard Rock Cafe, ASSH Victorian Chapter, 9 November 1998.
- 4 Julian Barnes, *England, England*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1988.
- 5 Barnes, *England, England*, p. 59.