

Rob Hess and Bob Stewart, eds, *More Than a Game: An Unauthorised History of Australian Rules Football*. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998. Bibliog., illus., index. pp. 261.

Clearly Rob Hess and Bob Stewart are not gardeners. And it's unlikely that they have ever attended a rose show. Like racegoers, lawn-bowlers, golfers and cricketers, gardeners would never call Australian football the nation's "most popular and most passionately supported pastime" (p. 2). On the other hand, they do identify a need for an "analytical and critical, rather than mythological or celebratory," history of Australian football (p. 2). Recent publications, such as Garry Linnell's *Football Ltd* (1995) and Robert Pascoe's *The Winter Game* (1995), lack social context and critical analysis. *More Than a Game*, however, does not greatly advance our historical understanding of Australian football beyond Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner's *Up Where, Cazaly?* (1981). Rob Hess's examination of Australian football in New Zealand and his original insights into female involvement offer the only substantially new material in the first six chapters. Unfortunately, the two final chapters, which cover the period since Sandercock and Turner's work, are also the weakest in the book.

Dave Nadel's description of the transformation of the Victorian Football League into the Australian Football League in the 1980s is a polemic against the 'big, greedy and selfish' (p. 205) VFL and its successor, the AFL. Nadel provides evidence to support his position, including the war waged by a VFL-Channel Seven-Herald and Weekly Times alliance against the Adelaide-based National Football League and the latter's proposed Australia-wide night football competition, the VFL-Channel Seven's battle with the rival Victorian Football Association-Channel 0 coalition for control of televised Sunday football, interstate Sunday football, and the relocation of the South Melbourne club to Sydney (pp. 206-7). But there is no evaluation of the counter evidence. Instead of being greedy and selfish, might not the VFL genuinely sought to protect the game? Two decades of falling attendances (as a percentage of Melbourne's population), large demographic shifts and new social attitudes posed real threats to Australia's premier football competition and survival depended upon expansion into new playing times and locations. In 1983, for example, the League's operating expenses exceeded operating revenue by nearly \$2 million, six clubs verged on bankruptcy, and the Corporate Affairs Commission had asked several clubs to explain

why they continued to trade. While Nadel provides this detail (pp. 220-21), it nonetheless appears incidental to his arguments.

The same problem arises when Nadel “analyses” South Melbourne’s relocation to Sydney. At the time the club was in tatters: it had not won a premiership for some 50 years, its last grandfinal appearance was nearly 40 years earlier, it had a membership of just over 1500, and its finances were in disarray. Yet, despite the VFL Board appointing a senior member to conduct a feasibility study, despite an application by South Melbourne club officials to play home games in Sydney, and despite support for the move from most players, Nadel still calls the relocation decision “ad-hoc” (pp. 215-16).

As an aside, Swans fans should note the irony in Nadel’s concern for the South Melbourne FC. In chapter 2 of *More Than a Game*, Robin Grow describes South Melbourne in the 1870s as the scourge of what was then an amateur competition. The club “used financial inducements to attract players, with devastating effects. The huge growth of employment in the district led to a massive increase in crowds and revenue, and the ... committee had no qualms about buying players and rewarding them handsomely” (p. 55).

Nadel’s disdain for corporate-style football administration leads to some bizarre conclusions. For example, he blames Fitzroy’s demise on “an administrator from a firm of accountants.” But his evidence essentially shows a small club facing bankruptcy with virtually no support from either the Melbourne football public or officials from other clubs. Indeed, other clubs opposed Fitzroy’s proposal to merge with North Melbourne, fearing the deal would create a “super team” (pp. 248-9).

Nadel’s nostalgia for a Melbourne-based suburban competition is palpable. But what, precisely, is the attraction? Could it be a perverse fascination with the squalor and filth endured by spectators in the 1950s and ‘60s as described by Bob Stewart (p. 179)? Or has Nadel simply forgotten the realities of life in “the outer” - crushing, raucous crowds and the pungent smells of urine and stale sweat. Perhaps he escaped the plebs in the (relative) comfort of the members’ stand, although his contempt for “theatre-goers” suggests that the latter is unlikely.

The term “theatre-goer” appeared in a report prepared by VFL commissioners in 1985. Determined to halt declining attendances, the commissioners decided to cater for “patrons who attend a few matches a year as part of leisure activity that may also include a movie, children’s

activities or a barbeque in the hills" (p. 224). The theatregoer strategy seems to have worked. In 1997 the AFL earned \$83 million in revenue and attendances reached a new high of 5.8 million. Crowds in Sydney averaged 35,810 compared with the League's average of 33,197. In addition, players received payments totalling \$55.6 million with 31 per cent earning more than \$100,000 (*Australian*, 23 March 1998). One wonders how Nadel would interpret these statistics. Likewise, one wonders how he would respond to former Swans Brownlow medallist Fred Goldsmith, who recently conceded that "it's better" with the club now in Sydney playing to capacity crowds (*Australian*, 17 July 1998).

Nadel's version of history will no doubt appeal to some football followers. But how many? In the early 1990s the Fight For Football group "dedicated" itself to "the preservation and resurrection of [Victorian Football]" (pp. 237). But who organised the FFF? How many members did it have? Who did it recruit? Nadel is silent. The best he can do is report a survey of fans conducted by the FFF at six Victorian matches in 1992. Based on a paltry return of 2642 questionnaires, which the AFL not surprisingly dismissed, the FFF concluded that "a majority of fans opposed the demise of the VFL, the influence of television, ground rationalisation, ... the draft ..., and the discontinuation of the under-19 competition. The fans felt that neither the AFL nor the individual clubs were responsive enough to the views of supporters" (p. 237). One wonders what followers in Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth think.

Malcontent Melburnian footy fans eager to apportion blame for the "destruction" of "their" competition will relish *More Than a Game*. Sober lay readers prepared to overlook Nadel's polemic will find *More Than a Game* an accessible history of Australian football with snippets of evocative writing (notably by Robin Grow) and flashes of good social contextualisation (best seen in the chapters by Hess and Stewart).

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