

Barrackers' Corner

A Rejoinder to a 'One-Eyed' Review of Staging the Olympics

Richard Cashman

Douglas Booth has developed a fine international reputation for his scholarship on surfing and surf lifesaving; sport, race and South Africa; and critical approaches to sports history. However, it seems that when he writes on the Olympic Games and on many facets of Australian sporting culture he is unable to hide his passionate distaste for his subject. So instead of objective reflection, well-directed criticism and new insights, he serves up a jumbled mixture of scholarship, personal opinion and moral outrage passing for a critical review. While his block-buster reviews are punchy and entertaining they also unfortunately include misrepresentation, inconsistency and sweeping and unsupported judgments.

The Booth review of *Staging the Olympics* includes some specious and grossly unfair comments. *Staging the Olympics* is about a 'staged' or 'managed' event — this should be obvious from the title. The book is part of a new genre — events management. So why deliberately misrepresent a statement on the Games as 'greatest peace time event' [staged] in Australia. Booth states:

The cover informs readers that "staging the Olympic games [*sic* Games] is probably the greatest challenge yet faced by Sydney and Australia". Sydneysiders who lived through the Great Depression, or who were resident when Japanese midget submarines penetrated harbour defences in 1942 (one of which sank a naval depot ship killing nineteen people), would reject this view.

Having grabbed the moral high ground Booth digresses further to the bombing of Darwin in 1942 and the destruction of that city by Cyclone Tracy in 1974 and wonders, along the way, whether Western Australians and Territorians had any real interest in a mere sporting festival in Sydney. This is a mischievous, if not downright bloody-minded, comment. Does he really think that the editors of *Staging the Olympics* even intended a comparison between a staged or managed event, and a war-time attack on Australia or a natural disaster. Such a suggestion is ludicrous.

While on the subject of misrepresentation, it is annoying to read in *One-Eyed* that I argued that Australia was 'once a "paradise of sport" and it may again be so' (pp. xiii). If the authors had taken the trouble to read Chapter 12 ('Australia:

A Paradise of Sport?') they would have noted some equivocation in the following comment:

If Australia was a paradise of sport, it was more so for some Australians: for men more than women, and Anglo-Celtic Australians more than other immigrants and Aborigines. A sizeable number of women (and some men) have resented the dominant role of Australia's sporting culture (p. 206).

Even more offensive is the statement — made in response to the critical reviews of *One-Eyed* — that *Paradise of Sport* is a 'panegyric' for Australian sport. In making the sweeping and glib statement that *Paradise of Sport* is a eulogy for Australian sport, Booth and Tatz impute the book promotes an heroic version of Australian sport — therefore it is uncritical and unscholarly.

Booth dismisses my chapter on legacy in *Staging the Games* with a magisterial back-hander or a 'don't argue':

Richard Cashman warns of post-games mourning: 'a city has to deal with its "death" — when the games [*sic* Games] have gone — in the same way than an individual may have to deal with the loss of a close family friend' (p. 190). This is a crass and insensitive analogy.

One of the great symbols of cricket, the Ashes tradition, draws on a similar analogy — is this 'crass and insensitive'? — even though this tradition started as a joke. A semi-serious advertisement was placed in the sporting press to mourn the death of English cricket in 1882. The purpose of the analogy in *Staging the Olympics* was to consider whether the 'loss of the Games' is something more than post-Games depression, a temporary let down, or whether it represents something more — a nostalgia for a halcyon period of 'deep play' and a sense of loss of a city's exalted international sporting status. For some people — volunteers, fans and even sports scholars, who were immersed in the Games — there was a post-Games problem of dealing with the feelings generated from that peak experience and of developing a well-rounded memory of what the event represented. If it is not a form of mourning, it has many similar features. Booth's critique of my work on legacy is not shared by many international scholars. Largely because of my work on Olympic legacy I have been appointed to an Olympic Studies Chair at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in October and November 2002 and will be a keynote speaker at an international conference on legacy in November 2002.

Part of Booth's problem is that he cannot understand and accept sporting passion — for many people sport is a matter of life and death — and that sporting loss is a serious matter. Because Booth sees much sporting passion as unworthy, delusory and a product of hype or manufactured consent, he fails to appreciate

and accept that it has importance to many individuals. So he does not engage with one of the central questions of contemporary sport.

It is also disappointing that Booth dismisses the pioneering work of Anthony Hughes on the Paralympic Games as 'a collection of unanalysed bland facts'. Perhaps Booth is unaware that there is virtually no literature on the Paralympic Games. Hughes is one of the first scholars to analyse the rise of the Paralympic Games, its relationship to the Olympic Games, the growth of public and media interest in it and the development of the Paralympic program, to include new forms of disability. This chapter has already had a significant number of international citations.

The Booth campaign to champion the lower case for olympic games and olympism has failed because of his own inconsistency or poor proof-reading. In *One-Eyed* the authors prefer olympic games and olympism but for some reason capitalise Empire Games, World Series Cricket and Super League. In the review of *Staging the Olympics* there is the unsatisfactory half-and-half style of Olympic games but in *ASSH Bulletin* no. 34 Booth reverts back to 'olympic games' though in the same article refers to 'the Olympics'. Booth notes at the end of this article that the 'olympics do not warrant the veneration of a capital letter'. So why venerate World Series Cricket and Super League? I have no quibble with the consistent application of lower case for olympics, olympic games and olympism. Capitalisation is primarily an issue of style and consistency. In addition, when Booth quotes *Staging the Olympics* it would be more courteous to adopt the style, 'Olympic Games [*sic* games]', rather than taking the liberty to alter a direct quotation.

The Olympic Games, like any sporting institution, needs all the constructive criticism it can get. Booth has contributed some important pieces in articles such as 'Swimming with the Big Boys' which provoked a lively debate. Helen Lenskyi, a noted critic of the Olympic Games and a fan of lower case olympics, was based at the Centre for Olympic Studies for four months in 2000.

I am well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of *Staging the Olympics* — like any edited book some chapters are better and more critical than others and then there is a question of whether one should write such a book even before the event. However, I believe that Booth's sense of affront with any book that doesn't 'slam' the Olympic clouds his scholarly judgment. Can he fairly assess this book? Apart from anything else *Staging the Olympics* reveals much about the process of staging the Games and how people thought about these issues 'along the way'. The book has also proved very useful as a teaching device.

Robin Derricourt of UNSW Press was certainly pleased with the book because the book had sold out by early 2001. How are the sales of *One-Eyed* coming along, Douglas?