

# reviews

**John Corder**, *The World of Football*, Self-published, Killara, Second Edition, 2002, pp. 229, illus., index, paper and hard cover.

John Corder is part of a famous Melbourne sporting family. He played football for the Melbourne Football Club and cricket for Victoria. He was raised in Melbourne but moved to a more pluralistic society (in football terms) — Sydney. His work took him for a period to England and he was personally exposed to several football codes. He notes that it was this Australian background, in a country with its own code of Football — Australian Rules, that gave him the perspective to undertake the task of analysing football's origins.

There is a romance to the idea of tracing the origins of football. Anyone who has strolled the Close of Rugby School; or watched as barefooted kids run in African townships kicking balls of tightly wrapped plastic bags in lieu of soccer balls; or circumnavigated the Melbourne Cricket Ground and dreamed of the 1850s when swarms of boys in Brownian motion edged their primitive football towards its goal; or watched in modern day Sydney, a hybrid football played in the park with rules pinched from various codes blended into a democratic mix, cannot but be beguiled by the beginnings of football.

This book is written in a spirit of conciliation and egalitarianism. It is without odious comparison of one game's worth over another. The level of research is considerable given the number of codes and geography covered. Given the ambitious nature of the book, each reader will find areas of weakness in their code of greatest interest. One of the most interesting psychological aspects to this book is a consideration of the fears that inhibit openness towards other football codes for most readers. This is one of the challenges to most readers who come to the table with their own prejudices. Many readers do not want the assumption of their code's status challenged. A broader education is the enemy of narrow, well-entrenched positions.

There are four chapters in which Corder sets out to examine chronologically the development of the ten codes. The codes examined are Soccer (Association Football), Rugby Union, Rugby League, American Football, Canadian Football, Rugby Sevens, Gaelic Football, Australian Football, Sepaktakraw and Il Calcio. The first quarter gives a background from ancient times in a rapid attempt to place games within the context of human culture. The second quarter covers the development of football from 1851 to 1900. It tracks the primordial soup in which fragments of ideas coalesce into recognisable games. It outlines how rules diversified, made local geographical adaptations and how organisational structures developed. The third chapter, by the author's admission, was the most difficult. Following the evolutionary ferment of the nineteenth century, most codes by the early part of the

twentieth century had taxied on the runway and with some effort lumbered into the air. Now at altitude they cruised undisturbed in their relative isolation towards their predictable destination of establishing themselves. In the fourth quarter from 1951 to 2000 the codes enter a time of challenge and trauma bruised by commerce, global networks and television. The complacency of isolation was at an end and the pressures of selection were at work again.

The major technical problem for the writer was how to structure the analysis of the 10 codes. The author in seeking a publisher was informed that readers would selectively read their code only and ignore the rest. They, of course, wanted the easy option — to write the 10 codes with 10 separate histories. The author, to his credit, has defied the predictable approach. He has adopted a path, which made his task more difficult and at the same time sets a more challenging task for the reader. By adopting this approach he integrates the evolutionary development of the codes with point and counterpoint. The creative forces and selective pressures reveal codes to have more similarities than differences. The would-be publishers either missed the author's rationale or, understanding it, saw little commercial potential. I think they missed the point.

The development of football is very much akin to Darwin's branching tree of life and evolution of species. It begins with the potential for branches to spread in many directions associated with periods of intense selection pressure and then relative cultural isolation to allow for the fruition of distinct entities.

Cordner does not allocate numbers of pages according to the popularity of a code. He attempts to describe the smallest code with the same respect and detail as the largest. Undoubtedly, some readers with a special interest in the world's larger codes may feel aggrieved. I felt that Cordner's approach was a success. There is a kind of pecking order in football, based on size. Boastful phrases such as 'The World Game' may be a celebration of popularity across the world, but can also be a phrase of the bully, a phrase of exclusion and a phrase of smug superiority. The quality of a game may have nothing to do with how widespread it is in the world.

With a voyeurism shared by this reader, Cordner cannot help but peer into where he imagines all the codes will be in 50 years time. Dominated by soccer and rugby union, diversity is seen as the biggest victim. Maintaining diversity in the world of sporting culture, as in the world of nature has much to commend it. Football, as in everything else, would become a dull entity, if indeed, we only had one form of football. After all the idea of eating McDonalds and kicking just one ball for one sport hardly seems a future at all.

**Gregory de Moore**

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