SOME YARDS EASY, SOME YARDS HARD

Gary Wickham


Here's a recent scene from sport in Australian history — just a few months ago in fact, the last round of home and away games for the 1997 AFL season, West Coast v Brisbane, the WACA ground Perth, a balmy late winter’s evening, a full house and some seated spectators, brimming with sobriety, have their view of the game blocked by late-coming standers, whose commitment to sobriety is less evident.

Mr Seated (in a loud, pleading voice, to no-one in particular, but in a particular direction): ‘Why doesn’t someone come and move you people out of the way?’

Mr Standing (in an even louder voice, directed at Mr Seated, but for the benefit of all, especially those sharing his mode of fortification against the cold weather, which never looks like coming, but you never know): ‘Why don’t you shut up!’

Mr Seated (thrilled to have someone take up his unstated challenge): ‘If you woulda got here on time you woulda got a seat’.

‘Some of us have t’ work for a living. We’re not all public servants who sit around on our fat arses and knock off whenever we like. You lot wouldn’t work in an iron lung’.

‘You look like a fuckin’ iron lung!’

Much laughter from everyone in the area. A grim-faced security guard
moves the standers over slightly; the usually quiet Perth crowd returns to being quiet, cheering politely for their boys and thoroughly enjoying the athletic spectacle, once it was clear that the Eagles had it in the bag, of course.

There's a lot in this Australian sport business, isn't there?; one small example gives us spectator enthusiasm and humour, the threat of violence (which hardly ever happens), a hint of male domination, player athleticism and high performance, the importance of victory, a touch of parochialism, to name just a few elements.

So how does a small book like the one at issue here tackle such a daunting topic and how does it fare? In short, it uses a conversational mix of historical detail and sociological argument and it scores a 'not too bad' from me, though some aspects of it annoyed me almost to the point of leaving during the third quarter.

Good things first: scope of coverage, easy style, rich details.

The book has something to say about the centrality or otherwise of sport to Australians (the so-called obsession or passion); sport's role in forming and policing social distinctions (sometimes even classes); the prevalence of a certain 'golden ageism' in discussions of sport in Australia (Ah, the good old days); levels of spectatorship; the development of sports 'markets' (featuring the mass media); professionalism; public funding of sport; nationalism and sport; legislative control of sport; discrimination in sport against women, Aboriginal Australians, ethnic minorities, gay and lesbian communities, the disabled, and the elderly; the role of each of medicine, coaching technology and science in sport; sport as art; corruption and violence in sport (on both sides of the fence); the law's role in governing sport; and the place of sport in schooling.

This is a lot; a marathon of topics in the space of a 1500 metre race. It's hardly surprising that the paint is very thin on some parts of the wall. Anyway, this is the bit for saying good things. I'll come back to the thin paint later.

There is a certain admirable adventurousness about the authors' determination to have a crack at so many topics. They must have known, as they scurried about in their writing lair, that dickhead reviewers like me would grumble about the scanty nature of some of their sections. But they were undeterred. It suggests they want us to read their book as a set of entries as much as a continuous narrative and I'm prepared to let at least some of their wishes shine through Barthes' and Foucault's attempt to kill them and their kind off.

The style is great. The authors, both respected academic writers in this field, don't let their academic hang-ups get in the way. The style reminds me of a good pub argument about sport: points are made forcefully yet
entertainingly, anecdotal evidence is as good as any other sort, you can disagree and it won’t disrupt the pleasure of the experience, and you don’t miss much if you go for a piss.

The historical tidbits are the main strength of this book. Here’s just a few.

On the early colonists: ‘the gentry emphasised their gentility by eschewing “common” recreational practices. They preferred, for instance, not to swim in the sea because Sydney convicts often bathed in salt water’ (4).

On the rise of professionalism: ‘Not that sport as an occupation was especially new; English cricket clubs had long employed labourers to do the “manual labour” of bowling, while gentlemen took to batting as their sport’ (37).

On age limits in veterans’ sports: ‘The upper age limit is less complicated. since there really isn’t one. The oldest competitor at the 1994 World Masters Games was 101-year-old swimmer Mary Maina, the sole competitor in her age bracket for the 50 m “sprint” ... the achievement brought the crowd to its feet’ (86).

Quirky little tales well told are always good value. If only Adair and Vamplew had stuck to the manufacture of such gems, their time in their lair would’ve produced a better book. Yes, that’s right, the ref has his back turned and it’s time for me to take a few cheap shots (a privilege book reviewers share with the likes of Richard Loe and Mike Tyson). I’ll restrain myself, in case I get caught on video, and throw snide punches at just two aspects of the book — arguments and politics.

I’ve already said I like our boys’ pub-argument style; now, as in a good pub argument, I’m going to contradict myself and pretend it’s just a subtle qualification. Far too often Adair and Vamplew get carried away with arguing. Many parts of the book are so thick with arguments you can’t get through to buy a pie. Some of the arguments are posed as historical explanations, many are no more than quick-fire opinions.

In the first camp try these three (you’ll have to take my word for it that I’m picking these examples from hundreds of candidates): ‘the Australian enthusiasm for sport might be explained, at least in part, by the import of British sports to the colonies from the very early years of settlement’ (7); ‘although sport and militarism were linked through physical training, popular culture and language, the varied political contexts in which this relationship was forged were vitally important’ (47); ‘With the introduction of state police forces during the nineteenth century, legislators were eventually able to reduce the violent and disorderly nature of many traditional forms of working-class popular culture’ (124).

Two examples of the argument-as-opinion will have to suffice (don’t worry, I’m as sick of this citing textual examples business as you; I have
to do it, you understand, it’s a review in an academic journal after all):
‘Aboriginal people will not tolerate token reforms or cosmetic window-dressing [that one might be in the running for Alex Buzo’s tautology pennant were it still on offer]. And neither should whites’ (70); ‘All young Australians ... have a right to enjoy sport, and to be able to participate in a way that promotes physical fitness and skill development but does not crush enthusiasm’ (137).

Arguments, whether as explanations or opinions, or both, are ten a penny, at least in my humble tenth-of-a-penny opinion. The festival-of-arguments approach has robbed much history and sociology of interest. Don’t get me wrong, I work as a sociologist and I’m not engaging here in any more than a pre-dinner nibble of the hand that feeds me. I love Elias’s account of manners and violence as much as the next freak (I’ve even written an article about its worth for sociology of sport¹). Relying on a version of Pyrrhonian scepticism (this isn’t the place for a thorough explanation of either this philosophical possibility or my twisted reading of it), what I am suggesting is that if you set arguments against one another in such a way that most of them cancel one another out (a sort of ‘lock ’em all in a room and see who comes out alive’ approach to intellectual work), Adair and Vamplew short-change us to a considerable extent. I’m one reviewer who can drink any amount of historical detail and still drive home, but my behaviour starts to deteriorate rapidly when arguments I didn’t ask for are forced down my throat.

The perceptive reader will know where I’m about to go with my criticism of Adair and Vamplew’s political ranting (don’t flatteryourself too much; anyone who’s safely negotiated Betty and Jim’s trip to the beach will be one step ahead of me). Yes, the authors’ political views are wheeled out almost as often as their arguments; indeed they keep getting mixed up in them. More often than not their arguments-as-opinions are opinions about the appropriate political position to adopt in the matter being addressed.

I begin to suspect at this point that their praiseworthy pub-argument style was achieved partly through the real thing. ‘As closing time approaches, many of us are guilty of thinking someone important might like to hear what we’ve got to say. The next morning reality usually arrives with a desperate thirst. These two lads must be among the lucky few who don’t suffer from hangovers. One of the tiny number of drawbacks of this state of grace is an inability to remember to rewind the brain back to its pre-pub humility.

Hey boys, this is a chatty history book, with some sociology mixed in. It’s not a policy paper that the minister has promised to push through cabinet.

And their political views? Give me fifty push-ups if you can’t guess inside
ten seconds. Of course, Adair and Vamplew are wishy-washy, left leaning, small-L liberals, just like me, and (I hazard a shot in the dark) just like you. It doesn’t take Mephistophocles (my thanks go to Rex Mossop for the allusion to the Ancients) to work out that the audience for this book is London to brick on to support better access to sporting glory and facilities for women, Aboriginal Australians, all ethnic minorities who aren’t violent about being ethnic minorities (us wishy-washy, left leaning, small-L liberals are very clever the way we bring our political support for ethnic minorities to a halt just short of those soccer clubs which see their particular ethnic minority as a candidate for ethnic supremacists of the century), handicapped people, gay and lesbian Australians, all young kiddies, and veterans (they mean veterans of life, by the way, not of military conflict).

So why do they make such a song and dance about these less than surprising political views? Beats me. I think it’s a waste of a lot of space. More than that it’s space they could’ve used to write some history of various political positions. That’s what I want my historians to do for me: instead of prattling on about how badly they feel for the downtrodden, I’d like them to tell me something I don’t know. For instance, why not provide more details about the thinking behind white supremacist sport and sport as military training? Our heroes needn’t worry about their reputations; historians of ways of thinking other than those currently dominant are regarded as good historians, not as apologists for the other ways of thinking they research.

So, as the final siren sounds and I’m compelled by my love of bad sports commentary to sum up unnecessarily: a good read, worth the price of admission, but take a video of your favourite game to watch during the dull bits about arguments and politics.

Notes

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