Sport in the National Imagination: Australian Sport in the Federation Decades


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There are few more eminent Australian sport historians than Richard Cashman. Co-founder (and current President) of the Australian Society for Sport History, former editor of the journal Sporting Traditions, Director of the University of New South Wales Olympic Studies Centre, and author or editor of more than a dozen books on Australian sport history, Cashman has been a driving force in the discipline for almost thirty years. Author of the most comprehensive history of Australian sport yet written, Cashman’s unsurpassed Paradise of Sport, published in 1995 and reprinted in 1998, set new standards for the academic study of sport in Australia. It was appropriate, then, that Cashman sought other fields to conquer in his subsequent works of synthesis.

Unlike some sport historians, who are ensconced in Schools of Human Movement or Physical Education, Cashman was a “convert” to sports history after establishing his reputation as a scholar in another field, namely early-twentieth-century Indian history. It is this grounding as a historian, rather than as a physical educator, that has provided some of the motivation for his two latest books. In the first of these, Sport, Federation, Nation (published in 2001), he acted as co-editor and major contributor, and, on the cusp of the celebration of the centenary of Federation in Australia, he ventured into uncharted waters by attempting to explore the impact of Federation on Australian sport, and the contribution of sport to the new Commonwealth of Australia. This groundbreaking anthology (to which, by way of confession, this reviewer was a contributor) was, according to the Preface, “one of the first attempts of sports historians to engage in a current debate in Australian history.” It was also the hope of the editors that the book would “promote greater dialogue between sports historians and those who write more in the Australian history ‘mainstream.’” One of the laudable aims of the book, therefore, was to “encourage Australian sport historians to read more widely in Australian history and to encourage Australian historians to locate sport within their work” (p. v).

All this serves by way of background to Cashman’s latest offering, Sport in the National Imagination: Australian Sport in the Federation Decades.
As the title intimates, this is a companion piece to *Sport, Federation, Nation*, and it allows Cashman to explore, in his own way and in some detail, some of the themes raised by contributors in the earlier volume. Attractively produced by Walla Walla Press, the book has seven thematic chapters that focus on the period between 1880 and 1930. Aside from more well-explored areas such as gender, politics, and race (to which Cashman admittedly brings some valuable new evidence and insights), this work is essentially concerned with “the representation of Australian sport through symbols, emblems, colors, and names, and how sport has become part of the national imagining of Australia” (p. iv). This means that there is much discussion of the meaning of Australian sporting culture, and inevitable comparisons are made with Australia’s three greatest sporting rivals, namely Great Britain, the United States, and New Zealand.

Cashman, however, steps out of the traditional paradigm of analysis and draws some instructive contrasts with other nations, including Canada, Norway, and some Asian countries, in order to explain what is unique about Australian sport and what is shared with other societies. He also underpins his narrative with some relevant theoretical material, and the perspectives of Benedict Anderson, Roland Barthes, Clifford Geertz, and John Hoberman are used intelligibly, but not overbearingly, throughout the text. The concept of an “imaginary grandstand,” whereby Australians tend to see themselves through the eyes of others, is also used as an important touchstone, and Cashman admits that the long-standing sense of sporting insecurity in Australia has only finally been purged with the successful staging of the Olympic Games in 2000.

In perhaps the most innovative chapter, devoted to the symbols and emblems of Australian sport, Cashman again neatly links the past with the present by deftly exposing the origins of various colors and insignias in order to explain their continued resonance, if not reverence, in contemporary society. The problematic adoption of the green and gold national colors, the (resurgent) popularity and “branding” of the “baggy green” cricket cap, the predominance of the kangaroo over the emu as a sporting icon, and the lesser respect for indigenous symbols such as the boomerang, not only help to illustrate the passion for various forms of Australiana in the first decade after Federation but also serve as useful case studies for administrators and corporate sponsors who currently manipulate the marketing and commodification of sport in Australia. This discussion is appropriately juxtaposed with the traditional (though not fully expounded) notion that sport essentially remains a public asset and still “belongs to the community” (pp. 56-7).

In the light of such issues, then, Cashman’s book, with its ability to challenge readers to bring historical perspectives to bear on current debates, will serve as a more than useful text for tertiary survey subjects in