



This sporting life

By Chris Middendorp

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Illustration: *Michael Leunig*

Having absolutely no interest in sport and living in Melbourne hasn't been easy for Chris Middendorp but he has no intention of changing.

As a kid, I was called a poofter because I didn't know the difference between Collingwood and Carlton. At 14 I was forced to play cricket and once told to get into the position of silly mid-on. I thought the phys-ed teacher was making a nasty pun on my surname.

Two years ago, I was punched in a bar for saying I wasn't fazed if Australia lost the Test match. I was once spat on at a workplace for failing to put money in a Melbourne Cup sweep. So when someone asks me "Who do you follow in the footy?" I feel more anxious than a card-carrying communist during the McCarthy witch-hunts.

I sometimes think of Australia as a nation of sports fundamentalists and believe that social critic Donald Horne was correct when he famously asserted: "Sport to many Australians is life and the rest a shadow. To many it is considered a sign of degeneracy not to be interested in it."

I have always found sport a turn-off, both playing or watching it. An AFL grand final or the Olympics on TV is just the network's way of telling me to go and do the shopping. I have no problem with people trying to get fit at their suburban oval - what consenting folks do in private is their business. But I vehemently despise the inescapability of our ostentatious spectating culture.

I take issue with that choreographed commercial bravado known as professional sport. I bemoan the fact that Australians worship this activity as though it matters more than democracy. Our society's fragile self-esteem seems tied to whether we win gold or beat the Poms at cricket.

In Clive James' recent collected essays, *Even as We Speak*, seven of his dextrous pieces are about the Sydney Olympics. James writes orgiastically: "Australians worshipped sports champions as a way of giving thanks for the land we lived in." What I think James means is that this is a country designed by God for sporting activities. I can only counter with a comment made by a visiting uncle of mine from the Netherlands. On leaving here, he observed, "This is such an amazing land, but the people are too busy watching nonsense at the MCG to notice."

In Australia it's perfectly OK to dismiss theatre, opera, literature or science. No one is going to sock you in the face for calling the Bell Shakespeare Company a load of pretentious bollocks. Dare to diss sport, however, and you'll cop it sweet.

I'm not alone in my dismay. When Steve Waugh was gonged the 2004 Australian of the Year, the redoubtable Stephen Mayne of Crikey.com lamented: "Can you believe that Steve Waugh is the fourth sporting recipient in the past seven years? Would there be any other country in the world with such an unhealthy obsession?"

Probably not. Proof that sport is all pervasive in Oz is the fact that even I can identify sporting identities - despite not giving a toss. Although I've never seen a game of footy or cricket, nor ever watched an Olympic event on the telly, I can tell Shane Warne from James Hird, I know the difference between Lleyton Hewitt and Ian Thorpe. Why? Because we are saturation-bombed by sport. The faces of sport stars stare at us from posters, TV screens and magazines like a dream team of Orwellian Big Brothers. But how many of us could recognise a prominent Australian conductor or scientist or a renowned Aussie dancer?

In an attempt to explain sport's hold on us, I consumed Best Australian Sports Writing, edited by Garrie Hutchinson. It's a lively anthology of mainly well-written pieces discussing sport from a multitude of angles. The quality of the prose and level of insight is superior to much Australian political writing. But then, we take sport more seriously than politics. The contributions of Martin Flanagan, Gideon Haigh and Philippa Hawker are excellent.

Flanagan's passionate contribution "The Meaning of Football" goes to the heart of the matter. It begins with a question asked of Flanagan by a curious Dutch journalist. "Here everyone talks about your game. Why?" I'd like to pose the same question. As a "clogwog" myself, the son of Dutch parents, I used to try hard to assimilate, to be a good Australian. If only I had been able to talk about footy, I may have found it easier. Sometimes I'd make myself watch football in a sad effort to kindle an enthusiasm. I never lasted past 15 minutes.

Flanagan regards the football community as the premier cultural metaphor for Australia itself. Football is "a marvellous sporting invention that found its way into the hearts of people and infiltrated other aspects of their lives". Footy provides "Australian stories with Australian characters, values and humour". If that's the case, then I am not an Australian. Football is not my country and never will be. I am not accepting the likes of Eddie McGuire or Sam Newman as ambassadors of my society. And I won't accept a sub-culture that treats women as prey or as Brownlow night ornaments.

Don't even start me on football's ignominious record of sexual assault on women. I can only concur with Phil Cleary's comment: "Women who have sex are sluts whereas the men are studs - that's the football subculture."

On the subject of female spectators, Flanagan reveals that 45 per cent of football attendance in Oz is female, whereas in Holland women only make up 13 per cent of soccer spectators. Very sensible, the Dutch.

The primary reason for my aversion to sport is my dislike of competition. Sport fosters unhealthy egotism and aggressive yet inconsequential rivalries. Sport amplifies our rampant culture of hostile individualism. George Orwell's famous quote on the subject has always rung true: "Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence. In other words; it is war minus the shooting." Next time Hewitt bashes a racquet, an Olympic athlete gets caught cheating with drugs or an AFL neanderthal slugs a rival player, remember Orwell.

I am opposed to any activity that vulgarly divides human beings into categories of winners and losers and it concerns me that so often in this country you're only viewed as worthy if you are a winner.

Any wonder that capitalism and sport so often go together. Any wonder that politicians, like Bradman fanboy John Howard, revere sport. Sport is about winning. So is politics. So is business. Anyone who says otherwise is either being disingenuous or practising their sophistry.

Percy Cerutti, the infamous and crusty Australian athletics coach would agree. "I would rather die than be beaten," Cerutti said, "I hate the person that's beaten me and I hate myself worse for being beaten."

Playing God: The Rise and Fall of Gary Ablett by Gary Linnell exposes winning for the hollow glory it can be. Geelong footballer Ablett had it all. A gifted athlete, Ablett was so awesome on the oval that he was dubbed "God". But, as Linnell confirms, this drop-kick deity was a mere mortal, tormented by success, tortured by fame. Ablett despised the fact that everyone wanted a piece of him merely because he excelled at football. "Fame ran its velvet tongue over him, liked what it tasted and decided to devour him."

Ablett got the goals, he got the girls. Our insatiable fascination with sporting winners ensured that he was stared at, pointed at and whispered about wherever he went. It freaked him out. "Fame was just another stranger trying to make a buck out of him," writes Linnell. In an effort to escape, Ablett apparently retreated into drugs, booze and partying. It all ended tragically and famously with the overdose death of a young female fan in a Melbourne hotel room.

Ablett's pitiable story is apropos, but the problem wasn't entirely Ablett's - it was also ours for insisting he was divine. Worshipping athletes is foolish. These celebrated people are not heroes or saints or gods: they are merely damn good at running, jumping or kicking. This doesn't make them good at life, nor does it make them superior to the rest of us. Just ask Wayne Carey.

Incidentally, Ablett's and Carey's stories are always good ammunition when someone tries to tell you that sport builds character. From Hansie Cronje to Mike Tyson, that argument has always been a crock.

The fact remains that there's an enormous market for books about sporting icons. Many of these swollen tomes demonstrate that all too often sport is steeped in tragedy and misfortune. The biographies often seem to be telling identical stories: their common template nothing less than the story of Jesus. The protagonist is invariably born into humble circumstances and shows early signs of greatness. Along the way, that remarkable he or she finds it possible to vanquish demons, conquer personal trauma and enter the kingdom of sporting heaven. To be venerated for eternity by all good Aussies.

On footballer Jason Akermanis, from Aka: The Battle Within by J.A. with Gary Smart: "Akermanis has fought demons at every turn: the absence of a father, the death of his mother, depression, ruthless

coaches to become a three-time Lions Premiership player."

On runner Raelene Boyle, from *Raelene: Sometimes Beaten, Never Conquered* by Gary Linnell: "A remarkable woman who managed to turn her insecurities and a series of devastating setbacks into a tale of personal triumph."

On Footballer Bob Rose, from *Bob Rose* by Steve Stevens: "The story of how a man climbed from obscurity, weathering life's lows both personal and sporting to become one of the greats of Australian life."

On swimmer Dawn Fraser, from *Dawn: One Hell Of A Life* by D.F: "Born on the wrong side of the tracks, in working class Sydney, she struggled with illness, family tragedy, petty bureaucratic opposition and personal demons to live a life filled with remarkable achievements."

Enough already. I don't doubt that these fine people coped with terrible adversity. But their setbacks are not unique. As a social worker I've seen countless ordinary people survive against overwhelming odds. Where are their medals? Human tragedy is commonplace. Our sporting celebrities, however, are granted special acclaim when they make it through hard times. It's as though they have demonstrated superior powers of resilience to the rest of us. They're winners even when they lose.

Dawn: One Hell Of A Life is one of the better biogs. Like most published sporting lives, it could have been more perceptive. Sporting stories often read like second-rate sports journalism - a series of exclamation marks in search of insight.

Fraser's life is slapped on the page the way Pro Hart "makes art" in those carpet ads. Everything's there: abortion, lesbian relationships, sexual assault, tragic family deaths. Yet it's all done at a distance. The best part of the book has nothing to do with sport. It's the evocative depiction of Fraser's early life in working-class Balmain - an Australia that no longer exists. Then again, Dawn's old sporting world has also vanished, replaced by a pitiless commercial juggernaut.

Former tennis star John Newcombe is amusing on this subject in his autobiography, entitled (what else?) *Newk*. "I was fortunate to play tennis at a time when it was still fun, before players became money-obsessed robots who would never crack a smile (or a beer)." The professional sporting culture of winning at all costs has turned so many athletes into human slot machines.

Trying to explain that sport isn't your thing can be tough in these parts. Many males can barely get their heads around it. "Not into footy!" they'll exclaim. "What about cricket?" No. "What about tennis?" No. "Soccer?" No. Many can't comprehend what not liking sport actually means. Surely, I must be into badminton or lawn bowls. Nup. When they finally get it, they realise they have nothing to talk to you about and leave.

I'm reminded of a TV debate I saw in 1992 between writer and broadcaster Phillip Adams and media impresario John Singleton. Attempting to dismiss Adams' arguments against too much TV advertising, Singleton declaimed that Adams didn't live in the "real world" anyway. "You don't go to the football, you don't go to the races, you're not a real, fair-dinkum Aussie." A phone poll held afterwards by the Sydney Daily Telegraph Mirror revealed that the overwhelming majority of callers sided with Singleton. Donald Horne was right: you're labelled a lesser Australian if you're not into sport.

You frequently hear that a genuine Melburnian is compelled to venerate "Melbourne's great secular cathedral", the Melbourne Cricket Ground. It's the thesis of Brian Matthews' in his book *The Temple Down The Road*. Matthews has put together a compendium of tributes to our famous sports ground and waxes lyrical about the central, quasi-religious role the "G" plays in all our lives. Well, your lives, perhaps.

"The G is part of the city's identity, its personality, in much the same way that Notre Dame is indistinguishable from the ideas of Paris and Parisians." Turn it down, mate!

I've never been inside the MCG and I've never felt a lesser Melburnian. Although Matthews is too polite to say it, like many Aussies, he believes that there is something perverse about the man who doesn't follow footy or cricket. He quietly seethes that there might be people in town who wouldn't notice if the G were turned into a multi-storied car park. "There might be people in Melbourne who were uninfluenced by - even incredibly more or less unaware of the G in their early lives." And some of these deviants "managed to maintain this deprived state into advanced maturity". Yep. Sorry Mr Matthews, the MCG means less to me than an empty Paddle Pop wrapper.

Mind you, I accept that the MCG is an important venue to others. Fine. By all means, Brian Matthews, celebrate your oval, but don't assume it has cosmic significance. Remember that for me, most of my friends, and countless more who are probably too scared to speak up, the MCG is just a place certain people frequent, like Treasury Gardens or The Main Course brothel.

I was recently called "an elitist wanker" at a barbecue after confessing my antipathy towards sport. A familiar and empty taunt. Given that professional sport involves elite athletes who often earn squillions, the argument is clearly fatuous. Besides, I refuse to believe that people who read Nietzsche and go to see Tom Stoppard plays are better people than those who don't.

I also accept that many significant thinkers adore sport. For instance, one of our finest historians, Geoffrey Blainey, is a passionate Geelong supporter. He even wrote *A Game Of Our Own*, an eloquent,

emotional history of Aussie rules.

I would never argue that only dummies love sport. I do believe, however, that too many Australians fill their lives and minds with sport and sporting lore at the expense of all other cultural activities. It bothers me that Australians (men, usually) are frequently reticent when it comes to conversing on intimate or emotional matters and yet when the subject turns to sport, they can earnestly explore the most intimate details for hours.

I sometimes wonder if the die-hard sports enthusiast is a person who doesn't handle real life all that well. Perhaps sport becomes a metaphorical language, a substitute tongue where people can safely discuss failure and hope, joy and sadness. It's safe because sport, like the sitcom *Seinfeld*, isn't really about anything.

Australian novelist Vereno Armanno (*The Volcano*) recently castigated our sport-obsessed society, taking the debate to an ethical plane. "Australia spends billions of dollars on sport," Armanno complained, "we supposedly ran the best Olympics ever, yet the plight of our original inhabitants is a disgrace. Our priorities are upside down."

Indeed. Statistics reveal that our Government spends around \$2 billion on supporting sports and sporting venues yearly. This could house and educate a lot of people. From bitter experience, I know that funding for public housing, for instance, is grossly inadequate. People are living and dying on Australian streets, while we drench sport in money.

I try to understand the things that don't engage me. The maxim of the Roman playwright Terence seems a reasonable creed: Nothing human is alien to me. Unfortunately, after 38 years, sport remains an impenetrable enigma. When I think about it, sports enthusiasts are just like Star Trek fans - or Trekkies as they are known. "Sporties" share a fascination for arcane lore, often wear silly costumes, speak a private language and fixate over trivialities as if they were life and death issues. Now think about it: if there were as many Trekkies as there are sporties in Australia, wouldn't you be disturbed too?

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SPORTING LORE

Dawn: One Hell of a Life, By Dawn Fraser

Sport autobiographies are rarely well written and Dawn is no exception. Dawn Fraser's life, however, has been such an engrossing roller-coaster ride that you'll easily devour this book in a session. Incidentally, Fraser also deserves a medal for rapid-fire name dropping.

The New Lords of the Rings: Olympic Corruption and How to Buy Gold Medals, By Andrew Jennings
The Olympic Games are a sham: a chauvinistic, grossly expensive and bombastic circus of deceit and drug cheating run by power-mad plutocrats - the International Olympic Committee - with severely compromised ethics. Author Jennings doesn't hold back.

Best Australian Sports Writing, Edited by Garrie Hutchinson

A generous and thought-provoking anthology of our most insightful sports writing. An entertaining read even if, like me, you find all sports a big, fat, hairy yawn.

Playing God: The Rise and Fall of Gary Ablett, By Gary Linnell

Ablett was God, that preposterously deified football player who fell from grace in a brutally spectacular fashion. He may yet redeem himself. Reading this book conclusively proves that our worshipped elite athletes are not just human beings but may be very ordinary ones at that.

Aka: The Battle Within, By Jason Akermanis with Gary Smart.

There ought to be a law against anyone under 60 writing an autobiography. Akermanis has contributed nothing to the genre and surely only die-hard fans would care to consume this stumbling prose. To be stored on a shelf beside your copy of Luke Perry: *In His Own Words*.

A Game of Our Own, By Geoffrey Blainey

Historian Blainey has a terrific prose style and a perceptive grasp of people and events. He evokes the evolution of "our game" with passion and reverence. If you're going to read anything at all about Aussie rules, this is the book.

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