Momentum Shift:
The Impact of Sport on American and Australian Culture

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

Australia is a land of mystery to many people. Movies like *Crocodile Dundee* and the legendary stories of the Outback have given the largest nation island on earth an air of wonderment. I had always been intrigued by Australia and in May of 2009 I got a chance to experience it first hand on a Sports Medicine Field Study through Ball State University. Since my career focus is not directly in the treatment aspect of sports medicine I was much more interested in Australian culture and more specifically and how it pertained to sports performance and athletics. I have been heavily involved in athletics since a young age and have continued that interest in college as an Exercise Science major. I hope to one day be a sports performance coach for a major university's athletics program. Therefore, I spent much of my time exploring Australia's sporting culture, most specifically the sports of surfing, cricket, and rugby as those were the sports which with I had the most contact. In the following pages I will compare and contrast the impact sports can have on both cultures, provide some historical context for the sports being reviewed and relate them to my own personal experience.

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Introduction

Australia and the United States have several aspects of their culture in common, not the least of which being a common ancestry. Both nations can trace their beginnings back to Great Britain. When America declared its independence in 1776, the British had to find a new place to send their prisoners and social misfits. It is no coincidence that the city of Sydney was founded by the British in 1788 as a veritable island prison. (Renwick) Surprisingly, most Americans believe Sydney is the capital of Australia, when it is in fact Canberra. When the people of Australia were trying to settle on a capital city, the two main camps were for Melbourne or Sydney. When it was clear that there would not be a unanimous decision between the two, they compromised and chose a city halfway between the two, Canberra. (Bryson) It is the shared heritage between our two societies that is the major reason that Australia and America share a common language, similar governmental hierarchy, and, despite a philosophy of separation of church and state, majority religion in Christianity. The countries are also similar in total land area. The difference between the two lies in the fact that while the majority of America is full of green, fertile land, Australia is mostly an inhospitable desert. It is because of this fact that 90% of Australia’s population (almost 22,000,000 by the most recent Australian Demographics Statistics) lives within fifty miles of the coast. This is also a possible reason why surfing is one of the most popular sports throughout all of Australia.

Surfing

Surfing is a sport that may be as much as a millennium old. (Mendez-Villanueva & Bishop) It was at one time considered a sport only kings could indulge in so obviously I was very excited to take a shot at it. While we were all excited, surfing was not without its inherent risks. Our major warning from our instructor was to fall off the board backwards and avoid falling
forward at all costs due to serious head and spinal risks in doing so. Their advice was well founded in the literature. Two separate studies have shown that roughly one quarter of all surf related injuries are to the head and neck. While a study by Taylor et al found that 75% of surfing injuries were minor, meaning sprains/strains or lacerations, nearly a fifth of all injuries were fractures or dislocations. This means that in a given 100 surf injuries, five of those would theoretically be serious head or neck injuries. This seems like an incredibly high risk, especially when you couple with that the findings the only about 2% of surfers in the study wore protective headgear. (Taylor et al)

All told, the injury rate for surfers is calculated at 1.1 injuries per 1000 surf hours. Competitive surfing reports 6.6/1000 hours of surfing. While this is much lower than the injury rates of, say, professional rugby (69/1000 hours) or collegiate football (33/1000 hours) we must remember that there are also many more total hours available for surfing than either of the aforementioned sports. (Nathanson et al) Armed with this information I still found myself falling head first (or taking a spill into the drink, as they say) roughly 90% of the time. Every time I went over the board my first thought was of my head meeting a rock or the fins of the board. Luckily, my head met neither that day. Even with the inherent risk involved, surfing is something I would try again in a second. I chronicled the entire event in a blog entry for the trip and have included it below.

_I will punch a shark in the face_

Today we learned how to surf. This means that I now have one more thing in common with actor Paul Walker, besides the uncommonly good looks and successful movie career. (Wait...what?) You could tell that in the back of everyone's mind (and in the front of some, and coming out of my mouth) were worries about sharks. You may have
heard once or twice that Australia has a bit of a shark problem. They are everywhere and they are nasty. I am here to tell you all that sharks are not that bad. They are boring. Not one shark in an entire day of surfing. They were scared and I can't blame them. We're Americans. We're crazy.

I looked around trying to figure out which person was our surf instructor. There was the lady with the two kids chasing around a bird. Doubtful. A young couple, both draped in dreads, that pulled up on bicycles? Possibly. A middle-aged balding man in a polo? God, I hope not. It turned out to be a sun-baked, bleach blonde Aussie whose name, until right before the lesson, I had been led to believe was Mojo. This had me very excited to learn how to surf because if you’re going to be taught the art of surfing it might as well be by a guy named Mojo. I imagine that for parents to even consider naming their newborn son Mojo they were intentionally pigeon holing him into the role of beach bum surfer from day one. Unfortunately, it turns out Mojo was the name of the surf company. Who knew? Turns out everyone but me.

After getting over the initial disappointment that I wasn't being taught by surf master Mojo, we began our surf lesson like I imagine many do: with a light stretch, some calisthenics to get our blood pumping and warm up all the major muscles in our body (it may not look it, but surfing uses basically every muscle you have), followed by some brief instructions on how to get onto the board. We also got some kind of lecture over riptides and drowning, but most of us found it far more important to pay attention to how good we looked in our skin tight surfer shirts. And we did. Finally, it was time for surfing. So there I was on my board, I'm paddling and I'm in the zone and I pop up and land on the board perfectly. I am perfectly balanced and I am riding the board flawlessly. First try. I
am amazing. I could do this blindfolded. I am the LeBron James of surfing. I'm feeling so good that I think I'm even ready to try it in the ocean.

It proved far more difficult with actual waves. Crazy, I know. Many of us spent the next twenty minutes being lured in by waves only to be smashed down into the ocean floor over and over again. I think many of us began feeling like dogs chasing cars when it came to the waves—we wouldn't even know what to do if we caught one. Just when it seemed like all was lost and I was about to go John McEnroe on my surfboard ("You can't be serious!"), it happened. I caught a perfect wave, didn't slip, popped up and rode it all the way into the beach (Though I have to admit it took all the strength I had to keep from channeling my inner Ninja Turtle, screaming "Cowabunga" or "Surf's Up, Dude!", and in doing so embarrassing every single American and offending every real surfer within earshot). Don't believe it happened? There was a professional photographer there. And he took pictures which I now have. Boom. How's your mind? Blown? Watch out, Kelly Slater.

Since the majority of the group at least caught one wave I am sure they can back me up when I say that catching that first wave is kind of like a first kiss. You're shaky, you have no idea what is going on, it happens way too fast, it is a little wetter than you'd prefer, but at the end you can't wait to do it again.

Cricket

A few days after our surf lesson we had a cricket lesson. I admit at first I was pretty skeptical as cricket is a bit of a joke in America since it has basically no following. My experience with cricket before this day had consisted of a funny credit card commercial featuring Jerry Seinfeld and an article in Sports Illustrated about the phenomenon of the above average
suicide rates among retired professional cricket players, which I will return to later. I left the lesson convinced it could actually be a pretty fun game if played from beginning to end by the official rules.

_We’ve got a smashed bat and two mattresses. Let’s play cricket!_

Today we learned the sport of cricket. While I could not stop thinking about the Jerry Seinfeld Mastercard commercial ("That was a wicked googly!") I was interested in how this sport was played all the same. We were taught by a father-son team. The father had spent years in the sport and the son, who was still in high school, seemed to be something of an “up and comer” in the cricket world. It took a while to get used to the bat, which resembled a baseball bat that had been flattened by a giant vice. Many of us went straight to the default baseball stance and swing, which apparently is nothing like the swing used in cricket. The cricket swing actually more closely resembles a golf swing in that the batter swings in a downward arc and uses much more wrist motion throughout the swing action. The cricket ball looked like a wooden ball wrapped around the middle in twine.

The throwing motion of the ball is also unlike anything else in American sport. It involves a several step approach followed by swinging your arm in a windmill like 360 degree motion. The arm is supposed to remain locked out at all times. A failure to do so is viewed as a dirty play, not unlike a pitch to the head in baseball, and can earn the bowler (pitcher) a reputation for “chucking”, which was presented to us as an undesirable title.
Points are scored in cricket by running back and forth down a line between two sets of sticks called wickets. Running can only be done while the ball is out in the field being recovered by the opposing teams. This may not seem too difficult, but it becomes much more so when you factor in the queen-sized mattress sized pads you have to strap onto both legs (ok, they may be smaller than that, but they feel gigantic when you’re trying to run).

I took my turn “bowling” (pitching) and decided to by-pass my turn at hitting, deciding instead to save my opportunities for public humiliation for later dates. While bowling was admittedly not my strong point, I did settle in well in a niche as the resident “sledger”. Sledging is a very important role, especially in professional American sport, although it is known by a different name in the United States. Sledging is trash talking. I basically made it my job to try and rattle the other hitters with quips and sarcastic comments, which led to a few angry participants and one more reason not to take my turn at bat (the cricket balls are really hard and I don’t think anyone was above aiming at any vital part of my anatomy).

Risk and Sport

I made reference to the increased rates of suicide in retired professional cricket athletes earlier, and I found it to be too important a topic not to explore further. A book released in 2001 called The Silence of the Heart investigated this phenomenon. The book focused mainly on British cricketers and the author, David Frith, observed that the suicide rate among British men was 1.07% compared to the 1.77% of ex-cricketers. This figures out to the former athletes being roughly 70% more likely to take their own life. When we compare this to the 2.75% suicide rate Frith found in Australian ex-cricketers the numbers become staggering. The main question here
has to be “why?” What about the sport of cricket makes it far more likely that a former player will take his own life once the game has passed him by?

While cricket gets much of the publicity for these high rates of suicide, the presence of depression, alcoholism, and other mental health disorders is well documented across many sports. One study has shown that only 5% of athletes retire under their own terms, leaving age, injury, or being dropped from a team as the major reasons for the end of an athlete’s career. When you consider that these athletes have spent their entire lives being identified by the sport they play, many of whom base their self worth on their status as a professional athlete, it is easier to understand the personal crisis that comes with the sudden or involuntary retirement from sport. The same study found that 75% of athletes only begin considering their life after sports in the last quarter of their career which, in effect, means many of these athletes have no real financial security, nor any career plans for when their paychecks stop coming from their respective team or club. (Fortunato & Marchant)

Arguably, this is true for most athletes. So why does the end of a cricket career end in such high rates of mental illness and suicide? The widely accepted reason is cricket is a sport that comes with massive amounts of pressure, and thus stress, as well as a huge time commitment. A “game of cricket” is actually a single game played over a five day stretch. Cricketers spend months on tour throughout the world away from family and friends. When Frith was asked why he believes cricket carries with it such a high rate of depression and suicide, he said, “Cricket wraps itself around people. They vanish from ordinary lives for the whole of their careers.” (Howard et al) Unfortunately, history is dotted with cricketers who were unable to find a way to reinsert themselves into a society and accept their role as an ex-cricketer. (Hundertmark) Perhaps
more unfortunate is that this phenomenon is not isolated to cricket. Many sports in both the US and Australia do little to help former athletes adjust to the life of a non-athlete. You can find instances of it in many sports, including one of the most popular sports in the United States - football.

American football is a violent sport. Many put it on par with modern day gladiators. Recent studies have shown that this analogy may not be too far off. The lucky ones escape unscathed and lead normal lives while the rest are maimed in the line of duty. Many former football players die prematurely. The injured have to deal with damaged or unusable joints and a high instance of diabetes haunts many former football players. It was not until relatively recently that a real and significant threat has come to the forefront.

The magnitude of the effect that concussions and head trauma have on a person has been very popular in the news in the last several years. Neurological disorders would not be unexpected in a sport with such high rates of collision, but there are also increased instances of mental disorders similar to those found in retired cricketers (depression, violence, suicide) being found in many older, retired football players. Upon autopsy, it had been discovered that many had a condition called chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and had gone either undiagnosed or misdiagnosed as dementia. CTE is a brain injury caused by repeated blows to the head that cause the buildup of a protein called \( \textit{tau} \) which interrupts and shuts down neural synapses much the same way protein build up does in Alzheimer’s patients (\( \textit{tau} \) is one of two proteins that builds up in the brain in Alzheimer’s). In an article written by New Yorker columnist Malcolm Gladwell on this very subject, he interviewed a major researcher specializing in the link between CTE and professional (American) football. The researcher claimed that there was only one
instance in which he had not found tau buildup in a former football player’s brain and it was from a 24 year old player who had only been in the league for two years. Another study done on living, retired players found that 6.1% of players over the age of 50 had been diagnosed with dementia or a memory-related disease, which is five times higher than the national average. More shocking were the results for former athletes between the ages of thirty and forty-nine, whose diagnoses were 19 times higher than the national average. (Gladwell)

The connection between sport and adverse emotional health effects is also likely attributable to the effects of tau. It is well known that many antidepressant drugs work at the level of the neural synapse – precisely where tau affects neurochemical transmission.

Some athletes come through retirement fine and go on to live fulfilled careers, but others end their lives prematurely regardless of the presence of CTE. Yet, armed with the knowledge of this risk, athletes continue to play knowing full well that doing so sky-rockets their chances of an early disability or even death. When Gladwell asked 34 year old former NFL-er Kyle Turley, if he would go back and change anything if given the chance he said, “He loved playing football so much that he would do it all again.” What is noteworthy about Mr. Turley’s response isn’t that he would continue to play, but that he would do so having already been diagnosed with symptoms of CTE. It would be nice if this was just an anomalous response unique to Mr. Turley, but it isn’t. There is a well known survey in which Olympic athletes were asked, “Would you take a pill that would guarantee you a gold medal, but would also take ten years off your life?” Nearly every one of them said yes. There is something about the culture of sport, about living life as the center of attention with thousands or millions of fans that almost all athletes find a fair tradeoff for their own well being. Mr. Gladwell may sum it up best where he points out that, “It
has been known for eighty years...boxers ran a twenty per-cent risk of dementia. Yet boxers continue to box. Why? Because people still go to boxing matches.”

Rugby

While we are on the subject of high injury rates in sport, a previously referenced study showed that rugby had the most injuries per 1,000 hours of activity. (Nathanson et al) After watching several hours of rugby, both on television and in person, I have a newfound respect for professional rugby players. As a former American football player, I am somewhat biased to think we are some of the toughest athletes around, but given that rugby contains almost all of the same hitting aspects of football, only without pads (while 96% of rugby union players reported the use of protective equipment, the majority of protection was limited to straps or tape, some light padding, a mouth guard, or occasionally a soft shelled helmet), as well as the increased pace of the game, it is difficult not to give that mantle to them. (Kaplan et al)

*Are you a giant? Feel no pain? Do you watch 'Braveheart' and feel you were born a few thousand years too late? Play Rugby!*

While our group never had formal instruction in the game of rugby, we did have multiple experiences with it in one form or another. Rugby has a much higher following in America than cricket (the U.S. even has their own rugby union team and Kaplan reports that rugby popularity increases in the United States by roughly 25% a year) so a few of us understood the basics of the sport. During some free time a few of us even tried to mimic it ourselves based on what we knew and had been watching on television, but eventually that just turned into a game of American football with an extremely large football. We are here in May, which is Australia's winter season and therefore both rugby union and rugby league are in full season swing. The difference between rugby
union and rugby league is something that I was having some trouble with, but it is just as it sounds; there are two separate rugby leagues that are, for the most part, the same sport, but with minor differences in many of the rules. For example, rugby league has rules in place that lead to a faster game and more points scored, while rugby union allows more players on the field at a given time (15, compared to the 13 of league play). Rugby union is also expanded beyond Australia and New Zealand. It is more comparable to the International Soccer Federation in that several countries contribute teams to the Union. Mistaking the two can be a big mistake if done in front of avid rugby fans and an even bigger mistake is made by comparing rugby and American football. I found both out the hard way during a cab ride in which the driver informed me that American Football is for "wusses and poufs". I'm not 100% sure what a pouf is, but it doesn't take a very drastic stretch of the imagination to figure out what he was probably calling me.

Tonight we went to a local pub to see a rugby union game on television and escape AIS (Australian Institute of Sport) for a little while. The pub we went to was comparable to an American sports bar during a major sporting event. Fans became progressively louder (see: drunker) throughout the game, the Chiefs beat the Hurricanes 14-10, a chicken sandwich was $16, and I used the terms "wanker" and "tosser" roughly 317 times. Along with observing the differences between rugby union and the rugby league games we watched on television, I also learned several other important things that night. For example, I never want to upset a rugby player in Australia. They are massive and they can run forever, so they take away both the fight and flight options.

Our most exciting experience with rugby came today with a chance to see a live rugby league game in Canberra. The stadium was not nearly as packed as one would
expect from a professional sports team as I would estimate it being only about half full. The overall vibe I got from the atmosphere was that the town of Canberra was not too interested in their Raiders rugby squad. When I took a look at their record I expected to find a team with a long history of losing, but was surprised to find them as a team on the rise. They had finished as high as sixth in the league of sixteen teams the year before, meaning that they were at least competitive. Turns out the fans must have known something I didn’t, as their 2009 campaign finished with them ranked thirteenth out of the sixteen team league. The fans that were there were passionate, though. There were many lime green jerseys dotting the crowd and more than a few fans so passionate they chose to wear entire uniforms, not unlike the infamous fans you might find at an Oakland Raiders or Indianapolis Colts game.

Sport as a Catalyst for Change

There are many instances throughout history where sport has been used as a vessel for social change. One doesn’t have to look back too far in our own nation’s history to find race relations at a near boiling point. On April 15, 1947, a brave man named Jackie Robinson walked out onto the Ebbets Field wearing a Dodgers jersey amid a showering of boos, racial slurs, and garbage. He was the first African-American player in Major League Baseball. While the road was by no means easy for Robinson he paved the way for non-white athletes for decades to come. Robinson went on to win the first ever Rookie of the Year award, but his greatest accomplishment that year, as said by Edd McDermott, “...was to enable white baseball fans to root for a black man.” Twelve years later, the Red Sox became the last team to sign a black baseball player and the integration of major league baseball was technically complete. While baseball still has the lowest percentage of African-Americans of the three major sports (baseball,
basketball, football) it also has the greatest percentage of Hispanic players (29%). To date, African-Americans also constitute 66% and 76% of the NFL and NBA, respectively. (Asian Americans In Sports)

We see this same impact in Australia with the integration of the Maori people. The Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand and have encountered similar prejudices and discriminations that African-Americans have throughout history. However, the use of sports, especially rugby, has been instrumental in the integration of the Maori people throughout Australia and New Zealand. Many families have used involvement in rugby clubs to assimilate themselves into the mainly white culture of Australia. Some even credit the Maori for bringing the faster rugby league play to Australia. They are lauded for their superior foot speed and ability to make their opponent miss, as well as their willingness to put their shoulder down and run through an opponent when the situation calls for it. As such Maori players have been targeted for various teams with above average compensation if they are willing to relocate from New Zealand to Australia. (Bergin) Situations very similar to this were seen in the early integration of many sports, including baseball. As the pace of the game increased, free agent contracts were extended to more and more African American players by teams trying to keep up with the changing times. While I am by no means saying that sports and sports culture have single-handedly integrated both of these cultures it is hard to deny that it played an important role for both.

Summary

Ryska et al define sports culture, “...as the attitudes, values, and beliefs engendered by sport within that particular society.” Given the common roots that Australia and America enjoy, it seems fair to argue that they would also have a similar sporting culture. In both cultures, sport has always been seen as an educational tool and a form of entertainment. What is not always
acknowledged is the impact that sport can have on a society or culture as a whole. Before this trip I had seen the impact sport can have on an individual and on American culture. The most interesting aspects of the field study to Australia was seeing first hand that the impact of sport on culture is not exclusive to the United States. I was forced to look at the culture without the blinders of my American upbringing. In the instances of cricket and surfing, I found sports so important to their followers that the inherent risk of physical and mental damage did not overwhelm the love of the game. In rugby, I found a tool for change and social growth and a means of integrating two separate cultures over something as simple as the common enjoyment of an activity. Sport can be used to initiate change for good, but on the other end of the spectrum, can also cause great harm when not monitored or utilized properly. Given what sport has done thus far to help shape the cultures we live in, it should be interesting to see what it has in store for us next.
Works Cited


