The place and function of sport in Australian universities: Sport at the University of Sydney

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The recent controversy over voluntary student unionism (VSU) has raised questions about the place that sport holds within university life. This article suggests that, firstly, the promotion of sport, with obvious benefits to the community, traditionally has been one of the most significant functions of Australian universities. Secondly, that sport has always featured prominently within university student life; and thirdly that universities have made a major, sometimes unrecognised, contribution to the organisation, development and promotion of sport within Australia.

INTRODUCTION

USING the example of the University of Sydney this article will outline how sport influenced University and broader cultural development in the 19th and 20th centuries. The article will then point out the significant contribution that the University had in the more general development of Australian sports; finally it concludes with consideration of the current controversy over Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) in universities. There is now considerable historical literature on the significance of sport within Australian culture. Yet, despite the fact that modern sport, as it developed in the 19th century, was created out of an ideology that was specifically educational in intent (Mangan, 1988; Mangan, 1992), there has been only marginal attention paid to the importance of educational institutions.
in the organisation and culture of sport. What attention has been paid to educational influences in the development of Australian sport has focussed on the growth of sport in schools; very little research has been concentrated on Australian universities. There are a couple of exceptions, such as, the history of sport at the University of Melbourne (Senyard, 2004); the history of the University of New South Wales Sports Association (Cashman, Hughes & Zavos, 2005); and the history of the Newcastle University Sports Union (James & Jones, 1996). These texts though are celebratory rather than analytical, adopting a ‘who won what where’ type approach. This article specifically explores the role of Sydney University in the development of the dual features of mass participation and elitism in Australian sporting culture.

THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES AND SPORT

The Australian universities that were founded in the mid-19th century had specific civic functions. They were designed to assist the growth of the professions and to produce social and political elite created through the principles of meritocracy. These colonial foundations were not merely transplantations of the English Oxbridge tradition (Barcan, 1980; 1988). Indeed, although the University of Sydney’s motto sidere mens eadem mutato (The stars change, but the mind remains the same) echoes Oxbridge sentiment, the Australian colonial universities were ‘public’ institutions in the sense that they were designed to serve broad public interests and they were ‘secular’ in the sense that they were open to all without any formal religious entry tests (Selleck, 2004; Turney, Bygott & Chippendale, 1991).

That said it is also important to realise that in the area of sport the Australian universities were responsible for incorporating certain English ideals but then developing them along particular lines. The concept of ‘athleticism’, for example, that emerged in the English public schools in the 19th century was infused with the view that playing organised sport was associated with personal moral development as much as it was associated physical development. This ideology of athleticism also had obvious overtones of class, gender and religion, and was closely associated with the nineteenth century vision of ‘muscular Christianity’. Athleticism also was aligned closely with the rise of an ideology of amateurism which came to form the basis of the modern Olympic Games (Young, 1996). Australian culture developed in parallel with these ideologies in England and elsewhere; however in Australian universities ideology became obsession and was manifest at the University of Sydney with the emergence of numerous sporting clubs and exceptionally high sporting participation rates. I will review these developments to illustrate their profound impact upon Australian sporting culture.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY 1852 TO WORLD WAR II

One of the most significant developments in this era was the creation of the idea of the ‘club’ as the basis for individual university sports. Historians of sport have sometimes suggested that the idea of the ‘club’ was often attached to local communities (Cashman, 1995). The colonial universities provided another context for the formation of the sporting clubs. In his recent history of the University of Melbourne, D·ck Selleck (2004) has pointed out the
growth of sporting clubs there from at least the 1860s. Founded before the University of Melbourne, but with a much smaller student population, clubs had begun to emerge at Sydney by the mid-1850s. By 1854 there was a cricket club established which was made up of over one-third of the total number of undergraduates. The first official match took place on 8 April 1854 against the Garrison Club at the rear of Sydney’s Military Barracks (Sydney Morning Herald, 21 April 1854). The cricket club played an important role in the growth of cricket in Sydney and the first Sydney University intercolonial representatives were cricketers such as John Kinlock and George Curtis (Scott, 1991).

In 1863 the Football Club was established at a period when the total enrolments at the University were still no more than about 40 students. This club, the Sydney University Rugby Club carries the cachet of being the first rugby club in the southern hemisphere and the eighth oldest in the world (Hickie, 1998). What formed the basis of support for these clubs were the graduates of the elite secondary schools in the colony such as those from Sydney Grammar and the King’s School. Of equal importance was the support from the three residential colleges, St Paul’s, St John’s and St Andrew’s. St Paul’s College, founded in 1856, had established a cricket club in 1858, which played its first competitive match at the University Oval on St Patrick’s Day. While intercollegiate sporting competition existed in a number of sports, the premier event was the annual boat race, which attracted a wide cross-section of Sydney society. The colleges would eventual play for the Rawson Cup, a competition that is still contested today. It is decided through competition in cricket, Rugby, soccer, swimming and diving, tennis, basketball and athletics over the university year.

The playing of games and sport at the University preceded the development of sport at the schools. In fact early graduates of the University went on to be the sports masters and head masters at many of the Great Public Schools such as Shore and SCEGGS, who were great advocates of sport. The role of universities in the development of sport has been overlooked by leading scholars such as Cashman (1995) and others. These authors specifically note it was the headmasters from Britain who introduced and promoted sports in corporate schools. By looking at the example of the University of Sydney it can be seen that the sport and games culture at the University preceded the corporate schools. For example, while rugby was first played at the University in 1863, it was not until 1894 that the Australian Association of Great Public Schools (AAGPS) was established and GPS sports, such as rugby, were not institutionalised until the late 1870s (Sherington, 1983). So university sport preceded the establishment of the elite corporate schooling system in the colony.

Much of the early organisation of sport was managed and organised by the students themselves. Thus the notion of intervarsity competitions with the University of Melbourne began in 1870 as an initiative of the secretary of the Sydney University Cricket Club Richard Teeece (Littlejohn, 1979). This first intervarsity competition involved both cricket and rowing. A member of the University of Sydney rowing four was Edmund Barton who would later become the first prime minister of Australia in 1901 (Bolton, 2000). Indeed the example of Barton reveals the close attachment between academic and sporting achievements. Matriculating to the University in 1865, he won numerous scholarships and prizes (Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1996). As well as rowing in the Intervarsity competition he had a love of cricket and played for the University 1870–71, later organising inter-colonial matches and evening umpiring in some major matches including the famous New South Wales
versus Lord Harris's English XI, which was interrupted by a riot. He also later became a vice-president of the Sydney University Football Club. The case of Barton reveals in part how the early sporting clubs of the University functioned with the support of a number of graduates as well as students studying for their degrees. In such ways sport built a bond between the University and the wider community.

It was the expansion of the University from the 1880s associated with the Challis Bequest and the formation of new professional faculties that really shaped the development of sport at the University. The Sydney University Rugby Club began to dominate the club competition in Sydney during this decade. At the same time a number of University professors and senators took an active interest in the affairs of both the football and cricket clubs. By the late 1880s the Chancellor of the University of Sydney had become president of the Sydney University Rugby Club, thus illustrating the importance of sport within the University and establishing its ongoing prestige. Matches between academic staff and students were common including in 1887 a cricket match between undergraduates versus 'pastors and masters' (Hermes, 1 December 1887).

A boat club was also founded in 1884 and an athletic club in 1885. With the admission of women to the University in 1881 there was also a crossing of the gender divide. The tennis club established in 1885 admitted both males and females. There were attempts to establish a number of other clubs such as rifle, golf, bicycle, golf, lacrosse, Australian Rules Football and Association football. Of these only the Australian Rules Football Club played in competition in 1887. The decade of the 1880s witnessed a general growth of University societies and clubs, and sport was the centre of these changes. The proliferation of sporting clubs required the establishment of the University of Sydney Sports Union in 1890, which brought together supervision over the various sporting clubs and opening membership to undergraduates, as well as graduates of Sydney and other recognised universities. The first affiliated clubs were the cricket, rugby, boat, athletics and tennis clubs (Hermes, 15 December 1890). The 'Blues' system was established in 1892 and generally the 'Blue' was given to representatives in the intervarsity events. The establishment of the Sports Union formalised the place of sport within the University. Until then, the University's encouragement of sport related more to the use of space. Thus the Senate had sanctioned the use of an oval since 1858. The establishment of the tennis club in 1885 had also led to the creation of tennis courts within the main quadrangle. The Senate also gave the Union generous financial and moral support although the Sports Union became a viable organisation in 1895 when it fenced off the oval and charged admission to football and cricket matches (SUSU annual, 1896). The gate receipts for 1904 alone were almost £4000, which meant there were adequate funds for capital works (SUSU annual, 1905). Yet the creation of the Sports Union provided general support from the governing body. The president of the new Sports Union was officially the Chancellor of the University while a number of academic staff held senior committee positions, including vice-president.

These developments of the late 19th and the early 20th century secured the foundation for university sport. Firstly we can see that development proceeded as an alliance between central support for sporting activities and the development of local club level. In areas such as rugby, cricket, tennis, athletics and boating, the 'club' continued to make substantial gains in the inter-club competition. The boat club first won the Premiership Pennant in 1895.
and in that year five members of the club were selected to represent the colony in the Intercolonial Eight Race (Sydney University Boat Club annual report, 1896). So strong was the boat club that it changed the rules and regulations, which governed the sport in Australia and also introduced revolutionary rowing techniques.

In the very early 1900s the athletics club was the premier club and included athletes such as Nigel Barker, the university’s first Olympian. By 1910, over a third of the 1500-student population was representing the University in teams engaged in regular competition. Before World War I sport played a major part in the lives of students and this is demonstrated in an article titled ‘The value of sport’, which appeared in the undergraduate student magazine Hermes (5 May 1890, p5) and noted:

Sports require and promote pluck, endurance, perseverance, watchfulness, cool-headedness, judgment and obedience. No one can be a satisfactory member of a team who is deficient in any of these qualities; and it is noticeable that a large proportion of those who excel in sports and are most amenable to the discipline they entail, also receive distinction in their University studies and in after life.

The second related development in the late 19th century was the growth of separate club organisations from women. This began in the 1880s with the creation of a Ladies Tennis Club in 1887. In part this was also the impact of the first wave of feminism stimulated by the opening of the Women’s College in 1892. The tennis club played a substantial role in the lives of the women and Hermes noted: “Our tennis club which is invaluable as a medium for social intercourse, difficult to bring about in any other way, is in a most prosperous condition, its members’ roll numbering over 50” (25 April 1891). The number represented over half the female undergraduate students for 1891. The first intervarsity women’s meeting took place in 1908 in Sydney between Sydney and Melbourne.

Women’s involvement in the Tennis Club was echoed in the establishment of the Boat Club in 1896 and the Hockey Club in 1908. In 1910, the Sydney University Women’s Sports Association (SUWSA) was formed with the Senate again sanctioning such a move, and also granting use of space through what became known as the Hockey Square (Lilenthal, 1997). The SUWSA was formed so creating a gender divide in the administration of sport which continued until the 21st century. The first aspect is emphasised from the beginning by the University’s support for the clubs and their competitions before World War I. This was also justified by direct reference to sport as an educational ideology, for example athleticism and its related form in amateurism. This was first intended as a male ideology; in the case of women ‘athleticism’ as an educational practice was also associated with late 19th century feminism and the creation of specific sporting competitions for females. Hence the continuing strength of the ‘traditional organised games’ rugby and cricket for men and tennis and hockey for women.

It seems then that sport was principally supported at the individual club level and in their related competitions, including competitions within the University, such as interfaculty and intercollegiate contests. District competitions and intervarsity events also were supported through the clubs within the Sports Union structure. Individual members paid to belong to clubs under the umbrella of either the Sports Union or the Sydney University Women’s Sports Association. The University gave support principally in the area of grounds
administration and the use of space or by specific grants to the two associations. The two associations would then distribute allotments to the various clubs.

World War I proved to be very problematic for sport at the University of Sydney because all sport ceased between 1915 and 1919. Tragically many of the University’s athletes enlisted and perished. Although working-class sporting activity in Australia continued throughout the war years, the University’s clubs encouraged and prided themselves on having club members enlisting and invoked a formal hiatus in their activities. Typical of this attitude is the 1915 Tennis Club annual report which noted: “In 1914 since the outbreak of war many of your members have volunteered. Amongst them were four members of last year’s winning Intervarsity team. Many members who have been staunch supporters of this Club have left to play a better game at the Front.” In the wider community professional sporting associations such as Rugby League and soccer continued during the war and gained popularity.

After WWI there was a resumption of sporting activity although it was quite clear that the Sports Union found itself in financial trouble and needed urgent funds to improve facilities, as during the War there was no upkeep of facilities. Competition from other ovals built by district sporting clubs meant that the Sports Union knew that the days of large revenues from the oval were gone. Therefore in 1920 the first concerted effort was made for compulsory Sports Union membership, that is the introduction of a compulsory sports fee for all students. The Sports Union argued that only with this introduction could sport be returned to pre-World War I conditions. The Senate rejected the plea but provided more generous funding. For the next two decades the Senate showed great resistance in introducing the compulsory sports fees. In effect what this ultimately meant was that elite athletes played for sporting clubs outside the University and the days of the University having leading cricket, boat, athletic and tennis clubs were over. Only the Rugby Union Club maintained a dominant position in the Sydney sporting scene after World War I.

While at this elite level sport haemorrhaged, the situation at both the lower amateur and social level was different. University sport was booming and for example at the club level there was a proliferation of new clubs which included: amateur Rugby League, swimming, ice skating, fencing, glider, ski, soccer, golf, boxing and wrestling clubs, while the women established the aquatic, cricket, golf, ski and fencing clubs. All clubs were student run and while allotments from the sports union were not generous the students themselves embarked on their own fund-raising drives. In the 1920s a popular event was the annual sports union fete, which in 1922 alone raised more than £2000 (Union Recorder, 28 September 1922).

The University of Sydney was a principal mover in forming the Australian University Sports Association in 1919, which was the first national sporting body to be created in Australia for the promotion and provision of sporting opportunities for University athletes (AUSA minutes, 1919). Typical of this influence was Professor Harvey Sutton who served on the executive from its formation straight through to World War II. Unlike current Australian University Games which are hosted by one University during the semester break, in the 1920s and 1930s sporting contests were held at different venues at different times of the year (Jamieson, 1985). Intervarsity competitions flourished in this period despite the transportation costs and limitations of the era.
Finally, the inter-war years also saw the rise of interfaculty sport which the Sports Union attempted successfully established as an important feature of university life. In 1919 there was interfaculty Rugby and two years later there were three sports: Rugby, boating and cricket. By 1924 each faculty had an interfaculty committee that co-ordinated the selection and running of sports within their faculty. The Sports Union drew rules and regulations and championships were inaugurated, and the Penfolds Shield was awarded to the winning faculty. The idea behind interfaculty competition was that it would increase the coffers of the Sports Union because athletes would be made to join the Sports Union in order to represent their faculty; in the process it engendered a culture of mass sporting participation.

POST-WORLD WAR II

Until the 1950s entrance to University was restricted to those who had matriculated and to those who could afford the tuition fees. While other universities such as Melbourne and Adelaide charged a compulsory sports fee before World War I, the University of Sydney resisted the introduction of such a fee for several years, although there were concerted efforts in the 1920s and 1930s. The introduction of compulsory sports fees in 1951 to first year students corresponds with the University moving from being an elite institution to a mass institution. For example, by 1959 the University of Sydney was gaining a thousand more students each year (Connell, et. al., 1995, p. 65), creating a need for balance in providing facilities for all students to participate in sport while still supporting the traditional clubs in their elite competitions. Hence there were specific policies for expanding facilities and appointing paid sports administrators of the men’s Sports Union and the women’s Sports Association. There was also renewed expansion of clubs beyond the traditional areas of organised games. But this growth in the numbers of sports and clubs was accompanied by the ‘uncertainty’ of the traditional clubs and, at times, their decline at club level competitions. The University continued its traditional support, but the traditional role of universities in producing elite athletes was changing with the emergence of specialist sporting organisations and ultimately with the establishment of the Australian Institute of Sport in 1980.

While sports in general were booming, the University began to question the place of sport in its programme. As sport became more professional in administration and competitive structure the traditional University clubs came under threat, even in the privileged sports of Rugby and cricket (Hickie, 1998). Between 1972 and 1996 the Rugby Union Club won only one first division premiership and was dropped into second division in 1979. The University found it hard to adapt to the professional era. By hanging on to the amateur ideal since World War I, the University suffered on the sporting field. There was also the other problem that the University did not have a monopoly on tertiary education students and elite athletes played sport at other universities. This was exacerbated with the opening of the Australian Institute of Sport in 1980. This phenomenon was replicated in all the tradition sports such as cricket, Rugby, tennis, athletics and boating. While the Sports Union always balanced the books there was no clear policy regarding the promotion of elite sport and teams.
The introduction of compulsory sports fees meant that the Sports Union embarked on a policy of building facilities. In 1956, for the first time, there was a surplus of £1100 due to the income generated from the compulsory sports fee and the Sports Union turned its attention to long overdue capital works. Capital works included a second asphalt basketball court adjacent to Manning House and the building of squash courts in 1956; in 1957 the HK Ward Gymnasium near the Ovals was built; this was followed by the erection of a large sports hall next to the HK Ward Gymnasium in 1966; while the last major capital works was the building of the Darlington Sports Centre in 1971 which also housed a 50-metre Olympic swimming pool. In 1976 a pavilion was also built on the No.1 Oval.

One of the most visible aspects of the post-WWII period was the introduction of non-traditional sports to the university. This was obviously partly due to the fact there was a huge increase in the number and diversity of students, but also in response to do with the fact that new sports were being introduced to the wider Australian society, such as surfing. There was also a developing emphasis on more recreational sports such as weight-lifting and aerobics; while a more visible ethnic element at the university resulted in the introduction of sports such as karate and volleyball.

Since the late 1980s there have been major changes in all Australian universities' administration. By 1990 it was decided that sport at Sydney University needed to be run like a business and needed to compete with outside sporting competitors. This meant expanding the commercial facilities to make it a more viable operation. The facilities of the University needed to be opened up to the public and engage with the community. Also in 1990, sporting scholarships were adopted to attract athletes to the University and within a decade they had grown to over 200. This revival was supported by a signing of a memorandum of agreement with the New South Wales Institute of Sport. By the time the Sports Union amalgamated with the women's sporting association there was a system that enabled bright people to achieve their sporting and academic potential simultaneously and the University was transformed into an organisation that regularly performed at the highest level across a range of sports. In fact University clubs again became the benchmark in Australian sporting codes such as Rugby, rowing, water polo and cricket. Not since the glory days of university sport before World War I had sport loomed large in the culture of the University.

In 2003 alone, the Rugby Union Club provided four players for the Australian squad at the 2003 Rugby World Cup and in that same year the club won all Colt competitions, a feat never achieved before. In the 2003-04 cricket season the Cricket Club won the first grade premiership, and ended an 89-year drought, while the Sydney Uni Flames became the flagship team in the Women’s National Basketball League. Since the inception of the Australian University Games in 1993, Sydney University has won eight times including the last six. In 2004 there were more than 60 clubs affiliated with the University and 45 athletes from Sydney University clubs represented Australia at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. There were highly qualified professional coaches and staff who ensured that sport and study receive equal attention.

In 2005 the introduction of VSU threatened to destroy what so many people had worked so hard to achieve. Both sporting participation rates and financial support of elite sport were at risk of fallout from removal of the compulsory student union membership. The legislation would prohibit the University from collecting student fees to provide sport and
fitness facilities or to support clubs and athletes. The last decade has seen the University invest more in attempting to revive competitive sport in a professional way, but the University also continues to try to provide sporting facilities for all students – hence the importance of the VSU debate.

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, the University of Sydney has been an institution where students have been able to experience the broadest range of intellectual, sporting and social life. The University of Sydney traditionally has been about far more than the transfer of knowledge. It has been about giving youth an opportunity to transform themselves. The role of sport in this transformation has been central; providing both mass and sociable sporting participation and the opportunity for individual expression in elite sport. The introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism by the Howard Coalition Government in July 2006 has threatened the nature and role of intervarsity sport in Australia and the traditions of participation and elite competition, built up by Sydney University over more than 150 years. Sydney University sport automatically lost $3.3 million of its funding, almost 30 per cent of its revenue. Like the previous battles and issues faced by the university it will respond to this challenge because of the value placed in its sporting culture. The strength of this culture is reflected in Sydney University sport’s strong and passionate alumni; rich illustrious history; the support it receives from the Senate; and the greatest asset of all – the students, who, ever since Arts student, John Kinlock took 11 wickets for the University on April 8, 1854, have found personal and community expression in sporting pursuits.

REFERENCES


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