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A Sporting Chance: Indigenous Sports Collections at the State Library of NSW

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Abstract:

The Australian obsession with sport – across a variety of codes and over numerous playing levels, from amateur to professional – is well known. What is not as obvious within the history books or within club records are the contributions to the Australian sporting tradition made by Indigenous athletes. This paper celebrates a long history of Indigenous participation through three brief case studies. The first case study will focus on individual excellence through the story of an Indigenous boxer, the second will examine Indigenous contributions to cricket and the third will explore Indigenous involvement in rugby league. Each study will be based upon the unique collection materials held by the State Library of NSW and will thus serve to demonstrate that old stories are vital to new histories of sport. Moreover this paper will unpack the wider benefits, to Indigenous communities, through engagement with different types of sport as participants and as supporters.

Note: *This paper has the potential to be repurposed for the Popular Culture of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ) Annual Conference in 2016. PopCAANZ has a growing sport area and offers presenters the opportunity to have their work published in refereed conference proceedings.*

Acknowledgement of Country

Acknowledgement of Country (Darwin); also, acknowledgement of the countries which support the paper being read here today (Newcastle and Victoria's Western Districts).

Introduction (Slide 1)

The Australian obsession with sport – across a variety of codes and over numerous playing levels from amateur to professional, from individual to team pursuits and from local to national and international competitions – is well known. Indeed it has been noted that '[We are] a country for which sporting success is a key indication of national success' (Freedman in Bryant 2011: online).

Many Australians, we believe, would be able to name Indigenous sportsmen and women who have excelled over recent years: Cathy Freeman, Nova Peris, Adam Goodes, Greg Inglis and Anthony Mundine are just a few of the names that have made it from the sporting arena and into popular culture. Yet, what is not as obvious within the history books, or even within some club records, are the contributions to the Australian sporting tradition made by Indigenous athletes across over two centuries of sporting history. This paper celebrates a long history of Indigenous participation through three brief case studies. The first case study will focus on individual excellence through the story of an Indigenous boxer, the second will examine Indigenous contributions to cricket and the third will explore Indigenous involvement in the football codes.

Each study will be based upon the unique collection materials held by the State Library of NSW **(Slide 2)** and will serve to clearly demonstrate that old stories are vital to new histories of sport. These studies will also highlight the imperative of contemporary collecting. As the collections held inform students and scholars of sport today; we need to ensure we preserve today's sporting stories - Indigenous and non-Indigenous - for everyone - from the sporting enthusiast to the sporting researcher - for tomorrow.

Boxing (Slide 3)

Boxing, as a sport for individuals, has captured the public imagination over the years and has produced - in contrast to the more collaborative, if still highly competitive, nature of team sports - numerous heroes that have inspired national celebrations. The Library's collections capture some of the figures central to these successes including materials on Les Darcy.

Often ignored but central to the boxing narrative of Australia are the many Indigenous boxers who have competed at amateur and professional levels over the years. One of the more prominent examples of these boxers is Keith B. Saunders (Slide 4). Saunders was born in South Cardiff, near Newcastle in New South Wales in 1934. A child in one of only three Aboriginal families in the area, his mother relocated the family to Redfern in inner-Sydney in the early 1940s. Billy McConnell - owner of a gymnasium in nearby Chippendale - saw Saunders when he was just thirteen and immediately recognised boxing potential. McConnell took Saunders on: training him and guiding his early boxing career. Amateur success came early and in 1950 Saunders made the New South Wales State boxing finals. This was soon followed by professional success when, just two years later, he had his first professional fight at the Sydney Stadium. Within a decade, in 1959, *Australian Ring* magazine rated Saunders as the 7th best welterweight fighter in Australia. Despite this top ten ranking Saunders was forced to retire prematurely from boxing in 1966. The numerous boxing bouts had taken their toll and Saunders was suffering from brain damage. Despite this significant setback, such was the talent that Saunders had, he made two comebacks: the first was in 1968 and the second was in 1970 before he went back into retirement never to return, competitively, to the ring. Keith Saunders died in November 2003.

The Library purchased the Keith Saunders collection in February 2004. The two boxes of material provide insight into one of Australia's more resilient boxing figures. Of particular interest, within these papers, are the handwritten, draft manuscripts of *Learning the Ropes* (1992) and *Myall Road* (1998) (Slide 5). There are also typed copies of these, with handwritten additions and corrections. The rich textual history these documents present, provide researchers with a range of insights into the evolution of these quite unique works. We argue these texts are unique for a number of reasons:

- They talk about boxing first hand; many boxers are the subject of biographical works - particularly big names such as Muhammad Ali - but is it rare for boxers to write their own accounts.
- Saunders' handwriting, which we share with you today (Slide 6), is also extraordinary. Saunders had a difficult life, dominated by family and work issues. Yet his handwriting is neat and consistent; almost copperplate in nature with long cursive flourishes.
- This collection is unique, too, because of the personal nature of the journey. Such records are often associated with literary giants rather than sporting heroes.

Cricket (Slide 7)

Cricket, in Australia, across all formats has been labelled a national obsession. Crowds converge on the nation's great grounds to watch Test matches, One Day International contests and the comparatively new Twenty20 version of the game. Indeed, in 'every season, every tour, every series, remarkable batting feats are celebrated, wickets fall dramatically and legends are created' (SLNSW DC).

As recently as March of this year, David Gallop of Football Federation Australia questioned this obsession and claimed the Socceroos were now the only national sporting team that 'truly represents' a diverse Australia (in Barrett 2015: online). The chief executive of Cricket Australia, James Sutherland, was quick to respond, suggesting that:

It's typically cricket first, followed by daylight. And of course that's backed up by record crowds, television audiences and participation rates which demonstrate the game's health and continued popularity. Part of the reason is that the Australian team is ever-present. The cricket season is part of the very fabric of Australian culture (in Barrett 2015: online).

Sports writer Chris Barrett supported the pre-eminence of cricket noting that it is 'often said that the Test captaincy is the second most important office in the country behind the Prime Minister' (2015: online).

Within the significant sporting collections of the State Library of NSW there is a wonderful array of material which helps to tell - what could be described as the elegant - story of cricket. The great narrative of cricket in Australia is dominated by the sport's best-known names: Victor Trumper, Donald Bradman and Richie Benaud to name only a few. Yet, much like the marginalisation of women's sport over the centuries; the contributions of Indigenous men and women to our sporting history have, often, failed to maintain their place in the public imagination alongside their peers.

(Slide 8) An excellent example of what we describe here as 'silencing the crowd' is the first Australian cricket team to tour England. This team, of thirteen players, set sail in 1868. Each of those players was an Aboriginal man from Victoria's Western Districts. The record books reveal that the men competed in a total of 47 two-day games across a six-month period: 'The team was on the field for 99 out of a possible 126 days' (Indigenous Cricketers).

Attracting large crowds the team produced an impressive record of nineteen draws, fourteen losses and fourteen wins (Indigenous Cricketers).

This was in addition to providing displays of what were labelled 'native sports', such as boomerang and spear throwing. In this way, we argue, both the game of cricket and the Indigenous squad who toured England in 1868 were slighted: cricket was transformed into a tourist attraction while, more significantly, Indigenous men were hybridised as athletes and curiosities - missing opportunities to both acknowledge the importance of Australia's first touring cricket team and to critically engage with Indigenous culture. The Library is custodian for a range of material that documents this important tour including the scorebook (**Slide 9**); a glorious tour poster (congratulating, if only in passing, each of the thirteen men to have made the squad) (**Slide 10**); and photographs. These stunning resources, digitised and now available online, provide a window into a world that is rarely explored.

Rugby League and Australian Rules (Slide 11)

Rugby football has evolved significantly since the game was first played in Australia in the 1860s. Found in two formats, or codes, Australians have enjoyed national and international success in both rugby league (full contact, 13 players) and rugby union (full contact, 15 players). We here profile materials that document some of the rich history of rugby league.

One of the highlights within the State Library's suite of materials relating to rugby league is the very well-regarded Tom Brock Collection (**Slide 12**). This collection, transferred to the Library from the University of New South Wales in 2006, was assembled by the historian of the South Sydney Rabbitohs¹, the late Tom Brock. This collection of rugby league books, magazines, photographs, letters and 'footy cards' is an eminent source on rugby league football at state, national and international levels, though the bulk this collection will be of particular relevance to those undertaking research into the history of the South Sydney foundation club². The Tom Brock Collection has informed numerous projects, most notably in the form of Tom Brock scholarships and the Annual Tom Brock Lecture Series.

Rugby in both forms is particularly popular in NSW. Here in the Northern Territory, Australian Rules football has gripped the public imagination. The Library has some collections of interest that document this game in the Northern Territory. The papers of Elisabeth Donnison

¹ It might be appropriate to point out that the South Sydney Football Club is the most successful club in the history of Australian Rugby League.

² It might be appropriate to burst into song at this point: "*Glory, glory to South Sydney! South Sydney marches on!*"

(Slide 13), for example, contain a wealth of photographs – which have been used by football historians, from the Territory – drawing on the team photographs taken around the time of the First World War and into the early 1920s. We have selected four photographs to share with you today. The first is a team photo of the Waratahs Football Club, taken at what is described on the back as the first Australian Rules football match played in Darwin. The year is 1916. The player marked with a cross in ink (middle row, far right) is Larry Donnison, who sent these photos back to his mother, Elisabeth, in Sydney. The second photo shows the Waratahs in season 1917. That man third from left in the back row is Reuben Cooper: more about him in a moment. The third photo shows another founding team and 1917 premiers, the Wanderers. The fourth photo shows the Vestseys team, so-called because most of its players worked at the Vestseys Meatworks. They were later known as the Darwin Football Club and nicknamed the Buffalos. The man with the ball is Reuben Cooper. Reuben identified himself as being of mixed descent, was later a sawmill owner and Aboriginal rights advocate. Reuben Cooper is said to have been the inspiration for the character Norman Shillingsworth in Xavier Herbert's legendary novel *Capricornia*.

Another Northern Territory-based collection is the R. Brian W. Browning collection **(Slide 14)**. The items within this unique collection include pictorial material across a range of sporting activities including the football carnivals held in Darwin in 1931 and 1932. Many photos relate to the processions that took place on the way to the football carnivals. **(Slide 15)** For those interested in other forms of sport, there are also photographs of cricket teams and race days. Interestingly, this collection also includes photographs of Darwin, 1922-1933, including aerial photographs of the city. This allows researchers, through a single set of materials, to explore not only the *how* of sport but also the *where* of sport. Situating teams, games and larger events onto a geographical image. This plays well into the idea of sporting rivalries and opens up a way to plot these. Sitting alongside these pictures are photographs from the riots that occurred in Darwin, in 1931, between Darwin police, the city's unemployed and communists **(Slide 16)**. This also allows for sport, often thought of as a social activity, to be placed in a broader – in this instance a political – context.

With the Library's broad collections, such location-specific materials can also be examined in situ with materials that document a national history of Australian Rules. Similarly, the club-specific and general histories of rugby league can be researched: rich collections, sitting alongside each other, presenting old stories that – when co-located with complementary collection materials – can be examined in new ways.

Community Benefits (Slide 17)

We also, today, want to highlight some of the wider benefits, to Indigenous communities, through engagement with different types of sport as participants and as supporters. Sport, as everyone here would know - and many here would have directly experienced - creates communities. There has been much made of the benefits of sporting to Indigenous communities over recent years with programs including AFL and cricket reporting a variety of positive outcomes such as increased wellbeing and the offering of valuable mentoring not easily obtainable in other spaces. Janelle Saffin has noted that,

Sport can be the 'hook' or 'vehicle' to provide opportunities for communities to come together, to encourage Indigenous participation in education and employment, and to demonstrate positive behaviours through local and elite sporting role models (2013 : v) **(Slide 18)**

Through highlighting our collections and celebrating sport we also hope to encourage greater engagement with Indigenous history and culture. There are also opportunities to change how this occurs. In the past Indigenous athletes have been used as an entree into a non-Indigenous world: today there are examples - though more are needed - of people coming to Indigenous athletes, not as curiosities as highlighted in our brief summary of the experiences of our first touring cricketers, but coming to these men and women to admire them, to commiserate with their losses and to celebrate their wins.

Collection Highlights (Slide 19)

The sporting collections at the State Library of NSW are, of course, much broader than a single presentation can accommodate. Treasures at the Library for sports historians and sporting enthusiasts include:

- The first sports book produced in Australia: *Field Sports of the Native Inhabitants* (1813) **(Slide 20)**
- The sod, a sample of the top dressing of the Sydney Cricket Ground pitch from the 1932 - the year of the infamous Bodyline series; as well as the cables sent from Test matches so that the games could be called on British radio **(Slide 21)**
- Diaries of champion swimmer Shane Gould which document her time at the

Munich Olympics (Slide 22)

- The collections also hold official records of clubs and associations, ephemera and photographs (Slide 23).
- Records of sporting clubs, associations and organisations such as the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (Slide 24).

These collections, we believe, highlight the necessity to continue to collect in this - often neglected area - as these stories contribute, in so many ways, to our national story. Contemporary collecting is a goal for many institutions and the State Library of NSW, through a strong Collection Development Policy, is actively working to improve collections across a range of areas and to increase our holdings of materials that document Indigenous histories and support a greater understanding of those histories.

Conclusion

This paper has, very briefly, looked at some of the sporting history collections held at the State Library of NSW, with particular attention paid to Indigenous sporting histories around boxing, cricket, rugby and Aussie rules. We have also highlighted some of the more important items held from Australia's first sporting book to a significant sod of soil. It is our hope that this work has served to shine a light on Indigenous sport in Australia and how critical this history is to the broader, national sporting narrative. We hope, too, that this paper simultaneously serves as an invitation to explore the Library's rich collections: onsite or online. Thank you (Slide 25).

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