

Sport and the New Zealanders A History

Greg Ryan & Geoff Watson



‘. . . those two mighty products of the land, the Canterbury lamb and the All Blacks, have made New Zealand what she is in spite of politicians’ claims to the contrary’, wrote Dick Brittenden in 1954. ‘For many in New Zealand, prowess at sport replaces the social graces; in the pubs, during the furious session between 5pm and closing time an hour later, the friend of a relative of a horse trainer is a veritable patriarch. No matador in Madrid, no tenor in Turin could be sure of such flattering attention.’

As Brittenden suggested, sport has played a central part in the social and cultural history of Aotearoa New Zealand throughout its history. This book tells the story of sport in New Zealand for the first time, from the Māori world to today’s professional athletes. Through rugby and netball, bodybuilding and surf life-saving, the book introduces readers to the history of the codes, the organisations and the players. It takes us into the stands and on to the sidelines to examine the meaning of sport to its participants, its followers, and to the communities to which they belonged.

Why did rugby become much more important than soccer in New Zealand? What role have Māori played in our sporting life? Do we really ‘punch above our weight’ in international sport? Does sport still define our national identity? Viewing New Zealand sport as activity and as imagination, *Sport and the New Zealanders* is a major history of a central strand of New Zealand life.

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Introduction

Such a diversity of assets as the tuatara lizard, social security, mutton birds, butter, racegoers, kiwis, boiling mud pools and those two mighty products of the land, the Canterbury lamb and the All Blacks, have made New Zealand what she is in spite of politicians’ claims to the contrary. But if New Zealand has anything in common with her distant friends, it is in her love of sport. Rugby, horse racing and trotting, yachting, tennis, skiing, cricket, golf, swimming and motor racing are not so much supported as worshipped, and the devotion is sufficiently catholic to embrace even such ludicrous nonsense as modern professional wrestling. For many in New Zealand, prowess at sport replaces the social graces; in the pubs, during the furious session between 5pm and closing time an hour later, the friend of a relative of a horse trainer is a veritable patriarch. No matador in Madrid, no tenor in Turin could be sure of such flattering attention.¹

Why *does* sport mean so much to so many New Zealanders? Although written in 1954, Dick Brittenden’s observation in *Silver Fern on the Veld* remains an accurate diagnosis of the New Zealand sporting condition. But how does one explain its existence? A short answer might be that, historically, sport has provided a consistent source of success and self-worth for a country often insecure about its place on the international stage. But this is only a partial response. To attempt to answer this question, we first need to understand the nature of sport itself and what, in the history of New Zealand, has elevated sport to its present status.

This book examines what sports have been played in New Zealand and why people have chosen to participate in them. It also asks what sport has meant to its participants and followers and the communities to which they belonged. Those who study sport agree that, among human activities, it has a unique capacity to shape

the self-image of communities. The reason for this lies in the way sport is intimately connected with both the everyday world in which we live and the possible world we construct through our imaginations. It is an arena where the abstract ('if only the coach had selected the right players we would have won') intersects with the concrete ('we got an absolute caning out there!'). Sporting encounters may in themselves be ephemeral, but they generate enduring memories. This element of sport is, perhaps, best expressed by British historian Richard Holt when he wrote that 'sports have a heroic and mythical dimension; they are, in a sense, a story we tell ourselves about ourselves'.²

In the case of New Zealand, some of these stories are immediately apparent. The most prominent story is that New Zealand is a great sporting nation which 'punches above its weight' on the world stage. There is more than a kernel of truth here, as there are many outstanding examples of New Zealanders who have become world champions, including Anthony Wilding in tennis, Peter Snell in athletics, Erin Baker in triathlon and Susan Devoy in squash. At times, though perhaps not as often as legend would have us believe, New Zealand has also produced some exceptionally talented sporting teams, such as the 1924 'Invincible' All Blacks in rugby and the 1976 men's hockey team that won an Olympic gold medal. Such teams are popularly regarded as embodying a broad New Zealand identity, as their success was apparently due to collective and egalitarian endeavour rather than superior resources and elite support.

The influence of sport as a shaper of identity extends far beyond the national level. It shapes individual memory and self-worth, while simultaneously engendering school, club, ethnic and provincial identities. At any one time, a follower of sport may be a supporter of their club, province and national team, and perhaps also a supra-national team such as the Australasian Olympic teams of 1908 or 1912. At times, these loyalties appear contradictory. One might deride a particular player when they are playing against your province yet cheer that same person when they are part of the national team. In the unwritten moral code of sport such potential conflicts are reconciled, often without need of explanation or examination.

For the purposes of this book, sport is broadly defined, following Richard Holt, as 'pleasurable physical activity, which is normally organised and competitive but need not be so'.³ The simplicity of this definition, however, should not obscure the fact that sport comprises much more than physical activity. It can provide a lens through which to view the world. While being very much a part of everyday life, sport also exists in a parallel moral universe. Historically, advocates of sport assert that it teaches its participants the values of maintaining discipline, accepting the decisions of match officials, understanding the importance of fair play and putting

the interests of the team ahead of selfish goals. Its participants, while not entirely discounting these sentiments, tend to invest sport with less altruistic values. At a practical level, these may include the need to bend the rules in order to win. John Mulgan, writing of New Zealanders' pragmatic approach to sport, believed it aided the armed forces during the Second World War because 'they looked on war as a game, and a game to New Zealanders is something they play to win, against the other side, and the referee if necessary'.⁴

Sport also creates its own geography. Some New Zealand sports enthusiasts, otherwise uninterested in international affairs, know many places in the world by their sports grounds. Hence London is associated with Lord's and Twickenham, and Melbourne with the Melbourne Cricket Ground. There is also an emotional geography of sport in which place names evoke spatial recognition and a state of mind. Cardiff in Wales, otherwise not especially significant for many New Zealanders, evokes memories of the disallowed Deans try in 1905 (the first of many sporting defeats that morphed into moral victories) and the All Blacks' earliest exit from the Rugby World Cup, during the 2007 quarter-final match against France.

That sport has generated many stories about New Zealand is easily demonstrated. Explaining the resonance of these narratives is a more complex undertaking. Why, of all the tales that people tell each other, have sporting stories proved so enduring? Part of the explanation is that they are closely aligned with what New Zealanders like to think about themselves and their place in the world. It is important to remember here that, historically speaking, New Zealand is a young country. Moreover, the dominant national story for many years was that New Zealand history began with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. Exactly when a distinct New Zealand political and cultural entity emerged is vigorously contested, but it is generally located somewhere between the 1870s and 1914. New entities, whatever their form, seek foundation stories to consecrate their existence. When, in the later nineteenth century, authors were endeavouring to write national stories that harmoniously accommodated New Zealand's numerically and politically dominant Anglo-Saxon population and marginalised Māori communities, sport was a useful symbol. It substantiated New Zealand's self-image as a nation created by hard-working pioneers. Sport connected New Zealand with its fellow British colonies and with Britain itself, which was still widely referred to as 'home'; it also provided a means by which New Zealand differentiated itself from these places. At a time when many feared that urbanisation had compromised the moral and physical character of the Anglo-Saxon race, New Zealand presented itself as a place where these ills had apparently been averted because most of its citizens lived in rural areas. It was a self-image into which Māori were selectively admitted, their



Tennis player Kathleen Nunneley serving to an opponent, c. 1899. She was unquestionably New Zealand's first female sporting star and won numerous titles both locally and in Australia. *Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, MNZ-0947-1/4-F*



ABOVE The Woolworths Ltd girls' marching team competing in the third annual sports meeting of the Wellington Inter-House Girls' Association at the Basin Reserve in November 1935. Marching was to gain even greater popularity following the physical welfare initiatives of the first Labour government from 1937. *Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, 1/2-C-016178-F*

BELOW G. Baker competing in the high jump at the New Zealand Division athletics championships held at the Farouk Stadium in Cairo, Egypt, on 11 August 1942. Baker achieved a record jump of 5 feet, 3.5 inches. *Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, DA-04387*



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