



The Black Dog of Swimming: Mental Illness and Australia's Sporting Industrial Complex

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the cultural and social crisis facing the sporting celebrity, with specific reference to the Australian athlete in the field of swimming. In that sense, this paper argues that parallels in other political systems for ruthless, sustained success, and the loss occasioned by it to individual sports figures, should be considered. Liberal democracies can still be perpetrating systems of sporting depression and mental illness, undermining their representatives in a relentless drive for performance and medals. The problem lies in what might be best described as a sporting industrial complex, one that emerged in Australia with the professionalization of sports.

KEYWORDS

mental illness, Australian swimming, health, sporting industrial complex

“Great sport begins where good health ends”

Bertolt Brecht

The scene begins with a perceived failure. Montreal 1976. The Australian athletes, notably those in the pool, are considered to have fallen short of expectations in these Olympics. From golden hopes, athletes were returning with bronze medals. A revolution at home was needed. “Sport... provides a uniquely effectively medium for inculcating national feelings; it provides a form of symbolic action which states the case for the nation itself” (Garvie, 1993, p. 74). Sport invariably divides as well. It computes winning and losing formulas, suggesting that competition is fundamental, and loss inevitable (Booth, 1995, p. 8). By the 1988 summer games in Seoul, the Australian swimming coach, Laurie Lawrence, provided an unmistakable picture of hysteria, whooping and throwing his hat about after Duncan Armstrong won gold in the 200m freestyle event in record time. “He did it again. Lucky lane six.” The interviewer, on asking him how he felt at the victory, was received an unequivocal response: “Mate, we just beat three record-holders. How do *you* feel?” The ultimate response in conclusion as he storms off is one of purpose. “Why do you think we come here? For the silver? Stuff the silver!” (YouTube Clip, 2008).

To come second, in the Australian sporting argot, is tantamount to not winning, a degree worse than losing. Such attitudes, and the sheer ferocity of the professional training culture, notably in such sports as swimming, deemed the traditional province of Australian prowess at the Olympics, has taken its toll.

Toll, costs, losses – appropriate words considering Thorsten Veblen’s consideration of sport as a subliminal war effort, “partly simple and unreflected expressions of an attitude of emulative ferocity, partly activities deliberately entered upon with a view to gaining repute for prowess.” Accordingly, sports “shade off from the basis of hostile combat, through skill, to cunning and chicanery, without its being possible to draw a line at any point” (Veblen, 1899, p. 255). The sporting pursuit, as US jurist Richard A. Posner claims, takes note of “the innate human delight – archaic as it may seem in our age rich in egalitarian pretense – in innate human hierarchies” be they agility, physical coordination, beauty or brilliance (Posner, 2008, p. 1729).

As in conventional conflicts, the warriors suffer various traumas. There are symbolic slayings, losses not necessarily seen, let alone appreciated. Devastating as these are, the costs are not necessarily factored in till years after an event. Some are acutely physical; others deeply psychological. The German Democratic Republic, notably through its programmatic use of doping, left casualties (Franke & Berendonk, 1997; Berendonk, 1991). Easily overlooked have been current sporting regimes, irrespective of their political orientation, who have likewise left their negative mark.

In broader sporting discourse, mental health has only featured as a means of release rather than a burden, a form of comfort in times of social and economic distress. Physical strength and fitness attitudes were shaped, in the Australian context, by such tropes as the masculine, vital pioneer figuring “toughness, manliness, a never-give-in attitude” (Dunstan, 1973, noted in Parker, 1996). This was sport as panacea; sport as saviour. The romanticisation of Australian sport reached its zenith during the Depression years, when sport became enlisted as a means of coping with economic hardship and distress. Economic privation and unemployment during the Depression might well be countered by physical activity on the field, channelling frustration.

In the last two decades, some interest in the sporting literature has tilted, if slightly, in favour of the mental health of the athlete. The examination of autobiographies by Newman, Howells and Fletcher, who considered twelve accounts by elite athletes, identified the following tendencies. Sport was seen, at least at the outset, as an escape from depression itself, be that in the form of external stressors (bereavement) and internal stressors (low self-esteem). But the facilitative nature of their sport did, in time, become debilitating. Sport was thereby acknowledged by the athletes as a means that could not dispel depression and might, in fact, inhibit performance (Newman, Fletcher & Fletcher, 2016).

This discussion commences with filling in the background about the obsession with the sporting edge as an industrial complex linked to politics and social prowess, then bringing it back to a specific case study: the cost occasioned to Australian swimmers, drawing upon precedents in other fields where necessary. It can be argued, more broadly speaking, that swimming remains both the superhuman domain of performance, and the most public repository of broken minds and bodies. A long overdue social and cultural examination of this phenomenon is offered, suggesting the neglect by the State and sporting establishments, more broadly, to the welfare of athletes.

Industrial incentives to win

Instrumentalising sports, in general terms, is a theme that historians have picked up in scholarship, characterised by such efforts as Hajo Bernett’s work on the Third Reich (Benet, 1971 & 1983). A more modern sentiment can be found in China’s *People’s Daily* after the Athens Olympics in 2008. “When a country is powerful,” claimed an editorial, “its sport will flourish” (Hong, Wu, & Xiong, 2007, p. 18). Athletes have tended to be the State’s biological extensions, and consequently casualties, of calculated sponsorship. A Cartesian phenomenon of sorts can be said to be at play for the modern sports figure, taking the body as a machine guided by mechanistic principles free of soul.¹ Their conditioned bodies have served programs motivated by nationalist agendas, show

¹ René Descartes’ philosophy on animals, their existence as machines and the dispute about their sentience, can be gathered in Hatfield, G. *Animals*. (2008) In John Carriero and Janet Broughton (Eds.) *Companion to Descartes*. Oxford:

pony retainers whose own wellbeing is only significant if it visibly impairs performances. Areas such as sports medicine have thrived in the pursuit of conducting “a gigantic experiment on the human organism” (Hoberman, 1995, p. 35).

The direct costs of these endeavours on the athletes themselves, more broadly speaking, is an emerging area, one that requires a keener gaze over the consequences of what might be called a sports industrial complex. Medical debility has been noted in the wake of the cultural and sporting wars during the Cold War. East German athletes have sought compensation for being biopolitical pawns in receiving Oral-Turinabol, an anabolic steroid with high doses of testosterone called the “blue bean” (Harding, 2005). Athletes such as East German swimmer Rica Reinisch, who won three gold medals in the 1980 Olympics, claimed that the pills were explained as “vitamins and preparations” by her coach. Studies on the GDR program, and the role played by the pharmaceutical company Jenapharm, have also been made (Editors, 2007).

Such casualties, however, have tended to exempt sport-obsessed liberal democracies from similar scrutiny, ignoring the common thread of inspiration central to such systems. Australia, being one such state, established a Sports Institute, with vast funding for its Olympic programs. As a body, its legacy, like much of its sporting progeny, lacks systematic scholarly analysis, be it at a political or broader social level (Hutchins, 2009, p. 209). The move signalled a seizure of sorts, with Brett Hutchins (2009) suggesting that the national pastime of Australians became a subject of government control in the 1970s. The competitive urgency in that endeavour was well reflected by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser’s remarks on Australia Day 1981 on formally opening the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS). As a matter of declaration, Australians, in a sporting sense, were “no longer going to let the rest of the world pass us by” (Daly, 1991).

The moves for founding the institute came from a shabby performance by the Australian team in the Montreal Olympic Games in 1976. This was deemed the benchmark: failure, inadequacy, athletes who should have brought back the bounty for their country. The underlying aspect of this lay in the continuing, even increasing strength of such countries as the German Democratic Republic, with an industrialised sporting establishment of merciless drive. “The spectre of the East German sports system lurked within the initial attempt to formulate an Australian national sports policy” (Hutchins, 2009, p. 200). No gold medals were won by the Australians; only one silver and four bronze. But it would be more accurate to say that this performance spurred research into the feasibility for such a state funded body, options already being considered in such works as John Bloomfield and the findings of the study group chaired by Allan Coles in 1975 (Bloomfield, 1974; Coles, 1975).

Bloomfield, who had been lecturing on sport science in western and eastern European countries through the 1960s, took issue with the bars placed by Australian athletic amateurism. With such a disposition, Australian athletes struggled against their international, more solidly backed counterparts. Such “professionals” had been created “to further the cause of nationalism” (Hutchins, 2009, p. 200). Bloomfield’s Report produced an annex suggesting that such an institute of recreation and sport might well be inspired by various European models, including those in the eastern communist bloc. Special emphasis was placed on swimming within the curriculum of instruction, thereby aligning Australia with police-state models concerned more with athletic success than athlete’s welfare.

The GDR legacy, and more generally the totalitarian sporting agenda here, is unmistakable in contemporary approaches across political systems. Physical impairment of athletes by remorseless state directives to win (the mandated taking of steroids, the crafting of a caste of super performers linked to ideological purpose) did not end with the Cold War. The stresses of winning gold persisted as an aim in itself, a patriotic impulse with Australia particularly notable for its Olympic campaigns. Such campaigns were bound to exert a costly mental toll. Despite these drawbacks, the mass industrialisation of modern sporting performance persists. The People’s

Blackwell (pp.404-25); Cottingham, J. (1998). Descartes’ Treatment of Animals. In John Cottingham. (Ed.) *Descartes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (pp. 225-233).

Republic of China has Project 119, “a kind of centralised planning model for sports, with its sights on Olympic gold and not concern for the overall health of athletics in Chinese society” (Bandurski, 2008). Chinese commentators would write in the wake of the 2008 games that its nationalised sporting system of state support would win “the Olympic War” against the commercialised model of the United States (Baoping, 2008).

Superhumans and good health

To understand this neglect of the sporting figure as potential mental casualty, a psychological sufferer falling from the Olympian heights of sporting achievement, a survey of the historical language, notably that of the colonies in the Australian context, is worthwhile. The situation of sporting pursuits as beneficial clouds the analysis of sport’s failings, but it takes place prior to the ideological co-opting of sporting achievement to the all powerful state. The age of the amateur is one of a more rounded physical and mental being, a case of aesthetics and civics rather than a mechanical figure attuned to ruthless training regimes.

Critical theory, when used to evaluate sport and society, posits the reinforcement of various orders. In terms of gender, hegemonic masculinity and femininity are reinforced “by the differential use of language concerning and the amount of exposure given to men and women athletes by sport commentators and via sport-related images in the media” (Curry, Arriagada & Cornwell, 2002, p. 397). Such use of language was already taking place as the role of sport became fundamental in the British colonies. But initially, the Australian subject was not seen as a Cartesian robot, a mere mechanised figure of professionalism rather than feeling. There was, at least initially, a heavy emphasis on its amateurish credentials. From that, came organisation and a greater professionalization of the Australian sporting sector (Cashman, 1995). Cashman’s work amply shows that formal sport in the Australian colony tended to be a matter reserved for the incipient governing classes, the governors, and the self-styled gentry (Adair, 1995, p. 122). Australia was initially an “unlikely sporting paradise” in 1850 (Cashman, 1995, p. 33). In time, though, sport was formalised.

Prior to the tally and folly of medals was the sense of sport as a developing mechanism for race and society. H. C. Rouse of Biraganbil, a noted member of a racing family, brought in the broader considerations of racial fitness, suggesting that sport had been “instrumental in making the British race.” Sport taught a code of discipline, instilling in the Briton, both as native and coloniser, a form of masculine reliance. Socially, sport also “begets the good-fellowship, which is an important factor in a happy, smooth-running civilisation” (Rouse, 1931, p. 2). Themes of race and endurance flourished, but these also took place in the context of battling social ills. A piece from May 1931 in the West Australian publication, the *Toodyay Herald*, marshals a range of opinions from a “list of leading men in Australian sport” keen to show “How Sport Helps Beat Depression.” The psychological dimension here is a positive one, the body tuned to fight external economic conditions. “None is better fitted to withstand the hard times,” argues a long-time cricketer and handicapper for the S.A. Jockey Club Clem Hill, “than he who keeps himself in condition by active exercise in sport” (Hill, 1931, p. 2).

While this order, evident in Australia during the pre-professional sporting years, suggests a more optimistic glow to the pursuit of sport as a general matter, the obsession with performance, measurement and achievement was also taking place on the international scene. J. Hoberman, in his *Mortal Engines*, identified this tendency as dating from the nineteenth century (Hoberman, 1992). His study, which went essentially unnoticed in many sporting circles, noted an obsessive tendency in the sporting establishment. The “Age of Calibration,” which began in the 1890s engendered an emerging interest in measurement and performance, often using scientific, or pseudo-scientific models. The emergence of the sporting *industry*, allied to the state’s ideological imperatives, took this theme to the next level.

The entire basis of measurement became an axiomatic feature of global sporting prowess. Sporting success required funding, testing, and science. It also saw patriotism twinned with performance, and the revival of the Olympic movement at the hands of such figures as Baron Pierre de Coubertin (MacAloon, 1981; Tsionias &

Anastasiou, 2010). The study of the mind and its cultural influences in sporting performance has been conspicuously absent in various codes. Recognition about the sports star as a serial casualty of his or her efforts tended to be slow (see Boland, 2013). Patsy Tremayne, a sports psychologist at Western Sydney University's School of Social Science and Psychology, has made the obvious point that sports figures "don't like to talk about mental health. It is almost a sign of weakness to mention it" (Butler, 2015). The external features of the body trump discussion about mental wellbeing. Look good, perform, and the rest will follow. The issue is particularly relevant to the type of sport pursued, with some form of physical activity often deemed an act of appropriate, useful socialisation. Industrially sponsored sport, however, is of a different order: it negates the social element in favour of the political, objectifying those in the pursuit of physical fitness as an end in itself. Australian sporting stars are viewed from the perspective of physical prowess in service of state, rather than enjoyment or mental brittleness. Vulnerabilities tend to be analysed in media and commentary from the perspective of physique, fitness, and appearance. Hidden mental battles are ignored; psychological strains are eschewed.

Studies of other domestic sporting codes also noted this lack of awareness, even indifference to injuries that were not patently visible. Zirin found the dilemma of Herschel Walker, a retired NFL pro bowler and former Heisman trophy winner, illustrative. "The NFL," claimed Walker, "has a problem. It has to determine the difference between concussions and depression" (Zirin, 2013, p. 39). For Zirin, depression had been the hidden illness, something marked beyond the physical injuries of the sport. Even more seriously was the case of Junior Seau of the NFL, who suffered the effects of a degenerative brain condition called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), one that can cause depression, memory loss and dementia (Wilner, 2013).

In a sport where head and brain injuries feature, such conditions are acutely relevant. The denial of their relevance remains endemic, the fundamental consequence of seeing endurance as fundamental. Anxiety, depression and mental atrophy, are actually reversed in the emphasis. Such scholarship on the pursuit of sports is treated, not as a cause of depression in of its own accord, but an alleviator of it, ignoring the effects of the sporting industrial complex. Its salvaging properties are to be favoured over its devouring ones. The unhealthy will be cured; the mentally ill shall be cured if they figure at all. "Physical activity is generally recognised as an effective adjunct treatment modality for many different physical, mental and emotional conditions" (Clearing House for Sport, n.d.).

The entire sporting complex, to that end, breeds elements of self-justifying necessity. There are the sports physicians, the trainers, the coaches, an industrial complex. With that come the stresses, a culture of frantic control that demands success. Even a 2010 survey of ethical and integrity issues in Australian sport conducted by the Australian Sports Commission and Colmar Brunton Social Research, the issues of most concern cited were: "Athletes being pushed too hard by coaches or parents"; "Negative coaching behaviours and practices" and negative administration (Australian Sports Commission & Colmar Brunton Social Research, 2010). Clinical studies have also shown that an "overtraining syndrome" can also impair medical health (Peluso & Andrade, 2005).

That said, sport is treated as the indispensable pursuit for busy, packed lives, the substance of consultancy reports for the Australian Institute of Sport and range of other sporting bodies in other countries (Mulholland, 2008). The issue of mental health is effectively inverted in a sporting sense: one pursues such means for reasons of well-being, a means of de-stigmatising social issues and ethical practice (Richards, Ward & Rosenbaum, 2015). Competitive sports players are not deemed burdened sufferers because of their sport, which constitutes something of a medicine. The push for acceptance, rather, is in the idea that such illness should be normalised "against perceptions that it reflects some kind of weakness" (Richards, Ward & Rosenbaum, 2015).

A 2013 report specifically commissioned to examine sporting trends in Australia is direct on the benefits of sport as a collective enterprise, noting that the general population is so inclined to greater exercise. "People are fitting sport into their increasingly busy and time-fragmented lifestyles to achieve personal health objectives"

(Hajkowicz, Cook, Wilhemseder & Boughen, 2013). The sports have moved from being “extreme” to assuming a “megatrend”. Intense sports, far from actually being problematic to mental health, is deemed supremely beneficial to mental and physical health (Hajkowicz et al, 2013, p. 2). The consultancy report, after suggesting the benefits to the Australian body (and bodies in general) proceeds to note the rivals – the “tougher competition” stemming from a wealthier, more populous Asia. Investment has been pouring into enhancing sporting capabilities among Asian countries, notably China, in order to improve Olympic medal outcomes (Hajkowicz et al, 2013, p. 2; Hong, Wu & Xiong, 2008). What follows, however, is a rebuttal of the virtues as stated in such reports.

The Black Dog of the Pool

The elite swimmer, physically toiling in the pool, assumes the form of a warrior at the mercy of a tough task master. Swimming also lacks the social, collective dimension present in other sports of a team and communal nature. For Michael Delany, Australian silver medallist in the 4x100m freestyle team in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, swimming remains “a brutal and lonely sport” characterised by “a lot of time in the pool counting the tiles’ (Clench, 2014).

The solitariness of the swimming pursuit is reiterated by the most formidable athletes. There is an absence of external stimuli, a problem not faced in more collective sporting pursuits. There is a narcissistic appraisal of beating the clock, what Austrian swimmer Dinko Jukic sees as “the competition not being everyone else, just yourself” (Culpepper, 2011). The near primeval focus, as with primitive humanity observing the flame, is an unbending obsession with the pool lines. Australia’s Dawn Fraser spoke about its crushing loneliness. For Ross Davenport, it was the daily grind spent “staring at the black line, adding to the unsociable hours” (Culpepper, 2011). Chuck Culpepper writes of what he considers “symptoms of some bedraggled supporter of some beleaguered low-tier football club”. These entail feelings of “profound loneliness... an inconvenient biology... an unusual brand of physical and psychological punishment” (Culpepper, 2011).

To this can be added a good deal of fear. For Petria Thomas’ part, as with her fellow competitors, this was an elementary one: having a talent that could, overnight, be obliterated or crippled (Thomas, 2005). Physicality and prowess can end in a moment of bodily injury. Resilience, backed up with an assortment of medications and counselling, help. “Even though I had my swimming, my shoulders were starting to hurt at that stage. In a sense, swimming is all I felt like I had in my life. If I wasn’t swimming I didn’t know what the hell else I was supposed to be doing, so that scared me” (Australian Associated Press, 2005). At a moment of weakness, she overdosed on paracetamol tablets, necessitating the pumping of her stomach.

Few have been as eloquently direct in enunciating this issue than Liesel Jones. Jones contemplated suicide on the bathroom floor of a Spanish hotel in 2011. A career of fanatical drive risked concluding in a haze of pills and grief. Brimming with depression at stages of her career, she was equipped with a box of sleeping tablets and a plan for taking her own life. Her then coach frustrated the venture, while a sports psychologist provided a program of mental healing (ABC News, 2015). Despite being a four-time Olympian and three-time gold medallist, she was the subject of relentless critical comment for her reservations of top-flight swimming. In 2009, she left the sport for what was deemed a 12-month sabbatical. As she took to the pools during the London Olympics in 2012, the sniping commentary peaked. *The Herald Sun* insisted on displaying pictures of Jones at her first training session in London in 2012, and the Jones of 2008, one considered “in stark contrast” to the other. “As these pictures show, she resembles none of her previous incarnation as and appears heavier than at previous meets” (Kent & Tucker, 2012).

One former sprinter, Cathy Freeman, thought it “very un-Australian, to be quite frank” (Kent & Tucker, 2012). For Freeman, the Olympic champion had to act as a supreme filter of information, ignoring the noise even as preparations for the competition were taking place. Former swimmer Hayley Lewis would make her own

observation that Jones had “never had that tiny straight up and down, very sinewy, lean swimmer’s body and [yet] she’s managed to win countless amounts of Olympic and Commonwealth Games medals” (Kent & Tucker, 2012).

Jones’ *Body Lengths* acts like a shattering hammer to the edifice of sporting assumptions, a reclaiming cry for bodily decency and image security. It can also be seen as a frontal attack on the sporting industrial complex. Jones is unsparing in taking what effectively amounts to an unsexing system that dehumanises with unsparing conviction. Swimming had “irresponsible and terribly damaging” effects on her body and mental wellbeing. Her world is one of brutal coaches and their code names for “fat” athletes, the weigh-ins, and encouragement to skip meals. Her description is that of a de-gendered, de-sexed machine, one with only one ruthless purpose: attaining victory.

“Whenever I have to stand on the pool deck in my togs, listening to my body being discussed like it’s an engine and not the arms, legs, thighs and stomach of a teenage girl, I am self-conscious and miserable” (Jones & McLean, 2017).

There are years without chocolate. There are calorie meters. “I am insatiable. I cannot eat enough. I am still a teenager, with a break-neck teenage metabolism, and after swimming and training for hours each day, I can never seem to fill myself up” (Jones & McLean, 2017). The ritualistic brutality is best exemplified by the ceremonial of the weighing ritual, held weekly by the Queensland Academy of Sport. The participants in this show, apart from the unfortunate subject of scrutiny, were the coaching staff and squad members. Targeted girls, after such bruising scrutiny, would weep in the shower after men “as old as our dads” would pass judgment, suggesting some to be a 6:1:20.”

“The have their post-examination sobbing in the showers occasioned by the knowledge that ‘6’ stands for the sixth letter of the alphabet, ‘1’ the first, and ‘20’ the twentieth. F. A. T. Doesn’t take a genius to bust that one open” (Jones & McLean, 2017).

Such a sporting system produces its votaries and followers. Fellow Australian Olympian swimmer, Stephanie Rice, was taken to task as a “ringleader” of the diet brigade and image junta, marking Jones for treatment for her eating habits and altering figure. The industrialised, corporatised system invariably makes, according to Jones “psychotics” of those who only value the mediating powers of gold. “I was psychotic about winning. It was the be all and end all” (Halloran, 2013). On the death of her father, a lack of sympathy was evinced. For those who had read her memoir, her relationship with her father had not been a close one.

“If you are a Dad, please give your kids a big hug and accept them for who they are. Little girls in particular need a strong male figure in their life that have their back and can teach them things in life that only a dad can” (Hornery, 2016).

Another swimming celebrity of conspicuous, post-competition decline is Grant Hackett. Finding it difficult to stay out of the pool competitively, Hackett ventured a return. Despite engendering much support at the national titles, the effort failed. Having not qualified for the Australian team for the Rio summer games, Hackett encountered an assortment of demons. In one widely reported incident, a Virgin Australia business-class passenger alleged that Hackett had groped him from behind, targeting his nipples with purpose. “There was no altercation – I was sexually assaulted by that man” (Booker & Mitchell, 2016). On reaching Melbourne’s Tullamarine airport, Hackett was photographed being taken from the plane by the Australian Federal Police, strapped to a wheelchair. Prior to boarding the flight, an observation was made that Hackett might have been under the influence, in the gloriously precise wording of the *Herald Sun*, “of something”. Channel Seven claimed to cite police sources noting Hackett’s “extended period” in the toilet mid-flight, from which he “emerged aggressive and agitated” (Booker & Mitchell, 2016). Such a decline would continue into 2017, with Hackett reaching such a state as to prompt brother Craig Hackett to claim him to be “a completely different person” (Lutton, 2017).

What Hackett had become was a victim of a sporting complex, one that had feted, funded and sponsored him to behave in an exemplary, clean way, one devoid of mental blotching. Sports writer Robert Craddock noted Hackett's "pristine" reputation, one that made banking executives and public relations gurus salivate. "The man with the toothpaste smile, pop singer wife and delivery so smooth he was hired as a TV broadcaster, Hackett's image was whiter than a polar bear in a snowstorm" (Herald Sun, 2016.) In attempting to make a comeback for the Rio games, he was, suggested Phil Lutton, an inspiring "Buddha figure among the budding Dolphins" (Lutton, 2017).

Australia's most decorated Olympian, Ian Thorpe, famed as the "Thorpedo", has been brutally frank about his struggle with depression, having been admitted to a rehabilitation facility in 2014 "after being found disoriented on a Sydney street" (Reuters, 2016). He was another sporting casualty, having failed to find his post-swimming legs in television, jewellery design or university courses (AFP, 2016). Thorpe's own life became a matter of intense analysis, scrutinised by pundits, commentators and interviewers. Veteran British interviewer Michael Parkinson granted an hour long segment to Thorpe (Parkinson, 2014). Footage features a young boy rattling off figures after his victories as a pre-pubescent boy. He concedes being "porky" when first swimming; he speaks of "an affinity" for the water, an "intimate" connection. "I try to listen to what the water is doing; what position the water wants me to be in." The water is much like an assessing computer, giving him "feedback". The Thorpe formula here is distinctly anti-establishment, a buck against swimming wisdom. He does not undertake the moves in the pool to compete, the presumptive status of any swimmer; he undertakes the competition in order to be left alone, a man communing in water. "I race and I compete so I can train."

In 2016, various public declarations about depression and a range of responses were made. Thorpe wrote about not wanting the condition to define him. Depression, he surmised, was at times "all-consuming, but in the race of life I just think everyone else gets a small head start, and perhaps rightly so" (Thorpe, 2016). His *Huffington Post* piece provides a meditation, confession, and apology for feeling as such despite enormous sporting success: "it would have appeared as though I had grasped the world with both hands – a gifted athlete, student with a youthful naivety and innocence who chooses to believe in the best the world has to offer".

Geoff Heugill's own reflections were like those of a traumatised post-conflict figure. Having been prepped and adjusted to the battles of the pool, the establishment had offered little by way of remedy and care after the travails. Returnees from the battle were left untended and abandoned by the sporting establishment. The casualties of the swim wars were effectively left to moulder in obscure oblivion. To *Southern Cross Radio*, he would reflect on finding substitutes, replacements for battles waged in the pool.

"I think the hardest think for an athlete is finding something that you have the same passion for after sport" (Clench, 2014).

Idyllic images of splendid sunsets in older, post-sporting life, are still to be found among journalists who see such figures are far better adjusted off the arena than on it. First comes the glory and controversy, then the quiet, uneventful retirement. The post-traumatic influence of the sporting establishment and the competitive experience is ignored. Sporting writers such as Craddock persist in fostering the illusion that bad boys and girls of the pool and field eventually calm down and become distinguished elders. He observes, erroneously, how sports figures "often lead controversial playing careers then melt into mellow, low-key retirements."

Criticising the cult of gold

Critics can be found suggesting that Australian policy on sports is confused at best, instrumental at worst. Douglas Booth, writing in the 1990s, wrote cuttingly that "Australian sports policy has developed with minimal critical thought or reflection." There was money to be had, and much provided, to the Australian Olympic effort. In time, it became an all-consuming project. "One month after the IOC awarded Sydney the 2000 Games, senior sports officials unveiled a \$420 million strategy to win 20 gold medals in 2000." Importantly, the political

classes and sports administrators were indifferent to cost and consequence, other than bagging medals. There was certainly nothing about the *personal* cost to the straining effort.

“The then minister for sport, Ros Kelly, warned sports officials against making excessive demands on taxpayers, but neither she, her colleagues, the opposition nor the media questioned the rationale of the plan winning gold is very much a national priority” (Booth, 1995, p. 8).

Even in the aftermath of the London games, veteran Fairfax journalist Paul Sheehan would express concern at the voracious hunger of the Australian sporting establishment for the medal count. “Hundreds of millions of tax dollars and thousands of hours of grinding, invisible sacrifice by athletes have been compromised by an obsession with gold. This obsession has clouded the reality that Australia has just had a brilliant Olympics. An unambiguous success” (Sheehan, 2012). Administrative figures such as John Coates of the Australian Olympic Committee had been either “misguided or cynical” in claiming that Australia should have been fifth in the medal tally at London. “Beyond a certain point, the cost of maintaining an elite Olympic program in any sport becomes a prohibitive waste of state funding” (Sheehan, 2012). Broadcaster, presenter and author Waleed Aly, writing in *The Monthly*, encouraged “the only enlightened position” possible in responding to the gold lust of the sporting establishment: declare it puerile, and that those “concerned or even moderately deflated by Australia’s below-par performance in London” be treated with derision (Aly, 2012).

The obsession with that goal was further criticised at the Rio Olympic Games in 2016. The returns did not justify the size of the team, a case of supposed gigantism (Baum, 2016). One gold medal was one for every 17 athletes, a poor result given the returns of other sides (US with 6 and Great Britain with 7, and China with 7.5 were points of comparison). David Mark, sports editor for the ABC, went so far as to suggest that it was time “to rethink Australia’s obsession with gold” (Mark, 2016). The specific conditions of the Rio Olympics had also proved wearing. One example stood out: nine Australian athletes were held overnight and fined by Brazilian police for sporting the wrong accreditation at a basketball game. Such events made Chiller desperate to identify the sense of Australia’s role, insisting that, “Our efforts here were very, very often close but they fell just short” (ABC News, 2016).

Former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett, chairman of Beyondblue, Australia’s conspicuous organisation dedicated to the subject of depression, suggested that the sporting class, and more specifically athletes, were in a “special needs” category, to be considered as much victims as sufferers in a broader sense. The singularity of it was noteworthy on a specific level: in the service of the state at the highest level, those involved would suffer, analogously to that of a casualty in conflict.

“They get put in a cocoon and taken away from what I’d call normal life. They’re in positions where they train hard, the expectations are hard. Those pressures mount, and they don’t seek help – they’re fearful of going public, scared of being dropped or not selected, or being seen as unsuccessful” (Butler, 2015).

The Strain of the Barracuda

To various voices critical of the lust for gold, notably in swimming, can be added a cultural critique of sporting costs, one with a specific Australian strain. Such efforts show an increasing awareness of the social cost arising from the Australian sporting complex. What emerges is gritty overview of the remorseless drive and ultimate denigration of the athlete who takes to the pool. In 2013 author Christos Tsiolkas turned his attention to placing the evolution of an Australian swimmer’s ambitions and behaviour into a novel, a setting that bears witness to his gradual demise after showing enormous talent. After an international race, defeat (in so far as the protagonist finishes fifth) ensues. “He’s going to be ashamed of this moment for the rest of his life.” The decline is inexorable: failure saps him; emotionally drained, he acts violently, an episode that destroys ties with a fellow

swimmer and his family and earns him a prison sentence. Within this matrix of emotions is monomania and competitiveness.

As is the manner of Tsiolkas' oeuvre, the point of the protagonist's problems is not merely his individual ruination as swimmer, his flawed character and poor choices, but a collective one of savage competitiveness. As Tsiolkas pondered in *On the Concept of Tolerance*, reflecting on a short story by Ursula K. Le Guin, the pact of social engagement, and guilt, is collective. Comfort is axiomatic to the acceptable oppression of the few who give good reason to live well. In Le Guin's story, the citizens of Omelas are content, but only because of the suffering of an enfeebled child kept in a damp cellar (Gildersleeve, 2016). All are complicit, and it is a complicity acknowledged. The parallel to the sporting public indoctrinated into believing that loss is a disgrace; and sporting officials who insist on greater returns of gold, is hard to ignore.

Reviewers of the novel missed the essential degradation inherent in the sport. Individual personality, went this particular interpretation, would survive, and the figure, however battered, would return to fighting form – eventually. Again, this was an arrogance voiced in a Cartesian tone: the sports figure as soulless, insentient machine, one who could survive the demands of state. “Danny's sudden decline” seemed “a bit odd” to Terence Blacker (2014) of *The Independent*. Surely such a youthful figure would have shown greater resilience after a defeat in the pool? Not so. The image advanced by Tsiolkas shows the necessary remorseless, and adds this to the cultural background of immigrant Australia, where swimming becomes both mission and statement. Dan or Danny never makes the team for the Sydney Olympics in 2000, and his decline is assured.

The reviews of the novel are also telling about a national obsession. Tsiolkas, suggests Huxley, “tackles the issue of sport and nationalism – two issues which are probably closest to the average Australian's heart” (Huxley, 2014). Danny comes across as a bundle of complexes. He is “annoying, selfish”, a “rude bastard” afflicted with a myopic perception of the world. Even Huxley felt that Danny had sympathy to succeed, a young man caught in the vice of being scholarship student, gay and “ethnic” levelled against “Anglo, well-off straight boys at his private school” (Huxley, 2014).

Conclusion

The garden of Australian sport is littered with the broken roses of mental anguish and spiritual strain. In some sports, notably swimming, the toll is amplified before the demands of a particularly ruthless sporting establishment. Mental illness is not uncommon, and in fact, is prevalent with the highest sporting achievers. The figure of a deeply troubled Hackett, sliding into a psychological abyss, is far from unusual. There have been contemplations of suicide (Thomas, Jones), public declarations of depression (Thorpe). There have been critics of the indifference shown by the post-swimming regime (Heugill). The same goes for the ritual humiliations, by sporting staff or media outlets, of such a swimmer as Jones. The fallen angel, the star of advertising in free fall, is an image that has become typical. This desolation can be seen as a result of professionalization, the nature of modern sports in the service of the state, and the incessant drive for success inherent in the sporting industrial complex. That Australia is a liberal democratic society is irrelevant to an obsession characteristic of authoritarian states keen on rising up the Olympic medal tables. In many ways, the obsession has been replicated.

Fittingly, this discussion can conclude with the coach who began this overview of how sporting complexes ignore the mental health and wellbeing elite athletes. Lawrence, one of Australia's most known swimming coaches, has seemingly adjusted to the modern role of coach after having the reputation of being relentless, even indifferent, to the torments of pool athletes. Subsequently, he has insisted on a greater role of the coach in enabling the sporting figure to adjust in retirement. He acknowledges that strains continue after the pool. This is made even more pressing given the solitary nature of the elite swimmer who gets up at five and heads to bed early. “If you are with people 30-odd hours a week, you've got a lot of opportunities to talk about other things.

The coaches need to be mentoring and talking to those people about their future” (Clench, 2014). But far more than a coaching readjustment, with the provision of sagacious words, is required.

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