

ON ISSUE

HOPEFUL SIGNS?

Arthur Ashe/Working-Class Spectatorship

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CBS's coverage of the last day of 1997 U.S. Open tennis included some footage of Arthur Ashe. I remember the interest in Australia when he won the 1968 U.S. Open. This came not so much because he was an *African* American but rather because we were astonished that *any* American could win a Grand Slam tournament. A few years later, with new global powers in tennis displacing Australia, Ashe was up against the apotheosis of arrogant White masculinity, Jimmy Connors, in a Wimbledon final. (Remember those bloated White guys in the expensive seats at any number of U.S. tournaments rising to punch the air in mimesis of his juvenilia?) Our exhilaration that Ashe's subtle variations and skill won the day was enormous. When his heart condition was revealed, and then years later he died so young, those traumas combined with his ability, philanthropy, and vision to leave the legacy of a culture hero.

This 1997 day, the montage sequence included a shot of Ashe on the court, joking and laughing with Bobby Kennedy. I hate to join the ranks of romantic bores raving on about lost possibilities from the 1960s, but this moment of hope reminded me that sport and youth culture do not have to be aggressive, dismissive, or pumped up to be progressive and the best. At the same time, seeing those men together is a reminder of trauma—Vietnam, AIDS, the decline of civil rights momentum, machismo, assassination.

Looking for hopeful signs in the international semiotics of sport got me thinking, too, about a recent trip back to Australia. I went there straight after writing a rather doom-and-gloom editorial for the last *JSSI* issue of volume 21, in which I predicted that Rupert Murdoch might follow his precedent from Australia and the United Kingdom, taking over entire U.S. sports rather than simply becoming a franchise owner. Since then, Murdoch has announced plans to bring a National Football League franchise to Los Angeles to match his investment in the Los Angeles Dodgers major league baseball team (Littleton, 1997). Across the Atlantic, the Manchester United Football Club has announced it will launch a satellite and cable TV channel along with Murdoch and a British firm, suggesting further convergence (Dawtre, 1997). But during my visit in the Southern Hemisphere winter of June-July, I encountered the pleasurable effects of working-class consumption (not to mention falling behind in non-e-mail *JSSI* correspondence). I

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saw soccer emerge from a minority stature to become a central part of Australian sporting spectatorship.

This was quite extraordinary. Soccer has long been marked in Australia as an ethnically differentiated "minority" practice, *ethnic* meaning Serbian, Greek, Jewish, Macedonian, Croatian, and Italian. In addition to soccer, Australia houses rugby league (league), rugby union (union), and Australian football (rules), the first two imported from Britain. Soccer, league, and rules have long been played professionally and semiprofessionally as well as in recreational modes, with national competitions that seek to overcome divisions of taste and history among the six states and two territories of Australia's federal structure. Union was the only exclusively amateur code until Murdoch took it over in the mid-1990s. The game still is dominated by fee-paying Anglican schoolboys and graduates living in New South Wales and Queensland, which is fitting given its soubriquet of "the game they play in heaven" (presumably easier to buy your way into from the ruling class). League ("the working man's game") is based in Roman Catholic and government schools in working-class and rural areas of New South Wales and Queensland. Rules is a cross-class indigenous code, strongest in Western Australia, Tasmania, South Australia, and Victoria. Soccer is played all over, but unlike league and union in particular, its organizational strength and public signification are not Anglo-Celtic.

Despite the incantation that more people play soccer than any other football code in Australia, it never has represented "the nation" to local spectators in quite the way it does for Europeans and Latin Americans. The key element—vital because of its location within wider discourses about the hetero-/homogeneity of Australia—has been ethnicity. Attempts to market the sport homogeneously—in other words, addressing Anglo-Celtic males—floundered for decades. Soccer has been the only major participatory sport in Australia known by its association with a diffuse set of migrant cultures. The game is somehow transgressive because of this marking, perhaps because it stands in for a material human presence differentiated from the Anglo-Celt that problematizes the power of a transplanted English language as an expression and a constitution of unity. The fragility of a unified national cultural subject is clear from such fractures. Innovations of summer soccer, team franchising in place of ethnically differentiated club names, managerial audits, and corporate plans were subordinated to the sense that soccer signified "new Australian." Inside the sport, debates proceeded over maintaining a base in ethnic identity versus integrating with the "mainstream" norms of sporting businesses.

But something may have happened to lift soccer, part of a grassroots challenge to Murdoch's attempts to commodify each object and relation he discerns. When he purchased the worlds of league and union (not just the television rights, but the very sports themselves), the big money-spinner in Australia was supposed to be league. Unlike union, league came to him via

a hostile takeover. The existing administration refused to lie down. It fought a series of battles with him, both legally and commercially (McKay & Rowe, 1997; Rowe, 1997). The ensuing rival competitions both have failed these past 2 years, and some measure of reunification is likely. The *Los Angeles Times* called the purchase of league "one of News Corp.'s bigger blunders" (quoted in Kidman & Sexton, 1997, p. 89). Crowd numbers are pitiful, down on aggregate by 23% from before the split and often comparable with soccer a while back. Television ratings—once record breakers—are below imported U.K. drama, and merchandising sales have fallen by comparison to the other codes. Stalwarts of the game have simply given up, with big increases in attendance, ratings, and profits for the other three types of football (Kidman & Sexton, 1997, p. 93).

The wholesale deracination of organic ties between regions, cities, or suburbs and their supposed sports representatives, plus the sense that league was purchased like any other private good by no friend of Australian workers, may have sent spectators away. One weekend this year, the attendance at a single soccer game exceeded the combined numbers for all league fixtures. This still is not reflected in column inches or network schedules. It may be temporary. But what a truly heartening moment in our seemingly unstoppable motion toward sporting commodification. An irony here, too: Newcastle, a working-class part of New South Wales dogged by deindustrialization and job losses in iron and steel ("restructuring"), won the traditional, non-Murdoch competition. Fully 50,000 previously disgruntled Novocastrians lined the streets in celebration—a farewell to manufacturing greatness and rugby league?

Returning to my text of origin, this is not to suggest that Ashe or Bobby Kennedy were opposed to capitalism, but they did stand for a utopianism that has seemed incredibly fragile these past 30 years. Perhaps the bitterness of Australian disputes over rugby league has produced a tactical working-class politics of consumption (as per U.S. claims for the United Baseball Fan Association) that may even draw Anglo-Australia away from its discriminatory attitudes toward "the world game." But just before I declare my hand as that 1960s romantic, it might be worth mentioning that Murdoch probably does not care about failure in rugby league. Latest reports suggest that the entire enterprise was motivated by his cable subsidiary Foxtel's contest with Australia's other cable operator, Optus; that knowing the centrality of sport to television, he simply made the rival company bid up to support the old competition to have something to screen against him. Already debt-laden and lacking its opponent's asset base, Optus is in trouble (Kidman & Sexton, 1997). Follow the you-know-what.

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