Language of Sport– Resource 3

A nation of barrackers at the expense of all else

Sport does not a national identity make, and in becoming more sport obsessed we risk also becoming more militaristic, writes Jim Davidson.

January 27, 2007

**'T**OO MUCH sport is never enough!" So said H. G. Nelson, and Waleed Aly seems to agree (Insight 20/01). He points out that, on a per capita basis, we are probably the world's most successful sporting nation.

John Howard, he writes, was "entirely believable" when he said that Bradman was the greatest living Australian. The greatness of Florey, say, is understood, "but not so keenly felt". Does this cheapen our culture?

Aly thinks not — but it does. If there is little real regard for scientists, they will get smaller salaries. It becomes easier to infringe upon the independence of the CSIRO. Fewer children will opt to do science courses.

Along with all sorts of commodities in a globalised world, innovations and ideas will increasingly have to be imported. Australia runs the risk of becoming just a lifestyle.

Aly talks of the most "revered of all Australian traits: ordinariness". But the ordinary can become ornery. Charged up, you get hoonage on the rampage.

There's sledging of the kind we saw last summer, with elements in the crowd yelling out racist jeers to put the South Africans off their game. Then there's the brandishing of the Australian flag, which, in an international context, may seem fair enough. The problem is that it does not stop there. Serbs and Croats start bringing their flags to the Australian Open, and then the fighting begins. So at Sydney's Australia Day gig the Big Day Out, our flag was banned.

It was being used as "gang colours", the producer said; "racism disguised as patriotism". There had been reports of people the previous year, hot on the heels of the Cronulla riots, bullying others into kissing the flag and pledging their allegiance — and shouting the sportscry "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, oi oi oi!". Not only the slogan but the whole attitude of barracking seeps across to other things. Eggheads (probably a less derisory term in Australia than intellectuals) are castigated for holding thoughts and attitudes divorced from those of the mainstream. Questionable, but isn't that what intellectuals and artists occasionally do everywhere? Tolstoy no more passes for a typical Russian than Shakespeare could pass for a typical Englishman.

But, as the barracking mood has spread across the country, there has been an exponential growth of the idea of something or someone being "un-Australian". Not part of the team. This idea has become so entrenched that people have been deported who have spent virtually their whole lives here but were infants elsewhere. Undesirable, not ours — although they may have been almost entirely shaped by an Australian upbringing.

The notion of being "un-Australian" is a silly one and should be sent back to the America of the Cold War, where it belongs. If we are truly a nation, then every citizen is a member, enriching it with the narrative, patterns and choices of their lives. Whoever heard of anybody being called "un-French", or even "un-English"? "Un-New Zealand" wouldn't even get to first base — not only because it's a mouthful, but because neither Maori nor Pakeha can claim the whole.

The barracking mentality has become more prevalent at the same time as a deepening khaki tinge has entered our national life. We don't hear much now of Australia as a pioneer of democracy: it's Gallipoli, the Western Front, Kokoda. Our history has been militarised. Then there's our military Governor-General, who does quite a good job (when he's allowed to). There are also things like the recent advertisement for Boags, which has a soldier in uniform, saluting, with his glass of beer. Or *The Australian* deciding that the Australian of the year should be the digger — advancing democracy around the world. You would think it was 1942.

"Around the world" is the give-away. We are running the risk of confusing our military capacity with our sporting prowess. To outsiders we must look as though we're spoiling for a fight.

A connection between sport and the military has always existed — although more as a flow-on from team spirit than from the contemporary stress on "personal best". It was in that spirit that in 1914 whole teams went down to the recruiting depot and signed up together.

But now the link is much more explicit. It is used to fire up sportspeople. Cricket teams off to England to play for the Ashes have stopped off at Gallipoli. And at the Athens Olympics, one of the girls in the softball team enjoined the others to "think of the Anzacs". "It lifted us," commented another. "It really lifted us."

More significantly, it also works in reverse. A military presence has become part of the scene at major football matches. Four days before last Anzac Day, a Hawthorn-Carlton match began with the two teams lined up before an enormous Australian flag, the crowd being asked to stand while two buglers played the Last Post. Then there is the special Anzac Day match: although only 13 years old, it is presented as being as traditional as *Waltzing Matilda*. War planes flew overhead, veterans were whisked around the ground in a lap of honour, while on television the army logo appeared throughout — along with an advertisement for recruitment. The risk is that sport and militarism are becoming increasingly aligned to produce a blunt equation: sport + patriotism = the military.

With the virtual collapse of high culture, and the weakening of its local forms (which looked so promising 30 years ago), we may be left with little else, particularly as sport is so deeply Australian. Most of our popular cultural icons have been sold off. But in becoming more sports-obsessed, the country could also become increasingly illiberal and increasingly militaristic.

That's why I take issue with Waleed Aly. Sport is exhilarating — for spectator and player alike. But somehow we've forgotten that the Greeks, who gave us the gymnasium, the arena, the marathon, the pentathlon and the Olympics, also gave us Plato, Aristotle, tragedy, superb architecture, geometry, and scientific medicine. We are becoming as one-eyed as the Cyclops.

Jim Davidson has been avoiding compulsory sport since the 1950s.