

**No. 4**

# Violence in Sport

**Brian Wenn, Manager, Policy and Planning  
 Australian Sports Commission**

Sport is a basic feature of Australian culture. The achievements of Australian athletes have enhanced our image as a nation. Participation in sporting activities contributes to the health of millions of Australians; the teamwork and fair play which Australians learn on the playing field provide the basis for a good society.

But Australian sport is not without shortcomings. Whilst sporting violence, on the part of both participants and spectators, is less frequent and less severe in Australia than in many overseas locations, it remains grounds for concern. Violence on the playing field sets a bad example for impressionable young Australians. Unruly crowd behaviour can spoil a pleasant family outing.

The National Committee on Violence recognises the importance of sport in Australian society, and has invited Brian Wenn of the Australian Sports Commission to contribute this issue of Violence Today. The Committee recognises that hard contact sport can still be played with integrity, that competition can be both vigorous and fair, and that spectators can be enthusiastic and fun-loving, without being violent. Discussion of these issues can help ensure that Australia remains a sporting society.

Duncan Chappell  
*Chair National Committee on Violence*

## SPORT IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

Sport is an integral part of Australian life. If Australians are asked to name their heroes and heroines, the people they most admire, the majority of names raised will be those of sportsmen and sportswomen. Australia's self-image, and international identity, is one of a sporting nation.

There are over 9.5 million individual sport participants registered with Australian sporting bodies. Allowing for people registered in more than one sport, there are between 6 and 7 million people playing organised sport. In addition, there are coaches, officials, administrators, voluntary workers and social sportsmen and sportswomen. The majority of the Australian population is therefore actively involved in sport. When one adds spectators, those who actually attend events and those who watch sport on television, it can be seen that the overall sports following in Australia is enormous.

The popularity and influence of sport can be judged by the level of advertising and sponsorship which is attracted to it. The media is also aware of the importance of sport, as is evident by the space in the printed media and time on the electronic media devoted to sport. The amounts paid by television networks to cover major sporting events are astronomical but these decisions are obviously made in the knowledge that public interest is so high that sponsorship dollars will more than cover the outlays.

Sport touches virtually every household in Australia. It has the capacity to unite families, to cross class barriers and to surpass politics! Similarly, any negative aspects of sport, such as violence, have the potential to affect many people.

## CONCERN OVER VIOLENCE

Violence on the sporting field has occurred throughout history and can be traced back to gladiatorial combat in ancient Rome. In Australia, at the Sydney Cricket Ground, there was a serious outbreak of violence during a cricket match against England as long ago as 1879. It was reported that 2,000 people invaded the ground, holding up play for 20 minutes, and that a spectator assaulted the English Captain, Lord Harris.

In the intervening hundred years or so there have been a number of relatively isolated incidences of violence in Australian sport. However, over the past few years, events involving sports violence and brutality have received greater prominence. This is partly due to greater media coverage of events and the increasing tendency towards litigation. Fortunately, the level of violence in Australian sport, both involving players on the field, but more particularly spectators, is not comparable with the situation in Europe and South America.

However, there is still cause for concern. The year 1985 was somewhat of a watershed in violence in sport. This was the year

of the infamous Heyshel Stadium soccer riot in Brussels, in which 38 spectators were killed and almost 300 injured. This subsequently led to England being barred from European competition and jail sentences for a number of the perpetrators. It was also a significant year in Australia.

In soccer, a National Soccer League match between Sydney Olympic and Sydney City was abandoned after more than 300 irate fans invaded the pitch when the referee ordered a player from the field. The referee, linesmen, players and officials were attacked and dozens of people were injured.

In rugby league, during a nationally televised Test Match between Australia and New Zealand, two players who had been dismissed from the field continued to fight on the side lines.

In Australian football (formerly known as Australian Rules), there was the altercation between Hawthorn's Leigh Matthews and Geelong's Neville Bruns. Although no reports were made at the time, the Victorian Football League (VFL) Commissioners subsequently investigated the incident in which Bruns received facial damage. They found Matthews to be responsible and deregistered him for four weeks. Upon expiration of that period, Matthews was subject to police prosecution over the incident, to which he pleaded guilty, and was fined \$1,000. This resulted in much debate over the role of the police in sporting incidents.

Hard data on the extent of sporting violence is not available, but the sporting associations consider that there has not been an increase in violence over recent years. However, since 1985 there have been a number of occurrences which are worth noting.

In 1986, 96 cricket spectators were arrested at the Adelaide Oval. In 1988, two policemen were bashed at a VFL match. Later in the same year, following a brawl in the Whyalla Football League grand final, a South Australian Magistrate convicted two players for assault. One received a 1 month suspended jail sentence and a 12 months good behaviour bond, while the other was given a 6 months good behaviour bond.

In 1989 there were further developments which could have widespread repercussions for sport. Overseas there was the Hillsborough tragedy in Sheffield, England, where 94 people died and

over 200 were injured. Ironically this was not caused by violent behaviour but by a crush which was at least partly caused by 'hoodlum barriers', or cages designed to inhibit violence by spectators. This has focussed attention on the need to review crowd control and safety standards for Australian sporting facilities to ensure that the Sheffield disaster is not repeated here.

In Australia in 1989 there were a number of important developments. A jury found a New South Wales country first grade rugby league player guilty of assault after he made a head high tackle on a player without the ball: the player was put on a \$25,000 good behaviour bond for three years. The player's solicitor commented that a major implication of the jury's verdict was that all sports would now become susceptible to the criminal law.

On one March weekend in Sydney, five spectators were assaulted during a seven-a-side rugby league tournament at Parramatta Stadium on the Saturday, while on the Sunday, four rugby league officials were attacked at an Under 15 match at Cabramatta in the Western Suburbs.

In a recent development Sydney jockey Malcolm Johnston was ordered to pay \$121,490 damages to Glenn Frazer, a jockey who fell after an incident in the 1978 Wyong Cup. Following the race, Johnston was suspended by stewards on a careless riding charge. However, Frazer sued Johnston alleging that he received a severe back injury, a fractured left thigh, other injuries and shock. Johnston denied negligence and defended the claim but the New South Wales Supreme Court decided in Frazer's favour. The judgment stated that 'recklessness' is not a requirement for civil liability between competitors, and that a competitor could be held liable for an injury 'caused by an error of judgment that a reasonable competitor, being a reasonable man of the sporting world, could not have made'. This decision, although it is almost certain to be appealed, could have enormous implications for sport.

Because of a perceived trend towards increasing violence associated with sporting events overseas, together with a series of highly publicised incidents in Australia, some of which have been mentioned above, the Sport and Recreation Ministers' Council (SRMC) agreed in 1985 that excessively violent behaviour in

sport was unacceptable and that strategies should be developed to reduce it. The Council is composed of the Commonwealth, state/territory and New Zealand Ministers with responsibility for sport. The Ministers considered that strategies should be directed at reducing violence both on and off the playing field. The strategies will be addressed later.

Following the aforementioned rugby league incidents in Sydney in March 1989, the New South Wales Minister for Sport called a top level conference to address the problem. This 'summit' of leading sporting officials agreed to use the New South Wales Government's newly introduced laws against violence and riots on unruly spectators. The Minister announced a number of initiatives, including:

- signs to be posted at arenas and in programs of sporting events warning of penalties from \$1,000 to 10 years jail for violent misbehaviour;
- a restriction on the sale of alcohol at sporting grounds;
- the creation of alcohol-free family areas at major venues;
- the establishment of a Sports Watch program similar to Neighbourhood Watch to help spot and eject trouble-makers;
- hiring prominent sporting personalities in a series of anti-violence television commercials; and
- encouraging ethnic soccer clubs to 'Australianise' so that racial tensions do not flare.

Clearly, violence in sport is still an important issue, with many facets: it should continue to be addressed by governments and sports bodies.

## CAUSES AND ISSUES

Some sports are violent by nature. Boxing is the obvious example, where physical attack is the point of the exercise. There has been much debate over the sport with many calling for its abolition. Other sports, such as wrestling and the martial arts, also involve one-on-one unarmed combat. These forms of 'violence' are within the rules of the sport and the possibility of injury is well known by participants.

Then there is a range of contact sports, particularly the football codes, where there is punishing

body contact within the rules but also the scope for borderline or unintentional 'violence' such as late tackles, high tackles and tackles on players without the ball. These tactics can be, and are also, used intentionally. However, the use of video replays over recent years has made these tactics more risky for the perpetrators, especially in professional sports where suspension can lead to a significant loss of income.

South Australian academic Wray Vamplew (1987, p. 27) is correct when he says that there is no single solution to violence in sport because there is no single trigger, and no simple solution because the causes are complex: this applies to both on-field and off-field violence.

There is a range of societal, economic, and cultural factors which come into play, particularly with regard to spectator violence. It has been noted that problems in English soccer are often associated with poor living conditions. The problem clubs appear to come from the worst areas in England, for example, Millwall is a docks area with extremely high unemployment, and Millwall fans are probably rated as the worst in England. Furthermore, Leicester University researchers once examined the addresses of 428 locals arrested at Leicester soccer grounds, and they discovered that one in five came from a particular council estate in which the unemployment rate was 36 per cent and the manual labour rate was 85 per cent (Main 1985, p. 10).

There are many who would suggest that there has been a rise in soccer violence corresponding with the rise in unemployment under the Thatcher government. Young people with no sense of identity or purpose and no realistic hope of worthwhile employment turn to violence as an outlet for their frustrations. If this theory has veracity, it is a warning against complacency in Australia. If economic conditions worsen in this country we could find ourselves with our own version of 'the English disease'—clearly the general societal problems cannot be addressed by sport alone.

Studies of English soccer violence have also identified a hard core of people who see fighting as an integral part of going to a match, who are led by proven fighters, frequently with local gang connections and a record of violence outside the sporting context (see Riches 1986). These people are

sometimes associated with extreme racist and right wing groups, but fortunately, this aspect does not appear to have surfaced in Australia.

Other broad social divisions based on religion, culture and race also influence the world of sport. The Scottish local derby between Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers is the oft-quoted example of religious differences spilling over onto the terraces. There have also been a number of race/culture related incidents in Australia, again in the sport of soccer. This carry over of international enmity into Australian soccer not only leads to violent incidents, but also holds back the sport of soccer. The game does not command a large following apart from international matches: the National Soccer League has failed to attract the attention of Australian sports followers at the senior level despite having a sound junior base. It is a moot point as to whether this is because of the sport's image or the actual product, and in all probability it is a mixture of both.

There are also a number of sports-related issues which affect the level of sports violence. The nature of the sport itself is obviously an important factor. Tempers are more likely to fray in a fierce body contact sport, and this can affect spectators as well as the participants. The approach taken by the coach is also important. In highly professional sports, victory can mean significant monetary gains. A loss for the players could lead to being dropped to second grade with a consequential drop in match payments; a string of losses could mean a sacking for the coach. So there is often more at stake than a mere match result.

It is now generally accepted that violent acts on the sporting field, rather than providing a catharsis for spectators, often work as a catalyst for violent behaviour.

The scoring level of games can also affect the level of violence displayed on and off the field. In high-scoring sports such as basketball and Australian football, an individual referee's decision to award or disallow a score is not seen to be as crucial as in a low-scoring game like soccer. Such a decision is therefore more likely to provoke an outburst from players and the crowd. Moreover, the likelihood of violence is exacerbated when officials are perceived to be incompetent or biased.

A further major factor to consider is the design of facilities and the dearth of reasonable amenities within them. Poorly designed facilities with inadequate seating capacity lead to crowding, frustrations and violence.

The excessive consumption of alcohol, particularly by young male spectators, greatly amplifies the problems outlined above. Alcohol consumption is widely recognised as one, if not the major cause of spectator misbehaviour.

The role of the media can be looked at in both a negative and a positive light. Certainly there are many who believe that the media unnecessarily highlights violent incidents. One particularly well known rugby league commentator has often made statements such as 'there is nothing wrong with two prop forwards standing toe to toe and throwing a few—it's a man's game'. Such attempts to legitimise thuggery (which is completely outside the rules of the game) provide a disgraceful example for young players, and also harm the code. Many parents hearing these statements do all they can to discourage their children from playing the game.

It has been noted that the electronic media's decision not to televise streakers at the cricket has led to the virtual elimination of the practice. Streaking is, however, quite incidental to the match in hand, while violent incidents can have a major effect on the outcome. The SRMC Task Force on Violence in Sport (1985b, pp. 5-6) sent a questionnaire to the media concerning its perceived role in reporting violence in sport. The general view of the media was that it was not glamorising violence but was merely reporting what happened: any form of censorship was opposed as the public had 'the right to know'.

It must be acknowledged that media coverage greatly enhances the chances of violent offenders being caught. There have been several examples of players, who were not reported by officials during a match, being cited by sporting bodies, clubs or tribunals after the event. Media footage has also helped track down perpetrators of violent acts off the field overseas. The would-be 'behind-the-play and off-the-ball king-hitters' may therefore be dissuaded from this thuggery by the presence of television cameras.

The role of the police, particularly since the Leigh Matthews incident,

has been subject to debate. Generally, sporting organisations consider that they should control events on the field of play involving players under their jurisdiction, while the police should have responsibility for off-field occurrences and pitch invaders. Do the normal standards of behaviour and the rule of law cease once players step onto the field? Is the player consenting to be assaulted by taking part in a sporting match? Obviously players taking part in contact sports must accept that they may be injured in the course of the game. However, stepping onto a field does not give open permission for assault, and there is a role to be played by the criminal law in some cases.

The SRMC Task Force Report Summary (1985a, p. 1) states that after surveying sporting organisations and the media, the general perception was that the incidence and intensity of violence in sport, both on and off the field, has at best decreased and at worst remained static. It was also the collective view of many sports administrators, coaches and referees that there had been no increase in violence in sport at the senior levels, but that at the junior level, a problem may exist (SRMC 1985a, p. 1). However, these are basically 'gut feelings', as there has been little research done on quantifying the level of violence.

## STRATEGIES TO REDUCE VIOLENCE

The SRMC endorsed a number of strategies to counter violence in sport. The Council supported the development of a national community education program targeted at people involved in sport. These strategies are being implemented on an individual state-by-state basis. This section outlines some of these strategies, but also draws on other views from a range of sources.

It is generally accepted that one of the major ways of reducing violence in sport is through an education process, thereby changing community attitudes so that violent behaviour is perceived as being unacceptable. This involves promoting the view that sport is for participation, fun and enjoyment and that winning at all costs is not everything, particularly at the junior level.

The Australian Sports Commission and the Drug Offensive have developed and promoted Codes of Behaviour in association with the Aussie Sports Program. The Codes were endorsed by the Minister for Sport, Senator Graham Richardson and the Minister for Community Services and Health, Dr Neal Blewett and cover administrators, officials, parents, spectators, coaches, teachers, the media and players. A copy of the complete codes can be obtained from the Australian Sports Commission but a sample of the points which particularly relate to the reduction of violence are set out below:

### Administrators' Code of Behaviour

- Ensure that parents, coaches, sponsors, administrators, officials, physicians and participants, understand their responsibilities regarding fair play.
- Ensure that adequate supervision is provided by qualified and competent coaches and officials capable of developing appropriate sports behaviour and skill technique.
- Remember that children participate for enjoyment, downplay the importance of rewards.

### Officials' Code of Behaviour

- Condemn unsporting behaviour and promote respect for all opponents.
- Actions speak louder than words. Ensure that your behaviour is consistent with the principles of good sporting behaviour.
- Compliment all participants on their efforts.

### Parents' Code of Behaviour

- Focus upon the child's efforts and performances rather than the overall outcome of the event. This assists the child in setting realistic goals related to his/her ability by reducing the emphasis on winning.
- Encourage children to always participate according to the rules.
- Remember that children learn best from example. Applaud good plays by all teams.

- If you disagree with an official, raise the issue through the appropriate channels rather than question the official's judgment and honesty in public. Remember, most officials give their time and effort for your child's involvement.

- Support all efforts to remove verbal and physical abuse from sporting activities.

### Spectators' Code of Behaviour

- Children play organised sport for fun. They are not playing for the entertainment of spectators only, nor are they miniature professionals.
- Never ridicule or scold a child for making a mistake during a competition. Positive comments are motivational.
- Condemn the use of violence in any form, be it by spectators, coaches, officials or players.
- Demonstrate appropriate social behaviour by not using foul language, harassing players, coaches or officials.

### Coaches' Code of Behaviour

- Teach your players that rules of the sport are mutual agreements which no one should evade or break.
- Ensure that equipment and facilities meet safety standards and are appropriate to the age and ability of the players.
- Develop team respect for the ability of opponents as well as for the judgment of officials and opposing coaches.

### Teachers' Codes of Behaviour

- Create opportunities to teach appropriate sports behaviour as well as basic skills.
- Help children understand the fundamental differences between the junior games competition they play and professional sport.
- Help children understand the responsibilities and implications of their freedom to choose between fair and unfair play.

## Media Code of Behaviour

- Place in proper perspective the isolated incidents of unsporting behaviour rather than make such incidents the 'highlight' of the event.
- Focus upon childrens' fair play and their honest effort.
- Identify and report on the problems of children participating in organisational sports and report the violation and distortion of their rights as participants.
- Be aware of the difference between the goals of amateur sports and those of professional sports. Make the readers, viewers and listeners aware of their differences. The professional is an entertainer and wage earner and this, on occasions, may be reflected in the professional athlete's behaviour.

## Players' Code of Behaviour

- Play by the rules.
- Never argue with an official. If you disagree, have your captain, coach or manager approach the official during a break or after the competition.
- Control your temper. Verbal abuse of officials or other players, deliberately distracting or provoking an opponent is not acceptable or permitted in any sport.
- Treat all players as you would be treated. Do not interfere with, bully or take unfair advantage of another player.

*(Australian Sports Commission)*

While these points are directed primarily to junior sport, many are applicable to the senior level.

A positive step in junior sport has been the introduction of modified rules. These aim at giving all children a more even chance to become involved so that a few talented, faster and bigger individuals do not dominate proceedings. Through modified sports children are better able to develop their skills and learn to enjoy the game.

In the younger age groups in some sports, no record is kept of the actual result. It is believed that this emphasis on fun and skill development will lead to children continuing with their sporting careers thereby overcoming the

existing teenage drop-out problem, particularly with girls.

At the senior level it has been suggested that the various sports develop their own codes of ethics. These would provide clear guidelines to players on what is and is not acceptable behaviour and would spell out the consequences of any transgressions. These have already been implemented in some sports in one form or other. Cricket at the first class level has established a system whereby a panel of players judge their peers on reported incidents and set penalties. Total self regulation by the players may not be appropriate, but player involvement in the development of an ethics code and associated penalties is essential if any such system is to gain legitimacy with participants.

The different approaches taken on reportable incidents in Australian football and rugby league matches is worth noting. In Australian football, when a player is reported, no further action (apart from a free kick) is taken until a tribunal hears the report, usually a few days after the match. The team which has allegedly been transgressed against, perhaps even losing a star player with concussion, does not receive any benefit from the incident. Rather, the sides that follow that team in the draw will be advantaged by the suspension of the transgressor if he is found guilty.

In rugby league, officials have the power to send a reported player from the field and he cannot be replaced. The argument against the system is that there is a presumption of guilt rather than innocence which hardly accords with principles of natural justice. Over recent seasons rugby league has also brought in provision for those who commit 'lesser sins' to be sent from the field for a limited period, five or ten minutes in the 'sin bin'.

The sending-off provision in rugby league is a useful tool to combat violence. The supposed 'hard men' who are more prone to using their fists and illegal tackles, rather than being condoned by the media and sports followers, are now more likely to be portrayed as irresponsible, brainless thugs. One particular forward may have missed out on state selection this year because his lack of self control made him a risky prospect. No-one wants to see their team playing tough opposition with only twelve players. There has also been a recent trend

towards guilty verdicts and longer suspensions which should act as a deterrent to illegal play.

The media has been asked not to glamorise violent and illegal play. It would be fair to say that the media now generally condemns these actions, perhaps not because of a particular concern over unsportsman-like conduct itself, but because of the repercussions for the team which might have to play the rest of the game a player short.

Vamplew (1987, p. 30) suggests that the biggest deterrent would be to penalise the clubs, not by fines, but by the loss of premiership points for violent conduct by their players. Perhaps this could apply when a team repeatedly offends, but sports followers would generally not like to see a situation where the finals contenders are decided by a tribunal.

It has been suggested that awards be given to the person who most effectively reinforces the principles of fair play and good sportsmanship. While there is some merit in this idea, there are some concerns. It seems that at the senior level in particular such awards may not be regarded seriously, and could only be awarded on a very subjective basis. Some major sporting awards, including the VFL's prestigious Brownlow Medal, exclude players who have been found guilty of misconduct and this is probably, if not a deterrent, a suitable penalty for transgressions.

Amongst certain sections of the community there is still an attitudinal problem in that violence in sport is not regarded in the same way as violence in the street: violence in sport is somehow more understandable, more excusable. In some sports there is aggressive and injury-producing body contact which would not be acceptable elsewhere, but when conducted within the rules of the sport it is considered all part of the game. Rule modifications could possibly reduce injuries but may alter the game in a way that is unacceptable to participants and followers. If a participant is not prepared to be slammed to the ground in a legal tackle, there are many other sporting options open to him.

However, the attitude that brawls and tackles off the ball are part of the game needs to be disputed, particularly at the junior level, through education in both the schools and the clubs. Coaches have a vital role to play here as their influence on junior players is very

marked. Juniors must be taught that there is nothing tough about illegal play, that it is cowardly and unacceptable, and that it can have an extremely detrimental effect on the team.

Turning now to off-field violence, this problem could be a greater danger than on-field violence. This is probably also the case in Europe and South America.

A major issue affecting the level of off-field violence is the standard and design of facilities. It is now generally acknowledged that there would be far less crowd problems if all spectators were seated, with good access to modern amenities and catering outlets.

Many facilities have for some time addressed the problem of excessive alcohol consumption. A number of measures have been introduced, for example, not allowing alcohol into the ground, only selling light alcohol beverages, using only plastic cup containers which are not suitable as missiles, limiting the number of drinks which can be bought on each occasion and most importantly, setting up clearly marked wet and dry areas.

Experience has clearly shown that most crowd trouble is caused by young unaccompanied males. It has been suggested that separate areas be provided for this group, penned off if necessary, but this seems somewhat harsh on those young males who do act responsibly. Perhaps these can be catered for through the separate dry and wet areas mentioned above, although not all drinkers are troublemakers. While there is evidence to suggest that in some circumstances the presence of police can inflame situations at events, the answer may be a greater police presence or, at least, a concentration of police or stewards in the likely trouble spots, such as the wet areas. This could mean additional costs which may in turn lead to higher admittance charges.

It is likely that some off-field violent incidents have frightened off a number of family groups. The implementation of the strategies outlined above, coupled with special family discount prices could encourage a greater attendance level by families which, in turn, would create a more civilised and relaxed atmosphere.

The installation of video cameras at sporting facilities, while involving an initial expense, would assist in tracking down troublemakers and may act as a deterrent to violent

behaviour. In Great Britain, consideration has been given to an identity card system for soccer match attendance, although it is unlikely that such a measure is required at this time in Australia.

## THE FUTURE

While there is no hard evidence to support it, the general view of sporting associations is that the level of violence in Australian sport is not on the increase. However, even if this is so, the situation could worsen, particularly if economic conditions in Australia continue to deteriorate.

The positive aspect is that governments at federal and state level, and to a lesser extent sporting organisations, are becoming more aware of the problem and are acting to ameliorate violence in sport through a range of initiatives.

The public's perspective has changed over past years: the 'tough men' of yesteryear are now seen as undisciplined handicaps to their team. This is at a time when sport is seen to be faster, more skilled and generally of a much higher standard, thereby leaving little room for the thug to operate. This situation is assisted by additional officials, video coverage and the option of after-game complaints concerning incidents not reported by referees. Misconduct is now much more difficult to get away with.

Nor does the general public have any time for the drunken 'yobbo' who spoils the match for the majority of spectators. Firm action against this minority is warranted and has the support of sports followers.

While the prognosis is reasonably optimistic, violence in sport is an issue which needs to be kept under constant review to analyse trends and to develop new, more sophisticated, far-reaching, and if necessary, tougher strategies to ensure that this issue does not get out of hand either on or off the field.

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**Australian Institute of Criminology**  
PO Box 28, Woden, ACT 2606

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