

Dr Rachel Payne
Edith Cowan University, Western Australia
r.payne@iinet.net.au

Play the Game, Iceland.

PhD thesis launch: *Australian Identity, the Press and Major International Sporting Events*

It is often said that sport has an almost divine influence on Australia's identity; that it is a "super-religion" transcending class, gender, race and ethnicity (Dunstan, 1976, p.2). Of all the major international sporting events held in Australia none have generated as much national interest as Olympic or Commonwealth Games. In total, Australia has hosted two Olympic (Melbourne, 1956; Sydney, 2000) and four British Empire/Commonwealth Games (Sydney British Empire Games, 1938; Perth British Empire and Commonwealth Games, 1962; Brisbane Commonwealth Games, 1982; Melbourne Commonwealth Games, 2006). Although Australians are not overtly patriotic in their day-to-day lives, these major, or "mega" events evoked a shared national sentiment among the general public. One reason for this is that Australians look to events like the Olympic and Commonwealth Games as international "grandstands" (Davison, 2002a; 2002b), or audiences to whom they can promote themselves.

In a broader sense, my PhD thesis looks at Australian newspaper depictions of Australia's national identity at two Olympic and two Commonwealth Games held in Australia from 1956 to 2000. Using both quantitative and qualitative analyses, my thesis shows how Australia represented itself, its Indigenous athletes and other Commonwealth nations' athletes over 44 years.

Australia's press, or print media, offers valuable insights into the ways Australians see themselves, the ways they see others, and the ways they believe others see them. Daily sports reports printed in Australia's newspapers play an important role in strengthening links between sport and Australian identity. Researchers have found that, based on day-to-day figures, Australian media allocate a higher amount of space and airtime to sport than to any other news category. Figures printed in the book *News around the world* (pp.93-117) show that Australia leads the world in its media emphasis on sport (Lawe-Davies & Le Brocque, 2006, pp.96-97; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006, p.38). The

Australian press' strong accent on sport translates to a high expectation of Australian athletes to perform well at Olympic and Commonwealth Games – particularly in Games staged at home. In this sense, the Australian press promotes the notion that Australia has a “reputation as a sporting nation” and that it is vital to uphold this reputation in major international sporting events (Lowe-Davies & Le Brocq, 2006, p.96).

My newspaper sample frame for each Games extended from the day of the opening ceremony to the Monday immediately after the closing ceremony. In order to carry out my content study, I tallied coverage from all parts of the newspaper, such as wraparound supplements, liftouts, editorial and comment sections. I counted articles and photographs as separate items and classified the results into national categories.

On one hand, Australia's press representations of its own nation and its own athletes, including Indigenous Australian athletes, evolved substantially over the 44 years. On the other hand its treatment of athletes from other nations did not develop as noticeably.

First, I will briefly explain the evolution of Australia's self-perception through these major events. At the Melbourne Olympic Games in 1956, the Australian press promoted Australia as a friendly sanctuary from Cold War tensions. Australia's athletes were seen to be wholesome and humble, and the staging of the Games had an inherently British feel. Australia's self-confidence grew rapidly from the first gold medal it won at these Games (by Betty Cuthbert in the women's 100 metres sprint). The Olympic Games in 1956 saw Australia emerge as a force in swimming and highlighted its women's “golden era” on the track.

With the realisation that Australia could punch above its weight at the Olympic Games, the press began to expect more from Australia's athletes at future international sporting contests, particularly the Commonwealth Games. As Australia's Olympic status improved, its newspapers believed that it should lead the Commonwealth in sport alongside England. This belief was strongest at the Brisbane Commonwealth Games in 1982. As Australia had lost ground in major international sporting events between 1962 and 1982, Australia's newspapers stressed the importance of winning at the Brisbane Games to help lift the nation's self-esteem. Australia's brazen, medal-hungry behaviour

during the 1982 Commonwealth Games reinforced the idea that sporting success was an essential part of Australia's identity.

In light of political diplomacy on both international and domestic fronts, the Australian media tried to tone down this overassertive outlook at the Sydney Olympic Games. It was still a primary objective for Australia to prove its worth through the achievements of its athletes, but it was just as important to promote Australia as a new, multicultural nation.

Australia's representations of its Indigenous athletes paralleled the evolution I just described. In 1956 Indigenous Australian people were notably absent from the Melbourne Olympic Games. Aboriginal people were not included in the Australian Olympic team or in the ceremonies, and the typical image of Australia's athlete was young, blonde, white and of British stock. In 1962 Indigenous Australians were not officially recognised as Australia citizens, although three Aboriginal boxers did represent Australia at the Perth Commonwealth Games, and one, Jeff Dynevor, won a gold medal. However, another Aboriginal gold medallist at these Games, Percy Hobson, was forced to hide his Aboriginality because it was not physically noticeable. While the press did not mention this athlete's Aboriginality, it described his living and training conditions as "primitive".

Australia's poor treatment of its Indigenous peoples was strongly challenged during the Brisbane Commonwealth Games in 1982. Aboriginal protesters at Games venues were often portrayed in the press as nuisances and threats to Australia's staging of the Games. Australia's only Aboriginal athlete at these Games, who won a silver medal in boxing, refused to speak to the media because he was constantly asked to talk about the land rights debate rather than about his athletic achievements.

The biggest change in the Australian press' attitudes towards Indigenous Australian athletes occurred between 1982 and 2000. The Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 placed Aboriginal people at the forefront of its ceremonies. Aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman was promoted as the "face" of the Games and of "new Australia". The Australian media's expectation weighed heavily on Freeman because of her high profile in the women's 400 metres sprint event, her prominent role in the opening ceremony, and

because of her symbolic potential to bring all Australians together. Most significantly, her success in the 400 metres was celebrated as an influential step towards the reconciliation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. From a more critical perspective, Freeman's win, and the media's positive emphasis on other Indigenous Australian athletes, briefly appeased the nation's conscience about its past mistreatment of Indigenous Australians. The newspapers' reporting of the Sydney Olympic Games suggested that Indigenous Australians were achieving equality in the eyes of mainstream Australia – but in reality little social progress has been made since these Games.

Turning to my quantitative study and Australian press representations of individual nations, it is evident that all of the newspapers in this study excessively published Australian content. In each year Australia hosted a Games these papers often focused a third or more of their Games coverage on Australia's athletes. Most of the newspapers produced outside the host cities printed more Australian items than all of the international items combined.

At the Olympic Games Australia has always looked up to and tried to beat its close ally, the United States. At the Commonwealth Games it has always tested itself against its mother country, England. Hence, these countries consistently received the next highest amount of coverage after Australia at these Games. However, to put this coverage into perspective, reports printed about Australian athletes tallied at two and a half to five times the United States' coverage at each Olympic Games. At the Commonwealth Games, Australia received two to five times more coverage than England in 1962, and five to ten times more in 1982.

These findings raise three questions: What made some nations more newsworthy than others? Did the newspapers' treatment of Western and non-Western nations differ? And what does Australia's coverage of other nations say about its own identity? Applying the theory of news values (Masterton, 1998, p.91), or criteria for news selection, to this study offers interesting answers to these questions.

The news value "proximity" explains why Australian athletes were given so much coverage in their own newspapers during Games staged within their country. The

proximity or familiarity of close Western allies, such as the United States, and Commonwealth siblings, such as England (or Great Britain), Canada and New Zealand gives these nations a greater status and higher level of interest in the Australian press. Rivalries between these nations' athletes and Australia's athletes were often reported as "must see" events. Athletes and teams competing in sports that are popular in Australia, swimming and athletics for example, also attracted more press attention than those in less popular or unfamiliar sports, such as wrestling, weightlifting and handball.

Conventional sports news values, including performance, profile, drama or controversy, expected success and surprise success, influenced the amount of coverage given to most nations. However, Australia's newspapers consistently drew on the news value of "unusualness/novelty" (Masterton, 1998, p.91) when reporting on athletes from particular world regions seen as being unfamiliar to the average Australian. I chose to focus on depictions of athletes from Africa, the Caribbean and the South Asian subcontinent. Researchers who study Western representations of race in sports journalism often find that an innate prejudice leads Western journalists to focus on physical or cultural differences when they report on athletes from these regions.

I found that, aside from a few exceptions, Australia's journalists did not emphasise the race or physical appearance of athletes from Africa, the Caribbean or South Asia. They rarely used the perception of natural ability to describe successful African or Caribbean athletes at these Games. When an Australian newspaper in 2000 did comment that Ethiopia's marathon runners had "restored the natural order of East African dominance" in the men's distance running events at the Sydney Olympics it was praising the Ethiopians' consistently superior performances rather than dismissing them on the grounds of "natural" physical ability.

The Australian newspapers generally treated African, Caribbean and South Asian athletes' victories with an equal level of respect as given to successful athletes from Western nations. However, when it came to reporting on less successful athletes from these regions or on nations with few competitors, unconventional news values determining the newspapers' selection of stories became more evident. Five recurring constructs were found in the reporting of African, Caribbean and South Asian athletes:

the “fallen athlete”, the “antihero”, the “disadvantaged”, the “exotic other” and the “entertainer”.

Typically, the “fallen athlete” was characterised as an athlete who spectacularly failed to complete his or her event and subsequently needed medical assistance. At the 1962 Commonwealth Games the “fallen athlete” was also presented in an ironic way to illustrate triumph. Although drama is a key element in news selection, commonly used to convey the sensational and tragic moments of the Games, the repetitive use of photographs showing African and South Asian athletes in a collapsed state suggest that Australians have a biased perception that athletes from these regions struggle to cope with elite competition.

Closely related to the “fallen athlete” is the “antihero”, who receives press attention for completing an event despite demonstrating a significantly poor performance. Unlike the “fallen athlete”, the “antihero” is always presented in a humorous light. Australia’s coverage of the Sydney Olympics prominently featured one of the Games’ most popular “antiheroes”, Eric Moussambani, who completed a memorable one minute and 52 seconds solo 100 metres swim. The news value of Eric “the Eel” was so immense that the Australian newspapers dedicated 72 items, including full page spreads and factfiles, to Equatorial Guinea’s athletes during the Games. The human interest value of the antihero is not necessarily based on racial prejudice, as Eric “the Eel” was compared with other accidental Olympic celebrities, such as British ski-jumper, Eddie “the Eagle” Edwards.

Eric Moussambani had never swum in or even seen an Olympic sized pool before he travelled to Sydney and this drew Australia’s attention to athletes from nations perceived in the West as being “disadvantaged”. The “disadvantaged” theme was a prominent news value in the reporting of athletes from African, Caribbean or South Asian nations. If they succeeded, they were said to have won “despite” hardship, and if they lost, they did so “because” of their nation’s deprivation.

The final two factors in this unconventional criteria of news values are interrelated. An emphasis on African, Caribbean and South Asian athletes as “exotic others” influenced the coverage of all of the Games studied. Western notions of cultural difference and

remoteness define the “exotic other”. Articles noting the traditional dress worn by African and South Asian athletes, and comparing behaviour and climate highlighted this view of exoticism from 1956 to 1982. Similarly, photographs printed in 1956 and 1962 of Caribbean athletes singing, dancing and playing musical instruments in the athletes’ villages gave Australians the impression that these athletes were “entertainers” first and competitors second.

Despite the thought that by 2000 an increasingly global culture should have increased Australia’s awareness of nations and regions once considered mysterious or unknown, there were still examples of Australian ignorance and curiosity in the coverage of the Sydney Olympic Games. For instance, local newspapers found it necessary to educate their readers by pinpointing Equatorial Guinea on broader maps of the African continent, and by mentioning general facts about Cameroon in their coverage of the Olympic football final. However, Australia’s recognition of accomplished African, Caribbean and South Asian athletes, such as Haile Gebrselassie, Hicham El Guerrouj, Ato Boldon and the Indian and Pakistani men’s hockey teams, as stars did increase before, during and after the Sydney Olympic Games.

It is common for a host nation to focus on the results of its own athletes at a mega event. However, Australia’s growing obsession with its own athletes’ performances at the Olympic and Commonwealth Games left little room for the reporting of other nations at these Games. Australia now prides itself on being a new, multicultural nation. Accordingly, its press representations of its Indigenous athletes had improved by 2000. But the quantity and quality of content was not always there for ethnic Australians or international visitors who had to turn to their home countries’ media when wanting to learn how their national heroes were faring at the Games.

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