Abstract

‘Thirty-six fools kicking a bag of wind around is not my idea of a Saturday afternoon’, scoffed one newcomer to Melbourne and its peculiar code of football. But for many Australians their attachment as spectators to a particular sport weighs on them so unbearably as to justify a Milan Kundera novel. Their conversations with both strangers and intimate others are threaded with the shared memories of sporting personalities, episodes and venues. How is this intangible heritage to be recognised and safeguarded? What are the crucial elements involved in assessing claims for cultural significance of sporting heritage? Turning away from the commercialised images of Australian Rules football that dominate the media, artworks offer one valuable source in this process of cultural assessment. Australian Rules football appears in the work of several painters, sculptors and other artists. How do their particular insights help us understand sporting heritage? What are the sacred meanings in this secular ritual?

‘Thirty-six fools kicking a bag of wind around is not my idea of a Saturday afternoon’, scoffed one Swedish immigrant, newly arrived in the 1920s in Melbourne’s Moonee Ponds, in reference to the peculiar code of football known as Australian Rules (Pascoe 1995: 122). That so-called ‘bag of wind’ manages, however, to capture the attention of many Australians, including that man’s son, who went on to become a devoted Essendon supporter. They watch the ball float high between goal-posts, leaving the outstretched feet of their bedizened heroes, sailing into the thickly packed crowds of raucous, multi-hued believers who sit in layered seats around the oval interior of football’s temples. Outside the stadium, life goes on with its usual madness, but here, within the football space there is a ritualised order that makes sense to all who participate. It is an intangible cultural experience, but all the more real for that. Conventional heritage assessments deal happily enough with the built fabric of the stadium within which the action takes place. Waverley Park and other modern sports stadia have been registered as examples of built heritage. But what can we make of the significance of the matches played inside particular stadia at particular times? Do they warrant the attention of the heritage experts?

The voice of the fans is lost to history – the stadia reverberate as the inspiration for Australian Rules football and its foundation story? The public disagreement in 2008 between writer Martin Flanagan and historian Gillian Hibbins was unedifying – the controversy between the champions of Marn grook as the inspiration for Australian Rules football and its opponents has been at best inconclusive. Most cultural activities proposed for heritage recognition do not involve wrangling about origins – the activities exist in their own right, as if they have been performed since who-knows-when. There is a sub-set to this question: what is the case for the heritage listing of the Melbourne Football Club, established in 1858 as the game was being codified? What puts this one club ahead of the others in the Australian Football League (AFL)? In short, how can we argue for the cultural value of Australian Rules football at the same level as dance or theatre?

One theorist who attempts to understand the connections between theatre, dance, ritual and play is Richard Schechner. In the classic chapter of his book, Performance Theory, entitled ‘The poetics of performance’, Schechner argues that these four kinds of performances can be usefully understood as sharing the following five attributes: a theatre (or performing space), rules of the game (recurring conventions that persist over time), ‘the creases’ (spaces within the dominant culture where the performance can be rehearsed), ‘transformances’ (an effect on audiences) and the performers themselves (accomplished practitioners of the performance) (Schechner 1988: 153–186). Australian Rules football arguably shares these five attributes with dance, ritual and other performances recognised by UNESCO as part of humankind’s intangible cultural heritage. Australian Rules football is at least 150 years
old, putting it into the same historical category as South Italian religious processions, some European ballet schools and other well-documented performative traditions.

Indeed, one of the distinguishing features of most if not all of the examples of intangible cultural heritage adopted by UNESCO is that they have attracted scholarly and critical assessment. It is the very weight of this assessment that gives each performative tradition its gravitas.

To put the case for Australian Rules football it is helpful to look beyond the usual primary sources beloved by historians, such as newspaper accounts and the commercial representations of the game, and turn instead to the work of painters, sculptors, architects and other creative artists. Many of Australia’s well-known artists – from John Brack to Charles Blackman – at some point in their oeuvre attempted their own depiction of the game. As the division between the academic observers of the game and the regular barrackers dissolves, the use of artistic representations seems less controversial. The Basil Sellers Art Prize, inaugurated in Melbourne in 2008, seeks to promote this very connection. Artists have indeed documented those intangible aspects of Australian Rules football and have embedded in their works a richer understanding of the game than that which we derive from commercial and mass-marketed forms. The football Establishment, including the AFL, seeks to control the culture of the game in all its aspects – it is a ‘top-down’ perspective that obscures as much as it reveals about the game. This is not unusual in the field of intangible cultural heritage: as W.S. Logan has argued, communities are often divided in their interpretation of their heritage (Logan 2008). There is a familiar politics in the heritage listing process used by UNESCO, both in the built forms enumerated in World Heritage monuments and in the newer field of intangible cultural heritage.

If we begin with Schechner’s notion of ‘the theatre’, there is a well-understood lineage from the ancient sacred grove to the Greek theatre typified by Epidauros, to the Roman amphitheatre of the kind at Pompeii, through the Elizabethan stage, to contemporary bullfight rings and the modern theatre. The sacred grove for Australian Rules football is depicted in William Blandowski’s 1857 image of Nyeri Nyeri boys playing ‘kick-to-kick’ on the banks of the Murray River, and in Samuel Calvert’s 1870 image of colonial children playing in Emerald Hill. So both Marn grook and Australian Rules football grew out of communal public spaces. In the very places where the Wurundjeri had performed their important ceremonies the newcomers also played their football – Albert Park, the MCG, Victoria Park retained their significance as meeting places, as ‘the theatre’. The usurpation of Aboriginal lands for Australian Rules football, an aspect of what historians now term the Frontier Wars, is the beginning of a close connection with war that the code would continue to have (Pascoe 2007). It is in the very nature of conquest of course that victors often deny their borrowings from the vanquished.

The two games, Marn grook and early Australian Rules football, do seem to share a number of key elements. The obvious one is that they were both played by young men. The bodily actions of the Nyeri Nyeri boys are surprisingly familiar to us a century and a half later. Marn grook may or may not be an antecedent to Australian Rules football, but the pictorial evidence for some causal connection is certainly strong. The 1857 etching is not only the earliest visual reference we have to the game, as played by either Indigenous Australians or the new settlers, but is, perhaps more significantly, evidence of how boys and young men practised football in contexts other than within a formal match. The four key ethnographic accounts we have all concern a match in progress. We can be reasonably sure that Tom Wills never participated as a boy in a formal match – he lacked the kinship qualifications to do so – but it is highly likely that he took part in the kind of activity depicted in the 1857 illustration (de Moore 2008). A well-known 1870 illustration is the work of Samuel Calvert (1828–1913), an engraver whose work appeared regularly in the periodical press. It is not clear the extent to which these and other colonial images relied on British treatments of field play, but they have a familiarity about them for the modern viewer. No images of British rugby appear in Punch around these years, but several colonial artists trained in London. One prominent football artist, the black-and-white artist Albert Henry Fullwood, emigrated to Sydney in 1883, aged 20 (Martin 1981). His work also influenced the depiction of American football. Calvert’s depiction of the 1879 encounter between Melbourne and Carlton (Figure 1) inserts football into the typical pleasures of Saturday afternoons in the colonial capital.

Both theatres, the Murray River bank in 1857, and the parkland landscapes depicted by Calvert, hosted vigorous football that followed strong conventions, ‘rules of the game’, to employ Schechner’s term.

What are the main conventions that persist and distinguish Australian Rules football from other codes? The first of these (five) basic presuppositions is that there is no off-side rule. Traditional European football required that a player could not kick for goal if there was no opponent between him and the goal. To attempt such is to be deemed ‘off-side’. Instead, in the Australian case, players can be depicted alone close to the goal, running in and leaving their opponents in their wake. A sketch from a match between Carlton and Geelong on 17 July 1880 shows a Carlton player, the famous George Coulthard, out-running an unnamed Geelong opponent. Coulthard’s flat-footed opponent has no chance of intercepting the Coulthard hero’s run on goal. The venue was the old East Melbourne Cricket Ground (Coulthard is running toward the northern end), in front of 11-12,000 spectators. At half-time Carlton was 3.8 to Geelong’s 0.1. By full-time Geelong had added only another 8 behinds to finish the match goalless on 0.9, while Carlton had scammed away to 5.13. Five goals to nil was an impressive
Victory in that period, which explains why the illustration was featured on the front page of Australian Pictorial Weekly (24 July 1880).

In "Bush Football" (a postcard from around 1905), the wily old bearded veteran also shows a clean pair of heels, this time to his clean-shaven city cousins. The urban men are left floundering in his wake as the rustic hero with the pepper-and-salt beard heads toward goal. The images are remarkably similar in their attention to the holding of the ball, and the action of the legs of the attacking player. The players are rushing into an imaginary distance – this is a colonial democratic society which does not afford private property any particular deference. It is one of the five basic principles of the game. There is no need for an off-side rule; unlike Europe, the guardians of property are absent from the frontier society.

The second principle is that the player-ball relationship is better defined than the one between player and player. Fundamental to the game is the idea that a player must have a close relationship with the ball. ‘He has the ball on a string’ became a cliché of radio reporting. The rules connecting individual players and the ball have been constant, with only minor variations, such as the demise of the short kick in the 1890s and the temporary introduction of the flick pass in the 1950s. What is being valued here is improvisation, the capacity of a player to exercise creativity during the pressure of the contest. This is an admired feature of the play of modern Indigenous footballers. The statues of footballers are one of the best artistic sources for understanding the ball-player relationship. Statues have become a significant depiction of the key skills in the game – the high mark, the big kick, the handball, the clever baulk – and can now be found outside football grounds right across southern Australia. Outside the Fremantle Oval the locally famous John Gerovich marker Ray French from the 1956 Preliminary Final is immortalised in a new statue.

Metropolitan Melbourne has become populated in recent years with football statuary standing like policemen on point duty at critically sacred sites. One of the earliest was that of Whitten right outside the Footscray football oval. Ted Whitten roasts the ball out westwards. The direction of his kick from this statue is important – he is lofting a ball into his beloved western suburbs. This was followed by the pair of Whitten and Hawkins statues in the front garden of the Braybrook Hotel, even further west. This double homage to Braybrook’s two famous sons sit on plinths that record their years of service to local club Braybrook as well as to the Western Bulldogs (Footscray Football Club). Hawkins famously danced on the wing – he out-stepped his opponent and made good of his baulking skills. Braybrook, one of Melbourne’s poorest suburbs, has produced much more than its fair share of footballers, including Whitten and Hawkins, and it was a local group of devotees who raised the money to pay for this pair of statues. They naturally enough had a say in how their heroes were to be depicted – Whitten and Hawkins were to be remembered in these heroic gestures that froze them for all time in characteristic poses with the ball, defying all who came before them.

Outside the MCG the Barassi statue thumps an imagined ‘bag of wind’ back into the ground where he played so much football. Such is the significance of the player-ball relationship that the ball is not always needed to make the point. On the muralled wall alongside an East Perth freeway Polly Farmer likewise handballs an imagined ball into the mouth of her eponymous tunnel.

In the inner east of Melbourne there stands Collingwood’s new training centre, the former state swimming pool on Batman Avenue. The statue of Bob Rose is contrapuntal to the cantilevered building behind it. His arms and legs trace a human-sized version of what is behind him. Jock McHale once famously said that Bob Rose was the greatest Collingwood player he had ever seen. Bob Rose passed on the compliment to Nathan Buckley – the statue therefore represents the middle link in the Magpie tradition, and thus vindicates the decision of the Club to relocate from Victoria Park. Bob Rose caresses the ball as if it were a woman, dancing with it just like Doug Hawkins. The Bob Rose statue celebrates this finessing of the ball – at the statue’s launch his widow declared that she married her husband because he had the best legs in the League.

A corollary of this second convention is that the man-on-man rules are highly ambiguous, stressing individualism ahead of the estates of the ancien régime. Rules governing the relationship between one player and the next (such as tackling) are notoriously changeable and fluid. In a painting hanging in Fitzroy’s North Star Hotel, the Carlton ruckman of the 1890s, H.W. Balharry, sends two Essendon rivals sprawling as he crashes through them. The so-called ‘hip and shoulder’ is a constantly contested feature of the game. In a more recent image by Jim Pavlidis, as a Carlton player attempts to kick the ball, the ball is sent out of bounds by a fine Richmond tackle.

A third theme running through the game is the absence of a clearly delineated property on which the contest takes place. The grounds have few internal markings and are not of any regular shape. The European football pitch is an ordained set of dimensions because it is the product of an Old World society; the Australian Rules football ground obeys no such rules. The Melbourne-Carlton match of 1879 is played at Yarra Park on Melbourne’s terms – the two teams do not meet on a battle field with an agreed space, because there is no such thing in a colonial culture. Local nuance is celebrated as part of the contest. Indeed the point of the exercise appears to be that local variation is celebrated – the Australian code permits and indeed encourages communities to design their football grounds according to local needs and interests. And with few internal markings, the Australian game depends on the boundary line as its point of real disjuncture between players and barrackers (Figure 1).

The fourth theme is that Australian Rules football is controlled by umpires rather than referees armed with a send-off rule. Umpires are mostly absent: they rarely appear in the images of Australian Rules football. Like government, they are merely a necessary nuisance for the football fan. The code eschews referees – there is no send-off rule at the elite level of the sport. External control of the game is not significant: the players undertake this responsibility themselves, or are mentored in the role. Tom Wills appears as a kindly umpire in the first recorded match in the Louis Lounen statue outside the MCG. In the Subiaco Oval mural an umpire is depicted by Gina Moore, blowing his whistle against the backdrop of the detritus of newspapers blowing across the oval, while pursuing the players as the game moves ahead of him. Umpires are also like policemen on point duty, striving to control the momentum of a game that accelerates out of their reach – they do not stamp their authority on it.

These four conventions lead finally to the fifth proposition, that Australian Rules sees players interwoven across the ground...
rather than moving in blocs. The well-known Robert Ingpen tapestry at the MCG depicts dozens of sporting heroes, including footballers, as interweaving individuals. Other football codes have formations – in Australian Rules football the emphasis is on the individual.

These five conventions arguably provide the continuity in Australian Rules football over its 150 years. The code’s administrators are always seeking to refresh the code, and need to go back constantly to 1858 or 1859. This recursive return is reminiscent of Kundera’s novel. Soccer is by comparison an imperial world code that sees no need to return to any real or imagined origin. Perhaps the Australian code’s ‘original sin’ of dislodging the Indigenous game operates subconsciously to take the code back again and again to the 1850s. The 1850s saw the formation of the first clubs, particularly Melbourne. Alongside the case for Australian Rules football to obtain intangible cultural heritage standing, there is also a special case for the Melbourne Football Club. This case is based on the fact that it was the Club’s officials who wrote the first set of rules in 1859 and then proceeded to proselytise them (‘the Melbourne Rules’) across suburban and rural Victoria (de Moore 2008). One club cannot compete in isolation from the others, of course, and other foundational clubs also deserve recognition.

Schechner emphasises the spaces in which performing arts begin and are then developed. He terms these the ‘creases’, liminal spaces in the dominant culture, away from the offices and the factories of Boom-period Melbourne. Just as La Mama provided ‘the crease’ for mainstream theatre in 1960s Melbourne, the generous parklands played the same role for football in the 1860s and 1870s.

The raised arms of the players provide the compositional unity of the image of footballers in Yarra Park. They are individuals in the Bush landscape, still in pre-Heidelberg School form (Figure 1). The men represent the merging local communities of this growing metropolis. There are 7,000 recorded names of players competing in the colonial period in senior football (Pennings 2008). In these performances, a football heritage was constructed and constantly recreated by communities and groups of both men and women, ‘barracking’ and performing in ‘the creases’ of this bustling new city. Marvellous Melbourne was built in the Long Boom (1860–1890); the new urban elite cohered around institutions such as football.

The development of a relationship between performance and community has continued to be an important feature of Australian Rules football.

Erin Hill’s Brunswick Street Oval match between Fitzroy and North Melbourne is delightfully anachronistic, with Melbourne downtown skyscrapers built long after the Royboys finished their playing days at Brunswick Street. The Fitzroy spirit lives on and the Harvey Street houses look on as the local heroes go through their paces. In Michael Leunig’s Street Football (c.1990), the houses watch open-mouthed as the young men kick the ‘bag of wind’ effortlessly from one side of Melbourne (Hawthorn) to the other (Essendon). In place of Sidney Nolan’s vertical goal-post (The Footballer) Leunig offers a power pole.

The mood of the crowd is an important theme in football art. The barrackers are surprisingly dominant in many depictions. They are not always mere foreground, but often provide the framing device for the image. Nolan’s famous The Footballer (1946) is held together compositionally by the faces in the crowd. He stands in the goal-square expectantly, waiting for the bag of wind to appear. (A persistent story identifies this player as the cricketer Keith Miller, who also played football for St Kilda.) His body is coiled and ready. The single goal post announces his position, as full-back or full-forward. There is no opposition player shown; the solitary hero has the full weight of the crowd’s expectations resting on his shoulders.

Within the performance the world can be changed. Following Victor Turner, Schechner calls these experiences ‘transformances’. The clubs each embody fragments of social experience. Heritage is transmitted from one generation to the next, codified among football players and administrators by the father-son rule, but applying also to the barrackers, as successive generations are inducted into a club by aunts and siblings. Australian Rules football is marked by a strong female presence in the crowd, right from the start (Figure 1), just as women everywhere stand out in the audience at theatre, ballet and opera. Heritage provides communities and groups with a sense of memory, identity and continuity – it also provides a means of welcoming newcomers into ‘our community’. In the 1870s, a charged sectarian period in colonial history, Essendon Football Club emerged as a staunchly Protestant club – its founders wanted to create a team without Catholics. In 1892 Collingwood was formed as a club with a working-class identity. Its success on the football field was evidence that the workingmen could defeat the snobs. In both cases the world of ‘the Other’ provides natural rivalry – Essendon versus Catholic Collingwood, Collingwood versus patrician Melbourne, for instance. These performances were contexts in which social dramas could be played out, and the fans are transformed in their participation in the event.

Two examples of the fans being transformed by their participation in football may be cited. Peter Stephenson’s Tribal Fever (oil on linen, 2004) depicts a match between St Kilda and Hawthorn in which the players appear to us as disembodied fragments of their club’s proud history – the faces of the fans carry the weight of expectation and hope. The enfant terrible Ivan Durrant powerfully evokes the sense of Zen experienced by the fans. The television images from which he draws his football narratives, when put in a painterly medium, suggest the pleasant blur through which the fans adore their heroes. As one’s gaze turns and becomes unfocussed, the worries of everyday life evaporate, and attending a football match becomes a cathartic experience.

A third kind of ‘transformance’ occurs at some point in the match, usually early, when an incident occurs that puts in stark contrast the two contending forces on the field – one’s own team, and the enemy’s. Schechner, again following Victor Turner, terms this moment a ‘breach’, the point at which the drama of the performance begins. In theatre there are typically four stages – the breach, the crisis, the repressive action, and the reintegration (Schechner 1988). Just as an Australian Rules football match takes the shape of four quarters, so too a piece of theatre routinely follows this formula. We can adapt the famous opening scene from the cult movie Run Lola Run (Twyker 1998) as follows:

The ball is oval. The game lasts 100 minutes. That’s a fact. Everything else is pure theatre. Here we go!

The ‘breach’, or the ‘willing’ contest of two or three players, is a common theme in football art. Jim Pavlidis was born in Melbourne in 1964, and so came to adulthood at the very
moment football was becoming professionalised and commercialised. His work is moody and melancholic, yearning for dead clubs like Fitzroy. Often his players drift in and out of foggy grounds, silhouetted only in the memory of the true believers (in Petsinis 2006). Time seems to stand still as the ‘hospital hand pass’ makes its tortuous way to the hapless Melbourne player caught between two Collingwood thugs.

Finally, in Schechner’s terms, we need to consider the performers. Each footballer is remembered as exhibiting a particular skill. The Pigdon Street stencil artwork places the ball at the centre of the action (Figure 2). The two players, both apparently Collingwood team mates, are in common pursuit of the bag of wind. The ball radiates a number of directions it could have taken to reach the leaping player’s outstretched arms. The player is drawn to it like a magnet, and indeed seems pulled up into space by it. Leigh Matthews is remembered for the vigorous use of his right elbow, the fulcrum of his statuary pose (Figure 3).

Some artists have taken this sanctification of the football-hero to new artistic heights. In one example, the footballer has become a Knight Templar, bringing back the Holy Grail from the Levant to present to the Pope. *Knackers*, 2005, by Mark Hilton, is rich in Florentine colours. The inset here is part of a larger allegorical work depicting the infamous Stephen Milne-Leigh Montagna incident at St Kilda. The pair of women allegedly mishandled by these two players appears as damsel in the football Establishment is portrayed as a medieval hierarchy.

Being is unbearably light, to use Milan Kundera’s phrase, because life offers all those alternatives within the one existence we are given. Australian Rules football, with its anarchic inventiveness, is a good example of a team sport where set plays and routines are minimal and transitory. The game changes constantly, even though it works within a few fixed rules and conventions.

‘Our day-to-day life is bombarded with fortuities’, writes Kundera, in one of the novel’s many philosophical asides (Kundera 1984: 48). In that sense we are as capable of as many manoeuvres as the “bag of wind” itself: our lives are symbolised by the oval football. We are at the heart of the contest, borne by our heroes, curtailed by our enemies, trapped in the social struggle that we did not conjure, but which existed well before we entered the game and will continue long after we are gone.

‘Happiness’, concludes Kundera, ‘is the longing for repetition’ (Kundera 1984: 290). Football, like other significant rituals, provides this sense of life eternally recurring.

This is the sense in which Australian Rules football, now 150 years old, merits UNESCO listing as intangible cultural heritage. Such recognition would help guarantee the safeguarding of this heritage. With the current administration no individual club feels safe, including the Melbourne Football Club. The fate of Fitzroy Football Club is the elephant in the room. Communities must protect the heritage they have.

Organised sport, whether the conflicts are gladiatorial or balletic, is rich in intangible cultural heritage and is critical to the morale of a community as in any other significant ritualised performance. Melbourne’s new Bolte Bridge features a pair of tall pylons that give the structure a distinctive look (Figure 4). ‘The traffic is backed back to the goal posts on the Bolte Bridge’ has become a familiar refrain of the morning traffic.
reports on radio – the city’s own football code is now firmly embedded in language and popular culture. Australian Rules football is ‘unbearably light’ in Kundera’s sense: it is a performance that can be read and enjoyed as light-hearted but is weighed down with the gravitas of its meaning and significance. In Schechner’s terms it is a performance that follows its own tried-and-true conventions now spanning more than 150 years.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written at the suggestion of Dr Celestina Sagazio, National Trust. The author also wishes to thank colleagues such as Ian Syson, Mark Pennings and the participants at the three conferences where this paper has been given in mid-2008 for their comments and questions, namely: the Intangible Cultural Heritage Symposium, East Melbourne, 2 July; the 150 Years of Football Conference, Victoria University, 15 July; and Out of Bounds, Monash University, Caulfield, 21 August. In particular Rosemary Cleerehan (Monash University) made many useful suggestions.

References

de Moore, Greg, 2008, Tom Wills: His Spectacular Rise and Tragic Fall, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.


Pennings, Mark, 2008, personal correspondence, 16 July.


Twyker, Tom, 1998, Run Lola Run, 76 mins, colour.

Figure 4 The so-called ‘goal posts’ of the Bolte Bridge.
© Sally Syme 2009.