
‘They have put a cyclist in’: The political lives of Australia’s sporting champions

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Winning the federal electorate of Corio has not been easy for Australian conservatives. Never has this been more apparent than in 1949, when the Geelong-centred seat, 80 kilometres west of Melbourne, was firmly in the hands of Australian Labor Party firebrand and minister for postwar reconstruction John Dedman. Nonetheless, the recently formed Liberal Party moved their challenger and his family to the electorate and prepared him for battle against one of Labor’s most experienced and respected members. When the Liberal leader, Robert Menzies, learned of his party’s preferred candidate, he was understandably concerned. He told Dedman’s private secretary, unable to hide his dismay, that ‘they [my party] have made a present of Corio to your minister’, as ‘they have put a cyclist in’.¹

The cyclist was no ordinary pedal-pusher. Better known as ‘Oppy’, Hubert Opperman had been an international sporting icon of the 1920s and 1930s and a unifying symbol of Australian fortitude during the Depression.² Although his sporting halo had begun to fade, he remained in the pantheon of Australia’s sporting legends, alongside the cricketer Sir Donald Bradman and the racehorse Phar Lap. As the *Brisbane Courier* announced in 1932, just a few months after the horse’s death in America: ‘There was only one Phar Lap: there is only one “Oppy”’.³

Opperman pedalled his Malvern Star around the electorate, reminding his would-be electors of his once-prominent place in the national imagination. Federal president of the Liberal Party Richard Casey lent credibility to Oppy’s campaign, declaring that the former sporting hero had a ‘more thorough and sympathetic understanding of the needs of the Australian people than [he] had heard in a long time’.⁴

1 Andrew Spaul, *John Dedman: A Most Unexpected Labor Man* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1998), 172.

2 Daniel Oakman, ‘The Human Motor: Hubert Opperman and Endurance Cycling in Interwar Australia’, *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 214–33, doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2015.1039555.

3 ‘“Oppy” Comes at Last’, *Brisbane Courier*, 2 August 1932, 3. See also ‘High Gear’, ‘Cycling’, *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 29 January 1932, 11.

4 ‘Thinks “Oppy” Will Defeat Minister’, *Advocate* (Burnie), 9 June 1949, 5.

Overconfident, Dedman campaigned from outside the electorate. He crowed that come election day he would be as far ahead in the poll as Opperman would be if they were riding to Canberra on bicycles.⁵

The cricket-loving Menzies might have preferred a representative of the noble game, but the gamble with a cyclist paid off. In one of the major upsets of the election, Opperman won by a few hundred votes. Dedman never quite got over the humiliation of losing to a mere bike rider and failed to retake Corio at the next two elections. Opperman thrived in his new role. He held Corio for 17 years, serving as government whip, minister for shipping and transport (1960–63) and minister for immigration (1963–66) before he retired to become Australia's first high commissioner to Malta.

As one of the few to have scaled the heights of both the sporting and political arenas, Opperman stands apart, but not alone.⁶ While no comparable sporting great has ever held ministerial portfolios of such significance or influence, he belongs to a rich national tradition of the sportsperson-turned-politician.

Sporting politicians

While not unique, Australia's enthusiasm for sport extends deeply into the cultural life of the nation.⁷ It has also left an indelible mark on its politics. 'The myth that politics and sport don't mix dies hard indeed,' wrote the pioneering sports historian Colin Tatz in 1995, 'especially in Australia.'⁸ Since the 1850s and the establishment of the colonial legislatures, former sportsmen and sportswomen have played a significant role in every elected assembly in Australia. As a group, sportspeople-turned-politicians offer a fascinating prism through which to explore the intersection of sport, class, race, gender, social mobility and the significance of place. This article explores each of these themes and aims to provide a more finely textured understanding of Australian political life and its relationship to sporting culture. It surveys a range of experiences and describes when and where former sports champions have found success. It explores why some of Australia's greatest sporting heroes chose to pursue public office and how they adapted to life as elected representatives. It also examines their political legacy. As well as reviewing the careers of sportspeople who attained political office, there is a brief survey of those who failed to achieve their political ambitions. Questions about why sporting prowess

5 Daniel Oakman, *Oppy: The Life of Sir Hubert Opperman* (Melbourne: Melbourne Books, 2018), 235.

6 Brian Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in Australian Culture* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1986), 64.

7 Keith Dunstan, *Sports* (North Melbourne: Cassell, 1973); Richard Cashman, *Sport in the National Imagination* (Sydney: Walla Walla Press, 2002); Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, 3–32.

8 Colin Tatz, *Obstacle Race: Aborigines in Sport* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1995), 1.

has resonated with Australian electors and which sports have led to electoral success are also considered. The article concludes with a reflection on the future of former sports stars in Australian political life.

As historian Bill Mandle has argued, Australia's passion for sport and athletic excellence has, since British settlement, been an important way to quash fears about 'the possible physical degeneration of the English race in the bright Australian climate'.⁹ Australia prided itself on the healthiness of its population and sport became central to debates about national identity and character.¹⁰ Importantly, Australians have not only been mere enthusiastic watchers of sport. Surveys routinely show that almost a third of Australians participate in a sport organised by a club, association or other organisation. As writer Gideon Haigh puts it, 'We're a nation of amateurs, a bastion of dabblers and duffers.'¹¹ Australia's participant culture, while not exceptional, has fostered a deep understanding of the work, discipline and sacrifice necessary to excel at the highest level.¹²

Scholars have written extensively about the political and cultural symbolism of sport, especially its role as a signifier of national identity.¹³ Yet, given the cultural pervasiveness of sport, it is surprising that the phenomenon of the competitor-turned-politician has not been subject to a more detailed study. The political scientist Joan Rydon briefly turned her attention to the subject in her magisterial study of the composition of the Commonwealth Parliament, published in 1986. She estimated that between 1949 and 1980, about 9 per cent of new members were known for their 'sporting prowess', although she does not provide any detail on how she defines it.¹⁴ Sporting interests, Rydon argued, have been as conspicuous as military service in the lives of Australian politicians. Of Commonwealth parliamentarians, 125 served during the colonial wars and World War I and 164 saw active service during World War II.¹⁵ In state legislatures, the numbers are likely to be similar.

During the mid-twentieth century, it was common for parliamentarians to have a sporting and military background. Granville Ryrie, a veteran of the South African War and World War I before he embarked on his successful political career, enjoyed

9 W. F. Mandle, 'Cricket and Australian Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 59, no. 4 (1973): 236–37.

10 William Mandle, *Going It Alone: Australia's National Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, 1977), 31–32; Gideon Haigh, *Silent Revolutions: Writings on Cricket History* (London: Aurum, 2006), 6; John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2017), 92.

11 Gideon Haigh, *All Out: The Ashes 2006–07* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2007), 36.

12 Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, 64.

13 Daryl Adair and Wray Vamplew, *Sport in Australian History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997).

14 Joan Rydon, *A Federal Legislature: The Australian Commonwealth Parliament, 1901–1980* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), 109.

15 Nathan Church, Hannah Gobbett, Marin Lumb and Rob Lundie, *Commonwealth Members of Parliament Who Have Served in War: Colonial Wars and the First World War* (Canberra: Parliamentary Library, 2014); Nathan Church, *Commonwealth Members of Parliament Who Have Served in War: The Second World War* (Canberra: Parliamentary Library, 2016).

success as a heavyweight boxer. Ross Hutchinson played football in Western Australia during the 1930s and 1940s, flew with the Royal Australian Air Force in the skies over Europe, and then held the state division of Cottesloe in 1955 for the Liberal Party for over two decades. Empire Games rowing gold medallist Gordon Freeth flew Beaufort bombers in New Guinea during World War II before winning a seat in the Menzies-led Coalition Government in 1949. He held the seat until 1969 and then served as ambassador to Japan and high commissioner to the United Kingdom. Before Labor stalwart Tom Uren became a prisoner of the Japanese during World War II, he had shown considerable athletic promise. In the 1930s, he swam competitively and played rugby league for Manly-Warringah. But it was boxing that he 'lived for'. In 1940, he challenged Billy Britt for the professional heavyweight championship of Australia.¹⁶ Opperman, too, had served with the Royal Australian Air Force in Australia during World War II in training and leadership positions.

For this article, I define a sportsperson-turned-politician as someone who had a significant sporting career before their election to public office instead of individuals who were simply physically active or occasional participants in competitions and games. By significant, I mean professional or amateur players and athletes who engaged in representative, competitive sport at the highest level. These individuals covered a broad spectrum of competitive achievement, including those who might have played a few seasons of football or first-grade cricket, through to elite sporting figures who won national championships or captured international attention.¹⁷ Even by this restricted definition, the numbers are significant. Based on my review of Wikipedia and the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, I estimate that no less than 175 sporting figures of this calibre have held public office at federal, state or local levels.¹⁸ Almost 70 per cent (119) entered state assemblies, with nearly 18 per cent (31) elected to Commonwealth Parliament (both the House of Representatives and the Senate). Just over 16 per cent (28) served on local councils.

Particular states have shown more consistent support for sportspeople-turned-politicians than others. For instance, in Western Australia, about 30 members of the state parliament have played one or more games of Australian Rules football. Some of the more prominent players-turned-politicians include John Dolan, Stanley Heal, Ray McPharlin and Trevor Sprigg.¹⁹ The electors of Tasmania have expressed a clear

16 Frank Bongiorno, 'Tom Uren, 1921–2015', *Guardian*, 27 January 2015, www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/jan/27/tom-uren-1921-2015.

17 On the history of Australian politicians who courted sporting association to boost their popularity, see Stuart Glover, 'Their Body Politic', *Griffith Review* 53 (2016): 28–38; Brett Hutchins, 'Social-conservatism, Australian Politics and Cricket: The Triumvirate of Prime Minister John Howard, Sir Robert Menzies and Sir Donald Bradman', *Journal of Australian Studies* 25, no. 67 (2001): 55–66.

18 'List of Sportsperson-Politicians', Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_sportsperson-politicians.

19 'History Brief: Footballers in the House', Parliamentary Library, Western Australia, 2013.

preference for sportspeople, electing no fewer than 17 high-profile former cricketers and footballers to the state assembly since the 1860s, such as Rex Townley, John Devine and Ray Groom.

Among the steady stream of former cricketers and footballers that held seats before World War II were a handful of rowers, swimmers and track athletes. Postwar, the sports played by politicians expanded to include boxing, cycling, powerlifting, billiards, skiing, basketball, bodybuilding and auto-racing. There were some notable exceptions.

The only wrestler to hold office in Australia was the former Queensland champion John Atkinson, mayor of Toowoomba in 1913. A skilled debater, boxer and mathematician, he stood for the state Legislative Assembly on two occasions, but without success.

The North American game of lacrosse was another of the more uncommon sports mastered by an Australian politician. As a young man, John Latham, member for Kooyong (1922–34) and chief justice of Australia (1935–52), played for the University of Melbourne and represented Victoria in interstate matches. In 1907, he played against a visiting Canadian team in the first series of international lacrosse matches ever held in Australia.²⁰ Latham maintained a lifelong interest in the game, at various times patron and vice-president of the Victorian Lacrosse Association.²¹

The arch-conservative Sir Arthur Campbell Rymill, lord mayor of Adelaide in 1950, excelled at the most unusual mix of sporting interests of any Australian public officer. Rymill representing South Australia in interstate polo matches from 1933 to 1951, including the Gold Cup tournament in Sydney in 1938. A keen golfer and yachtsman, he also raced speedboats. In 1933, he drove his father's boat to victory in the Australian hydroplane championships. The following year, Rymill and his crew were lucky to survive an accident during an interstate championship race when his boat flipped at 113 kilometres per hour.

The summer game

For all the variety of sporting talent exhibited by Australian politicians, cricket overwhelmingly shaped the composition of the colonial assemblies and the early decades of the Commonwealth Parliament. Cricket was part of colonial society's cultural fabric and nurtured the social connections vital for any player with political ambitions. Belonging to the close-knit cricket fraternity—and *being seen* to belong—

20 'Body Check', 'Lacrosse', *Herald* (Melbourne), 2 August 1907, 3.

21 In the 1920s, Latham, along with Earle Page, was the tennis champion of the federal Cabinet.

was the first step for many on the path to power. Once elected, many politicians continued to play cricket and took up senior administrative roles, further extending their influence.²²

A long career or on-field prowess did not necessarily matter. Adye Douglas, premier of Tasmania in the mid-1880s, played only one first-class match for Tasmania, scoring a duck in his first inning and six in his second.²³ His association with the Launceston Club proved more enduring and formed the bedrock of his social and political reach. He launched his political career a year after his rather forgettable on-field display. He became one of Tasmania's most prominent citizens.²⁴

In the 1880s, businessman and aspiring politician John Beveridge crafted an image of himself as a well-rounded gentleman, astute in matters of money, culture and colonial politics. Cricket, however, lay at the heart of his self-image. As the *Illustrated Sydney News* explained in series of profiles of leaders of the 'mercantile world':

A thorough believer in the old maxim, that a healthy body makes a clear head, Mr Beveridge attributes much of his success in business to his devotion to the noble game of cricket ... For the last ten years he has been captain of the Surrey United Cricket Club ... Any afternoon during the season he can be seen intensely interested in the game he loves so well.²⁵

Elected to the Redfern Municipal Council in 1886, Beveridge served briefly as mayor in 1891. He was instrumental in making the suburb the first in Sydney to have electricity and electric street lighting.

Cricket has not been the exclusive pastime of the socially and politically conservative.²⁶ Just as a declared interest in cricket connoted social respectability, it also exposed class tensions. Born in Cabramatta in 1829, Richard Driver fell in love with cricket in his mid-20s when he started playing for New South Wales. He launched his political career advocating for the rights of native-born Australians at around the same time. To his critics, Driver's passion for the British game was at odds with his belief that those born in Australia suffered discrimination at the hands of the English-born. Just who did he seek to represent, asked the *Southern Cross*, 'the cricketing clubs' or 'the Cabbage-Tree Mob?'²⁷ (A predecessor of the larrikin, gangs of rowdy youths were known as cabbage tree mobs because of their distinctive hats made from native palm leaves. It was also a pejorative term for native-born

22 Rick Smith and Kevin Wilson, *566: The Story of Charles Eady* (Hobart: Apple Books, 2016), 130–35.

23 'Death of Sir Adye Douglas', *Mercury* (Hobart), 11 April 1906, 5; 'Death of Sir Adye Douglas', *Examiner* (Launceston), 11 April 1906, 5.

24 F. C. Green and P. T. McKay, 'Douglas, Sir Adye (1815–1906)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 4, ed. Douglas Pike (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1972), 87–88; 'The Northern Match', *Launceston Examiner*, 10 March 1892, 3; *Mercury* (Hobart), 'The North V. South Cricket Match', 1 April 1875, 3.

25 'Leaders in our Mercantile World', *Illustrated Sydney News*, 22 August 1889, 10.

26 Hutchins, 'Social-conservatism,' 57–58.

27 'Young Impudence', *Southern Cross*, 5 November 1859, 2.

Australians.) For the independent-minded Driver, representing the interests of the Australian-born did not preclude a passion for a game synonymous with the mother country. Indeed, it proved the opposite. Aware of cricket's importance to Australia's emerging national identity, he was a chief organiser of the visits of English cricket teams and intercolonial matches. Driver went on to spend 25 years in the New South Wales colonial assembly. A popular figure in Sydney, he also enjoyed rowing, sailing and horse-racing. He was instrumental in preserving Sydney Common (Moore Park), and while minister for lands he secured funds to improve the Sydney Cricket Ground. A road on the west side of the ground bears his name.

In the decades after World War II, sport underwent a major revival and diversification. Schools began to diversify their sports programs from the traditional pursuits of rugby, cricket and rowing. Australian success at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne also left a legacy of interest in other athletic pursuits, including track and field, swimming and track cycling. The popularity of cricket waned against a fresh enthusiasm for tennis and Australian Rules football, both games boosted by radio and television coverage.²⁸

Across the country, the number of sporting figures elected to parliaments rose dramatically. Political parties of all stripes courted prominent sportsmen (the first sportswomen to enter parliament was still decades away), each hoping to gain votes from a population with more leisure time to enjoy and identify with sport. Both sides of politics, however, had failed to entice cricketing legend Don Bradman into the fold. 'The idea is not even in the back of my mind,' he said when the offers started in the late 1930s.²⁹ After a decade, he had grown tired of the overtures and constant speculation. 'I hope this will be the last time I have to answer this question,' he said in 1948, finally dispelling a rumour that he had sought endorsement to stand for the Liberal Party at the next federal election.³⁰

Cricket had already started to lose its influence over the political arena, despite a few fabled players still prepared to take to the hustings, such as Sam Loxton, Rex Townley and Gil Langley. Overall, footballers were in the ascendancy. Nowhere was this more evident than in Victoria, where football had been the leading winter entertainment of suburban Melbourne since the 1860s. By mid-century, Victorians were increasingly happy to vote for the players they had once barracked for during the weekend rounds.

Not to be outdone, the rugby (league and union) playing states elected several high-profile ex-players into office during the postwar decades, including Michael Cleary, Clive Evatt, Paul Gibson, Mike Horan, Mike Veivers, Ron McAuliffe and Kevin

28 Haigh, *Silent Revolutions*, 9.

29 'Don Bradman', *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 30 May 1938, 7.

30 Roy Colmer, 'He is "Not Interested in Politics"', *News* (Adelaide), 10 December 1948, 1; Irving Rosenwater, *Sir Donald Bradman: A Biography* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1978), 315, 361.

Ryan. One sportsman and rugby player who enjoyed a long political career was Francis 'Frank' Stewart.³¹ As a soldier in World War II, Stewart was the Australian Army Service Corps' light-heavyweight boxing champion. He played first-grade league football for Canterbury-Bankstown between 1948 and 1950. A member of the Labor Party, Stewart won a seat in federal parliament in 1953, where he served until 1979. In 1974, as minister for tourism and recreation, he appointed the study group that recommended establishing the Australian Institute of Sport.

Pathways to power

'Sport is not and never has been the great classless institution in Australian life,' wrote the historian Brian Stoddart: 'sport for many Australians is a major area where class and status are most commonly encountered.'³² It is also true that sport has enabled players of all social rank and economic standing to attain political office, even if they have tended not to transcend their class backgrounds.

As we have seen, cricket provided a conspicuous pathway to power for the socially and economically privileged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But other sports have helped prominent citizens maintain political influence. In 1923, the Adelaide *Observer* described how the then premier of South Australia Henry Barwell used lawn bowls as a forum for 'meeting and fraternising' with 'men of all professions'.³³ Barwell was a skilled bowler and played competitively as well as socially with members of his Cabinet. The high point of his bowling career came after he left politics when he represented Australia at the 1934 British Empire Games.³⁴

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, Australian Rules football produced popular players with strong community associations, which could be parlayed into electoral success. And, like cricket, football clubs provided networking opportunities for players to build a political identity. Footballer Jack Galbally exemplified the seamless connection between a political and sporting life. In 1933, at the age of 22, he joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and started playing for Collingwood. A life member from 1943, Galbally also acted as club solicitor. Two years after his election to the Victorian Legislative Council for the ALP in 1949, he commenced a decade-long stint as vice-president for his beloved Collingwood.³⁵

31 David Clune, 'Stewart, Francis Eugene (1923–1979)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 16, ed. John Ritchie and Diane Langmore (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 307–8.

32 Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, 55.

33 'Bowls', *Observer* (Adelaide), 10 March 1923, 17.

34 'Game for Statesmen', *News* (Adelaide), 2 November 1929, 5; 'Empire Games', *Mercury* (Hobart), 7 August 1934, 8.

35 Barry O. Jones, 'Galbally, John William (Jack) (1910–1990)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 17, ed. Diane Langmore (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 420–21.

Another sportsman with deep links to working-class politics was the Tasmanian footballer Darrel Baldock. Best remembered for captaining the St Kilda Football Club to their first and only premiership in 1966, the famously gifted player was also a lifelong supporter of the ALP. Baldock won a seat in the Legislative Assembly of his home state in 1972 and held several ministerial positions. He resigned from parliament in 1987 to become coach of his old club.³⁶

Yet, Galbally and Baldock are not typical of politicians to emerge from Australian Football League (AFL) ranks. In fact, sports with working-class roots like Australian Rules football have produced far fewer left-leaning politicians than one might expect. Of the 80 ex-footballers elected to public office, 50 per cent (40) represented the Liberal, National or Country parties. Just 25 per cent (20) stood for the ALP. Less surprising is that most of Labor's football-playing politicians were elected between the Depression of the 1930s and the 1970s when the game rose in popularity among the working classes as an inexpensive entertainment. Since then, most ex-players with political aspirations have represented conservative parties, perhaps due to football's corporatisation and the professionalisation of sport more broadly. A recent exception to this trend is the election of former AFL player Joel Bowden to the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly for the Labor Party in 2020. Bowden had previously been the general secretary of Unions NT, the peak body for the Northern Territory's labour movement.

Making a difference

The reasons offered by sports figures for entering politics are as varied as the sports they represent. In the nineteenth century, professional and amateur sport was generally considered a respectable precursor to public office. Many sporting figures made an almost seamless transition into political life without ever saying why. However, some sporting figures were more willing to articulate how their experience of athletic competition had shaped their identity and life chances. This was more notably in the twentieth century, especially among high-profile sportspeople and politicians.

Olympic swimming medallist, politician and businessman Frank Beaurepaire claimed that 'out of amateur sport' he had 'gained part of my education and a great deal of my progress through life'.³⁷ Beaurepaire won six medals at three Olympics between 1908 and 1924 before becoming a Melbourne city councillor (with two years as mayor). In 1942, he was elected to the Victorian Legislative Council, where

36 Patrick Caruana, 'Saints Great Darrel Baldock Passes Away', *Age* (Melbourne), 3 February 2011, www.theage.com.au/sport/afl/saints-great-darrel-baldock-passes-away-20110202-1adwv.html.

37 Graham Lomas, *The Will to Win: The Story of Sir Frank Beaurepaire* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1960), 162.

he sat for a decade. Beaurepaire's faith in athletic endeavour influenced his many philanthropy acts, including a £200,000 gift to the University of Melbourne for a sports centre.³⁸

Don Chipp, inaugural leader of the Australian Democrats, prided himself on his athletic skills. As a young man, he had been a talented professional sprinter (he narrowly lost the prestigious Stawell Gift in 1953) and footballer (he played in both Victorian leagues, including with the 1951 Victorian Football Association premiership winners, Prahran). According to his biographer, the foundation of Chipp's identity had come 'from the primal stuff of sport'. Chipp believed his sporting experiences taught him self-discipline, gamesmanship, 'how to pace himself [and] how to go beyond apparent endurance'.³⁹

A few were born to their ideological convictions, following the political values they had learned in their early years into adulthood. A sense of civic duty or a desire to improve living conditions in their electorates motivated others. Some seemed to run for no other reason than an established political party asked them to do so.⁴⁰ Joan Rydon has suggested that a desire to remain in the public eye may have attracted some sporting figures towards a political career. A combination of these factors motivated Dawn Fraser, swimming legend of the 1950s and 1960s, to launch her bid for election.

After years in the limelight, Fraser struggled to adjust to the relative obscurity of post-sporting life. 'The letdown was something I couldn't have imagined,' she said. In the 1970s, there were few opportunities to earn money speaking at corporate functions or through product endorsements, so Fraser worked as a swimming coach, sales representative and consultant. For a time, she worked for a pool manufacturer and then ran the Riverview Hotel in Balmain. When she struck financial difficulties in the 1980s, the prospect of a four-year term with a decent salary was appealing. 'I felt I could make a difference and ... I needed to find work,' she recalled.⁴¹ Fraser had been concerned at the declining state of the local roads, schools and other services. Outspoken and energetic, she ran a vigorous campaign as an independent for the electorate of Balmain at the 1988 New South Wales elections. A prominent local figure, she capitalised on her sporting status and a simple policy platform. Fraser won and became the first female member in the Sport Australia Hall of Fame to win parliamentary office.

38 J. R. Poynter, 'Beaurepaire, Sir Francis Joseph (Frank) (1891–1956)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7 (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1979).

39 Don Chipp and John Larkin, *Don Chipp: The Third Man* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1978), 14, 17.

40 For example, see Jim Rosevear, *'Gil' Langley: The Humble Hero* (Adelaide: Jim Rosevear, 2002), 93.

41 Dawn Fraser, *Dawn: One Hell of a Life* (Sydney: Hodder Headline Australia, 2002), 294.

Professional sportspeople can sometimes lead cosseted, insular lives. However, for international test cricketer Tom Veivers, the travel demanded by his sport broadened his world view and shaped his political outlook. In the 1960s and 1970s, Australia's test cricketers often played in countries riven by inequality and racial injustice. The extreme poverty Veivers witnessed during the 1964 tour of India started him thinking about political, economic and social issues. A tour of South Africa two years later also left an indelible impression:

Like most Australians at the time I subscribed to the view that sport and politics should not be mixed ... Apartheid was then strongly entrenched ... I came away concerned about what was happening ... I think I was one of the few sportspeople at the time who supported the idea of sporting bans on South Africa as a means of getting some justice and merit back into the system.⁴²

Attracted by Labor's strong position on South Africa, Veivers joined the party and stood as a candidate in the 1972 federal election. Although unsuccessful, he tried again in Queensland in 1983, this time winning a seat in the Legislative Assembly, which he held for three years.

Phil Cleary, the former Australian Rules footballer and independent politician, developed his class-consciousness during his childhood and on the football field. His ideas became more sophisticated after he studied politics at La Trobe University in the 1970s, where he discovered the writings of Karl Marx. 'I read Marx and that just made sense to me,' he told an interviewer, 'power was connected to class and that economic considerations were so often the imperative in the decision-making process; in political decisions of all kinds.'⁴³ In 1992, he won the Melbourne electorate of Wills, previously held by Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

Be a good sport

While the public has shown a consistent willingness to vote for former sports stars, the presence of sports stars in parliament has sometimes disturbed the tribal closeness of the major parties. Political scientist John Warhurst has suggested that while political parties have coveted the votes and attention the sports star might bring, they have been ambivalent and occasionally hostile about their place in the political arena, especially if they did not belong to a major party or had the temerity to frustrate the passage of legislation.⁴⁴

42 Quoted in Gideon Haigh, *The Summer Game: Australian Test Cricket 1949–71* (Melbourne: Text, 1997), 261.

43 John Harms, 'Interview with Phil Cleary', *Journal of Australian Studies* 21, no. 54–55 (1997): 124, 125.

44 John Warhurst, 'Give Sporting Politicians a Sporting Chance', *Eureka Street* 25, no. 5 (March 2016): 10–11.

In 1943, the attorney-general and minister for external affairs, Herbert Vere Evatt, attempted to shore up support for legislation transferring certain powers from the state to the federal government. The Commonwealth powers bill had stalled in the Tasmanian Legislative Council, in which former test cricketer Joseph Darling had led a forceful campaign to preserve state autonomy. Regarded as one of the best captains in history, Darling had played for Australia between 1894 and 1905. Elected to the Tasmanian Legislative Council in 1921, he retained his seat until his death in 1946. Fiercely independent, Darling had never been a man to take lightly, either on the pitch or in the parliamentary chamber. Evatt, an avid cricket fan, saw an opportunity to fawn over his childhood hero. ‘When a boy I saw you play cricket and was a great admirer of yours,’ he wrote in a letter to Darling. ‘Your name as a sportsperson was well known throughout Australia, so continue to be a good sport and vote for the Bill.’ Enraged, Darling voted the Bill down, telling the press that Evatt’s approach had been insulting. ‘He started off to flatter me for all he was worth, and then said: “Change your vote, old chap.”’⁴⁵ Evatt had made a similar overture to another former test cricketer who sat in the parliament alongside Darling, Charles Eady. Evatt’s entreaties had a similar effect on the towering former batsman who had played with Darling on the 1896 tour of England.

Apart from a few jibes that he had more muscle power in his thighs than his brain, Opperman was rarely attacked for his athletic pedigree.⁴⁶ Personal insults have become a common (and more widely publicised) feature of public discourse in recent decades, intended to delegitimise and undermine a political opponent. Dawn Fraser found her rightfulness to hold office called into question. ‘I was not your regular politician,’ she recalled. ‘I wasn’t especially cunning or tough about how I performed and I more or less performed from the heart.’⁴⁷ Her Labor rivals soon exploited her self-doubt, implying that she had neither the intellect nor the political skill to represent her electorate: that she was someone who had ‘made people feel good’ in the 1950s and 1960s but needed to leave the business of governing to the professionals.⁴⁸

The colossal former rugby prop Glen Lazarus cut an unlikely figure in the Senate chamber of federal parliament. In early 2015, after speaking out against the Coalition’s tertiary education reform legislation, the former Canberra Raider known as ‘The Brick With Eyes’ earned the ire of Peter Reith, a former minister in the Howard Government. Offended by what he considered was Lazarus’s unparliamentary language, Reith lambasted Lazarus as someone unworthy of

45 ‘Powers Bill Killed’, *Mercury* (Hobart), 27 May 1943, 2; Bernard Whimpress and Graeme Ryan, *Joe Darling: Cricketer, Farmer, Politician and Family Man* (Melbourne: Ryan Publishing, 2018), 176.

46 Billy Mackie Snedden and M. Bernie Schedvin, *Billy Snedden: An Unlikely Liberal* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1990), 69–70.

47 Fraser, *Dawn*, 297.

48 Fraser, *Dawn*, 303.

holding public office, 'a dud from the start'.⁴⁹ 'The broader lesson from the saga is that a candidate for Parliament should not be promoted simply because he or she was good at sport,' wrote Reith. 'It happens, but, fortunately, not too often.' He cited Hubert Opperman, a fellow Liberal, as a rare example of a sportsman who successfully transitioned from sport to politics.⁵⁰ Yet, if Reith's attack said more about 'The Brick's' tendency to vote against the government's legislation, it also showed how vulnerable those from outside the political classes have always been.

A world and a whirl you never knew existed

Once elected, Australia's sporting champions arrived at their respective parliaments with almost no knowledge of the process of government or what was expected of them. They relied on government whips and their newfound colleagues to guide their first months. In a strange environment, they were a long way from being prepared for the amount of reading they needed to do, the correspondence they were required to answer and the meetings they had to attend. For most, the transition was physically and mentally overwhelming.

Although accustomed to leading a busy life in the public eye, Hubert Opperman described the transition as 'that of a frog to a prince ... [and] into a world and a whirl you never knew existed'.⁵¹ After each sitting of parliament, Opperman flew to Melbourne and drove his car back to Geelong. Exhausted, he often had to stop the car and walk around it for a few minutes to remain alert for the rest of the journey. The workload and time spent travelling also meant he had no time for exercise. He put on 6 kilograms in the first six months. After 10 years, he was 20 kilograms overweight and had his first heart attack in his late 60s.⁵² As he told the House:

during my sporting life I was often bone tired and right down to what appeared to be the last drop of energy—when competing, say, in the Tour de France ... In those days I was never so utterly fatigued, unhealthily fatigued, and devoid of enthusiasm and ambition, as I have been after weeks of incessant sittings of this House, and travelling to and from it.⁵³

49 Peter Reith, 'Can Glenn Lazarus Raise His Political Career From the Mire?', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 2015; John Warhurst, 'Sportspeople Can Prosper as Politicians, but Circumstances Count and Not All Will', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 March 2015, www.smh.com.au/opinion/sportspeople-can-prosper-as-politicians-but-circumstances-count-and-not-all-will-20150318-1m1toc.html.

50 Warhurst, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 March 2015.

51 Hubert Opperman, *Pedals, Politics and People* (Sydney: Haldane Publishing, 1977), 261.

52 Oakman, *Oppy*, 239, 309.

53 Hansard, House of Representatives, 11 May 1967, 2062.

Not much had changed three decades later. Fraser thought that being a member of parliament would be a regular Monday to Friday job. She soon discovered that she was on call seven days a week, 24 hours a day and often spent the night in her office, sleeping on a couch.⁵⁴

The more theatrical dimensions of parliamentary life, such as question time, left most former sporting champions in various states of disbelief. Opperman was shocked at the intensity of debate in the House of Representatives and the 'sheer aggression' on display.⁵⁵ Fraser expressed her surprise at the 'muckraking and stirring that went on'.⁵⁶ Phil Cleary was more direct. 'It was just as I ... expected. It was full of bullshit, like in many ways it's a sort of farce,' he said in 1996 after losing his seat.⁵⁷

Former sports stars can appeal to voters precisely because they are not career politicians. Yet, their inexperience and ignorance of parliamentary protocols has sometimes caused embarrassment and brought unexpected attention. Kirstie Marshall's former career as a world champion aerial skier played well among disengaged voters in Melbourne's eastern suburbs during the 2002 Victorian election (she won the seat of Forest Hill for the ALP with a swing of 10 per cent).⁵⁸ She held the seat for the next eight years. Unfortunately for Marshall, her place in political history did not come from her sporting background or any notable contribution to a parliamentary debate but by her unwitting breach of the standing orders. On 26 February 2003, she was ejected from the Lower House for breastfeeding her 11-day-old baby during question time. In the public outcry that followed, a special room was created for MPs to feed their children without fear of bringing unelected individuals into the House.⁵⁹

For professional sports stars used to being fawned and 'fussed over', life on the backbench could be frustrating.⁶⁰ Richard 'Ric' Charlesworth is one of Australia's most successful sportsmen and coaches. He played first-class cricket for Western Australia and international field hockey for the Kookaburras (the Australian national team), winning a silver medal at the 1976 Summer Olympics. A trained physician, Charlesworth's experience as a locum in general practice at which he observed

54 Fraser, *Dawn*, 300.

55 Oakman, *Oppy*, 239.

56 Fraser, *Dawn*, 300.

57 John Harms, 'Interview with Phil Cleary,' 129.

58 Jill Stark, 'Sinking Feeling has Marshall Turning Camera Shy', *Age* (Melbourne), 28 November 2010, www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/sinking-feeling-has-marshall-turning-camera-shy-20101127-18bj.html. Marshall was the second skiing champion to attain public office, after Tom Mitchell, who represented the electorate of Benambra in the Victorian Legislative Assembly from 1947 to 1976.

59 'Baby in the House', *Age* (Melbourne), 12 March 2003, www.theage.com.au/education/baby-in-the-house-20030312-gdvd74.html; 'Victorian MP and Baby Ejected from House', ABC Radio, 26 February 2003, www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s793397.htm.

60 Nova Peris, *Nova: Finding My Voice* (Melbourne: Wilkinson Publishing, 2018), 49.

social and economic disadvantage first-hand, shaped his political views. He joined the Labor Party in 1980 and, leaning heavily on his sporting reputation, won the seat of Perth at the 1983 federal election.⁶¹ For the first five years in parliament, Charlesworth continued to play hockey for Australia. Nevertheless, he aspired 'to be more than a humble backbencher attending to the needs of his local constituents'. After retiring from hockey, he hoped that Prime Minister Bob Hawke would offer him a ministerial portfolio. No offer was forthcoming. He later conceded that the process of choosing the Cabinet was opaque, governed by factional deals rather than merit. 'I'd rather have a group of selectors choosing [the Ministry]', he said.⁶² Frustrated with his failure to advance to the front bench and disillusioned with what he saw as Labor's pursuit of short-term political advantage rather than social reform, Charlesworth chose not to contest the 1993 election. From 1993 to 2000, he was head coach of the Australian Women's hockey squad, the Hockeyroos, a team that included future parliamentarian Nova Peris.

Not every former sports star has looked for greater public attention or sought to shape government policy. Many have been content to focus on representing their constituents and quietly assisting the passage of legislation. Former tennis champion John Alexander won the federal seat of Bennelong for the Liberal Party in 2010. He has remained on the backbench, dutifully voting with his party and attending to matters in his electorate. Similarly, Bob Marshall, Australia's greatest billiard player since Walter Lindrum, recalled that after entering the West Australian Parliament in 1962 and delivering his maiden speech, he barely uttered a word in the House for the next three years.⁶³

Some sports stars ended their political careers disappointed by their inability to attain positions of influence or bring about social change. Many more left with increased respect for their parliamentary colleagues and what they been able to achieve. By the end of his career, Opperman's admiration for his parliamentary colleagues knew no bounds. For him, they served in the 'toughest and most exacting occupation in Australia'.⁶⁴ In time, Fraser came to see her time in parliament as 'three of the most interesting years' of her life. 'The problem was,' she reflected, 'that just as I started to get into it and knew what was going on, it was over.'⁶⁵

61 Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, 64.

62 'Plunging into Politics', *About the House*, 2001, 7; Tony Barker, *Ric Charlesworth: This Sporting, Medical and Political Life* (Cardiff, UK: Association of Cricket Statisticians and Historians, 2009), 52–64.

63 Cyril Ayris, *Bob Marshall: My Life and Times* (Western Australia, 2002), 77–78.

64 Hansard, House of Representatives, 11 May 1967, 2062.

65 Fraser, *Dawn*, 303; Anthony Sedunary, *Dawn Fraser: Australian Swimming Legend* (Melbourne: Reed Library-Cardigan Street, 1996), 38–41.

Sport, politics and place

An abundance of sunlight, an urbanised population, weekend leisure time and the provision of parks and grounds have helped Australia—and particularly Victoria—lead the world in the development of spectator sport. ‘You can be assured of a crowd in Melbourne,’ said Ron Leahy, Queensland president of the Lawn Tennis Association, in 1972, ‘It is the home of sports watchers whether it be cricket, tennis, football or anything else.’⁶⁶ Victorians have also been particularly likely to vote their sporting heroes into public office. Of the individuals assessed for this article, almost a quarter were from Victoria.

The electors of the inner Melbourne division of Prahran have shown a particular preference for players-turned-politicians. A member of the Bradman-led ‘Invincibles’ tour of England in 1948, Sam Loxton was a legend of the game. For any political party, having Loxton on their ballot was the next best thing to having ‘The Don’ himself on the hustings. Famed for his aggressive displays with the bat, he had also played in the Victorian Football League (VFL) for St Kilda.

When Loxton joined the Liberal Party in 1950, he was still playing and had no desire to stand for election. In the months before the 1955 Victorian state election, Loxton was overheard arguing with a fellow member of his cricket club. Word of his spirited performance found its way to Henry Bolte, then leader of the Victorian Liberal Party, who persuaded him to contest the safe Labor seat of Prahran. ‘You won’t win,’ Bolte reputedly said, ‘but we’d like you to fly the flag.’⁶⁷ Undeterred, Loxton told Bolte that he did not go into anything intending to lose.

During the campaign, Loxton played in the grade cricket final for Prahran and his seven wickets and 129 runs helped secure victory. The game also kept his name in the papers. Loxton won by just 14 votes, added by preferences from the Democratic Labor Party, which had recently broken away from the ALP. At 34, Loxton was the youngest member of the government and the first international cricketer to take a seat in the Victorian Assembly.⁶⁸

During his first three years in parliament, Loxton continued to play first-class cricket. A conscientious representative, he even took his electoral correspondence to his matches to read while waiting for his turn to bat.⁶⁹ Holding Prahran was never easy. Its mix of working-class and lower middle-class residents made it a perennially marginal electorate. Loxton’s slender victories meant that he often faced stern

66 Dick Tucker, ‘They Will Flock to Watch Anything’, *Daily Mirror* (Sydney), 10 January 1972, 36; Rickard, *Australia*, 89, 92.

67 Haigh, *The Summer Game*, 260.

68 ‘Loxton Home by 14’, *Argus*, 7 June 1955, 1.

69 Haigh, *The Summer Game*, 102.

competition for his seat, with the Labor Party keen to pitch some of its own sports stars against the retired test cricket hero. In 1961, amateur boxer and local councillor George Gahan made the first of two attempts to win Prahran. He tried again in 1967, but without success. At the same election, the ALP pitted the ex-footballer and working-class idol Jack Dyer against Loxton. Known as 'Captain Blood', Dyer had been one of the most feared ruckmen in the game.

After 24 years in office, Loxton retired before the 1979 poll. Without his profile, the Liberals lost the seat to Labor. Fittingly, the new member was yet another sporting identity. Bob Miller had played as a centre half-back for the Melbourne Football Club in the 1960s. The club had deemed him worthy enough to wear number 31, previously worn by Ron Barassi. Miller held the seat until 1985, himself resisting a vigorous challenge by former international golfer Peter Thompson in 1982.⁷⁰ In 1985, Liberal Don Hayward became the first non-sportsman to win Prahran in 30 years, bringing to an end a remarkable period in which a sporting career seemed all but essential to winning the support of voters.

The depth of sporting talent vying for election in Prahran was rare, but throughout Melbourne, ex-footballers have served in parliament and on local councils. Alex Gillon, Kevin Hardiman, Maurie Sheehy and Jack Gervasoni are just a few of the local mayors who had significant football careers. Since the 1970s, Victorian governments have appointed more ex-footballers to lead the sports ministry than any other legislature, with Brian Dixon, Neil Trezise (see below) and former Carlton ruckman Justin Madden each having had responsibility for the portfolio.

Sport has long been a vital component of Geelong's regional identity. In the twentieth century, its growing working-class population and a single (and successful) football team helped sustain the region's reputation for being especially devoted to the weekend game. Like Prahran, political representation in the area remained firmly in the hands of former sporting heroes for almost half a century.

In 1949, when the Liberal Party selected Opperman as their candidate for Corio in the upcoming federal election, they did so not because he had shown any political conviction. Rather, party leaders reckoned that the once national sporting idol might appeal to the voters in the 'sports-mad town'.⁷¹ In the by-election that followed Opperman's resignation in 1966, the Liberal Party lost to another sporting star. Labor's Gordon Scholes had been the amateur heavyweight boxing champion of Victoria in 1949. The switch from the professional cyclist to boxer-turned-engine driver seemed an appropriate symbolic shift for the rapidly industrialising region. Labor has held the seat ever since. Scholes served as minister for defence and then minister for territories, before his retirement in 1993.

70 Peter Ellingsen, 'Spotsmen Battle for a Small But Vital Seat', *Age* (Melbourne), 18 March 1982, 14.

71 Oakman, *Oppy*, 234.

Geelong residents voted a local sporting hero into state parliament, an ex-footballer affectionately known as 'Nipper'. Neil Trezise played 185 games for the Geelong Football Club between 1949 and 1959, helping the club to two premierships. He won office in 1964 and represented the city for almost three decades. In 1982, he became minister for youth, sport and recreation, a portfolio he held until his retirement in 1992. Trezise embodied the region's passion for sport and Labor politics, both in his role as an elected representative and, it seems, as a father. His son, Ian, recalled his father setting rules for family life: 'He used to say, "in our house if you don't vote Labor and you don't barrack for Geelong you don't get fed."' ⁷² Although he lacked his father's sporting talents, Ian also pursued a political career, representing Geelong in the Victorian assembly for Labor from 1999 to 2014.

Wannabees and couldabeens

The sportspeople who made unsuccessful bids for public office can reveal as much about Australia's political and social history as those who succeeded. While their stories can be harder to find, they provide a more comprehensive picture of the democratic process and the motivations of those who have sought election.

Failures, too, can illuminate some of the less orthodox attempts to pursue a political life. In 1985, former ruckman for the Carlton Football Club, Peter 'Percy' Jones, led a waggish but unsuccessful bid to enter the Victorian Parliament with the campaign slogan 'Point Percy at Parliament'. International rugby player Mal Meninga famously bowed out of his embryonic political career during a live-to-air radio interview in 2001 only moments after announcing his candidacy. ⁷³

More sinister was the attempt by former boxing champion Rocco 'Rocky' Gattellari to enter the New South Wales Parliament in 1995 as a candidate for the Liberal Party. Revelations of Gattellari's violent past (revealed in his autobiography, *The Rocky Road*) and his use of aggressive language to describe his intention to defeat his opponent, Labor's Reba Meagher, brought national attention. Meagher subsequently sought an apprehended violence order against him, which she withdrew after soundly defeating Gattellari at the ballot box. ⁷⁴

One of the more notable sporting figures to fail in their attempt to enter parliament was Shirley de la Hunty (née Strickland). The West Australian track star won seven Olympic medals between 1948 and 1956, in an era when Australian women

72 Norrie Ross, 'Neil Trezise was a Champ', *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 22 August 2006.

73 'Meninga Sidesteps Politics', *The World Today*, ABC Radio, 24 September 2001, www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s374271.htm.

74 Imre Salusinszky, 'Rocky Was Much Better Off in the House of Stoush', 71; *Australian Financial Review*, 10 February 1995; 'A New Ball Game', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 August 2006, www.smh.com.au/national/a-new-ball-game-20060805-gdo43j.html.

excelled at track events. De la Hunty held the record as the most decorated female in Olympic competition until 1976 when Polish sprinter Irena Kirszenstein-Szewinska equalled her tally.

De la Hunty knew that sport 'opened doors' and she always 'hoped to be seen ultimately as ... more than just a sports person'.⁷⁵ A committed environmentalist, de la Hunty was an articulate and popular public figure. She was a perennial candidate for state and federal office for the three decades, the first prominent female sporting identity in Australia to pursue a political career. De la Hunty's insistence on a conscious vote on education, sport and environmental matters precluded her from standing for election with any of the major political parties. She first campaigned as an Independent before joining the Australian Democrats in 1977, contesting seven federal elections with the party.⁷⁶

Although never elected to a parliament, her profile and political activism helped her gain election to the City of Melville council. She served two terms from 1988 to 1996 and from 1999 to 2003. Throughout her life, de la Hunty remained a lobbyist and advocated for issues around conservation and environmentalism. A Member of the Order of the British Empire since 1957, in 2001 de la Hunty was made an Officer of the Order of Australia for service to the community, particularly in the areas of conservation, the environment, local government and athletics. She was one of the first Australian women to challenge male dominance in the sporting and political spheres. Her varied career demonstrated the variety of life experiences that women could pursue outside the family.⁷⁷ The Western Australian Government honoured her with a state funeral, the first-ever for a private citizen.

Some of Australia's most celebrated athletes-turned-politicians have found that national reputations could contract rapidly to the localities they represented. Attempts to broaden their political reach became futile. A Commonwealth and Olympic medallist and holder of 17 world records, Ron Clarke had been an inspirational figure in Australian athletics during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1956, as a promising young runner, Clarke lit the Olympic flame at the opening ceremony for Summer Olympics in Melbourne. Still a recognisable figure in south-eastern Queensland in his late 60s, Clarke was elected mayor of Gold Coast in 2004. In 2012, he resigned to contest the division of Broadwater (an electorate that includes the northern suburbs on the Gold Coast) in the Queensland state elections. Standing as an independent, Clarke had overestimated his personal following and attracted only 4.6 per cent of the primary vote.

75 Shirley Strickland de la Hunty, interview with Robin Hughes, *Australian Biography: Extraordinary Australians Talk about Their Lives*, 1995, www.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/strickland/index.html.

76 At the 1993 federal election, Strickland stood as an independent candidate for the seat of Canning in Western Australia.

77 Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, 150–51.

Trailblazers

Until the 1990s, the sportspeople who pursued a political career were more likely to be white, able-bodied and male. Change has been slow, but the increasing diversity in sport has started to influence the composition of Australian parliaments.

One of the first Indigenous sports stars to turn to politics was Australian Rules footballer Maurice Rioli. One of the greatest players of his era, Rioli's storied career spanned three decades from the 1970s. In 1992, a year after his retirement, he won a seat in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly for the ALP, which he held until 2001. He was inducted into the Australian Football Hall of Fame in 2016.

As a member of the Australian women's hockey team at the 1996 Olympic Games, Nova Peris was the first Indigenous Australian to win an Olympic gold medal. In 2013, after Prime Minister Julia Gillard invited her to stand as a Labor candidate in the Senate for the Northern Territory, Peris became the first Indigenous woman elected to federal parliament. She entered parliament with no ideological agenda other than a determination to 'make use of the platform I was privileged to find myself on' and speak on behalf of Indigenous Australians when she could. Like many professional sportspeople, Peris had been preoccupied with improving her athletic performance. 'I've always been focussed on the task at hand,' she wrote, 'when that was completed, I was already switching my attention to the next goal, and the next.' Peris believed that her sporting background helped her become a better politician:

My upbringing, plus my years as an athlete under such demanding coaches as Ric Charlesworth, helped me to form a tough skin. I certainly needed it during my time in parliament!⁷⁸

Nine Olympians have entered local, state or federal politics: Frank Beaurepaire (swimming), Ric Charlesworth (hockey), Nova Peris (hockey), Ron Clarke (athletics), Dawn Fraser (swimming), Wilfred Kent Hughes (athletics) and Shirley de la Hunty, née Strickland (athletics). Aerial skier Zali Steggall is the most recent Olympian to win a seat in an Australian parliament. She was an independent candidate for the Sydney electorate of Warringah at the 2019 Australian federal election and defeated the incumbent member, former prime minister Tony Abbott.

Paralympians, however, have taken longer to blaze the trail. During her sporting career, Liesel Tesch won three medals in women's wheelchair basketball and two gold medals in sailing (with partner Daniel Fitzgibbon). In 2017, she entered the New South Wales Legislative Assembly for the Labor Party, becoming the first

78 Peris, *Nova: Finding My Voice*, 8; Nova Peris, *Nova: My Story* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2003), 244–45.

Paralympian to enter an Australian parliament. The following year, Australia's most successful Paralympic swimmer, Matt Cowdrey, won the federal seat of Coulston in South Australia for the Liberal Party.

Legacy

Australian historian Greg Denning once said that 'there is nothing so momentary as a sporting achievement, and nothing so lasting as the memory of it'.⁷⁹ Making a mark in either sport or politics is rare; leaving a legacy in both fields of endeavour rarer still. For Australia's former sporting champions, translating their cultural authority into effective political action has not been easy. Nor has it always proved the best way to bring lasting change. A few, however, have contributed to cultural and political life in ways that have threatened to overshadow their place in sporting history.

Wilfrid Kent Hughes represented Australia on the track at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp. The following year he travelled with the Oxford ski team on a tour of Europe, becoming the first Australian to ski competitively overseas. He is far better remembered for his distinguished political career and his pivotal role in organising the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games.⁸⁰

Australian Football Hall of Fame inductee Brian Dixon was a stalwart of the Melbourne Football Club during the 1950s and 1960s. He entered the Victorian Parliament for the Liberal Party in 1964 when he was 28 years old and continued playing for another four seasons. In 1975, as minister for youth, sport and recreation, he initiated the 'Life. Be in it' campaign, which became one of the best-known health promotions in Australian history.

Opperman's legacy is more complicated. The public controversies that dogged his time as the minister for immigration in the mid-1960s went some way to obscure the important legislative reforms he helped make to Australian immigration law. On leaving parliament, he expressed disappointment at his political legacy, believing that he:

did more really for Aust. in the 20s and 30s in Europe as a pedaller than as a politician—there were plenty who could have done my Ministerial job—but a few less who could have got over the Alps or the Pyrenees.⁸¹

79 Quoted in Gideon Haigh, ed., *The Penguin Book of Ashes Anecdotes, 1882–2005* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 2006), 2.

80 Frederick Howard, *Kent Hughes: A Biography* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1972).

81 Letter, Opperman to Heydon, 25 July 1968, MS 3155, Box 18, Folder 151, National Library of Australia.

It is tempting to agree that Opperman's sporting triumphs will outshine his contribution to the parliament. Yet we should remember that he received his knighthood in 1968 for services to politics, not sport. Opperman's role in the liberalisation of Australia's immigration laws in 1966 is sometimes ignored, in part because subsequent changes made his reforms appear less significant. At the time, however, Opperman's workmanlike approach to reform had been vital in building the consensus that allowed the changes to pass, first through Cabinet and then through parliament. Journalist Max Walsh reported in 1971: 'Sir Hubert sat down with the same dogged determination that must have made him a top athlete and set out to learn the problems and ... the aspirations of the department.'⁸² Of course, the consequences of those small changes were not evident in the late 1960s. Indeed, it would be another three decades until Opperman's role in the dismantling of the White Australia policy received any public recognition. In 1996, Jamie Mackie, one of the founders of the Immigration Reform Group who worked with the former cyclist when he was minister, felt compelled to set the record straight. In an article for the *Australian*, Mackie explained that while the Labor Party had established a new set of liberal immigration policies in the early 1970s, 'the ground-breaking work of changing public opinion had largely been done'. It was 'Opperman [who] began the process by breaking the ice irrevocably [and] deserves the nation's thanks,' he wrote.⁸³ The changes to immigration policy he initiated as minister were part of a more gradual reorientation that would, in time, change the cultural composition of the nation; a change that has proved more enduring than his contributions to Australia's sporting glory.

The beguiling promise

Sport permeates almost every facet of Australian life and sportspeople are among our most recognisable and exalted public figures. Fourteen sporting identities have been Australians of the Year, starting in 1962 with yachtsman Jock Sturrock. Historically, we have looked to them in times of economic and social crisis as symbols of unity and national purpose. We still look to sporting heroes to inspire and unite, and guide us through important social and ethical issues.⁸⁴ As paragons, when they disappoint—or cheat—they are said to have damaged the national reputation. When they become politicians, we hope that they will rise above partisan bickering and

82 Maximilian Walsh, 'How the White Australia Policy Was Breached', *Herald-Sun* (Melbourne), 23 May 1971, 13.

83 'Who Ended the White Australia Policy?', copy in papers of Jamie Mackie, National Library of Australia, MS Acc09.125. For an account of Opperman's role in the liberalisation of Australia's immigration laws see Oakman, *Oppy*, 281–97.

84 Jenna Price, 'We Need Sporting Heroes to Unite Us, Not Divide Us,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 2019, www.smh.com.au/sport/we-need-sporting-heroes-to-unite-us-not-divide-us-20191107-p538e3.html.

bring the integrity they showed in competition to the assemblies in which they sit. 'The beguiling promise of sport is that everyone is treated equally,' write Matthew Klugman and Gregory Phillips, 'that it transcends politics through meritocracy.'⁸⁵

This survey has attempted to show that Australian sports figures have sought to go beyond their role as abstract signifiers of national identity for over 150 years. They have been willing to risk their celebrated status to make a more direct and tangible contribution to the process of government. Motivations have varied, as has their effectiveness as politicians. Many have had long parliamentary careers, including some of the longest in Australian political history.

The enduring myth of Australian sport as an egalitarian meritocracy has helped sporting champions in their election bids.⁸⁶ Yet, it has proved less useful to navigating the process of government or achieving change.⁸⁷ Perversely, the inevitable compromises that come with a political career have tended to negate the cultural gravitas that has enabled sporting figures to win election in the first place. They have had to learn new skills to sustain their political futures.

The lives surveyed here might encourage us to be more circumspect about what our sports stars can realistically achieve once they step beyond their hallowed grounds. Nevertheless, their role in public life seems assured. Surveys show that since the late twentieth century, community trust in politics and democratic institutions has declined.⁸⁸ In such a climate, the opportunities for sporting identities with political ambitions are likely to increase.

There are other influential public positions, still largely untapped by Australia's sporting legends. Vice-regal office may hold the opportunity to foster social change without the polarisation that comes with elections or the compromise of party politics. Only three sporting champions have served in vice-regal positions in Australia. John Landy, Olympic medallist and the second man to break the four-minute mile, was the governor of Victoria between 2001 and 2007. Marjorie Jackson-Nelson was governor of South Australia from 2001 to 2007. Known during her athletic heyday in the 1950s as 'The Lithgow Flash', she finished her sporting career with two Olympic and seven Commonwealth Games gold medals and six individual world records. The appointment of two shining lights from Australia's sporting past was relatively benign. The appointment of former footballer and Yorta Yorta man Douglas Nicholls as governor of South Australia in 1976 was not.

85 Gregory Phillips and Matthew Klugman, 'The Land We Play On: Equality Doesn't Mean Justice', *Griffith Review* 53 (2016): 185.

86 Jim McKay, *No Pain, No Gain?: Sport and Australian Culture* (Sydney: Prentice Hall, 1991), 1–18; Tatz, *Obstacle Race*; Peter Kell, *Good Sports: Australian Sport and the Myth of the Fair Go* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2000).

87 Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, 55–57.

88 Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987–2019* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 2019).

Nicholls rose to prominence as a dynamic Australian Rules footballer in the 1920s and 1930s. As the first publicly recognised Indigenous man to play at the game's highest levels, he endured racist abuse and discrimination. He nevertheless became a popular and outspoken figure, rarely missing an opportunity to speak publicly about the problems faced by Aboriginal people. As his playing career subsided, he coached the first Aboriginal All-Stars football team and was chairman of the National Aboriginal Sports Foundation. He later became a pastor and campaigner for reconciliation and social justice. Nicholls was not a politician, but he was undoubtedly a political figure. Football gave him a platform, which he used to advocate for the rights of Indigenous Australians.

The sporting public soon forgot about Nicholls. (To this day, the AFL has decided not to include him in its Hall of Fame.) Recognition came instead from the reformist premier of South Australia Don Dunstan who, in the mid-1970s, selected Nicholls to be the state's next governor, a decision that the *Canberra Times* described as the 'acid test of [the state's] racial tolerance'.⁸⁹ The retiring governor, Sir Mark Oliphant, actively opposed Nicholls's appointment. In a strongly worded letter to Dunstan, he questioned every aspect of the 'background of the proposed incumbent', such as his birthplace, religion, and whether Government House would be 'filled to overflowing by his relatives and tribesmen'. Oliphant then asked, 'Does his fame as an athlete and footballer make up for this?' He answered the question himself, in racial terms: 'there is something inherent in the personality of the Aborigine which makes it difficult for him to fully adapt to the ways of the white man.'⁹⁰ Sport alone, in the 1970s, would not dislodge trenchant racism. But Dunstan saw a chance to use Nicholls's standing to challenge community expectations. 'I know that there is still racial feeling in the community,' he wrote in his reply to Oliphant, 'but I think it is necessary constantly to war against it.'⁹¹ Nicholls became the first Indigenous man to hold vice-regal office. Poor health forced his early resignation, cutting short the career of one of the state's most prominent citizens.

The trajectory of Nicholls's career—from Indigenous football hero to governor—is remarkable. It was an important symbol for the nation and remains so today. As with many of the people examined in this article, his life demonstrated both the potential and the limits of sports cultural and political power. Nevertheless, given its mass appeal in Australia, sport remains one of the few enterprises with the potential to transcend divisive politics and build the cultural and political accommodations

89 'Next Governor May Test Community's Racial Tolerance', *Canberra Times*, 25 May 1976, 2. Other candidates included Sir Donald Bradman.

90 *Age* (Melbourne), 20 August 1981.

91 Stewart Cockburn and David Ellyard, *Oliphant: The Life and Times of Sir Mark Oliphant* (Adelaide: Axiom Books, 1981), 317–18, 347–48; Don Dunstan, *Felicia: The Political Memoirs of Don Dunstan* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1981), 273–74; Angela Woollacott, *Don Dunstan: The Visionary Politician Who Changed Australia* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2019), 194, 212–13.

necessary to face an uncertain era. Can sport ever make good on its beguiling promise to create a new sense of nationhood that attends to questions of sovereignty, inclusion and social justice?

Should Australia become a republic, the community will have a say about who will become the head of state, regardless of the model finally adopted. With sport likely to remain at the centre of Australian cultural life and national identity, the elevation of a former sporting champion to the position is possible.⁹² Just who that person might be is an intriguing thought indeed.

92 Graeme Davison, 'The Imaginary Grandstand', *Meanjin* 61, no. 3 (2002): 4–18.

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