



## CHINA SHOP

### *Artie Chokes*

The recent rugby union World Cup has once again exposed Australian sports lovers to the talents of an ABC commentary team. I was going to say 'idiosyncrasies', but that's just the point—there aren't any. The symbol of the ABC's mediocrity when it comes to sport is their insistence that all their commentators and presenters appear dressed in bright green blazers with bright red ties. It's not just that such an outfit is an offence against any normal standards of sartorial decency. The green blazer and red tie are screaming at us from every fibre that what the ABC really loves in its sports presenters is not wit, insight or communication skills of any kind, but uniformity.

I would hazard a guess that the roots of this sad quest, along with so much of the ABC's cultural baggage, lie with the BBC, and a disastrous misinterpretation of what it stood (and stands) for. While the BBC was certainly founded with a conservative ethos, it has almost always been able to make room for eccentricity and individuality, within certain limits. Usually these limits have been defined by class—hence the free rein given to Monty Python, for example. In sport, this tolerance, even encouragement, of upper middle-class idiosyncrasy has been particularly prevalent in those major

sports which the BBC regards as its own exclusive preserve: rugby union, cricket and tennis.

The voice of rugby for decades has been Bill McLaren: cultured, Scottish and a pompous ass. McLaren would never describe a thug of a prop forward as anything more pejorative than a "stout citizen", as long as he was a doctor or lawyer in his other life. The best cricket commentator on British TV is, ironically, Richie Benaud. But for years it was John Arlott's West Country drawl which was the quintessential embodiment of English summer days. (English summer days up until about 3.40 pm, that is—after which Arlott was prone to indulge in his other great passion, fine wines.) The third icon of BBC sports commentary is the ancient, crusty Dan Maskell, the only man in Britain who can still say "Oh, I say", without the slightest hint of self-parody. Maskell has been bemoaning declining standards at Wimbledon at least since Fred Perry won Britain's last mens' singles title in 1936.

Three very different men, but all with similar qualities: a love for the game; an ability to communicate that passion, however irritatingly; and a personality which over long years became inextricably bound up with the sport itself. Above all, all three possess a certain gravitas which surpasses ridicule. One of the few ABC commentators of recent memory who could be said to possess the same quality, is cricket's Alan McGilvray (perhaps significantly a radio rather than TV man). None of the above, it seems almost superfluous to add, would be seen dead wearing a scarlet tie with a loud green blazer—and certainly not if they were told to do so.

The aspect of the BBC's character which the ABC seems determined to perpetuate is its altogether less admirable stuffy superiority. This was exemplified by Lord Reith's insistence that all radio announcers should wear evening dress, or the assertion by early newsreaders on

occasions that "there is no news tonight" (I kid you not).

Thus the green blazer signifies a modern-day craving for respectability and a reluctance to criticise, or even to express a mildly controversial opinion. The outcome is all too often a grating, hearty enthusiasm, combined with creaking attempts at informality, as when Gordon Bray refers to "Campo" or "Poido". The same trait used to be painfully evident in the ABC's National Soccer League coverage (RIP), with wooden frontman John Bell's tortuous attempts to engage "Kozzie" (former NSL star John Kosmina) in relaxed banter.

Nowhere is the inhibiting effect of this attitude more clearly to be seen than in the ABC's rugby league lineup. The sight of poor oversized league icon Artie Beetson unfeelingly stuffed into The Blazer is almost enough to make you yearn for Channel 10. I can't help feeling that if only Artie were allowed to appear wearing shorts and to bring a few stubbies into the studio with him, not only would he enjoy himself a lot more, but his comments on the game would be much more incisive too.

The ABC present sport as if it were a wedding or a funeral: an important, solemn occasion, for which everyone gets dressed up like a dog's dinner and generally has a miserable time. What sport is really about is something much more akin to emotions of the reception or the wake. It's a chance to unwind, to laugh and to cry, to have a few drinks, get a bit sentimental and to say what you really think about the bride's father (or the pathetic inadequacy of the Welsh pack). So come on Aunty. Loosen your collar a bit and stop taking it all so seriously. And get rid of those blazers, for crying out loud.

MIKE TICHER was glued to the ABC for the duration of the rugby World Cup despite himself.  
Dr Hartman has unfortunately had to suspend appointments.