Rugby League

“The virtue of all-in wrestling”, according to the French writer Roland Barthes, “is that it is the spectacle of excess”. Likewise, according to the Italian writer Umberto Eco, all sports activity “is dominated by the idea of waste”. If Barthes and Eco are right, it must surely be true that Rugby League is the quintessential “spectacle of excess”. Australian Rules is clearly a species of gymnastics, with all the aesthetic rules this implies. Rugby League, on the other hand, has exorbitant exertion without any discernible aesthetic whatsoever: it is spectacle without the trappings of art.

Rugby League is, for a start, one of the most gratuitously violent games in the world: this is universally commented upon by its critics. Very few of its leading exponents last beyond the magical age of thirty (by which time they are often balding and arthritic) — and even fewer who are over that age dare to admit it. Yet the idea of a “Rugby League riot”, like that of “Rugby League hooliganism”, is almost absurd. Anyone familiar with Rugby League crowds knows that they are far safer places to be than the average cricket Test match audience at the MCG or SCG. Violence, it seems, is part of the spectacle itself: to practise it in the crowd or on the stands would be an overloading of this “excess” — in other words, simply in bad taste.

Some of this peculiar character of Rugby League as spectacle can clearly be attributed to its elements of carnival. In carnival, we are told, taste is inverted, and what is normally seen as base or grotesque becomes exalted. Likewise, carnival is travesty, in its original sense: the spectacle of the mayor of the town, pilloried, dragging at the rear of carnivals, was (we are also told) a familiar mediaeval scene. Thus, also in Rugby League, the referee is the all-important catalyst of the game’s entertainment value — a displaced authority figure (many are policemen), travestied in carnival form (even down to the absurd clothing). In Rugby League mythology, as every fan knows, one’s team is never really beaten: either the referee awarded too many penalties to the other side, or the invariably all-important forward pass in the first opposition try was somehow overlooked. Hooting and mocking the referee is an integral part of the really serious fan’s pleasure.

Nor are the central social themes of gender and class far to seek. Rugby League is not just a “man’s game”, it is a particular definition of manhood itself. Australian Rules players are sex symbols, their buttocks an item of universal acclaim with their (heterosexual) female fans. But no Rugby League player far beyond the age of twenty-five is likely to be a pretty sight. Rugby League stars are invulnerable to being portrayed (even by the most subtle of feminist table-turning) as sex objects: like the classic Anglo-Saxon definition of manhood, their bodies are purely functional objects, their movements rational beyond the worst fears of sensuality.
And Rugby League has long served as a parody of class divisions. In Sydney, Manly-Warringah are the much-hated symbols of the Establishment: when they bought up the cream of the players from Western Suburbs — the “fibro” battlers — in the latter '70s, the demonology both of class struggle and incorporation was complete. Parramatta, by contrast, are the gateway to the New Western Suburbs — clean-cut, stylish, and usually remorselessly successful.

And all the general themes of modern sport are here: the growth of professionalism, the era of “percentage football”, tackle counts, and the specialist defensive player. Appropriately enough, this last was an era ushered in during the mid-seventies with the development of the risk-free “bomb”, or high kick, by the then unfashionable Parramatta club.

But where lies the pleasure in watching Rugby League? (And this is a matter of constant mystery to its detractors.) It is to be found again, I would argue, in the territory of “excess” as spectacle: excesses of endurance and exhaustion; vast excesses of energy expended in travelling, often over the course of a full six tackles, no more than five metres. Another component of the spectacle is the old wartime rhythm of long periods of regulated monotony broken by short flashes of intense excitement. Unlike Australian Rules, where the action is conventionally described as “non-stop”, Rugby League can delay the moment of excitement, of climax, for five, ten, even forty minutes — and scorelines without tries to either side (which is not the same thing at all as soccer’s often satisfying “nil-nil” draws) are becoming increasingly common.

Finally, the followers of anti-psychiatry might tell us. Rugby League also represents the playing-out of the dramas of psychiatry in sporting form. The repressive paranoid instinct, obsessed with territory lost and gained, lasts ten or twenty tackles or more: then comes the schizophrenic release of an apparently random fifty-metre breakthrough, the zig-zag chain of passes, and finally a spectacular leap back to Mother earth behind the tryline...

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