

Storm – The Loss of Innocence

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Just as we are finalising the May 2010 Sports Newsletter, the Storm Rugby League scandal has broken. This is a huge news story blowing the Governments announcements in relation to the Child Care

Centres and Insulation program off the front pages of newspapers nationwide.

It has to be asked why even in a sports loving country like Australia that this story has received such prominence. I believe that it represents the loss of innocence for Australian sport. There is no doubt that Australia, as a nation, loves sport. Australians love playing it, watching it, betting on it and using it as a social event. It sits at the very heart of many families, with parents passing their love of sport and a healthy lifestyle onto their children.

For most of Australia's 200 odd years, sport has been amateur or if not amateur, the professional rewards have been modest. Rugby until the 1990s was still an amateur sport. The Olympics for most of its history has been amateur. Tennis had its huge split between the amateurs and the professionals in the 1960s. Until very recently, there was very little money in athletics or swimming. The Australian icon of Surf Lifesaving is still largely amateur. The money in cricket only changed after World Series Cricket in the 70s.

Professional sport has been seen by most, as a natural extension of the amateur game. Talented sports people have been able to earn money, because of the desire of Australians to watch them play their sport either live or on television. The ethos and nature of sport that people love so much was carried through into the professional side of the game.

Australians abhor cheating and whilst we are quick to point the finger at others, the suggestion that an Australian could cheat is greeted with astonishment and is quickly rejected.

The reality is that internationally professional sport can be a dirty business. The professional sporting codes in the United States of ice hockey, basketball, baseball and gridiron are littered with decades of dirty business corruption, cheating, gambling and dishonesty. The European English football (soccer) is again full of interesting characters, some with allegedly dubious backgrounds and all sorts of dubious behavior. Indian betting rings are back in the news today.

In recent years in Australia we have seen increasingly bad behavior by professional sports people. We have also seen breaches of salary caps, boardroom brawls, network legal battles and major fights for the prize; some of which have been conducted in a questionable fashion. Overall, however, professional sport somehow has not really been tainted.

Australians have always viewed their professional sport as having the best attributes of sport; fair play and sportsmanship. This organisational cheating at the Storm brings to light what we might have suspected but what we are afraid to admit, that professional sport in Australia is also a potentially dirty business.

It begs the question 'is what happened at the Storm an isolated event, or is organised cheating prevalent in Australian professional sport?' I don't think that it is, but that is the problem with loss of innocence. Once it is gone, you can't get it back.