

# **Sport in Prisoner-of-war Camps, in the Army and on the Home Front**

## **Cricket in Stalag 344 Sport in German Prisoner-of-war Camps during World War II**

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Sports historians to this point have tended to examine the relationships between sport and war by concentrating on the home front, exploring, for example, the various contemporary and debates as to whether sport was an impetus or hindrance to the war effort. Some attention has been given as to how sport was utilised for morale purposes after the end of both World Wars. Cricket, in particular has received this sort of analysis in accounts such as Ronald Cardwell's *The AIF Cricket Team*<sup>1</sup> and Ian Woodward's *Cricket, Not War*.<sup>2</sup>

Other aspects of sport and war have yet to be considered. Another area worthy of examination is the part played by sport in the lives of Australian prisoners-of-war. Many questions can be posed. Why did prisoners-of-war go to such great lengths to organise sport in such an unpromising situation? Was sport there simply a matter of maintaining morale or was there an attempt to retain a sense of normality? Or, did it amount to a measure of resistance? Did the German authorities tolerate, accept, or even encourage sport in the camps?

This account draws on the experiences of a number of servicemen who were prisoners-of-war in the European theatre of World War II. An indication of the variety of sports played will be given followed by a case study of one particular sport, cricket in one particular camp, Stalag 344. The article concludes with some tentative analysis of the function and significance of sport in the experience of these former prisoners-of-war.

### **Australian Prisoners-of-war**

Just over 8000 Australians became prisoners-of-war under the Italian and German regimes. Most of the AIF personnel were captured either in the North African desert campaign or in the shambles of Crete and Greece. These prisoners-of-war captured by the Italians became the responsibility of the Germans in 1943 when Mussolini's regime collapsed and were then transported north by train to Germany. There were two main groups of RAAF air crew who became prisoners-of-war: those who were captured in the desert campaign, mainly in 1942 and 1943, and those who were shot down in the bombing raids over German territory later in the War.

In general these prisoners-of-war were confined in separate army and air force camps which were further divided into camps for officers and those for other ranks. Even in the comparatively small Italian camps a variety of sports appeared, particularly those which were economical of space. Henry Comber: an RAAF pilot-officer serving with the RAF, spent time at Sulmona in the Abruzzi and, almost as soon as he arrived, found himself engaged in basketball, quoits and a version of hockey requiring four to five players, adapted to a small playing area. Basketball, along with volleyball, baseball and softball were sports introduced to the Australians by the arrival of the Canadian and American servicemen.

Another sport introduced by the Canadians was ice hockey. The staging of ice hockey matches demonstrated the ingenuity which was required to play a sport at all in the unpromising conditions of a prisoner-of-war camp. Max Dunn: an Australian pilot, recounted that at Stalag Luft 3 at Sagan (site of the Great Escape) shallow trenches were dug during winter and then flooded by water from nearby taps which then froze overnight.

At Stalag Luft 3 also, an impromptu nine hole golf course was constructed in the sandy soil of the camp. Dunn and Comber described a nine hole course with the length of holes varying between sixty and 140 yards; the course was played under the rule that the golfer had to make

his own ball and use the one golf club available: a ladies' wooden five which meant that players were required to book that club rather than the course.

Winton Healey,<sup>5</sup> who spent two years at Stalag 383 at Hohenfels near Parsberg in Bavaria, gave an account of a large tank of fire fighting water being used for swimming races. Although the water was never changed, swimming carnivals were wholeheartedly supported.

### **Cricket at Stalag 344**

Wherever Dominion and Empire prisoners were gathered there were innumerable games of impromptu cricket going on. Bill Bowes described one such game at Chieti, Italy, in his autobiography *Express Deliveries*.<sup>6</sup> The *Cricketer Annual* of 1943 carried a report of a Test match between England and Australia played at Stalag Luft 6 in July of that year, while the Hon. T Prittie gave a detailed report in the *Cricketer* of June 1944 outlining how POWs at camp IX A/H had improvised a game of cricket with specially adapted local rules in the moat of their castle prison. The Australian War Memorial currently has on display a score book of the 'Ersatz Ashes' played at Stalag 383 at Hohenfels in 1943 as a triangular tournament between Australia, England and New Zealand. Australian Jim Welch's cartoons, decorations and illuminated scorecards resemble a cricketing prisoner-of-war's Book of Hours. So Lamsdorf was not unique in staging prisoner-of-war cricket matches but is interesting for the thoroughness of its organisation and the detailed records which have survived.

By 1943 Stalag VIII B was a large complex of about 40 000 Allied POWs, half of whom were Russians who were imprisoned separately from the rest. In addition there were a further 20 000 Allied POWs who were organised into working parties in facilities such as mines, quarries and factories in the Lamsdorf district. In that year a triangular cricket tournament was held between England, Australia and New Zealand. The matches resulted in comprehensive wins to Australia, whose outstanding player was a tall lively right-arm bowler, Alan Snedden who had taken

four wickets in four balls in suburban cricket in pre-war Perth. In the match against New Zealand he took 5/13 and 9/18.

My knowledge of these matches in the 1944 series comes from the kindness of the family of the late Maurice Kelk, one of the Australian players at Lamsdorf. Kelk was born and grew up in the central western New South Wales town of Parkes where he was a keen local cricketer. He was taken POW on Crete in May 1941 and made the long and difficult journey to Lamsdorf where he kept meticulous handwritten descriptions and scores of the matches. In addition, a hand-painted souvenir booklet was prepared possibly by Jack London, an RAP POW, consisting of a handsome stylised art-deco cover with cricket cartoons and players' autographs. Amazingly, in the disintegration and chaos of the final stages of war these mementos were cared for and survived. Alan Snedden's son, now living in rural Western Australia, also has a lovingly-compiled set of scores and a statistical analysis which reveals the hardiness of the avid cricket follower's dedication to maintaining accurate records.

As the summer of 1944 approached and a program of winter sports finished, cricket preparations began in earnest. A new factor at Lamsdorf was the arrival of a contingent of South African POWs from North Africa via Italy. Ike Rosmarin, who had been captured at Tobruk, tells in his memoir, *Inside Story*,<sup>7</sup> of how the South Africans quietly set about preparing a team, confident in the knowledge that they had a Test player in wicketkeeper-batsman 'Billy' Wade who was on a working party at Auschwitz which was not far from Lamsdorf.

The English supporters were not happy with their team's dismal performance in the 1943 series. According to Bob Henderson<sup>8</sup> who had grown up in Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire, and was aboard a Wellington Bomber shot down over the Ruhr in August 1942, a meeting was convened at which the English selectors were sacked and a new panel appointed (how familiar it all sounds!). An immediate search for cricket talent was instigated amongst the many working parties of English POWs spread throughout the Lamsdorf region. One immediate result for Henderson, now living in retirement in Adelaide, was that he became England's wicketkeeper for the 1944 series.

Naturally, in these surroundings, the ability to improvise was at a premium, so ingenuity and adaptability were the keynotes of the cricket preparation. A limited range of equipment was obtained through such channels as the Red Cross and the YMCA, so that bats, pads, batting gloves and some balls were supplied but none of my informants can remember 'boxes' being available.

As open space was limited, a cricket ground was adapted from an area which was used for other sports. It was a small rectangle where the square boundaries were only about twenty five yards from the wicket. Consequently, a local rule was introduced which provided for a stroke to the square boundaries to be counted as two runs while a ball hit over the boundaries on the full brought the batsman four runs. The straight boundaries were more conventional in length and normal rules applied to them.

Russell Hoyle,<sup>9</sup> who had played pre-War cricket with Winchmore Hill Cricket Club in London and was a Barrack Room Orderly with the Territorial Field Ambulance, remembered the surface of the playing area as bare, dusty and hard with a covering of tiny pebbles which were removed by a volunteer parade before each day's play. Hoyle, who now lives in Hobart, Tasmania, opened the bowling for England in their first three matches but then was required for duties back at the camp hospital.

A pitch was provided by laying a set of mats on the hard ground. A special loom was constructed and convalescing POWs in the camp hospital used the string and twine from Red Cross parcels to weave a set of mats. David Radke,<sup>10</sup> an RAAF POW from Brisbane, explained that the warp and weft in the mats were completely different from one another with the result that batsmen had to contend with a two-faced pitch where the ball skidded through at one end and stood up at the other.

Two rounds of Tests were played between early July and late September 1944. The long hours of available daylight were fully utilised so that matches would typically run from early morning to as late as 9 pm. Each team had its taste of success: Australia won the first series, defeating New Zealand in the final while England were undefeated in

the second series with South Africa and Australia tying for second position. Towards the end of the second series, two additional matches were played involving composite representative sides: one, for example, was Anzacs versus the Rest, which the Rest won.

Australia was captained by G S 'Pat' Ferrero of the RAAF, a stockily-built former first grade cricketer with South Melbourne who had been a team mate of the likes of Lindsay Hassett and Keith Miller and who was to captain his club in 1947/48 when Hassett was absent on Test and Sheffield Shield duty. Ferrero was no stylist but he was a determined and effective batsman who was a shrewd and popular captain with a flair for the well-timed tactical move. Alan Snedden continued to dominate the opposition batting, bowling at a lively pace with a Jeff Thomson-like slinging action and was able to get considerable cut from the off on the matting wicket. His cause was assisted by the presence of two agile close-in fieldsman in David Radke and Bruce Trethewey,<sup>11</sup> an AIF POW taken on Crete, who had learnt his cricket in the Leeton district of south west New South Wales.

After a miserable start, England went on to play with authority. Captaincy appears to have been shared between Len Thallon, a Royal Navy coder from York and George Butterworth of the RASC. Fred Colledge, a military policeman from Renfrew in Scotland, opened the bowling in some of the later matches. He was to meet Australian cricketers again on the 1948 tour of England when he dismissed Keith Miller in Edinburgh. RAF W/O Fred Cooper also played for England at Lamsdorfz he had a few games for Lancashire in 1946 and then joined his brother, Edwin, at Worcestershire between 1947 and 1950, during which time they showed the Essex bowlers the meaning of fraternal partnership with an opening stand of 163 at Worcester in 1947. Another RAF player was Phillip Dorrell, an ex-student of the Bromsgrove School, who represented Worcestershire in one county match in 1946. The English player who made the most vivid impact was Celso de Freitas who had played with distinction for British Guiana in the 1930s and had scored two first-class centuries. He was serving with the RAF when captured and my informants are unanimous in their admiration of the

wristy elegance and easeful correctness of his batting even in the unpropitious surroundings of Stalag 344. In manner and style, Sir Colin Cowdrey was their united point of comparison for the batting of de Freitas.

The New Zealand Captain was Jack Jacobs who had played Plunket Shield cricket as a batsman for Canterbury in the 1920s and 1930s. He made a vital contribution to one of the most famous domestic matches in New Zealand, in scoring 52 and 46 not out for his side against Auckland at Lancaster Park, Christchurch, in December 1930, when the visitors set Canterbury 473 to win in the fourth innings. Jacobs scored the winning run with three minutes to spare. At Lamsdorf he was ably supported by the batting of Norm Gates, a skilful Wellington club cricketer and all-rounders Murray Sharp of Poverty Bay and A H 'Bill' Sibley of Christchurch. Naturally, Billy Wade, with the experience of three Tests against England in 1938/39 behind him, was the dominant South African player. He is remembered as a cricketer and man of quiet authority and wise counsel. Lionel Laird and Pat Delaney were the mainstays of the attack, while Bob Woodin, later a Cape Town cricket administrator, was a useful all-rounder.

Henderson, Hoyle, Radke and Trethewey are unanimously insistent on the high standard of cricket played in these matches and the keenly competitive quality which it had. This edge was doubtless sharpened by the proximity of the sizable crowds of up to 2500 which attended each match. Spectators brought out forms from their barracks and erected temporary grandstands, while some of the Australians created an ersatz Sydney Hill from which Yabba's comments were brought to a new audience.

Billy Wade<sup>12</sup> highlights how spectators could make themselves felt. A German guard, oblivious to the significance of what was going on around him, walked from one side of the ground to the other, pushing his bicycle and leading a large guard dog straight across the pitch. The crowd reaction and commentary made it fortunate that the German had no ready grasp of irate spectator English.

Cricket at Lamsdorf had an eye for innovation well in advance of the ICC in that neutral umpires were appointed to each match, usually resplendent in white coats borrowed from the camp hospital. Needless to say, betting flourished, normally in the camp currency of cigarettes, but confident punters were even known to wager a Red Cross parcel on what they considered a sure result.

Two brief examples illustrate the intensity of the cricket. On 17 July, Australia appeared to be batting itself into a sound position against New Zealand with its second innings at 3/70 when David Thomas struck and finished with 5/19, including a hat-trick, to have Australia all out for that score of Antipodean mystical significance, 87. Thomas completed a memorable day when he arrived at the crease with New Zealand at 7/65 and helped Norm Gates eke out the 15 runs which sealed a New Zealand victory. A month later, South Africa only needed 47 to win in the fourth innings. Ike Rosmarin tells of the pessimistic Australian spectators and punters going to ground but Alan Snedden took three wickets in his first over and he and Neville Byrne took five wickets each to dismiss the South Africans for 38. Rosmarin was then paraded around the camp on a stretcher by the Australians being displayed as the trophy of a dead Springbok.

The cricket season was followed by the severe winter of 1944/45 whose privations were magnified by the disintegration of the camp as the Russians approached from the East. Many of the POWs had to undertake forced marches of up 500 miles. One of the Australian cricketers, David Radke, assisted Jim Holliday in collecting and editing vivid personal accounts of the march and other experiences of the eighty-four RAAF POWs at Lamsdorf.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Role of Sport**

What functions, then, did sport serve for these prisoners-of-war? At a basic level, games allowed them to maintain some degree of physical fitness. For those who were confined in Italian camps, there had been the possibility of liberation by Allied forces as the fascist regime collapsed in 1943. If this had happened, they may have been required to walk



significant distances to reach safety and physical fitness would have been at a premium. As it was, many of them were faced with arduous forced marches in freezing conditions after January 1945 as the Germans moved their captives west as part of their policy of leaving nothing behind for the advancing Russian forces. In the context of physical fitness, each of my informants was adamant that it could not have been maintained without the regular and life-saving Red Cross parcels which augmented the inadequate diet provided by the Germans.

A constant feature of camp life for many prisoners-of-war was the boredom of existence in crowded living quarters which were unhygienic and subject to the extremes of the weather. Sport became an important way of providing a structure and a focus for daily existence (together, of course, with things such as educational activities and theatrical productions). While the actual playing of the games was crucial, the meticulous recording of them, as in Maurice Kelk's scorecards, provided later opportunities for discussion, reminiscence, analysis and argument which would have lasted long after the games had finished. In these ways, sport became an important facet in the maintenance of prisoner-of-war morale.

The boredom referred to was only one aspect of the complex psychological condition of being a prisoner-of-war. Those who experienced it remember the frustrating and sometimes debilitating feeling of being an important bystander removed from the war effort yet held far from the normal round of civilian life. So, the trappings of sport became an emblem of normality. Test matches, Empire Games, athletics contests, a Davis Cup at Stalag Luft 3 all became powerful approximations of an everyday life in peace time where sport was an integral part of the fabric of that life. A poignant example of this activity is a photograph in the possession of Bruce Trethewey of a surf carnival march past at Stalag 344, complete with bamboo flag pole, home-made reel and costumes made from singlets and shorts.

Sport also served a utilitarian function because there were occasions where it was used to camouflage escape activities. For example, Henry

Comber recounted how, at Sulmona, basketball and volleyball with their necessary shuffling, shouting and jumping, combined with accompanying cheering were a useful diversion from the noise of nearby tunnelling activities. Max Dunn also offered an example of the imaginative adaptation of the rules of Rugby Union. At the camp at Spangenberg, near Kassel, there were a number of games where twenty players per side appeared to take the field but the surplus men would disappear to undertake tunnelling operations.<sup>14</sup>

For their part, the German administrators in many camps appear to have been prepared to tolerate and, in some cases, even encourage sporting activities. The prisoners-of-War sensed that the Germans felt that sport offered a way of keeping their charges content and removing thoughts of escape. In general, the German officials wanted a quiet, trouble-free life, because the rigours of the Eastern Front awaited those who could not produce a trouble-free camp.

A final strong reminder needs to be issued in order to keep this discussion in perspective. The sport discussed was not a Saturday afternoon of green fields and sumptuous teas; it took place in the sombre context of a life with no liberty and little physical comfort. Further, sport was not the totality of camp existence or even a major part of it, yet how and why these prisoners-of-war played it tells us something of one role of sport in Australian society.

## NOTES

- 1 The author, Sydney, 1980.
- 2 SMK Enterprises, Brighton East, 1994.
- 3 Interview, 16 Jan. 1995.
- 4 Interview, 17 Jan. 1995.
- 5 Interview, 28 Dec. 1994.
- 6 Stanley Paul, London, n.d.
- 7 W J Flesch, Cape Town, 1990.
- 8 Letter to the author, 18 Aug. 1994.
- 9 Interview, 16 Aug. 1994.
- 10 Letter to the author, 10 July 1994.
- 11 Interview, 20 Aug. 1994.
- 12 Letter to the author, 5 July 1994.
- 13 Lamsdorf RAAF POW Association, Holland Park, 1992.
- 14 The classic account of such operations is Eric Williams, *The Wooden Horse*, London, 1949.