

ESSAY

Time for spart: sport + art

Moral fibre and muscle fibre

Scott Rankin

I LIVE AND work in the poorest electorate in the poorest state in the country, on the north-west coast of Tasmania. It may be beautiful, with the cleanest air in the world – Cape Grim beef chew the cud peacefully up the road, abalone on the rocks – however, the negative social indicators are off the dial: obesity, school retention, intergenerational welfare dependency, rural male suicide and family violence.

I've spent a quarter of a century in this community working with social change company Big hART, delivering projects to help prevent violence and then exporting these projects nationally. Over that time the taxpayer has invested in our approach and the organisation has been acknowledged with eight Coalition of Australian Governments Violence Prevention Awards and a World Health Organisation Safe Community Award. A less violent culture would be much easier to encourage – in which fewer coward punches are thrown, fewer women die, fewer children are damaged by violent mothers, fewer husbands receive stick wounds, fewer people are bullied and hazed in workplace port-a-loos, and fewer kids shy away from participation in the classroom – if policing was consistent across all sections of the community, especially in those areas of public life that hothouse public opinion, such as big media and the big business of sport.

Since when did we vote to decriminalise violence under floodlights? When did we decide it was okay to verbally abuse someone because you're wearing colourful socks? Since when is it okay for a coach – the moral leader of their team – to violently and repeatedly smash the handset of their phone against the desk, while yelling violent expletives at umpires and opponents on national television during Friday night footy? It is not okay. And neither is it okay for TV commentators to make light of these violent male role models who can't control their anger.

When professional sports people are violent or verbally abusive on the field, arrest them, in front of the cameras and the spectators, and make them face the laws they have just broken. And not just in some pretend Monday-night tribunal trussed up in designer suits and hair product kind of way. Verbal abuse and vilification are illegal – don't let some narcissistic young tennis star get away with abuse and then make enough money to buy another Ferrari he's too young to drive, because his tweets, clicks and likes peaked for an hour and secured him a few more endorsements. Arrest him. And if his agent gives him an away from camera high-five, arrest him too for collusion.

If a football player throws a punch on field the police should be on the spot. It is a crime. If they use threatening and abusive language – straight in the paddy wagon. No ifs, no buts. Sporting culture encourages violence and abuse on the field, but when spectators copy that behaviour we ban them from the ground. Fine. Ban the players too. And please, no bullshit about 'the cauldron' or the 'emotion of the game'. These are highly sought-after, highly paid, highly disciplined professionals mostly mugging for the media, or for more 'likes' and a better book deal, ghost-written by some complicit writer, through some complicit agent for some complicit publisher.

Both the arts and culture sector and the sports sector abdicate their responsibilities to serving the community, by spooning like strung-out addicts in bed with vested interests – 'how many hotel beds will this blockbuster arts festival show sell?' 'How many media dollars could this footy code generate?' – leaving *both* sectors open to criticism. However, at a time when families are ripped apart by violence in the home and women are dying at the hands of men across our suburban battlefields, big sport has some serious questions to answer in its indefensible and continuing implicit condoning of male violence.

Sport is not that different from any other cultural endeavour. Sport can be defined as 'an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against others for entertainment'. Artists also compete, but mostly in a more implicit manner. Dancers, actors, singers, musicians all get sweaty; it takes a lot of skill; there are spectators, so...

If Bill Henson punches someone in a gallery, arrest him too. If an audience member on a TV show starts a fight or throws a shoe, arrest them. However, as it happens, violence and verbal abuse in the public arena is vastly over-represented in sport, not to mention politics – two key areas of community leadership. (Sure, if passive aggression were a crime, the arts would be leading the charge.)

Male dominated sport is not some backyard hobby. It is big business. Violence is being condoned, endorsed and implicitly encouraged by this billion-dollar enterprise. It has no intention of wiping violence from the game. It needs the testosterone. It needs the ratings. It needs to incite the 'burbs, to claim the media space, the advertising dollar and the gate. Violence is the business model. The various tribunals and posturing are just part of the theatre. And make no mistake, men's sport is far more violent and abusive than women's sport.

BIG hART IS interested in community, in art and also in sport. Recently the organisation has been developing a project that combines all three. Skateboarding is the world's fastest-growing sport. As a culture it is deeply altruistic, free and fitness based, with a sophisticated appreciation of architectural form, space and environment at the core of its practise. Skateboarding is also an emerging artform, combining kinetics, music, design, deck art, video, photography and fashion in new ways. It is a temporal and ephemeral work, with a physical language that grows and changes over time. It is presented in public spaces and responds to them. It seamlessly combines a participatory form with professionalism. It displays an ensemble and individual pursuit of excellence and nuance that would leave many of our bloated arts institutions for dead. And it helps keep the tumbleweed wastelands of the inner city safer, when alcohol, alienation and testosterone fuel senseless violence in the bleak empty shadows.

Skateboarders are likely to be among society's most law-abiding citizenry – statistically there are far fewer white-collar crims, tax cheats, cocaine abusers and illegal political donors among the skateboarding fraternity than there are among lawyers darting around the Sydney CBD in their designer brogues. Yet skateboarders are treated like petty criminals by local councils, law enforcers, security firms and social policy wonks, and their cultural icons are often ripped up or closed down. Cities like Sydney and Melbourne dedicate vast cultural infrastructure to well-heeled citizenry who are part of the law-dodging set, providing them with heavily subsidised theatres, opera houses, arenas, galleries, museums and venues that facilitate big sport, big gambling and big media – and their shareholders. However, for skateboarders – who, by their conspicuous presence at all hours, make our cities safer, less homogenised and more vibrant – we dedicate almost no space and no resource, and what's more we inhibit and ban their participation in urban communal spaces.

Skateboarding brings sport and art together through its improvised choreographic form and its pure athleticism. Skateboarding successfully avoids the narrow binary thinking of both the sports and cultural sectors. Australia gladly worships big sport, with its institutionalised violence, and salivates over big culture, with its institutionalised provincial mediocrity, yet when it comes to skateboarding – this beautiful combination of sport and art – it is at best ignored by both sectors, and at worst criminalised by society. Which would I rather have as a highly sponsored role model for my sons and my daughter, a skateboarder with their outlier, OCD excesses, or a thug masquerading as a hero being paraded by big sport as a muscle-pumped billboard for violence, alcohol and immaturity?

SPORT IS NOT a substitute for war or gangs or tribalism, or an outlet for otherwise dangerous national passions. Sport is something remarkable – a beautifully designed participatory community model for building social cohesion. But it has been bastardised. Our broad-based sports model is shaped like an iceberg, with an expansive and important social function at its foundation, in the dreams, hobbies and habits of the local oval. At the pointy, highly visible tip it is a money-making machine, made up of elite muscle-bound sports drones, designed to please media and gambling moguls, fill

stadiums and flog merchandise made by thirteen-year-olds with early onset arthritis in Third World countries. It is designed to pump preservatives and fake-fructose and calories down the throats of polyunsaturated spectators wearing XXL active wear. And one of the key selling points used to boost ratings is a barely concealed culture of immature violence masquerading as legitimate competitiveness.

The tip of this sporting iceberg could be so valuable, because so much of the community invest so heavily in this world of elites, living vicariously and pursuing a deeper meaning through their winning, heroism and stardom. Perhaps we use it to distance ourselves from the great vacuum that is modern life, by pinning our hopes on the hard-won successes these elites achieve on our behalf.

However, 'elite' is not a dirty word – unless those so named start believing the hype, and see themselves above both maturity and the law. It doesn't matter whether it is throwing acid at a rival ballet dancer, or spear-tackling a rival footballer, elite becomes a dirty word when released from a personal moral code, fuelled by rampant immaturity and amped up under the scrutiny of the public stare. Violence is the free-to-air gonzo-porn of the sporting world, and parents should have the right to sue officials, clubs, media outlets and players if they continue to expose us to this form of sanctified criminal behaviour.

However, the elite in sport and art also carve out a unique place for themselves, often through talent and hard work, which can be such a valuable asset for our community. The modelled behaviour, the clout, the adoration, the pursuit of goals, the achievement of very high standards, the virtuosity – in and of itself – can resonate across society in very positive ways, if seen for what it is.

The elite in sport can form pathways that others can follow – out of disadvantage or turmoil (especially for young lives), or as a way back into participation for older people who feel they have fallen out of sync with community usefulness and inclusion. Sounds plain weird to say it in this day and age, but sport and sportspeople are here to *serve* the community. Being good at sport is clever, but it's not that clever; it's on par, in terms of evolution, with say, a talented sheep dog. Being a good sport, however – now that has real value. Perhaps that should lead to increased endorsements and fees.

Where's the Brownlow for that? Where is the highest honour for brilliantly trained 'moral fibre', so much more long lasting than muscle fibre.

From this perspective, sport can be so valuable; however, out in the community it is often overprescribed as a panacea, a fix-all, for working with people in need, such as young people, or Indigenous communities, who face some kind of hurdle or disadvantage. 'I know, why don't we send in an immature, slightly bewildered AFL star to sign a few footies and run a clinic, to work with young men who are falling through the cracks and getting in trouble with the law, that should fix it.' So what if the following weekend there is a smorgasbord of criminal behaviour on high rotation replay in Fed Square, in the lounge room, on handhelds or in every pub, where women and men mix the aggression with alcohol and hurt feelings, before heading home to wounds from steak knives and booze-bruises and black eyes.

Sport – and its valuable elites, who burn bright for a few years like incendiary flares lighting the way for our young people before spluttering and falling from the sky – has a lot to offer the community. However, it also has a lot to learn about more sophisticated approaches to community building, participation, 'shared value' and involvement. There is not much room for divergence or failure in sports models, and not much room for the individual, the outsider, the kid who tries hard, the family that isn't coping. There's not much room for an expression of 'the self' as well as 'the team'. More and more, sport requires participants to dare to dream through rose-tinted glasses, which predetermine a picture of triumph that will never be theirs because 'sport' has come to mean the same thing as 'competition', and ultimately 'winning'. Success justifies the narcissism and immaturity, and so parents sensibly, and kids intuitively, soon learn there isn't really a place for them and they back off. (Not so much with skateboarding interestingly). A recent Ausport survey found only 9 per cent of teens and pre-teens see winning as important; rather, 60 per cent said that having a chance to play was what mattered.

BY FAR THE largest part of the sport iceberg is participation at a community level, which is undervalued and underfunded – run mostly by volunteers. It is the critical mass on which the tiny and ungainly elite stand on tippy-toes to reach for the sun, or at least a moment in it.

The community model that holds sport up has a lot to teach other areas of society about the possibilities of cohesion and inclusion – about the glue that binds communities together. The government holds sport – as well as art and culture – as relatively unimportant outer ministries, way, way down the list after health and education and social services. I would argue that sport and art are often implicitly doing many of the same things as these other three portfolios – in many ways, better, cheaper, quieter and more preventatively, without a welfare focus. It is the blinding influence of the elite end of these activities that makes us goggle-eyed and miss the really good work happening in small communities, season in and season out.

In many community settings, there are programs in both the sport and art sectors set up to mitigate against disadvantage, to promote inclusion and participation, and encourage literacy, education and pathways back into society. However, these sports and arts programs are hardly aware of each other, and rarely work together. Each has a different and useful set of foci: the ‘self expressed’ for instance, or holding the self in check for the sake of the team. The kinetic nature of sport is different to dance, but a dancer and a sportsperson require similar motor skills. An ensemble on stage must work as a team and be ‘in the zone’, much like a team on a sports field. Underlying these pursuits, however, are many different voluntary roles and community structures that form the foundation of the cultural industries and the sports industry. Sport and art can and should work together in many settings, and yet each remains mostly blind to the other’s gift to the community, and can often be carpingly critical or dismissive.

The arts tend to see culture as somehow their domain, and even have a special category of art-making called ‘community cultural development’, where art-making is applied in a community setting, working with teams of volunteers, often creating spectacle in outdoor community arenas, with a half-time and drinks, costumes, uniforms, giant mascots, parades, crepe-paper banners, smoke machines, Meatloaf singing out of tune... Hang on, that’s the footy.

These community events, with participatory audiences, often attempt to deal with social issues. There has been an extreme societal shift over the last decade, in which intimacy, friendship and connection are mediated to a large degree through a flat screen, an alias, a swipe. On average, in the West, each of us is spending around two months of each year with this new kind

of 'hand-holding'. Research in the US suggests one outcome of this is a fear of unmediated intimacy, a drop in empathy and also a renewed longing for ritual, authenticity, and contact with others. Community cultural development is experiencing a resurgence and hotting up as the experimental arts practice for the twenty-first century. The state-inspired flagship arts companies and institutions, who claim the biggest taxpayer subsidy, are becoming more like the big footy clubs, bread and panto and flogging the brand, relying more on cheap airline fuel to attract new tourist audiences and blockbuster churn, rather than genuine engagement and commitment to community.

In many ways sport is well advanced in the sophistication of its no-fuss community model. Without the dogma attached to the 'change making' mantras of cloistered community arts workers, sport can be a deeply embedded part of a community's structure – a web of volunteering, self-funding, self-starting, mostly self-regulated. No community model is perfect but the structure of sport, engaging families and young people early and holding their loyalty, moving them slowly through different forms of participation on and off the field over a lifetime, has much to teach the arts.

Both cultural forms, however, fall prey to believing their own rhetoric, and believing that the success of their elite organisations gives them the right to operate under a different moral code. They begin to listen to those with a vested interest who manufacture the dreams and aspirations and sweatbands, with the arts industry selling candy-coated culture – preferably European, bombastic, out-of-date festival fare – while sport creates desire and then feeds the public with flashing LED billboards, selling whatever holds the most profits: sugar to diabetic kids in sports drinks, hooray! Gambling to the poor – why not? Big sport manipulates and manufactures a narrative around the sanctity of testosterone, aimed at muscle-bunny boys at home with their tins of protein or indulging their man-arexia and encouraging violence as the heroic first resort. Let's not be fooled: a real, 3D, living, breathing person, in a real footy jumper, who is already a huge star and is aligned with the real dreams of young people, is persuasive. When the media links his commitment to the game with notions of 'revenge', or 'hammering the opposition' – with the commentators rhetoric all based on male metaphors and the language of

war – it is far more persuasive than some 2D figure in a dumb, shoot-'em-up, screen-based game. It's far more dangerous than an academically brilliant Bill Henson photograph. It's far more insidious than an invincible Vin Diesel in a muscle car smash-'em-up petro-porno.

ART AND SPORT, as forms, can work together. Big hART's skate project combines their kinetic synergies. The collaborations and research and creative developments began five years ago and stemmed from a single inquiry – what do we mean by 'sport and art?' Skateboarding is an individual activity that is sometimes competitive, against others or self, yet it is also artful, generating nuanced movement beyond the pursuit of a skill, which somehow emanates from an expression of the self.

The body in space explores endless patterned variations and, when visualised and re-created, forms new kinds of flesh-and-blood animation. Skateboarding, if you close your eyes and listen, also creates a world of sonic possibilities – deeply percussive and at times very structured.

SKATE is a skateboarding performance piece, an experiment in bringing what is essentially an individual sporting experience into an ensemble setting – choreographed skateboarding, at times for a soloist or a duo, not dissimilar to dance. Through utilising new forms of precision – every action triggers a percussive sound, the patterns of movement are tracked and projected in real time – SKATE works to combine some of the best qualities of sport and art in the one project.

This fast-growing sport has been included in competition at the Tokyo Olympics in 2020. It is becoming huge across Asia and South America. The SKATE project is designed to work with that wave of recognition and bring out the artfulness, as well as the sport. The show has no spoken word and is designed to tour internationally. It is a pure physical, musical and visual spectacle. If successful, it will generate strong profits, to be set aside to fund inclusive work in disadvantaged communities. The choice of working with skateboarders – a group of highly skilled sportspeople much maligned by our risk-averse community leaders – on this altruistic project was deliberate. While helping to raise funds for future community projects, it is hoped SKATE will assist in changing some of the stigma around skateboarding.

Experiments for the SKATE project began on the north-west coast of Tasmania in 2009, and have since expanded to creative developments in other cities. For Melbourne's White Night Festival 2016, SKATE invited skateboarders from across the city to Riverslide Skate Park to bring their unique and individual skills to be part of the performance, and to skateboard all night alongside percussionists and projectionists, blending movement, music and image. SKATE is now being workshopped and rehearsed before heading off on tour.

Big business in sport is not the enemy of community, but the lack of a moral code at the top is. A similar kind of problem exists in the elite arts, where the budgets and rhetoric do not deliver enough engagement and value at the grassroots. Sport and art, amateur and professional, elite and community, these are not binary either/or equations, they are all part of the cultural mix, which at present is out of balance, and not well enough supported by policy. Dollars talk, and ordinary participants walk – often away from sport and art.

Culture is one of the main ways in which societies discuss, invent and reach for their co-imagined future. Without the 'carrot' of culture, society ends up relying too heavily on the 'stick' of legislation. However, culture has to be deeply participatory and inclusive, while also embracing virtuosity and elite talent, otherwise much of the community is robbed of their cultural rights and involvement. They are encouraged to become passive consumers of culture – whether in the form of sport or art. Care must be taken regarding who controls the bankable end of these two deeply entwined and profoundly influential cultural areas because they play out in lounge rooms across the country. They come with responsibility, not just to reap a profit, or to establish a brand or a stellar career, but to keep strengthening the community they serve. To be an elite sports person or an elite artist is to serve your community first, and your ego not at all.

Scott Rankin is a writer, and for twenty years the creative director and executive producer of Big hART. He is an Australia Council fellow and lives on the north-west coast of Tasmania. His collaborative work projects have won many awards. His work has previously been published in *Griffith Review* 39 and 44.