PHYSICAL CULTURE AND SPORTING CRAZES

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INTRODUCTION

Physical culture is a term used to describe the health and strength training movement that originated in Germany in the early-1840s and which became popular in the United States, England and in Commonwealth countries like Australia, Canada and New Zealand during the second half of the nineteenth century. Physical culture programs were promoted through the education systems in these countries, and were utilised by military academies and armed forces. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw the spread of public and private gymnasia and the increasing production of exercise-oriented sports equipment.

Various physical culture systems were also developed by different organisations and within different countries. Naturally each was promoted as being the superior form of exercise and/or physical therapy. Some types of exercise, and equipment were in commonly use, however. These includedIndian clubs, medicine balls, and dumbbells. Combat-influenced sports like fencing, boxing and wrestling were also widely practiced.

The advance of physical culture in Australia was led by Danish immigrant Hans Christian Bjelke-Petersen. He opened a medical gymnasium in Hobart which became so popular that he and his brother Harold established physical culture institutes in Sydney (1906) and Melbourne (1909). Their method of instruction was taken up by many leading Australian colleges. During World War I Bjelke-Petersen served as director of a Commonwealth scheme of physical training under the Department of Defence and was accredited an honorary lieutenant-colonel.

Various forms of physical culture also found their way on the variety stage during this time, and continued entertaining audiences well into the twentieth century. Among the most popular were gymnastics, acrobatics, balancing, ball punching, military-style displays (including sword-play, club throwing, and baton twirling) and strong man acts. Although presented as an entertainment in variety theatres the physical culture aspect was ever-present, as can be seen by the many reviews from the period which describe particular acts as "scientific."

The popularity of physical culture within western countries led not surprisingly to the rise of sporting crazes - whether new or redeveloped versions of old games. Among the most popular of these fads were skating, netball and basketball, croquet, and cycling. While most were brought to Australia from elsewhere at least one sports craze, Batinton, was invented by an Australasian, New Zealander Pat Hanna. Several of these sporting crazes were popular on the variety stage. Some were introduced as specialty items in minstrel olios or as a vaudeville act (notably skating and trick cycling), while others used the variety stage as a means of publicity - netball for example.

1 Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, former Premier of Queensland, was his nephew but he never had any association with the company.
2 See Pat Hanna's biography in the AVTA for further details.
A punching bag is a round or cylindrical piece of athletic equipment used by professional boxers for training and by amateurs for exercise. The bags come in a variety of sizes for a variety of uses. The largest, known as the heavy bag, is used to develop footwork and power. The timing bag, usually suspended from the ceiling and floor by bungee cords, develops timing and hand-eye coordination. The small speed bag develops hand speed, coordination, and rhythm.

A striking bag is usually constructed of two leather balloons, inserting one inside the other. Inflating the inner balloon with air then creates a resilient ball. It is not certain when the punching bag became part of the modern boxer's training regimen. The United States Office of Patents and Trademarks awarded a patent for the punching bag to Simon D. Kehoe in 1872. Since that time, others have made improvements to better simulate the human body.

Although regarded as a traditional part of boxing training, the origins of the speedball are actually unknown. Some ancient artefacts depict boxers from Greece and Rome hitting a bag like object, almost certainly made of animal skins and likely filled with some kind of material or liquid. Following the vulcanization of rubber in the 1840s boxing bags and balls were manufactured with rubber air bladders on the inside. One of the most common outer coverings for striking bags in the late 1800s was kangaroo skin. However, goatskin is now more commonly used for small punching bags.

Ball punching acts began appearing on the Australia variety stage in the early 1900s, one of the first being American Charles N. Brown Parker in 1902. He toured for Harry Rickards. Within a short period of time the novelty became extremely popular in all levels of the industry. Not surprisingly some ball punchers, like Billy McCarthy, Jack Bryant and Joe "the Dago" Costa, came from the boxing profession. This was especially the case during the early 1900s. It was soon taken up, however, by other athletes and athletically-inclined vaudevillians who saw potential in the sport as a stage entertainment. The need to present something different (i.e. original) meant too that that newly emerging ball punchers had to either devise new routines or steal them (typically from overseas artists). These acts ranged from individuals and duos and to small groups. The use of multiple bags was common. Bland Holt even saw potential for it as a feature in drama, and in 1905 incorporating a routine into his production of The Betting Book.

Some performers worked a comedy angle, as did Jim Mack in the 1910s. Part of his routine included hilarious attempts to knock out Tommy the Dummy. Matador Zigomar toured the Australasian region for some six or seven years (ca. 1915-21), presenting a specialty ball-punching and acrobatic/balancing act with his wife Madge that many critics considered to be the best in the world. At an amateur trials night at the National Amphitheatre, vaudeville hopeful Harry Lane gave an exhibition while blindfolded and playing a mouth organ in one hand.

No further record of him performing in public has been found, however. Among the local male artists who did establish careers (albeit briefly) was the self-billed "Australian champion" Victor Gershon (ca. 1900-1910).

A particular favourite with audiences was the female puncher. The first Australian exponent may have been Charters Towers athlete May Bryant who was largely associated with various sporting troupes (including a boxing and variety) led by her husband, Jack Bryant. In 1905 she was billed as the "only lady ball-puncher". Perhaps the best known of the Australian women performers, however, was juvenile athlete Dot Ireland. Routinely hailed during her career as

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3 "Volume 7: Punching Bags." How Products are Made. [sighted 15/05/2014]
4 The term "champion ball puncher" was used in much the same way that clog dancers of the late-1880s used it - typically to build their reputation only and most often without a competitive background to justify the claim.
5 May Bryant was also known around 1907/08 as "Madam Flaro the Human Comet."
"Australian's champion lady ball-puncher" she switched from her dancing career in 1907 and found instant popularity on the Brennan vaudeville circuit. Other women to tour Australia as ball-punchers included Scottish boxer Valetta (who worked in partnership with Leon "the world's strongest miniature athlete" on the Brennan circuit in 1909), and a Miss Jeffries (ball puncher and club swinger, ca. 1916).

Ball-punching as a vaudeville attraction appears to have declined during the war years. This may have been due to several mitigating circumstances - the reduction in overseas performers touring Australia and the massive enlistment of eligible young males (including variety artists and those from the boxing fraternity). It is also likely that original acts were becoming harder to devise, given the restrictive visual potential of the routines. Apart from the Zigomars very few acts are known to have toured during the late-1910s. In 1921 Brooklyn and the Annersley Boys presented a boxing and ball-punching act on the Tivoli circuit. Almost all of the ball-punching exhibitions recorded in newspapers during the 19020s were conducted, however, as part of the programmes for boxing tournament and other sporting events.

Visiting ball-punching acts included:

- Frances Namon (1909). An American performer who toured the Tivoli circuit with Al Lawson (as Lawson and Namon). Their act also included trick cycling.
- Bob Fitzsimmons (ca. 1910).
- The Vagges (1911). American ball-punchers. The act toured for Harry Rickards.
- The Keeley Brothers (Tivoli circuit, 1912). A comedy ball-punching act "direct from London."
- Alec Taylor (ca. 1913-14). The Scottish performer toured Australia and New Zealand playing variety halls and giving public demonstrations.
- Torino (ca. 1914) American juggler and an expert with Indian clubs.
- Walter De Oria (1915) An American novelty ball-puncher whose act featured an "electrical" routine called "The Alpine Storm."

Walter De Oria
Sunday Times (Sydney) 6 June 1915, 19.
NETBALL

[NB: There is some conjecture as to whether English netball or American basketball was being exhibited in Australia when it was introduced on the Tivoli circuit in 1902. As the game was promoted as "netball" this entry uses that term. See the "Historical Notes" section for details regarding this issue. The derivations net ball and net-ball were also commonly used]

Basketball, the game upon which netball is based, was invented in the United States in 1891 by Canadian physical education professor Dr James Naismith. Conceived as an indoor sport for men the game proved so popular that within a few years it was being played throughout much of the country. Interest in basketball from women soon led physical education instructor Senda Berenson to develop modified rules in 1892 that eventually gave rise to women's basketball. The physical contact aspects of the sport were somewhat off-putting to many women, however. Seeing a need to develop a similar but less exacting version, Swedish physical education instructor Martina Bergman-Österberg introduced a variation of the basketball in 1893 to her female students at the Physical Training College in Hampstead, London. The rules of this new sport, which were modified at the college over several years, saw the game eventually played outdoors on grass. The peach baskets then being used in basketball were also replaced by rings that had nets. Österberg's new sport subsequently acquired the name "net ball," and by 1901 its codified rules were published in 1901 by the Ling Association (later the Physical Education Association of the United Kingdom). Considered much more appropriate for women than basketball, netball's restricted movement appealed to contemporary notions of women's participation in sport and hence it spread quickly to other countries within in the British Empire.

When netball was first seen by the Australia public it was not played on grass outdoors but by "10 Young Ladies" on the vaudeville stage. Its promoter, Harry Rickards, had brought the game to Australia in 1902 to tour his Tivoli circuit, and in preparation had two teams of young women trained. The game was first staged at his Sydney Tivoli on 22 February. Although invented and made popular in England, the Tivoli advertisements described the game as "America's latest craze." Interestingly, less than a month prior to its Australian debut newspapers around the country were reporting on the recent (and first) death of a basket-ball player in America. Seventeen year old high school student Mande Durand had apparently made a desperate attempt at shooting a goal when the opposition team threw themselves on her. Durand tried to play on but collapsed and was taken to hospital where she later died.

Another report, published in the Australasian (Melbourne) in March, highlighted the apparent lack of rules in the America game, noting that as a result it looked "terribly rough." Although the chance of injury was still slight the Australasian records the experience of University of California player Miss Sadie McFadden who came down in a scramble and broke her collar-bone.
Whether the Durand or McFadden incidents played any role in attracting initial audiences is unclear. The game was certainly regarded as a major Tivoli event when it was first presented, however. In fact its popularity was such that Rickards quickly organised another couple of teams to simultaneously play his Melbourne stronghold, the Opera House (beginning 8 March). Indeed the introduction of netball onto the Melbourne Tivoli programme reportedly "roused the audience to a pitch of enthusiasm reminiscent of the old football days of ten years ago."

Another critic noted: "There is a generally ancient flavour about the Tivoli bill just now which makes one marvel at the dexterity of the buxom netball players as they reach for one another's corsets." The Australasian's M.G. also said of the new vaudeville specially attraction: "The large and growing army of those who believe in athletics for women should applaud Mr Harry Rickards for introducing the American game of net-ball into Australia. Under the unfavourable conditions of a cramped area and players who are novices, the game is interesting and exciting, and as the girls learn its points it should become one of Australia's settled sports." Interestingly, advertising for the Melbourne season records that the net ball exhibitions were being presented under the direction of American jugglers Derenda and Breen [see "Historical Notes section below].

In addition to Sydney and Melbourne Rickards took the game to Brisbane (Theatre Royal; 29 Mar. - 13 May) and Adelaide (Tivoli Theatre; 24 Jan. - 13 Feb.). Although he promised that two teams of female net ball players would appear in Perth during his Vaudeville Company's season at the Theatre Royal, no record of any exhibitions has yet been found.

As a means of maintaining the public's interest going (and increase return patronage), the Tivoli management also promoted several interstate competitions. The first began in May when the winning teams from the Sydney and Melbourne exhibitions played each other in series of matches. A second series, between South Australia and Victoria, was held in early 1903 following the game's introduction to Adelaide audiences.

9 Argus (Melbourne) 31 Mar. 1902, 6.
11 M.G. "Topics for the Block." Australasian (Melbourne) 22 Mar. 1902, 46-47.
12 Reportedly in early November 1902.
Interestingly, Harry Rickards attempted to protect his investment and secure his advantage in bringing netball to Australia by claiming that he held the copyright to the game throughout the British Dominions. The ruse appears to have worked in Australia for a little while. By mid-year, however, the game was being staged in parts of Australia and in New Zealand without his permission. One of the first non-Tivoli exhibitions to be presented on the vaudeville stage was played by teams from Townsville (blue) and Charters Towers (red) during the opening season of Charters Towers newly-built Cremorne Theatre (1 Sept.). The game was also played and exhibited in New Zealand as early as August 1902 through a game played at Dunedin's Agricultural Hall [see "Historical Note" section below for further details]. Percy Dix is believed to have been the first to introduce netball onto the New Zealand variety stage, this occurring at the Christchurch Opera House in early December 1902. That the game wasn't promoted by more vaudeville firms may have been due to the lack of stage space, a problem noted by "M.G." in relation to Harry Rickards' Melbourne Opera House season.14

**Historical Note:** The term netball appears to have been used interchangeably with basketball in the Australasian region during the early 1900s. What was actually being presented as netball, either on the vaudeville stage or in sporting arenas, is therefore still subject to some conjecture. This issue is made more complex as a result of several factors. Not only were the rules of netball and basketball during this early period of their development different to those we recognise today, but there is scant description in the region's newspapers or magazines of the rules or the manner in which the games were being played. Little help is currently available from Australian basketball and netball associations or from independently published historical insights as most provide little historical evidence relating to the arrival of either game in Australia. Those that have attempted to identify basketball's introduction nominate years that range from 1900 to 1905. The "History" page on Netball Australia website's also clouds the issue when it states:

> Once established the game developed locally and soon each country [in the Commonwealth] had its own separate rules and distinct methods of play, even its own name for the game. In Australia and New Zealand where the game was established before 1901, it was called Women's Basketball and the name was changed to Netball in these two countries in 1970.

No evidence of the game having been played in Australia prior to its Tivoli debut has yet been identified through a search of Australian newspapers digitised in Trove - either as netball or as women's basketball.

In its 22 March 1902 edition the Australasian refers to the game being played by women in America as "basket-ball," but infers that the "net-ball" being played on the Tivoli stage was American netball. Rickards publicity also describes it as "the Great American Net Ball Game."16 Adding to this confusion is the photograph published in Punch in 1902.

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14 M.G. "Topics for the Block." Australasian (Melbourne) 22 Mar. 1902, 46-47.
15 Ibid, 46-47.
16 Sydney Morning Herald 22 Feb. 1902, 2
Evidence suggesting that the Australian exhibitions were American basketball may also be inferred by the Tivoli's engagement of US-born jugglers Derenda and Breen as the exhibition's "directors." Their association with the introduction of basketball to Australia is noted in the US magazine Jugglers Bulletin in 1946: "During a trip to Australia in 1902, [Derenda and Breen] introduced Basket Ball in that country. They put it on the Tivoli in Melbourne and called it Net Ball and it was a sensational hit." Several counter arguments can be made, however, in relation to both the engagement of Derenda and Breen and the history of basketball in Australia in general. In relation to the first issue, although Derenda and Breen were certainly Americans, the pair came to Australia in 1902 having spent the previous few years in Britain (ca.1900-1901). The assumption that they oversaw the introduction of the American game because they were American must be tempered by the fact that they may also have acquired first-hand knowledge of the English game while in that country.

The issue in relation to Australia and the Tivoli circuit might also be explained by looking at both vaudeville (as an entertainment form) and the game of basketball in Australia leading up to 1902. For any game to be staged on the Tivoli, or in any vaudeville theatre for that matter, it would have had to have been a novelty attraction - something new. An investigation into the arrival of basketball in Australia indicates, however, that the American game had been played in the country (by Australians) as early as 1897. In an article published in the Advertiser (Adelaide) that year, the journalist writes of a recent game between two local boys teams. He concludes his report by saying that the popularity of the game would likely lead to the organising of a basketball league along American lines. By 1901 basketball had effectively spread throughout the country, as evidenced in the Queenslander which reports, for example, that several girls' boarding schools in Sydney and Melbourne were in the process of adding basketball courts to their grounds.

Because basketball was already known to Australians by 1902, and hence held no attraction as a novelty, Harry Rickards would have had no reason to introduce it to his Tivoli patrons (except perhaps for the game being played by women). The inference in all of the Tivoli advertising, however, is that the game was a "new craze" and not a known sport now being played by women. Why his advertisements describe "netball" as an American game is unclear, then, especially when one considers that the nightly competitions were initially billed as "England v Australia." Whether the English players were actually from England is also unknown. It is unlikely that Rickards imported a team of netball players to Australia given the expense. A more prudent option would have been to engage English women already in the country and teach them rudiments. Conversely, the players (or most of them) were probably not English at all. The team may simply have been comprised entirely, or mostly, of local girls. One wonders, too, why an American team was not "engaged" given that the game was billed as originating from that country.

As to which game was being played on the Tivoli circuit, perhaps only time and further research will provide the answer. It bears mentioning, however, that the English game of netball had only just begun to spread throughout the British colonies and Commonwealth nations in the early 1900s and appears not to have been played in the Australasian region prior to 1902. It had not at that time been introduced into America either.

Further Reference:
"History of Netball." Netball Australia. [sighted 28/4/2015]
Sometimes referred to as Five-Pin Bowling, Box Ball was an arcade game that became popular in the USA in the early twentieth century and eventually made its way to a number of other countries including Australia.

Initially manufactured by the American Box Ball Company, which was bought out in 1903 by the Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Company, the game was a modified version of bowling. Using smaller balls the object is to knock down five pins set horizontally across a wooden alley. When you roll the ball it is possible to take out two pins by going between the metal strikers. The pin will then flip in a horizontal position. A scoring number is positioned up each pin. After striking the pin each ball returned to the bowling end via gravity.

Lanes were portable and available in three sizes, providing for quick and easy installation in amusements parks, bars and other entertainment venues both big and small. Demand for the game remained steady in the USA for at least seven years after it was introduced.

American Box Ball made its way to Australia in late-1906. As with other new technologies and sports crazes it was first demonstrated as a special attraction at variety and amusement venues such as Melbourne's Prince's Court and Sydney's Wonderland City. It also made appearances at such events as Parkes' Swiss Fair (NSW, 1908), sports carnivals, regional shows and exhibitions through until the 1910s, while also being incorporated into many metropolitan amusement arcades and fun parks. The game became particularly popular at seaside amusement grounds.

Holcomb and Hoke was also responsible for manufacturing (in collaboration with engineer/inventor Dan Talbert) the first indoor/outdoor, fully automated popcorn-making machine in 1913. Prior to this popcorn was made in small handheld poppers over a kerosene burner and sold from carts.
Pushball (aka push ball or push-ball) is a game played by two sides which compete to drive a large ball between two goals at opposite ends of the playing arena. The goals have a cross-bar which allows a team to earn extra points if they can shoot the ball over it. The game was invented by M.G. Crane of Newton, Massachusetts in 1891 and although taken up as a sport by Harvard University the following year, it never attained mass popularity in either America or elsewhere. Students from Emory University in the USA began playing competitively from 1923, but were forced to stop in 1955 due to a spate of injuries. Pushball is also known to have been played in the Netherlands during the late-1920s, and a photograph taken in New York during the 1939 World's Fair shows police and firemen from the city competing in a game.

Pushball was introduced into Great Britain in 1902, with the first official game being played at Crystal Palace by two teams of eight players (the English rules are somewhat different to the US version). A horseback version was also introduced in 1902 at Durlands Riding Academy in New York and has been played in England at the Military Tournament and in Berlin among other places.

In similar fashion to netball, the game of pushball was introduced to Australians by Harry Rickards. The first exhibition was staged in Sydney at the Tivoli Theatre on 8 March 1903. Momentum for the game had been building.
for a number of months through newspaper reports detailing its introduction in both the United States and Great Britain. Rickards introduced some spice into his exhibition, however, by engaging ten young ladies to play the game. In its report on the event *The Newsletter* noted:

Ten damsels took the boards on Saturday night, and initiated the Tivoli patrons into the mysteries of push-ball, a game that is said to cause the faces of our Yankee friends to crumple up like a damp towel with laughter. A similar state of affairs eventuated on Saturday, and as the game progressed the excitement and amusement increased.23

Pushball’s popularity with the Tivoli’s Sydney patrons saw it remain on the bill until 9 April. The game was subsequently taken up by the United Friendly Societies association which organised an all-male game at the Sydney Cricket Ground on 8 August. The two teams were from the Eastern and Western suburbs. Somewhat surprisingly, given its success in Sydney, Rickards does not appear to have exhibited pushball elsewhere in Australia.

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A tussle (top) and a scrum (bottom).
Photos taken from the 8 August 1903 Sydney Cricket Ground match.
Australasian (Melbourne) 15 Aug. 1903, 34.

Further Reference:
[sighted 28/04/2015]
"Push Ball: A New American Game." Examiner (Launceston, Tas) 14 Aug. 1903, 3.