

Ken Donald and Muscular Christianity

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“MUSCULAR CHRISTIANITY” was a system which relied upon sport to allow people to grow in a moral and spiritual way along with their physical development. It was thought that

... in the playing field boys acquire virtues which no books can give them; not merely daring and endurance, but, better still temper, self restraint, fairness, honor, unenvious approbation of another's success, and all that 'give and take' of life which stand a man in good stead when he goes forth into the world, and without which, indeed, his success is always maimed and partial [Kingsley cited from Haley, in Watson et al].¹

This system of thought held that

a man's body is given him to be trained and brought into subjection and then used for the protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes [Hughes, cited in Watson et al].¹

The body ... [is] ... a vehicle by which through gesture the soul could speak [Bloomfield, cited in Watson et al].¹

In the 1800s there was a strong alignment of Muscular Christianity and the game of Rugby:

If the Muscular Christians and their disciples in the public schools, given sufficient wit, had been asked to invent a game that exhausted boys before they could fall victims to vice and idleness, which at the same time instilled the manly virtues of absorbing and inflicting pain in about equal proportions, which elevated the team above the individual, which bred courage, loyalty and disci-

pline, which as yet had no taint of professionalism and which, as an added bonus, occupied 30 boys at a time instead of a mere twenty two, it is probably something like rugby that they would have devised. [Dobbs, cited in Watson et al]¹

The idea of Muscular Christianity came from the Greek ideals of athleticism that comprise the development of an excellent mind contained within an excellent body. Plato stated that one must avoid exercising either the mind or body without the other to preserve an equal and healthy balance between the two.

Great Britain, and England in particular, are not only responsible for giving the world its major language and the ideas of parliamentary democracy as well as the industrial revolution, but also the great gift of teaching it how to play and making sport popular — the English either invented sports or codified the sports.

In the schools in particular the way was led by Thomas Arnold who was the head of the Rugby School. His ideas on the use of sport as a means of disciplining and adding spiritual growth to his unruly school subjects spread to other great Public Schools and also in particular to Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Under his guidance the rough and ready sport of football as it had existed for hundreds of years became codified and turned into a game which was named after the school from where it originated. The influence of the mathematics of the school boys is still present with the naming of players as half backs, five eighths, three quarters, etc. The aim of the game was to put the ball over the so-called try line, allowing a kick to be taken out into the field of play. A “try” at goal was then made by kicking the ball through the H-shaped posts.

The Founders of the University of Queensland and also the Public Schools of Queensland were heavily influenced by the ideas of Muscular

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Christianity and the ideas of Thomas Arnold, and took the Public Schools and Universities of Great Britain as models. The Sports Union of the University of Queensland was founded in 1910 by people like MacGregor, Rowe, Steele, Gibson, Michie and Priestley. Sport was compulsory at the University and it was noted that:

In Universities the world over special attention is directed to sport not only by students themselves, but by those responsible for the administration of the establishments, who realize how necessary it is that there should be a sound physical education for the superstructure of intellect.²

Sir William MacGregor in 1911 stated that:

A University gave a man through his life, the sense that he belonged to a great community in which he spent his youth which indeed he had left but to which he still belonged. That feeling was fostered no doubt by a community of education, by attending the same lectures, by passing the same examinations, but no influence fastened more securely, more effectively than that of a feeling of a common life that some athletic sports as they had been developed in the modern place of learning gave.²

The design of the sports grounds at the University of Queensland owes much to Professor Mahoney, a Rhodes Scholar and Professor of French from 1932 onwards who stated:

I have trained at Iffley Road on a three laps to a mile circuit surrounding a field. My memories of it greatly influenced the design of the number three oval, the Rugby oval which provided a running track and field games surrounding a Rugby field. No turf is to be laid down on the Rugby field because the turf square is a serious disadvantage to Rugby players particularly in wet weather.²

Rugby players today are thankful for his foresight.

A product of Muscular Christianity

Ken Donald was a product of a system of Muscular Christianity. Ken's early athletic career started

in Ipswich, his home town. At the age of 12 he won the Gatton Show Open Running Contest. His prize of forty pounds was duly pocketed by his relatives, thus maintaining his amateur status. He went on to play Rugby League for the state at an early age and went on his first tour to Sydney in 1950 at fourteen years of age. He could not get enough of sport. He also competed at the Great Public Schools Athletic Championships where he won numerous races in the 100, 200 and 400-yard contests. Ken did not have a minor athletic talent. He went to the Olympic Trials in 1956 and led the 100-metre dash for 90 of the metres. Hec Hogan, who beat him in the end, went on to lead the Olympic final for 90 metres: Ken could reasonably have been argued to have been the fastest man on earth over this distance! He also played cricket at a high level, for two years in the First XI.

Ken went on to play for the University of Queensland Rugby Club with several other doctors including Charles Wilson, Fergus Wilson, Kerry Larkin, and John O'Neill. Playing Rugby at club level in Brisbane was not for the faint-hearted. Ken did play in the so called Battle of Normanby in 1959. Frank O'Callaghan, the journalist, had this to say about the game which took place between University and Army:

Persistent and at time vicious brawling between University and Army players prompted Referee, Allen Findlay to abandon yesterday's Rugby Union semifinal at Normanby. He was then ordered by the QRU Executive to continue the game after reference to the rule book revealed that the Referee had no power to abandon a match because of rough play.³

Earlier, Findlay had sent four Army and one Varsity player from the field. The depleted teams took to the field for a further seventeen minutes and Varsity vaulted to a 35–3 win.

Ken was selected for his first Test for Australia against the All Blacks in a Bledesloe Cup match on 25th May 1957. He was very close to scoring a try in that test match, a matter of a few yards from the try line, when he was heavily tackled by a famous All Black full back, Don Clarke. In the

tackle, Ken had four metacarpals of his right hand broken. In those times there were no replacements allowed. If a player came off the field he let his side down, therefore Ken was expected to stay on the field. Since his right hand was unusable he had to throw the line out ball in with his left hand. The Australian second rower, Tony Miller said he couldn't see the problem because Ken had at least one hand left to play with.

Ken learnt his lesson about being totally committed to the try line and went on to score twelve tries for Australia from 1957 to 1959. He then had a break for a while because of medical studies and other pursuits and came back to play for Australia once again in 1963. Ken could not overcome the smell of liniment and old Rugby boots and, after another seven-year break from the game, and a full thirteen years after he had first played for Australia in 1957, he was back playing for Queensland against Scotland in 1970. He did so well that he was asked to tour New Zealand for Queensland.

Ken then became involved at a high level as an Australian selector and an Australian manager for some years and I was lucky enough to be his captain on a tour to Argentina, Australia's first tour to that country. Ken has been an exemplar of Muscular Christianity and its capacity to discipline and affect both the mental and physical development of young men but which has disappeared as a cause celebre in modern universities. The number four oval at University of Queensland was constructed and maintained despite efforts to convert it to a car park. If one goes back to the University today, however, one can see now that the buildings have impinged upon that very oval and ugly car parks are taking over.

Obesity in childhood is a recent phenomenon and has become an epidemic in the affluent Western world. Studies have shown a powerful association between the amount of inactive leisure time and obesity. Perhaps a modern version of Muscular Christianity will return at some time in the future to have a beneficial effect upon the lives of young men like Ken Donald and so many others.

References

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