

Olympians of the Antipodes:

SPORT AND AUSTRALIAN CIRCUS, 1833–2000

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Since 1833, the circus arts have been an important feature of the Australian leisure landscape. A colonial circus industry was established by 1847 and a growing community of travelling circus companies serviced the colonies from 1851. Building on the model of the circus established in London in the late eighteenth century, Australia's circus entrepreneurs and circus families developed a viable domestic industry that was exporting talent by the end of the nineteenth century. Essential to this model were sporting and physical performances, dressed and presented as performance art, given in, or above, a circus ring: equestrian, acrobatic, gymnastic, juggling and aerial. This article seeks to identify areas of commonality and differentiation between Australian sport and Australian circus. Both deserve to be better understood, not only in terms of what each represents as a medium of entertainment but what each may have to offer each other and what each may say about Australian culture.

Specifically, where does circus stand in relation to sport and art? How have tokens of sport been reflected in circus in Australia? To what extent did Australia's circus people engage in sporting activity? Have sportspeople pursued careers in circus? Have circus people pursued careers in sport? This article might guide — and hopefully inspire — deeper investigations into points of commonality and differentiation between Australian circus and Australian sport so that historians, policy makers and entertainment managers may better understand these forms of popular entertainment and contributions within the contexts of Australian society and culture.

The Modern Circus

Despite much written to the contrary, the modern circus is linked only tenuously to the circus of ancient Rome.¹ Shaped elliptically, the Roman circus was dominated by spectacles such as athletic games and chariot and horse races. It was too long and narrow for spectators to comfortably witness the more bloodthirsty spectacles such as gladiatorial combat. These entertainments could be seen within another Roman edifice, the amphitheatre, that was circular or semi-circular in shape and approximated the modern concept of a circus arena.² The largest of the amphitheatres was the Coliseum.³

Circus in a modern form was first presented in London in the late eighteenth century. Philip Astley, a former cavalryman, gave open-air displays of trick riding in 1768 in a field at Lambeth. By 1779, these benign displays of acrobatics, animal training, rope walking and clowning were given in a building called Astley's Amphitheatre. The establishment was popularly referred to as 'the circus', a word used at the time to describe the large, open-air circular riding tracks in and around London used by recreational lady and gentleman riders.⁴ Provincial circus companies throughout Britain and on the Continent, the United States and, from 1847, the colonies of Australia, mimicked Astley's programs. Also mimicked were the exquisite equestrian pantomimes of Andrew Ducrow, the principal equestrian, lessee and manager of Astley's from 1825 until his death in 1842. It has been written that Ducrow made the circus 'a scene of picturesque, rational and chivalric entertainment, full of dramatic and olympic attraction'.⁵

Robert Avis Radford (1814–65), a Devonshire-born equestrian, horse dealer, training groom and publican, pioneered the first successful circus in Australia in Launceston in December 1847. Radford's 'Astley's on a limited scale' was a building of simple construction located in the yard of his aptly-named Horse & Jockey Inn. With a small company of performers, some of them former convicts, Radford presented feats of horsemanship, dancing, vaulting, gymnastics, acrobatics, clowning and equestrian burlesque. Radford's pioneering enterprise proved a 'hit' not the least because he was catering for people who abstained from the 'higher order of dramatic representations', who were 'rough and coarse' and who offered little in terms of conversation.⁶

From Radford's and other colonial 'amphitheatres' the first peripatetic circus troupes were formed. Circus programs based more on spectacle than speech appealed to a frontier society that was more concerned with material than intellectual issues. In rural Australia especially, as late as the 1930s, circus was 'basically the only form of [professional] entertainment with the exception of the vaudeville shows like George Sorlie or Barton's'. Yet the audiences for which circuses catered were drawn from the same people who,

as far back as the 1840s, had taken an ‘inordinate pride’ in their sporting prowess and were ‘passionately’ fond of sports such as boxing, horse-racing and cricket.⁷ In 1883, the English writer, Richard Twopeny, described the Australian colonies as not only ‘the most sporting country [*sic*] in the world’ but its circus audiences as the most ‘critical and appreciative’ owing to the widespread popularity of horses and horsemanship.⁸ In 1908, an observer wrote that equestrian displays in circus reflected Australia’s ‘international reputation for sporting proclivities’.⁹

Sport or Art?

From the earliest white settlement, sport provided Australians with a welcome break from the drudgery of the working day.¹⁰ A temperate climate was a natural inducement to outdoor leisure activity, while urbanisation fostered the development of spectator sport, a welcome outlet for a society that was uncertain about its origins and history.¹¹ Climate and urbanisation were also natural inducements to the development of Australian circus and the touring routes that developed to serve widely dispersed centres of population. Like sport, the itinerant circus relieved the isolation and boredom of provincial towns and remote settlements, fostered a sense of community amongst its audiences, and distributed values that contributed to social cohesion.

Possibly more than any other *genre* of entertainment transplanted from the Old World, circus simultaneously addressed Australians’ ingrained irreverence for pretentiousness and authority, on the one hand, and their partiality for athletic excellence on the other. But was circus ‘sport’? Or was it ‘art’? Does it belong to either, neither or both? These distinctions are important to establish if different forms of entertainment - but especially the much maligned and misunderstood entertainment of circus - are to be effectively managed, nurtured, supported, understood and appreciated.

When Radford opened his Royal Circus in 1847, a Launceston newspaper, the *Cornwall Chronicle* placed reviews of the opening performances in a column headed ‘Sport & c.’. Was this just a classification of convenience or a genuine editorial perception? In the early 1900s, popular Sydney sporting weeklies such as the *Sydney Sportsman* and the *Referee* regularly devoted columns, even entire pages, to news, gossip, photographs and memoirs concerning popular entertainment, especially circus and vaudeville. Were their editors catering for an homogenous readership or were they seeking to extend the commercial appeal of their respective journals?

Superficially at least, circus does appear to have more in common with sport than art. Conventional circus resembles sport more than it does live theatre for example, as it neither seeks to address the questions of the age nor enrich the intellect or soul with wisdom or instruction. Like sport, circus has embraced elements of spectacle and surprise, danger and humour. Like

sport, circus entertainment catered for the masses and was viewable from all directions by spectators. But circus and sport diverge in key respects as the British circus historian, Antony Hippisley Coxe, wrote in 1980:

In the boxing ring, in the *plaza de toros* or on the football field, the course of everything is never predetermined. In the circus ring it is. Everything is calculated and timed to a fraction of an inch and a split second. Just as every wire in the apparatus of a flying trapeze must have its stress and strain, so every gesture of the performer must have its meaning.¹²

If the predetermined nature of the circus performance prevents it from being categorised in any meaningful sense as 'sport', can it instead be regarded as theatre? While the two share obvious parallels in terms of performers, a performance and an audience, the similarities are by no means absolute:

Any performance presented on a stage framed by a proscenium is a spectacle based on illusion ... Go backstage and the illusion is lost ... Just as theatre has a parallel in painting, so does circus have an analogy in sculpture. You can walk around it. It can be seen from all sides. There can be no illusion, for there are eyes all round to prove that there is no deception. The performers actually do what they appear to do ... [Whereas] an actor says he will 'play his part', the circus artiste tells you he will 'work his act' ... The circus then is a spectacle of actuality.¹³

It would therefore seem that circus is 'art' after all, if somewhat nebulously so. Since the Industrial Revolution, the term 'art' has come to stand for skills of imagination and creativity. The arts — literature, music, painting, sculpture, theatre — were grouped together, as having something essentially in common that distinguishes them from other human skills.¹⁴

Today, circus is commonly, if begrudgingly at times, accepted as a legitimate branch of the performing arts.¹⁵ Nevertheless, sport finds or has found expression in circus: at a professional level, by the incorporation of sport and sporting motifs in aspects of performance and promotion; and at a private level, whether as recreation or as a pecuniary supplement.

Sport as Circus

Of the dozens of equestrian-based spectacles and pantomimes that Radford presented to Launceston and Hobart audiences in his Royal Circus in 1848, several carried titles that alluded to sport in one form or another, such as: *The Chinese Vaulter*, *The Cockney Sportsman*, *The Fox Hunter*, *The Huntsman*, *The Jockey*, and *The Roman Gladiator*. Such allusions to sport served to remind audiences that, even if circus was not sport in the strict sense of the word, it was at least

strongly allied with it. Given the critical role of horses and horsemanship in circus, jockeys and racing was most commonly the subject of these allusions and associations. Radford was by profession ‘a successful trainer and jockey on the Tasmanian racecourse’.¹⁶ With the development, from the late 1860s, of a more acrobatic style of circus horsemanship, the so-called ‘bounding jockey’, suitably attired, began to appear in circus and was regularly seen in Australian circus programs as late as the 1950s. The great ‘draw’ of Burton’s Circus when it visited Rockampton in 1869 was Mdlle La Rosiere (Jenny Kendall), ‘one of the few lady riders who did the bounding jockey act’. Dressed in jockey costume, she bounded up and down from her horse as it circled the ring at a smart pace.¹⁷ In the 1890s, the FitzGeralds began the custom of presenting a gold-topped riding whip to the winning jockey of the Melbourne Cup each year, a practise that was continued by their successors, Wirth Bros, from 1906.¹⁸

As well as racing, sports such as cricket, sculling, football, boxing and wrestling found expression in the Australian circus ring. After the final performance of St Leon’s Circus in Bendigo in February 1879, the management presented a bat to the highest scorer in the Gentleman of England cricket match that had taken place earlier in the day.¹⁹ At Grafton in 1884, the so-named ‘second clown’ of St Leon’s Circus sang his original song ‘The Latest News of Beach and Hanlan’ to commemorate the sculling contest between two famous oarsmen.²⁰ In 1915, Chicko ‘the football pony’ of the Gus St Leon Great United Circus created ‘shrieks of laughter’ amongst Sydney audiences by kicking a large football across the ring.²¹

Accounts of boxing matches or demonstrations within the circus ring were rare, possibly because circus proprietors were catering for families and in keeping with the mores of the day emphasised the refinement of the entertainment they offered. During Radford’s Royal Circus’s final days in Launceston in 1850, the celebrated ‘sable hero’, Perry, gave an exhibition of boxing prior to his departure for England to compete in a national championship.²² In Sydney in 1876, Wilson’s Great San Francisco Palace Circus, the visiting American company, presented ‘the World’s Champion Heavyweight Fighter, Jim Mace’ who proved to be ‘a great drawing [*sic*] card throughout Australia’.²³ Colleano’s All-Star Circus presented its two ‘boxing ponies’, *Commodore* and *Pompadour*, as it toured Sydney’s suburbs in 1921. Standing on their hindlegs, the quadrupeds sparred with each other using oversize boxing gloves fitted to their forehooves.²⁴ In 1905, FitzGerald Bros Circus presented the novelty of six Sumo wrestlers, claimed to be the first professional team to leave Japan. They included the favourite ‘trick’ wrestler Onenoko. Special, richly-embroidered ceremonial costumes were made for the Australian visit.²⁵

Table 1 Results of the Grand Hippodrome, Adelaide, 1873

Event	Description	Burton's	Bird & Taylor's
1	Gentlemen's flat race three times around the course	A. St Leon Walter Erneste Alfred Burton J. Crosby	George Gilham W. Jones Young America W. Griffiths
2	Ladies' chariot race, twice around in heats	Mdme La Rosiere	Mdme Salavario
3	Roman flat-race, twice round.	Leon W Tier A. St Leon Walter Erneste	George Gilham W. Jones W. Griffiths
4	Roman hurdle race, as bareback horses over jumps 3ft 6 inches high, each man to ride the horses standing up.	Leon W Tier A. St Leon Walter Erneste	George Gilham W. Jones W. Griffiths
5	Ladies flat race, twice around	Mdme La Rosiere	Miss A Norman Mdme Salavario
6	Chariot race, gentlemen	Leon W Tier	W. Griffiths
7	Steeplechase, three times around, ladies and gentlemen.	Walter Erneste Alfred Burton J. Crosby Miss H Newton Mdme La Rosiere	George Gilham W. Jones Miss A Norman Mdme Salavario

Source: Thomas King, 'Mummer Memoirs' column, *Sydney Sportsman*, 22 March 1911.

Comments	Result
A good race and a fine struggle at the finish	A. St Leon, winner. Gilham, second One point to Burton's Circus
In the first heat the charioteers drove their pairs well, and the horses were eager. Mdme Salavario won. In the second heat, Mdme Salavario led at the start, but Mdme La Rosiere passed her and won. In the third heat, Mdme Salavario went ahead, hard pressed. There was a slight collision, and the race was most exciting, the horses going their hardest.	Mdme La Rosiere won a splendid race, thus scoring another point for Burton's.
This affair was sensational, there being twelve bareback horses eager for the start, and ridden two and three by six men, who stood erect. Gilham went admirably, and maintained his position well throughout. Giham was standing up.	Gilham, with Jones second. Thus the American Circus scored one point. making the score one to two.
This proved a very exciting race, and the rush was tremendous. In the first leap, several riders were obliged to drop to their seats. One man fell, and two horses were down, but no person was hurt severely. Tier had a good chance but lost it by a tumble. Gilham, who rode magnificently, also fell as did W. Jones and W. Erneste.	However, Gilham came in first, with Tier, who had ridden some distance lying across two horses, second. This made the two troupes equal in points.
No comments	Miss Norman won, with Mdme La Rosiere second. This made Bird & Taylor, 3 with Burton 2.
This was a good race. There was a collision.	Tier won. Scores now equal.
This was to decide the great contest. George Gilham fell while leading and young Alfred Burton took a severe fall. Walter Erneste rode a good race, and won.	Walter Erneste won, Crosby 2nd, and Mdme La Rosiere 3rd, all members of Burton's company. This gave Burton one more point than Bird & Taylor, the score being Burton, 4, Bird and Taylor 3.

Contests

Although a circus act involves an element of 'contest', it is most often a non-competitive, non-aggressive contest between the performer and the natural elements of physical endurance, balance and gravity, or between the performer, in terms of his abilities, and his audience, in terms of its expectations. But athletic-like contests between performers before a paying audience were not unknown. During the 1888 Melbourne season of Wirth Bros Circus, riders Paddy Montgomery and George Wirth competed 'for the jockey championship of Australia'.²⁶ In Australia, the few circus challenges that were publicised usually served the higher purpose of promoting the main circus performance, as when Ashton bet £50 with a local identity, a Mr Dangar, in 1853 that he could ride and drive three horses, 'erect and barebacked', from East Maitland to West Maitland in 15 minutes.²⁷

Given the generally low density of settlement and the widespread distribution of circus companies throughout the colonies at any point in time, meaningful challenges between entire companies were largely impractical. One exception was the Grand Hippodrome, a contest that materialised in Adelaide in May 1873 between two major colonial circus companies, Bird & Taylor's Great American Circus and Burton's National Circus, for the 'circus premiership' of the colonies. In what proved to be a milestone in Australia's circus history, the two companies were pitted against each other in tests of agility and daring:

The opinion was expressed ... that the often-exhibited antagonism between the two companies was assumed to excite the popular interest, and that in reality the proprietors of the two concerns were acting in concert. This is emphatically denied by both owners, who allege that there was no collusion whatever.²⁸

In his reminiscences for *Sydney Sportsman* in 1911, the elderly circus man Thomas King recorded the results of the Hippodrome (see Table 1).

A contemporary observer gave a detailed account of the races:

A large number of people assembled to witness the going forth of the band of helmeted toga-clad riders, and at the Exhibition grounds there must have been upwards of eighteen hundred spectators in spite of the rain and mud ... The gay green and gold, blue and gold, and crimson and gold chariots with 'fiery steeds' plunging despite the skilful coaching of sturdy limbed men in antique dresses and helmets gleaming in the often-clouded sun presented a pretty if not awe-inspiring scene ... More than once men, horses and hurdles came down crash.²⁹

Burton's performers won four of the seven Roman-style races on the rain-soaked Exhibition Grounds and his company was declared the winner of the

contest.³⁰ It was generally acknowledged that the races were ‘exceedingly fair and well-conducted’.³¹ However, a critical analysis of the sequence of results suggests otherwise. As Table 2 shows, no clear winner emerged until the last race:

Table 2 1873 Adelaide Hippodrome, Cumulative scores

Event	Winner	CUMULATIVE SCORES	
		Burton's	B & T's
1	Burton's	1	0
2	Burton's	2	0
3	B & T's	2	1
4	B & T's	2	2
5	B & T's	2	3
6	Burton's	3	3
7	Burton's	4	3

Source: Thomas King, ‘Mummer Memoirs’ column, *Sydney Sportsman*, 22 March 1911.

Were these results contrived? Recollections of similar races held on the Sydney Showground many years later provide a possible answer to this question. About 1916, the Great United Circus of Gus St Leon (one of the riders who participated in the 1873 Hippodrome) presented ‘Roman’ races on the showground track. As Gus’s son recalled when interviewed in 1974, the exhibition of Roman riding was skilfully performed so as to maximise the spectator excitement:

[My brother] Cass and I did Roman races, him on two horses and me on two horses, around the Sydney Showground track three times. I’d pull up my team to let Cass get a bit of a lead. We’d build it up that way, backwards and forwards until we’d get a bit of attention from the audience and then it would be a neck and neck finish.³²

Direct contests between rival circuses were rare, due to the monopolistically competitive nature of circus touring activity and the sheer size of the territory embraced. Even as competition between Australia’s two largest circuses, FitzGerald Bros and Wirth Bros, intensified in the early 1900s, no formal contest eventuated between these rival, rail-based companies.³³

The Adelaide Hippodrome set in train events that re-distributed both power and personnel in Australian circus. By 1878 the St Leon family circus had replaced both Burton's and Bird & Taylor's as the premiere colonial circus. Matthew St Leon promoted his eldest son, Gus, as 'the champion performer, who has challenged Australia to do more acts, and better than any performer in the colonies, for the sum of £200, commencing with horsemanship, in 30 different acts'.³⁴ The St Leons sometimes offered the further assurance that both 'man and money' were 'ready at a moment's notice'.³⁵ However, although examples of Gus St Leon's equestrian prowess were well-documented in the colonial press, no independent substantiation for his claim of 'champion' can be found. In fact, none of these proclamations appear to have materialised beyond the level of self-congratulation; as in American circus, challenges in Australian circus usually went unanswered.³⁶

Circus People and Sport

As well as tokens of 'sport' inside the circus ring, Australia's circus people engaged in sporting activities beyond the confines of circus, whether for pleasurable or pecuniary motives. As occasion required, itinerant circus people diversified their incomes by wagering at billiards.³⁷ In the outback, shooting and fishing were popular pastimes of the circus people especially in the less rushed, pre-motorised era. Finding a good river bank, the old circus families could afford to camp for a few days or weeks to take in some fishing and shooting, as well as spending time to train horses or break in new acts. Returning from flood-stricken Queensland in the early 1880s, the Wirth circus family engaged in the 'rare and exhilarating sport' of kangaroo hunting while Brewarrina stockmen introduced them to dingo-chasing which was 'exciting enough to satisfy anyone'.³⁸ Duck shooting was also popular among circus people, in or out of season.³⁹

The strongest and most natural overlaps between Australia's circus people and professional sport activity occurred in the areas of racing and boxing. The flavour of the racecourse was frequently imparted to circus audiences; the racecourse also provided an outlet for Australia's circus people. In February 1848, Radford took the equestrians of his company to appear at the local races at Longford, near Launceston, erecting a temporary circus building within the racecourse.⁴⁰ A few weeks after the Longford visit, Radford displayed 'admirable jockeyship' in winning the Launceston Town Plate on his favourite horse *Coronet*, collecting £156 in prize money.⁴¹ By the 1850s, before a circuit of country agricultural shows was firmly established, the permanently peripatetic circuses typically timed their arrival in a provincial town to coincide with a local race week in order to reap some share of the concentration of people and commercial activity.

Some circus people carried their own racehorses to race at country race

meetings, while some circus riders were skilled as jockeys. The 18-year-old James ‘Goldie’ Ashton, a grandson of the founder of Ashton’s Circus, was killed when thrown from his horse onto a fence post while competing in a race at Beaudesert in 1903.⁴² In the early 1900s, a horsetrainer named Jack Denner travelled the outback with Eroni Bros Circus with his racehorses which he raced at country meetings.⁴³ The association inspired Denner and his family to form their own circus about 1907. In the 1930s, Perry Bros Circus took with them a professional horse trainer on a trip to North Queensland, along with six or seven racehorses, including a mare named *Lotus*:

They travelled for about three days to St George. They took the whole circus. They had [*Lotus*] ... on the back of the truck. She became used to the elephants, feeding with them and so on ... She was twenty-to-one or something, a good price ... They had the elephants tied where the racecourse was coming around. Of course, when they come around the bend, half the horses went that way because of the elephants. Horses get very frightened of them. But ... [*Lotus*] just kept going on and she won the race. They told the Perrys, very politely, to ‘Get your horse out of town or we will put you out for life’.⁴⁴

When the ‘Great White Fleet’ of the United States Navy anchored at the deep-water port of Albany in September 1908, some 16,000 American sailors landed ashore to be met by the various Australian entertainments that had detoured to greet them, including the circuses of Mrs Tom FitzGerald and the St Leons:

Mrs Tom FitzGerald had The Flying Herberts [a trapeze act]. A fellow called Steve Outch was one of The Flying Herberts ... The Yanks wanted some boxing. They had some men in their navy and they wanted to try them out. The American sailors hired one of the [circus] tents ... to put on this boxing contest. Steve was a bit of a surprise to me. I knew he could use his hands a little bit. This Duey Smith, the champion of Western Australia was there and nobody would have him on to box with him. So Steve said, ‘Oh, I’ll take him on!’ I was in Steve’s corner of course and I could hear this Duey saying, ‘Ease up! Ease up!’ This Steve was giving him a hiding! Anyway, I think the match ended in a draw. They wouldn’t go against the champion. But Steve was all over him ... He was only a lightweight too.⁴⁵

Boxing was not only a popular sport but a valuable skill for circus men, who were regularly confronted with ruffianism on the showgrounds and larrikinism in the cities and towns:

There was a certain amount of unemployed also. They wanted to have a fight or something. You’d protect your stuff. Perry’s had professional boxers on their show to teach them. When you’re handling men



A bush boxing contest, possibly in Tasmania, c. 1910. Note the presence of musicians to accompany the proceedings. SOURCE: Author's collection.

you learn to use your hands a little bit ... Snowy Flynn run a boxing show for years just before Jimmy Sharman came into the business ... I've heard them both say that Henry Perry in his day would have beaten any welterweight in the country. Henry wasn't a professional fighter but he could certainly look after himself if he got tangled up in anything.⁴⁶

One of Australia's most successful circus families owed its origins to a showground boxing troupe and continued its boxing activities long after moving into circus. The Colleano family's original name was Sullivan and its circus grew out of the boxing troupe that their father, Cornelius 'Con' Sullivan, toured with through the bush in the 1890s. Born at Maryborough, Victoria, in 1871, Sullivan was a popular boxer in his youth who had fought the Australian middleweight champion, Jim Ryan in 1890. The *Dead Bird*, a shortlived Sydney sporting journal, recorded the lead-up to the match:

Con Sullivan is willing to fight Jem Ryan for a purse if any of the clubs will put one up for them. Ryan says he is real sick of being idle for so long, and will accept a purse to fight Con Sullivan. Now, Gentlemen, here are a couple of men hampering for a fight, and you should give them a cut. Both say a month's training will suit them.⁴⁷

The fight took place at the Australian Club in Sydney six weeks later. Another Sydney sporting journal gave a blow-by-blow description of the fight



Winnie Colleano (1897–1961) specialised in a solo ‘heel and toe catch’ performed on an open air trapeze at American fairgrounds in the 1930s. SOURCE: Author’s collection.

that led to Sullivan’s defeat by knock-out in the 14th round:

It was a good fight and no pair of men ever stepped into a ring and fought a fairer battle. Sullivan was completely outclassed for ... he met a phenomenon ... Sullivan deserves credit for his gameness and his fairness.⁴⁸

Sullivan became an itinerant showman, hiring aspiring young boxers in the cities to travel the bush and outback and stand on his line-up boards at country shows. One was Albert Griffiths — ‘Young Griffio’ — who later won the World Featherweight Title.⁴⁹

Sullivan eventually concluded that a circus could provide him and his Aboriginal wife and family with a more lucrative living than boxing. Circus, unlike boxing, could productively employ the talents of all of the Sullivan children who, by 1910, numbered three boys and five girls. That year, the family started travelling northern New South Wales with horses and wagons under the name of Collino [*sic*] Bros Circus.⁵⁰ Each of the siblings eventually emerged into circus artists of international stature. The eldest daughter, Winifred (b. 1897) developed a solo trapeze act.

Con Colleano (b. 1899) concentrated on the tightwire and eventually developed an act that is still regarded as one of the greatest of circus

performances. The other Colleano boys — Bonar and Maurice — honed boxing skills under their father's guidance:

They'd have somebody fight in the tent outside ... He put a sidewall up ... After the circus finished the circus [audience] come out, and they'd announce it outside. 'So and so' is going to challenge the local champion or something, outside in the tent.⁵¹

In 1922, Colleano's All-Star Circus ceased operations and the family decided to seek opportunities abroad for their talents. By 1925, Con Colleano was a 'center ring' attraction in Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey, America's largest and most prestigious circus, performing his acrobatics and dancing act on the tightwire before audiences as large as 16,000 in cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles. Maintaining his boxing skills, he won the boxing championship on the Ringling show three years in a row.⁵²

The Colleanos I would say were the most professional [of the boxers in circus] because of their father ... [Young Con was] a welterweight. He was a good-looking fellow and he made sure that he never got his face marked up.⁵³

The climax of Con Colleano's 15-minute tightwire performance was the 'perilously dangerous' forward somersault on the tightwire. His dramatic entrance 'dressed as a matador ... with his scarlet *capo*' brought 'new excitement and aesthetic satisfaction' to circus while camouflaging his Aboriginality.⁵⁴

Sportspeople in Circus

Popular folklore is replete with stories of children who ran away with a circus and, in truth, such things did happen. But sportspeople sometimes joined the circus too. In 1851, a Scottish-born youth named James Munro was apprenticed to John Malcom, the proprietor of the Royal Australian Circus in Sydney's York Street.⁵⁵ This was Sydney's first successful circus but Malcom, in order to address the colonial shortage of circus performers, was soon obliged to seek aspiring young people as apprentices. In 1883, by then one of the highest-paid and most famous riders in American circus, Munro told the story of his Australian apprenticeship:

My father and all his brothers were boatmen ... I was born in Inverness, Scotland, but was carried to Australia when 18 months old. There I was soon put in a boat, and, when I was only 16 years of age, won a two-and-a-half-mile race in a shell boat, and shortly after acted as coxswain with a crew which won 19 races out of 21 at Sydney. But boating was not in my line and I liked horses and the circus better, and so my father ... apprenticed me to learn to be a horse-rider.⁵⁶

Munro took, or was given, the professional name of James Melville. Melville

‘was the best Australian circus rider of his day’.⁵⁷ His daredevil equestrianism consisted of ‘a series of wildly beautiful pictures, which once seen can never be forgotten’.⁵⁸ By 1861, Melville was travelling the Midwest of the United States with his own circus company which he named Melville’s Australian Circus.⁵⁹ He died at his home in New York City, aged 55, in 1892.⁶⁰

In Melbourne in 1883, a 14-year-old railway brakeman named Adolphus Holden fell between two moving railway wagons. His lower left leg was crushed and subsequently amputated.⁶¹ During his physical rehabilitation, Adolphus developed his upper body strength, and a passion for gymnastics saw him become an expert at Roman rings, triple horizontal bars and trapeze. With these skills he became a renowned vaudeville and stage performer as ‘The Amazing One-Legged Adolphus’. As early as 1892, Adolphus conducted a touring circus. During the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s, Holden Bros Circus was a major provincial circus travelling rural Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales. Holden Bros Circus was one of the first to use electrical lighting and motor transport. Perhaps not co-incidentally, his cousins were coachbuilders whose firm was eventually transformed into General Motors Holden. The circus closed in 1940, not long after the death of Adolphus Holden.⁶²

In Australia’s more recent circus history, Nikki Hicks is the pre-eminent example of an athlete moving into professional circus life. As a teenager, she excelled at sport and competed in state school swimming championships. She studied ballet as well. Leaving school at 15, she joined a professional water ballet show. Her performance included displays of trick diving - such as a one-and-a half somersault, and a back-half somersault with a half-twist. Commuting from her parents’ home in Kogarah, she served briefly as a dancer in a circus ballet in Ashton’s Circus as the company played the suburbs of Sydney in the 1960s. The Ashtons recognised her ability and trained her in trapeze work. She married Mervyn Ashton and became an integral part of this great Australian circus family and its trapeze act, the Flying Ashtons. Today, their son, Joseph ‘Pepe’ Ashton, who once performed with Nikki on the trapeze, conducts his own circus, Circus Joseph Ashton.

Circus Olympians

The word ‘Olympic’, with its overtones of games and athletics, was employed frequently in early British circus advertising. In January 1842, the visiting Italian gymnast, Luigi Dalle Case, opened his short-lived Australian Olympic Theatre (a circus-like tented pavilion) in Sydney’s Hunter Street.⁶³ During the 1850s, almost every early Australian circus proprietor took his turn at naming his company an ‘Olympic’ circus, as when Ashton’s Olympic Circus turned up in Singleton in August 1852.⁶⁴ In 1880, St Leon’s Circus presented the Olympian Brothers, an exhibition of strength and agility that concluded

with one rider standing on the shoulders of the other as their horse carried them at a steady canter around the ring.⁶⁵ The circus building that the FitzGerald brothers built on the south side of the Yarra in 1902 to house the annual Melbourne seasons of their circus was named the *Olympia* after the London venue of the same name. The premises were later assumed by the FitzGeralds' rivals, the Wirth brothers, who retained occupancy of the building for their annual circus seasons until the edifice was destroyed by fire in 1953.⁶⁶ Between 1951 and 1958, the Warrens, a branch of the famous Ashton family toured Australia and New Zealand with their circus, promoted as Warren Bros *Olympic* Circus.

The formation of tangible connections between the word 'Olympic' and the Australian circus is a recent development. In 1978, Circus Oz gave its inaugural performance as an independent company at Melbourne's Moomba Festival and soon proved to be Australia's major contribution to the international contemporary circus movement. An early highlight of the company's arrival on the world stage was its appearance at the Los Angeles Olympic Arts Festival in 1984.⁶⁷ A contemporary circus group which arose in its wake was the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, founded in Albury in 1979. The elements of teambuilding, physical skills development and self-discipline which underpin the education of youth in the Flying Fruit Fly Circus could just as well be applied to any high school football or cricket team. In association with the Shanghai Circus School, the 'Fruit Flies' were a feature of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Arts Festival with its production *Fusion*.⁶⁸ This was not the only link between the Flying Fruit Fly Circus and the 2000 Olympics for one of its early alumni, Emma George, had already made the transition from circus performer to Olympic pole-vaulter. Interviewed in 1999, George made clear the reasons for her affinity for the pole vault:

I think it was originally from my circus background that got me interested; doing trapeze and towers of chairs and tumbling and then I moved away from that to start doing long jumps, sprints and hurdles ... I think even a background in circus at that age teaches you if you're not dedicated and if you don't put in, then you're never going ... to succeed.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Australia's agreeable climate provided a rationale for both sporting achievement and an energetic circus industry. Although each form of entertainment developed along its own path, Australian sport and Australian circus have shared common defining characteristics especially with regard to athletics and display. Each has touched at the perimeters of each other. The Australian circus experience shows that aspects of sport at least, if not sport itself, were present in aspects of circus, whether inside or outside

the ring, whether in performance or promotion. Both circus and sport contributed to, and reflected, the values of contemporary society. Both forms of entertainment may learn from each other in terms of mutual support, cooperation, example, training and career possibilities.

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