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<https://theconversation.com/the-case-for-sheilas-wogs-and-poofers-by-johnny-warren-23696>

The case for Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers by Johnny Warren

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Johnny Warren argued that no other sport reflects life the way football does. Dan Himbrechts/AAP Image

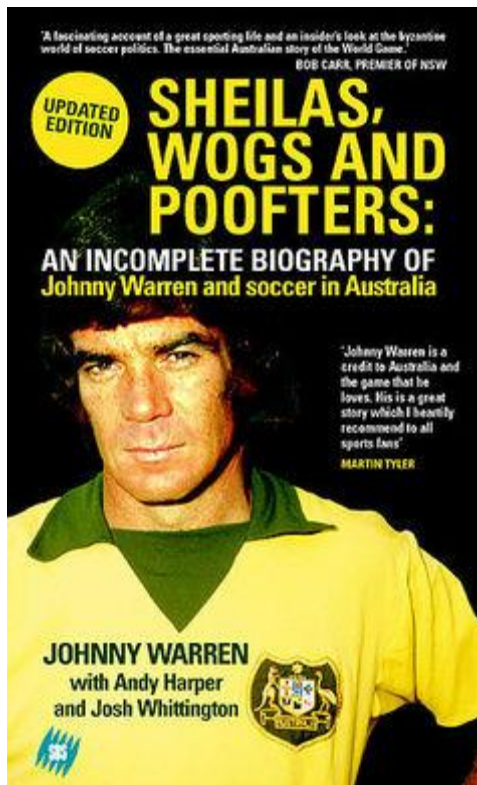
If you had to argue for the merits of one Australian book, one piece of writing, what would it be? Welcome to our occasional series in which our authors make the case for a work of their choosing. See the end of this article for information on how to get involved.

The late Johnny Warren – also known as Captain Socceroo – was a legend of Australian football. He is fondly remembered as a player, coach, administrator, writer and broadcaster, and the award for the best player in the A-League is named the [Johnny Warren Medal](#).

And yet his 2002 biography [Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers, an Incomplete Biography of Johnny Warren and Soccer in Australia](#), which he co-wrote with Andy Harper and Josh Whittington, seems eternally destined to raise eyebrows.

It was published when football – some people still call it soccer – was in a “transitional phase” regarding its profile as a national spectator sport in Australia. In the context of the sport’s burgeoning popularity, you’d think we’d now be well past the misogyny, racism, homophobia and other associated stigmas the title refers to.

But in May last year, AFL coach Kevin Sheedy, [suggested](#) the Immigration Department were the best recruiters for A-League newcomers Western Sydney Wanderers; and David Gallop, Football Federation of Australia CEO and recent convert from NRL, seemed to revel in the opportunity [to stick a boot in](#).



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Everyone moved on; we got over it. And quite honestly, that's what you would expect to happen to a book with a title like Warren's.

It hasn't because the book is just too important.

Its "story" follows Warren's career as player, coach, captain and mentor, and his effusive post-career advocacy as a commentator and benefactor.

Simultaneously, it captures the history of Australian football from the darkness of the 1950s through to solemn days of administrative greed, redundant power-struggles, and political self-destruction.

Undoubtedly the text is weighed down by requisite facts and figures; it's also repetitive, a little flabby, and yes, Warren is prone to preaching. But it is lifted beyond the vast grey swathe of sports biographies by the author's low key awareness of his contribution to the game's social and cultural history.

It is not a work that prides open scandal-filled cans, or aims to justify embarrassing public mistakes. The gentle voice lends itself authority through its intelligence, keen insight and overwhelming honesty.

Along the way, Warren shames those responsible for the sport's lack of unity, champions players who should have been famous long before the lionising of Australian players such as [Lucas Neil](#) or [Harry Kewell](#).

There are fantastic stories, such as the doomed 1966 campaign (the Socceroos lost to North Korea who then became the darlings of the same World Cup), the infamous witchdoctor's curse that John Safran [reversed in Mozambique in 2010](#), and the ridiculously small payment the players received for the nation's first World Cup Qualification in 1974 (reportedly less than A\$14 each).

Warren was born in Australia. His family are "sixth generation Australians". He grew up playing a sport he loved and was chastised for it almost every day. His playing ability, his understanding of a responsibility for something much larger – and the constant push against the stigma he and the game have undergone – are carefully linked in this book.

In the "Where to from here?" chapter that closes the work, Warren highlights the need for a strong national league. The A-League was established in 2005, the year after his death from lung cancer. He also underlines his disgust for FIFA, the international governing body of association football, and makes an argument for Australian club and national level engagement with teams from Asia, which has since happened.

The book's title refers to what Warren described as a "mentality" that exists around football in its early days in Australia, a mentality he implied was borne of fear. Commentator Les Murray [argued in 2012](#) that stigma still surrounds the game in Australia, and that its reputation is "soiled" by influential media commentators, who see it as:

some kind of alien animal to which real Australians will never take because there are far too few goals, there are too many prima donna divers, there is no video refereeing and their fans are far too violent and, in any case, not like us.

Although the book's title was allegedly contested by the publishers, Warren was adamant, and Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers prevailed. It seems outdated now, but the book's content remains the best, most insightful account of the Australian game's contemporary development.

In the opening chapter, Warren argues that no other sport reflects life the way football does. I agree. Football changed my life too. Warren's vociferous passion is contagious, his vision realised. Even if you dislike the sport and never feel the need to buy a ticket for an A-League game, when someone is able to articulate the depth of their soul-brimming passion we can't help but be a little changed by the experience.

Like the Socceroos, the book's name requires a revisit – but while the national team will struggle against their opponents in Brazil in June, had it not been for Johnny Warren they would never have made it in the first place.

That alone makes his biography worth a second look.