Sport, we're told, lies at the heart of what it means to be Australian. But what in reality does this mean? The Conversation, in partnership with Griffith Review , is publishing a series of essays exploring the role and place of sport in Australian life .

The 21st century has already seen a stream of premature epitaphs written for many long-standing social phenomena, not least social capital – often referred to as the "glue" that binds us together. I eagerly jumped on that bandwagon at the turn of the century, worried about signs of weakening social connectedness.

At that time, Harvard professor Robert Putnam, in his bestseller Bowling Alone , persuasively traced the consequences of weakening social and civic ties in middle America. I haven't really gotten off that wagon, although I've never felt completely comfortable with some of my fellow travellers' laments about the state of the world and declining stocks of social capital.

My discomfort with this received wisdom – shared by these fellow travellers – is a product of the time I spend outside work hours in grassroots football, where social capital seems to be flourishing.

Yet sport has received little considered academic discussion about how social ties are faring in Australia. I am at fault here: my co-edited book Social Capital and Social Justice: Critical Australian Perspectives overlooked several local academics' thoughts on sport and social capital.

The book stemmed from an Australian Academy of Social Sciences workshop where, as the title indicates, invitees were asked to address the emerging policy implications of the growing interest in social capital for social justice; sport didn't readily appear to be a "critical perspective".

This omission is telling. I have structured this "redemptive" essay partially around the Julius Sumner Miller question of why is it so. Not from an academic point of view, but from that of a lifelong participant in team sport: a player, coach, recruiter, father, spectator, researcher and writer.

Missing in action?

At one level, the relative lack of scholarship about the significance of sport in Australian social life reflects a dispiriting degree of academic snobbery. To be a sports sociologist in many Australian universities will cast you as the equivalent of the high school sports "jock" in your department.

Public discourse and commentary, dominated by corporatised sport, are generally blind to the massive contribution that local sport contributes to social connectedness.

In the now-commonplace writers' festival session on the future of cities, panellists inevitably thump the familiar drum of the desperate need for more public amenity and interaction in our inner cities, seemingly oblivious to the thriving social world fuelled by grassroots sports throughout our suburbs on any given weekend – a picture that the celebrated liveable cities Vancouver and Zurich could only dream of.

Despite the vast array of talented authors writing about sports, it still seems a stretch to include them in prominent events. But it's not only literary circles doing the cold-shouldering.

For all our unquestionable acceptance of the central place that sport plays in Australian society, where is the great Australian sporting film? (Save Your Legs? Haven't heard of it? OK, maybe The Club?) Musical? (Warnie?) Satirical comedy? (The Footy Show is beyond satire, though Roy and HG have done this genre proud.)

Popular music, particularly in Melbourne, bucks the trend but the effect still seems to leave sport beneath the "proper" arts.

The increasing corruption of professional sport, accompanied by infantile behaviour of several notable sports stars, has furthered public cynicism about sport's virtues. But even here, I detect an upside among many parents standing along the touchline: such shenanigans are the fallout from top-tier sport's riches and, in turn, actually serve to affirm what's most important about sport, namely its capacity to allow people of all backgrounds and abilities to come together and shelve petty prejudices.

Incidents such as the persistent booing of Australian of the Year and AFL champion Adam Goodes in 2015 were an unseemly reminder of how racism permeates Australia at every level of society. But again, even though the venom of some of the online trolling was redolent of KKK language, the nation's most popular team sport provided an extraordinary platform for the issue to have such enduring reach and impact, as Stan Grant's impressive orations since have so powerfully demonstrated.

My most memorable opportunity to engage with this came with the reunion for an old state under-age representative footy team at a well-known pub in Brisbane last year. Our only Indigenous player put us all in our place by correctly noting that none of us had recognised him in the first half hour of the night because he was sitting alone at the bar enjoying a few jars:

Like any typical pissed bum blackfella you bastards would have us all for!

An inherent contradiction

Good academic training should caution one against drawing too long a bow in arguing the neglect of sport's contribution to social good. For sure, there has been a burgeoning of philanthropic activity funded by sports stars that shows little sign of slowing.

The Shane Warne Foundation's troubles notwithstanding, there would seem to be very few ex-Test cricketers with a decent number of baggy-green appearances who don't have a trust or charity of one form or another. And the breadth and depth of causes now spanned by sport grow ever more impressive, from the Homeless World Cup backed by the Big Issue and the quadrennial Gay Games, to the enormous diversity of disabled sports participation and sport subsidies for newly arrived refugee communities.

But perhaps all this sporting altruism just reinforces the point: that is, do we all just take it for granted that the scale of social connecting ignited by sport is a good that's best served unscrutinised and unexamined, an opiate for the masses to enjoy at their leisure, free of the boss or teacher standing over to inspect their sport doodlings?

Or is it more pertinent to remark on sport's multifaceted unintended consequences, as the American author Henry David Thoreau shrewdly observed:

Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.

I know this from my own experience of sport's trickle-down surprises. I didn't grow up in a family that played club cricket, but the countless hours spent with other fathers at the boundary rope during my eldest son's two summer seasons saw me learning more about the lives of those men than I've ever known about a group, before or since.

So this doesn't appear to suggest lost virtues are only found in sporting circles, I hasten to add how first-hand experience inside football clubs at many levels has made indisputable the reality that they are as flawed as any social institution.

It never ceases to amaze me, come State of Origin time of year, that the same mass-media champions of one-punch-can-kill campaigns reserve a special bloodlust that not only sanctions such violence during Origin clashes, but actively promotes it.

Hypocrisy is alive and well, even if in such entertaining prose as that offered to my team by an Irish referee prior to the grand final of a thoroughly enjoyable season of Gaelic football; before he blew the starting whistle, we saw no hint of irony on his face as he barked his orders:

If I hear one swear word from any of you fookin' cunts during the fookin' final, then you'll be fookin' off!

Not all about fun

I was the last of a generation in junior AFL to have league ladders in all age groups. These were replaced in the early 1990s with Auskick for all kids under 11, with no game scores recorded and no tackling.

There persists an old, flat-earth brigade of many ex-players, now fathers or uncles, who label this change of philosophy as "politically correct nonsense" and typically go on to allege the illogical extension of a mollycoddled and cotton-wooled generation and its ensuing woes. I'm not one of them.

When I was in my 20s, I was an under-eights and under-nines coach and saw the rapid surge of kids registering to play, who felt safe playing – getting in a kick and a handball that full-body contact wouldn't have allowed them – and then stayed on into the older age groups.

Mind you, I recall a rather pampered kid at the close of a Thursday night training at the club where I coached asking his mother if they could take the Pajero and not the Lexus to their upcoming away fixture because it would be easier on his back, triggering a haughty hurrumph as I fondly remembered the days when all 20 of us little Vegemites would squeeze into the open-tray plumber's ute that belonged to our team manager. Perhaps we were even a better team for it.

One of the consequences of this new approach to youth sports – the one I have found most challenging – is the negativity associated with the emphasis on winning. From my experience across team sport, and especially with boys, the motivation to win remains fundamentally powerful.

I could readily dwell on "winning versus enjoying" – particularly its tendency to be set up as a false dualism – but such puffery is shot through by an especially fruity but perceptive email written by an old mate, SB, a couple of years back:

Elvis Costello once said that 'writing about music is like dancing about architecture – it's really a stupid thing to want to do'. And so, probably, is trying to write about what's important about competitive sport. You kind of need to experience it to understand it. Trying to write about it is stupid. So let's be stupid for a second.

Like most kids playing club sport when I was young, I wanted to rock up on a Saturday, piss about with my friends for a little bit, try to avoid getting 'dacked', then get on with doing something that was totally different to everything else in my week (and my life in general).

Matches provided an hour or so where my fellow nose-pickers and I took each other a bit more seriously – where we all put our bodies and brains together to tilt at the windmill that was trying to get a win. It was different to mucking about in the park; it gave us a reason to run ourselves out of breath until we weren't entirely sure whether our little lungs would ever catch up again.

And, it was exhilarating. We craved it as kids. Most young people love to test themselves like this. Get in with your mates from your suburb and try to run out of breath together to beat the kids from across the way – it really tickles your DNA. You know you're alive – even when you are nine. It's so sweet.

You start thinking about playing days before you actually do. You get nervous; you get excited. You get invested. It hurts. It brings happiness. I never found it 'fun': fun was to be had at the BMX track.

Footy was way better. I loved the shit out of it. I lived for it. It satisfied something in me that I wasn't getting elsewhere. I was a nervous kid. I walked taller when I got together with all my friends to play footy. I was obsessed with it. I couldn't wait to do it – sometimes waiting for Saturday was worse than waiting for Christmas. It was never ever 'fun' to me.

We still talk about those footy days now as adults. We don't talk about 'fun' totem tennis games we had; footy was better than 'fun'.

I think SB's words speak to a lot of boys finding their way in team sport. Arguably, the most

treasured email I've ever received in my footy life was from the father of a ridiculously courageous, undersized back pocket who played in a premiership-winning side that I coached. He simply wrote:

Harry's just told me that was the best moment in his life to date … thanks for how much you helped contribute to it.

Escaping egotism

I watch the pathetic antics of the tennis brats Bernard Tomic and Nick Kyrgios and wonder if they'd carry on as they do if they'd actually played a team sport for a decent period of their upbringing.

Solo sporting pursuits might garner our admiration, but they also seem more susceptible to feeding the prima donna, as I witnessed in a brief halcyon period of involvement with elite athletics when I held the state schoolboy race-walking record, the caveat being that race-walking is such a bizarre outlier in so many respects, the very concept of it gives it automatic immunity from hubris!

Perhaps this is again best put by SB:

… and then there's the giddy thrill of playing together, playing for others, not just yourself. The period when I stopped playing footy corresponded with when I started university. I spent a long time at uni just trying to get along with people amongst the seemingly unrelenting herd of upper-middle class intellectual pseuds – a population hitherto unfamiliar to me.

All too often, I found myself nodding in nervous agreement with someone or other about how pointless barracking for sport is. It never felt right. Once I got a bit older, I then worked out what I loved about organised sport.

Obviously all the things I've already said, but more. Intellectual pursuits are fine and more than worthy, but there is a visceral enjoyment in pitting yourself physically against someone else that cannot be intellectualised. Add the enjoyment of helping your friends to do that alongside you and you're getting pretty high.

Then add being part of a club and community that is all about sticking fat for one another no matter what, and you are mainlining heroin, my friend. You jump up and down together if you win and you get around each other if you don't – from teammates to parents to canteen volunteers to committee folks – the lot. The feelings of winning and losing are then both incredible.

Either way, that little community values you for how hard you tried, as opposed to whether you had a win or a loss. We mostly lost, but I loved every single second of it. From root to branch – the club, the team, the people who just wandered in off the streets with the arse out of their britches – we all marched on together as a gloriously supportive mess.

Why deny young people this experience? Having that connectedness is rare at any stage of life, through sport or otherwise. Let the kids get into it – at any age!

Hidden treasure

Is fun the fall guy for sport taking itself too seriously? Another distinctive facet of sport in the new millennium is its obsession with harnessing elite athletes, and all the paraphernalia that comes with this hot-housing, including the proliferation of academies of one form or another.

Such an emphasis on the top end of the talent pool has obvious consequences down the line, specifically to make a whole lot of competent, if not the most skilled, performers fast-forward to the question of whether they want to play the sport at all.

I've seen first-hand the AFL academy system and its barely disguised contempt for local club football: there has only been one session in Brisbane over the past five years where the well-remunerated AFL academy coaches have directly invited local volunteer club coaches to learn about current coaching methods.

The AFL's hitherto rolled-gold business strategy of pumping participation numbers in at the pyramid base, licking the cream that oozes over the apex and overlooking everything and everyone in between may have become as redundant as the drop kick, given almost all footballers play in leagues other than that of the 18-team AFL.

If the implicit – and some would argue explicit – message emanating from AFL academies continues to be "nice try, but you've failed to become elite in this sport", don't be surprised if many of these same young men and women never return to football or, worse still, to any sport.

Through family members, I've also observed a similar pattern in local soccer circles, the fallout in this case exacerbating an already long-standing conundrum of so many exiting from soccer in their adolescence.

To be fair, concerns about the implications of this concentration on elite talent for community sport have become more widely acknowledged, most notably in a recent study commissioned by the Victorian Football League on country and community football.

All said, however, the enduring power of achieving together in team sport, no matter the level of competition, overcomes most failings. Just last weekend, I walked past a bunch of high school seniors clearly not playing their sport of choice in a ragged game of soccer, laughing themselves silly with their impossibly spectacular shots on goal, each far more likely to hit the corner flag than the back of the net.

It was infectious, and a wonderful reminder that our nation's mental health is far better off for the bonding and bridging social capital manifested through team sport, even if the word does not appear once in our current National Mental Health Plan.

Perhaps, as has been suggested above, sport's social benefits are so obvious as to make them not "problematic" enough (read publishable) for the scholarly community. A more blunt but persuasive reason lies in the reality that the vast bulk of our social scientists have had little to do with sport of any shape or form.

Meanwhile, as the wise Hugh Mackay might put it, our innate desire to belong can conquer our perverse drive to exclude, and grassroots sports continue to be one of this nation's most potent social lubricants.

You can read others from the Griffith Review's latest edition here .

Geoff Woolcock has received funding from the Australian Research Council as part of a Linkage grant investigating sporting talent pathways and provides ongoing talent ID data for the AFL.

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