

Profile

Nino Borsari

by Elizabeth Broughton

Elizabeth Broughton is currently studying honours in History at the University of Melbourne. As part of her undergraduate course last year, Elizabeth elected to complete her placement for her university subject, 'History in the Field', at the Italian Historical Society, where she undertook conservation, cataloguing and research on the Borsari Collection. One of the outcomes of Elizabeth's work on the project is this essay on the life of Nino Borsari.



Nino Borsari, who became known as the 'uncrowned king of Carlton', for his extensive involvement in the organisation of sporting, cultural and charity events within the Italian community in Carlton and wider Melbourne, 1970.

In 1932 Nino Borsari aged 20 years, successfully competed as a cyclist in the Los Angeles Olympic Games. Alongside fellow team-mates, Cimatti, Pedretti and Ghilardi, Borsari won a gold medal in the 4 x 1000 metres cycling event, beating France by two seconds.¹ At the time, he was already considered a cycling champion in Italy and Europe. Borsari's home-town of Cavezzo, 25 kilometres north of Modena, honoured him by naming their velodrome 'Stadio Comunale Nino Borsari'. He would later become a prominent figure in Carlton and wider Melbourne, well-known for his extensive work in sport and involvement in the community.



A postcard commemorating a visit in 1983 by Nino Borsari, of Melbourne, to his home-town, Cavezzo, in the province of Modena. In 1975, the Cavezzo Stadium was renamed Stadio Comunale Nino Borsari in his honour.

Political and social issues of the time are significant to Nino Borsari's story, as they undeniably shaped his experiences and the community in which he lived. Nevertheless, the story of Borsari's migration to Australia seems to differ from those of other Italian immigrants at the time. Most notably, it seems that he did not originally intend to migrate to Australia. In 1934, Borsari competed in the 'Centenary Cycling Road Race' in Melbourne, winning



Nino Borsari, Olympic gold medal cyclist, on the race track, 1935.

the 1,700-kilometre race. In 1940, he returned to Australia as a guest of the Australian Cycling Federation. It was during Borsari's stay that Italy entered the Second World War against the Allies. Due to the nature of his visit, Borsari was not relocated to an internment camp, unlike many other Italians in Australia at the time.² Nevertheless, he was unable to leave Australia. After the war ended, he decided to stay in Melbourne. This preceded the peak period of Italian migration to Australia which occurred during the 1950s and 1960s.³

Nino Borsari married Fanny Cester in 1940 after a three-month courtship.⁴ Nino and Fanny had two children, Diana and Nino (junior). The Borsaris lived in Kew, and later built a house in Ivanhoe. Fanny, an opera student, was born in Pasiano di Pordenone in the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy. She had migrated to Melbourne in 1937, ten years after her father, Ernesto, had arrived in Australia. He had worked as a shoemaker, cook and tobacco grower in rural areas of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

Borsari owned two stores in Lygon Street, Carlton: 'the Borsari Emporium' and 'the Borsari Bicycle and Sports Centre.' The Borsari Emporium was opened in 1941, at 201 Lygon Street, Carlton. It played a significant role during the peak of Italian migration to Carlton. The emporium specialised in a variety of goods, including jewellery, household items, hunting equipment and imported Italian magazines and newspapers. Borsari said: 'I pawned everything I owned'⁵ to set up his business. As it grew, he advertised extensively – particularly in local newspapers. In 1961 the emporium was extended to include 'Borsari's Bicycle and Sports Centre' at 193 Lygon Street, where Borsari sold sporting goods and his own range of bicycles.

In order to settle in an unknown country, it is vital that each immigrant has access to advice and support. As there was no official welfare organisation for the Italian community in Australia at this time, the surrounding community played a vital role for the newly-arrived Italian immigrant. 'Migratory chains' formed the basis of much Italian migration, where individuals would join family members or neighbours in a particular rural or urban location.⁶ Thus, on arrival in Australia, the Italian immigrant could often join an existing network of friends and family. Nearly six million Italians left Italy between 1946 and 1965. The Italian government encouraged emigration, as a method of dealing with issues of poverty in the South and post-war

structural instability.⁷ Meanwhile, the Australian government set up the first Australian Immigration Department, with the desire to bolster the Australian labour force. After Britain, Italy became the largest source of migrants to Australia in the 1950s, with approximately 360,000 Italians arriving in Australia between 1947 and 1976.⁸

Carlton held the earliest concentration of Italians in Melbourne during the peak of Italian migration.⁹ The need for employment, food and household items within the community was met by an increasing number of institutions and Italian businesses formed during this time. Businesses that offered familiar produce, or staff who spoke the immigrant's first language, made the transition to a new country significantly smoother for the immigrant. For example, one could find traditional Italian produce from a number of grocery stores, including one owned by the Varrenti family.¹⁰ Caffé Sport, and later University Caffé, provided space to socialise and keep in touch with friends and current news in the community.¹¹ The local Catholic Church, St George's, was a place where one could attend church, as well as confirmations, holy communions and weddings. The church hall also served as a venue for concerts and dances.¹² These establishments and businesses were not only significant for the goods and services they provided, but also for the opportunity they gave individuals to connect with community networks.

The emporium played an important cultural role in this growing community. Borsari recalled newly-arrived Italian immigrants asking him such questions as 'Nino... where do we buy spaghetti?'¹³ It seems that Borsari recognised the potential for a store like the emporium in Carlton. It was a place where immigrants could seek advice on everything from where to wash one's clothes, to finding employment.¹⁴ As well as providing the latest items one needed to set up a home, services such as lay-by and ANZ savings facilities were available at the emporium. Many imported Italian items were sold at the emporium, including traditional jewellery for cultural and religious occasions. It was also a place where one could hear news from the homeland, through current editions of Italian magazines and newspapers, or at gatherings held at the emporium before Juventus soccer matches.¹⁵



The Juventus Soccer Club, from Melbourne, arriving in Adelaide for a competition match. Nino Borsari [president], is pictured in front at right, 1958.



Interior view of the Borsari Emporium, 201 Lygon Street, Carlton, showing the household goods section, 1960.

It is significant that Nino Borsari was able to open the emporium during the war – at a time when the freedoms of Italians were restricted in Australia. In the absence of official social services for the Italian community, the emporium became a point of contact for newly-arrived Italian immigrants. In an interview with the Melbourne Observer in 1971, he stated that: 'After the war, I devoted my time to helping Italian migrants.'¹⁶

As a cyclist, sport was Nino Borsari's passion, but he also assisted individuals in their sporting pursuits, including racing car driver, Alfredo Costanzo.¹⁷ Borsari was actively involved in the running of sporting clubs, including the Juventus Soccer Club. He was president of Juventus in the years 1949-54, 1956-60, 1965-66 and 1971-72. The soccer team won the first division premierships every year from 1952 to 1956, and the state league championships in 1958 and 1960.¹⁸ Borsari was named 'patron' of the Victorian Soccer Federation for his extensive involvement in the sport of soccer.¹⁹ He was also active in other sporting groups, including the League of Victorian Wheelmen, and founded the Basketball Team Club of Victoria, the Amateur and International Cycling Club and the Professional International Cycling Club.²⁰



Nino Borsari [centre] with two professional boxers in a publicity photograph for a bout promoted by him, 1958.

Nino Borsari was also active in organising sporting events. As a well-known sportsman and former Olympian, Borsari helped secure the Olympic Games for Melbourne in 1956. In 1967, as the founding President of the Australian Boxing Federation, Borsari travelled to Europe and Asia, meeting with other boxing federations.²¹ Alongside sports-promoter Bill Long, Borsari arranged for cyclists and boxers to compete in Melbourne; in particular, he brought out Italian boxer Gilberto Biondi, who later decided to live in Australia.

However, not all events were successful. In March 1970, Italian boxer Nino Benvenuti arrived in Australia to compete in a fight against American boxer Tom Bethea. The fight at Olympic Park attracted much ridicule for Benvenuti's 'shocking performance [which made] boxing look a sick sport in the eyes of the paying public...'²² Bill Long believed that this fight caused his 'own future as a Promoter [to be] at stake.'²³ *La Gazzetta dello Sport* claimed that the defeat caused 'great sorrow to the half a million Italian migrants [in Australia].'²⁴

Despite the 'failure' of the Benvenuti venture, both Borsari and Long continued to seek out promising athletes to compete in Australia. In July of the same year, *La Gazzetta dello Sport* stated that Borsari was 'today the most qualified person in the Italian community, sporting and recreational and cultural fields' to contact organisers, promoters and professional boxers.²⁵ While the fight may have momentarily embarrassed the Italian community, it now seems insignificant amidst other successful sporting events organised by Borsari. Interestingly, this episode may reveal more of Borsari and his personality. Borsari's continued enthusiasm after the Benvenuti-Bethea fight demonstrated that his passion was based in working for the good of sport and the community.

Fanny Borsari played an important role in the success of the family business, and was a strong support in her husband's

community and sporting pursuits. While Nino Borsari was purchasing items for the emporium and the Italaustralia Import-export Company, Fanny Borsari ran the emporium. Nino Borsari spoke of the period when he opened the emporium, stating that it was 'about then [that] I met my wife. We married after a three month courtship, and from then on, things got better.'²⁶

As well as working alongside her husband, Fanny Borsari was involved in sporting and community activities in her own right. In the 1950s, she became the first woman to be president of a soccer club, accepting the position of president at the Geelong Soccer Club at a time when the club was threatened with expulsion from the Victorian Association. Four years later, a journalist credited her with putting the club 'back on its feet again.'²⁷ She was also Vice President of Co-As-It from 1970 to 1971, and President of the Royal Children's Hospital Italian Auxiliary. Fanny Borsari was honoured with a life-membership of the Juventus Soccer Club, for 'services of the highest order... over many years, with rare spirit of sacrifice and unselfishness for the advancement of the Italian Community in the field of sport.'²⁸

As a prominent figure in Carlton, Nino Borsari was involved in strengthening cultural bonds within the Italian and the wider community. Alongside his involvement in Italian community groups such as the Casa d'Italia, he participated in the Italian and Australian Association



Nino Borsari and his wife, Fanny [nee Cester], 1940.

(IAMA) and the Italo-Australian Welfare Association. In order to raise funds for an IAMA Sporting Centre, Borsari organised a 'Champion's Night' showcasing famous sportspeople in cycling races, boxing, acrobatics and wrestling matches.²⁹

Nino and Fanny Borsari participated in many charitable and civic organisations. The Borsaris often opened their home for fundraising events, including one for Yooralla in 1974. Borsari was also involved in the Royal Children's Hospital and the Salvation Army, and organised a 'Cycle for Sight' fundraiser for the Blind Appeal of 1974.

'Civic duty' was important to Borsari as seen in his extensive involvement in community groups such as the Carlton Police and Citizens' Youth Club (of which Borsari was vice president) formed to 'provide sporting and recreational facilities... for young lads of the district who are our future citizens.'³⁰ In 1969, he stood as the Australian Labor Party candidate for the Victoria Ward in the Melbourne City Council Election, in which Borsari aimed to preserve housing in Carlton and develop a Carlton Community Centre.³¹ He was however unsuccessful in this seat, which was won by John King.

At times, it can be difficult to see beyond an individual's public persona, especially given the lists of Borsari's achievements. However, his give an insight into what he valued and his self-perceptions.

Borsari's early Olympic gold medal win when aged 20 years was a great achievement, which naturally carried through his life. The Olympic Rings, used as the symbol of the emporium, were printed on the underside of jewellery case lids and on store receipts and to this day, one can see the neon sign of Borsari on a bicycle, on the building where the emporium used to be.

But Borsari also converted this love of sport into active community involvement. For him, sport bound people from all backgrounds together. An advertisement for the Borsari Emporium in a sporting handbook states that 'fraternity through sport is [Borsari's] creed' and emphasises that: 'No matter who you are, where you are from, or what you believe, you are Nino's friend if you are interested in sport.'³²

Borsari's Italian heritage remained an important motivation, as seen on the occasion when responding to a suggestion that he trade under another name, he said: 'No, I am a world champion – people know my name.'³³ At the same time, Borsari valued being Australian, stating in 1972: 'I still consider myself to be Italian while at the same time being proud to be Australian. I am both ways.'³⁴

Through his business and involvement in sporting clubs in the Carlton community, Borsari stated that 'I come to know most

people, and the people call me "Cavalier" or "Knight."³⁵ In 1978, Borsari was knocked from his bicycle in a road accident and suffered fractures to his skull. He subsequently underwent surgery at the Austin Hospital. The numerous letters and telegrams wishing him a quick recovery signified his popularity.³⁶ Recognition of Borsari is also evident in numerous cartoons that were printed in newspapers, highlighting his role in organising sporting events and as a businessman. A cartoon from the Age in 1963 labelled him the 'uncrowned king of Carlton.'³⁷ In 1962, Borsari was recognised by his homeland, receiving the 'Italian Order of Merit' for his involvement in the Italian community.³⁸

Nino Borsari died in 1996 at the age of 84, eight years after the death of his wife, Fanny. The Nino Borsari Emporium became a jewellery store in the 1980s. This closed in 1992, and was turned into the 'Borsari Ristorante.' A bicycle store still exists at 193 Lygon Street.

Nino Borsari was an important figure during the period of mass Italian migration to Melbourne. Through the efforts of Nino and Fanny Borsari, the emporium served as an unofficial, but vital site of community and welfare for the Italian community. Because Borsari valued both sport and community, he saw these two areas as united, and demonstrated this in the way he spent his life.

NOTES

1 Italy 4'53"; France: 4'55"

2 Michael Ryan, 'The olden goldie!' Sunday Press, 20 Jul., 1986, p. 18.

3 Table 1.2 'Net Migration of Italians and Southern Europeans: Australia 1947-1980', Helen Ware, A Profile of the Italian Community in Australia, Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs and CO.AS.IT., Citadel Press, Hawthorn, Dec., 1981, p. 17.

4 'Italians' [title incomplete], Melbourne Observer, 19 Sep., 1971, p. 11.

5 *ibid.*

6 Stephen Castles, 'Italian migration and settlement since 1945,' Australia's Italians: Cultural and community in a changing society, eds. Stephen Castles, Caroline Alcorso, Gaetano Rando and Ellie Vasta, Allen & Unwin, 1992, pp. 36-37. Castles, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-2.

7 *ibid.*, pp.36-7.

8 *ibid.*, pp. 38-9.

9 *ibid.*, p. 50.

10 Bridging Two Worlds: Jews, Italians and Carlton, ed. Dr Diane Carlyle, Brown Prior Anderson, 1993, p.12

11 *ibid.*, p.12

12 *ibid.*, p.26

13 *ibid.*

14 'Italians,' *op. cit.*

15 Gualberto Gennai, interview conducted at the Italian Historical Society, Aug., 2002.

16 *ibid.*

17 Nino Borsari, Testimonial for Alfredo Costanzo, Sept. 12, 1977.

18 Egilberto Martin, Juve! Juve! Elabor Helena Nominees, Brooklyn, 1990, p. xi.

19 *ibid.*, p. 55.

20 George Yelland, 'A man of the people,' Soccer News, Aug. 21, 1969, p. 5.

21 Cecil Cripps, 'Bid to help boxing, cycling,' The Australian, Jul. 29, 1967, page unknown.

22 Letter from Bill Long, Bill Long Promotions, to Secretary General of Palazzo Delle Federazione, Rome, Mar. 25, 1970.

23 Letter from Bill Long, Bill Long Promotions, to Cav. Nino Borsari, Carlton, Apr. 2, 1970.

24 'L'Australia riuole Benvenuti (che non si fa trovare...),' *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, Venerdì 24, Luglio, 1970, translated by Lorenzo Iozzi, Italian Historical Society.

25 *ibid.*

26 'Italians,' *op. cit.*

27 Ken Knox, 'NSW has a UN Soccer Team,' The Herald, Jun. 7, 1960, page unknown.

28 Letter from S. Manenti, President of the Juventus Soccer Club, to Fanny Borsari, date unknown.

29 Programme from Champion's Night, Italian and Australian Association, West Melbourne Stadium, Sept. 28, year unknown.

30 Carlton Police and Citizens' Youth Club pamphlet, printed by York Press, date unknown.

31 Nino Borsari, pamphlet for Melbourne City Council Election, Victoria Ward, August 1968.

32 'Stadium news, boxing tournament pamphlet, 2, date unknown.

33 *ibid.*

34 Richard Zachariah, 'When is an Australia an Australian?' The Sunday Australian, Apr. 16, 1972, p. 4.

35 'Italians,' *op. cit.*

36 'Vi sono molto grato,' Il Globo, Apr. 10, 1978, page unknown.

37 'Make the Wheels Go Round,' The Age, Jan. 21, 1963, p. 17.

38 Ricordo del Santuario di S. Antonio e dei Fondatori, Santuario di S. Antonio, Melbourne, 1969, p. 161.