The unfairness of British sporting bodies is very marked. We in Australia may send home Hellings, Cavill [...] et cetera] but we must pay the piper for the privilege (?), and if we desire a J. B. Tyers to visit us in return we have again to pay the piper.¹ – ‘Harrier’, athletic commentator for The Australasian (Melbourne).

If the name ‘Cavill’ was not synonymous with Australian swimming at the turn of the twentieth century, even an informed observer may attribute the sentiments expressed in the quotation above to current concerns in Australian sport. ‘British sporting bodies’ may also have to be modified to read ‘French rugby clubs’ or ‘Indian cricket franchises’. These changes would reflect the contemporary realisation that – while Australia may develop rich sporting talent – its place in the global market places it at a disadvantage when securing the services of top athletes. The quotation actually derives from a leading athletic commentator from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It illustrates that, in spite of vastly different methods of transmission and consumption of sport over this period, a surprising continuity exists in some aspects of the conduct of amateur sport between then and now.

Amateur athletics in Australasia was in fact marked by a distinctly capitalist edge, demonstrated by the techniques that were employed to popularise the sport. This realisation sits uneasily with the notion of sport undertaken for its own sake rather than more base motivations as furthered by proponents of amateur sport.² Athletics is far from the most popular of sports in Australasia, the role of most popular sport historically falling to cricket in the summer and the various codes of football in the winter months. Nevertheless, athletics is an extremely significant sport in Australasian culture due to the central role that its
competitors and administrators played in defining Australia and New Zealand’s engagement with international competitions. These include the Olympic Games and various pan-Britannic sporting festivals, from the Festival of Empire sports in 1911 until the present incarnation – the Commonwealth Games. The careers of administrators and notable athletes make sense to the Australian sporting public and sports historians alike through their achievements at these large competitions.\(^3\) In a New Zealand context, Adrian Smith has suggested that the silver fern on black running vest worn by its athletes at international events ‘proved a simple but memorable motif’ for New Zealand. The gear of athletes such as Peter Snell ‘stood out in a sea of white running vests’ in the era of black and white television. Smith likens this effect to that of the haka performed at rugby union internationals in restating ‘a powerful and remarkably resilient representation of New Zealand nationality’.\(^4\)

Reet and Max Howell have argued that Australian Olympic champions are worth studying as they ‘have made a remarkable contribution to Australia’s social scene, helping the nation’s self image to evolve’.\(^5\) Among the athletes that the Howells studied is Stanley Rowley, the winner of a teams event at the Paris Olympics of 1900.\(^6\) His victory in this event had little impact on the evolution on Australian sporting culture. In fact, it is doubtful whether the event for which Rowley has been posthumously awarded an Olympic title was even recognised as an Olympic event at the time.\(^7\) This is not to say that Rowley, a key competitor in early Australasian championships, was an insignificant athlete. He competed in front of large crowds during the Australasian tour made by the great American sprinter Arthur Duffey in 1905. It is in this capacity that Rowley will be studied in this chapter. The view that sees the significance of athletics in its Olympic expression diverts focus away from what the sport meant to the vast majority of competitors. By examining the manner in which Australasian athletic administrators were able to attract athletes from overseas to the Antipodes, we can begin to appreciate the international relationships that were formed in the name of Australasian athletics. This is a vital first step in understanding the way that Britishness was understood, as the influence that these negotiations had an important impact on relationships with English administrators.

The New South Wales Amateur Athletic Association (NSWAAA) and the Amateur Athletic Union of Australasia (AAUA – or Australasian Union) took a series of steps to popularise athletics throughout Coombes’ tenure as president of these organisations. These bodies used tactics that are generally attributed to professional sport to provide a standard of sports that would attract competitor and spectator alike.