

Going for Bloke



Friendly Birdsville Sumo, 1999

NO PUNCHING. No kicking. Just beergut on beergut. This is how the boozed-up locals of Birdsville, Queensland, settle their scores on a stinking hot day after the legendary Birdsville Cup horse races. Jason Kimberley, intrepid self-taught photographer from Melbourne, stumbled upon and immortalised this ocker-style sumo display during his epic journey across Australia in 1999-2000. "No one got hurt, no one got bruised," he laughs. "The winner just got to raise his arms and be a hero to 500 drunks for ten minutes."

Kimberley has seen wilder sights than this. During a year off the beaten track with his wife, four-wheel drive and old 35mm camera, the one-time inner-city restaurateur traversed the most remote and treacherous outposts of Australia's arid interior. His striking images of rodeo riders, boxers, stockmen and beer-swilling boys from the bush prove that the macho spirit of the archetypal Aussie bloke lives on.

"A lot of the places, like the mining communities, are men only – or the chicks there are transient," says Kimberley. "So the boys have to entertain themselves with horse racing, fighting, good yarns, steaks and beer drinking." There was no evidence of anything more intimate, however. "There's not an overwhelming acceptance of our gay friends in the Australian bush," he says with a wry chuckle. "They're in the same category as greenies and politicians, but it's not as openly hostile as maybe 20 years ago. You would get your fair share of odd looks, though." Nevertheless, he says, "They are fantastic characters. And I grew a big bushy beard on my trip so I fitted right in."

The proof of this lies in Kimberley's recently released photographic book, *Australia Exposed*, which effectively captures the unreconstructed Australian male in his natural habitat. "Australia is the oldest, flattest, driest land on earth; it is so harsh and rugged," he says. "That shapes the people in many ways. You see it in the hands and faces of the Aborigines and whitefellas making a living from such marginal country. They have a different outlook, a different mentality."

Although he's back in the urban sprawl, Kimberley retains some of the outback attitude which impacted upon him so profoundly. "I don't ever want to get vacuumed back up into city life," he states, " 'cause even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat."

B

Jason Kimberley's *Australia Exposed* is published by Sunburnt Country Photos.