

The Beginnings of a Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain, 1793–1850

**Adrian Harvey
University of London**

Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004
ISBN: 0-7546-3643-7 (hb); \$84.95/£47.50
270pp

Many historians have described early industrial Britain as a 'bleak age' where the masses possessed little time, energy or money to devote to sport. Adrian Harvey reveals a very different picture of Britain at this time to show a rich, diverse and commercial sporting culture accessible to almost everyone. Far from being tied to a recreational calendar that was dependent upon established, traditional holidays, sporting events occurred within their own leisure timetable. Indeed, by the 1840s, it was common for sporting events to be conducted on a regular basis every week.

Harvey demonstrates how newspapers and periodicals began to recognize that sport had the capacity to capture the public's imagination, and the importance of the spectating audience transformed the staging of events into a major source of revenue. The increasing amount of money involved in sport created a situation in which the participants were often unable to regulate and administer activity, especially as they were confronted with instances of substantial corruption and fraud. The public perception of activity in many sports changed dramatically, with the existence of professionals expanding and the social elite withdrawing from the various roles that they had previously performed as organizers, supervisors and competitors.

This is the first in-depth study of sporting culture in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century that is based upon sporting periodicals, newspapers and sporting archives. Harvey depicts a society that is not suffering from a severe attack on recreations by commerce, industry and government, but one in which the principal problems experienced stemmed from criminal activity. As such, this book provides a much-needed revision of many misconceptions about the early history of sport in Britain.

Contents: Prologue; Genesis: a national sporting culture is born; Sex, sport, and sales: the sporting press; No time for idleness? The law and sport 1793 – 1815; You can all join in — the law and sport 1816–1850; how many rats can you eat in a minute? The rules of sport; Big crowds — big money — mass entertainment comes to Britain; Better than working for a living: professional sportsmen...and women; Epilogue; Appendix; Bibliography; Index.