

Communications

To the Editor of the *Journal of Sport History*:

Leverett F. Smith, Jr. of North Carolina Wesleyan College praised Allen Guttman's book, *From Ritual to Record*, as a book ". . . clearly written"¹ He went on to give it accolades because he believed Guttman ". . . shows us how we may synthesize materials available to us."² Mr. Guttman certainly presented a wide-ranging collection of materials to help illustrate a rather grandiose plan. On the whole, I would agree with Mr. Smith that Guttman has given to us a worthwhile study. Nevertheless, Guttman has made not a few serious mistakes in evaluating medieval European sports. I would be the first to admit that medieval sports need evaluating and explaining to scholars and a general readership alike. For too long, medieval sports have been ignored as a viable part of medieval social history.³ However, I do not believe Mr. Guttman's background as a literary historian of American life equips him for the job. A few examples of his treatment of medieval sports will demonstrate what I mean.

Guttman, in the key chapter of the book, has devised a list of seven characteristics of sport: 1) secularism, 2) equality of opportunity to compete, 3) specialization of roles, 4) rationalization, 5) bureaucratic organization, 6) quantification, and 7) the quest for records. In explaining the medieval pitfalls of the author, it is necessary to begin with number seven, "the quest for records."⁴ The author claimed that the quest for records is a truly modern phenomenon. If it is not quantifiable in the modern sense, according to Guttman, it is not a record. This type of thinking demonstrates an unfamiliarity with medieval life and thought. Surely medieval "athletes" kept records, even if only in their heads. And, the records kept in people's heads are oftentimes the most effective. The desire to outperform—beat the record—as Unferth enviously displayed in *Beowulf*, must unquestionably have been on the minds of medieval competitors.⁵ The history of medieval tournaments is filled with knights lusting to unhorse—break the record—a renowned "tournament professional."⁶ Jean Froissart's *Chronicles* provides us with a typical example. The tournament at Saint-Inflevert was attended by Sir John Holland and other French and English knights ". . . always eager to perform with honour in the lists. . . ." ⁷

Mr. Guttman explained that modern hunters rationalized ancient and medi-

eval “. . . hunting by creating . . . an animal which symbolizes the equality of all animals, i.e., a target.”⁸ Yes, he even credited modern civilization with inventing the target, when everyone knows that medieval knights trained on occasion by striking a quintain and that medieval bowmen certainly fired at immobile, inanimate targets.⁹

There are some eye-raising statements in this important chapter under the heading “specialization.” After claiming that medieval football was an unspecialized, undifferentiated mass of players and spectators alike, the author failed to include any of the scholarly literature on medieval football.¹⁰ Guttman quickly concluded that medieval sports were unspecialized. One believes that the author would change his mind if he perused *The Master of the Game, By Edward, Second Duke of York (1406- 13)*.¹¹ Equipment, seasons, types of deer and how they are to be hunted, and countless additional rules and procedures fill this important sporting treatise and demonstrate the complexity of certain medieval sports. Not only were medieval sports specialized—aristocratic hunting was truly specialized with a mounted hunter or hunters, sometimes armored, serfs to beat the bushes, tend the hounds, blow the hunting horns, and carry the kill—life itself was a specialized society of warriors, clergymen, and workers.

In his section on “Equality” —what he refers to as a player’s opportunity to play—Guttman remarked that medieval peasants were punished severely, sometimes by death, if they emulated the sporting circles and games of their aristocratic masters. There is considerable evidence to the contrary. William fitz Stephen, biographer of Saint Thomas Becket, wrote a famous description of London in the late twelfth century which included the following statement about the emulation of the nobility by the non-aristocratic classes:

The lay sons of the citizens rush out the gates in crowds, equipped with lances and shields, the younger sort with pikes from which the iron head has been taken off, and there they get up sham fights and exercise themselves in military combat. . . .¹²

Fitz Stephen does not mention that the nobles of London rush out and bash out the brains of these peasant imitators. In addition to Fitz Stephen’s depiction of London sports, there is the knowledge that the peasantry of medieval Europe hunted, and, it would be unwise to suggest that none found pleasure in it.

It would be an error to suggest that members of the servile class participated in aristocratic tournaments. Nonetheless, Guttman seems to underestimate the medieval peasant’s genius for creative play when he said, “In medieval times, jousts and tournaments were limited to the nobility.”¹³ William fitz Stephen is again an important source to demonstrate an alternative view.¹⁴

I am in no way suggesting that people should refrain from writing general

surveys of particular institutions. Unfortunately, when surveys are written, most people must venture into unknown territory at one time or another. And, when surveyors of historical institutions reach that historical “no-man’s land,” they ought to demonstrate that they have, at least, tried to understand the secondary literature of that unknown field. This is my biggest criticism of this author’s work. In his otherwise copious notes, Guttman listed only Christina Hole’s *English Sports and Pastimes* (London, 1949) and Dennis Brailsford’s *Sport and Society: From Elizabeth to Anne* (Toronto, 1969). Both of these books are indeed important for the study of English sports, but both are decidedly lacking in information about English medieval sports. No book or article on medieval sports is cited.

If one never dared to “see the big picture,” how narrow our views of the past would be. Nonetheless, when a student of American literature writes about medieval sports, the result is not in keeping with the author’s usual depth of knowledge. Speaking of sports, there have been few Gene Conleys, Dick Groats, Jim Thorpes, or Bob Hayes’s.

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John Marshall Carter

Notes

1. Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). Professor Smith’s review appeared in the *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Winter, 1978), p. 61.
2. Ibid.
3. An inaugural essay by America’s most famous medievalist did not bring many scholars into the field of medieval sports: See Charles Homer Haskins, “The Latin Literature of Sport,” *Studies in Mediaeval Culture* (New York, 1958); this article was first published in *Speculum*, II, 235-252 (1927). I have attempted to gather much of the literature of medieval sports history in my essay, “The Bayeux Tapestry and English Medieval Sports: A Forgotten Element of Medieval Social History,” a paper written under the direction of Professor Bennett Hill, chairman of the department of history at the University of Illinois (Spring, 1979).
4. Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, p. 55.
5. I have cited this example from the alliterative verse translation made by Charles W. Kennedy, *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic* (Oxford, 1940), p. 19.
6. Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, trans. Geoffrey Brereton (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968), p. 378.
7. Ibid.
8. Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, p. 42.
9. Carl Stephenson, *Mediaeval Feudalism* (Ithaca, New York, 1942), p. 46.
10. The author might have cited F. P. Magoun, “Football in Medieval England and in Medieval English Literature,” *American Historical Review* (1929) and Magoun’s *History of Football: From the Beginnings to 1871* (Bochum-Langendreer, 1938).
11. This extensive work is edited by William A. Baillie-Grohman and Florence Baillie-Grohman (London, 1904, 1909).
12. William fitz Stephen, *Description of London, in the Life of Saint Thomas*, ed. James Craigie Robertson (Rolls Series) (London, 1877), Vol. III, 2-13; a useful translation is found in *Stow’s Survey of London* (London, 1965), 501-509.
13. Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, p. 30.
14. William fitz Stephen, *Description of London*, p. 10.

To the Editor of the *Journal of Sport History*:

Before I attempt briefly to discuss Mr. Carter's comments on my alleged errors, I should like to point out that I do not come to sports history simply as a "literary historian" or "a student of American literature." Two of my previous books, and all four of the books I have edited, are concerned primarily with history rather than with literature. For twenty years I have taught American and, occasionally, European history as well as American and European literature. Since I have always advocated an interdisciplinary approach to historical scholarship, I'm pleased to see that Mr. Carter includes the Bayeux tapestries and *Beowulf* among his sources; I hope he will not take it amiss to hear that I offer my course, "Sport and Society," within Amherst College's Department of Anthropology and Sociology.

The substance of Mr. Carter's charges can be summarized into three indictments: my failure to (1) see that medieval man did understand the concept of a sports record; to (2) recognize the specialization of medieval sports; to (3) cite the standard sources in medieval sports history.

Mr. Carter's evidence for the first point is of two sorts. In the first place, he assures me that "medieval 'athletes' kept records, even if only in their heads." Although I am not a positivist about historical proof, I cannot accept this kind of argument on the basis of what is *not* known. In the second place, keeping records in the sense of noting something down is not the same as setting records in the modern sense. Mr. Carter indicates that medieval men sought to outperform their rivals. Of course they did, as did the heroes of the *Iliad* (Book XXIII) and the *Odyssey* (Book VIII) and the competitors at Olympia and Delphi, as did the athletes of Roman, Persian, Chinese, and other civilizations, but eagerness "to perform with honour in the lists" is no evidence whatsoever of the modern concept of the sports record. In Mr. Carter's own example, *Beowulf* replies to Unferth's heroic boast with his own boast:¹ ". . . I had more sea-strength, power in swimming, and also more hardship, than any other man." He mentions five knights swimming and nine sea-monsters killed, but this is not what we mean by quantification in sports. Neither *Beowulf* nor Unferth displays any conception of the modern record as a quantified abstraction of the absolutely best performance (at any given moment in the progression of records). If my analysis in *From Ritual to Record* is not clear enough for Mr. Carter, I urge him to read Henning Eichberg's "'Auf Zoll und Quintlein': Sport und Quantifizierungsprozess in der frühen Neuzeit" or Richard Mandell's "The Invention of the Sports Record."²

Mr. Carter's comments on specialization in medieval sports are based on more than simple miscomprehension. Of course there are elements of specialization in every society we know of, even the most primitive (even, indeed,

among ants and bees). Of course the handbooks of sports in medieval as in other times contain complex rules and procedures. The question is not one of the elementary division of social labor into warriors and clergymen and serfs, nor is it one of the complexity of the hunt or tournament. The question is rather the specialization of roles within sports. Did medieval hunters divide themselves into specialists for deer and specialists for boars? Did knights choose to concentrate on the lance to the exclusion of the long sword? The evidence as I read it indicates that knightly training aimed at the mastery of a wide range of skills so that an unhorsed knight was able to fight with sword or dagger or even with his bare hands. When I write that medieval sports *were* specialized in the sense that social divisions excluded peasants from jousts and tournaments, Mr. Carter hastens to cite Fitz-Stephen's famous description of twelfth-century London, which shows that commoners (city-dwellers with lances and shields are hardly "peasants") imitated the nobility. Yes they did; I can be faulted in that I did not specifically mention the fact, but it is nonetheless true, despite Mr. Carter's sarcasm about bashed out brains, that knightly tournaments were restricted to the nobility and that punishments meted out to outsiders were severe. Indeed, F. K. Mathys reports that the famous knight Heinrich von Ramstein was "schwer verprügelt" when he attempted to enter a tournament subsequent to his marriage to a middle-class girl.³ Martin Vogt's account of the class nature of jousts and tournaments is as good as any I know of,⁴ which brings me to Mr. Carter's other point about my alleged ignorance of the standard sources.

He says apropos of my argument about medieval football that I failed "to include any of the scholarly literature on medieval football." There is, on the contrary, a clear reference both in my text and in my footnotes to Eric Dunning's essay, "The Structural-Functional Properties of Folk-Games and Modern Sports."⁵ In his penultimate paragraph, Mr. Carter says that his "biggest criticism" of my work is that I cite no book or article on medieval sports. On the contrary, I cite both Joseph Strutt's early *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* and Jean Jusserand's great work, *Les Sports et jeux d'exercice dans l'ancienne France*.⁶ I did not cite other works which I had read, like F. P. Magoun's famous "Football in Medieval England and in Middle-English Literature" and Stephen H. Hardy's fine "The Medieval Tournament: A Functional Sport of the Upper Class" because I did not bring specific items directly from their work into my text as I did, for instance, from Jusserand.⁷ Perhaps I should have asked my publisher to allow me a complete bibliography of all the books (more than a thousand) and articles (roughly fifteen hundred) which I had read, but I did not imagine that my sources needed display in quite the fashion that Mr. Carter calls for. My notes are, as Mr. Carter kindly says, "copious," but they are not a complete record of every article which I read and found helpful.

Mr. Carter does point to a lack of clarity in my text which I do regret. When I

comment on the transformation of hunting into archery, I refer to the target as if the invention of the target were all that is necessary for hunting to become a fully modern sport. Since the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt (as well as medieval archers) shot at targets, it is obvious that this degree of rationalization was not in itself sufficient to make a sport modern. Perhaps I should have said that the transformation of archery to a modern sport in my sense of the term comes when the target is divided into concentric circles each contributing a specified number of points to a final score. If this stage occurred in the age of William Fitz-Stephen, then scholars will have to revise their conception of sports history to indicate that the contests of the yeomen were far in advance of those of their lords and rulers.

One final point. *From Ritual to Record* has received considerable attention from North American and from European scholars. Although most of the attention has been nearly (but not quite) embarrassingly favorable, the majority of the reviewers and correspondents have had valuable negative criticisms as well as positive ones. I am sure that Mr. Carter too, had he been asked to write a formal review of my book, would have come up with something better than petulance.

Amherst College

Allen Guttmann

Notes

1. *Beowulf*, lines 533-534, edited and translated by Howell D. Chickering, Jr. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1977).
2. Eichberg's essay appeared in *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, LVI (1974), 141-176; Mandell's appeared in *Stadion*, II, No. 2 (1976), 250-264. Eichberg's views are also developed in *Leistung, Spannung, Geschwindigkeit* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1978).
3. F. K. Mathys, *Spiele und Sport im Alten Basel* (Basel: Verlag Druckerei Cratander, 1954), p. 15.
4. Martin Vogt, "Der Sport im Mittelalter," *Geschichte des Sports aller Völker und Zeiten*, ed. G. A. E. Bogeng, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Verlag von E. A. Seemann, 1926), I, 163-237.
5. Dunning's essay originally appeared in *Sportwissenschaft*, III, No. 3 (1973), 215-232; it has been incorporated in Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1979).
6. I cited Strutt from William Hone's edition of 1838; Jusserand's book was published by Plon-Nourrit in 1901.
7. Magoun, who was, incidentally, a professor of literature, published his essay in *American Historical Review*, XXXV (1929), 33-45; Hardy's essay appeared in the *Journal of Sport History*, I, No. 2 (November 1974), 91-105.

Editorial Note: Letters to the editor are published verbatim.