

Book Reviews

*Historians relate not so much what is done
as what they would have believed.*
Benjamin Franklin

Mason, Tony. *Association Football & English Society, 1863-1915*. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980. Pp. x, 278. Index, bibliography, notes, tables, maps, pictures. \$36.25.

In the past decade, an increasing number of historians, trained in traditional approaches towards their subject, have turned their attention to sports. Tony Mason, a member of the Department of Social History at the University of Warwick, combines his background as a student of the British working class with his interest in Association Football (soccer) to produce the most scholarly and complete look thus far at soccer. The unstated assumption in the book is the point raised so eloquently by Arthur Hopcraft, the English sportswriter and playwright that, "What happens on the football field matters, not in the way food matters but as poetry does to some people and alcohol does to others: it engages the personality."

Morris Marples's *History of Football*, George Keeton's *The Football Revolution* and James Walvin's *The People's Game* raised many of the points that Mason considers. His book is remarkable for the range of the evidence he has collected and marshalled to support his conclusion that football has been an integral part of working class life and has played an important part in developing a sense of community.

Mason has much to say about the background of the men who played the game and the status and motives of the men who ran the clubs. The most important chapter concerns "the crowd"—who came to watch the games and what effect the sport might have had on their lives. Mason's research is prodigious—a combination of the sporting press, local and national newspapers, club records, and personal reminiscences augment the traditional sources for social history in the period. The 1902 disaster at Ibrox Park, Glasgow, where over 550 people were injured when a section of the stands collapsed, provides Mason with a unique way to look at a football crowd. At the same time, he is careful not to make too much out of this evidence. The game was an international match, therefore the audience was somewhat atypical, and since it was

played in Scotland, it was not fully representative of the attraction of the game in England.

Mason cannot draw more definite conclusions about the crowd because it is very difficult to obtain precise evidence about the socio-occupational status of the spectators. Admission charges give some indication about the crowd as do the advertisements that appeared in the programs. The existence of relatively cheap mass transportation enabled the crowds to get to games outside their neighborhood and intercity train travel made it possible for “away” fans to support their teams.

In the 1880’s the governing elite of Association Football was faced with its most important crisis, professionalism. Could gentlemen, many of them the products of posh public schools, be expected to play with working men who were paid to play a game?

The distinction is summed up in Mason’s description of the sentiments of N. L. Jackson, the amateur who was the captain in 1892 of an otherwise all professional England team. “Amateurs should not be compelled to mix with pros . . . Servants did not dine with their masters in the dining room, nor did they come and go through the front door, and professional footballers were paid servants.”

Professionalism had two immediate impacts on the men who ran the clubs. They had to adapt their principles to hire “paid gladiators” and then they had to find a way to cope with the economics of the situation. The social and economic background of the directors should lead us to think that most of them were firmly attached to the free market concepts of a capitalist economy. In the question of players’ wage, the directors’ belief in competition bowed to a stronger force, their desire not to see salaries raised by competitive bidding between clubs. In the 1901-2 season, the Football Association instituted Rule 32 which mandated the *maximum* (my italics) salaries and other terms that could be offered to a player. The maximum wage and the life time contractual hold the clubs had over a player combined to lock the professionals into a situation which gave them two choices—accept the offer made to them or find another way to make a living. Mason is quick to point out that many of the more important clubs followed the maximum wage restriction more in the breach than in the observance. Thus, football demonstrated two social values so common to Victorian England, the necessity for each class to know its place and the ability of the middle class to act with consummate hypocrisy when self-initiated regulations stood in the way of their pleasure.

Mason’s most important contention is that football did help create a sense of community within many cities. It built a sense of pride amongst the followers

of a club and gave them a shared enterprise. A football match gave men someplace to vent their emotions outside of the workplace, as well as giving the middle class a sense of contributing to local pride and harmony. Football clubs did build upon an existing sense of geographic and class identity, but it is undeniable that the emotions and loyalties engendered by football were different in scope and intensity from already existing “community spirit.”

Two disquieting features run throughout the book, demonstrating both the strength and weakness of Mason’s approach. He backs away from some of the far-reaching implications of his material and almost appears to be trying to wring much of the drama and romantic appeal out of the subject. One wishes that Mason had done more to get the atmosphere of the crowd and the emotion of the game into the book, but this absence is surely small enough price to pay for his meticulous use of the evidence.

The second problem is the absence of the broader generalizations that the title of the study appears to promise. Conclusions about the importance of the game to both players and patrons are tentative. Although they suggest lines for further research, Mason’s grasp of the subject makes us wish he had gone further. There are constant reminders about the sketchiness both of the sources and other secondary works, another indication of the pioneering nature of his work.

Now that Mason has made a crucial first step into a systematic analysis of the structure of football, we can only hope that he and other historians will build on both his subject and approach. No one in the field of sports history should be deterred from reading this book because it deals only with soccer and with a fifty-year period; the approach Mason has taken could set standards for much of the work that must be done in other sports for other times.

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