

# Sport and the Study of Latin American History: An Overview\*

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This essay starts from two basic assumptions:

1. That the academic study of sport no longer requires extended justifications or apologies;
2. That modern sport, whose emergence accompanied the rise of industrialization from about the mid-nineteenth century, is qualitatively different from all sport in all societies which preceded it.

Some elaboration is in order:

Over the last several decades, pioneers in the study of modern sport have often felt compelled to justify their research or teaching focus, fearful-perhaps with good cause-that their colleagues would consider their work intellectually inferior and professionally frivolous.<sup>1</sup> While such concerns may linger, it seems obvious, in the Latin American context alone, that any activity which can repeatedly attract up to 200,000 spectators in many places at about the same time, support multi-million dollar betting pools, sustain profitable daily and weekly newspapers, fill hours of radio and television programming, justify significant governmental budgets, provide the theme for speeches by politicians from mayors to presidents, convince not-so-wealthy nations to bid for the right to host international competitions, and more-such an activity merits serious analysis (Ruocco).

But to accept its legitimacy does not imply that the study of sport is without its problems. One such is that of definition. Attempts have been made to define sport, often in opposition to non-sportive games and play, but even the best leave imprecise areas (Guttmann; Loy: 1981). For example, again in context, are bullfighting and rodeo (*charrería*) true sports? Chess? Are young boys playing pick-up soccer in an open field engaged in sport? Turn-of-the-century cyclists touring the Mexican countryside? Ladies swatting tennis balls at the club? If not in each individual case, perhaps in a systemic structure. Or, perhaps in these gray areas, it doesn't matter much.

Another problem concerns level of analysis. Children playing intramural

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1. Some basic arguments in favor of researching and teaching sport history are presented in Chandler and Remley.

basketball may validly constitute sport just as much as their country's Olympic team, but qualitatively are they doing the same things? And the boys trading punches in the make-shift neighborhood ring may be doing sport as much as the millionaire middle-weight champ, but are we, in fact, witnessing the same process?

In a sense, these debates carry us into a third problem confronting the field of sports studies: the existence of conflicting theories or paradigms. To avoid making this too complex, we suggest that the broad philosophical or theoretical differences appear to revolve currently around a few basic issues: Is sport, as opposed to play and perhaps games, inherently enslaving or liberating or perhaps both simultaneously? Or is sport itself neutral, with the context determining its meaning? Is professional by definition more exploitive than non-professional sport, assuming one can define professionalism? Does sport always replicate the dominant or hegemonic culture or can it (should it) be a means of challenging that culture? Is sport in socialist societies meaningfully different from sport in capitalist nations? The questions are exciting, the answers usually elusive; fortunately, there are a few areas of general agreement among sports scholars today.?

One appears to be that the foundations of nearly all modern sports (that is, all sports in their modern forms)-with their emphasis on rationalization, standardization, secularization, specialization, quantification, record-keeping and breaking-are located historically in England and in the upper classes (Guttman). In a way, then, the global history of modern sport is characterized by parallel processes of diffusion geographically outward from centers of innovation and hierarchically downward, spatially from more to less industrialized sectors and socially from upper to lower strata, processes which repeat and rerepeat themselves internationally and, on a smaller scale, intranationally (Bale; Loy: 1966).

In that framework, Latin American is primarily a recipient region which, over the last century, has adopted sports mainly developed in other places and which has generally seen those adopted behavior patterns move from capital and/or major port city to the hinterlands and from elite to mass cultural phenomena (Beezley:1983; Escobar M.; Gonzalez; Rachum). In the process, older forms of sport and popular recreation were modified, reduced, or even eliminated (Slatta).

Put another way, the most popular sports in Latin America today have little connection with traditional society, not much with colonial society, and even less with pre-Columbian civilization, though remnants or residual expressions of those pre-modern activities continue to express themselves, at times in surprising ways (Kelly). Rather, as in other parts of the world, including western Europe, the United States, the socialist bloc, and increasing portions of the Third World, modern sport seems intricately linked to the complex of

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2. There is a growing body of good literature on sport theory. An introduction to some of the basic issues is found in: Brohm; Cantelon and Gruneau; Gruneau; Guttman; Morgan; Mutis; Rigauer; and Whitson.

cultural patterns and values associated with urban-industrial institutions and their spheres of influence.

What that suggests in turn is that the evolution of modern Latin American sport can be used to analyze various attributes of Latin America's increasing involvement in the capitalist world system. At the same time, given the infinite variety of creative outlets in the sporting experience as well as the diversity of historical and cultural mixes in the Latin American realm, sport also vividly expresses the unique ways in which different peoples have reacted to the penetration of so-called modern models and of transnational institutions with connections between metropolitan centers and weaker peripheries. In other words, the process of adoption/adaption, rather than true innovation, which marks modern Latin American sport, permits comparison among Latin American countries and perhaps between Latin America and other Third World areas (Lyra Filho). In turn, the resultant international sports relationships may prove to be another graphic indicator, highly correlated with and partially determined by the economic, political, and military indices of Latin America's overall weakness and dependency in the world community (Martin Baró; Reyes Matta; Cadavel).

This is not to pretend that sport need be understood solely within this global "dependency" framework. Clearly sport, as a highly complex and pervasive social phenomenon with many interconnected dimensions and expressions, can offer insights into various related historical and contemporary processes on different levels. For, at one and the same time, sport has (at least) cultural, psychological, social, institutional, economic, and political content and ramifications, though, as suggested above, the nature and meaning of any of these is not always clear or predictable.

Nor is it to assert that sport is only a reflector of society, a mere indicator of these other dimensions. Rather, sport is a part of society, interacting with other parts often in a dialectical fashion. Sport, it appears, like other institutions, can be consciously or unconsciously manipulated by individuals or, more commonly, interest groups and classes in pursuit of ends which may be limited to the sports realm or which may have larger implications.

Certainly in this essay we can't hope to examine the manifestations of all these themes over all of Latin America, but we can offer some examples and suggest some tentative relationships.

In the cultural realm, sport may be both an expression of national or regional cultural characteristics, broadly defined, and a source of cultural creativity, in the narrower sense. In the first instance, for example, it has been argued that the style in which Brazilians play soccer is illustrative of other attributes of the Brazilian "character," and that the bullfight simultaneously reflects and reinforces the structure of the Mexican family (Reid; Zurcher and Meadow). In the second, sports themes have been used by various writers and artists as a metaphor, setting, or motif through which to communicate their intended message (Pedroza; Galeano; Goldemberg). In one special case, that of the Chilean "university classic," the soccer match provided the physical and

emotional ambience in which to practice artistic creativity, in the form of mass theater (Obregón).

The psychological implications of sport throughout Latin America are surely varied, difficult to determine, and subject to debate. In one circumstance, it may be suggested that the persistence of pre-modern games and sports is a source of self-respect and even a type of rebellion among people who have seen much of their traditional culture destroyed, especially under the wave of modernism imported over the last century in the name of progress (León Echaiz). A similar interpretation can be applied to the resiliency of indigenous forms of recreation throughout the centuries of European colonial rule.

In another situation, sport has been blamed for diverting popular attention away from more serious social and political problems (Flynn; Levine: 1980b), though not all observers agree (Evanson). In fact, one Chilean maintains that, in an atmosphere of political repression, the soccer stadium may provide citizens a unique opportunity to choose (read vote) among two contenders and to act, through cheering, in a way that, they believe, will influence the outcome of events (Ossandón). Brazilian anthropologist Roberto Da Matta contends that another socio-psychological result of soccer is to teach players and fans to live by standardized rules, operating in a structured environment, and to accept the outcome as being a result of merit, laying thereby the groundwork for constructing a "liberal" society (Da Matta).

Two other interesting psychological interpretations of Latin American soccer include: 1) Luis Millones' proposal that weekend violence on the soccer fields and in associated rituals of Lima's neighborhood teams is a function of the pent-up hostilities deriving from the socio-economic frustrations suffered by the working-class players during the rest of the week (Millones); and, 2) Marcelo Suárez Orozco's contention that the on-field style of play and the off-field nature of fan behavior and folklore suggest that Argentine males are excessively concerned with protecting their maleness and must symbolically avoid being penetrated from the rear—they are stuck in Freud's anal phase of development—hence players and the fans who identify with them are preoccupied with protecting their goal (Suárez Orozco).<sup>3</sup>

No doubt, sport can also reflect, express, and even encourage class or racial cleavages or both. Despite the recent success of darker players such as Pelé, Brazilian soccer was marred in its early days by overt racism and discrimination; even today, critics contend, the black player earns less while playing and has little carry-over into his retirement years (Lever: 1972, 1983; Levine: 1980a). And, it has been charged that one reason for Brazil's decline in international soccer through the 1970s was a deliberate effort by the military regime to change the national team's style by "whitening" its complexion (Klintowitz). And Stein, *et al.*, illustrate how soccer in early twentieth-century Lima afforded both the exploiters and the exploited a mechanism for manipulation (Deustua Carvalho, Stein, and Stokes).

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3. For a larger discussion of violence and aggression in relation to modern sport, see Cagial.

As sports in Latin America have become more sophisticated and structured, they have elicited larger administrative and support institutions and bureaucracies. One frequent criticism heard among Latin Americans is that these institutions have not functioned to aid either athletes or athletics, a reflection of corruption or ineptness among the administrators or of inadequately developed institutions throughout the entire society or of insufficient funding (Krotee; Morales Roca; Vidales). Nevertheless, it has been argued that, in the best of cases, in organizing and managing teams, leagues, etc., people learn skills potentially applicable to other areas of life; in other words, sports administration, broadly defined, may be an aid to "development" (Escobar M.; Clignet and Stark make a similar assessment of soccer's impact in Cameroon).

Nearly all Latin American comments on sport arrive eventually at the question of money, either because too little is spent on sport or because what is spent is spent unwisely, an issue that ranges from the lowest scholastic programs to the highest professional ranks. In some cases, Latin Americans admit in frustration that their economies are poor and that they are lucky to do as well as they do (Guerrero). Others condemn governments for incorrect priorities (Ponce). More recently, there has been an outcry against the so-called *espectáculo deportivo* (sporting spectacle) and concomitant administrative policies which, it is argued, have cheapened the product (usually professional soccer), reduced attendance and the gate, attracted too many unproductive hangers-on to the game, and reduced the clubs to selling players to keep from going bankrupt (Angel; Cagigal; Domínguez Dibb; Morales; Taboada; Sebrelí). Some critics further link this to excessive commercialization, the "star system," and exploitation of athletes, all of which together undermine whatever positive educational and developmental value sport may theoretically offer ("La corrupción"; Angel Jaramillo).

Whether intrinsically so or not, sport, like virtually everything else, has also become ultimately political. Even if, contrary to Hoberman's suggestion (Hoberman), policies on sport and physical culture do not absolutely link governments to specific ideological traditions, certainly such policies can provide evidence of attitudes and objectives in such areas as health, education, social integration, mass mobilization, and foreign policy. Sport law and sport legislation can also indicate power relationships among various interest groups and, especially on the professional level in capitalist societies, between owners and players. And the funding and operation of sports federations and olympic committees may illustrate, as implied above, the workings of bureaucracies and the linkages among public, quasi-public, and private agencies.

There is no doubt, for example, that both Cuba and Nicaragua have developed "revolutionary" sports programs aimed at achieving specific domestic objectives and inculcating selected social values (Pickering; Russell; Wagner: 1982 [both]; Whorton and Wagner). Cuba, in particular, has made sport a significant element in its foreign policy (Komorowski). Mexico, in contrast, has done little officially to raise the quality of its national teams, but it has been the conspicuous host of various international competitions with the aim, not only of

earning tourist dollars, but of satisfying domestic constituents and favorably impressing the outside world (Mera:1968, 1970). On a smaller scale, the Guatemalans did the same when hosting the Central American and Caribbean Games in 1950 (Paniagua S.). Returning to the dependency perspective alluded to above, it may be argued that such an assertive, independent sports policy represents one way of symbolically, and perhaps even substantively, weakening those dependent relationships.

Of course, even when governments do not deliberately encourage it (the Brazilians in 1970 and the Argentines in 1978 can here join Fidel Castro), individual and team success against foreign foes can stimulate national consciousness, pride, and unity across broad spectrums of society (Velázquez Rojas); it is interesting how many writers even from the smaller, poorer countries express pride in the achievements of their athletes or administrators when analyzed in the context of their own region, resource level, or athletic specialization (Ramos Mirena; Cospín). One Argentine wrote, just two decades ago, that Luis Angel Firpo's boxing success, despite his second-round loss to Jack Dempsey in 1923, "affirmed to the world that we were more than a pasture populated by cows," and became part of the mythology by which Argentines have defined their national being (Speroni). Witness, also, the so-called Fernandomania within Mexico resulting from the athletic and financial triumphs of the screw-balling Valenzuela (LaFrance). In contrast, however, the importation of foreign players has aroused the nationalistic ire of numerous Latin Americans (Angel; Morales Roca).

In an example of politics from the bottom up rather than the top down, referring back to the question of the psycho-political implications of sport, there is evidence that one way the people of Chile expressed their quiet disgust, and perhaps lingering fear, growing out of the coup of September 1973, was to avoid attending events in Santiago's national stadium where some of the military's most brutal actions had taken place (Calabrano).

Despite the pervasiveness of sport in the Latin American experience and despite the rich archival, printed, and human sources available, Latin American sport remains a subject of limited systematic analysis. Pre-Columbian sport, above all in Mesoamerica, has earned notable attention (Wagner: 1985), but the colonial and early national periods have been almost completely ignored (Llanes; Pereira Salas). Modern sport is better covered, though in English a mere handful of books and a few dozen articles reflect scholarly inspection (Lever:1983; James). Although more plentiful and often very good, work in Spanish and Portuguese tends to be impressionistic or anecdotal and thus far regionally and topically spotty."

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4 The author of this introduction is currently preparing an annotated bibliography of sport in Latin America from all periods and regions; projected publication date is 1988

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