

Mason, Tony. *Sport in Britain*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988. Pp. 128. Notes, bibliography, index. \$9.95.

The series editors of the Faber and Faber 'Historical Handbooks' intend 'to provide short, up-to-date studies in the evolution of current problems,' to give 'critical accounts of the way in which the present is formed by the past, and of the roots of present discontents.' What Tony Mason has achieved, so far as British sport is concerned, is an excellent survey of some of the current controversial issues, well placed in their recent historical settings.

Wisely, given the space at his disposal, Mason concentrates on several well-defined themes. He looks first at finance, prejudice, drugs and violence. Few would quarrel over the selection and few apart from the administrators, politicians, journalists and others who come in for criticism would quarrel with his often trenchant conclusions. He is surely right, for instance, to ascribe the late surge of wholesale racial prejudice in British sport to the comparatively late arrival of a large black population. While he is not the first to point out that football hooliganism is only marginally connected with the game itself, his considered conclusion that optimism about its future is difficult is one that many must share. The book moves on into a twin discussion of the amateur/professional divide and the role of the media in the nurturing of modern sport and here again Mason puts his finger on an important pulse in his criticism of the cosy relationship that usually exists between sports reporters and the authorities, at both national and club levels. 'It should be their job,' he writes, 'to treat sport with the same inquisitiveness that they would apply to the National Health Service or the British aerospace industry.' (p. 57) The ruling bodies of most of the major sports also suffer, and rightly, for their lack of leadership, imagination and commercial expertise, and for their inherent conservatism.

So much for the polemics. What of the history? Given that the expressed intention of this series is to provide 'for those with little time for extensive reading of the specialised literature,' it is bound to disappoint every specialist in one respect or other. Historically the book does have its strengths. The growth of the sporting press in the latter half of the nineteenth century is well analysed (though earlier sporting journalism is ignored) and sexism and drug abuse are very well set in their recent historical contexts. The major value of Mason's book to the specialist is, indeed, as an account of contemporary British sporting history. As a survey of what is significant in the last two or three decades of

British sport it has not been bettered, covering as it does not only organised sport on the commercial scale but also issues such as mass participation in sport. Contemporary theorising over the nature of the sporting experience is also cogently introduced and in these respects the book makes accessible much material that will be new to many.

The prime difficulty about the book doubtless stems from the publisher's brief and the space the author was allowed to meet it. As would be expected from one whose *Association Football and English Society 1862-1915* is one of the important contributions to the social history of sport, the touch is sure and the historical treatment impeccable-if often necessarily brief-over the last century and a half. Any comment on topics before the mid-nineteenth century, though, tends to be sketchy and even tentative. 'Pedestrianism,' he writes, 'seems to have enjoyed a fashionable period from about 1790-1810' (p. 60) when there is ample evidence for greater assertiveness. Without venturing into the broader question of whether pre-industrial sport, however defined, is of general relevance to present-day considerations, it can hardly be denied that Mason's very valid thesis that 'reliance on business money will make it difficult to stave off business control and values' would have been historically strengthened by looking further back than Victorian press promotion of sport. The sponsorship of sailing contests on the River Thames from the late eighteenth century actually dictated where they should be raced-to finish in front of the sponsoring pleasure gardens-while the railway companies in the mid-nineteenth century virtually dictated the pattern of horse racing, not just by where they put their lines, but also by their active financial backing of races in towns which they served.

Such instances could be multiplied-over early turf attempts to define the gentleman amateur, over gambling and stake money and their prevalence over all social classes, as well as their prime role, here understated, in the formation of the rules of play. These should not rank, though, as more than minor dissatisfactions with a work that fulfils one much-needed role very well indeed. It is to Tony Mason's credit that, in spite of the constraints imposed by the series format, he has produced a most useful contemporary history of British sport, one that is at once instructive, informative, and entertaining, and always written in a user-friendly style.

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