

GEMS, GERALD R., ed. *Sports in North America. A Documentary History. Volume 5—Sports Organized, 1880-1900*. Gulf Breeze, Florida: Academic International Press, 1996. \$76.50 cb., subscription; \$96.50 cb, nonsubscription.

The publishers list this as the fourth of six “volumes in this series” (colonial era), followed by five volumes of twenty-year intervals spanning 1820 to 1920. One assumes there will be more volumes covering the last eighty years of this century, but it is hard to tell. There is no introduction to the series, no general editor, no sense of what the publishers intend.

It is a daunting task—to offer readers a comprehensive set of documents for “North American” sport, especially for these two decades, which have been relatively well-studied by scholars. One wonders what the guidelines were for each volume. Gerald Gems does not mention any in his preface, although he emphasizes his focus on primary sources and laments the abundance of eastern male, Anglo documents. Absent explicit objectives, let me offer a framework for analyzing such a documentary history and use it to assess Gems’s work.

**1. The work should cover a broad range of sports.** Gems has triumphed in this regard. The book is arranged alphabetically by sport, from “aquatics” to “winter.” There is balance; baseball and football do not crowd out horse racing, golf, or ice hockey. Gems is especially strong on boxing, bicycling, and track, which have been terribly understudied at the grassroots levels. He opens doors to the world of bowling, rodeo, tennis, and speed skating, which have received very little coverage. Perhaps he will spur additional research. His compilation is an exceptional entre for anyone just starting out in the field.

**2. The work should cover a broad range of social, cultural, and political-economic topics within the sport industry.** Gems lays out his main themes in the preface, including the growth of standard rules, the struggles for power among young governing bodies and their constituents, the role of technology, the unending quest to justify sports, the tensions of race and gender. These are standard themes and Gems covers them well. For instance, Gems presents dozens of constitutions and reports from assorted amateur and professional bureaucracies. He traces changes in rules and equipment. He is especially strong on the gambling “menace,” which deserves much more attention since gambling is one of the long residuals that helps explain human interest in sports. He also has some interesting tidbits on sportscraft, including a description of tennis champ “Dickie” Sears’s new weapon—topspin (p. 399).

**3. The documents should represent a wide range of geographic regions.** Sports promoters had an obvious stake in spreading their gospel. Gems captures this well in a *Sporting News* editorial wherein Alfred Spink crows about the widespread support his new journal has received from afar—from Lake Superior to Dubuque and the “Sunny South” (p. 112). Given the eastern, urban bias of sport historiography, Gems has done well to include coverage of other regions. *Outing*, Gems’s mainstay, ran numerous stories on the spread of amateur sport, with titles such as “Football on the Pacific Slope” (p. 305), “Curling in the

Northwest" (p. 448), and "Baseball in the South" (p. 114). Gems also is strong on local accounts from the Midwest, largely from the Chicago *Tribune*. One hopes this prompts more research on the reception of "eastern" sports in other parts of the continent.

At the same time, it is difficult to consider this a "North American" compilation. Except for lacrosse and the winter sports, Canada is an afterthought, provided little space to demonstrate its unique history.

**4. The documents should represent a broad range of roles within the sport industry.** Gems is especially strong in representing the views of players, journalists, and amateur bureaucrats. He included some classics, like Monte Ward's assault on the baseball barons and their reserve system (p. 128), or Richard Harding Davis's proto-ethnography of Thanksgiving Day football spectacles in New York City (p. 314). Accounts like Davis's also capture the energy that rocked early stadiums and arenas, with orchestrated chanting and cheering that is seen more in European soccer today. At the same time, one does not find much insight into the plans, schemes, and battles of promoters or entrepreneurs like Chris Von der Ahe or George Wright. Sport in America has been nothing if not a free market commodity-made, bought, and sold like donuts or used cars. That ethos is less clear here.

**5. The documents should represent voices from a broad range of demographic groups.** In his preface, Gems mentions his desire to reflect the sporting life of women and minorities. Except for "middle class women," he notes, "materials proved sparse." Gems does not provide documents on ethnic clubs or prominent black athletes like George Dixon, Isaac Murphy, Fleet Walker, and Major Taylor. And we do not know the budget or time allowed Gems to dig up the local sources that would offer a fuller picture. But he does make a curious error in his preface when he says that the *National Police Gazette* is inaccessible or "cost prohibitive" (preface). In fact, the *Gazette* is available on microfilm in the same "American Periodical Series" that contains *Outing* and *The Spirit of the Times*. As Elliott Gorn and Michael Oriard have demonstrated in their work in sport history (even if filtered through the wacky lens of Richard Kyle Fox), it would have offered an important balance to the genteel views in *Outing*.

**6. The documents should represent a broad range of "source types."** Sport historians have tended to rely on magazines and newspapers, which are obviously more accessible than private materials such as letters or business memoranda. Gems has drawn from the normal range of sources, which time constraints probably dictated. His reliance on *Outing* (maybe 35% of his material) serves as both a strength and a weakness. *Outing* covered a wide range of sports and regions, but it was a "gentleman-amateur" outlet, heavily sprinkled with the voice of Caspar Whitney, who despised all commoners. Beyond this, many of the "historical" accounts in *Outing* are misleading. Caveat lector.

But Gems goes well beyond *Outing*, including some excerpts from the annual Spalding "guides"—which are particularly valuable in tracing rule changes. Moreover, he provides some significant material from private collections, such as Richard Dott's description of a Michigan "rugby" road trip in 1881, when the

team could not afford “sleeper” berths on the train (p. 296). How things have changed for the Wolverines. One wishes that Gems had appropriate time to incorporate material from the Walter Camp Papers, now available on microfilm.

7. **The indexes must be comprehensive.** The volume contains indexes: names, subjects, institutions, geographic and place names. They are all comprehensive except for the subject index, which tends simply to replicate the list of sports. For instance, there are no entries for “African Americans,” for “Sabbath,” for “urban boosters,” or for “sporting goods,” all of which are central themes in the historiography of the period.

Of course, Gems may have had nothing to do with the index. And he certainly had no part in the most disturbing aspect of the book—the difficulty in distinguishing introductions from documents. It is hard to fathom why the publishers did not change the fonts for the introductions. Gems does a splendid job of cuing the reader. Alas, the publishers diminished his efforts.

On balance, Gems has succeeded in opening vistas of the sport world 100 years ago. To be sure, the view is distinctly white, male, bourgeois, and American. But Gems goes well beyond this. Novice and expert alike can find the alternative attitudes and behaviors that continue to make sport such a rich area of study. And even old dinosaurs like me can find numerous documents we wish we had read long ago.

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