

A Model for Teaching Sport History

by

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At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York in January, 1974, I taught an experimental minisemester course entitled Sports: Past and Present. I described my approach to the course as a possible model for anyone interested in teaching sport history at colleges or universities.

There are many compelling reasons for teaching sport history. Sport enjoys a larger following nationally than perhaps at any time in the history of the nation. Americans now have more leisure time to participate in or watch athletic events. Television and radio designate more prime time for sports contests, while newspapers devote increased space to athletics. Above all, sport is a mirror of American society.

Around 120 students enrolled for the class, which met two hours daily five days a week. Students either signed up to receive 3 hours academic credit or to satisfy the January minisemester requirement.

A majority of class sessions were devoted to sport history, with emphasis upon the development of professional baseball, football, hockey, and basketball. Lecture topics included describing the impact of some major personalities and teams, assessing the fundamental ways that athletics has changed, and evaluating the relationship between sport and society throughout American history. Audio-visual aids, including sport magazines, pictures, and autographs, and numerous anecdotes added to the lectures.

Classes also included various other activities. Students often engaged in lively debates on contemporary issues, such as the emphasis upon winning in amateur sport, college recruiting methods, the role of women and blacks in intercollegiate sport, and the impact of the mass media upon athletics. As an added attraction, several former professional athletes shared some of their experiences and observations on sport. Walter "Rip" Coleman, Marc Filley, and Dale Long, all former major league baseball players residing in the Troy area, engaged in an informative and lively panel discussion, while William Harrell discussed his experience as a black baseball and basketball player in the 1950's. Other guest lecturers were Ned Harkness, professional hockey; Jack Kemp, professional football; Barry Kramer, professional basketball; and James Salfi, college hockey. For one class session, students toured the fascinating National Baseball Hall of Fame Museum in Cooperstown, New York.

For their major assignment, students wrote a documented, 10-15 page paper on a topic of their choice from either sport history or contemporary sport. Of particular interest, one student described his experiences as a guide at the 1972 summer Olympic games in Munich, Germany. Students also wrote four book reviews of major works pertaining either to sport history or contemporary sport.

The course convinced me that sport has a legitimate place in the classroom and, on the basis of enthusiastic student response, sport history may be more relevant than many history courses currently taught in colleges and universities.