

Researching Sport History: The Newspaper

by

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The authors contend that newspapers are valuable repositories of historical information, and if employed correctly, can serve as accurate barometers of social reality. The purpose of this presentation was to illustrate this contention and to demonstrate a method whereby sport historians can approach the extraction and treatment of newspaper data in a systematic and scientific fashion.

For the purpose of the presentation, the Toronto Globe (later the Toronto Globe and Mail) was selected. This paper was examined on the third Monday of each month, every fifth year, from 1870 to 1960. Thus, our sample for the ninety-year period consisted of 228 different editions viewed over nineteen years. Whether the researcher elects to examine every third, fifth or tenth year depends upon the level of discreteness required. Obviously, a yearly analysis would provide the most objective view of the topic under scrutiny. The investigator will also have to decide upon the type of intra-year sample to be used, e.g., random (to obtain unbiased characteristics of the population); select (to examine a specific seasonal sport); or, biased (as in this study, to obtain maximum sporting coverage). In general, the sample-type depends upon the question(s) being examined.

Every effort was made to standardize the system of measurement. Recognizing that the resultant data would be both qualitative and quantitative in nature, collection sheets were designed to facilitate recording and analysis. In collating the quantitative data the following was gleaned from each paper:

- i. Total number of pages
- ii. Number of columns per page
- iii. Average length of a column
- iv. Total number of columns devoted to sport
- v. Length of columns per individual sport, and
- vi. Amount of Canadian (U.S., British, etc.) sport reported.

All measurements were made in millimeters and expressed in percentages. When graphed, these figures permitted a number of tentative observations to be made, on both an intra- and inter-year basis, concerning apparent trends and relationships between individual sport activities, sport and the larger metropolitan society, and so on. However, statistics say little in themselves. Their ultimate worth only became apparent when they were viewed in light of the questions being considered — questions that had to be structured before any form of qualitative analysis could be undertaken.

To illustrate the types of queries that researchers may pose and the nature of the qualitative data related to these questions, we glanced briefly at the game of lacrosse. Recognizing the limitations associated with this form of textual material — reporter error and bias, the political and commercial nature of newspapers, and so on — information relating to the following issues was recorded:

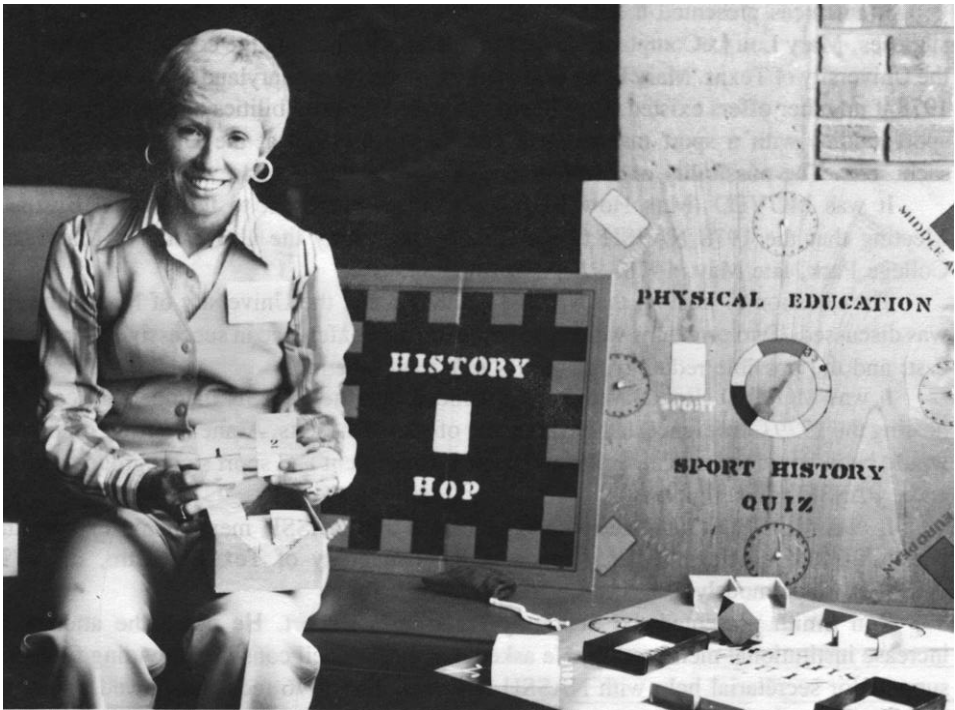
- i. Bureaucratic structure of lacrosse
- ii. Popularity of the sport
- iii. Seasonal nature of the game
- iv. Ethnic involvement in lacrosse

- v. Professional/amateur dichotomy, and
- vi. Violence associated with lacrosse.

The qualitative data for each of the preceding issues was analyzed in conjunction with the quantitative data. This allowed us to draw several conclusions relative to the structure and form of lacrosse and its place in Torontonain society over the ninety-year time span. Further, the qualitative material served to pinpoint other significant issues that warrant future investigation. To wit:

- i. Government interest in the game
- ii. U.S./Canadian lacrosse relationships, and
- iii. Commercialism and spectator involvement in lacrosse.

This approach permitted us to maximize our use of a historical source that has not been fully exploited by sport historians. Our ultimate objective is to examine a representative sample of Canadian newspapers, so that we may better understand the devlopement of those intricate relationships that exist between the play-world of the Canadian and that social structure within which he resides.



Joan Paul presented a game which she used in an undergraduate class