

# Sport History Ten Years After

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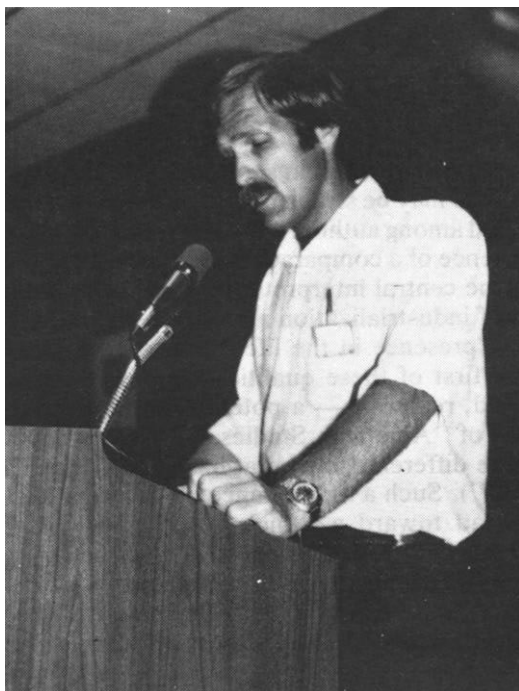
(John R. Betts Lecture)

Observing the progress of writings in sport history during the ten years since the founding of NASSH, one may be struck by several qualities: the continuation of the diversity in background among authors and researchers based on primary academic affiliation, the persistence of a comparatively conservative or traditional emphasis on social history as the central interpretative approach, and a great emphasis on sport during the era of industrialization and “modernization” disproportionate in terms of sport’s long presence in the life of various cultures over much longer periods of time. The first of these qualities seems to stand as something of an unused, or under-used, resource - a potential for more richly interdisciplinary work, along the lines of “American Studies,” “Victorian Studies,” and the like (and in a fashion quite different from what has already been appropriated by the area of “sport studies”). Such a rich reliance on different analytical methods and assumptions might lead toward a “thick description” of sport as culture, or sub-culture, along the lines generally suggested by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Thus, perhaps, the task remains to be undertaken to see sport in its own terms rather than as a mirror, an illustration, and an example of the society as a whole. Perhaps this approach might lead toward a more effective identification of the very special something which sport is, rather than toward assuming that it is a derivative collation of the more general something that society is as a whole.

The two other qualities - the emphasis on nineteenth and twentieth century sporting experience, and the use of a relatively conservative approach common to social history - carry with them the risk of masking the exceptional and “trans-rational” aspect of sport. Moreover, those two qualities appear related in their origins: for the “scientific” method in social analysis was itself something of a creature of the age in which sport itself was organized, rationalized, bureaucratized, and made subject to “scientific” governance. Perhaps there is a potentially distorting conformity of means to subject matter - which turns researchers away from other time periods. Even more, however, it may turn all researchers away from the features of sport and its inner dynamic that are more than rationality and other than rationality. Since understanding may come without a completely scientific array of a complete set of data perhaps a deliberate effort to exceed the presumption that sport emerged to prominence out of purely rational and conscious motives is overdue.

Lastly, although there have been a significant number of worthwhile monographic works added to the literature of sport history during the past decade, one continues to find examples of extreme premature generalization - a rush toward textbook-scale works and toward a comprehensiveness sometimes insufficiently aided by preliminary specialized studies. The reasons for this may be several; but

one cannot help thinking that one cause is the unstated belief that sport is so common, so human, and so “natural” that one really knows the answers to questions about it even before those questions are researched. As a corrective to this, perhaps all sport historians may again be drawn to the unpretentious yet sometimes brilliant efforts of John Betts himself, where nearly sacrificial devotion yielded monumental results in stimulating articles - but did so patiently.



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