

# The British Sports Media During the First World War

JOHN OSBORNE

Dickinson College

The years of the First World War were momentous ones for the British mass press. The British general circulation newspaper had started to come of age by 1914, and, aimed as it was largely at the lower middle classes and already famous for its jingoism, was heavily responsible for generating the nationalistic atmosphere of “holy war against the Hun” that prevailed in Britain through most of the war. At the same time, this type of organ underwent important further developments as it dealt with wartime changes in ownership, censorship, and format, all helped along by shortages and economic pressures.

The British sports newspaper was also at the end of a formative age when the First World War began and, like the press in general, was to face trying times. Although all have remarked on the need for more work to be done, Walvin, Tischler, and Mason have discussed the clear link the rising sports media had with the burgeoning sports industry

during the years leading up to 1914. With both loyalty and fortune tied up with the success and survival of mass sports, the sporting newspaper faced particular problems during four years of war. The puritanical attacks against professional association football's 1914- 1915 season, the subsequent adjustments of professional sports to the reality of the duration of the war, and the continuing efforts of determined patriotic interests to mobilize the nation's sporting life and attitudes were serious challenges to the integrity of the sports newspaper, as were the more mechanical matters of declining circulation and rising paper costs that, among other things, brought a doubling of newspaper costs in February 1917.

Concentrating on Manchester's *Athletic News*, the premier sports newspaper in the land, this presentation makes a preliminary examination of the response of the sports media to these challenges. The response reflects both the position of the pre-war sporting press and also the pressures of economics and morale much of the media, and the nation, faced during *the war years*. *The Athletic News*, for one, had very strong and longstanding ties with the professional sports industry, and the way in which the News and others like it coped with the difficult conflicting demands of 1917 and 1915 confirmed that, in the final analysis, loyalties to commercial sports management stood before either the general patriotic hysteria seen in the non-sporting press or the interests of other segments of the sports world in difficulty, like the professional players. After 1915, the long hard years of war and the control they placed on the nation's leisure were difficult times that tested but did not break this fundamental pre-war relationship.

The impact of the First World War upon British institutions is not yet fully understood. Centering on the sports media, this paper analyses the choices, changes, and responses of one important part of Britain's leisure structure to the pressures of twentieth century total war.