

American Sport History, Anthropology, and the Culture Concept: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

LINDA J. BORISH

University of Maryland

Anthropological theory has played an increasingly important role in American culture studies. Sport, as a component of American culture, represents one area of research and teaching in which anthropological theory proves fruitful. In particular, the concept of culture employed by anthropologists has significance for historians investigating both past and present sporting forms in American culture. This paper explores viable areas of research and teaching in sport history based on anthropological perspectives on the culture concept. Drawing on the cultural theories and methods of such cultural and symbolic anthropologists as Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, Arnold van Gennep, Charles Frake, and others, this paper explores the interdisciplinary study of sport history in American culture studies.

Anthropological theories and methods can be adapted to the historical study of sport. Indeed, there are similarities and differences between anthropological and historical approaches to sport. In exploring interdisciplinary perspectives on sport history, these similarities and differences must be investigated. Important concepts to both anthropologists and historians such as “culture” and “context” will be discussed. Anthropological perspectives applied to historical studies of sport point to several topics in which an interdisciplinary approach can be beneficial. These topics include sport and the image of the body; sport, symbols and rituals; sport and subcultures; sport and gender; sport and cultural change; sport and imaginary social worlds; and others.

Exploring how the culture concept and culture theories can inform research and teaching in selected topics in sport history suggests ways in which anthropology and history can be integrated in investigating sport. Important cultural concepts will be introduced in this paper to provide sport historians with possible approaches to interpreting sport in historical contexts. In addition to the concepts mentioned above, such concepts as the “emic” and “etic” perspective, ethnography, and “thick description” provide insight into the historical analysis of sport. In both teaching and research, sport historians can enhance their knowledge of sport by incorporating an interdisciplinary approach in their work.