

In Defense of the Historian of Physical Education

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I am defining a historian of physical education as a person who has written a history book using only “physical education” in the title. Therefore I am talking about Edward Mussey Hartwell, Fred E. Leonard, R. Tait McKenzie, George B. Affleck, Emmett A. Rice, Clarence A. Forbes, Dorothy Ainsworth, Norma Schwendener, Deobold B. Van Dalen, Elmer D. Mitchell, Bruce L. Bennett, Mabel Lee, John L. Hutchinson, Arthur Weston, Charles W. Hackensmith, and Ellen W. Gerber. These names are listed roughly in the chronological order in which their books appeared. The only Canadian historians of physical education are Frank Cosentino and Maxwell L. Howell, co-authors of a very brief history of Canadian physical education.

It is my belief that the writings of these historians of physical education have been ignored or overlooked by most sport historians today. When contemporary historians refer to earlier periods in our history, they usually turn to John Allen Krout’s *Annals of American Sport*, or to Foster Rhea Dulles’ *A History of Recreation*, or sometimes to Robert Weaver’s *Amusements and Sports in American Life*. I am certainly not critical of anyone using these references, but I must point out that there is also a vast amount of useful research and information about sports in the histories of physical education. The term, “physical education,” was commonly understood to include not only sports and games, but also recreation, dance, and even health education. It was unnecessary and even redundant to write or say “physical education *and* sport.”

Most of our historians of physical education are deceased; only a handful remain. Those still living are Van Dalen, Weston, Gerber, and myself. Cosentino and Howell are still active. I am therefore serving as a spokesman for the departed and living souls. I have talked with Van Dalen and had a fine letter from Weston. Gerber did not reply to two letters. Some of what follows will necessarily be personal and will include my own experiences and observations.

May I first of all emphasize the fact that up until around 1970 the history of physical education and sport was written by physical educators because general historians considered the subject unworthy of their time and effort? Only within the last 20 years has sport become a legitimate area for teaching and research in the history departments of our colleges and universities.

These physical education historians are sometimes criticized today for a lack of scholarship and training in the methods of historical research. Of course there is some truth to this charge because they were first of all physical educators. But they were highly motivated to write history, and many of them had had some experience with historical research techniques. The scholarship of historians like Fred Leonard, who read both Swedish and German, D. B. Van Dalen, and Ellen Gerber is above reproach.

A number of circumstances can be identified which made the writing of history by these physical education historians even more difficult and arduous than those faced by you today.

1. *A lack of sabbatical leaves or released time.* Van Dalen had two semesters leave in his 19 years at the University of Pittsburgh. Weston had no leaves or released time in his 36 years of teaching at Rice and Brooklyn College. He did all his research in the summer. I was at Ohio State for 28 years before I had my first full quarter off duty. I taught at least one term every

summer because I needed the money. I am sure that most of the other physical education historians worked under similar conditions.

2. *Heavy teaching loads and administrative duties.* Teaching responsibilities included both theory and activity classes. Heavy teaching schedules also were augmented by teaching a variety of courses. Van Dalen taught 20 different courses, and I taught 15 different theory classes and always had two additional activity sections in a number of sports. Van Dalen, Weston, McKenzie, Affleck, Ainsworth, Lee, and Howell were also departmental chairpersons at one time or another. These full schedules were in addition to other duties such as advising students, directing theses and dissertations, and the usual university committee work.

3. *Little financial support.* Grants for research in physical education were virtually non-existent and support money from any source was meager. Also no research assistants were provided. You were on your own. Research and writing came out of your own hide and your own pocketbook.

4. *Technological benefits.* Can you imagine doing historical research without a copy machine or a word processor or computers? Can you imagine making carbon copies as your only method of duplication? There were no computer searches available, no assistance from ERIC, but there was inter-library loan service.

5. *Fewer source materials.* Sport historians today have access to innumerable books, articles, periodicals, journals, dissertations, theses, encyclopedias, indexes, and other sources for research and writing which were not available to the historian of physical education.

One might assume that the subject matter of history received due respect and recognition at least from the profession of physical education and from professional organizations, especially the national association. But, alas, such was not the case. About the only opportunity for publication was through the *Research Quarterly* or sometimes the *Journal of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation*. Presenting a paper at a convention was usually within a 15-minute time allotment at a research section meeting interspersed with numerous other reports on a wide range of topics, especially exercise physiology. The College Physical Education Association for Men and the National Association of Physical Education for College Women did provide some additional outlets for historical studies.

This dismal situation began to change with the 75th anniversary celebration of the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation at its convention in Miami in 1960. This stimulus was followed up by the Association in 1962 with the twin appointments of Mabel Lee as the first archivist and Bruce Bennett as the first historian. It was four more years before the editor of the *Journal* could be persuaded to publish a column by the archivist and historian.

Within the Association itself in the 1960s there was an Area of Philosophical and Cultural Foundations under the Physical Education Division, but it gave only incidental attention to history. Therefore Bennett convened a first meeting for historians and teachers of history at the 1966 convention. Ruth Schellberg helped with the program which drew an enthusiastic audience of over 60 people. Two years later a second meeting was held, featuring the authors of three history textbooks-Mabel Lee, Arthur Weston, and Deobold Van Dalen.

The participants at both these meetings overwhelmingly endorsed the need for a specific History of Physical Education Area in the Association structure. After considerable negotiation by Bennett with reluctant Association officers, the approval was granted and the first official meeting of the new Area on History of Physical Education took place at the Boston convention in 1969. Upon the recommendation of Guy Lewis, Dr. John Betts of the Department of History at Boston College was invited to speak and gave an excellent paper. Betts was overwhelmed literally to find such a large and receptive audience which was in stark contrast to the apathetic response from his own history colleagues at their professional meetings. At this convention Guy Lewis also organized a memorable day-long historical tour by bus to the Round Hill School, Amherst College, Mt. Holyoke, Springfield College, the Basketball Hall of Fame, and old Sturbridge Village.

By 1970 the history area in our national association was on a solid, established basis. Two more landmarks followed shortly. The first was the Big Ten Symposium on the History of Physical Education and Sport at Ohio State University in 1971, with additional support from The Athletic Institute. The second event was the founding and first meeting of the North American Society for Sport History in 1973, again at Ohio State University. Marvin Eyler, Guy Lewis, and Ron Smith were the primary movers in getting NASSH under way.

In 1977 under the new Alliance structure, the History Academy was created and gave history appropriate visibility and status. At the same time NASSH has proved to be a vigorous and vibrant professional organization supported by many members of the History Academy. Thus the two groups have not been mutually exclusive, and the early fears that one might detract from the other have proved to be unfounded.

I have mentioned the fact that historians of physical education have been charged with insufficient background in historical research and techniques. However they did have a solid and substantial background in their subject matter, physical education. Most sport historians today have had the training in historical research, but they do lack a broad background in physical education. They may have had some experience participating in sports, but that is not the same thing. Thus, in my opinion, sport historians in particular need to be familiar with the writings of the historians of physical education to help compensate for this lack of knowledge and because sport and physical education have always been closely related to each other throughout this century.

In conclusion let us recognize that these historians of physical education have made enormous contributions to knowledge under trying conditions and for which they received little recognition. They are worthy predecessors for you modern sport historians today who work under more favorable circumstances and who continue your scholarship in this same great tradition with considerable professional and public approval and acceptance.