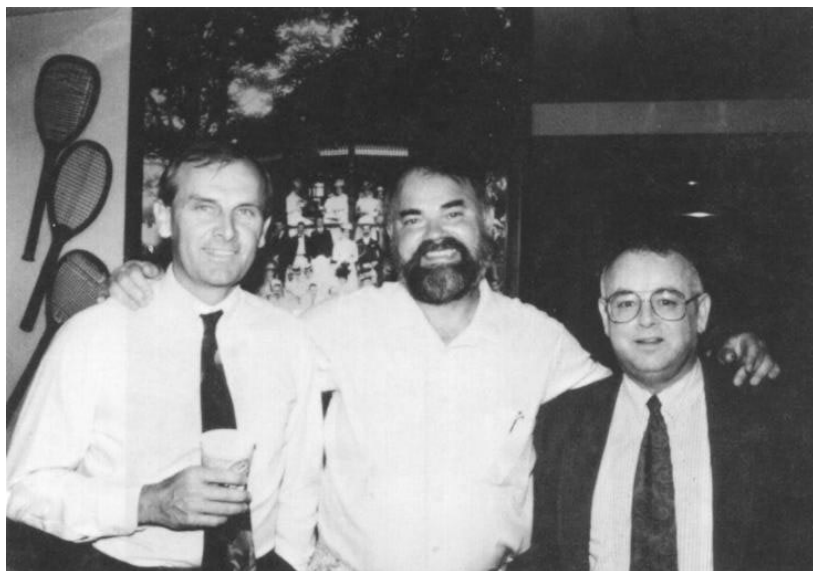


THEORIZING AND TEACHING SPORT HISTORY



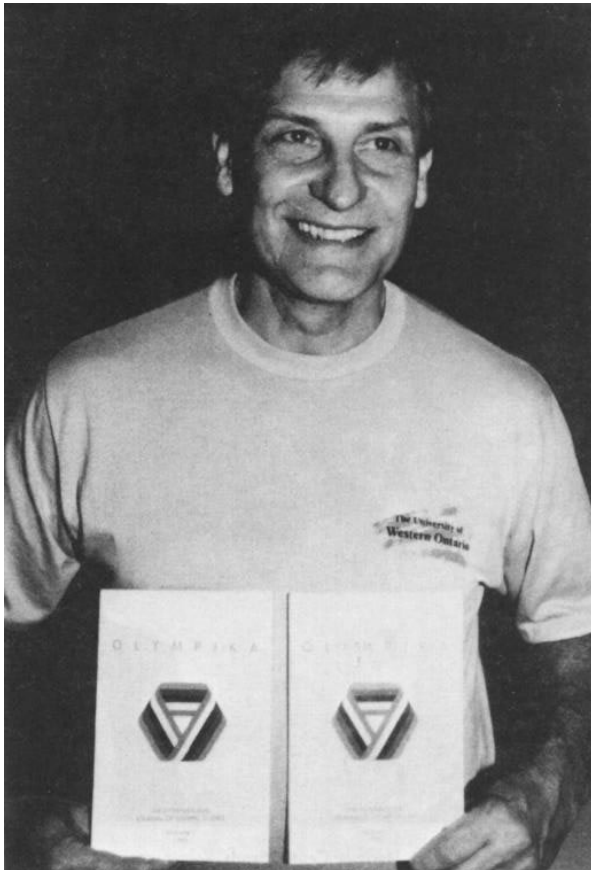
Welcome party at the Nova Scotia Heritage Center. Sandy Young, center, hosted the conference.

Organized Sport and Popular Culture in Early Modern London

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Historians have generally dated the emergence of modern approaches to sport with industrial England and have excluded the sixteenth-century from the ranks of organized sport. Keith Sandiford's account of British cricket crowds and Wray Vamplew's discussion of sport crowd disorder represent only two examples of the "commercialization of leisure" in early industrial England. Allen Guttman, in his influential work, *From Ritual to Record*, concludes modern sport took shape over a period of

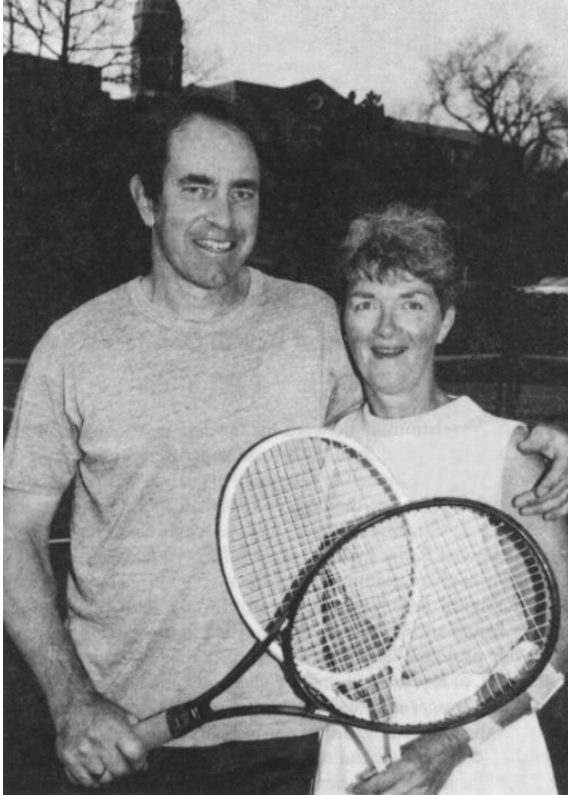


Bob Barney, NASSH President, with his *Olympika* journal.

100 years, but did not commence until the early eighteenth. According to Guttman, the telling signs of modern sport-rationalization, record keeping, specialization, and bureaucratization-were largely absent prior to the eighteenth century. Such thinking likely prompted historian Richard Mandell to conclude that sport as we know it today to have “only tenuous connections. . . with the recreations of pre-modern Europe.”

But these studies have ignored the one event that would do more than any other to shape the course of England’s cultural and perhaps social history; they have overlooked the birth of England’s first professional theater. The English popular theater, producer of more than twenty professional acting companies, one-thousand paid performers, and over a dozen permanent playhouses, became home to the creative genius of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Christopher Marlowe. The heretofore untold story of an organized sporting enterprise that emerged and prospered as part of sixteenth-century London’s popular theater is the subject of this paper. Large crowds witnessed elaborate fencing, wrestling, and animal contests first performed at the venues within the city limits, and after 1576, at the suburban playhouses. The Bankside arenas, situated adjacent to the baiting rings, and close to the martial grounds at Finsbury Fields, made sporting contests readily available to all London citizens.

The rooting of a successful sporting enterprise within the popular theater should prompt us to consider what made these “artificial acts of combat” so appealing to the Elizabethan audiences, and why such a sporting enterprise emerged and prospered two hundred years before such sporting



Ron and Sue Smith, NASSH classics!

practices established themselves elsewhere? I will argue that the firm grounding of an organized sporting enterprise within the Elizabethan popular theater was largely due to two factors: 1) the new entrepreneurial ethic emerging in one of sixteenth-century's Europe's fastest growing mercantile and industrial centers, and 2) the sporting enterprise's ability to bring together citizens from a variety of different social ranks and social strata. Furthermore, I will argue that the sporting contests' dramatic or theatrical means of expression and distinctive plebeian appeal-most particularly its capacity through humor and laughter-created and sustained a briefly intensified "shared culture" between plebeian and privileged alike. Because the sporting contests were not restricted to one segment of English society and performed in full view of others they provided what G. R. Elton has termed a "multiple point of contact," a place for the playing out of a number of different social and political agendas, some opposed and counter to the dominant culture, while others, proposed and legitimated by the same ruling authorities.