

Sport History Projects From University and Special Collections

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Teaming sport history in a university setting lends itself to research and writing projects based upon university archives and special collections. Primary sources are not only important for the historian, but we often should be using primary sources as readings for our courses and especially for students' historical papers. Because almost all universities and colleges have special collections and archives, this is a goal place for students to begin. Local sport and physical education histories can be successful if given proper planning, especially if the instructor is knowledgeable of the archival holdings.

Several examples of projects in different university archives come to mind. At the McGill University archives, material is likely available for biographies of such figures as R. Tait McKenzie, the sculptor-educator-physician, and James Naismith, the inventor of basketball. At Smith College, one could uncover aspects of women's sport and Physical education with the holdings of Senda Berenson, Dorothy Ainsworth, and the Eastern Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women. Even at a small institution such as the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, there is a sizable collection on the development of intercollegiate athletics. At Stanford University, histories of women's athletics from Play Days to big-time intercollegiate athletics for women could be pursued.

At Penn State, I recently taught a course on the History of Sport in Higher Education. I decided to have each student write a paper on some aspect of Penn State's history of men's and women's intercollegiate athletics. I listed 30 possible term paper topics based on my familiarity with the archival material. Students could pick one of the suggested topics or are of their choice. I wanted each student to do vertical research, digging deeply on a relatively small subject. I prefer this approach rather than a horizontal paper in which the surface of a large subject is touched upon. For example, I believe that a history of football at Penn State is too large a subject for a term paper, but research and writing about the rise and fall of Coach Hugo Bezdek in the 1920s is much more manageable.

Topics that I believe proved successful included the following: 1) "Title IX's Impact Upon Intercollegiate Athletics for Women at Penn State University," 2) "The Relationship of Athletic Scholarship Distribution at Penn State and the Success of Various Women's Teams in AIAW-NCAA Championships, 1974-1992," 3) "Race and the Theory of Centrality on Joe Paterno's Football Teams,

1966-1992,” and 4) “You Have to Pay to Win: The Failure of ‘The Great Experiment’ at Penn State to Win in Football Without Athletic Scholarships from 1927-1948.”

Students come away from an archives experience in primary research with respect for the difficulty of writing history - in making some sense of material that has no inherent sense when they are reading it. The project forces the successful student to come to grips with organizing material into a coherent story. The research experience also gives students the opportunity to see human nature at work, often the evil as well as the virtuous side of individuals. It can also explode sport myth that has surrounded many institutions. Above all it gives you and your students the opportunity to discover something new.