

The Public History of Sports: A Critical Look at Sports Halls of Fame

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The Echo From Our hallowed sports halls of fame: the stats won't necessarily lead you to the truth...

truth...
truth...

(even in chronological order!)

There are several hundred North American institutions devoted to the investigation, public exposition and celebration of various sports and athletes. These "halls of fame" range in size and ambition from small, volunteer coordinated one-room displays of memorabilia to large professionally run commercial enterprises with libraries and archives, multi-media exhibits, "try-it-yourself" gadgetry, and even--in the case of the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown New York--sports facilities and regularly scheduled contests.

Many "halls of fame" play a strategic role in the public remembering and interpretation of sports. Through their annual, often well-publicized selections

and inductions, they confer status (and lifetime “bragging rights”) to athletes, patrons and other participants. In the process, they single out particular sports, skills, practices, and values for praise and blame, fame and obscurity, legitimation and marginalization. Many “halls” have become important sources of reference for school children, journalists, and amateur and professional historians. To the extent that their selection decisions shape the records they maintain--the excellent archives of Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame in Toronto only actively collects materials on inducted members; for example--their judgements profoundly shape the primary data available for research. To the extent their exhibits are tied in with the tourist and exhibition industries, or enjoy close working relationships with schools and community centres, so that other institutions work to encourage attendance, they enjoy a far greater audience than the readership of most sports history books and articles.

This session examines the “public history” presented by the Saskatchewan Sport Hall of Fame in Regina, which has been established to honour Saskatchewan athletes and “builders” in all sports; and the National Hockey League-sponsored Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

Zeman offers a post-modernist critique of the formalist approach to history taken by sports “halls of fame,” contrasting the postmodern notion of the self-reflexive voice and multiple points of view (shifting first-person narrative) with the formalist voice of authority (third person historical narrative), history as process-in-progress with a kind of history that produces only the completed product, the humanizing influence of oral history (the unofficial version of history) with the fragmenting dehumanizing influence of white print culture (the official version). She argues that all writing, regardless of genre and including history, is, at the least, one zone removed from “fact” and is open to interpretation. The effect this formalist approach has had on the selection criteria to achieve institutionalized immortality in the Saskatchewan Hall is that unimaginative history has resulted. By neglecting social history and public culture, these institutions are signalling death more than examining life.

Kidd analyses the recent transformation of the Hockey Hall of Fame. It move from a seasonally out-of-the way site at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto to a well travelled central location in the downtown core. Some of the displays have been redesigned as interactive physical and computer skill challenges, and the Hall has acquired national and transnational corporate sponsors.

There is much to recommend the new Hall. It provides a great deal of information about the history, organization, skills, equipment and folklore of the

game, in an attractive variety of well designed exhibits and displays, It gives fans the opportunity of seeing the famous trophies which symbolize mastery of the game, and the plaques which honour the famous stars, in the “core sanctuary of hockey’s proud history,” the Bell Great Hall.

But while the new Hall provides much useful information, it does so within the most uncritical of modernizing assumptions. Its account of the historical process is largely limited to the ludic aspects of the game and (not surprisingly, given its co-ownership) partial to the NHL tradition. There is little evidence of the social history, including the commercial, ideological, regional and national conflict which shaped many of its developments. The worldview offered by the new Hockey Hall of Fame is identical to--and imaginatively reinforces, through the appropriation of the past as legitimation and consumable objects--the sports-are-for-buying-and-selling ideology of the sports media complex, many enterprises of which sponsor the exhibits. We conclude by suggesting several approaches which teachers conducting field trips to halls of fame might use to help their students reach a more critical and comprehensive understanding of sports and their history.