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Chicago Sport History: An Exhibit

For the past two years, I have been the chief academic consultant for an exhibit on the history of sport at the Chicago Historical Society. The exhibit is scheduled to open about one year after the NASSH meetings in Banff, in late Spring 2001. By that time, its overall structure will be in place, the particular “stories” to be told will be mostly fleshed out, artifacts selected, and a designer will be creating the exhibit itself.

The exhibit centers around five themes. The Rise of Chicago Sport describes the origins and highlights of Chicago’s major professional teams, sports that originated in Chicago, and national or even international events that were held in the city. The Ideal Athlete shows how images and perceptions of athletes — professional and amateur — have changed over time. It focuses on what our heroes have been like, the ideals they have embodied, and asks how these have reflected larger social and cultural issues. Indeed, it asks how our perceptions of athletic bodies themselves — male and female, black and white — have changed. Group Identity tries to show some of the ways in which sport has sometimes reinforced, sometimes broken down racial, class, ethnic and geographic boundaries. It pays particular attention to neighborhood and school sports, as well as collegiate and professional ones, considering how sports have been invoked to help define the identity of Chicago itself. From the beginning, American sports have been dominated by the profit motive. The Business of Sports examines the increase of commercialization over time; the role played by owners, promoters, players and gamblers; and the development of the sporting goods industry. It also asks, who pays for sporting arenas and what alternatives are there to for-profit sports? In *Covering the Game* we work with the evolution of sports media coverage and its affect on fans perceptions of their games. We include newspapers, radio, television, and cable and the internet.

This paper is an opportunity for describing the exhibit and themes we selected, making clear our goals, and discussing our underlying assumptions. It also discusses the possibilities and limitations of “public history” in general and historical exhibits in particular. Such exhibits are a fine way of reaching a large public with some of the findings and accomplishments of sport history. But books and exhibits are very different; telling story with images, artifacts, and relatively little text is much different from telling it with words alone. As museum people are fond of pointing out, there is no surer formula for disaster than doing an exhibit that is little more than a “book on a wall”.

Rather than simply accepting the “hall of fame” approach to exhibits on sport, I believe that sport historians should try to seize upon the growing interest in athletics shown by cultural institutions, and help lead an effort to get the public to think more seriously about the history of sports. There is more to education for historians than just teaching and writing, and this paper indicates how we can help move sport exhibits to new levels of sophistication.