

## HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS IN THE BRITISH SPORTS EXPERIENCE : A REVIEW ARTICLE

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**Richard Holt**, *Sport and the British: A Modern History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

**Stephen G. Jones**, *Sport Politics and the Working Class: Organised Labour and Sport In inter-war Britain*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

**Tony Mason (ed.)** *Sport in Britain: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

In the past few years there has been a quite remarkable flowering of works devoted to the history of sport on both sides of the Atlantic, works which have not only been highly important in their own right but which have also placed sport fully in the context of social history per se. On the north American side we can think of Metcalfe on Canada, Adelman on New York, Gorn and Sammons on boxing and so on. On the British side there is Mason on football (along with Korr, an American), Vamplew on economic history and racing, (though he now counts as an Australian), Mangan on the public schools, Smith and Williams on Welsh rugby union, along with others.

The three books in question here (along with Holt's recent edition of essays on working class sport) collectively add immeasurably to the quality of works available to our deeper understanding of the place of sport in a specific cultural construct. Importantly, they carry a strong concern with (if not universal admiration for) social theory, a strand not nearly so evident in productions from their North American colleagues. And, no less importantly, these books are produced by major intellectual publishing houses which confirms the rise of sport as an increasingly legitimate avenue of intellectual concern - though it must be suggested that if

Manchester products continue to be priced at the rate of Stephen Jones' book (\$90.50) then too few scholars will be able to afford to buy them. Perhaps Manchester United's economic woes are being subsidised by the press.

A particular value in these books is that they work from the specific (Jones) through a wide sampling (Mason) to the comprehensive (Holt). In so doing, they highlight strengths and weaknesses in the current literature and confirm just how much work there is left to do. They also reveal the riches of source material which still await scholars equipped with ideas, background and persistence. In short, rather than being seen as simply capstones on the first twenty years of modern British sports historiography, these books will become quickly regarded as indicators of where we might go next.

In that sense, though, it is saddening to know that we will read nothing more from Stephen Jones who was killed in a car accident after his manuscript was finalised. There is now a depressingly growing list of scholars taken away before they could give us all they knew: Bob Wheeler, Barry Andrews, Jones and Frank Manning. Nevertheless, what Stephen Jones has left confirms him as a major analyst.

Broadly he is concerned to trace the ideological battles waged by the political and social forces of organised labour both within itself and against the classed enemy by way of sport. As Jones argues, the interwar period saw the emergence of sport as a major political factor which, far from being a distraction from mainstream politics, was recognised by some astute observers as a new force with considerable consequences. He concludes that sport became, in many ways, co-opted into the dominant culture's ruling orthodoxy (by stigmatising sports contact with Russia but not that with Nazi Germany, for example), that it divided some wings of the labour movement, and that sport in some ways acted as a conservatising drag upon sections of the labour movement as a whole.

To demonstrate all this, Jones mixes theory and archival diligence most impressively. He mined trades union and official archives, private papers, the sectional press and sporting records to provide one of the best examples to date of how sport can be

understood fully through the surprisingly large amount of documentation relating to it.

The best chapters are probably those in the middle where he discusses socialists, unionists and Labour Party attitudes to the rise of sport, chronicling the battles which took place inside the myriad of organisations which went to make up the labour movement. The importance of his analysis is that he sets the developments inside the titanic ideological battles of the time 'Class Against Class', for example, and the idea that sport was being penetrated by the forces of capitalism.

A hallmark of Jones' work is a great attention to detail as he builds the argument by the sheer weight of evidence. It is sometimes overdone, but frequently makes the point about just how subtle much of the development was during the 1920s and 1930s. Just how many would know that Fred Perry, three-time winner of Wimbledon in the 1930s, was the son of the Co-operative Party's secretary who saw his boy as one of the people. The mixture of privileged Wimbledon and activist winner is an elegant symbol of the social stress which marked Britain in those years.

It is an impressive book, though some readers might find the theoretical approach over-rigorous to the point of prescription. It comes as no surprise, for example, to find that Jones discerns considerable worker resistance to and victories over the forces of domination. Much of that lies in subtle interpretation which may be challenged, but which certainly opens debate about the ultimate significance of sport in that setting.

The Tony Mason-edited collection of essays is equally as important but in quite different ways. Unusually for an edited collection, it hangs together quite well because each writer worked to a specific brief requiring examination of the role of women, elite and mass participation, power and administration, and the flavour of the sport itself. Overall, the result is an excellent contribution to what might be called conservative or traditional social history, an account unburdened by theoretical discourse.

Inevitably, in a collection like this, we end up having favourite essays invidious though that be. For me, in his chapter on rowing Christopher Dodd displayed the virtues of love and enthusiasm for the

sport being combined with an encyclopedic knowledge of its past and expressed in the intelligent journalist's style. The interrelationship between technological change and altered technique is beautifully explained. For example: 'Fat fixed-seat boats required brawny short-arsed men; lean sliding seat boats required longlegged slim-limbed rowers' (p. 288). The characters are there as are the great feats and the administrative inanities.

As a whole, the book is especially good at sketching in the complexities of sports administration, particularly in regard to the evolution towards professionalism in sports like athletics and rugby union where the logic of the late nineteenth century has provided very poor defence against the forces of late twentieth century commercialism. There is something of a general sense here which contributes to the 'degradation of sport through commercial corruption' line of analysis. Stan Shipley, for example, argues that the rise of televised boxing has created an audience which seeks aggression other than skill and so has destroyed a part of working-class culture (p. 93). It is an intriguing thesis which requires a good deal more proof.

The inner culture of sport is well examined, a good example being Tony Mason's own explanation of the word 'Kop' which came to describe the football terraces around the turn of the century. It was a shortening of Spion Kop, the site of the battle for a hill during the Boer War (p. 153). Given the rise of hooliganism much later, the term was to be apt for the best part of a century. And Mason, again, is very good on the relationship between the framing of rules and the evolution of playing styles and tactics, an important part of the sports story too frequently overlooked by academic historians.

Like Jones, the authors here frequently turn detail to the assistance of finely textured social analysis.

Gareth Williams, his usually excellent self on rugby union, is at pains to stress the impact of World War One on the sport, noting that 45 of the 60 players fielded in London Scottish teams on the eve of the conflict never returned from the battles. And among the 27 English internationals to die was the 25 year old Ronald Poulton-Palmer biscuit fortune, who scored four tries in his very last international. Williams revisits briefly, too, one of the enduring sports

controversies and mythologies which do so much to entrench the social power of the activity. He and New Zealanders are fated to differ forever on the interpretation of cultures which swings upon a disputed try in the Wales-All Blacks game of 1905 (one of my treasured possessions is a postcard picture of that All Black team which I bought in Cornwall, of all places).

*Sport In Britain* then, is a marvellous read which takes a selection of codes from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth, encapsulating the links between social change and sporting practice (Ian Botham's photograph on the dustjacket is most appropriate, then). In its riches, however, the collection raises some interesting questions.

It is intriguing to think, for example, of how few sports have a really good history written about them. In the British context soccer has clearly done best of all, while major games like cricket, golf and tennis are very poorly served. The cricket case is particularly interesting. It has one of the largest sports literatures and boasts some good biographies, the marvellous C L R Jones social dialogues, some evocative tour books, a few literary gems and some esoterica like Asish Nandy's recent *The Tao of Cricket*. Yet no really great history. Are there, perhaps, sociological or historiographical reasons for this?

And then comes Richard Holt's marvellous book. Within a five part structure the writer of the earlier *Sport and Society in Modern France* traverses the rise of British sport from the pre-industrial period to the age of hooliganism while visiting class, nationalism, parochialism, imperialism and commercialism. His conclusion is somewhat revisionist: sport has been promoted 'privately without politicians, employers or trade unionists taking a significant part except as enthusiastic individual sportsmen' (p. 346). And where sport has been given political labels, participation is still driven by sociability organised by and through the club. While that is too simplistic an encapsulation of the intertwining themes pervading *Sport and the British*, it would have been marvellous to have had Stephen Jones around to debate them.

He might well have started with the appendix in which Holt considers some theoretical matters connected with the social history and sociology of sport, and lays out the organising concepts which he

employed in his work. Holt has read the sociology of sport but has little patience with much of it because of its jargon, obscurant writing and minimal respect for the body of evidence. We have here the quintessential battle over 'old' and 'new' social history which has stalked the analysis of sport for well over a decade now and shows little sign of resolution. Perhaps the most important point Holt makes here is about the need to remember the actual activity in the middle of our speculations, the sport itself. He prefers bonding in rationality, emphasising in some ways what he calls the 'natural' appeal of sport from which people derive pleasure. That aspect comes through clearly in most of the Mason collection, but scarcely at all in Jones and therein lies much of ideological rub - the cruder critics of Holt will, unfairly, label him another defender of the faith in which sport is maintained as a historical block.

Holt builds his case for naturalness, bonding and sociability by way of a vast amount of documentary evidence which, with a few strange exceptions, draws upon most of the extant secondary literature. His real skill is as a synthesist, and that skill is an invaluable one at this point in the growth of the social history of sport when 'big' works are needed to crash the reading lists put together by our colleagues in more mainstream historical pursuits.

Because the book is so ambitious, those who specialise in corners of its spread will sometimes find matters for concern or points for debate. In the section on Sport in the Empire, for example, some important sources are missed so that some of the story is received wisdom rather than reflective of the new work in areas such as New Zealand rugby or even West Indian cricket. (Some specialists will note that on p. 112 Lord Harris is credited with being Governor of Bengal when, in fact, he held the post in Bombay. The Bengal cricket-wallah was Sir Stanley Jackson who was in India some fifty years after Harris).

But that might well be considered a strength in a curious sort of way - to have attempted so much and failed in so little is a wonderful encouragement to other writers to take on similarly optimistic ventures. South African and New Zealand rugby deserve such big treatment, so do golf, tennis, rugby league and all the rest. There are still few great biographies of the players and bosses which go beyond

the one-dimensional portrayal, many more clubs (which Holt emphasises so much) need the Korr treatment, and the full spread of British sport is yet to be really tracked.

But the really great thing about the collective impact of these books is that they must surely put to rest whatever negativity towards the historical significance of sport remains in the minds of the doubters. These works belong on the shelves of not only sports historians but on those of all historians interested in the processes of cultural formation, institutionalisation, international expansion, power, authority, challenge, resistance, collaboration, modernisation, ideology, economic opportunity and change, state intervention, mass culture, class, elitism, the media and gender, to name a few. We are truly indebted to Jones, Mason and Holt.