

Sports and National Prestige: The Case of Britain 1945-48

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In June 1946, the *Daily Herald*, a newspaper generally supportive of the Labour Government and thus inclined to view life in post-World War II Britain in a more optimistic light than most of its journalistic rivals, was, nevertheless, moved by a string of British sporting disasters to poetic despair:

How do Britain's sportsmen fare
In the field athletic?
How with challengers compare?

Our record is pathetic,
On the track the course the field,
British Champs their trophies yield.

Racing? Britain's Waterloo
What a knock-out blow there
Caracella sailing through
British horses nowhere!

After Ascot's mopping up
France takes the palm, the stakes, the Cup.

Tennis? Well the games are short
Britain bravely scrambles
Wightman girls have cleared the Court
Wimbledon is a shambles!

Doubles, singles bring more shocks
Britain must pull up her socks.

Cycling? Britain's teams would score
Were the French not faster,
But Great Britain meets once more,
Absolute Disaster.

Nor can she report success,
Won in Anglo-Soviet Chess.

Boxing? Britain's heavyweight,
Takes an awful beating.

Golf? Her champion meets his fate,
Yankee champions meeting.

But these melancholy lists
Do not dash the Optimists
Post-War Britain's sporting form
Spurs her high ambition
She is back to pre-War norm
True to old tradition
Britain keeps her sporting fame
Though she loses every game.¹

A year later, the same newspaper, responding to continuing British failures in international sporting competition, ran a series of articles under the title, 'What's Wrong with British Sport?' In their turn, boxing, horseracing, cricket, tennis and football (soccer), were each reviewed and a range of explanations provided and solutions suggested.² Discussion of each of the sports encompassed both standards of domestic competition and failures in international events. Running through each of these articles was an underlying tension between a nostalgia for bygone days, assumed to be marked by British sporting success, and a recognition of the need for new ideas and new practices if Britain was again to be competitive. At least for the duration of the 1940s, it was the former sentiment rather than the latter perspective which prevailed.

'Featured' lamentations, such as the *Herald* articles, were buttressed by the persistent, day by day, month by month, season by season, journalistic evaluation of Britain's sporting performance. Although those contributing to daily newspapers and sports journals, like most followers of sport, were of a wildly fluctuating humour and would eagerly grasp at straws of hope, the overall tone was one of defeat and gloom, evident across the spectrum of press opinion from the traditionalist *Times*, through the populist conservative *Daily Express* and *Evening Standard*, and on to the *Daily Herald*, generally a supporter of the Labour Government. Even in football, where England remained undefeated on its own fields by foreign opposition, less than convincing victories, the occasional defeat, 'on the Continent,' or losses by club sides to foreign rivals, would all precipitate forecasts of long-term disaster. The generalised sense that the game was not what it had been

was conveyed in newspapers of varying political sympathies. There is no reason to believe that it was not representative of public opinion. Current standards of play were not only criticised by regular sports writers but also by those who contributed to the correspondence columns which appeared on the sports pages of the popular dailies. Whatever the reasons for record-breaking attendance figures for most of the major sports, they don't appear, at least in the first three or four years of peace, to have included the attraction of rising standards of play.

By 1947, it was reported that British boxing, 'in a parlous condition', had, 'descended to the ground floor,' with its prestige, 'down to nothing'.³ When an Australian and a Belgian met in the finals of the match play Championship in 1947, it was considered a, 'new ignominy for British golf'.⁴ Wimbledon had become what it has been ever since, namely, a, 'now foreign dominated championship', where titles had, 'been added to the long list of extravaganza for export only'. For British tennis, 'more poverty stricken than ever', it was judged to be, 'a long road back to the top'.⁵ While there had been competitive disasters after World War I, most notably at the hands of Australian cricketers, Britain's sporting failures after World War II were more widespread and sustained. The expression of generalised despair over British sport ranged from a mild form as, 'of late we are used to taking defeats at sport', or, 'Britain is going downhill in sport', to the more dramatic, 'We get licked at everything, on the running track, on the Centre Court, on the Rugby and Soccer ground, in Australia, in fact in any place there happens to be a game going on'. By 1947, the British public were believed to be, 'getting a little tired of seeing their representatives laid in the dust more times than they are not'.⁶

Given the far-reaching legislative program being enacted by the Labour Government, the fragile nature of peace itself as the lines of the Cold War began to be drawn, the complexities of Imperial/Colonial relations and the depth of economic woes which befell Britain and drew out austerity as a way of life well into the era of peace, why was so much stock still placed on Britain's sporting performance and prestige? In fact, sport was neither seen as irrelevant nor unassociated with the more serious issues facing post-War Britain. Indeed, no less an authority than King George VI himself, made such connections in a message addressed to the Central Council for Physical Recreation:

As a nation we have led the world in many activities, not least among these being sports and games. The health and stamina of my people, so tried in two world wars, has been principally derived from their love for outdoor activities.⁷

Popular spectator sports and sporting events were viewed by the Government as making a significant contribution to public morale and thus to the efforts of workers which were, in turn, critical to economic recovery.⁸ Equal emphasis was placed on the link between participatory sports/recreation and the national productive effort. At the National Playing Fields Association's annual general meeting in May 1947 it was argued that it was, 'probably on the playing fields of this country that the battles for production would ultimately be won'.⁹ John Macadam of the *Daily Express*, in anticipating what he termed, the 'Summer Carnival, of sports scheduled to take place in Britain in 1948, saw it as being, 'decisive not only in the morale re-building of work-weary Britain, but in the selling of the British idea to the world'.¹⁰ Sports officials were just as vigorous in warning of the national peril that would result from, 'the misuse of leisure time'.¹¹ When the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) reduced its commitment to overseas tours after 1948, the decision was protested by the *Sussex Daily News* which believed it ran counter, 'to the spirit that won the Ashes in happier days and the Battle of Britain yesterday'.¹² Sports in general, and cricket in particular, were considered to play a special role in the maintenance of Imperial connections.¹³ The MCC decision mentioned above was protested in part because it was, 'damaging to England's prestige . . . throughout the Empire'.¹⁴ After all, cricket was 'a bond throughout an Empire on which the sun only sets because it is close of play'.¹⁵ Sport was not apart from, it was part of, the way in which the British, of all classes though not always in the same ways, saw themselves and their relations to others. Logically or not, national self-respect rested in part on national competitiveness in sport. This relationship rested on a particular role in world sport which the British believed they had played.¹⁶ The balance of this article is concerned with elaborating on this self-conceived role of assumed leadership and the ways in which it was adapted and amended in the face of the realities of the post-war World.

The Birthplace of Sport

Regardless of political disposition or social class it was a given, an article

of faith, among the British that they had played a unique role as the 'Founders of Modern Sport', and that, implicitly, this characterisation carried with it certain inherited privileges and responsibilities. In a BBC talk on the occasion of the 1948 Olympic Games, Philip Noel-Baker, a member of the Labour Government and a former Olympic athlete, gave expression to popular belief when he claimed that, 'Fifty years ago, most of our modern sports were hardly known beyond the English speaking world'.¹⁷ Belief that Britain, 'the home of modern sport,' had, 'pioneered cricket throughout the world,' had indeed, 'taught the world how to play football and cricket', was not seriously challenged.¹⁸ Less predictably, the British even claimed to have originated skiing as a sport and that, 'the Continentals', had merely, 'followed our lead with their usual faithfulness'.¹⁹ The particular role of the British was to act as sports missionaries, a concept with not inappropriate imperial and religious connotations.²⁰

Coupled with belief in Britain's role as originator of sports was an assumption that, at some time, she had, 'won practically everything'. Considered opinion had it that this era of sporting dominance had occurred in the late nineteenth century although the press of the 1940s often implied that it had run through to the eve of World War II. Frequently, the 'Golden Age' was vaguely placed somewhere in the past. This was the case when the *Daily Herald*, talking of football, harked back to the, 'old days when a double-figure score for us against any of the European sides was an even-money bet'.²¹ The British, who still thought of themselves as, 'a great sporting people', were, by the late 1940s, forced to concede that although their country had been, 'the cradle of most of the world's international games', 'its recent performances have reduced its sporting prestige'.²² Indeed, 'times have changed since we led the world in athletic prowess'. Regrettably, 'the old supremacy has gone'.²³

Whatever its substance in historical fact, the belief that Britain had once enjoyed a golden age of sporting success gained strength and certainty as mythology. Such convictions made it possible, even when recognising contemporary weakness, to see the set-back as temporary so that a notion of manifest destiny survived into the post-War era and substantiated a view that Britain's rightful competitive position was on top, as a major power in world sport. When England won ten-nil in Portugal in 1947 it, 'put British soccer prestige back where it belongs—

on top'. The same self-confidence was reflected in the belief that Britain had, 'always been regarded as the home of the finest racing stock in the world'.²⁴ Even in the face of persistent defeat in the late 1940s, it was unthinkable that such misfortune was permanent, for Britain would surely soon resume her rightful and dominant place in world sport. Evidence of belief in the doctrine of imminent recovery abounds in the late 1940s. New young players were soon, 'to restore English hockey to its old pride of place'.²⁵ Many appeared confident that, 'it will be England's turn again soon'.²⁶

Particularly British qualities, stemming from its sporting heritage, were identified as surviving off the playing field as well as on it. Thus, Britain's accumulated wisdom in sports was such that importing foreign coaches, whatever the sport, was seen to involve a loss of prestige; the British were the teachers not the students.²⁷ Such attitudes, that others might reasonably view as the products of arrogance, were for the British themselves merely the natural consequence of a long period of sporting leadership.

What had Gone Wrong?

Declining international competitiveness, albeit temporary, necessitated explanation. Why had the mighty fallen? The War and its ramifications in terms of post-War shortages held centre stage among the explanations for disappointing athletic performance. Although contradictory voices would occasionally point to the success of other countries that had been even more severely impacted by the war, notably France, the majority of commentators embraced the War almost as if it were a uniquely British experience. The limited and dull diet that most Britons experienced was frequently cited as a critical factor in the nation's poor sporting performance. Diet and defeat were linked by press comment in early 1948 that, 'ever since the War the sporting boys and girls of this hungry island have been hit for six'.²⁸ Limited or poorly maintained facilities were also blamed for Britain's failure to live up to its presumed place in the world of sport. The 1948 Report of the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) made this connection when it forecasted that, without adequate facilities, 'we shall not attain our proper place in international athletics'.²⁹ British defeats were also blamed on the inadequacy of non-British officials whether they were, 'continental', football referees, guilty of ignorance and cowardice, Australian umpires, who lacked first-class experience,

or figure skating judges who overvalued North American athleticism.³⁰ As an, 'elder brother adviser', the British had, 'nourished quality for a long time', but often without any beneficial influence on 'foreign' officiating.³¹

Hardly surprisingly, the Government was not immune from blame for British sporting inadequacies. Economic conditions meant that the appearance of the British team at the 1948 Winter Olympics was, 'reduced to a ridiculous austerity level'.³² The fact that in the Summer Games the British had, 'our noses rubbed in the dirt', was blamed on a Government that was, 'content to make us C3 in every aspect of life.'³³

In a somewhat more subtle fashion, Britons, discouraged by sporting defeat, took refuge in broadly enveloping theories of amateurism and sportsmanship, virtues that provided a counter-point to competitors' over-seriousness.⁵ Some of Britain's former sporting pupils had learned to play successfully but had forgotten how to play well, that is, within the codes of behaviour to which their tutors had given preponderant weight. Such a divergence of ideals was particularly, though certainly not exclusively, evident in the intense competitiveness credited to the Americans. It had been apparent to observers well before Britain hit its post-World War II sporting doldrums. Harold Abraham, whose own conflicts with authority over appropriate attitudes and practices were featured in 'Chariots of Fire', suffered a career ending injury in 1925 and soon thereafter became involved in broadcasting, particularly on track and field. In the late 1920s he was already arguing that the failures of the British athlete stemmed from an unwillingness, 'to take his sport seriously'.³⁵ In Abraham's view English ability was equal to, 'any other people in the world'. However, he believed that, 'on the whole they are not prepared to spend a great deal of their leisure time on practice'. The American on the other hand is as thorough as it is possible to be.³⁶ Addressing Americans at the time of a collegiate meet in 1930, Abraham offered his opinion that, 'for attention to detail and hard work you have us stone cold as an iceberg'.³⁷ Abraham confined himself during the inter-War years to a forthright statement of the incompatibility of the casual British approach and the possibilities of competitive success at the international level. By the 1940s there were those who would go further, pursuing arguments that did in fact place competitive success ahead of any attempt to retain what was characterised as the British sporting ideal. In the editorial column of *British Lawn Tennis*, it was

argued that English 'attitudes' were no longer respected internationally and it was, 'humbug that we only play for the love of the game'.³⁸ After an eleven-one defeat in Ryder Cup golf in 1947, the *Daily Express*, charged that there was, lacking in our people a correct professional mental attitude'. The somewhat ambivalent conclusion drawn from this observation was that the British might very well not want to adopt such attitudes, in which case they should step aside from international competition.³⁹ Even the *Times*, the traditionalist among the British press, could occasionally become tom over the issue of idealism as against competitiveness. During the 1946/47 Test series the paper somewhat grudgingly conceded that the Australian cricket team possessed, 'an impudent confidence, entirely lacking among the Englishmen', who were only, 'going half-way mentally and in spirit'.⁴⁰ The role of good loser did not always sit comfortably even with traditionalists who still generally lauded the virtue inherent in such a position.

Although failures after World War II provoked a significant tension between the ideals of true sportsmanship and the desire for competitive success, what were assumed to be traditional British attitudes still predominated. The gospel of the Good Loser and the practice of criticising the over-seriousness of others still held sway. Walker Cup defeat in 1947 was conceded to be, 'very sad', for Britain's amateur golfers, but it was, 'a good and friendly match against the most friendly of enemies'.⁴¹ A 1948 comment from the Women's AAA endorsed the similarly traditional sense that, 'the essential thing is not to win, but to do one's best in a true sportsmanlike manner'.⁴² Those who drifted from such principles were frequently charged with over-seriousness both in competition itself and in preparation. Such criticism was implied when British swimmer, Roy Romain, 'a natural performer', was contrasted with his three American rivals at the 1948 Olympics who were described as, 'manufactured'.⁴³ After crushing England in the first two Tests of the 1946/47 series, the Australians became targets for the familiar charge of over-seriousness.⁴⁴

The Test of the Olympics

The various ways in which the British sought to reconcile a presumably once glorious past with a tarnished contemporary performance and to rationalise, or ignore, the transition from one to the other, were brought into sharp relief as the one-time leaders of world sport hosted the 1948 Olympic Games in London.

Although negotiations had been going on since August 1945, it was not until February 1946 that the formal decision that London would host the 1948 Games was made public. Throughout the following thirty months of preparation there was an obvious awareness in press, public and official circles that British prestige was closely tied to performance at the Games. It was argued in the *Times* that British representatives must, 'have a fair chance to show that on equal terms we can hold our own in amateur sport with all comers'.⁴⁵ Philip Noel-Baker, who had been assigned a role as liaison between the Government and the Olympic Organising Committee, in a memorandum to Harold Wilson, then of the Board of Trade, emphasised of the Olympics, 'it is essential to our prestige that they should be a success'.⁴⁶ There was fear that Britain's generally poor sporting form would hold good at the Games and the host nation would thus be embarrassed. In some of what the British viewed as minor sports this was no great cause for concern but in athletics (track and field), at that time still very much *the* central event of the Games, it certainly was. The *Daily Express* warned in May 1947 that, 'something must be done or the gloomy procession of British defeats since the War will reach the humiliating climax of the Olympics being staged in London without a single British victory'.⁴⁷ Although Britain was to enter a purely amateur side in Olympic soccer it was considered that, 'whatever excuses can be formulated for dust-biting in the majority of events, there can be none if we are pasted at the national pastime'.⁴⁸ Despite awareness of how important Olympic success would be, some traditionalists hoped it could be achieved without abandoning British 'ideals'. With track and field primarily in mind, the *Times* trusted that the AAA's preparations would, 'raise athletics to a proper world standard while keeping it a true sport'.⁴⁹ Even in 1948 it is doubtful if this balance could any longer be maintained in some sports.

The sense that Britain had much at stake in 1948 extended beyond athletic performance to include the organisational ability displayed in staging the Games. The British Olympic Association's investigating committee in its report on the feasibility of putting the Games on in London expressed the hope that, 'Great Britain would set an example of value to other nations organising the Games in later years'.⁵⁰ Jack Crump, a prominent official of the AAA believed that, 'others will not judge us on how many events we win but on how we present the Games. We are striving to assure that the 1948 presentation will be the best in the

history of the Olympics.⁵¹ Even the ancillary task of covering the Games on radio and, to a lesser extent TV, was considered, 'important to the prestige of the country and of British broadcasting'.⁵² When the initial commitment was made to the Games it is unlikely that anyone anticipated the intensity and longevity of Britain's post-War economic woes. Nevertheless, by the late summer of 1947 such difficulties had provided cause to question the wisdom of continuing that commitment.⁵³ Ironically, the majority reaction to such doubts included an insistence that the Games should go on, the more so because of the economic crisis. Cancellation would be, 'a shocking piece of defeatism', and, 'most damaging to our prestige'.⁵⁴ Lord Burghley, chairman of the Olympic Organising Committee, protested that, 'If we backed out now our name would be mud, our prestige would sink'.⁵⁵ Within the Government itself it was recognised that to abandon the Games, 'would greatly encourage those people abroad who desire to think we are down and out'.⁵⁶ Burghley even took the argument further, pointing out that by going ahead as planned British prestige would be enhanced because, 'foreign visitors will say how wonderful that Britain can face crisis and still put on a great show'.⁵⁷ Staging the Olympics was viewed as, 'An act of faith on the part of a city and a country that have felt to the full strains of war and the stringencies of peace'.⁵⁸ In a manner analogous to wartime experience it was anticipated that difficulties could be overcome by, 'the spirit of the people(which) had come through the War not only unimpaired but strengthened'.⁵⁹ The emphasis placed on organisational rather than athletic performance in the anticipation of the Games was to be echoed and, indeed, intensified in judgements made during and after the Olympics themselves.

Failure and Success

With national prestige, 'on the line,' how in fact did the British perform in July-August 1948? Although numerous efforts were made to put a brave face on it, the outcome in most sports was unflattering to say the least. In all the events of the Games, Britain won only three gold medals; two in rowing and one in sailing, both sports staged away from the main crowds assembled in London.⁶⁰ How was such a catastrophe to be explained? How was self-respect to be salvaged? Explanations stressing diet, a lack of facilities and the generally debilitating effects of sustained austerity, which had all been rehearsed over the preceding three years,

were again brought forth. Some press commentators sought answers in substantial long-term trends leading to the emergence of other nations as athletic powers.⁶¹ More often, persistent defeat in the Olympics provoked renewed questioning of the traditional philosophy that laid emphasis on participation over winning. Frank Butler of the *Daily Express*, observed that, 'Its nice having the reputation of the world's best losers, but I'd like us to be the world's worst winners for a change'.⁶² Clifford Webb of the *Daily Herald*, expressed similar sentiments when he conceded that, 'In the Olympics the important thing may be taking part', but countered that, 'it is also nice to win sometimes'.⁶³ It was occasionally implied that the passage of time had rendered what were presumed to be traditional British values obsolete. Thus, running, 'for the fun of the thing is theoretically tops, but in the harsh world of 1948, where achievement is the main coinage, it does not pay dividends'.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the majority of press and officials focussed less on excuses or recriminations and more on the operation to salvage British prestige by laying strong emphasis on organisational achievement and displays of sportsmanship. It was widely proclaimed, not only by the British themselves, that in these areas the hosts had nothing for which to apologise, rather, much from which to take satisfaction. Lord Burghley, as chair of the Organising Committee, was hardly an objective source of judgement on the success of the Games. But, in praising the efforts of his army of volunteers, he identified their reward as, 'the knowledge that they have done their best, that our visitors have been satisfied, and that they have made a contribution to showing the world that Britain is very far from being a back number'.⁶⁵ These themes became the basis of an oft-repeated litany of achievement that was recited by others as they sought to retrieve some element of self-respect from what had been, athletically, a disappointing Olympics for the British. Others who were closely involved with the organisation of the Games followed Burghley's lead. In its annual report for 1948, the AAA took pride in the, 'excellent organisation that has been universally regarded'.⁶⁶ Equally predictably, *World Sports*, a publication of the British Olympic Association, claimed the Games as, 'a credit to the Organising Committee'.⁶⁷ Nor was it surprising that the editorial column of *Athletics*, should judge that, 'all who were concerned with the organisation of the Games are to be congratulated on their work'.⁶⁸ From a somewhat more detached position, the daily press was fulsome in its praise of the organisational effort. The

Times, usually understated in its judgements, enthused that, 'the Games taken as a whole appeared little short of a marvel of organisation'.⁶⁹ Representing very different political positions, the *Daily Herald* and the *Daily Express* both joined the chorus of praise. The *Herald* pointed in particular to the, 'superb staging of the Wembley athletics.' while the *Express* proclaimed, 'a triumph of organisation', and singled out Burghley as the, 'Man of the Games'.⁷⁰ Most tellingly, the *Evening Standard*, which had been calling for the cancellation of the Games less than a year earlier, was converted to recognition of the, 'grand job', which had been done.⁷¹

Praise also came from weekly journals and from the provincial press. The *New Statesman* praised the organisational success of the Games and the *Sussex Daily News*, whose editorial columns were consistently critical of the Government and much that was happening in post-war Britain, nevertheless, expressed pleasure that visitors would see that the country was not, 'down and out', and that the many shortages it was experiencing would be recognised as, 'part of the price paid by this country for its defence of democracy'.⁷² Such embellishment of Olympic organisational success with reminders of the severe post-War circumstances within which it had been achieved and even connection with the 'inheritance' of the War itself, was not uncommon in the British press in August 1948. A *Dairy Express*, editorial was very representative when it contrasted the successful staging of the Games with the fact that, 'Many abroad, and quite a few at home, said it was asking the impossible for a country short of homes for its own people, short of food and hard up', to organise such a major event.⁷³ The *Dairy Herald* agreed, pointing out that all had gone more smoothly than any official had dared to hope given the, 'war-ravaged and economically handicapped,' condition of Britain.⁷⁴

Good Sports

It was not only organisational success itself which was the object of praise but also the manner in which it had been achieved. What was seen as the essentially British character of the organisational achievement evidenced itself in two particular contexts. The organisational style had been less nationalistic and strident than had been the case in Berlin in 1936 and comparison reflected favourably on London. This was a perception that the British shared with others.⁷⁵ The successful promotion

of the Games was also viewed as a vindication of the British practice of voluntary organisation, a tradition which blended in with the supposed virtues of amateurism among the athletes themselves. Most notable in this context was the achievement of Donald Pain who had the main responsibility for orchestrating the week of track and field competition at Wembley and took his annual vacation from his position with a bank in the City of London in order to carry out that task.⁷⁶

Praise for the organisation of the Games came not only from diverse sources within Britain but also from many foreign visitors. The *New York Times* was expansive in its praise and reported enthusiastically on positive comment from American, Peruvian and Chilean athletes and officials.⁷⁷ Finnish observers who had Helsinki, 1952, in mind believed, 'there are no mistakes, the organisation is perfect'.⁷⁸ Praise from foreigners extended beyond organisation to the spirit of the Games, particularly the sportsmanship displayed by the crowds, considered the more remarkable because of the disappointment over British lack of success. In retrospect, the *New York Times*, observed that, 'Even though England's own athletes were almost totally eclipsed, shining above all else . . . was the sportsmanship of the crowds'.⁷⁹ Such comments echoed the satisfaction that Britons themselves expressed over the behaviour of the spectators.

One incident at the end of the week of track and field competition at Wembley became the focal point for British self-esteem as the supreme practitioners of sportsmanship, mixed with a somewhat contradictory hostility toward others who were believed to fall short on that account. On the last day of track and field competition it appeared that Britain had finally won its first gold medal and thus avoided being 'shut-out' in this central element of the Games. The American four by 100 m men's relay team crossed the finishing line first but was disqualified and the gold medal went to the runners-up, Britain. American officials protested this disqualification which had been made on the grounds that one of the exchanges had not been completed within the assigned area. In deciding on this issue, judges had recourse to the official Olympic film, but their decision was delayed while this was duly processed. The final determination was that the Americans had completed the exchange within the rules, so the British lost the gold medals, now awarded to the Americans. During this protracted process, British responses took two, apparently contradictory, but for them, reconcilable, forms. While the

decision was being awaited, some in the British press were critical of the American's protest. Frank Butler in the *Daily Express* contrasted the Americans, 'we wuz robbed', attitude with, 'the sportsmanship of the crowds who consistently cheered great American athletes'. Fred Thorne in the Communist *Daily Worker* believed the British crowd had shown, 'the true Olympic spirit,' by their greeting of the US team after the four by 100 relay. Clifford Webb of the *Daily Herald* wished the Americans had, 'accepted the official decision with better grace', while Geoffrey Simpson of the *Daily Mail* was similarly critical, implying that the Americans showed a degree of greed, protesting even though, 'they have done astonishingly well in these Games'.⁸⁰

In contrast, once the result had been reversed, the incident was projected in the press as an ultimate expression of British sportsmanship. The *Times* was, 'only too happy to have had the opportunity of putting the matter right', and quoted the American team officials who believed that the incident had been handled, 'with the same high sportsmanship which prevailed throughout the Games'.⁸¹ The *Daily Mail*, preferred, 'we finished with a blank scoresheet than gain the title like this'.⁸² The *Sunday Times* gave grandiloquent expression to these sentiments when, after discussing the 'Olympic Spirit,' it concluded that:

Typical was the positive sense of relief mixed with sadness as it was, with which the British sporting public learned that the single title our track athletes had seemingly won was lost after all to the Americans—relief at the expunging of any thought that honours had not gone to the best man.⁸³

The pattern of reaction to this one incident at the Games constitutes a clear exclamation mark at the end of a period in which the British, beset with misfortunes, sought to retrieve self-respect in the sporting world by clinging to the 'life-jackets' of organisational skill and true sportsmanship. Though no longer a major force in athletic contests *per se*, Britons still saw themselves as occupying a special place within, having a special contribution to make to, the world of athletics. Tensions between traditional ideals and competitive desires notwithstanding, a compensatory rationale was developed stressing that Britons could still demonstrate sportsmanship, organisational skills and the ability to face up to, and overcome, adversity. Some of the essential characteristics of this compensatory rationalisation of athletic decline can also be found in contemporary discussion of the loss of political and economic status.

Britain was no longer a dominant world power but it still had a special role to play in international affairs. While, 'Britain had a new place in the world order that was unalterably different to what it had been before the War,' the majority of Britons still, 'viewed their nation as a . . . unique political and moral force throughout the world'. Loss of empire was to be mitigated by the maintenance of the multi-racial Commonwealth. No longer the workshop of the world, Britain was nevertheless still capable of contributing technical and scientific expertise.⁸⁴ In each of these spheres of activity an admixture of myth and reality went into the process whereby Britons came to terms with, or explained away, national decline. National adjustment, philosophical and practical, to a new, and reduced, situation was no easier in sport than in any other sphere of British activity. The Olympic Games of 1948 mark a distinctive point in the process, not a conclusive ending. The same could, of course, be said of the loss of India, the devaluation of the pound in 1949 or Suez in 1956.

NOTES:

- 1 *Daily Herald*, 24 June 1946.
- 2 *Daily Herald*, 30 June, 1-4 July 1947.
- 3 *Daily Express*, 17 Apr., 18 and 30 July 1947.
- 4 *Daily Express*, 21 June 1947.
- 5 *Daily Express*, 5 Feb., 18 and 26 June 1947; *Daily Herald*, 9 Apr. 1946.
- 6 *Daily Express*, 6 Feb., 4 June and 1 Oct. 1947; *Brighton and Hove Gazette*, 3 July 1948.
- 7 *Times* (London, hereafter *Times*), 19 Apr. 1947.
- 8 Norman Baker, 'The Labour Government and Sport, 1945-48', unpub. paper, NASSH Conference, Saskatoon, May 1994. Cabinet and Home Office papers at the Public Record Office substantiate this view.
- 9 *Times*, 31 May 1947.
- 10 *Daily Express*, 31 May 1948.
- 11 *Times*, 31 May 1947; *British Lawn Tennis*, vol. 17, no. 166, Feb. 1947.
- 12 *Sussex Daily News*, 21 July 1948.
- 13 *Times*, 1 Nov. 1947.
- 14 *Evening Standard*, 21 July 1948.
- 15 *Daily Express*, 17 Apr. 1948.
- 16 Michael Sissons and Philip French, eds, *Age of Austerity*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1963, p. 11.
- 17 Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, NBKR, 616, draft of a talk on BBC, July 1948.
- 18 *Surrey Comet*, June 1948; *Daily Express*, 20 July 1948.
- 19 *Daily Express*, 30 Oct. 1947.
- 20 The term missionaries was used in the sporting context by Lord Aberdare who was active in many sports organisations in post-War Britain and was an IOC member. *Sporting Record*, 9-15 June 1948. For various examples of these attitudes at work, and reactions to them, see, J A Mangan, ed., *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society*, Frank Cass, London, 1992.

- 21 Sir Adolphe Abraham quoted in *the Evening Standard*, 27 July 1948; *Daily Herald*, 21 Jan. 1946.
- 22 *Daily Herald*, 27 June 1947 and 29 Aug. 1948.
- 23 *Sussex Daily News*, 2 Aug. 1948; *Daily Herald*, 4 July 1947. The age of British sporting dominance may have rested solely on myth but this does not negate the persistent belief that it had indeed existed at some point in the past. Furthermore, a sense of decline is evident before the 1940s, but it was intensified by the experience of the first years of peace. I am concerned in this article with the ways in which the contradiction between myth and contemporary experience was handled.
- 24 *Daily Express*, 26 May 1947; *Sporting Life*, 8 Mar. 1947.
- 25 *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Jan. 1947.
- 26 *Daily Express*, 9 June 1947. The six-one victory of Great Britain over the Rest of Europe achieved in May 1947 provided particular reinforcement for these notions. Brian Glanville, 'Britain against the Rest', in Sissons and French, *Age of Austerity*, pp. 149-66.
- 27 *Times*, 1 July 1946.
- 28 *Daily Express*, 2 Jan. 1948.
- 29 *AAA Annual Report*, 1948, p. 8.
- 30 *Daily Express*, 7 June 1947; *Star*, 29 Apr. 1947; *Daily Herald*, 4 Jan., 22 and 26 Mar. 1947; *Times*, 23 and 30 Jan., 14 Feb. 1948.
- 31 *Daily Express*, 16 and 17 June 1947.
- 32 *Daily Express*, 29 Jan. 1948.
- 33 *Brighton and Hove Gazette*, 14 Aug. 1948. C3 was both a designation that one was medically unfit for military service and a poor mark in an evaluation system used by many schools. It was thus generally equated with low standards of achievement.
- 34 Norman Baker, 'The Amateur Ideal in a Society of Equality; Change and Continuity in post-Second World War British Sport, 1945-48', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 12, no. 1, Apr. 1995, pp. 99-126.
- 35 Harold Abraham's Papers, Centre for Sports Science and History, University of Birmingham, XXV H27, notes for an illustrated lecture, 1928. Materials in this collection are generally unsorted and thus citations are imprecise.
- 36 Abraham's Papers, XXV H27, transcript of a BBC talk, 1925.
- 37 Abraham's Papers, XXV H27, Comment on the Occasion of Oxford and Cambridge v. Princeton and Cornell, 1930.
- 38 *British Lawn Tennis*, vol. 16, no. 161, Sept. 1946.
- 39 *Daily Express*, 10 Nov. 1947.
- 40 *Times*, 30 Jan. 1947.
- 41 *Times*, 19 May 1947.
- 42 *Athletics*, vol. II, no. 32, July 1948.
- 43 *Daily Herald*, 29 Aug. 1948.
- 44 *Times*, 20 Dec. 1946.
- 45 *Times*, 10 June 1946.
- 46 PRO CAB 129/18/202, Memo, 25 Mar. 1947. Noel-Baker was hoping for both competitive and organisational success.
- 47 *Daily Express*, 23 May 1947.
- 48 *Daily Express*, 2 Sept. 1947.
- 49 *Times*, 17 Dec. 1947.
- 50 Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, NBKR 6/6, Report of the Investigating Committee, 6 Feb. 1946.
- 51 *Daily Express*, 14 Jan. 1948.
- 52 PRO CAB 124/767, BBC to the GPO HQ, 11 July 1947.
- 53 *Evening Standard*, 2 Sept. 1947.
- 54 *Star*. 3 Sept. 1947; *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Apr. 1947; Churchill College Archives,

- NBKR 6/6, Philip Noel-Baker to Sir Norman Brook, 25 Sept. 1947.
- 55 PRO WORKS 16/1697; *Evening Standard*, 6 Sept. 1947.
- 56 Churchill College Archives, NBKR 6/6 Philip Noel-Baker to Herbert Morrison, Sept. 1947.
- 57 *Evening Standard*, 6 Sept. 1947.
- 58 *Times*, 29 July 1948.
- 59 Report of the Olympic Organising Committee, London, Oct. 1948, p. 17.
- 60 But for the dominating performance of Fanny Blankers-Keen of the Netherlands, who won four gold medals, British women would have enjoyed considerable success in track and field. That these achievements received limited weight in the overall assessments of the Games is indicative of contemporary attitudes which I hope to discuss in other work.
- 61 *Times*, 18 Aug. 1948; *Manchester Guardian*, 23 Jan. 1947.
- 62 *Daily Express*, 12 July 1948.
- 63 *Daily Herald*, 9 Aug. 1948.
- 64 *Daily Express*, 26 July 1948.
- 65 *Times*, 18 Aug. 1948.
- 66 *AAA Annual Report*, 1948.
- 67 *World Sports*, Sept. 1948.
- 68 *Athletics*, vol. II, no. 34, Sept. 1948.
- 69 *Times*, 18 Aug. 1948.
- 70 *Daily Herald*, 9 Aug. 1948; *Daily Express*, 6 and 16 Aug. 1948.
- 71 *Evening Standard*, 14 Aug. 1948.
- 72 *New Statesman*, 21 Aug. 1948; *Sussex Daily News*, 9 Aug. 1948.
- 73 *Daily Express*, 29 July 1948.
- 74 *Daily Herald*, 15 July 1948.
- 75 *Times*, 16 Aug. 1948; *New York Times*, 29 July 1948; *Sussex Daily News*, 9 Aug. 1948.
- 76 *Evening Standard*, 6 Aug. 1948.
- 77 *New York Times*, 30 July, 15 and 18 Aug. 1948; *Times*, 18 Aug. 1948.
- 78 *Daily Herald*, 2 Aug. 1948.
- 79 *New York Times*, 26 Dec. 1948.
- 80 *New York Times*, 10 Aug. 1948. These and other British press comments were fully quoted.
- 81 *Times*, 11 Aug. 1948.
- 82 Quoted in *New York Times*, 10 Aug. 1948.
- 83 Quoted in the *New York Times*, 16 Aug. 1948.
- 84 Kenneth Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945-51*, OUP, Oxford, 1984, p.280 Richard Holt, *Sport and the British*, OUP, Oxford, 1989, p. 278; Bill Williamson, *The Temper of the Times*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 38.