

The End of Sports History? Or the Beginning of Oral History Archives?

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Futurologists, particularly the doomsayers, have an unenviable record. While difficulties for sports history are not negligible, I suspect that most of them are due simply to failure of nerve. Postmodernism is not the chief issue: we may cease to be sports historians simply because external pressures on college curricula are now so great. Worldwide, higher education must be self-evidently 'useful'. Legislators have become increasingly unwilling to allocate public money to matters of the mind that seem to have little immediate economic benefit. How to deal with that situation is a paper in its own right, but we do need to understand that our long run of exemption from public scrutiny is over. More importantly, we must realise that sports history is different from the other 'new' sorts of history that have arisen in the last thirty years, because historians engaged in writing about hitherto largely ignored groups almost always uncover something of which the group can be proud. The contribution of black cowboys and soldiers to the development of the American west, of Navajo speakers to the Allied victory in World War II, of pioneer women in 'civilizing' frontiers, for instance, all give readers a sense of accomplishment. Sports history, on the other hand, is almost always deflating, and our audiences, whether captive or free, don't like it.

In trying to strip away falsehood, sports historians have probably not concentrated sufficiently on what Novak called the 'joy of sports'. Ten years ago, for instance, I received a very well-written letter from a mature student, complaining about one of the texts I had used in class, Eitzen's *Sport in Contemporary Society*.² The student wrote, 'of course there are elements of racism, sexism, exploitation and cruelty in sport, but if these were present in the overwhelming measure that Stanley Eitzen maintains, no decent person would have anything to do with organised sport'. The writer went on to analyse the text in detail. One of his points was that a variety of athletic events such as cycling rallies, triathlons, foot races, and

community swims occur annually throughout the United States that negate the whole notion that 'winning is everything'. 'To participate', he wrote, 'to complete the course, perhaps to set a personal best, [is] supremely important'.

This man made the point about adults. But we all know children who can't wait to get to their soccer, football, baseball, skating, or whatever. And while overpaid, sulky professional athletes often attract media attention, thousands more obviously love what they do, and are devastated when age or injury, or even the realities of minor league salaries, force retirement.³ It is, in fact, precisely because sports historians know this that the cynical manipulations of owners, coaches, officials and others who control athletic events and players offend them so deeply. But I wonder if we've said that sufficiently often.

To make our work less forbidding, we need, it seems to me, to get much more into the heads of those about whom we write, while not neglecting the sources we already use. And while several new sorts of material have been suggested, one seems to me not to have received the attention it deserves: oral history.

By oral history, I do not mean simply interviewing relevant people in the course of writing an article or book, useful though such strategies are. I mean the coherent, purposeful, focused attempt to find out what players, coaches, officials, and fans know but do not write down. The need for such work was brought home to me when I read a book I was asked to comment on at the last meeting of the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH). It dawned on me that while the writer felt free to discuss amateurism, the author had never played in, or even seen, an amateur game in the nineteenth, or early twentieth, century use of the word. The author certainly knew that amateurs were not paid, and could not overtly accept valuable prizes, and that the genesis of the amateur code lay in the class consciousness of British society. But he had no idea of the complexity of that code, of its ramifications in politics, economics, and education, nor even of its provisions, because the code existed very largely in people's heads. It was passed down by word of mouth and example; it was truly a hidden agenda because those who had not been properly brought-up barked their shins and worse on an ironclad system of behaviour not covered in the etiquette books.

How do I know such a code existed? Simply because I lived it. But it is no longer with us, save in the hearts and minds of a generation that is

rapidly disappearing. The British Empire that spread it has vanished and commercialism has overcome it throughout the world. But if one wants to understand the worldview of players, officials, and fans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in many parts of the world, one simply has to come to grips with a system everywhere in evidence but nowhere fully documented.

Nor was this system a matter only of rules. It was a way of life, internalised by multitudes, often to their detriment, because it left them vulnerable to those who paid lip service to their ideals while acting on very different principles. It shaped one's emotions for life.⁴ I found it utterly offensive that during the presentation of the trophy to the Tennessee University Volunteers — which calls itself an amateur team — after what had been billed as the college national championship, the vice president of Tostidos was actually wagging a large bag of Tostidos beside the trophy. Bad enough that the game was called 'The Tostidos Bowl', the company was making sure that no one visiting a supermarket could fail to recognise the product that had bought and paid for this college game. Previously, Peyton Manning had been shown intoning the mantra of US college athletics — what a privilege it is to be a student athlete. No one actually mentioned *mens sana in corpore sano*. After all, who on the field would have known what it meant? But the empty rhetoric of amateurism is still draped over a commercialised, professional endeavour because so few people know what amateurism really was.

Amateurism is just one example of the subjects sports historians should be putting on tape before it's too late. Historians in other fields have made great strides in gathering materials from members of society who do not normally keep diaries, write letters, or otherwise leave their thoughts for posterity. And some people such as Neil Isaacs and Lawrence Ritter⁵ (a professor of finance, incidentally) have collected such records. But there's not much of such oral history about.

It's all the more necessary to collect such material, because the sportspersons about whom we know most have always understood how to project the persona that would bring them the greatest rewards. Their autobiographies have to be treated with the utmost caution. Well before the age of television, savvy athletes knew that favourable publicity equalled cash, and were not above prevaricating in print. As Cayleff points out in her book on Babe Didrikson, the Babe's autobiography was 'put ... to paper to cement the immortality of the self-image she had

laboured so hard to create'. Didrikson even lied about her age, claiming in her autobiography to have been born in 1914, while on a visa application she put 1919. Her real birth year was 1911.⁶ The careers of most professional athletes are short and the image in print must therefore be carefully crafted and buffed. It's less easy to maintain a facade in conversation.

I wish now that I had taken my own advice to heart. I knew one of the first women cricketers to play a Test match against Australia. Now she's dead. While she lived, I didn't think to ask her why she would give up her job for six months, spend six weeks on a boat both ways and return to debt and unemployment, simply to play cricket. In one of my classes, I had a member of the ill-fated professional soccer team sponsored by Lamar Hunt. The student talked to me at length, and wrote a paper about his experiences, but I didn't think to get out my tape recorder and ask him what it was like to be a professional athlete in a sport being promoted before its time. Other opportunities come to mind but I thought too late in archival terms.

What I am suggesting, then, is a systematic creation of archives. This is an altogether different enterprise from conducting what one might call interviews-with-a-purpose. There is no doubt that such interviews authenticate and enliven sports history. One of the strengths of Bill Baker's biography of Jesse Owens⁷ is that it is shot through with quotations from people who knew Jesse Owens in a variety of situations. There are other reasons why this book was picked up by the History Book Club, and if we want to enlarge our general audiences, we must certainly use oral history as part of our endeavours. But interviewing people who knew X, or who knew about situation X is one thing. Setting out to record material for the sole purpose of depositing it in an archive is another.

Such an enterprise requires a clear sense of purpose, skilled interviewers, and financing. But it ought to be done. When, for instance, Gary Shaw's *Meat on the Hoof*,⁸ an autobiographical account of a student athlete's ill treatment at The University of Texas, was published, it was greeted by howls of anger from reviewers. When I used the book in class, most mature students regarded Shaw as a 'whiner', a man 'who'd never made it'. Others believed Shaw's account to be the rule rather than the exception. A woman who'd voluntarily dropped her basketball scholarship and then changed colleges, even thought Shaw's strictures applied across sports and gender. But where was the evidence against which Shaw's claims could be measured? To my knowledge there are no

archives containing student-athlete accounts of their college experiences. There is, to be sure, a plethora of official inquiries, graduation statistics, journalistic and scholarly *cris de couer*. But where are the voices of the people without whom college sport could not be played, the athletes themselves?

Has the situation changed over time? In 1987, Ernest Cueno, an All-Ivy League player who in 1928 was a member of the Grange Tornados, a professional team that ultimately became the Washington Redskins, wrote about his experiences. So many things have altered, but one in particular stuck in his mind. No US President now overlooks sport, but while Red Grange was at the height of his powers, he was presented to President Coolidge at the White House:

‘Mr President’, grandiosely announced Grange’s proud senatorial escort, ‘may I present to the President of the United States “Red” Grange of the Chicago Bears’.

‘How do you do, Mr. Grange’, said President Coolidge, ‘I am indeed delighted to meet you. I’ve always liked animal acts’.⁹

We have in the Australian Society for Sports History and the North American Society for Sport History a number of former college athletes. Have we ever suggested they put their memories on paper? And what about collecting the views of ordinary fans? I was surprised by the comment of a former student, a young man then in charge of the Southern Methodist University’s football fundraising, who told me he wondered whether SMU

football would survive in thirty years, because contemporary SMU students regard their athletic teams as hired hands, unrepresentative of the demographics and values of the university, and deserving of no particular alumni support. Have fans of professional and college sport or their loyalties changed? I’m not sure we’ll ever know, because we have so little information about what was in the heads of anyone but sportswriters.¹⁰

Now, collecting oral history is not easy, and it may not even be professionally profitable. Isaacs, for instance, mentioned that ‘he wrote a hundred letters, made a thousand phone calls, prowled stadiums long before game time, drove a few tough interviewees to Atlantic City after a Phillies

Game’, and ignored security people’s advice in following up a lead in a doubtful part of town. Yet it was not his oral history of batboys that was

published by a major press, but a more conventional scholarly book based on it, written 'from the perspective of a cultural historian'.¹¹

Further, if anyone is to undertake such archival work, he or she must understand that plenty of people know how it should be done. At a long past NASSH meeting, a book on boxing was the subject of a session. Someone asked about conducting interviews. The elementary level of the discussion puzzled me, until it dawned on me that few historians take courses in folklore. If our work is to be respected, we must master the discipline we propose to use. I'm entirely in agreement with those who suggest we should enlarge our methodologies to include the use of photographs, study of equipment, museum artifacts, and so on, but we must recognise that we cannot just blunder into a new domain. About a year ago, for instance, the film studies faculty member with whom I'd jointly taught an American history undergraduate course, came bursting into my office raging about a book written by a historian on the use of film. 'What is this (expletive)?', he demanded. 'All he cares about is whether they've got the colours of the uniform buttons right. How dare he write about films he can't even read?'

I know exactly what Paul meant, as my own film education began when I found myself supervising a master's thesis on ethnographic film being written by an Iranian in exile who'd washed up on the interdisciplinary shores of the University of Texas at Dallas. I quickly realised that I'd never properly looked at film at all, and certainly had no right to use it in class as cavalierly as I had been doing. Historians in general seem to have found the time to bury themselves in Foucault, Derrida, and other literary theorists.¹² As sports historians, it seems to me, we ought to spend an equal amount of energy mastering the disciplinary contours of film, technology, archeology, or folklore before we launch ourselves lightheartedly into pontification about the artifacts such disciplines use.

I have a couple of other caveats that relate to the state of our discipline. The first is that we must think clearly about what we are doing. I take strong exception to what Steve Pope wrote in the latest edition of the *Journal of Sport History*: 'as the integration of knowledge eclipses narrow specialised research, the basic curriculum will, itself, move away from textbooks and monographs towards multimedia, interactive software.'¹³ Pope is here confusing content and delivery systems, and he's wrong, I think, about both. The 'hard' disciplines, physics, computer science,

medicine, or even applied subjects such as accounting, are becoming more specialised, not less. The generalist is the gatekeeper, at the bottom of the totem pole. To my mind, if we want to relegate sports history to the academic sidelines, all we have to do is stop doing the hard work of research on limited topics and splatter ourselves all over the landscape.

'Multimedia, interactive courseware' is only a delivery system, and while delivery systems can change how we think (writing on paper isn't the same as writing on a word processor), the crucial question is, *what* do we want to deliver?

Audiences will determine content and modes of discourse, but if we are thinking of students, do we want them to learn to analyse an argument, construct an argument, differentiate between the essential and the peripheral, absorb some facts or even to adopt our prejudices in order to get a good grade?

And how long term are our intentions? Do I want to pass on skills that will be valid in thirty years time, or do I want to entertain, or worse, perform before a captive audience? Am I willing to help students cut their own intellectual teeth, however painful the process, or do I just want to enhance their airhostess smiles?

Once we've decided *what* it is we want to do, and *who* is to be our audience, we can decide *how* the task is to be done. Personally, I can foresee no audience for self-indulgent, make-what-you-will-of-my-ideas-here beyond a handful of academics who want to play their own exclusive game. It also seems to me that the 'gut' electives and even the general required courses so beloved in America will also disappear as the economics of higher education become clearer to taxpayers. In Texas, for instance, certain high school classes, taught by suitably qualified teachers, must now be accepted in lieu of freshman requirements. But I do believe there will always be a market for carefully researched, engagingly written sports history, although some of us may have to write it in our spare time.

In my first job as an American assistant professor, my department head had earned his anthropology PhD in the early 1930s. It was a privilege to work with him, not least because he had no time for anyone who did not believe wholeheartedly in what he or she was doing. Our employment prospects are nothing like as dreary as his once were, and it seems to me we have a choice. We can put our fingers up to the wind and do work that shifts with every change in the market, or we can continue

to ground ourselves in trying to understand 'the way it was' from the point of view of those who were there. Which is it to be?

Collecting archival material is not trendy. Unlike most postmodern intellectual activity, it requires hard work outside the university, depends on other people's good will and the collector's tact and dedication, and provides grist for other academics' mills. But in the pragmatic world we now inhabit, tape recording memories has one great advantage over much of what sport historians do — it is readily understood and approved by those who pay our salaries. Building archives may, then, be more necessary for the growth and development of sports history. It may help us justify our existence.

Notes

- 1 Revised version of a paper delivered at the 1999 Australian Society for Sports History conference in Queenstown. I am very grateful to Dr. Douglas Booth for his invitation to speak there, and for the excellence of the conference arrangements. I want also to thank the other participants, who made the occasion an intellectual treat.
- 2 While this book [Stanley Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society*, second edition, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1984] falls primarily under the rubric of sociology, it contains a good deal of historical material, to most of which the student objected.
- 3 In one issue alone of *Sports Illustrated* (June 29, 1998), two articles conveyed this deep desire simply to play the game. Alan Shipnuck's 'Qualified Success', pp. 932-34, dwelt on some of the 89 golfers who had to compete among 7,117 men to make it to the US Open. John Schulian's 'Morman's Mission', pp. 98-106, is the story of one of baseball's journeymen, whose fifteen-year career includes being called up to the majors three times in the same season while being sent back to the minors twice.
- 4 Writing in *The Glory of Their Times: The Story of the Early Days of Baseball Told by the Men Who Played It*, Macmillan, New York, 1966, Lawrence Ritter pointed out that most history is written by people who have not experienced what they are writing about. The baseball players who talked to him, however, 'do not have to try to analyse yesterday from the perspective of today. To them, today is strange and different, and the way it used to be is the natural way. They are more used to analysing today from the vantage point of yesterday', p. xvi. Sport is played largely by the young and we need to capture the ethos of each successive generation if we are not to be beguiled by our usual documentary sources.
- 5 Neil Isaacs, *Innocence and Wonder: Baseball through the Eyes of Batboys*, Masters Press, Indianapolis, 1994, and *Vintage NBA: The Pioneer Era 1946-1956*, Masters Press, Indianapolis, 1996; Ritter, *The Glory of Their Times*.
- 6 Susan Cayleff, *Babe: The Life and Legend of Babe Didrikson Zaharias*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1995) p. 5 and p. 27.
- 7 William Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life*, The Free Press, New York, 1986.
- 8 Gary Shaw, *Meat on the Hoof: The Hidden World of Texas Football*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1972.
- 9 Ernest Cueno, 'Present at the Creation: Professional Football in the Twenties', *American Scholar*, vol. 56, no. 4, 1967, pp. 487-501.
- 10 In the course of his work on batboys, Isaacs noticed how sportswriters did their

work, and remarked on it in a subsequent book. Prior to the game, although they were in the locker room, members of the media talked to each other rather than to the players. 'The batboys see it, take it in, joke about it, and largely ignore it — except as they have to circle the pack while completing their appointed rounds. The writers have extensive access to the inside, but they remain outsiders, untapped for membership in the club. It is ironic that from a position of such ambivalence comes the bulk of the way the game, the club, and its world are presented and recorded to the world outside'. Neil Isaacs *Batboys and the World of Baseball*, University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, 1995, p. 45.

- 11 Isaacs, *Innocence and Wonder*, preface; Isaacs, *Batboys*, preface.
- 12 It is obviously impossible here to enter into an extended argument about poststructuralism postmodernism. But it is important to realise that times are changing. Some years ago, in most departments of literature and social science on American campuses, even to raise questions about postmodernism was to mark oneself as an intellectual dinosaur incapable of grasping the new paradigms that were supposedly revitalising all forms of knowledge. Recently, however, historians, philosophers and scientists have begun to challenge postmodern dogma they had ignored until they began to see how it was undermining their own intellectual endeavours. Lefkowitz, for instance, was deeply dismayed when she 'went to the then dean of the college to explain that there was no factual evidence behind some Afrocentric claims about ancient history, (and) she replied that each of us had a different but equally valid view of history'. Mary Lefkowitz, *Nor Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*, Basic Books, New York, 1996, p. 4. It is becoming once more intellectually respectable to think that while beauty may lie in the eye of the beholder, all claims to truth are not legitimate, and all realities are not socially constructed. See, for instance, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, Picador, New York, 1998, and, Noretta Koertge, ed., *A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodern Myths About Science*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998. One undeniable advantage of postmodernism is that it frees one from the tedious business of checking one's facts and sources, and enables one freely to create new ways of looking at old material. I have toyed with the idea of writing an article on the history of angling from the point of view of the fish. After all, 'in a cool curving world he lies / Rippling with dark ecstasies' is only the starting point of the literature that could enable us to perceive the dualisms that underlie what has hitherto been understood as a unitary, usually predatory, activity.
- 13 S. W. Pope, 'Sport History Into the 21st Century', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998, p. vii.