

'The End of Sports History?'

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If sports history has reached an 'end', it is no different to other branches of humanities scholarship that today face challenges relating to certainty, authenticity, absolutes and inclusivity.¹ 'Endings' have a certain cache, however, amidst the late 1990s millennial appetite for tales of cataclysm — as the huge popularity of James Cameron's film *Titanic* surely testifies. But to my mind the 'The End of Sports History?' presents an invitation for reflection rather than a prediction. The changed form and circumstances in which both sport and historical scholarship exist in the late 1990s present considerable opportunities for extension and renewal of the field. The four broad areas considered below address the more specific questions put to those participating in the forum in Queenstown, namely, what is the essence of history and of sports history?, and what is the future for sports history? They are: the potential for sports history in the face of the collapse and reshaping of narrative; the competitive environment surrounding the production of sports history and the problems of segmentation; the varieties of sports history and where it is being 'done'; and some possible future research directions.

Sports History in a Changing Intellectual Climate

The collapse or abandonment of the meta-narrative has been the most obvious outcome of the recent theoretical and epistemological revolution in the discipline of history. Single, all-encompassing accounts claiming to tell *the* history of a place, people or period are now rare. Narrative histories in the sense of histories primarily defined by chronological frames have also become scarce, vastly outnumbered by historical discussions of specific communities, identities, relations of power and elements of human experience. Histories have replaced History; narratives increasingly have come to refer to the texts, representations or evidential points of access to the past rather than the creations of historians. The discipline of History has grown wider and richer as a result. Areas of interest — what are often referred to as sub-fields — have burgeoned, many supporting their own journals, conferences and professional associations. Sports history is one such field that has thrived under a

widening scope of curiosity and creativity that explores the shape and meanings of the past and those who inhabited it.

Like other 'sub-fields', sports history developed, in part, out of a critique: that existing history was insufficiently attentive to a major aspect of contemporary life, in this instance, sport as an increasingly significant preoccupation of people — as participants and as supporters — in modern societies. Now, some twenty or more years later, practitioners in this and other fields have come to assess how far the work prompted by that critique has altered the larger picture. The answer is, inevitably, highly individual, and difficult to assess with any definitiveness. The collapse, or erosion, of mainstream history — especially the grand narrative — has removed what once might have been the central measure. But the demise of this kind of history is hardly one which many sports historians are likely to mourn. Its disappearance, however, does raise other dilemmas.

Narrative — telling a story across time — has always presented particular challenges to sports historians. To begin with, sports historians have taken time to define what sport is but beyond that have generally been highly selective, operating mostly as a federation of allies in a common cause rather than producing histories of sport as a collective entity. Even the more synthesising works tend to concentrate, for good reasons, on a small number of major sports. National sporting histories are often collections of histories of individual sports. Secondly, and more importantly, sports historians have always wrestled with the tension of deriving meaning from an activity which is intrinsically ephemeral. A horse race might be over in a few minutes, a sprint in a number of seconds, a football or netball game in less than two hours. (Of course, ephemerality has considerable economic value, a point quickly released by those who once organised games behind high walls and gates and who today supply sport via cable television.) Yesterday's results are of interest to those for whom the condition of the team or the athlete is of more than passing concern, but they sink quickly before the anticipation of subsequent fixtures and rival contests. The intrinsic interest in a game, or a sporting contest, is largely expended at its conclusion. In this sense, sport represents the antithesis of the historian's craft. In selecting, identifying, charting and accounting for historical phenomena, and change across time, historians of whatever subject, area, period or approach, seek to identify that which is of enduring import rather than which is

ephemeral. In another sense, the ephemerality of sport makes its study different to that of other forms of popular culture: the dramatic essence of games cannot be recaptured (at least as an unknown outcome) whereas comics and rock albums can be read or played long after their initial creation and temporal popularity.

Meaning of the passing drama of excitement in sporting contests derives from the surrounding context. But the nature of that context has become less clear as history has become more diffuse. There is now much greater potential for relating and explicating sport's significance in the expanded range of contexts and realms within which sport might be understood. Small narratives of particular events, microcosms, have become common starting points for discussions of larger themes and questions. Sport's ephemerality, its episodic and discontinuous character may lend itself well to this kind of historical treatment. Its character will continue, however, to pose the thorny problem of an activity that is popular and occupies much cultural space but which is attributed with little force beyond the mimetic.

As history comes to be 'read' and 'studied', not only in written texts, but more and more through electronic platforms and media, the discontinuous and episodic, fragmented and federated character of sports history might find itself stronger placed to feed into other historical, cultural and sporting studies. Sport can be viewed as a cultural, social, economic or political element in any one of a number of settings — sampled or visited in the way it is 'in real time' for contemporaries. Contextualisation will continue to be a critical issue. But where 'readers' are navigators of a widening range of materials — including photographs, historical commentaries, film clips, articles and works written by historians mounted on CD-Rom or internet-accessed libraries and repositories — this will be the case for all, not just students of sports history. The disadvantages of such de-contextualisation will be outweighed by the access such sources will provide. The making of meaning will continue to be the main goal, the means available to do so is what is changing.

Sports History in a Competitive Environment

Whether we like it or not, sports history in the late twentieth century is engaged in a numbers game. With a host of other historical and cultural studies it is jostling for the attention of students, readers, viewers, and dispensers of research monies and publishing contracts. The competition

has never been more fierce. Sports history may be better placed than some to survive in the arena. New configurations of political, economic and cultural power make it necessary for academic institutions to realign themselves in the late twentieth century. Defending the case for the value of disinterested research, and supporting the maintenance of a space where students and faculty can pursue their curiosity about the past, and be creative in their endeavours to present and explain it can be our only overriding goal. The particular circumstances will vary from place to place and are likely to change quickly.

Sports history has the advantage — in a competitive environment — to draw on an activity that already commands a popular following, but it also carries the disadvantage of being connected to something which is, by its nature, strongly segmented. Sport is all too readily seen not simply as another interest or sphere of investigation but something that exists outside the ‘real’ or general ambit of fruitful systematic investigation. This is not new: sports history has always dealt with the tension of taking games seriously, seeking to draw links between ‘sport’ as a place apart and the society within which it exists — what Richard Gruneau calls the paradox of play. What is different in the late 1990s as compared to the early 1970s when the field was new, is the *development* of that paradox. In some senses sport has completely saturated contemporary society: in the political language of ‘the level playing field’, the corporate language of ‘team players’, ‘team building’, and mentors known as ‘coaches’; in the near universal fashion for sportswear in contemporary clothing and footwear, not just in the franchised sports club and brand outfits; in the prominence of sporting celebrities and much else. Yet there remains both a high level of separation — in the widening gap between elite and participatory sport; between the ‘top’ professionals and high profile sports and the ordinary players and minority sports — and segmentation. Sport, for all its prominence, may be becoming less and less a part of many people’s lives in a participatory sense. While at the same time, it becomes more important as a source of diversion, as a form of consolation and local, ethnic, national or class identification in the insecurities and shifting grounds of post-industrial life. As such, there may be greater resistance to seeing it analysed and the acknowledged facades removed to expose what lies behind the gloss and the spectacle.

More importantly perhaps, for those of us ‘in the field’, is the need to recognise that for many people sport is a subject of indifference, or at the

very most, of passing, transitory interest — even of a perceived triviality, lacking the gravitas of other histories. The demarcation between sports and other coverage in all forms of the media has long established news and sport as a natural dichotomy. There is life and the real world and there is sport. Amanda Smith refers to sports broadcasting at the ABC as a ‘closed world’. The segmentation within print and television media is also tied very tangibly to commercial campaigns carefully directed to specific audiences. While sizeable, sporting audiences represent only a slice of the total population. Moreover, sporting audiences remain predominantly male.

As sports historians we are not dealing with just another sub-field or area of interest like urban history, health history, rural history, and so on, that readers, students and others may or may not pick and choose as they like. We are dealing with a field that is quite explicitly detached from the ‘rest’ in the way it is represented in the world. Because it is the place of play and diversion, because of its apparent purposelessness, sport can more easily be set aside as less deserving of attention, resources or esteem. The case for connection must continue to be made.

The Varieties of Sports History

Much of the reflection on the ‘end’ or current state of sports history has come, not surprisingly, from those already engaged in the field, specifically those who have actively created the institutional framework (conferences, journals, professional bodies such as the Australian Society for Sports History), most of whom are also practitioners within universities endeavouring to sustain courses and research programs in the field. Doug Booth has recently outlined forcefully the problems which exist particularly in departments of physical education (kinesiology/human movement),² while John Lowerson paints a rather different picture of the scene in Britain where academic developments have resulted in new patterns of interaction between historians and those from physical education disciplines.³

An academic environment, whatever its character, is critical to the field of sports history and its professional associations and structures. But it is not the only place where sports history flourishes. Sports writing — imaginative or fictional, and analytical — is commanding a profile well beyond the academic sphere. The very popularity of the subject makes the boundary between academic and non-academic more permeable

and there is much to be welcomed in that. Sportswriting has enjoyed spectacular success in the 1990s through novels such as Nick Hornby's bestseller *Fever Pitch*, Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*, the Picador collections of sportswriting, and in the New Zealand context, works such as Tessa Duder's *Alex*.⁴ Greg McGee's 1980s play *Foreskin's Lament* remains a major work in New Zealand cultural history.⁵ In film and television the documentary *Hoop Dreams*, and the 1930s episode in *The People's Century* series, together with Finlay Macdonald and George Andrews' *The Game of Our Lives* series, Tom Scott's four-part documentary on Edmund Hillary, and the forthcoming history of rugby scripted by Gareth Williams due to be screened before the 1999 Rugby World Cup have all provided, or promise to provide, powerful lenses through which sport makes greater sense of the world.⁶

Interest in the lives of individuals is apparent in the unprecedented demand for biography. Simon Rae's splendid *W G Grace* is but the latest addition. The inclusion of significant numbers of sporting figures in dictionaries and collections of biography in New Zealand and Australia in recent years all indicate a recognition of, and an interest in, sport as a central part of the culture and national history.⁷ In New Zealand, particular subjects have prompted recent attention from writers on the fringes of academic life. The major political and sporting controversy of the twentieth century, rugby relations with South Africa, has been the subject of two substantial recent works, Malcolm Templeton's *Human Rights and Sporting Contacts* and Trevor Richards', *Dancing on Our Bones*, which sit alongside Doug Booth's excellent academic study.⁸

Sporting organisations have also been attuned to the interests of supporters in seeing the game in a broader framework. They have invested in the 'heritage' of their games as part of their explicit promotion, and endeavour to locate sports within national or cultural traditions (especially in New Zealand and Australia where the advent of professionalism, and its allied pay television, has raised the prospect of ruptures with the popular, grass roots traditions of games). Sports organisations have worked hard to produce a 'usable' past. There is a large body of work to be done here by historians to ensure that nostalgia, celebrity promotion and 'heritage' is not the only version of the past available.

Future Research Directions

If this can also serve as the place to present a personal plea for future

research I would urge that first, gender be at the centre of much more sports history. Of all identities that sport brings into being, the masculine one is the most recurring and consistent across sport, culture and time. Sport is a very important site for the creation and performance of masculine identity. Yet this remains on the edge of many studies. Second, spectators should be brought more often into the account of sports histories. The consumption of sport is part of this, not just in the drama of recent pay television debates, important though they may be, but also in other areas. A study of sport at the domestic or household level could examine how spectating has altered the disposition and use of domestic living space, or the acquisition and use of reading matter and home appliances (from radio and television, to video and satellite dishes), or the division of labour and time within households, and the decisions taken in the spending of weekly budgets. There is much scope for work that sets sports history within family history and the histories of life cycle and generation.

Sports history continues to concentrate on major sports — not surprisingly, they occupy centre stage. Yet the demographic composition and minority recreational cultures of minor sports may be revealing of more than simply variations from the mainstream. In particular they may offer a way into histories of those groups and experiences least easily accessed through other forms of historical record. In New Zealand, sport as a place for Maori-Pakeha racial interaction — in ideologies and creations of race, gender and national identities has been strong and continues to be, but remains under-researched. In both Australia and New Zealand more could be done on the nexus between sport and state. Both countries share a tradition of activist government going back to the 1890s, strong sporting traditions and a sporting culture strongly derived from the English voluntarist traditions. How has this particular trajectory played out? What particular tensions has it roused?

Sports history is not in decline but has all the more to say to a world in which sport has never been more important and more valued (in tangible terms at least). The paradoxes of its supreme unimportance alongside its passion and power in forging identities deserves more attention not less. Sports history, along with other strands of the scholarly historical enterprise, has been forced to consider fundamentals in its practice — at the same time as fighting to maintain a toehold in ever harsher environments of cultural and educational funding. At such a time sports

history cannot be complacent or stand still but it needs to keep its borders open rather than closing the gates for fear of the rivals who stand outside.

Notes

- 1 Richard Evans, *In Defence of History*, Granta, London, 1997. Evans provides a succinct summary of the impact of these challenges on the discipline of history from a largely British perspective. A discussion from more of an American vantage point can be found in Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, Norton, New York, 1994.
- 2 Douglas Booth, 'Sports history: What Can Be done?', *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1997, pp. 191-204.
- 3 John Lowerson, 'Opiate of the People and Stimulant for the Historian?', William Lamont, ed., *Historical Controversies and Historians*, UCL, London, 1998, pp. 201-214. See also Peter Bailey, 'Leisure, Culture and the Historian: Reviewing the First Generation of Leisure Historiography in Britain', *Leisure Studies*, vol. 8, 1989, pp. 107-127.
- 4 Nick Hornby, *Fever Pitch*, Gollancz, London, 1992; Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*, New York, 1995; Tessa Duder, *Alex*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1987.
- 5 Greg McGee, *Foreskin's Lament*, Price Milburn and Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1981 and 1985.
- 6 Steve James, *Hoop Dreams*, 1994; Sean Barrett and Veronika Hyks, '1930: Sporting Fever', *The People's Century*, series 1, no. 5, 1997; Finlay Macdonald and George Andrews, *The Game of Our Lives*, Auckland, 1997; Tom Scott, *A View from the Top. Hillary*, TVNZ, Auckland, 1997.
- 7 Simon Rae, *W G Grace: A Life*, Faber & Faber, London, 1998; Charlotte Macdonald, Merimeri Penfold and Bridget Williams, eds, *The Book of New Zealand Women/Ko Kui Ma Te Kaupapa*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 1991; *New Zealand Dictionary of Biography*, vols. 1-4, Department of Internal Affairs and Bridget Williams Books/Auckland University Press, Wellington, 1990-1998.
- 8 Malcolm Templeton, *Human Rights and Sporting Contacts: New Zealand Attitudes to Race Relations in South Africa 1921-94*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1998; Trevor Richards, *Dancing On Our Bones: New Zealand, South Africa, Rugby and Racism*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 1999; Douglas Booth, *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South, Africa*, Frank Cass, London, 1998.