TOWARDS THE TEACHING OF SPORT HISTORY

Joan M. Chandler
University of Texas at Dallas

Historians have paid curiously little attention to sport. As late as 1977, a group of Australian historians conferring about sport were conscious they were doing something new.[1] The sociology of sport is far better developed.[2] Nevertheless, historians ought to be teaching what they do know of sport, not because it is popular, but because it is significant. As John Lucas and Ronald Smith write, "Sport in America has reflected the nation's dominant themes."[3] However, the field of sport history remains undefined. So someone who embarks on the teaching of sport history must first decide on one of the three approaches: To include sport history in regular history courses; to teach a course wholly on sport history; or to teach a course such as "Sport and U.S. Society" which involves sport history, but includes work from disciplines other than history.

The first approach, the integration of sport history into regular courses, is probably the easiest. For example, it would be simple to include the Olympics and chariot racing as an integral part of ancient history courses; E. Norman Gardiner's Athletics of the Ancient World, although it was published in 1930, remains a standard work. H.A. Harris's Sport in Greece and Rome and his Greek Athletes and Athletics are also excellent sources. Courses on modern Germany could well draw upon Richard Mandell's The Nazi Olympics. This book demonstrates clearly Nazi administrative capacity and manipulation of symbols, and by so doing makes it easier for students to comprehend how Hitler was able to plunge the world into catastrophe. The Olympic theme can be extended into recent American history. It was no accident that Harry Edwards, a Black sociologist and activist, used the Olympics symbolically to fight American racism in 1968.[4] To students who have grown up during a time of expanding civil rights, the effect of Black exclusion from sport comes as a real shock. Although some students are aware that Negro baseball leagues existed, few comprehend what it meant to Black players to be fed and housed separately on the road even when they were finally allowed to play on the same teams as whites. Robert Peterson's Only the Ball Was White or Jackie Robinson's I Never Had It Made ought to be on the reading lists of standard American history courses.

Most students know that the Olympics are now political as well as sporting occasions, but they are less aware of the symbolic importance of sport in international and national affairs generally. Books carrying titles such as The Politics of Race and International Sport: The Case of South Africa by Richard Lapchick, and Sport, Politics and Ideology in China by Jonathan Kolatch, speak for themselves. There is not a great deal of literature in this field, but it will come as historians demand it.

To come to terms with the sport of a particular country is to understand much about its history. As the writers of the 1956 research report pointed out, cricket "is a peculiarly English game: not suitable for export and found only in places where Englishmen have taken it. Cricket is an expression of the national character and, as such, inscrutable."[5] Christopher Bookes's English Cricket makes the class system more comprehensible than any conventional social history I know and well illustrates the way in which that system was and is perceived by the English themselves. Another excellent introduction to modern English history is Eric Dunning's and Kenneth Sheard's Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players, a study of rugby football, a game which Heywood Hale Broun once described as "football in underwear." Many American historians have been puzzled by British working class apathy towards social revolution; there is much to be said for G.K. Chesterton's views that British workers would not be drawn into promoting the equality of men because they were much more interested in the inequality of horses. Unfortunately, we do

not really know whether Chesterton was right, as so few historians have given their energies to the investigation of sport.

It is for this reason that the second approach, to teach a course in the history of sport, designed chiefly for students majoring in history, is the hardest to take. We simply do not have the literature, especially in English. Allen Guttmann's excellent From Ritual to Record is a cultural analysis as much as a history book in the conventional sense. Steven Reiss's book, Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era is, as yet, one of a kind. To try to handle the history of sport on a worldwide basis would be to invite disaster. Yet crucial aspects of the history of sport even in the United States lack exploration. We have no history of football comparable to Harold Seymour's or David Voigt's works in baseball. Nor is there a scholarly study of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, although there are numerous accounts of individual college teams and Edwin Cady's The Big Game attempts to account for the uniquely American phenomenon of college sports. While there are thorough and penetrating accounts of disastrous moments, such as Eliot Asinof's Eight Men Out (on the Chicago "Black Sox") and Charles Rosen's Scandals of '51 (on gambling and college basketball), there is no study which sets such corruption in its historical context. We know almost nothing historically about spectators in the United States or any other country. Further, conventional history classes require texts and it is difficult to know what to put into students' hands. John Betts's America's Sporting Heritage could not be used easily by students, although John Lucas's and Ronald Smith's illuminating Saga of American Sport might be. Betty Spears's and Richard Swanson's History of Sport is designed with physical education majors in mind.

Fortunately there is an abundance of literature if a historian wants to adopt the third approach, that of teaching a course which will serve as a humanities course, an interdisciplinary course, or some other broadly based course which traces the relationship between sport and American society over time. For the past five years I have taught such a course, which involves anthropology and sociology as well as history. I am sure there are other ways of doing this, but the course as it stands attracts students from a wide range of disciplines, and provides them with new ways of looking at a historical phenomenon.

First, we settle the matter of definitions. Even among historians there is no agreed definition of what constitutes "sport." John Betts, a historian whose consuming interest in sport was ahead of his time, did not think it necessary to define his terms at all.[6] Allen Guttman goes to a great deal of trouble to distinguish between "play, games, contests and sports." This difference arises partly because Betts wants to show how sport has been influenced by, and in turn has influenced, American historical development and civilization, while Guttman is interested in "the nature of modern sports."[7] But Harold Seymour, the author of the first serious history of baseball, declared that "professional baseball is not a sport. It is a commercialized amusement business."[8] The Journal of Sport History concerns itself with such diverse topics as harness racing, football, the politics of stadium construction, American Indian games, and medieval pastimes. One can waste a good deal of time weaving semantic webs, but students bring such longstanding and emotionally charged preconceptions to a class in sport, that I find it essential to be certain we are all working in an agreed frame of reference.

In the first class session the students work to distinguish between a sport, a game, and a hobby. The final definitions are rather long. They are based on the purpose for which a particular activity is undertaken (which in itself determines the nature of the rules, the practice needed, and whether the players are paid or not). Using these definitions, we can all decide what

constitutes a sport, a game, or a hobby. Fishing, for instance, as part of a national or local contest, is a sport; fishing done competitively by friends according to rules they themselves have agreed on is a game; fishing done by Tom Sawyer is a hobby. By no means would all historians, much less philosophers, agree with the definitions, as I make clear to the class. The point is that in the class itself we all know what we are talking about and why, and we do not get bogged down in attempts to decide precisely which specific physical activities "count" as sport.

The thrust of the course is to show how certain societal values in the United States have changed over time (mainly since the nineteenth century) and how these values relate to and are transmitted or epitomized by sport. Two texts are used as a basis for class discussion. James Michener's Sports in America is readable, raises substantive issues, and is written by a man who cares deeply about what sport "ought" to be. In Sport in Contemporary Society: An Anthology, D. Stanley Eitzen is deliberately concentrating on the corruption of sport. The juxtaposition of their points of view is fruitful. There are other anthologies which could be used, such as George Sage's Sport and American Society or Andrew Yiannakis's Sport Sociology. I find Eitzen's book particularly useful because it contains historical material on racism and the economics of sport, among other subjects. Students also have to read and review a book chosen from each of two lists supplied. One list contains books such as Michael Novak's The Joy of Sports, which delight in or discuss the history of sport. The other list contains books such as David Wolf's Foul! The Connie Hawkins Story, which expose corruption. Students must also analyze a live or TV game.

Much of what students need to know is not readily accessible. Therefore, I lecture on the history of college and professional sport, on sports such as cricket and soccer which once flourished in the United States but failed to develop professionally, on rules and other changes in professional sport which have been made to attract television audiences, and on sport and the law, among other topics. The preparation of these lectures is not always easy, because the sources are scattered.

It is important to show that pro football, for instance, has not always dominated the American sporting scene, and that the game now played is not the game spectators watched in the early twentieth century. Students find it hard to believe that until 1933 the quarterback could not pass forward until he had carried the ball at least five yards back from the line, although the forward pass itself had been legalized in 1906. Once students understand when, how, and why college football gave way to professional football as a spectator sport, they are in a better position to understand the problems of the development of women's sport. Women's college teams have not had the years free of professional competition to build a following which men's college teams were granted; women's teams find themselves competing for the entertainment dollar at a time when spectators have become much more demanding and sophisticated than they once were. There is no tradition of watching women's team sports in the United States; discussion of the development of college and professional football illuminates the importance of a sporting heritage in attracting spectators.

Until definitive histories are published, one must gather material on such topics where one can. John Lucas and Ronald Smith give a good deal of basic information on early college football and the development of the professional game in their Saga of American Sport. Less easy to find are Park Davis's Football: the American Intercollegiate Game and Walter Camp's and Lorin F. Deland's Football. Robert Leckie's The Story of Football is by no means a penetrating study but contains useful facts; the volume on football in the New York Times Encyclopedia of Sports vividly portrays the evolution of college and

professional football. Something can be gained from the large coffee table books, The NFL's Official Encyclopedic History of Professional Football, and John McCallum's and Charles H. Pearson's College Football U.S.A. 1869-1972. Books such as Halas by Halas; The Autobiography of George Halas shed a good deal of light on the early struggles professional footballers endured, but they must be used with caution.

Similarly, changes in women's sport relate to societal attitudes toward women which must be traced through time; the sources for this are dispersed. It is simpler to show why Albert Spalding, who did so much to make baseball America's national game, was desperately determined to have baseball conceived on United States soil. It is also not difficult to relate Richard Hofstadter's Anti-Intellectualism in American Life to the ambivalence with which athletic scholarships have always been regarded. The development of the present situation in college athletics, which has prompted suggestions for changes in the status and recruitment of athletes, such as those found in John Rooney's The Recruiting Game, can then be made clear to students. This, in turn, relates back to women's college athletics. One of the joys of teaching a course involving the history of sport is the fact that "everything fits." Connections can readily be made both by students and instructors.

The range of topics which can and should be included in a course on sport and society is so broad that most historians will be able legitimately to include their own areas of expertise. Historians who are interested in the role of the federal government, for instance, could well apply that interest to sport. As the Brookings Institution study Government and the Sports Business points out, the sports industry has been shaped by government policy. The Supreme Court has played its part also. I include some of this material, but do not find time for much. Others could shape the theme of the course differently.

I also use films. "Rookie of the Year" provides a basis for discussion of American methods of conflict resolution, and what constitutes cheating and what smart play. The film "Winning" bears directly on the question of sponsored and contest mobility and the place of competition in U.S. society. "Trobriand Cricket" raises questions about the functions of sport, and of the ways in which minority groups can adapt a sport to their own ends.

I find the comparative perspective to be extremely useful in teaching sport history. Few American students have ever asked themselves why their nation alone supports "Saturday's Children" or why football means soccer almost everywhere else in the world. Any historian will already have some specialized knowledge of other times and places; comparisons can be made in whatever context a particular historian finds himself or herself able to supply for students.

A course on sport, whatever its content, will attract students. To discourage the casual, I do not teach the course pass/fail; I require consistent attendance and two or three pieces of literate written work, besides an essay-type examination. Grading is irksome, as there are seldom fewer than fifty students in the class; but this becomes a means of encouraging literacy. Probably because few inept students enroll (or withdraw as soon as they discover the course's demands in the first class) the course is evaluated favorably; students make comments such as "it made me think; define my own opinions." It has, I know, caused some student parents to investigate what coaches are actually doing to or with their children, to reform their own behavior as spectators, to discuss the course with their spouses, children, and other instructors, and to alter their TV viewing habits. The course has attracted a few (too few) students to regular history courses. Some students have reported that they have thought over what they had learned of American

history, and done some further reading of their own. The course does not get stale; rather, I think it has improved over the years as a result of what I have learned from students, who have often brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to the course.

Given the literature and resources available to historians at this point, it seems to me that each historian must decide what he or she can best teach about sport, given what one already knows, and then set out to supplement that. The literature is growing; Benjamin Rader has a book in press entitled From Players to Spectators: A History of American Sports, for example. I suspect this trickle of literature will soon become a stream. Once sociologists got interested in sport, it did not take long for a literature to develop which is worth anyone's attention.

In spite of the difficulties, we need to take the history of sport seriously and to teach it how and when we can. This is not because sport is something which is overwhelmingly important in the 1980s, but because since the end of the nineteenth century it has been profoundly influential in the development of every industrialized society. John Betts devoted himself to the study of sport because he found it intellectually exciting; the subject can certainly excite the intellectual curiosity of students.

NOTES

[1]Richard Cashman and Michael McKenan (eds.), Sport in History: The Making of Modern History (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979), xi.

[2]The best review of this literature is contained in the Handbook of Social Science of Sport, edited by Gunther Lüschen and George Sage. The book contains not only articles on cross-cultural analysis, social institutions and processes, sport groups, and deviance in sport, but an exhaustive bibliography and a list of sport organizations and societies. Much of the work cited can be used by historians.

[3]John Lucas and Ronald Smith, Saga of American Sport (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1973), vi.

[4]Harry Edwards, The Revolt of the Black Athlete (New York: Free Press, 1969) is a bitter, biassed book. Nevertheless, it reflects the frustration, anger, and perceptions of many Blacks, particularly at the time it was written.

[5]Christopher Brookes, English Cricket: The Game and Its Players Through the Ages (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1973), 2.

[6]As John Loy points out in the preface to John Betts's book America's Sporting Heritage: 1850-1950 (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1974), when Betts finished his dissertation on "Organized Sport in Industrial America" in 1951 there was "little demand for a book on the history of American sport." Betts later "found few fellow historians who deemed the study of sport a worthwhile endeavor." The book was published posthumously.

[7]Allen Guttmann, From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), vii.

[8]Harold Seymour, Baseball: The Early Years (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 3.

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Films

"Rookie of the Year"
"Trobriand Cricket: An Ingenious Response to Colonialism"
"Winning: Midget Football"
Films can be obtained from a variety of sources; see Educational Film Locator of the Consortium of University Film Centers, R.R. Bowker, Co., n.d.