

Analysing the Game: Evidence and Knowledge in Sports History

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Abstract

No fully informed debate on sport can take place without reference to the historical dimension. This talk will examine how sports historians have approached their subject, looking at the concepts employed, theories and methods applied, and, most importantly, the evidence from which they draw their findings, including newspapers, archives, interviews, and visual sources such as photographs, film and works of art. Sport history is an empirically-based, interpretive social science and thus sports historians are dependent on their source material. Too often, however, the subject has suffered from false information and omitted information as well as partial information and imperfect information. So it is important for sports historians to interrogate their sources and assess their authenticity and

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validity. By use of examples it will be argued that historians should always ask four major questions of their primary source material.

- When was it produced?
- What was the authority of the person producing it?
- Why was it produced?
- What is its code?

It will be stressed that 'truth' in sports history is a nebulous concept and that historical perspective is contested terrain with a plurality of meanings with different versions of events depending from whose perspective the narrative is being constructed.

Keywords: evidence, knowledge, sports history



Introduction

No fully informed debate on sport can take place without reference to the historical dimension. If we want to know where we are going it is useful to know where we have been. In simple terms history provides the benchmarks for measuring progress or, conversely, the lack of it. We cannot properly study contemporary sport without a sense of history for the sporting past helped shape the sporting present and, by implication, the sporting future. All sports have some ‘inheritance from the past’ (Polley, 2007: 12), be it rules, governing bodies, styles of play, competitions or equipment, none of which are totally reinvented every time you go out to play.

The role of the sports historian is to set straight the sporting record: not just the basic ‘sportifacts’ confirming who won what, where and by how many, but, more importantly, offering an explanation of why and when sport changed [and also why change sometimes did not occur] and how it has arrived at a particular situation.

In doing this sports historians often borrow concepts from other disciplines, especially when they are investigating a historical topic in the light of modern developments in social science theory. However history, including sports history, can lay claim to some key concepts that it has made its own, in particular the duality of *continuity* and *change* as well as *heritage*. Sports historians are interested in explaining why some sports of the pre-industrial period, folk football being a prime example, continue to be played into the twenty-first century (Hornby, 2008) but that others such as stowball, pall mall and hawkey have disappeared from the scene (Collins, Martin and Vamplew, 2005). They want to trace the process of how some sports changed in character and structure so that, whilst maintaining their basic theme, they have been accepted by a modern audience as with cricket’s limited overs and twenty versions. They also wish to explain the development of new sports, often associated with technological change such as the coming of bicycle racing, speedway and sky-diving, but also the long residuals associated with sport, the unholy trinity of sex, alcohol and gambling.

Heritage is another historical concept. It can cover a wide spectrum

of visual and material culture including defunct and nostalgic sports sites, statues and other effigies, streets and stadia named after sporting celebrities, photographs and film, ephemera and memorabilia. Sports heritage has also become part of our speech in that sporting terminology has entered the vernacular as with 'throwing in the towel' from prize-fighting, the 'rub of the green' from golf, and 'stickler for the rules' from early wrestling in which judges used sticks to assess if a competitor's shoulders were pinned to the floor.

Approaches and Methodology

Within methodology there are dichotomies between those who opt for quantification and those who prefer a qualitative approach; between those who seek information at the aggregate level (often the quantifiers) and those who look at the individual (mainly the non-statistical historians); between those who apply theory and theoretical concepts and those who are more empirically focussed; and between those who pose modern questions in an historical setting and those who try to understand what mattered to those in the past.

Statistics provide a quantified basis for historical assertions. Sport is full of statistics but to batting averages and record times should be added such things as the proportion of players from a particular ethnic background or the gender balance of sports club membership. As elsewhere in the social sciences, argument by example is no substitute for the use of hard, quantified data: measurement can allow historians to be more precise in their answers (Cronin, 2009). Even to postulate that a relationship is positive or negative is not enough; we need to know the strength of the relationship not just its direction. The great contribution of the quantifiers is to help determine what is typical. A biography of Harry Vardon, the Tiger Woods of his day, contributes to the understanding of a champion golfer troubled by tuberculosis and marital difficulties (Howell, 1991). This is interesting but more useful as sports history if it is contextualised into asking if tuberculosis was an industrial disease of professional golfers and whether the marriage problems emanated from the time away from home making a living as an elite professional designing courses and playing in championships. Staying with golf, if you

study 3,000 professional golfers you are able to say something about the average age at appointment and retirement, the length of career, the degree of mobility between clubs, and the modal level of earnings (Vamplew, 2008a). Yet this strength might be seen as a weakness by researchers more concerned with the experience of the individual. In seeking to generalise, aggregation can marginalise those who do not fit the standard pattern, those who are statistical outliers.

In his seminal work Booth (2005) takes sports historians to task for a failure to engage more extensively with theory and criticises those who simply gather facts to tell a story. Yet Booth can be too harshly judgemental and appears unwilling to accept that approaches other than his own can still be useful. Although (very) few sports historians discuss theoretical issues, many implicitly do use theory, or more precisely, theoretical concepts, to help them frame questions. Booth (2010) acknowledges that theoretical frameworks such as modernisation, hegemony, feminism, discourse and textualism have been embraced in this way. Yet there is a worry that these concepts are being applied uncritically. The concept of the 'body' pervades a corpus of writing by sports historians but how many of them are clearly aware of the subtleties and complexities of Foucault's work on the knowledge-body-power trilogy? Booth plays down the possibility that the theory being applied could be erroneous. However, no theory is immutable. If the facts do not fit the theory then the historian should check the facts again and, if still convinced they are correct, then the theory should be modified. Historians must not only be prepared to use theory, they also must be prepared to adapt it. Until substantiated by evidence theories are just competing hypotheses. They might aid our understanding but they do not explain a situation completely. Empirical support is a necessary concomitant for accepting any hypothesis.

Generally sports historians have applied the theories of other disciplines to historical material rather than develop theories of their own. Two notable exceptions are the overarching theories to explain the development of sport put forward by Guttmann and Szymanski. Guttmann (1978; 2004) postulated sports history's own version of 'modernisation' in which he argued that seven features of modernisation

could be used to measure how near a sport at any time in its history was to being modern. He saw such modernisation as being a cultural expression of an increasingly scientific world. First modern sport was secular with no religious reasons for participation. Second, it should demonstrate equality: theoretically everyone should have an opportunity to compete and conditions of competition should be the same for all contestants. Third, it introduced the idea of specialisation: everyone who wanted to could join in folk football, a sport in which there were no sharply defined roles, but the emphasis on achievement in modern sport brought in specialisation both within a sport and between sports. Fourth came rationalisation, in particular the development of rules which in primitive societies were often considered 'divine instructions'. God-given rituals, not to be tampered with by mere humans; in contrast non-secular modern sports have been invented and have written rules. Even more rationalisation came via the development of coaching and sports science. His fifth feature was bureaucratisation. Almost every major modern sport has its national and international organisation which have developed extensive bureaucracies to establish universal rules for their sport and oversee their implementation. These were not required when there were no written rules. Sixth was quantification by which modern sports transform every athletic feat into statistics. Following on from quantification is his seventh point, the modern emphasis on records.

In the early eighteenth century a movement began in Britain which involved the formation of clubs for many purposes not least sports such as cricket, golf, pugilism and horseracing. They enabled people with a common purpose to come together, provided a basis for agreeing common rules and regulations, created a framework for competitive interaction, and secured a location for participation and sociability. Szymanski (2008a, 2008b) has argued that modern British sport emerged from these new forms of associativity which developed autonomously in Britain following the retreat of the state from the control of associative activities. This was in contrast, he contends, to the situation in countries such as France and Germany where club formation continued to require the explicit or implicit approval of the state. Here modern sports developed in ways consistent with or even in the service of, the objectives of the state,

most notably the need to maintain military preparedness.

To return to the point about theory not being immutable, although Guttmann's model has stood the test of time it has not done so in its entirety. There have been modifications which suggest that his model required more input on press publicity, commercialisation and professionalisation and a recent major criticism has been made of his use of Weberian concepts (Adelman, 1986; Vamplew and Kay, 2003; Tomlinson and Young, 2010). Symanski's critics (Riess, 2008; Krüger, 2008; MacLean, 2008; Nathaus, 2009), acknowledge the ambition of the analysis but suggest missing elements and alternative causal factors. They argue that more evidence is required to support the hypothesis; that he should have looked further back in time for his European material; that he failed adequately to address the issue of class; and that he understated the role of commercialisation.

Sports historians can approach the content of their research in two main ways. Issues of current interest can be taken and it can be asked whether these applied in the past. Historians might consider body performance in Victorian sport, whether private ownership of sports clubs raised any problems in Edwardian sport, or how sport coped in the past with economic recession. Here there is a possibility of applied history with the past offering advice to the present. The other approach is to ask what sport meant and what aspects of sport mattered during the time period being studied. Hence what might be looked at is the Scottish Football Association's worries about disguised professionalism in the early 1890s or President Roosevelt's concern with violence in American college football. Here the past is being understood on its own terms. Nevertheless it can still be analysed using modern concepts or theories.

Evidence

Booth (2005: 81, 210) maintains that sport history generally remains 'very firmly anchored to a bedrock of empiricism' and criticises sports historians' 'slavish devotion to sources and evidence'. However unless there is some evidence from the past there can be no sports history. Nevertheless it should be acknowledged that there is a danger that a totally empirical approach can result in the building up of far too much

detail so that no patterns or explanations can be advanced. This is sometimes the case with the enthusiastic, non-academic historian amassing facts about their favourite team or player, but even then it can provide information with which to test ideas and hypotheses. Many writers too may offer 'history by example' in which statements are illustrated by pertinent examples but the reader should query whether the examples are representative or the most interesting. Readers also need to be aware that some researchers might follow the concept of what could be termed 'reverse research' in which the search is solely for evidence that will justify pre-determined views.

History is an empirically-based, interpretive social science. What historians do is utilise evidence in such a way as to create 'cumulative plausibility' so that readers are increasingly convinced by the argument (Holt, 2000: 50). History is thus dependent on evidence though it is important for sports historians to interrogate their sources so as to assess their authenticity and validity. Historians should be aware that archives are sites of power that privilege some information above others. What evidence is collected and what is saved can be functions of power in past and present society. Hence subordinate groups – usually people who do not keep diaries, are not interviewed, and are too often nameless – do not always get their voice 'heard' in historical documents. A case in point is an inquiry by the Agenda Club (1912) into the welfare of golf caddies in Edwardian Britain which took evidence from golf club secretaries but not from a solitary caddie. Booth (2006: 97) has shown that all references to the alleged misconduct of Australian swimming icon Dawn Fraser during the Tokyo Olympics have been physically cut from the archives of the Australian Swimming Union. Similarly photographs can be doctored, newspapers can be beholden to the political views of their proprietor, oral testimony may be affected by false memory, and committee minutes can hide the intensity of a debate.

Prior to television newspapers were 'the great instrument of popular communication' (Hill, 2006a: 121), and sports historians have placed great, perhaps undue, reliance on them as a source for reconstructing the history of sport by dint of match reports, details of AGMs, and interviews with players. However, Hill for one has stressed that the press should be

seen as a text to be interpreted rather than as a factual source to be accepted. Indeed some aspects of reportage are on a par with inventing tradition: adding anecdotes, selecting facts and forwarding opinion can help sell newspapers but tarnish them as a reliable, straightforward source material. As sportswriter Koppett has pointed out journalists write tomorrow's news not history (Booth, 2005: 90).

Historians should always ask three or four questions of any primary source material. When was it produced? What was the authority of the person producing it? Why was it produced? And what is its code? It is important to know if a document was contemporary to the event being investigated or one produced some time later with the benefit of hindsight. It is important to know if the author of the material had some expert knowledge or insider information and whether they were carrying any value judgements in their cultural baggage. It is important to know whether there were any hidden agendas lying behind the overt reason for the production of a document. It is also important to know the terminology which is employed.

Sports have changed over time and a description of a game or sporting event today might be almost incomprehensible to spectators of yesteryear; and, of course, the reverse. Ideas and philosophies can also change over time. A case in point is the perceived relationship between sport and alcohol. Today it is recognised that alcohol depresses the nervous system, impairs both motor ability and judgement, reduces endurance, and, as a diuretic, can cause dehydration, none of which are conducive to sports performance. In the past, however, the drinking of alcohol, particularly ales and porters, was positively encouraged as a perceived aid to strength and stamina. In the 1880s adverts professing the fitness-aiding qualities of alcohol were common and even in the interwar years Bass advertised its beers as health and fitness promoting (Collins and Vamplew, 2002). Then there are the changing definitions of what constituted an 'amateur' and what a 'professional'. These used to be social not economic concepts. In rowing, for example, 'Gentlemen' could row against each other for money prizes and remain amateur, but working men were automatically labelled non-amateur (Vamplew, 2004: 185-187).

Is the person responsible for producing the material they any value

judgements in their baggage? For example, on the drug debate are they an official, an athlete, a convicted athlete, a chemist, a doctor, a member of the public, a member of the IOC. Whatever their position it is likely that their standpoint is not a neutral one and researchers must be aware of this when assessing the value of their statements.

It is important to know if there were any hidden agenda lying behind the overt reason for the production of a document. In the 1890s the Americans set up a Baseball Commission to decide when the game had originated in America. It decided that it was invented by Abner Doubleday at Cooperstown in 1839. Three things should be noted. First it is rare that a game can be invented at a particular point in time by any one individual: most games have long antecedents. Second, it was convenient to use Doubleday's name as the originator as he was a Civil War hero with whom few would take issue. Finally, the Commission was a political one with the task of showing that baseball did not emerge (as it really did) out of rounders which suffered the dual disadvantage of being not only a girl's game but also a British one (Block, 2005)!

Finally if you take on sports history research you need to know the code i.e. the language and terminology of the sport under review. Every sport has its own concepts and terms impenetrable except to the initiated. Who but a pigeon fancier would know that a 'race ring' is what is clipped to a bird's leg before an event or, to maintain an ornithological theme, how many outside golf appreciate that an 'albatross' is three shots under par in golf?

Traditionally sports historians, like other historians, have relied on written sources for their evidence, among them minute books, letters, diary entries, official reports, and especially newspaper columns. In recent years these have, however, been supplemented by new sources: oral and email interviews, visual sources such as photographs, film and art works; ethnographic ones where sports history is explored by site visits; and others where material culture is subjected to historical examination. Yet, as with more conventional sources, these need to be interrogated and interpreted.

Oral history can provide a personal perception of events and what they meant to particular people, but they can go back only as far as living

memory. Moreover there are the dangers of false and selective memory, the random survival of those involved, and the danger of hindsight being employed. However, in producing material not available from other sources, oral recollection can give life to dry historical evidence.

Huggins (2008: 327) has appealed for a more effective exploitation of visual material by sports historians for 'to exclude the visual is to reject a key area of human [sporting] experience'. Photographs have often been used by sports historians to illustrate points they were making, but they can also become the focus of the research itself as in Osmond's (2010) socio-political interpretation of the iconic picture of the 1968 black power salute at the Mexico Olympics in which he gave due credence to the white Australian athlete, Peter Norman, who shared the podium with black Americans Tommie Smith and John Carlos. Osmond points out that the captioning, positioning and accompanying text all have an explanatory and/or interpretive role. Some versions omit the white runner altogether! Both film and photograph confirm the very existence of the past with film having the added dimension of movement, the body in action being a central feature of sport. Early documentary film from Edwardian Britain has allowed historians to see how sport was actually played and shown the overt composition of the crowd (Toulmin, 2006); Huggins (2007) has looked at how interwar newsreels showed women's sport through the male gaze; and in the antipodes Headon (1999) has studied how Australian sport was presented in silent movies. But again the visual evidence, like all other forms, has to be interrogated. When researching their book on the relationship between sport and alcohol, Collins and Vamplew (2002: 6-7) found that not all inn signs apparently depicting sport actually had a sporting heritage. Many bears, bulls, falcons and greyhounds represented the coats-of-arms of the local nobility rather than animals of sport.

Some postmodernists have suggested that fiction could be a valuable source as it was a cultural force that shaped how people understood the world around them (Hill, 2006b). Yet sports historians have been reluctant to use such sources, viewing them as unreliable and subjective. Nevertheless novels, particularly those written within the period being studied, can cast light on the context within which sport took place

(Johnes, 2007b). Literary texts can add colour and give insights into matters on which conventional sources are opaque, in particular the role of sport in everyday life. They can also bring in the passion and emotion of sport, something lacking in most academic histories.

Occupying the middle ground between the fiction of the novel and overtly factual accounts are autobiographies which often contain fictive elements and as such, despite being ‘probably the most substantial body of published material on the history of sport’ (Taylor, 2008: 470), have been regarded by most sports historians as an imperfect source of information. Nevertheless these self-narratives do purport to relate to real experiences and are not written in cultural isolation. Hence, at a minimum, they can provide atmosphere, but often they can act as vehicles of subjective identity and self-representation which enables the historian to give meaning to a sporting career. In aggregate the sum of the parts may also allow something to be said about the sporting culture in which the players operated.

Post-modern sports historians argue that all sources are biased, all of them distort or filter the truth (whatever that might be), and all of them need interpretation. Indeed Booth (2005: 30) believes that all ‘facts are propositional statements about the nature of reality’ at its extreme post-modern sports history is almost a nihilistic rejection of a subject in which no information can be trusted. A more moderate version would suggest two lessons for all sports historians, both of which are already operated by the better practitioners. First they should continually interrogate the archive so as to assess their sources carefully and certainly defend any privileging of material (Johnes, 2007a). Second they should accept that there are different versions of events depending from whose perspective the narrative is being constructed: historical perspective is contested terrain with a plurality of meanings.

Although historians deal in facts, quite often these facts turn out to be percentage likelihood, reasoned speculations, or even personal bias – sometimes consciously so, more often a subconscious product of their background. Evidence is an issue but so is the historian who, it is often forgotten, has a personal relationship with the subject which can be influenced by upbringing, education and politics. Here indeed is a danger

of ‘reverse research’. We need greater reflexivity within the discipline: ‘an awareness that historians play creative roles in the production and presentation of history’ Booth (2005: 211). Historians should be more open with their value judgements and acknowledge how subjectivity affects their approach and narrative.

Conclusion

Sports history is dependent upon information, but this cannot always be relied upon. Too often the subject has suffered from false information and omitted information as well as partial information and imperfect information.

Sports myths are a prime example of false information that develops as nostalgia clouds memory. Much of what appears to be historical evidence is actually recycled without being re-searched. It simply becomes accepted over time as the ‘truth’, but often it is no more than conventional wisdom which falls apart when subjected to serious historical research. What can also occur is the deliberate invention of tradition in which a false continuity with the past is claimed and evidence to the contrary ignored or wilfully misinterpreted. So there are so-called traditional sports created for commercial or nostalgic reasons or, the reverse, the attempt to invent a history as with the Baseball Commission. Or the attempt with rugby to invent the origins of the sport so as to separate it from working-class folk football (Collins, 2005). Then there is history with omissions. Sports museums are ‘the public face of sports history’ (Vamplew, 1998: 279) and these can be the best places to replicate the performance, drama, romance, passion and emotion of sport but unfortunately too often they have catered to the nostalgia market and, in doing so, perpetuated myths, lacked historical objectivity and subtlety of argument, failed to contextualise artefacts, eschewed the controversial, and had an obsession with winners and winning. Additionally there has been a concentration on sport that was competitive, adult and a male-dominated activity (Vamplew, 1998). And then there are the ‘official’ histories, authorised or commissioned by a governing body or the like. Here the criticism is both of omission and commission: the funders are told what they want to hear and a spin is often put on controversial issues.

Celtic F. C.'s approved histories, for example, make much of the club being founded in 1888 to raise money to feed poor Catholics in the east end of Glasgow, but they never mention that within a decade Celtic had become a limited liability company and no longer made charitable donations (Kay and Vamplew, 2010). Finally we have the most common situation of imperfect or partial information with which this paper has been mainly concerned.

Sports history, correctly practised, is a counter to nostalgia, myth and invented tradition. It can be considered the sports memory of a nation: without sports history there is sporting amnesia. It can set straight the sporting record but also it can explain why some things changed and why continuities also occurred. History's great contribution to sports studies is the time dimension. It provides the benchmarks for measuring progress and change (or the lack of it). It can help us appreciate the difference between trend and fluctuation and realise that not everything seen as 'important' in sport need have a permanent influence or that everything in modern sport is new.

Of course sports historians offer only an interpretation of the past. Apart from 'sportifacts' there is no absolute truth in sport history. History written on the basis of archived material should not be classified as fiction, but the past that it reveals may not be the whole truth. Increasingly it has been recognised that we can have history from different perspectives, involving diverse interrogations and interpretations of the source material. Sports history is a contested terrain with different views of the same situation. And any findings should be made with caution rather than certainty, respecting the point that historical knowledge must always be provisional.

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