

Sport and the Working Classes

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Class or Classes? - The difficulties of dealing with the notion of a working class

It is convenient and relevant to look at British sport from the point of view of the middle-class or working-class participant, but there are, of course, dangers in making such a neat dividing line. Firstly, it means assuming a cut-off point between the classes, whereas, in fact, there is a large area of overlap between them. Furthermore, it does not allow for movement between the two, whereby someone born of, say, working-class parents leads an entirely middle-class existence. Hargreaves [95/6] warns of these traps, stating that the most dangerous thing is to see the working classes as a homogeneous group: tastes, attitudes and, importantly income differ from the lower to the upper working classes quite considerably. It is a matter of statistical fact, for instance, that the lower working classes have a far higher involvement in watching televised sport and are more inclined to gamble on sports than the upper working classes. Differences such as this within the classes necessitate caution when we deal with statistics, particularly in terms of contemporary issues, for class boundaries have now become more blurred than ever before.

Similarly, there are dangers of neglecting differences and correspondences between men and women within the working classes. Hargreaves [103] claims that women are 'grossly under-represented in most of the better-known sports'. There is sometimes a tendency to lose sight of statistics for women amidst overall figures, although it might surprise many observers, particularly from outside Britain, to know that gambling on football [the football pools] is as popular with women as with men in the UK. However, the picture of female under-representation in sport and in sports administration is certainly changing.

In attempting to differentiate between working class and middle class, the question of private and state education gives us a convenient point of departure, particularly in dealing with the nineteenth century and the formative years of state education. For this reason, reference to the working classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain will mean those who received a state education or no education at all. The misleadingly-named public [i.e. private] school system afforded the time, space and encouragement for middle-class boys and a small number of girls to devote themselves to a life of sport and recreation, a trend that continued at university and then at the sports and country club. Yet, as we shall see later, the same opportunities were certainly not available to the sons and daughters of the labouring classes.

However, the very fact that we hear rugby league referred to as a 'truly working-class sport' implies the existence of a sports culture for the less privileged. We know, too, that sports such as rugby, cricket, football and horse-racing appeal to members of all

classes. So how and why has working-class involvement in sport traditionally differed from that of the middle-classes? For our answers, we must go back to the latter stages of the nineteenth century, and to the development of the notions of rational recreation, broken-time payments, and to the introduction of schooling for all.

Rational recreation

It was as a result of middle-class fears over urban extremism that the idea of rational recreation was born. For decades, the bourgeoisie had felt uncomfortable at stirrings among the working class, and there was a belief that the old-fashioned respect of the commoner for authority and for the Church had worn dangerously thin. After 1850 there was a climate of what Holt calls 'moral panic', and a workers' equivalent to muscular Christianity was sought, to occupy the minds and bodies of the restless proletariat. Holt expresses it thus: [1989: 136/7]

The very idea of a play discipline would have seemed absurd, yet this is what a growing band of bourgeois idealists advocated during the second half of the century. Sports were to play a major part alongside the provision of parks, museums, libraries and baths in the creation of a healthy, moral workforce.... Fear of urban radicalism, above all, was what galvanised the rich into thinking about the poor and gave weight to the wider programme of moral reform and education that was proposed by a vigorous minority of evangelicals and idealistic political economists.

This programme became known as [rational recreation](#), and its effect was probably felt keenest, although not exclusively, amongst the young. The greatest practical difference that rational recreation made in the lives of adult men [and, in consequence, to the lives of their wives and families], was through the arrival of the sports and social club. Many of these were attached to local churches. Aston Villa and Everton football clubs are famous examples, but there were also work-based clubs, such as those at the railway towns of Swindon and Crewe, which provided an environment for recreation and, of course, drinking after working hours. The most popular club sports were football, fishing and cricket, although there was a considerable interest in rugby and athletics, and indoor games such as darts and billiards had a strong following. The gambling lust was catered for in pastimes such as dog-racing, [greyhounds and whippets were the most popular dogs] and pigeon racing. Many of these sports have, to the English native, a 'northern feel' about them, and, indeed, the social and sports clubs became an integral part of everyday life in the great working-class conurbations of the Midlands [Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Leicester] and the North [Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Newcastle, Sunderland, Sheffield, Bradford]. Out of these social clubs grew many of the great names in twentieth-century professional sport: the rugby league clubs of Wigan and St Helens and the football clubs of Liverpool, Manchester United, Bolton Wanderers and Sheffield United. Even the smaller mining or textile towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire had their semi-professional rugby or football clubs by the end of the nineteenth century: names such as Blackburn, Burnley, Oldham, Leigh, Hunslet, Dewsbury, Huddersfield and Featherstone are imbued with an undeniable flavour of Saturday afternoons in the North, a flavour which has lingered and been savoured for over a hundred years.

Broken Time Payments

The tradition of Saturday play came about partly as a result of the death of [the Saint Monday tradition](#), but also because of the regulation of working hours, which meant

that Saturday came to be accepted as a half day for workers in almost all professions. The vigour of the Lord's Day Observance Society [LDOS] ensured that Sunday play was kept to a minimum, and there was certainly no professional sport on the Sabbath, so Saturday became, almost by default, 'match day'. Middle-class sport had never suffered from a lack of time, and, now that the running of business and factories was being handed over to managers, the successful businessman found more and more leisure time on his hands. Of course, the strictures of societies such as the LDOS affected the working class above all, for they were obliged to use public facilities, which were easier to regulate. Those with private means could retire behind the walls and fences of their private clubs to play golf or tennis.

For gentlemen with time at their disposal, attending or participating in cricket matches which lasted several days was feasible, and a day's golf was certainly no hardship. Yachting trips or excursions to climb and ski in the Alps demanded time and money, as did hunting and angling for game fish. The choice for the athletic working man was limited to sports which could be fitted into the time-frame of a Saturday afternoon and which would not make too much of a hole in the weekly wage-packet. It was from this need to keep the family income steady that the issue of broken time came about. Broken-time payments, for cricketers, footballers and rugby players, were small payments by way of compensation for those who missed work in order to compete. Clubs made these payments in order to secure the services of the best players, and claimed that they did not constitute professionalism. Amateurs, that is to say, middle-class teams whose players generally had no need of broken-time payments, disagreed, and this became the catalyst for the schism in the game of rugby in 1895. Broken time was an issue which divided sport in Britain, and which truly set class against class in an overt and acrimonious manner.

Gentlemen Only – Sports Discriminating Against the Working Classes

Tennis

While tennis requires a minimum of equipment and might have been a sport in which the working classes could participate, the courts were almost exclusively in private, middle-class clubs and the sport thus did not catch on among the workers. Certainly, tennis is more popular as a pan-class activity nowadays, mostly as a result of television exposure, but the administration is still notoriously middle class. There are remarkably few black tennis players in Britain, and one might assume that it will be overshadowed by athletics, football and cricket until Britain produces a men's or women's champion. The last British man to win Wimbledon, Fred Perry, did so in 1936! [And was then obliged to play abroad because the tennis establishment shunned him; his crime was that he turned professional.]

Athletics

Athletics was a cheap and easy pastime, and there was enough public ground available in most cities for running and jumping to be a possibility for anyone with the desire to be physically active. Running clubs sprang up around the country from the 1880s: unfortunately, they fell foul of middle-class prejudice, and athletics at this level was doomed to live in the shadow of the university amateurs for decades to come. The amateur clubs had come about as a reaction to pedestrianism [professional running races], which was a sport notorious both for fixing and for outrageous theatrics; some of the pedestrian stars would turn up in bizarre fancy dress, and more attention might well be paid to the show than to the races. [In this respect there are parallels between the pedestrianism of the nineteenth century and wrestling, which was popular in working-

class clubs and halls around the country from the 1950s to the 1970s. Although wrestling has all but died out as a spectator sport in the UK, the glamorous and preposterously stage-managed American version has a small but fanatical television following.]

Broken time became an issue in athletics, and the refusal of the amateurs to admit any workers to their clubs caused bitterness for decades. Nowadays, though, the sport is pan-class, and its spread owes much to the success enjoyed by Black athletes from unprivileged backgrounds such as Daley Thompson, Linford Christie, Colin Jackson and Tessa Sanderson. Trust funds and openly-acknowledged prize money mean that successful athletes can now be full-time professionals. The sport is successful on television and equipment is relatively cheap, making it a popular choice in schools.

Rowing

Rowing as recreation was undoubtedly a middle-class, university-based pastime. Professional, working-class crews had raced for well over a hundred years on the Thames, and continued to be popular with working-class spectators. The sport underwent a boom in the late nineteenth century and popular support grew around the country, [Dodd: 230], but it was never really a working-class sport in terms of participation. The crews that raced were comprised of 'watermen', professional boatmen who took time off from their work to race. As a recreational activity it was and is a middle-class pursuit. The only time that rowing captures the public's imagination these days is for the annual Oxford versus Cambridge boat race and, to a lesser extent, for Henley Regatta: both of these events smack very much of privilege even now.

Golf

Golf was reserved almost exclusively for middle-class participation in England, if not in Scotland, although artisans' clubs did eventually allow a limited amount of play for the less privileged. Brailsford [1992: 104] says that, 'the only role for the worker was as club servant'. [Golf has a wider popularity base these days](#), and is very telegenic. However, there is still a certain snobbery associated with the game, and the companies who manufacture equipment have built a flourishing industry around the myth that good clubs mean good scores. When cheap golf clubs were produced to appeal to the less affluent player, they were an abysmal failure [Lowerson, 1989: 2: 210]. There are those who suggest that golf is the sport of the working-class man or woman with middle-class aspirations, epitomised by ownership of a time-shared holiday home next to a golf course in the Algarve. [In Scotland, 'the home of golf', working-class participation lacks this pretentious aspect.]

Horse-Racing

Horse-racing has always been a popular choice with the working-classes because of its symbiotic relationship with gambling. In the past, there have been attempts by some members of the administration [Vamplew, 1989: 216] to keep the sport exclusive. Royal patronage has led to the adoption of the sobriquet 'the sport of kings', but common sense prevailed, for without the money generated by the common punter, racing would not have survived. In the late nineteenth century, the sport threw up a number of working-class heroes among the ranks of its colourful jockeys, the most famous being Fred Archer, champion jockey for thirteen successive seasons from 1874. Television coverage and off-course betting have allowed the punter with neither the time nor the inclination to attend the race meeting itself to follow and bet on the horses. Nevertheless, horse racing is exclusive in the sense that active participation is

conducted in an ambience of aristocracy, and even the part-ownership of a horse is seen as a status symbol. Meetings at Cheltenham, Newmarket and, above all, Ascot, are events of some import on the social calendar, attracting those in the world of horses and those who merely wish to be seen in the company of those involved in the world of horses. Real ownership and the breeding of bloodstock are matters for millionaires. Yet it is a sport of real divides, for whilst the racecourse and the stud farm have the smell of money about them, an altogether different smell pervades the training ground, and the stable lads and lasses, grooms and all but the most successful jockeys are among the most poorly-paid professionals in the country.

Anyone Can Play

Cricket

By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, cricket had long been a game which appealed to the working classes, and could be played relatively cheaply on any bit of open ground which had a fairly flat, central area. Unfortunately, many towns did not have such areas for public use, and the talented working-class cricketer often had to play as a paid professional in an otherwise amateur, middle-class side. By the 1930s, the provision of public playing fields meant that those who wanted to play cricket could do so. Another difficulty, however, lay in the amount of time the games took, and, although the Lancashire League played a game that could be completed within a full Saturday, the cricketing establishment eschewed its teams and has continued to keep League cricket firmly in the position of second-class cousin to the middle-class, MCC-controlled, county game. Cricket has seen very few internationals come from the ranks of the Lancashire Leagues [although foreign players of high standing would sometimes play there until they had gained their residence requirement for playing in the county game] and yet the standard has always been high. S.E Barnes is considered one of the greatest bowlers of all time, but his name barely figures in the history books because he played much of his cricket in the League. League cricket was reviled and shunned from its inception and, like athletics, it can be considered a victim of middle-class disdain.

The lack of prestige associated with the Lancashire League, coupled with its very regional setting, eventually led to a high proportion of working-class support going to the county game [although, in its heyday between the wars, League cricket could attract crowds of up to 10,000]. Williams [134] claims that the 1930s signalled a boom time for cricket partly because of the high unemployment at the time, but quotes a surprising statistic; in a survey done in Liverpool in the 1930s, only ten per cent of boys listed cricket as a hobby. Presumably, the popularity of the new-fangled cinema and wireless and the fact that the city boasted two outstanding soccer teams accounted for this. Nowadays, it is still a sport with an air of middle-class privilege about it, and selectors, coaches and captains have traditionally been educated at Oxford or Cambridge. The current England team is unusual in that the captain and team coach both speak with decidedly northern accents [although the captain was at Cambridge], emphasising the grass-roots appeal of the game. Certainly, the cricketing establishment has had to accept that the sport is no longer a middle-class preserve, and the amount of coverage it gets in both the quality and popular press emphasises that its appeal is truly pan-class.

Television has no doubt played a large part in the revival in popularity of the sport amongst the masses, as has the introduction of the one-day version of the game. The travelling [barmy army](#) of lager-drinking, noisy supporters who follow the England team around the world are an indication, furthermore, that the young sports enthusiast has far more disposable income than at any time in the past. The class divides are now so

blurred that we would be hard-pressed to describe this enthusiastic but somewhat ill-mannered type of support as 'working-class', even though the majority of the barmy army are undoubtedly from the sorts of background which would once have put them into this category. However cautious we need to be in the use of class divisions in a contemporary setting, it is evident that watching cricket appeals to members of all social strata and both sexes and is one of the few sports with such a broad support-base. It is unfortunate for the game that private education is still the route followed by most of those who enter the game as professionals. The teenager with all-round sporting prowess at a state secondary school is far more likely to choose football or rugby, where financial rewards are far greater, for a career. Unless it can match the incentives offered by these sports, English cricket is likely to have a dwindling supply of talent coming into the game.

Angling

The other sport which has always appealed to both lords and labourers is fishing. There are two versions, with game fishing, both expensive and exclusive, the sport of the middle classes. Angling for coarse fish was cheap and, furthermore, in the atmosphere of nineteenth-century piety encouraged by the [Lord's Day Observance Society](#), it was impossible to control Sunday participation. In addition, the angling club which was not run by one of the church associations was invariably centred around the pub or social club, and drinking could be combined with fishing, thus ensuring its continued popularity: it was, for this reason, very male-dominated, for the new morality of the late Victorian era kept respectable women away from the pub and the social club.

There was, too, a strong socialist element about the sport, with many clubs calling themselves 'the brothers' [Lowerson, 1989: 1: 19]. It is still the most popular of sports in terms of participation [excluding walking]: stroll along the Bridgewater Canal early on a Sunday morning and you will pass an angler every five yards along some stretches. It has, however, failed to become a success as a spectator sport, for fairly obvious reasons, and therefore gets almost no television coverage.

Football Fever - Football and [working-class identity](#)

Soccer, or association football, was undoubtedly the biggest sport in terms of working-class involvement, at least from the 1890s on. Equipment was cheap, the rules were easy to learn, it could be played on sloping and uneven surfaces in almost all weathers, if necessary, and it had a tradition going back hundreds of years. Of course, not everybody played, but those who chose not to would almost certainly have been caught up in the spectator fever that saw crowds even at pre-1914 cup finals regularly draw over 100,000 spectators [Mason, 1989: 1: 152]. Between the wars, numbers reached a peak never to be repeated, with crowds of 60,000 for league matches between the top clubs being the norm, rather than the exception. As we have seen, the roots of the game were middle class, a product of the public-school penchant for re-organising and regulating team sports. But the advent of widespread professionalism turned it into a game for the worker, played by the worker. In terms of spectator appeal, Dunning [37] refers to a social mix even a hundred years ago, and it was certainly not uncommon then for women to attend.

From the turn of the century, however, the game became almost fully professional, and the vast majority of players were of humble, working-class origins. Many of the early professionals at teams such as Blackburn, Burnley and Sheffield United were Scots, tempted from the North by the possibility of relative prosperity as a professional footballer. It is still the most popular spectator sport. Average attendances in the Premier

League fall not far short of the thirty-thousand mark, and figures at a number of grounds are limited by the number of seats available rather than by the lack of support: Manchester United are able to fill their 55,000-capacity stadium whenever they play, as are other teams such as Arsenal, Newcastle, and Sunderland. Even the lowest-supported fully professional teams in England from the third division draw as much support as Legia Warsaw. Wherever there were workers, there was football. In England, if you live in a town near Leeds, for instance, the chances are that you will follow your home-town club, Bradford, Huddersfield, Halifax, Doncaster, Barnsley or Rotherham, rather than the 'glamour' club from the Premier League. Holt [166/7] sees this as due to a sense of civic pride and identity that grew out of the urban expansion which accompanied the industrial revolution. Within the space of a hundred years, Britain's population had shifted from being predominantly rural to predominantly urban, and there were hundreds of thousands of people with shallow roots and an ill-defined cultural identity. The football clubs gave them a sense of belonging which was missing from the life of the street or the factory.

Community pride, rather than regional bias, seems to be more usual in England, with the bitterest rivalry being local, rather than North/South [Bolton fans, for instance, may sing songs about 'cockney bastards' from the South, but their most venomous abuse is reserved for Manchester United, their infuriatingly successful neighbours]. Yet this love of the small-town club goes even deeper than a sense of community belonging. The big club in some countries appears to stand for the establishment, even for authority in a way which would have been anathema to the turn-of-the-century worker. Liverpool, Aston Villa, Everton, Newcastle, Manchester City, Arsenal and others grew from the same, working-class roots as teams such as Darlington, Wigan, Barnet and Scunthorpe of the Third Division. Some of these small teams have had their moments of success, others have remained in relative obscurity for a century or more, but all still have their partisans.

Shouting for your team in a rickety, windswept stadium, then drinking a few pints in the club and conducting a post-mortem on defeat or reliving a famous victory: this was the essence of Saturday afternoons in small town England and Scotland for decades. It lasted until the nineteen sixties, when the television boom and off-course betting gave working men something else to do on a Saturday afternoon. The seventies saw a switch in family values which meant that the football match no longer figured top of the list of Saturday priorities for many men, and the hooligan explosion of the late seventies and eighties further cut back the numbers of those prepared to endure cold fingers, poor toilet facilities [sometimes none for women] and a barrage of foul language in order to shout for their local team. The recent resurgence in the numbers attending football matches has come about as a result of safer and more comfortable grounds and the almost total disappearance of the hooligan problem. It has also, however, signalled a shift in the social backgrounds of those attending. Along with an increase in the numbers of women at matches, there are notably more middle-income people attending, and most clubs now have family stands, where parents accompanying children can sit in reserved accommodation. This is, in many ways, a welcome change, and the image of football has had a facelift over the last three years which would have been unimaginable as recently as the crisis-ridden nineteen-eighties, which saw many lifelong football fans give up going to the game in the wake of the disasters at Heysel and Hillsborough, among others. It has also, however, taken football away from its working-class origins, and there are many in the North who feel that the game has been usurped by the middle-class entrepreneur. This perhaps accounts in some measure for the fact that many youngsters in Lancashire and Yorkshire have switched their allegiance to rugby league, the other great working-class pastime of northern England. Certainly football in the nineteen-nineties is unlikely to provoke historians of the future to write in the terms Hargreaves chooses to describe football and rugby league at the turn of the century

[67].

Working class people stamped sports like football and rugby league with their own character and transformed them in some ways into means of values opposed to the bourgeois athletical tradition: vociferous partisanship, a premium on victory, a suspicion of and often a disdain for constituted authority a lack of veneration for official rules, a mutual solidarity as the basis of team-work, a preference for tangible, monetary rewards for effort and a hedonistic, 'vulgar' festive element, were all brought to sports.

Purely for the Proletariat - Rugby League and Boxing

Rugby League

If anything can be said to epitomise division in British sport it is rugby league. Since the formation of the Northern Union, in 1895, there has been a class split [working class = rugby league, middle class = rugby union], a regional split [league = northern, union = southern and midlands] and, significantly the league game has traditionally been professional whilst the union game was, until 1995, amateur. For many commentators, rugby league is *the* working-class sport but this is a limited, regional view, for it has never really extended beyond the northern counties of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cumbria and parts of Cheshire. Nevertheless, the formation of the breakaway Northern Union signalled rebellion against the administrative bullying of the middle-class elite who dominated sport at the end of the last century. The issue of broken-time payments was decisive, with workers playing for the northern teams unable to compete without compensation for missed labour hours. A stand was made, and the unforgiving administrators of the union game henceforward banned for life anyone who had any contact with the league game: it took a hundred years for union to accept the inevitable and allow professionalism. Interestingly, although the union game signalled middle-class privilege in Ireland and Scotland, it has traditionally been the workers' game in Wales, particularly among the coal-mining communities of the South. Rugby league's traditional ties with the working-class supporter are best illustrated in the symbolic sound of the hooter rather than the referee's whistle to end the game; the factory hooter was for many years the signal of the end of the working shift in the industrial towns of northern England.

Boxing

Rugby league, then, was too regionally-based to be the universal sport of the working classes. Eleven-a-side football was initially a middle-class invention which was gradually taken over by the masses, and, in any case, it has always found most favour among the skilled and semi-skilled labourers, rather than among the lower working classes. If there is a sport which could be considered working-class in the sense that its appeal cuts across the spectrum of the working classes and is spread geographically throughout the United Kingdom, then it is boxing. It is true that the first rules were formulated, as in other sports, by gentleman amateurs, and for a decade or two at the end of the last century there were competent boxers from among the privileged classes, but the turn of the century saw boxing dominated by the common man. Shipley [179] calls boxing, 'the most proletarian of all sports', but it has not always been democratic. Blacks could not box for a British championship until 1948, and there were still no black referees in 1987! Neither has boxing ever been a popular sport for women: the few fight promoters who do feature a women's contest on the bill usually see it as a novelty act, as do most of the spectators. Blacks now dominate boxing in England, if not in Ireland or Scotland,

and tend to come from among the working classes. Indeed, the sport has remained working class despite changes in the community which have affected opportunities, lifestyles, economics, attitudes, tastes, and pretensions. Shipley sums it up succinctly:

Boxing as a job has always appealed to manual workers. As miners, market porters, tailors' pressers and the like have become a smaller proportion of the labour force the number of professional boxers has shrunk. Boxing has remained a working-class sport. The growth of alternative forms of entertainment [greyhound racing, cinema, television] reduced boxing shows at local halls because they became unprofitable. The profitability of dance halls in the 1930s and 1940s suggests that masculine recreations were perhaps losing their hold. Suburbanisation and private motor cars have extended the boxing supporters' range, yet the sport has tenaciously claimed a sense of place. Boxers have always been seen as coming from a working-class community. The boxers are still so billed; whether the community remains is another matter.

Compulsory schooling from 1870 - Keeping Trouble Off The Streets

The push towards rational recreation which took place in the third quarter of the nineteenth century had its most noticeable effect on the young. The streets of Britain's industrial towns had become playgrounds for gangs of children, and there was concern at the fact that such a large proportion of Britain's population was, in effect, being educated on the street-corner: in addition, property was being damaged and traffic impeded. Holt [1989: 142] sees this as the main inspiration for the 1870 Education Act, saying, 'compulsory schooling was, of course, the single most important means of taming the young and clearing the streets'. It was also a means of providing rudimentary education of a sort that would benefit the worker later in life. Bedarida [156/7] contrasts the subjects studied at private and at state schools and the motivations behind the syllabus:

Although at Rugby in 1870, 17 out of 22 hours of study were devoted to the classics, reflecting an aristocratic view of culture, modern subjects that conformed to more material and bourgeois needs were gradually introduced: mathematics, science and modern languages.... In deep contrast to this world of education for rulers, organised teaching for the children of the lower classes was designed to instill obedience and acceptance of their lot, and to produce manual workers. The elementary syllabus aimed at teaching the rudiments needed for performing the basic tasks of an industrial society. Not that every door to the advancement of freedom through education was closed. The tremendous efforts made after 1870 resulted in the opportunity of a place in school for every child of every class. They created an education that was gratis and compulsory.

The motifs of obedience and order were evident in the recreational provision that was made at the state schools, which consisted of military style drilling [marching in unison, turning to the left and right when ordered to do so, and so on] and general exercise [jumping on the spot, legs apart then legs together, arms spread then by the sides, and so forth]. This was not a particularly fulfilling nor exciting way to give the children the fresh air and exercise which medical and moral opinion of the time demanded, and it was seen as a chore by most participants. This drilling was so transparently military that instructors were usually ex-army sergeants hired by the hour [Holt: 142], and one can

feel for the young working-class boy whose only escape from the dull, repetitive classroom chore was the drilling session.

Yet it was even worse for girls, and it was not uncommon for them to be excluded even from these drilling sessions; some held the view that girls could get enough exercise by cleaning out the home on a Saturday and thus had no need of additional recreation! This dismissive attitude to women and sport was to be a feature of their adult lives, too. Hargreaves [79] has this to say:

Women's almost total exclusion, in all but the most passive and subordinate capacity as helpers and spectators, from a valued, deeply meaningful part of working-class men's lives, signalled their inferiority; and it strongly reinforced all those other forces, cultural, economic, and political, which restricted their horizons and induced passivity.

It was not really until the 1950s, when changes in lifestyle and in disposable income saw the working classes buying household appliances such as washing machines and vacuum cleaners, that most working-class women were able to look upon recreational activity as a feasible and acceptable way of spending their time. Until that time, they were slaves to the home, and even the Saturday half-day which allowed the men to go to the sports and social club meant household chores for most girls and women. One of the rare forms of recreation they might enjoy was street dancing, popular in northern towns around the turn of the century, but this was restricted to holidays and major celebrations. Otherwise, relaxation might comprise 'sitting out' - sitting on the doorsteps and gossiping once the chores were finished and with the men safely at the club [Davies: 112/3]- or an occasional visit to the pub in the company of the menfolk.

Male Clubs

If there was little in the lifestyle of the working-class woman which could be considered conducive to health and fitness, men at least had a choice - drink, play, or drink and play, with the club as the focal point of whichever they chose. The exclusively male club was something which, from the 1880s, most men grew up with, for the sports and social clubs had their counterparts for younger men and boys. The Boys' Brigade, which Holt [138ff] describes as 'in tune with the growing militarism and imperialist sentimentality of the period,' was one example, and, despite its rather moralistic stance on recreation and national duty, it did at least give boys the chance to play organised games and go to camp. Similarly, the Boy Scouts [from 1908] attempted to combine military discipline with a fresh-air environment. Lowerson [1995: 281] believes, however, that this organisation missed its mark, attracting lower-middle class boys rather those that it targeted among the working classes: no doubt the vigorously uplifting tone of its tenets was of limited appeal to many of the boys.

Although the appeal of these various organisations was limited, there were other alternatives, for church-affiliated clubs, where boys could spend their time playing football rather than in any particularly religious activity were springing up around the country. Indeed, such was the appeal of cricket and football that even the state schools started allocating time for these pursuits from the mid-1880s. The new availability of organised recreation for the less privileged helps to explain the influx of professionals and the inevitable conflicts that this produced in what had been the amateur gentleman's sport of football towards the end of the century. When the former public schoolboys had first formed the F.A. in 1863, there was no real threat from outside their clique. Twenty-five years later, every self-respecting boy knew how to kick and head a football, and the more talented among them had begun to realise that this was an

opportunity to earn a living at something other than menial, manual labour. By the end of the century, football had lost its public-school image. Teams had been developing from churches, from factories, from boys organisations and from social clubs, and the gentlemen's teams found themselves swamped. Although the Corinthians and others continued to provide decent opposition for professional teams throughout the Edwardian era, sheer weight of numbers saw such teams become an idiosyncratic exception to what had become the province of the working-class man's Saturday afternoon entertainment.

Factory Sport - Benevolence From Above

Although there was still a spirit of rational recreation in working-class sport, it had taken new directions by the end of the century. The combination of benevolence from a 'kindly' ruling class and a desire for an orderly and healthy workforce had led to initiatives from factory owners such as the provision of after-hours sports clubs for the men and, albeit rarely, organised day-trips to the seaside or to the country. Some took their concern for the workers' welfare [and, undoubtedly for a more disciplined work ethic] even further, and the Cadbury's factory at Bournville broke new ground for a number of reasons: it provided housing for employees, took on the responsibility for their medical welfare, and provided recreational outlets for them and their children in a spirit of what has been termed 'benevolent despotism' [Holt: 143]. Indeed, such was the sense of organisation and community welfare at the industrial complex which developed on the site that women were even required to attend weekly swimming lessons, a chance to incorporate feminine hygiene into a routine of healthy recreation.

Such a level of organisation and opportunity was, however, the exception. For most working men, no significant change occurred to the sporting routine until the widespread provision of corporation playing fields in the 1930s. Sport was, of course, expanding in terms of size and importance. From the 1880s to the outbreak of the First World War, active sport had shifted from its position as an occasional pastime of a minority to a regular occupation of the majority. Heavier urban concentrations of population had created both a need for recreational outlets and the raw material for the team-sports which the public schools had made so popular. The increased income and leisure time available to the working classes, together with the improved railway and tram network, meant that teams could travel. Hargreaves [58] also cites technological advancement as a catalyst in the expansion of sport, referring to the improvement in design [and fall in price] of the bicycle:

There was similar progress made in the manufacture of ice-skates, footballs and football boots, protective cricket equipment and so on. One further great advance which helped to kindle enthusiasm for sport, and for gambling, whose flames needed little fanning, was the development of a working-class sporting press. Brailsford recalls the era of the first Saturday night sports papers [1991: 150].

The electric telegraph was by then bringing the result of the game to the public much more quickly, and by the closing years of the century, the new mass football following had its special Saturday night sports papers [often pink, green, or buff, according to local taste!] appearing on the streets within the hour at the end of play.

From the 1930s, when local councils began to accept that they needed to provide playing fields if the populace was to exercise its excess energies in an orderly manner, the benevolence of the factory and the necessity of the social club began to decline, the former dramatically, the latter gradually. The drinking aspect of the work-based club was

responsible for its continued survival, keeping a tenacious hold on the working man's bar-room loyalties, even if he chose a different location for his physical recreation. The social clubs' football teams did survive the changes, however, and until the end of the nineteen sixties, when there was still a mining industry in the North-east, the local football leagues of Wearside and Teeside were littered with the names of teams with an appended 'CW', standing for 'Colliery Welfare'. The disappearance of the industry, the social clubs and the football teams has not meant that football has died out in the region - far from it - but it does indicate a shift in lifestyles which for some has signalled the end of Britain's true working-class culture. This can be summed up in Ferguson's lament on football in Cowdenbeath, once a thriving Scottish mining community with a locally popular, if not particularly successful football team. The industry has gone, and the football team is on its last legs. There is humour in the author's comments, but sadness prevails [p.16].

Often not many more than two hundred spectators huddle in a ground whose broken terraces are full of eerie echoes of a tempestuous and passionate past with more than just its share of moments of glory..., the crowds are so sparse that before the game they announce over the tannoy the names of the fans to the players instead of the other way round.... Clubs like Cowdenbeath, which have faced extinction several times, may not last much longer. These twilight teams with a once-great past are regarded as a dragging anchor on the Scottish football ship of state. There are those who would like to cut them loose.

Working-Class Sports Culture in the 1990s

Despite all the changes that have taken place over the last three hundred years, there are certain constants. Elements of what we might today consider to be working-class sport and recreation have their parallels in the pre- and post-Puritan festive culture of the seventeenth century.

Alcohol

Alcohol, for instance, is an integral part of sport, just as it was integral to the pagan feast day or Christian holiday in the past. Nowadays, however, working-class drink culture means more than just getting drunk at a festive event, although there are certainly occasions when this still seems to be frequent - Wales versus England rugby matches are one example, but many of those who attend, particularly the England supporters, are by no means from a working-class background. The relationship between drinking and sporting activity tends to be more peripheral nowadays: groups of football supporters watch *Sky Sports* in the pub when they do not have tickets for the match; bowls, darts and pool teams are affiliated to pubs; people meet up for a drink before or after the game; cricket matches feature beer tents and bars to feed the appetites of the 'barmy army'. Certainly, social drinking is important to the working-class sports spectator and player. Yet the most significant alcoholic presence in the world of sport is through advertising, which, although not restricted to the traditionally working-class sports, has infiltrated every sphere of the most popular games. Bowls competitions are sponsored by breweries [Bass], football teams are sponsored by breweries [Newcastle, Glasgow Rangers, Chelsea, Nottingham Forest, Liverpool], the rugby league championship is sponsored by a brewery [Stones], and football's premier league championship is sponsored by a brewery [Carling]. Given the money that such advertising brings to these sports, drinking, it seems, is just as important to the survival of the working man's recreational activity as ever it was.

Gambling

Gambling, too, has the same hold it had in the past. Television and off-course betting have meant that its format has changed, and the family' football pools have been accorded a measure of respectability to the activity, but however the bet is placed, the possibility of the big win is still part of the working-class escapist dream. Hargreaves [97/8] sees gambling, and, above all, televised sport as central to defining modern working-class culture, and it is true that the armchair has replaced the terraces or the racetrack for many sports enthusiasts. Some sports which have small but passionate followings have traditionally owed their existence to the gambling sub-culture which surrounds them: pigeon fancying, greyhound racing and bowls are all betting sports which may or may not survive the changes in society and in working-class habits which the television age has brought with it. If they are to flourish, then they need to arouse the interest of the sponsors, notably the breweries, and the circle of alcohol, gambling and sport will once more be complete.

Violence and Television

The other aspect of festive culture which has survived to the present day is that of violence, but the modern passion is for the boxing spectacular rather than for cruel sports involving animals. Boxing has changed, however, to the extent that commentators on the sport lament the effect of television, which has brought in money and helped to attract a wider audience, but which has also seen the very nature of the sport manipulated to suit the armchair-highlights fan. Shipley [110] sees television as a dangerous intrusion which has seriously altered the shape and appeal of boxing.

Its presentation by this means, however, has two serious faults. First, as Roland Barthes wrote, 'a boxing match is a story which is constructed before the eyes of the spectator', it has a flow of action which shapes the whole, and the perpetual editing of contests, both amateur and professional which are not shown live, has trivialised the sport. Such commercial packaging ruins the story and almost eliminates pure endeavour, an important element in the history of boxing. Secondly, the producers of boxing on television love a winner and abhor a loser, a feeling which has never been natural within the boxing arena.... Television encourages boxers to drop craft because producers assume that viewers prefer knockdowns, and the machine in the living room has had a recent tendency to reduce the artistry in boxing.

Perhaps television is assuming the role of the 'social control through sport' that the Marxists have long attributed to the reformers of the nineteenth century. If the producers decide what we want to watch and what is good for us, then presumably they can also decide what needs to be edited out for our own good. In 1986, 18% of newspaper coverage in the tabloids was devoted to sport [Hargreaves: 139]. That figure has risen to over 25% in the last decade and the quality newspapers, too, are increasing the space they allocate to sport, highlighting its importance to many people of all classes.

Yet where people have traditionally spoken out at political interference in the organisation of their sport, [identity cards at football matches provoked great controversy and resulted in heated parliamentary debate], it seems as though there is a passive acceptance when it comes to the press and, in particular, television. Although there is an occasional bleat of disapproval at the cost of a subscription to *Sky Sports*, and there are mutterings about the idea of [pay-per-view](#), the first is already part of working-class culture in the nineties and the second will almost certainly be so as we enter the new

millennium. This is possibly a consequence of what many observers see as an inherent apathy in the working classes to matters of social and cultural importance. It has long been a feature of sport and politics that the working classes did not show much interest unless they were directly involved. The apartheid row over South Africa was as irrelevant to most working-class spectators of sport as the suggested immorality of pay-per-view; concerns that are expressed are to do with cost and availability, rather than cultural acceptability.

The Future

As we approach the year 2000, just over a hundred years after the great schism in rugby which saw the formation of the professional Northern Union, little remains of traditional, Victorian, working-class sports culture. The sports themselves are still there, the passion is still there, the top rugby and football grounds are still full, but what is open to debate is whether or not the working class itself is still there. Much of what separated the working-class spectator from his or her middle-class counterpart has disappeared. Football grounds are all-seater; television makes no distinction between the classes; rugby union is a professional game; athletics openly awards prize money; the football paper is no longer part of Saturday culture, nor is the hot pie and bovril that generations of men and boys supped to keep out the chill of winter terraces; boxing audiences comprise celebrities who can afford 1,000 pounds a ticket while the public watches on satellite television; and, perhaps most telling of all, the factories, mines, social clubs, welfare clubs and many of the manual professions have all gone. Ferguson, in his investigation into the near-death of a Scottish mining and football town, closes his narrative in gloomy style. He remembers explosions in the mine and a fatal car crash which were part of his past when the town was thriving. The town has all but gone... but football lives on [p.191].

The gravestones tell the story of the community - of patriarchs and of pit tragedies and of radical politics and of football: and of the women who endured it all.... Then there's a coughing in my lungs. Coal dust. German bombers. The Kirkford bus. An arm hanging out of a car on an unspeakably silent Keltie road. The motionless wheels as the bodies are laid out at the pithead: the dried-up tears on the black-dusted cheeks.

Over the wall from the cemetery, the boys and some 'rough girls' of the new Beath High School shout and run.

And play football.

Glossary of Terms

1. BARMY ARMY

Name adopted by the young [generally 20-30] supporters of the England cricket and football teams. They follow the team around the world so must have adequate incomes, but their behaviour is typically 'rough', incorporating much drinking and singing, although little violence. Statistics on their employment backgrounds are unavailable, but an educated guess

would put most of them into what would once have been known as the middle and upper working classes.

2. BROKEN TIME

Broken-time payments were made by sports clubs to those who could not afford to lose wages by playing football or rugby. Some saw this as a form of professionalism and refused to compete with teams who made the payments. This was the catalyst for the formation of the breakaway Northern League in rugby and was certainly the first step towards full professionalism in football.

3. LORD'S DAY OBSERVANCE SOCIETY

The LDOS were the self-appointed vigilantes who ensured that Victorian and Edwardian England was free of the blight of sport on Sunday [their activities were not limited to sport, they would also report shops and markets which attempted to trade on Sundays]. They were reasonably powerful, enjoying the support of influential figures of all political persuasions, but they were essentially bourgeois in make-up.

4. PAY-PER-VIEW

Referred to as PPV by the television companies. The system, already well-established in the US, whereby certain programmes delivered via cable are charged for separately, the tariff being set according to the perceived audience demand. The first instance of PPV in the UK was a world heavyweight boxing fight between Mike Tyson & Frank Bruno in 1996.

5. RATIONAL RECREATION

The name given to the nineteenth-century movement towards the provision of parks, public baths, cultural centres [museums and art galleries] and so forth for the working classes. The notion of rational recreation also incorporated a programme of physical exercise and healthy eating, although much of this was never formalised. Many commentators viewed this as a form of middle-class hegemony, but it was certainly a step toward schooling for all and an improvement in recreational facilities.