Teaching Sport as History, History through Sport

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Teaching Sport as History, 
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If you have ever wondered whether there is more to “history” than presidents, prime ministers and kings, or “great” books, “great” wars, and “great” depressions, etc., here is a chance to find out. To those individuals who may feel that there is more to the history of sport than hero worship and trivia collecting, it is also an invitation to examine the role of sport in man’s and woman’s past.

SO BEGINS the course description for History 255, “Sport and Modern Society,” an undergraduate class I initiated a few years ago. In

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this introductory history survey, sport is used as both tool and object in examining the recent past. Although the course requires substantial reading and frequent written assignments, exams are demanding, and grading is strict, the enrollment has consistently been among the best in the department. Nor has interest been confined to students, for inquiries regarding the class have come from historians throughout the United States and abroad. Prompted by the hope of generating still more scholarly interaction, I decided to write this essay.

Before examining how “Sport and Modern Society” is organized and taught, it is useful to consider why it is offered at all. My motivation for doing this course involves a combination of the philosophical and practical. For those who, like myself, reject the elitist bias of traditional history, sport can be one way, among many, for gaining a fuller understanding of our collective past. In a pluralistic society it is particularly important that historical studies be concerned with the activities of the many as well as the few and that students have some exposure to such history. Yet the reality is that with the gradual erosion or removal of general education requirements fewer and fewer students take even an occasional history class. Given the negative attitude toward the subject most students bring with them to college, combined with society’s emphasis on “practical” knowledge, this is not surprising. How then in these circumstances to attract and maintain student interest becomes a crucial question. One possible answer is a serious historical consideration of sport.

The stuff of history is no more nor less than the sum total of human experience, and sport has increasingly occupied an important part of this experience in modern society. There is, consequently, no reason why sport cannot provide a legitimate basis for historical study, i.e., the critical examination of continuity and change over time. Indeed, it offers an exciting avenue for exploring some of the more fundamental realities of the modern world. As Eugen Weber noted in a pioneering article on sports in France: “far from standing apart, sports were integrated and integrating activities, part of the contemporary scene, reflecting social and ideological preoccupations and very likely affecting them in turn.”

Weber’s words embody the two basic themes, or working hypotheses of History 255, namely sport as a mirror reflecting society and sport as a conditioner or socializing agent affecting society. Throughout the semester students are encouraged to examine these basic ideas and to form their own judgments regarding the validity of these hypotheses. To facilitate this process there are regular small group discussions, written reviews, and take-home, open-book examinations as
well as lectures, readings, and audio-visual presentations. All are directed toward the course goal of fostering a critical, historical awareness and the ability to think rationally and articulate coherently.

There is nothing unique about such aims. They are, after all, the ultimate objectives of any history course. What is different is the subject matter and, to a lesser extent, how this material is used. In contrast to more traditional geographically and chronologically delimited classes, "Sport and Modern Society" began with no corpus of information and experience to draw upon. As a result, course content was developed from scratch, exploiting everything from the typical history monograph to the daily sports page. The approach is likewise eclectic and ongoing, having evolved by trial and error from a purely experimental initial stage to a more firmly structured format at present.

"Sport and Modern Society" defines "modern" as roughly the last hundred years. Within this time frame the subject matter is treated in a comparative and topical fashion. The reason for confining the course to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is simple, since organized sport, i.e., systematic and competitive physical activity according to fixed rules, did not generally exist prior to this period. The methodological decision is personal and more complex, for I believe that if a person would better understand his or her own environment, it is necessary to experience and examine other cultures. Once the efficacy of the comparative approach has been accepted, the topical follows out of practical considerations. While it may be feasible and even desirable to consider subject matter chronologically within a specific national area, to do so during a single semester in an international context would be extremely difficult. Therefore pragmatic considerations—including the unevenness of available material—led to the topical approach.

A discussion of the origins and initial expansion of organized sport does, however, take place at the very outset. Since most students accept sport as something of a given, I find it useful to begin the course by emphasizing its relatively recent appearance. Few realize that what is commonly understood as sport today did not exist prior to the industrial revolution. Nor do most students recognize that its growth was closely interconnected with modern capitalism and the expansion of urban-industrial society. Since Britain is rightly considered both the home of industrial capitalism and modern sport, it provides a natural focus for examining the elitist origins of organized sport, the rise of leisure, and the development of mass sport. The British pattern is followed with minor variations in most modern societies and therefore
offers a valuable introduction to the course as a whole. It also has the added advantage of demonstrating the serious historical nature of "Sport and Modern Society" to all concerned at the very start.³

Throughout this initial discussion and for the remainder of the course, students are urged to reflect on a single question: what, if anything, does the material under consideration suggest about the society—indeed, the people—involved? This simple short-hand formula embodies the main course themes—sport as both microcosm and conditioner—as well as the basic historical concepts of continuity and change. Thus an examination of British football (soccer and rugby) and industrialization might "mirror" the strong class divisions in that nation while, at the same time, demonstrating a growing democratization of sport that paralleled similar developments in British politics. Likewise, the introduction of modern sport to the urban masses by young clerics, so-called "muscular Christians," involves the use of sport as a social conditioner much the same as its upper class socializing function on the "playing fields at Eton."

To demonstrate that the correlation between sport and industrialization is not unique to England, other societies such as France and the United States can also be treated. For example, the origins and growth of French cycling, especially the Tour de France, and American baseball follow the British model. Both sports began as elitist preserves, spread to the masses as a consequence of industrialization, and came to serve as something of an integrating factor for the nation-state.⁴ As a way of stimulating student interest, it is helpful to make contemporary comparisons particularly to sports which remain upper class and to raise questions as to why industrialization led to the democratization and professionalization of some sports and not others.

A second major focus of course content is on traditional and modern sports. Comparing and contrasting such sports both nationally and internationally offers a unique and instructive way of testing for continuity and change in societal attitudes. Among the best examples illustrating this idea are sumo wrestling and baseball in Japan, bullfighting and soccer in Spain, and baseball and football in the United States.⁵ In each country mentioned, the primacy of the "national" or traditional sport (sumo, bullfighting, baseball) has been challenged by a popular newcomer (baseball, soccer, football.) In every case part of the attraction of the newer sport appears related to its connection with more modern values as opposed to the more traditional attitudes associated with the older sport. This tendency is illustrated in any number of ways; for example, while traditional sports
frequently have their strongest support among the rural and older populace, the modern challenger's appeal is greater among urban and younger people. Continuity and change can be fruitfully examined both within such comparisons and by examining the attempts by older sports to keep pace and adapt. Such analysis, especially when carried across international boundaries, is equally as valuable for considering national character and local variations as the more common historical methods with their greater emphasis on elitist courses. Then, too, by contrasting sports in one society, students can gain a sense of both national diversity and uniformity and thus avoid the oversimplifications associated with so many treatments of this question.

The political and economic aspect of sport provides a third general category I use to excite student interest in historical analysis. Since a surprisingly large number of people still consider sport "above" such mundane matters (an attitude interesting in itself), this section frequently necessitates debunking a number of myths and misconceptions. I find this easiest if I begin some distance from home, e.g., by considering East Germany and Brazil as contrasting socio-economic systems which consciously use sport for political ends. My main emphasis, however, is on the modern Olympic games. The basic idea is to consider to what extent politics was and still is involved, and why. Is politics alien to, or an integral part of, the Olympics? Has the political aspect of the games changed or remained consistent since their inception? To facilitate informed replies, special consideration is given to the 1936 Berlin games and comparisons are made with both the origins of the modern Olympics and contemporary developments.6

The skyrocketing cost of the Olympics provides a natural tie-in with the economics of sport. Among the myriad possible ways for exploring this branch of the entertainment industry, I concentrate on two matters: the changing nature of the professional sports business in the United States and abroad, and the financial side of amateur sports, most notably intercollegiate athletics. While money has always been associated with organized sport, the actual amount has taken a quantum jump in the recent past. Given the "now" orientation of so many young people, I find it useful to emphasize how recently the changed economic status of professional sports, be it American baseball or European soccer, came about. To do this requires a historical consideration of the phenomenon. It also offers an excellent opportunity for encouraging students to seek out the reasons for this change, whether at the management, employee, or consumer level. Some historical discussion of the amateur sports business is in order if only because of its symbiotic relationship with professional sports. In addi-
tion, the evolution and contrasting methods of amateur sports financing—state support, business subsidies, and college scholarships—furnish an interesting basis for comparing different socio-political systems.7

The fourth and final focal point I use in teaching “Sport and Modern Society” is inequality. Class, ethnic, and sexual discrimination in sport supply an excellent opportunity for interrelating past and present. Has prejudice lessened in sport? Does it continue? How does it correlate with societal developments as a whole? A thoughtful examination of such basic questions can lead to a remarkable growth of both historical and social awareness on the student’s part.

Many undergraduates have not given much thought to class bias in sport. I therefore find it useful to recall the elitist origins of modern sport and to discuss the degree to which this earlier situation persists in contemporary “country club pastimes” like golf, tennis, and swimming. In fact, the suburban American country club and its equivalent in other parts of the world8 can offer a telling introduction to this section, embodying as they so often do examples of all forms of social prejudice.

Ethnic discrimination in sport, while frequently interconnected with class bias, should probably be considered separately. I emphasize the world-wide nature of this problem, e.g., blacks in Britain, Mediterraneans in continental Europe, non-whites in South Africa, blacks and Indians in Latin America, not only to broaden the student’s cultural experience but also to break the ice on a potentially volatile subject. Since conventional wisdom has it that sport serves as an avenue out of the ghetto and that all people are equal at least on the playing field, it is necessary to weigh the reality of this notion. A survey of American baseball or Brazilian soccer, for example, suggests that their national sports have generally reflected and reinforced national racial attitudes. An analysis over time of more subtle factors such as positional and salary discrimination by race can prove particularly instructive. And we cannot forget the paradox of integrated sport, that minority success in athletics may well breed new racial stereotypes when it socializes minority youth to accept a service or entertainment function in society.9

The largest “minority” in society, of course, is women, and it is difficult to overemphasize the historical importance of sport in determining sexual role models. The “macho” image communicated throughout the world by popular sports, such as sumo, bullfighting, soccer, and football, is subconsciously ingrained in nearly all men and women. Indeed, sport remains a male preserve in most societies down
to the present day. If anything, the advances made by women in some areas—professional tennis, international swimming, and intercollegiate sports—only serve to illustrate the "masculine" orientation of sport as a whole. Consequently this is an excellent area for considering the interrelationships between sport and society and the extent to which sport may reflect both ongoing and changing attitudes. Given half a chance, students are generally quite honest about these issues. Their responses to controversial discussion questions—What would you do if your teenage daughter wanted to go out for the football team?—can be most illuminating.10

Such are the main topics I concentrate on in "Sport in Modern Society." Even though they can be interconnected in a variety of ways, some students feel it might be better to start out with the more up-to-date and controversial and then move backwards. Still, whether or not the first and last weeks of the semester remain fixed as at present, there is a great deal of organizational flexibility possible, and in truth, I have yet to teach the course the same way twice. Nevertheless, the need remains to tie the topics together in a meaningful way, much of which can be done by stressing the basic course themes in the lectures and discussions. One of the best instruments for integrating the topical materials can be examinations. I use the take-home, open-book essay because my experience has been that this method is intellectually challenging and produces original ideas. Most important of all, it gives the student both an opportunity and a responsibility for thinking through and pulling together the course materials. The following examples illustrate my approach.

It has been said that to understand Spain one must also understand the bullfight. Do you agree? Explain. Could the same type of statement be made about sumo in Japan and baseball in the United States? Why or why not? What do challenges to these traditional sports, for example, by soccer in Spain, baseball in Japan, and football in the United States, suggest about these societies.

Discrimination and prejudice, in one form or another, are present in most societies. To what extent has organized sport historically illustrated social, sexual, and class bias? Does sport continue to reinforce and reflect such stereotypes? To what extent has it been an agent for change? Discuss, using examples from both inside and outside the United States.

Utilizing such questions, tests become not only an authentic learning experience but also an integral part of the course itself.

Besides examinations there are a variety of other resources
“Sport and Modern Society” draws on. Students are one: they can, for example, often provide telling illustrations of class, ethnic, and sexual attitudes from their own experience. Newspaper and magazine articles are another. The printed media can be most helpful, especially if one has access to publications where the “new journalism” has infiltrated sports reporting. A final, albeit more conventional, resource is the competent colleague. While I have avoided the temptation to bring on a host of sports personalities and play the role of master of ceremonies, I have exploited fellow academics both for information and for lectures. One colleague, an expert in Japanese history and a devotee of sumo, has regularly presented a first-rate, illustrated lecture on sumo and Japanese society. A few inquiries around campus may well uncover a surprising number of “closet” sports enthusiasts among the faculty.

I underscore such extraordinary resources because “Sport and Modern Society,” in contrast to more customary history offerings, has a very limited supply of published scholarship from which to select. Historians have written almost nothing on modern sport, and scholars in other disciplines have not contributed much more. What little has appeared is in hardcover, thus limiting its accessibility for students. Outside of a few readers compiled by sociologists and physical educators—almost all of which concern just North America—that there are no scholarly paperbacks. I have been forced, therefore, to rely primarily on non-academic books for most of my core readings. For example, Paul Hoch’s Rip Off the Big Game comes as close as anything to serving as a class textbook. Despite an annoying, gossipy pseudo-Marxism, Hoch provides a thought-provoking overview that illustrates the course’s main themes. Even his harshest student critics—and they are legion—will generally admit that he made them think.

Another useful non-scholarly work, also available in paperback, is Or I’ll Dress You in Mourning, by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre. Although technically a biography of the Spanish matador El Cordobés, the book offers a magnificent look at the broad social fabric of Spain since the Civil War, and even though most students arrive knowing and caring little about Spain or the bullfight, it is invariably their favorite reading. Another book that receives high marks from the class is Curt Flood’s autobiography, The Way It Is. Not only does it effectively treat Flood’s challenge to baseball’s reserve clause, but it also presents the realities of racism as experienced by the individual. Yet ironically, the book contains one chapter which unwittingly provides a classic example of male chauvinism. Since no satisfactory paperback material is available on women in sports—and pitifully
little is even available in hardcover—such works as Flood’s have an added value.14

Fiction can provide another useful source of readings. I use two British works, David Storey’s novel *This Sporting Life* and Allan Sillitoe’s short stories, “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner” and “Match.”15 Both authors provide insights into sport’s connection with the traditional social and sexual order in industrial society and raise questions relevant to the main themes of the course.

There are also a few essays available that can be assigned with profit. The best I’ve come across, *The Rise of Leisure in Industrial Society*, is actually by an historian, Michael Marrus, who furnishes an excellent introduction to the historical interaction of industrialization, leisure, and sport. In addition, some of the selections published in the reader *Sport and Society: An Anthology*—particularly those dealing with Japanese baseball, Brazilian soccer, American baseball and football, and racism—have some value. Unfortunately this paperback is not cheap and these excerpts comprise only about a quarter of the volume. One can, of course, have selections copied, provided one is within the confines of the revised copyright laws. Another way to handle the problem of reading assignments is to require book critiques from a bibliography, a practice I began recently at the suggestion of students.16

Besides book reviews, students in “Sport and Modern Society” are required to submit a series of brief film criticisms. Films that deal with the historical or societal aspects of a sport that students generally know little about can prove very valuable. For example, two shorts on the bullfight, the black-and-white collage “The Day Manolete Died” and the technicolor “Hemingway’s Spain: Death in the Afternoon,” greatly facilitate the discussion of traditional sport in Spain. Similarly, “Pour un Maillot Jaune,” and excellent cinematic survey of the *Tour de France*, greatly facilitates talking about cycling and its relationship to society, be it in contemporary France or nineteenth-century America.17 By contrast, however, I no longer show a 60-minute film on the history of soccer, since despite some excellent clips relevant to the historical and societal sides, there was just too much “action” footage.18 I also use two low-key propaganda films. One is the exceptionally well done West German film, “Sport in Fall,” on the Cologne Sports Academy, which provides a very different picture of sports in the university than Americans are familiar with, and serves as a good point of departure for comparing sports organizations in Europe and America and discussing the politics of sports organizations in East and West Germany. The other is a French film entitled “Pierre de Couber-
tin,” which presents a useful, if idealized, historical survey of the modern Olympics and a classic statement of the Olympic ideology. Since Coubertin’s theory has generally clashed with the Olympic reality, both modern and ancient, the film is a good foil for lecture and discussion purposes.19

In conclusion, let me admit that many students may be attracted to such a course as this one for the wrong reasons. It is, therefore, imperative that some form of quality control be exercised. One way of doing this is to pre-screen applicants.20 But since most of us cannot do that, we must simply enforce rigorous course requirements. Any innovative classes must have intelligent interaction between student and instructor, and almost assuredly more than enough serious students will be attracted if offered the opportunity. I can think of no more fascinating and stimulating introduction to modern history than to examine the role of sport in modern society.

A few years ago, the late John R. Betts, one of the first historians to treat sport seriously, wrote that sport “has grown into an institution of such proportions that it can no longer be ignored. It is an element to be reckoned with . . . a factor in our national life . . . [and] one of the major interests of urban and industrial society.”21 In my view, it is time for historians to shed what Eugen Weber described as their “disaffection” for sport.22 Not only is sport a legitimate but also a necessary aspect of historical inquiry. If we are to attempt to understand the past and to share this understanding with our colleagues and students, it is essential that the study of sport as history enter the mainstream of our profession.

Notes

1 Since 1975 the course has been offered four times; the respective enrollments were 59, 83, 82, and 78 students.

2 "Gymnastics and Sports in Fin-de-Siècle France: Opium of the Classes?", American Historical Review, 76 (1976), 72.


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8 The best examples are to be found in Brazil, England, Germany, and South Africa.


10 Another valuable source is the press; my clippings file on women in sports is twice as large as on any other subject. Particularly useful are the September 1974 issues of Women's Sports and Ms., and the January 1977 "special sports issue" of Do It NOW.

11 See, for example, George H. Sage (ed.), Sport and American Society: Selected Readings (Reading, Massachusetts, 1970); M. Marie Hart (ed.), Sport in the Socio-Cultural Process (Dubuque, Iowa, 1972).


13 Or I'll Dress You in Mourning (New York, 1968).


18 The films on bullfighting are available at the Los Angeles Public Library, Central Branch, and the soccer film at the German Consulate General, Los Angeles.

19 "Sport in Fall" can be obtained from the German Consulate General, Los Angeles; "Coubertin" from the French Film Library. These and the other shorts mentioned in the text may be borrowed for a minimal charge. In addition, there are a variety of longer rental films one might consider if time and money are available. These include "Goal" (an excellent film on the 1966 world soccer championships), first rate productions of "This Sporting Life" and "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," and Leni Riefenstahl's classic, "Olympia," on the 1936 Olympic games.

20 A colleague at UCLA used this approach, as did Howard Cosell when he taught recently at Yale. See *Sports Illustrated*, June 21, 1976, p. 42.

21 Betts, *America's Sporting Heritage*, vi.