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Last man picked. Do mainstream historians need to play with sports historians?

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Last man picked. Do mainstream historians need to play with sports historians?

This polemical essay explores whether 'mainstream' political and social historians need to engage with the history of sport. It recounts the coercive nature of the author's encounters with sports and sports history and suggests that greater integration of the history of sport into histories of Britain relies on a mutual understanding of the imperatives of academic historians, not least in the world of the Research Excellence Framework and the 'impact' agenda.

Keywords: history of sport; national identities; Britishness; historiography; anti-sport

At least since Richard Holt published *Sport and the British: A Modern History* in 1989, the history of sport has been considered an important site for understanding identities of place in the United Kingdom and Ireland.¹ Holt's great strength in that book was that he considered the specific connections between participating in and watching sport and *being* British. This was not just a survey of sport in the British Isles, a narrative or chronology, but a discussion of the experience of taking part. 'To be part of a team,' he wrote, 'was to have friends, to share a sense of loyalty and struggle together, and to represent *your* street or workshop, *your* patch of territory'. This enabled him then to consider sport as identity and led to a further chapter on 'Empire and Nation' in which he explored 'larger' identities of place. Holt's is a fine book and probably the most widely read academic work on British sport history among 'mainstream' historians, by which I mean those working more broadly in the fields of British political, cultural, social and economic history.² *Sport and the British* made the writing of the chapter on sport in my own book *Britishness since 1870* (2004)

much easier than it would otherwise have been. Yet writing that chapter raised a number of questions for me intellectually (and personally) about the history of sport at the time, which remain prominent in my thinking about the way in which British history works. I am not going to deny that my scepticism towards sport history is a product of my dislike of sport, or indeed that my dislike of sport is not based on not being any good at any sport. This is indeed a polemical paper, questioning the emphasis placed on sport history, suggesting some of the reasons mainstream historians find little need to 'play' with sports historians but it begins with a brief autobiographical statement that could find its way into an anthology of writings on experiences at school. As John Bale notes of literary figures who took an anti-sports line, 'it is noticeable that at least half of them make it clear that bad experiences of sport at school predisposed them to anti-sports sentiments in later life.'³

Born in 1964, I went to a moderately good comprehensive school in Essex in the late 1970s. As with other schools, the only two compulsory subjects that a pupil had to take were physical and religious education.⁴ As a small boy I had little or no interest in cricket and athletics in the summer and much less desire to play football and rugby in the winter. I felt much like Billy Casper in *Kes* (1970) when he was faced with the prospect of an hour's football except that he was northern and working class, while I was southern and (lower-) middle class.⁵ On one occasion, when assigned to the position of full back in rugby, and faced by Mr Hoyle, the PE teacher, running towards me with an oval ball I turned and ran the other way, only to have him chase me, knock me to the ground and run over the top of me, leaving clear stud marks on my back.⁶ This and a further incident with athletics spikes

confirmed that I was no sportsman. For me, to quote John Bale again, 'sport amounted to intimidation and bullying.'⁷ Furthermore, the humiliating experience of being 'last man picked' for any team game suggests that others concurred with my self-judgement.

Having left school, I had no intention of participating in, or indeed watching, any sport for the remainder of my life. University, at undergraduate and PhD level, confirmed my freedom of choice and it was not until about 2002, aged 37, that I came face to face with compulsory sport once more. I was preparing a book proposal for my second book, a broad examination of national identities in the United Kingdom since the last third of the nineteenth century. The book was intended as a synthesis of the existing historiography with some original archival material, on the themes of monarchy and empire, gender, politics, ethnicity and territorial politics. There was no intention to exclude sport, but the reader of the proposal for the publisher suggested that there should be a separate chapter on sport.⁸ I fudged by including a chapter on 'Spare Time' – including sections on going on holiday and the impact of Americanization on popular culture, both themes that could have been covered elsewhere in the book, especially in the chapter on urban and rural life and regional identities. I had intended to scatter such themes, as well as sport, across the other chapters. Nonetheless, sport makes up two-thirds of the chapter. Once more I was being made to do sport and I dreamt about Mr Hoyle again.

In this essay, therefore, I want to consider what the use of sport as a case study added to my understanding of national identities in the United Kingdom between 1870 and 2002 and it is worth pointing out the deep debt I owe to sports

historians for the chapter, which was based on secondary reading and not primary research. I argued in my introduction to the chapter that:

People have been more free to choose their identities when they have not been constrained by work, paid or unpaid, or membership of formal or involuntary associations, such as school, the armed forces, or even families. How people chose to identify themselves might be expected to provide a good indicator of collective distinctiveness.⁹

Sport as a normally voluntary activity and the hobby of perhaps a majority of British men across the twentieth century was therefore likely to be a fruitful place for examining the ways in which people identified themselves with various national identities in the United Kingdom. It would provide an important site for understanding adherence or opposition to Britishness. I argued that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as industrialisation and urbanisation, imperialism and modern war developed, Britons watched football, rugby, cricket, hurling and Gaelic football, among other sports. The watching and playing of sports became embedded into society and contributed substantially to a sense of identity of place (and class). Sport and identity became integral in modern Britain.

Yet the chapter had few surprising conclusions and, I would suggest on reflection that sport did not need separating out from the other chapters. Its content ought to have been integrated into the structure of the book rather than having been 'ghettoized'.¹⁰ That is not to say that the chapter did not involve a valuable discussion of the intricacies of identities in the multi-national British Isles, in a period when Ireland was partitioned, granted quasi-dominion status and eventually

left the Commonwealth, or when Wales and Scotland renegotiated their political arrangements within the United Kingdom, or when continued immigration meant that issues of ethnicity were played out on the sports fields of Britain.

The chapter began with a discussion of the way in which sport and national identity came to constitute parts of the British state calendar (associated directly with Britishness) through major sporting events such as the Oxford-Cambridge boat race, the Grand National, the Derby, the FA Cup Final and tennis championships at Wimbledon. Such events formed part of the nation's year, even for those who did not attend or who were normally uninterested in the particular sport being played. They were not distinct from the nation but a part of other national events including Christmas (and its endorsement by the monarch), Empire Day and so on. Such events were integrative. Some were clearly the sports of the aristocracy and upper middle class, but in 1914 George V attended the FA Cup Final, which gave the royal seal of approval to a largely working-class sport, and the building of Wembley stadium in 1923 confirmed the importance of the game to national institutions and events. Furthermore, I discussed aspects of the relationship of sport to empire. Despite my dislike of sport and imperialism I have always had a soft spot for Henry Newbolt's *Vitai Lampada*, which especially personifies the widespread notion that sport was a preparation for imperial heroism – a theme that runs through Eliza Reidi and Tony Mason's recent book on sport and the military.¹¹

These were examples of sport holding Britishness together – contributing to a sense of collective unity. However, there were equal forces within sport that acted centrifugally to emphasize different and contest within the United Kingdom. The

chapter explored the way in which sport allowed the expression of distinct identities, made complex by the multinational nature of the United Kingdom in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hence, while some components of sport were integrative of different classes, nonetheless the hierarchical nature of British society was also displayed. One example was the association between the ruling elite and cricket with a southern English idiom – explored in the recent work of Duncan Stone in relation to amateurism and the metropolitan/south-eastern elite and symbolized by images of village green cricket.¹² This was an example of class and place converging. Elsewhere other Britons were also forging similar relationships. In Wales, rugby union became part of the self-definition of the Welsh and signifier of Welshness from without, symbolising a sense of democratic Welshness associated with the working class of the mining valleys, but able to encompass other classes too. While expressing a distinct identity, rugby allowed the Welsh to assert this in the context of Britain and its empire as a whole, such as when Wales defeated the previously unbeaten New Zealand All-Blacks. As Andrews and Howell argue: ‘The path to an Imperial Wales was reached through the promotion of Welsh cultural nationalism.’¹³ In Scotland, football was the chosen sport of distinctiveness. So, in 1886 as the first Irish Home Rule Bill was introduced in the British parliament so too was the Scottish Football Association formed. And in the annual Scotland-England match, the two nations were divided by a common game, as thousands of Scottish fans came south with tartan, bagpipes and banners of Wallace to play-fight the ‘auld enemy’.

In Ireland, the fighting was often real rather than performative.¹⁴ The Gaelic Athletic Association rejected garrison games and many nationalists used their hurling sticks as weapons off the sports field against the British state. The GAA was part of Irish-Ireland seeking to assert cultural opposition rather than cultural distinctiveness, and five of those executed after the Easter Rising had links with the GAA.¹⁵

Sport therefore acts as illustrative of the multi-national nature of the United Kingdom state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthermore it allows examination of the complexities of other identities of place, associated with region, city, town, village and neighbourhood. It allows examination of the ways in which different identities of place could be complementary to each other on the one hand, and could express real internal divisions on the other. Local sports teams provided the building blocks for county and national teams and there was usually no conflict in supporting Huddersfield Town Football Club and England, or Partick Thistle and Scotland in football, Wigan and the British Lions in rugby, and Essex and England in cricket, and so on. Nonetheless, these local identities were often important and celebrated in civic events for returning triumphant teams.

On the other hand, regional, local and religious *differences* were all also asserted in displays of sporting allegiances. A couple of examples will be sufficient here. One can only sympathize with the Barnsley FC fan in 1910 who was quoted by *The Times* as saying: 'They don't know English i' London an' stare at us like we was pole-cats ... and there's not a happy face in the streets. Why can't they be neighbourly?'¹⁶ Another example is, of course, the sectarian religious rivalry in

towns across the north of England and particularly in Scotland.¹⁷ I used sport to explore attitudes towards 'race' and identity in Britain, again relying on the work of other academics including Dimeo and Finn, Polley and Back, Crabbe and Solomos.¹⁸ The obvious example to cite in the late twentieth century was Norman Tebbit's 'cricket test' in which he decided that 'those who continue to cheer for India and Pakistan are wanting in Britishness' but the chapter also considered the experience of black and Asian players in football and cricket.

An exploration of sport across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries therefore provides good illustrative material for examining the range, diversity and complexities of national identities in the United Kingdom. Indeed, in various biographical works I have written, I have recognized the importance of sport in the subjects of my biographies: Gwilym Lloyd-George organized MPs at the House of Commons to play cricket, Lady Tweedsmuir, the first woman to serve as a Minister in the Foreign Office, tried to shoot grizzly bears in Canada, and the north Wales trade union leader Huw T. Edwards played golf.¹⁹

So why do I feel aggrieved? It may well be because there is a cultural assumption that all men like sport (and that this is somehow not historical but natural and instinctive) and that therefore I am abnormal for not doing so. But it is actually because I think that sport does provide a good example of the diversity of cultural identities but should not be privileged over other forms of popular culture, and that the material in the chapter on sport might better have been integrated into the other chapters, as was evidence from other forms of leisure activity such as cinema. One reason for the emphasis on sports is the physical presence of large

crowds of supporters tends to make sport seem more important in British society than it actually is – others involved in leisure activities, such as anglers, book readers and wine drinkers, do not congregate in such numbers, nor do they fight and lay waste to city centres. They are less visible in both history and historiography. A search on the online Bibliography of British History reveals 967 results for football, 621 for cricket and 333 for rugby, but only 48 for stamp-collecting. Of course, the numbers engaging in such activities differs enormously, but there are only 84 results for angling, the most popular participatory sport in Britain.²⁰ Why, given the male-dominated nature of sport, could not much of the material be in my chapter on gender? Why was ‘Vitai Lampada’ not in the chapter on imperialism? My discussion of sport added to my understanding of the complex way in which national and other place identities were played out in twentieth-century Britain but I would suggest that its integration into the broader argument would have made for a stronger contribution to the conclusions of the book, because it would have allowed examination of people’s identities across the range of their lives rather than just in relation to one aspect.

Those concerned with the welfare of sport history have seen its ghettoization as a particularly problematic and I would suggest the same about my chapter – those who come to the book to look for sport only need read that chapter (though I do refer to it in other parts of the book) and other historians can skip the chapter entirely. Peter Beck has rightly argued that historians too often neglect sport:

[M]ost histories of Britain overlook the central role of leisure and sport in industrial urban culture. Frequently, these activities are written out of the national past Their history is often treated as a world apart, meriting neither integration nor parity with historical studies of, say, high politics, foreign policy or the economy.²¹

Yet part of the exclusion is self-imposed through too often publishing in specialist sports journals, some of which are unlikely to catch the eye of the 'mainstream' historian.

I think that there are also some broader problems with sports history that make it more difficult for the mainstream to play. All of these have been identified by leading sports academics, but a summary is nonetheless necessary here.²² First, the quality of some sport history in academic journals and edited collections is not high. No one minds amateurs, participants and spectators publishing an enormous variety of histories of sport, as I would not object to people writing and publishing histories of towns and villages, railway lines and tram routes and so on but if such work not supported by an academic framework and historiographical knowledge was submitted to most mainstream history journals it would be rejected out of hand. In sports history, it is often, it seems, treated with indulgence. Sport history has not been alone in this and I think there is an analogy to be made with other sub-disciplines of history, especially in the field of military history (where collectors and hobby re-enactors are indulged) and also in the field of labour history where in the

past the field was dominated by left-wing activists, both academic and non-academic, who considered that publication of all sorts of material was an act of democracy. Such interaction can be fruitful – one can look at developments in oral history to see this – and many will defend it as the need for our research not to be isolated. The cries of ‘impact’ will certainly add to this perspective. But historians working in universities should be clear – when we want our research to have impact, we want excellent research to shape public understandings and dialogues, not for poor historical works to have a detrimental impact on academic history. We should note that in the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework, which measure the quality of academic research and its impact, the latter must be underpinned by publications ranked at least at Two Star, which is defined as ‘Quality that is recognized internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.’²³ Sports history does make a tremendous public impact, as the award of grants by the Heritage Lottery Fund attests.²⁴

Second, there is much confusion over what counts as History. Consider the difference between histories of sports in Britain (golf, hockey, tennis etc) and the history of sport in British society. Again, this might equally be considered in relation to military history. We might need to consult histories of regiments and battles to compile a comprehensive overview of what happened to society at war, but we would be fully aware of the difference between the history of the Lee Enfield rifle and its technical specification and the social history of the British infantry soldier. Yet, so often sport history gets caught up in some amazingly detailed stuff that seemingly only describes the scores, teams and exciting events relating to a

particular sport or town or city. As Martin Johnes has remarked elsewhere mainstream historians need to be guided through the morass of material produced in the name of sport history.²⁵

Third, even the best historians of sport tend to elide sport in past and present at the drop of a hat. This might also be seen as part of the desire to consider history as relevant, though for many sports historians their interest in sports history emerges from a passion for sports. This is natural –and it is one of the continuing perks of the historian’s ‘job’ that it is personally enjoyable. But as historians we ought to be studying the past in its own context and terms. We should not start in the present and work back to explain where we are currently at. A discussion of cricket in the late nineteenth century may or may not account for the current health of English cricket but making leaps in chronology and argument is not a sensible way of displaying historical rigour.

So, to conclude, the mainstream can play with the sports historians, and indeed should. Sport has been one of the most popular pastimes in British society across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To ignore it, or to be academically snobbish about its study, leaves a tremendous gap in our understanding of how many people have filled their time and thoughts. But sports history needs to think in return about how to relate to mainstream history. Academic sports historians need to come out of the sports history journals and publish as well in *History*, in *Historical Research*, in *Economic History Review* and so on so that other historians take the opportunity to read them. Sports historians need to think about how to ensure that their books and articles directly address the needs of other historians, drawing

out the wider significance of their research, keeping up the quality, and engaging fully with historians working in social, political and other forms of cultural history. There does, of course, remain a place for specialist journals in sport history as in other fields of *history*, but reaching out from these will encourage wider engagement. Jeff Hill, for example, has emphasized the need to bring 'sports history out of the cold and into the common world of history.'²⁶ Mainstream historians, in return, do need to recognize the high quality of much work in the field of sport history (as indeed many do) and journal editors need to be ready to accept that an article on Rugby League is as fit a subject for a heavyweight journal as, say, an essay on schisms in religious denominations. Certainly, then, the mainstream needs to play. But it should be through choice rather than compulsion.

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- ¹ Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History*. For the impact of the book see papers from the Historians on Sport conference at the International Centre for Sports History and Culture at De Montfort University. October 2010. A number are available on Academia.edu.
- ² Martin Johnes, 'British Sports History: The Past and the Future'.
- ³ Bale, *Anti-Sports Sentiments in Literature*, p. 152.
- ⁴ It is noteworthy that after a Catholic upbringing and RE at school, I am now an atheist.
- ⁵ There is an appropriate clip at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3cayRMnVb8> [Accessed 5 September 2011].
- ⁶ Names have been changed to protect the guilty.
- ⁷ Bale, *Anti-Sport Sentiments*, p. 152. Bale's sample is six authors: Charles Dodgson/Lewis Carroll, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Jerome K. Jerome, John Betjeman, Alan Sillitoe, and Philip Roth.
- ⁸ The reader was, as it turned out, my PhD supervisor, the late Professor John Ramsden, to whom I am enormously grateful for support and guidance in all aspects of my career.
- ⁹ Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, p. 73.
- ¹⁰ Johnes, 'British sports history' discusses the ghettoization of sport history.
- ¹¹ Mason and Riedi, *Sport and the Military*. For Vitai Lampada see <http://net.lib.byu.edu/english/WWI/influences/vitai.html>, where it is cited as an influence on the First World War literature.
- ¹² See for example Stone, 'Cricket's regional identities: the development of cricket and identity in Yorkshire and Surrey'.
- ¹³ Andrews and Howell, 'Transforming into a tradition: Rugby and the making of imperial Wales, 1890-1914'. p. 79.
- ¹⁴ For national identities as performance see for example Featherstone, *Englishness: Twentieth-Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity*.
- ¹⁵ Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland*.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Mason, 'Football, sport of the North?' p. 47.
- ¹⁷ Dimeo and Finn, 'Racism, national identity and Scottish football'.
- ¹⁸ Polley, *Moving the Goalposts: A History of Sport and Society since 1945*; Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 'Lions and Black Skins'.
- ¹⁹ See Ward, *Unionism in the United Kingdom, 1918-1974*.
- ²⁰ Searches conducted in April 2012.
- ²¹ Beck, 'Sport and Leisure in Britain, 1900-39', p. 453. Beck's essay is in Wrigley (ed.), *A Companion to Early Twentieth-Century Britain*, which shows his contribution to ending this exclusion. See also Croll, 'Sport and Leisure', in Williams (ed.), *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain*.
- ²² The best survey is Johnes, 'Putting the History into Sport: On Sport History and Sport Studies in the U.K. For an earlier survey see Holt, 'Sport and History: The State of the Subject in Britain'.
- ²³ <http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/assessmentcriteriaandleveldefinitions/>

²⁴ See, for example, 'The Cricketing Heritage of Calderdale & Kirklees' initiated by Dr Peter Davies at the University of Huddersfield.

<http://www.ckcricketheritage.org.uk/>

²⁵ Johnes, 'Great Britain'.

²⁶ Hill, 'Introduction: Sport and Politics,' p. 360.