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1 What is Sports History?

Asking such a basic question as ‘What is sports history?’ may seem to be too obvious a place to start. Common sense tells us what it must be: what happened in sport in the past. However, no historian of any subject ever got far by taking definitions only at the level of common sense; and the wider study of history is crowded with books and courses that attempt to define the discipline’s terms of engagement. In his excellent survey of some of the philosophical issues raised by studying history, *History: What and Why?*, Beverley Southgate quotes Plato’s dictum that ‘The life which is unexamined is not worth living’, and applies this view to the study of history:

it is arguable that ‘unexamined history’ . . . is not worth doing. . . [W]e need, as historians no less than as human beings, some self-awareness, some understanding of what it is we are trying to do, and of why we are trying to do it.¹

This approach is taken as the starting point for this chapter. It is based on two assumptions: first, that you will understand sports history more fully if you spend some time reflecting on its nature than if you rely on common sense alone; and second, that your work as a sports historian will be most effective if it is based on some engagement with a wider sense of history’s character and purpose. The chapter aims to introduce you to these issues, first by looking broadly at the nature of history, and then by characterising sports history itself. For history students new to sport as a subject matter, this chapter will consolidate your appreciation of the ‘What is history?’ debate, and introduce you to the contours of sports history. This survey can only be introductory, and you should follow up and read out from the references to go into this subject in depth.

► 1.1 What is history?

If you are a student of history, then it is likely that you will already be familiar with this question. If you are coming to sports history from a

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sports studies or sports science background, then it will probably be a new one. Either way, it is a crucial one for you to address, as it will give you a conceptual foundation for your studies in sports history. Reflecting on the nature of the discipline, in the manner advocated by Southgate above, can help you rationalise what you do in your sports history, and make connections between sports history and other things that people have done in the past.

There is a huge literature devoted to the question of history's nature and identity. Probably, the most important point we can make in this brief survey is that history's nature is disputed and debated between historians. Jeremy Black and Donald MacRaild refer to 'the shifting and often confusing grounds of historical inquiry',² and you need to recognise at this early stage in your sports history work that the grounds do shift. The terms of the debate are often accessed by history students through two influential books from the 1960s: E.H. Carr's philosophical *What is History?*, first published in 1961; and Geoffrey Elton's more practical *The Practice of History* of 1967. However, these two were not the first or last word in the debate, and there are many other texts that you should use to guide your way in this fascinating subject. Arthur Marwick's *The Nature of History*, Beverley Southgate's *History: What and Why?*, John Tosh's *The Pursuit of History*, and Black and MacRaild's accessible *Studying History* all provide a blend of debate, practical guidance, and examples which will help you navigate those 'shifting and often confusing grounds'.³ For our current purposes, we are going to consider seven snapshots about the nature of history. If you want to work successfully as a sports historian, then it is worth your while to reflect on these snapshots.

1.1.1 The multiple meanings of the word 'history'

'History' means a number of different things. Its common sense meaning is 'the past': history is what has happened, and where we have come from. Next, it can mean a narrative, close to the French setting where *histoire* covers both 'history' and 'story'. We use it in this sense to refer to the story of a particular event, or related series of events, such as 'The history of the Second World War' or, in a sporting setting, 'The history of baseball'. A third meaning is more about the present: history is what historians write, and is thus different from the past. History here is thus made by historians. Finally, we can see history – often with a capital H – as being a structured academic discipline, similar to Physics, Geography, or Biology, with its own courses, university departments,

and networks. This is history as a profession and a discipline. Some of these meanings are at odds with others: in particular, it can be difficult to see history both as what happened in the past and as something that historians create in the present. The point here is to help you tune in to the different meanings of the word that will come up in your reading, and to guide you in using the meaning appropriate to the context in your own work.

1.1.2 Positivism and relativism

Different historians approach their subject from different philosophical positions. The two main areas are often called positivism and relativism. A positivist approach to the past is one which assumes that the truth of what happened in the past can be discovered. Here, it is the historian's job to locate, sift, and analyse the evidence from the time, and to establish what happened and why. The well-trained historian is seen, in this tradition, as an objective reporter and analyst, or as a detective attempting to bring the evidence together to work out what happened. This approach is related to positivist traditions in science, which assume that the truth is discoverable through carefully designed experimentation and observation. Historians writing from relativist positions, however, view the notion of 'historical truth' as problematic due to the incomplete and subjective nature of the evidence itself. Moreover, they draw attention to the historian's own position in writing history, and argue that the historian's own biography – his or her gender, social class, nationality, religion, and political affiliations, for example – will all have a subjective effect on what gets written. This tradition also emphasises the relationship between the time and the place in which the historian is working and the aspects of history that he or she studies. We shall return to these positions later in this book in relation to sports history: for now, it is important for you to be aware of the basic positions and start thinking about your own views on them.

1.1.3 The importance of evidence

Although the two positions outlined above have different approaches to evidence, all historians are agreed on the basic point that unless there is some evidence from the past, there can be no historical study. There are many types of evidence, such as documentary, archaeological, artistic, linguistic, cultural, geographical, and architectural: we

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shall explore these later in this book in relation to sports history in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Whatever the type, the importance of evidence is hard to challenge: without some kind of source material from the past, we as historians cannot begin to know what happened. Recognition of this situation is fundamental at this stage. An appreciation of the nature and significance of what historians call 'primary sources' will help you read sports history books with sensitivity, and will help you in making your own choices about what aspects of the past to study. Put simply, there is no point in you committing to a study of an aspect of sports history for which no evidence has survived; and conversely, you need to consider carefully taking on a subject with an abundance of sources. Either way, the bottom line is clear: no evidence, no history.

1.1.4 History is political

Whatever happened in the past has gone. We may be living with its aftermath, but there is nothing that we can do to change it. However, an important aspect of the nature of history that you need to recognise now is that we – as individuals and as communities – constantly rewrite the past in the light of our current needs and interests. Think personally for a moment of how you may relate an incident from your childhood in a way that makes you appear in a positive light. Think socially about how communities will look at past events in the light of contemporary needs, as in such public aspects of history as which figures have statues put up to them and which parts of the past are taught in schools. History here is thus about conflict and power, as different groups within society – say, different religious communities or ethnic groups – will struggle with each other about how history should be seen: think, for example, of the debates that have surrounded the British recognition of Holocaust Memorial Day, or the discussions over governments apologising for things that happened centuries ago, such as slavery, colonisation, or genocide. This is not a recent development, and it would be naïve to ascribe it to 'political correctness': political and ideological influences have always characterised people's dealings with the past, and naming a street after a Boer War battle in the 1900s was just as much a political act as renaming it after Nelson Mandela in the 1980s. This ties in strongly with the relativists' assumptions outlined above: the history we get is relative to the time and the place from which we are looking.

1.1.5 History is about debates

You will already be aware that there is some debate about the nature of history itself. Within the discipline, debating is also a key feature of research and writing. In all areas, the work of one historian will typically be challenged by another historian, and debates will develop over particular themes. These debates focus on many different aspects of the past: the causes of wars, the standard of living, the significance of a particular person or movement, or the reasons for a particular occurrence. Debates happen when historians from different positions, or writing at different times, look at the evidence in a way that leads them to argue against their predecessors' findings. Once you are aware of this, you will be able to read the literature effectively, and you will be able to recognise different themes running through different books and articles. This awareness will also help you to recognise that no history book is ever the final word on a subject: there will always be a chance for someone else to come at the subject again from another angle to challenge our existing views. It also shows how studying history is not just about learning dates, but is about analysis, interpretation, and dialogue.

1.1.6 History is specialised

While history as a subject may be debated, history as an academic discipline has some fairly clear structures. From school curricula through to university departments, history has a presence within the academic life of all countries, complete with its professional networks of conferences, learned societies, journals, publishers, museums, libraries, and archives. Moreover, history as a subject is divided into various categories, known as sub-disciplines. The largest of these vary across time, evidence of the point made above about history being about what the present wants from the past. For example, ecclesiastical and constitutional history were major areas for historians working in the nineteenth century, but, as tastes and contemporary requirements have altered, they have been eclipsed by social and cultural history. At present, it is easy to identify political history, social history, economic history, and cultural history as the most obvious umbrella sub-disciplines. This division may seem arbitrary, and there is often enormous overlap between areas. For example, it is impossible to write social history effectively without taking account of political, economic, and cultural factors, so boundaries between sub-disciplines are softer and more permeable than they may first appear. At the same time, history as a discipline is increasingly outward looking, with historians

and academics in other fields – such as archaeology, anthropology, geography, political sciences, and cultural studies – creating interrelationships that can increase our knowledge and understanding of the past.

1.1.7 Our history was other people's present

Finally, it is worth stepping back from the discipline and its attendant debates to remember that what we call 'history' or 'the past' was the present for other people. An appreciation of this simple fact is useful when faced with debates about the nature of history. The people who lived through what we are studying were not thinking of themselves in the historical terms that we use for them, but were simply getting on with their lives: fighting their wars, having their families, worshipping their gods, working in their fields, or whatever. Keep this in mind whenever you come across historians using shorthand terms such as 'between the wars' or 'before the industrial revolution', and remember that the people who lived then could not have known what they were between or before. The period we now call 'medieval' or 'the middle ages' was, for the people living through it, nothing to do with the middle of anything: to them, each day was the present. Remembering this can also help you to avoid anachronistic judgements about past people's behaviour, beliefs, or motives. Burning women accused of witchcraft, voting for a dictator, or basing an entire economy on a single crop may all strike us as foolish things for people in the past to have done: but those acts must have made sense or been viable options for the people who did them, and to criticise them only in the light of later evidence or opinions does not make for good history.

These seven snapshots cover a huge amount of ground. For now, they should have given you a sense of the issues at stake, and should have moved you on from uncritically accepting that 'history' simply means 'the past'. Read around these themes to get proper insights to the key question, 'What is history?'

Activity 1: Moving towards a definition of history

The themes covered above should have shown you that history is not easy to define. However, unless you reflect on your own attitude towards history, and try to position yourself in the debate, any sports history you do will

be based on weak intellectual foundations. Below are four quotations from different historians, about the nature and identity of history. Read all of them – ideally, go to the originals and read around the quotations, too, so that you can see the assumptions and evidence that helped shape each author’s view – and then answer the questions below:

Quotations

- (a) '[History is the] actions of human beings that have been done in the past'.
R.G. Collingwood, 1946.⁴
- (b) 'History is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the past and the present'.
E.H. Carr, 1961.⁵
- (c) 'The study of history amounts to a search for the truth'. Geoffrey Elton, 1967.⁶
- (d) 'History is not “the past”, nor yet the surviving past. It is a reconstruction of certain parts of the past (from surviving evidence) which in some way have had relevance for the present circumstances of the historian who reconstructed them.' Gordon Connell-Smith and Howell A. Lloyd, 1972.⁷

Questions

1. Which of the quotations most closely resembles your view of history? Why?
2. With which of the quotations do you most strongly disagree? Why?
3. Once you have done this, write your own single sentence answer to the question 'What is history?'

► 1.2 What is sports history?

Sports history may be easier to define than history as a whole; but once again, there are various activities that could be given the name. For our purposes, we can identify three distinct but overlapping answers.

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Type 1 sports history is everything that happened in the past relating to sport. This is the day-to-day, year-to-year real-time events that people who lived in the past did whenever they played games. Much of it has left no evidence behind, just as much of your own day-to-day sport leaves no traces. However, enough evidence has come to us – archaeological, literary, physical, visual, and in people’s memories – for us to know that sports, physical exercises, and games have happened throughout human history.

Type 2 sports history is the narrative of those events. This is the act of looking back on the past of sport through the evidence that we do have, and telling its story. This is the kind of approach that Richard Holt has characterised with his biblical comparison as ‘little more than the book of Chronicles or the book of Numbers’.⁸ This kind of history, which often focuses on a specific club, provides us with chronologies of events, and with details and anecdotes about players, teams, and competitions. We shall examine this kind of history writing in Chapter 3. For now, we can simply note it as a type of sports history, a type usually classified as ‘popular’ or ‘non-academic’, and one characterised by what Booth calls a ‘reconstructionist’ approach, where historians go to the primary sources and attempt to simply narrate the story of what happened.⁹

Type 3 sports history is the contextual analysis of those events. This answer to the question ‘What is sports history?’ is the one with which academic historians would feel most comfortable, as they see their role as being the detailed exploration of what sport was like in the past in relation to the society in which it was taking place. It is an outward-looking definition, one that sees sport as being interrelated with social, political, religious, economic, and cultural trends. It is an approach that finds something lacking in the popular sports history characterised above, and would find resonance in W.G. Hoskins’ criticism of popular local history for being ‘preoccupied with facts and correspondingly unaware of problems’.¹⁰ This type of sports history goes beyond the facts and into the problems, and is characterised by J.A. Mangan’s aim to ‘set sport in its full cultural context’, with attention paid to ‘sequence, tendencies, outcomes and change’.¹¹ Booth’s ‘constructionist’ and, to a certain extent, ‘deconstructionist’ historians fit into this type of sports history: although they differ on many matters, both types are interested in going beyond face value of facts and narratives, and in analysing sport’s past.¹² This is the type of sports history towards which you should aspire.

A quick example using a real sporting event can illustrate these three answers, and show us how the different meanings of sports history typified above are interrelated. The Ashes is the trophy competed for in cricket test matches between England and Australia. A type 1 sports history is the series of events that have taken place from the 1880s onwards in the contests between the two countries' teams, the day-to-day acts of players, administrators, and spectators in their own present. A type 2 sports history is the detailed record of the Ashes that you could construct from the primary sources such as newspapers, cricket almanacs, and players' memoirs. This would be a ball-by-ball, match-by-match, and series-by-series narrative of this particular rivalry. A type 3 sports history would be an analysis of the Ashes phenomenon in such wider contexts as cricket's development and diffusion, imperial and Commonwealth relations, English and Australian models of national identity and masculinity, and sporting and media technology.

Activity 2: Past – narrative – analysis

Using the model of the Ashes given above, you now need to develop your own example of the three levels of sports history. Family history is a useful way into this, due to its accessibility and its unique nature for you.

1. Talk to an older member of your family about his or her sporting interests when he or she was younger, trying to focus in on a particular period – say, a season in which he or she played for a school team, or a time when he or she attended a major sporting event. Identify any evidence that might survive from this time, such as photographs, newspapers, diaries, letters, and artefacts. This will give you a sense of the first level discussed above: sports history as what happened in the past.
2. Try to construct a chronological narrative of the events you have uncovered. Be as accurate as you can with dates, and try to be as objective as possible in the way you list the items. The aim is to produce a reliable and trustworthy chronicle of the time. This will give you some experience of the second level: sports history as a narrative.
3. With the narrative in place, try to step back and start asking analytical questions that can help you place the sporting events in context. What links are there between your family member's gender and the sport in

question? How much would the sport have cost (both financially and in terms of time), and what does this tell you about the links between sport, income, and social class? Was the sport in question representative of a community, such as a school, a village, or a city? If so, what kind of image did the sport give of that community? These are just examples of the kind of questions you can ask here. Using a conceptual map or a spider diagram, make as many links as you can between the sporting events in your family member's past and the time and the place in which they happened. This will give you a sense of the third level: sports history as an analytical study of what happened.

There are thus different answers to the question 'What is sports history?', and the different answers relate both to the past itself – the historical events – and to the ways in which people in the present approach them. This diversity is not a reason to avoid sports history: indeed, the debates that arise out of the different approaches are part of sports history's intellectual appeal. Sports history, then, is far more than just a part of your syllabus, or an optional area that you might like to study for a project. It is a dynamic sub-discipline of history, one that connects with many other areas of historical study. Moreover, history is more than just a background for the socio-historical parts of a sports studies course. It is a stimulating and philosophically challenging discipline concerned with the human past in all its varieties. However, 'what is . . .' definitions can take us only so far: for any deeper understanding of history as a whole and sports history in particular, we need to move on to the question of 'why?'

► 1.3 Why study history?

Just as there is no simple answer to the question of history's identity, so there is no single rationale for the study of history. Every historian will have a different reason, and every official sanctioning of history – such as history as part of a state school curriculum – will be rationalised in terms of that state's own needs. However, as with our discussion of what history and sports history are, the absence of a single answer as to why we study history should not put us off asking the question. History is a popular academic subject throughout the world, despite its lack of obvious vocational application. It is also growing in popularity outside

universities and schools through the proliferation of museums, heritage sites, television and radio documentaries, feature films and stage plays, the internet, romantic fiction, and community history projects. Why are so many people interested in knowing about the past? By examining some of the reasons, you can get your own approach to history in general and sports history in particular into focus.

First, knowing about the past can give people – as individuals and as members of communities – a sense of belonging and identity. Mobility and migration are typical features of modern societies. As people become more mobile, families more extended, and communities more ethnically and culturally diverse, it is natural that people should want to know something of their past. History – particularly family and community history – is about such roots. This interest is also evident at national level, with collective notions of history enshrined in the celebration of key dates from the past as holidays and times for reflection: Armistice Day in the UK, Independence Day and Martin Luther King's birthday in the United States of America (USA), Canada Day, Australia Day, and St Patrick's Day are all examples of this. Such events help to define a modern nation's shared history, and to keep the links between past and present alive. This can, of course, be problematic for multi-cultural nations, as the choice of which historical events to celebrate is an exercise in power and, inevitably, exclusion: the debate over establishing Martin Luther King Day in the USA and the ongoing controversies surrounding Holocaust Day in the UK are examples of this. The point remains, however, that history here is approached because it tells us something – maybe something very selective, but at least something – about where we have come from.

A second reason why we study history is that it can – ostensibly, at least – teach us lessons for the present and the future. One of the great clichés of history is that we should study it so that we can learn from past mistakes. This is not a view that stands up to much scrutiny: the wars, arms races, genocides, and famines that have taken place since the 1930s do not suggest that much was learnt from millennia of human experience. However, we can be more optimistic at the personal level, where we often act in ways informed by past situations. Organisations also do this, basing present decisions on past examples as well as projections about the future. It is important not to overlay this aspect of the past's appeal: but, at one level, we can see that we study history in order to compare present situations to past ones.

Third, history is popular because of its value in explaining the physical environments in which we find ourselves. Local and community

history and archaeology are thriving, through academic coverage, adult education, field clubs, and local history societies. Wherever we live, the diverse nature of our townscapes and landscapes needs explanation, and only the historical and archaeological exploration of place can tell us about different building types and land-use patterns, and the timing of any community's growth or decline. Without historical awareness, the spaces in which we live, work, worship, and play can appear only as a random jumble of clashing layers. Imagine attempting to understand the different court markings on a multi-use sports hall's floor without any knowledge of each sport's laws: that is how baffling it is to look at a townscape or landscape without historical awareness. People study history because it helps them to make sense of their everyday surroundings. The same point can be made about the social settings in which we find ourselves. Knowledge of history helps us to make sense of such diverse aspects of our everyday lives as our political systems, the economic activities and forms of religion available to us, and the manners and protocols expected of us. We do not need to be reductionist, and claim that history explains everything: but it is clear that none of our systems were invented this morning, and that all have some form of inheritance from the past.

Taking these three brief reasons together, it is clear that the past matters to the present: as a place from which we came, a place from which we can learn, and a place which explains our current environments. The fact that history matters is the basic reason why it should be studied. If we leave the past unexamined, and simply live with its remnants – physical, social, mental – as so many myths that we accept without reflection, then we will be unable to make sense of our present. History gives us insight, perspective, and the ability to compare and contrast.

Activity 3: To study or not to study. . .

Using the themes covered above, take a piece of paper and mark out two columns. Head the left-hand column with the question 'Why should I study history?', and the right-hand column with the opposing question 'Why should I not study history?' Under each heading, write as many answers as you can think of. Make your answers as personal as possible, as this will help you reflect on your own attitudes towards history and your own strengths and weaknesses in approaching it.

If these are the basic reasons for studying history, then what case can be made for studying sports history? What is there about sport that makes its past worthy of the time, effort, and financial resources that sports historians devote to their work? The obvious answer is that we should study it because it happened. People played sports in the past, and these activities deserve to be studied just as much as those same people's religious habits, political systems, wars, or any other activities that take historians' attention. However, there is more to it than that. Sport is a cultural activity that is obsessed with the past, as witness the observance of traditions, the veneration of sites, and the obsession with records that permeate modern sport. Considering this aspect of sport can help us to appreciate its past not just as a subject that deserves to be studied, but as a living part of our everyday culture. The next chapter will explore this presence of the past in sport.

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