

Sports History

A Practical Guide

Martin Polley

palgrave
macmillan

2 The Presence of the Past in Contemporary Sport

This book is a practical guide. It is designed to help you develop your understanding of sports history, and to improve your academic skills in this area. This chapter is dedicated to the first of these aspects – deepening your understanding. If you approach sports history simply as a part of your syllabus, and see it only as an academic subject, then you will miss out on a significant part of the interrelationship between sport and history. If, on the other hand, you step back and look at the ways in which the past permeates contemporary sports culture, then you will be able to see history as a meaningful component of everyday life, and not just as something dead with which historians deal.

Let us begin with a few snapshots taken between 2004 and 2006 that serve to illustrate some of the ways in which sport's past is engrained in its present.

- Soft drink manufacturer Coca-Cola sponsored the torch relay for the 2004 Olympic Games, stressing the historical nature of its commercial relationship with Olympism: 'As the Olympic Movement's longest continuous corporate partner, Coca-Cola has helped and shared in the evolution of the Olympic Games into the most watched and revered international event.'¹
- Replica retro and vintage football shirts made by Toffs, 'The Old Fashioned Football Shirt Company', carry the wording '100% cotton, 100% nostalgia guaranteed' on their washing instructions.
- The Quorn Hunt's official website's 'About Us' section lists its current office holders alongside a list of its Former Masters going back to T. Boothby, who was appointed in 1698.²
- Martin Gough of the BBC quickly called the 2005 Ashes cricket series between England and Australia 'the greatest series ever'.³ The prize-giving ceremony saw England captain Michael Vaughan receive an urn dating from 1882 containing the ashes of a cricket stump.
- Brentford FC's manager Martin Allen described his team's January 2005 FA Cup match against Hartlepool as 'the kind of blood and thunder game you got in the 1930s'.⁴

- In July 2005, Wade Boggs and Ryne Sandberg were inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, joining the list of illustrious former players, managers, and umpires whose contributions to the game have been formally recognised. Boggs and Sandberg were the latest names on a list that goes back to the start of the Hall of Fame culture in 1936, when such greats as Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, and Walter Johnson were honoured.⁵
- On 6 January 2006 – Old Christmas Day – the Fool in the Haxey Hood celebrations began this annual Lincolnshire event with the traditional cry of 'Hoose agen hoose, toon agen toon, if tha meets a man, nok im doon, but daon't ort im' ('House against house, town against town, if you meet a man, knock him down, but don't hurt him'). Teams from rival villages then attempted to propel the hood – a piece of rope wrapped in leather – to the designated goal, the door of the opposing village's pub. The exact origin of the game is unclear, but it is linked in local mythology to an incident in the thirteenth century, when villagers helped to retrieve the riding hood of a local woman after it was blown off in high winds.⁶

These diverse examples – and it would have been easy to have added many more – all illustrate an important feature of contemporary sport: the past features prominently in the present. This is not about academic interest in sports history: it is more about nostalgia, heritage, tradition, pride, and mythology, and about people's individual and communal sense of identity and belonging. In this chapter, we are going to explore some of the ways in which history – in its broadest sense – makes itself felt in sport. We will do this through three themes. First, we will look at the past as the place from which sport comes, the source of the ways in which we play. Second, we will look at the theme of sport and mythology, where the past is something we believe in as part of our engagement with sport. Finally, we will look at the past as something to commemorate and celebrate.

► 2.1 The past as the source of sport

The obvious starting point for our consideration of the presence of the past in contemporary sport is the basic, but easy to overlook, fact that all sports started at sometime in the past. No sports with which you are engaged started this morning; and even when there is a major development – say, the formulation of basketball in the 1890s, or emergence

of wakeboarding in the 1980s – there is always something in the past to which we can make links. In all sports, it is relatively simple to move backwards from what we do now in order to find roots: from the various contemporary football codes to medieval football and Japanese *kemari*; from modern croquet to medieval *pelle melle*; from modern basketball to ancient *pok-tapok* from Yucatan; and from the unassisted speed-based sports of running and swimming to these same activities throughout human history. This is simply about recognising ancestry and family trees of sports as cultural activities. All sports have a history. They have all come from some points in the past, and the past influences many features of their current shape. Let us think through some of these.

2.1.1 Laws, rules, and organisations

Any attempt to define what it is that makes any given activity a sport will always include a reference to mutually agreed and bureaucratically enforceable rules. Without them we can have play, but not sport; and they are so central to our concept of sport that we simply take them for granted when we play, even if we try to break them for our advantage. As historians, we need to look beyond this, and look at their historical character. Every law and rule in every sport was created at a given moment, and was supported by enough people involved – players, coaches, officials, administrators, and so on – to tell us something about the sport's character at that time. Research will show the ways in which experimentation and evolution shaped rule-making within particular historical contexts, and those contexts will be evident for as long as the rules stand.

Let us consider a few examples. The laws of football as developed by the Football Association (FA) at its formation in 1863 were based on the version of the game as it had developed out of Cambridge University since the 1840s and Sheffield FC in the 1850s, and before that from various schools. The new rules brought together various traditions and cultures, and maintained the social character of amateurism through such concepts as 'fair play' and 'gentlemanly conduct'. In a related development, the breakaway Rugby Football Union (RFU), when it devised a separate set of rules from 1871, enshrined handling the ball and hacking as features of the sport that would distinguish it from what the FA were doing. Similarly, when the Northern Rugby Union (subsequently the Rugby Football League) broke away from the RFU in 1895, they quickly established new laws – relating both to players' finances and to features of the game, such as team

sizes – that were more fitting to their increasingly working class catchments. Jack Broughton's London Prize Ring Rules of 1743 were devised to make pugilism safer after a fighter's death in the ring. They limited wrestling-style holds, for example, and barred punches below the belt. Later, changes under the Marquess of Queensberry in 1867 introduced further safety measures by regulating the length of rounds, insisting on good quality gloves, and setting a 10-second time limit on a fallen fighter being judged out rather than the more dangerous 30 seconds of Broughton's time.⁷ These examples take us into such diverse issues as educational elitism, acceptable social behaviour, the management of finances, the tolerance of violence, and the safety of participants. A fuller analysis of rules would throw up many more themes. All of them are examples of specific historical contexts shaping the ways in which we play sport.

Activity 1: Recent influences on sports' laws

Various factors in various historical settings have influenced the evolution of sports' laws. The examples given above illustrate the role of such factors as financial protection and the control of violence. In recent decades, some of the most significant influences have been television, multiculturalism and the growth of an equal opportunities culture, and health and safety concerns and the related growth of litigation. Find evidence of these factors in the current rules and laws of as many sports as you can. You can find current laws on the official website of any sport's governing body. Tabulate your findings, and try to make connections and comparisons across the different sports.

As well as laws and rules, the organisations that regulate sport are all historical. They were all created at particular times by people with shared interests within the prevailing historical and cultural contexts, and these roots are evident in the way those organisations work in the present. In some cases, history and tradition are the most notable things about these organisations. In British sport, the key marker here is any organisation that uses the prefix 'royal' in its name, as this is evidence of both authority and tradition: the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, the Royal Caledonian Curling Club, the Royal Company of Archers, and the Royal Ocean Racing Club all have this historical statement embedded in their names, as do a number of clubs throughout the former British Empire, such as the Royal Calcutta Golf Club and the Royal Perth Yacht

Club. Other clubs, such as the Jockey Club in horse racing, the Marylebone Cricket Club in cricket, and the Hurlingham Club in polo, have also maintained both strong traditions and significant political power within their sports, thanks to their age. History is also evident in all sports' governing bodies, as the time of creation has entered into their cultures. This is particularly evident when we look at the wave of sports that developed associations or unions as their forms of governance in the period c.1860–1914. The Football Association (1863), the Rugby Football Union (1871), the Amateur Boxing Association (1880), the Amateur Swimming Association (1886): these are all period pieces. Despite various forms of modernisation, each one still has some semblance of the time of its birth, such as committee structures, forms of record keeping, notions of fair play and amateurism, and disciplinary cultures. The same can be said of all players' associations and trades union, ranging from the Professional Footballers Association (formed in 1907 as the Association Footballers' and Trainers' Union) to the Major League Baseball Players Association (1965). The reasons why the body was created – health insurance, earning potential, mutual aid, and so on – still characterise these organisations' working cultures. Yet again, history is inescapable.

2.1.2 Names

Another way in which we can see current sport as a product of the past is through names. The names of sports themselves are inherited from the past, and some of the apparent anomalies of naming can be understood only if we look to history. For either rugby code to call itself 'football' may seem incongruous to the newcomer due to the preponderance of handling over kicking in open play, but the name makes sense if you look at the sports' histories. Real tennis is no more or less 'real' than lawn tennis or table tennis: but a historical appreciation of language ('real' to mean 'royal', here, from the French), and a consideration of its players' desire to define their game as separate from the Victorian version's more bourgeois character, puts the name in context. Many sporting events have names that are shot through with history. The Derby in horse racing, run since 1780 and named after the patronage of the 12th Earl of Derby, and the label 'Olympic', used by Pierre de Coubertin for his multi-sporting event in the 1890s to stress his belief in the qualities of classical Greece, are two of the hundreds of historical names that remain in everyday use in contemporary sport. Historical names also abound at club level, seen clearest in British

football culture, with many names still taking us into the community structures and urban landscapes of the Victorian period. The proliferation of Wanderers and Rovers, for example, reminds us of a boom in the numbers of football clubs without permanent homes, while the Uniteds maintain evidence of smaller clubs coming together. Sheffield Wednesday most perfectly keep alive into the twenty-first century the working week patterns of the late nineteenth century. One of the most famous English clubs, Arsenal, has a name that has no link to the part of North London in which they have been based since 1913, but instead maintains the tradition of their foundation in 1886 in the Woolwich Arsenal, an armaments factory in South London, with the cannon on their badge and their nickname of The Gunners reinforcing this historical link. In rugby union, the names of the various exiles' clubs – such as London Scottish (formed 1878), London Welsh (1885), and London Irish (1898) – keep alive not just national identity, but also the demographic circumstances and migration patterns of the periods in which they were created. Similar examples are evident across the world, from the German football club Schalke 04, who commemorate their year of foundation in the name, to the Richmond Alemannia Soccer Club in Australia, who stress their origins in the German community in their name. Finally in this context, we can look at sports' trophy cabinets for evidence of names inherited from the past being known by any sport's current enthusiasts. Sailing's most important trophy, the America's Cup, is named after *America*, the first yacht to win it in 1851. Australian state cricket teams have competed for the Sheffield Shield since 1893, named after patron Lord Sheffield; while a Victorian Governor-General of Canada, Lord Stanley, is remembered in North America's most prestigious ice hockey trophy. In ways such as this, names that made perfect sense in the past – names about time, geography, or patronage – but have since lost their contexts have stayed constant in sport, a key feature of sport's historical character.

Activity 2: Who were Lady Byng and Edgar Mobbs?

Many sporting events and competitions are named after people from the past. Some are named after sportsmen or women; but they are more often named after patrons. The list below names some of them, and the sports in which they are awarded. For each one, find out who the person was, when the event took the person's name, and why people within the sport at that

time would have wanted to commemorate that person. Do the sport's current followers know anything about the person being commemorated? What are the differences between this sort of trophy naming and the commercial sponsorship of trophies, such as cricket's Benson and Hedges Cup?

Boxing	Lonsdale Belt	Heisman Trophy
Canadian Football	Grey Cup	Bawerman Award
Cricknet	Ranji Trophy	
Croquet	MacPherson Shield	
Field hockey	Beighton Cup	
Golf	Ryder Cup	
Ice hockey	Lady Byng Memorial Trophy; Calder Memorial Trophy	
Indoor bowls	Aird Trophy	
Lawn tennis	Davis Cup; Wightman Cup	
Rugby Union	Edgar Mobbs Memorial Match; Currie Cup	
Shooting	Pershing Trophy	

2.1.3 Language

All sports contain their own technical language and insider's jargon.⁸ This has two main purposes. First, it helps each sport's followers label increasingly specialised features, such as equipment or types of play: where an outsider sees a fielder on a cricket pitch, an insider sees a gully, a second slip; or a silly mid-on; where an outsider sees a sailing boat, an insider sees a 470, a Finn, or a catamaran. Second, the language helps to define the insider from the outsider, and helps to create a shared identity for insiders through vocabulary. In all sports, the language used contains historical elements: as with the names exemplified above, much specialised language has come out of each sport's past, and it cannot be fully understood unless that past is known. This can be seen in the languages which influence the official usage in sports. Think of fencing's reliance on French (*épée, piste, doigte*), of judo's use of Japanese (*judoka, kyū, dan, shiai, ippon*), or the prevalence of English in global football, where Japanese commentators call a penalty a 'p-kick', South American clubs call themselves Old Boys, Corinthians, Wanderers, and Juniors, and one of Italy's top teams uses the English spelling of its city's name, Milan, rather than the native Milano. It can also be seen in the specialised terms used in all sports, whether it be the bosey in cricket named after B.J.T. Bosanquet, who first used it in 1903; the axel in ice skating, named after Norwegian skater Axel Paulsen; or

Activity 3: Language of origin

The following are words from various languages that are regularly used in specific sports. Find out each word's language of origin and meaning, and discuss the reasons why they are still in use within their sports. Bear in mind that some sports have taken words from more than one language.

Hurling	camán, sliothar	faax-tiék
Kendo	hakama, shinai	
Pelota	cancha, jai-alai	
Real tennis	bisque tournée, paumier	
Rowing	repêchage, regatta	
Show jumping	barème, puissance	
Skiing	vorlage, fraspark, schuss	

2.1.4 Places

Another theme to set up here when considering the presence of the past in sport is to look at the locations at which sport is played. Where sports are played in the present tells us a great deal about their historical development. Ancient sports sites have usually been abandoned and, if they survive, do so as archaeology. However, in some settings there is a strong link with ancient sites, notably in the continued use of Roman amphitheatres in southern France for bullfighting. This usage can be seen at Arles, Nîmes, and elsewhere, where each arena's antiquity is obvious. If we look at the sports that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the British Isles, we can see that some spaces dedicated to sport are still in use, notably in the racecourses of Newmarket and the golf course at St Andrew's. The past is firmly alive for anyone who competes or watches at these spaces, a past driven home in such localised names as the Rowley Mile at Newmarket, taken from Charles II's nickname, and the Old Course at St Andrew's. We are still living with the spaces built for the boom in urban sports from the late nineteenth century. In the UK, football grounds such as Aston Villa's Villa Park in Birmingham and Liverpool FC's Anfield are still in use, situated in the tight

confines of Victorian residential areas. Many British greyhound and speedway stadiums are also still located in the urban communities they first served, as in Sheffield and Portsmouth. Recent stadium building has tended to be outside city centres, itself evidence of a new, post-industrial historical trend that has given us such locations as Housdon's Astrodome and post-Taylor Report football stadiums in Sunderland, Bolton, and Reading. Altogether, the places in which we play and watch sport tell us something about the sport's development over time.

2.1.5 Access and etiquette

Even the most cursory look at contemporary sport shows that while opportunities for playing may be growing throughout the world, not all sports are available on an equal basis to all people. Some sports require participants to have significant disposable resources at their command. These resources include such tangible ones as time, money, and space, as well as less tangible cultural resources such as the knowledge of how to behave in certain situations and experience in certain forms of etiquette. This is best illustrated by contrasting the financial and the cultural resources needed to play polo with those needed to play darts or pool. While patterns of access can and do change over time, they are heavily influenced by historical patterns of access, and by perceptions of sports that are inherited from the past. These patterns are, in part, influenced by the traditions that sports choose to maintain and highlight. Dress codes in lawn tennis clubs and golf clubs, the use of the adjective 'royal' in certain sporting events (such as Henley Royal Regatta and Royal Ascot), and the use of particular terms of address (such as the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club's continued usage of titles indicating women players' marital status in the Wimbledon Championships⁹) are all pieces of everyday history that help to perpetuate image and reality. Acts such as these help to stress tradition for those on the inside, while excluding those outside the sport who do not feel comfortable with that particular code of behaviour. There are also more tangible relationships between current access patterns in sports and their historical ones. Lawn tennis and croquet emerged in their modern forms in the second half of the nineteenth century, specifically as games that could be played on the lawns of people with grounds or large private gardens, and the clubs that supported these sports inevitably developed in socially exclusive areas, such as the new suburbs of London and Birmingham. Moreover, they were designed as sports that both sexes could play together, which meant

for the Victorians that they could not be too physically strenuous for women. Without wishing to reduce everything to history, it is clear that there is a strong relationship between these sports' origins as mixed sex games for upper-middle-class leisure time, and their current structures and cultures. Using this model, we can look at any sport's historical development to see how closely it was linked to any particular groups within society, whether those groups were defined in terms of class, occupation, sex, age, ethnicity, or any other factor. In the British model, many sports had cultures that overlapped some of these boundaries: association football and horse racing are great examples, with their aristocracy of patrons and credit bettors, their bourgeoisie of managers, directors, owners, and disseminators, and their working class of labourers (such as players, jockeys, and stable workers), speculators, and cash bettors. The influence of these historical patterns remains strong in all sports' presents, and we cannot understand issues of access and inequality unless we look to history.

2.1.6 Records

Allen Guttman's seminal study of sport, *From Ritual to Record*, analysed the ways in which sports have moved away from their religious origins and taken on secular roles. One of the characteristics of modern sports culture that he isolated as differentiating it from ancient parallels was the status of the record:

When we can no longer distinguish the sacred from the profane or even the good from the bad, we content ourselves with minute discriminations between the batting average of the .308 hitter and the .307 hitter. Once the gods have vanished from Mount Olympus or Dante's paradise, we can no longer run to appease them or to save our souls, but we can set a new record. It is a uniquely modern form of immortality.¹⁰

The cult of sports records that this quotation identifies is another way in which the past informs the present in sport. Some sports are more record-obsessed than others, but all sports have a cult of their own specific record holders – the fastest, strongest, highest, most successful, and so on, depending on the sport. The names of the first to complete certain activities are celebrated even outside each sport, with, for example, the triumphs of Roger Bannister (the first runner to cover a mile in under four minutes, in 1954) and Matthew Webb (the first person to swim across the English Channel, in 1875) still known widely outside

of athletics and swimming respectively. Records such as this are celebrated for what they tell us about human potential and athletic discipline, and are maintained as a way of seeing how far we have come: here, history is something that we are aware of because we are, to use Nancy Struna's simple but effective phrase, 'moving away from' it.¹¹ Enthusiasts who maintain accounts of the high achievers in their sports, and who update these records when they fall, demonstrate the vitality of the past as a shaping influence on the sporting present.

There are countless other ways in which the past informs the present in sport. The past is present for every runner who maintains records of personal bests, for every gambler who considers a horse's pedigree and form before placing a bet, for every league in any sport that is based on past performance, for every cup winner who kisses the trophy in the way that previous winners have done, for every fan who carries out a familiar ritual on the day of a match hoping that it will bring good luck, and for every collector of baseball cards or football programmes. The past is the source of sport.

2.2 Sport and mythology

Another reason why we should study the history of sport links to an important feature of most sports' own engagement with the past. It should be clear by now that many sports' establishments care about the past of their own sport: they simply would not name trophies after heroes, maintain traditions, or preserve old laws if the past was irrelevant to them. This does not mean that they cannot be forward-looking and interested in change and innovation, too: it is just that the past matters as a part of their identity. However, it is also clear that many sports are relatively narrow-minded when it comes to history: they tend to see what they want to see, and to ignore or marginalize less comfortable aspects, or features which contradict their preferred view. This is particularly evident when major changes have occurred, and sports administrators rewrite what went before to make it fit with the new situation. The early years of the modern Olympic movement provide an excellent example, analysed so thoroughly by David Young in *The Modern Olympics*. Young shows that there were a number of multi-sport events that used the name 'Olympic' or 'Olympian' throughout the nineteenth century, based variously in Greece, England, and France; and Pierre de Coubertin was working within a long tradition. However, he

quickly became seen as the founder of the Olympics, and his predecessors were written out of Olympic history.¹² This is history as written by the victors to explain and justify their victory, and it is written without the self-reflection that most historians now recognise as fundamental to their study. However, we cannot simply dismiss sports' readings of their own past because they are misleading: we need to go further. It is crucial to see what parts of the past sports promote, as this helps us to understand their identities and how they see themselves in the present.

What we can do, then, is to consider sport's own engagement with its past as being mythologised. This does not mean that it is based on things that did not happen: we are using the concept of mythology in a more sophisticated sense than that. Looking at myths in this setting is about looking at the selective bits of the past that people want to remember, and at the ways in which people construct particular stories out of them. This is something that we can see in many aspects of human life beyond sport. All major religions have creation myths, for example, which take elements from a real past and develop a religious narrative around them. Societies also develop political, military, and social myths, based around attractive and usually simplistic readings of particular events from the past. Sport is no different: and through looking at some sports' own myths, and at the way they present the past as leading inevitably to their own preferred present, we can get a sense of what history means to those sports' enthusiasts and establishments.

2.2.1 Creation myths

Any basic engagement with history will show that all sports have evolved over time. Even those that can claim specific moments of invention in particular forms, such as basketball's creation by James Naismith in 1891, have precedents in earlier forms of play. In the case of basketball, for example, John Arlott has shown similarities not just with sacred games played in South America in the seventh century BC, but has also noted the eleventh-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam's words: 'You are a ball, played with by fate; a ball which God throws since the dawn of time into the catch-basket.'¹³ Ultimately, all sport can be seen to have roots in certain activities, notably running, swimming, throwing, catching, kicking, and hunting, as well as in displays of physical strength against other people, animals, or on inanimate objects. Most sports acknowledge the varied roots of their particular game. As Percy Young put it in his popular history of football, 'a historian knows that to speak of any phenomenon as being the first of its kind is either impossible,

or impolitic, or both'.¹⁴ However, despite this sensible view, there has been a significant trend, especially in the nineteenth century, for sports to claim specific moments of birth. These are **sports' creation myths**.

The two most famous examples are probably the 1823 William Webb Ellis story in rugby and the 1839 Abner Doubleday story in baseball. Eric Dunning, Joseph Maguire, and Robert Pearton have argued that belief in these myths is 'a kind of sports equivalent of the belief in the tooth fairy or Father Christmas'.¹⁵ In the case of rugby, Jonathan Rice has provided us with an excellent digest of the myth's development.¹⁶ Contemporary records from the 1820s showed that handling and running with the ball were developing as features of the version of football played at Rugby School, but no one recorded who had first had the idea of playing this way. When the laws were published in 1846, handling was clearly part of the game. When the clubs that preferred the running and handling style split from the kickers at the Football Association in 1871, they did not promote any particular story about how the distinctive style had started; and two books on the history of the game published in 1885 and 1892 respectively did not mention Webb Ellis. The story of a key moment in 1823 when Webb Ellis is supposed to have ignored the rules by picking up the ball and running with it was not produced until the 1890s, 70 years after it is supposed to have happened. The timing is the point of the story: this was the decade in which association football became dominated by professionalism in the leading clubs, and when a number of rugby clubs in the north of England were pressing for some financial incentives for players, either broken time payments or open professionalism. Under this type of pressure, a middle-class sport which wished to stress its clean, amateur roots found it convenient to do so by inventing a story about a moment of inspired individualism in one of the country's leading schools. The myth became immensely popular within the rugby establishment, formalised in stone in 1923, when a plaque commemorating Webb Ellis' 'fine disregard for the rules', one hundred years earlier, was erected in Rugby School, later joined by a statue. The continued popularity of the story can be seen in the fact that some rugby enthusiasts evidently still believe it, and it has survived as a straightforward historical fact in some popular history. For example, Clem Thomas, a former international who wrote a history of the British Lions in 1996, discussed the 1888 idea of a British representative team as having happened '65 years after William Webb Ellis had invented the game which took the name of his school'.¹⁷ The myth also survives at the sport's highest level, where the World Cup is named the Webb Ellis Trophy.

In the USA, baseball has a similar creation myth, with Abner Doubleday of Cooperstown, New York, credited with inventing the sport in 1839. As with the rugby union example, this version of the sport's origins was established by committee in the early years of the twentieth century, when the Mills Commission (1905–07) settled on Doubleday as the founder. This came at a time when the baseball establishment wished to distance itself from the allegation that their sport was simply an adaptation of the English children's game of rounders. His adaptations to generic bat and ball games – notably the use a diamond-shaped area with bases at each angle – were seen as proof that the game was all-American and manly, not English and juvenile. This version became the accepted story, and the sport's centenary was accordingly celebrated in 1939. As with Webb Ellis, the myth has come under attack from historians, and its shortcomings are now recognised by the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Nevertheless, it continues to influence the game's historical image, not least in the baseball heritage tourism centred on Cooperstown, and in the continued dating of baseball's anniversaries from 1839.¹⁸ Creation myths such as these serve the purpose of telling a sport's followers where the sport has come from. They can variously offer age, heritage, social legitimacy, and national identity. Whatever their function, such myths show one of the ways in which sports present their own history.

Activity 4: Myths and their modern believers

The William Webb Ellis and the Abner Doubleday stories continue to have their believers, despite their dubious accuracy. Using popular histories, reference books, and club and governing body websites for one of these sports, find five references to either Webb Ellis or Doubleday. How are the stories presented in these sources? How far do the authors appear to believe in the myths? Why are these stories still popular?

2.2.2 Continuity and the 'invention of tradition'

Mythologising the past is also evident in narratives of continuity and evolution that are rife in sport. Any number of authors of popular histories of sport, particularly those who publish on the Internet, draw direct lines between ancient play and their favourite sport. However, this trend is not limited to the opportunities for bad history writing

that the World Wide Web offers. As with creation myths, it is something in which a number of sports' establishments have engaged. It is sport's version of a trend that Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger described as 'the invention of tradition'.¹⁹ As the contributors to Hobsbawm and Ranger's collection *The Invention of Tradition* showed, institutions as diverse as the monarchy and Scottish nationalists all have produced dubious historical traditions for themselves in order to stress their age and legitimacy. Various sports' establishments and enthusiasts have similarly invented continuities and traditions. Some of the stories strike us as comical from the start, such as the legend promoted by some of the nineteenth-century enthusiasts of the Gaelic sport of shinty (*camanach*). Writing in the 1880s, a time when many sports were striving to establish their amateur roots and their antiquity, the True Highlanders took shinty back to Genesis:

[I]t is said, and, no doubt, with great truth, that the game of *Camanchad*, or club playing, was introduced into the Green Isle [Great Britain] by the immediate descendants of Noah. On such authority we may rationally conclude that it was played by Noah himself; and if by Noah, in all probability by Adam and his sons.²⁰

A similarly long-term approach, albeit to classical antiquity rather than to the Bible, is also present in some Olympic historiography. Many from within the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have, since its foundation in 1894, worked hard to present the Olympics not as the modern phenomenon that it is, reliant on such luxuries of the industrial age as international transport links, leisure time, organised physical education, and cross-border social and professional networks, but as a revival of the ancient games. There were – and are – some ancient trappings, such as the IOC's chosen nomenclature and the quadrennial calendar: but these were born out of the leaders' love of ancient Greece, not through any survival of a particular way of doing things over the millennium and a half between the ancient games' dissolution and the establishment of the modern Olympics. The modern trappings of Olympism – the sports involved, the strong role of nation states, the secular setting, the cosmopolitanism of the participants – far outweighed any ancient features, even in the 1890s. However, in a quest to establish legitimacy and authority, the ancient games form a frequent feature in modern Olympic history. Most recently, the 2004 Athens Olympics were presented as a return not just to the host city of the first Olympics of 1896, but as a return to the spiritual home of Olympism. Throughout modern Olympic history, this theme has been significant, as exemplified in Webster's

1914 book of Olympic history, staggeringly entitled *The Evolution of the Olympic Games, 1829 BC–1914 AD*.²¹

This type of approach gives each sport's followers a sense of tradition. This tells us far more about the beliefs of the people writing the history than it does about the past itself. In the case of the Olympics, this promotion of a mythologised tradition takes us into a range of ideologies and beliefs of some people in early twentieth-century Europe and North America, such as a fear of modernism and a belief in the spiritual and cultural supremacy of ancient civilizations. A good example is the torch relay from Olympia to the host city, now an established ritual in the Olympics: but far from the supposed antiquity of such a ritual, embodied in the allegedly classical clothing of the women who light the torch, the relay was created by the Nazi organisers of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. This invented tradition thus owes more to the Nazis' interest in ancient civilisations and their antipathy towards modernism than it does to any genuine Olympic tradition. The fact that all Olympic hosts since 1936 have taken it on as an ancient symbol rather than recognising it as a Nazi one forms an interesting sidelight on the invention of such traditions.

2.2.3 Golden ages

The same forces as those which lead sports to invent moments of creation and long-term traditions can be seen at work in any sport's promotion of its golden age. All major sports are deemed to have such periods, times when the game was at some kind of peak of development and performance without any corrupting features being present. As with other mythologies from within sport, golden ages bear deconstruction. First off, they are relative to the people looking back. Look at the absence of women from cricket's apparent golden age, of black athletes from athletics' golden age, of wheelchair participants from the golden age of the Olympics. All of these groups would come up with alternative golden ages that are meaningful to them. Golden ages can be similarly one-eyed when it comes to national groups. Referring to the England football team's two defeats by Hungary in 1953 and 1954 as the end of a golden age ignores the fact that it was the start of a golden age – albeit a short-lived one – for Hungarian football. Whenever faced with a golden age, it is the historian's job to ask who is doing the reminiscing, and for whom the age was golden. A second characteristic of golden ages is that they were rarely as free from the symbols of decline and corruption as their believers would wish. Olympic athletes used drugs at least as

early as 1904, rugby union players received illegal payments throughout the game's amateur period from the 1870s to the 1990s, governments intervened in sports for political capital and diplomatic advantage from the start of modern sport, there was event sponsorship at the 1908 Olympic Games, cricket was dominated by gambling in its early days, and competitors in the ancient Olympics were effectively professionals. Historical research can quickly chip away the haloes that enthusiasts for golden ages would place on their heroes, and show them as human beings making choices about how they conducted themselves when they played. Research into contexts rather than merely contests can help us make sense of the presence of money, the media, politics, and cheating in any period of any sport's history. This is the basic work of the historian: to try to make sense of what happened in the past, based on its own evidence and our reading of it. The point here is to stress that a belief in golden ages, however naïve it may seem, is an important part of sports' own engagement with its past.

These sporting mythologies, based on creation, continuity, and golden ages, can be described as history, albeit history that is at best unconsciously subjective and at worst wholly fictional. However, this does not mean that academic historians should ignore these mythologies. Historians have to try to work out what happened. How did rugby union emerge as a distinct form of football throughout the nineteenth century, for example, or how did the founders of the Olympic Games disseminate their ideas? The myths outlined above tell us very little about what happened in this sense. However, historians also have a duty to look at what people believe about their situations, including how they interpret their own past. This is what John Tosh calls the 'quest for meaning' in history writing, a quest designed to help us see 'how people interpreted their world and represented their experience' as a 'matter of intrinsic interest'.²² In this setting, the rugby union story about Webb Ellis and the Olympians' belief that their organisation owes more to ancient Greece than to nineteenth-century France are significant. They may not tell us what actually happened, but they tell us a great deal about the beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, and cultures of those whose actions and decisions we are studying. So, for example, the Webb Ellis story may tell us nothing about the 1820s, where it is set; but it tells us a great deal about the 1890s, when it was popularised. In this sense, we have to study sports' own myths as a way into their own views of the past. This can be challenging, especially if you have grown up believing in these myths. As Bernard Whimpress put it in his discussion of facts in sports history, 'myths often have a sense of wonder about them which

hard facts will deny and the historian can appear as something of a 'spoilsport'.²³ However, the importance of tackling myths while finding out why people believe in them is central to academic sports history, and you should not shirk this responsibility.

► 2.3 Sport and heritage

A third theme to look at in this overall consideration of sport's historical nature is heritage and commemoration. Sport's past remains alive in diverse acts of remembrance and celebration that are woven into the lives and rituals of those involved with sport in the present. In these ways, sport can be seen as part of the heritage of many different types of community, including the family, the town or suburb, the city, the region, and the national and global communities of sports enthusiasts. Heritage, defined here as the preservation of something from the past in a way that is meaningful for the present and could be of interest in the future, figures heavily in sport. We can see this through sports museums, through the preservation of sites or the commemoration of sport when places are redeveloped, and in the recognition of individuals through road-naming, stadium-naming, and memorial statuary.

2.3.1 Museums

Sport is increasingly being represented in museums. This is most obvious when we see the growth of specialised museums devoted to particular sports or sporting organisations.²⁴ These are prevalent in the USA, where the long-standing hall of fame culture has given us such museums as those dedicated to baseball in Cooperstown, New York; basketball in Springfield, Massachusetts; and soccer in Oneonta, New York. English examples include the National Football Museum in Preston and the River and Rowing Museum and the Henley Museum in Henley-on-Thames, along with specialised collections linked to clubs and stadiums, as in the museums devoted to rugby union at Twickenham, lawn tennis at Wimbledon, and horse racing at Newmarket. In addition, many other museums with a wider remit are also increasingly including sports-based displays. This is evident in local history museums, where sport is covered in particular displays, and in specialised museums where sport can be seen as a minor part of the story: sport in the army at the National Army Museum and transport workers' sports clubs in the Glasgow Transport Museum are both examples of

this. When we also include art exhibitions in this, such as the National Portrait Gallery's Sporting Heroes exhibition of 1998–99, we can see a significant interest in sport from the museum and gallery sector. Such spaces are, as Wray Vamplew has put it, 'sports history's public face'.²⁵ However, as Robert Hewison argues in his *The Heritage Industry*, museums are not neutral places: 'A display in a museum may simply be telling a story, but the existence of a museum has a story to tell.'²⁶ The story to be told from the growth of the museum industry's interest in sport is that sport's past matters. The growth in museumisation is underpinned by the assumption that sport's past – both the physical artefacts that fit into display cases and the memories and stories that such artefacts can inspire – should not be allowed to die out. This trend is, of course, open to criticism. Who chooses which parts of sport's past should be museumised? Does the growth of museums suggest a feeling of insecurity about the future? How can commercial, community, and academic interests all be served by any particular sports museum? Would resources spent on museums be better devoted to developing sport for the future? Wherever we stand on these issues, we need to recognise that sport is now taken seriously by museums, another sign of the presence of the past in contemporary sports culture.

Activity 5: From running track to display case

Sports museums, like museums dedicated to any other theme, collect artefacts that can be linked to famous individuals from the past. The link between object and hero gives the artefact an elevated status, turning it into a secular relic. For example, British Olympic double gold medallist Kelly Holmes, who was in the army before making a full-time career in athletics, has one of her running vests displayed in the National Army Museum. Objectively, there is no difference between this vest and any other army running vest from that period: but the fact that Holmes wore it makes it special. Using a reliable internet search engine, locate the museums in which the following artefacts are held.

- The Washington Senators' baseball cap worn by pitcher Walter Johnson during the 1926 season.
- The shoes worn by Carl Lewis in the final of the 200 metres at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games.

- Ski jumper Matti Nykänen's medal collection.

- The shirt worn by England's Arnold Kirke-Smith in the first football international, the England v Scotland match of 1872.
- The ice hockey net in which Wayne Gretzky of the LA Kings scored his National Hockey League record-breaking 802nd goal.
- Fishhooks dropped on the pitch of Lancaster Park, Christchurch, by anti-apartheid protesters during the 1981 South African rugby union tour of New Zealand.

What does this significance by association tell us about sporting celebrity? Why do sports enthusiasts revere some items but not others? What should the relationship between museums, private collectors, auction houses, and the famous sports person's family be?

2.3.2 Sites

Towards the end of the twentieth century, stadium development in many countries set up interesting questions about the heritage of sports sites. Many sports places were no longer suitable for the demands of the sports that they had been built for: health and safety concerns (especially, in the UK, after the 1989 Hillsborough disaster), the changing demographics of crowds, the technical demands of media companies, and new accessibility requirements all meant that many clubs had to choose between closing sections of their grounds, redeveloping them, or selling up and relocating. Different clubs took different solutions. In the debates about those solutions, sporting heritage began to be discussed seriously. In England, the heritage organisation English Heritage became involved, and helped to promote the idea that sports sites – not just professional football clubs' grounds, but also everything from pub bowling greens to Victorian swimming baths – should be open to the same kind of interest as the more traditional sites of heritage investment and tourism, such as castles, ruined abbeys, and stately homes. The interests of heritage have to be balanced against those of the present, and the constantly developing needs of health and safety requirements in sports sites create a tension between those who would seek to preserve and those who would update to keep a site functional. Some of the results may be compromises, but there have been some

imaginative attempts to maintain a sense of sport's past, once a site has become obsolete.²⁷ This has been demonstrated in the ways in which professional football clubs' nineteenth century grounds have been redeveloped once they have moved to new, twenty-first-century homes. In many, where housing or retail interests have taken over the old site, various architectural and design steps have been taken to remember sport. At The Dell, Southampton FC's home from 1898 until 2001, the property developers used a

specific design approach... to preserve some of the great memories by echoing the layout of the Dell. The four sided arrangement of the homes evokes the spectators [sic] stands. These surround a central landscaped courtyard which itself is on the exact site of the old pitch and indeed the old centre spot.²⁸

Roads and buildings within the complex have been named after players and managers, such as Le Tissier Court and Ted Bates Court. In this way, sports sites that are no longer economically viable can be converted for a new economic activity without the sport associated with the site being forgotten. This is an exciting new development in sports history, and one that shows a strong link between past and present in the sporting public's perception. English Heritage's interest in sport, evident in its involvement in the Played in Britain project, is an example of this growing interest in sport's material heritage being taken seriously.²⁹

2.3.3 Public commemoration

Public commemoration does not just focus on naming roads after club heroes in converted football grounds. Beyond this, sport's past is kept through diverse forms of public remembrance. Some clubs name parts of their grounds, or the ground itself, after famous players, coaches, or administrators from the past, such as the Tom Finney Stand at Preston North End FC's Deepdale, or Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu Stadium. As well as naming, many sports figures have had statues erected to them at meaningful sites, such as Reg Harris at the Velodrome in Manchester, Fred Perry inside the All-England Club at Wimbledon, Bill Shankly at Liverpool FC's Anfield, and Paavo Nurmi outside Helsinki's Olympic Stadium. Nor is this limited to people: Red Rum, the horse that won the Grand National three times in the 1970s, has a statue at Aintree, and is buried near the winning post. However, this trend has not been confined to the stadium or its precincts itself, and sportsmen – and, to a lesser degree, women – have been commemorated within their

communities, or communities in which they made an impact, in various ways. The two major media for such remembrance have been statues and street names, with sports figures encroaching on areas that were previously the preserve of royal, military, artistic, political, and religious figures. Again, any list can only scratch the surface of this trend. Statues to athlete Fanny Blankers-Koen in Amsterdam, boxer Joe Louis in Detroit, and footballer Stanley Matthews in Stoke-on Trent are all examples of this. At least one sporting animal has gone one better than statuary: 1930s greyhound racing legend Mick the Miller not only has an enclosure named after him at Wimbledon Stadium, but has his stuffed remains on display in the Rothschild Natural History Museum at Tring. Beyond statuary, the naming of roads after significant sportsmen and women often affords public recognition. As with statues, this tends to happen in the communities where the people made their biggest impact. Rugby league legend Clive Sullivan has the Clive Sullivan Way in Kingston Upon Hull, while Alf Ramsey is remembered by Sir Alf Ramsey Way in Ipswich, where he was Ipswich Town FC's leading manager. Similarly, Jesse Owens Strasse, dedicated in 1984 after the 1936 Olympic hero's death, is close to the scene of his triumphs in Berlin. This trend is ubiquitous, with the commemoration of sporting heroes now a part of the fabric of the urban community. In addition, memorials are often erected to people who have died in or around sporting events. From teams, such as the members of the Manchester United team killed in an air crash in 1958, through to spectators killed in crowd disasters as at Hillsborough in 1989, and Heysel and Valley Parade in 1985, and individuals who died as a direct result of sporting activity, such as cyclist Tommy Simpson in 1967: all of these dead have some kind of memorial erected to them, either at the site of the death or in the fabric of relevant stadiums. As with military memorials, these serve to remind us in the present of sacrifices – usually accidental, always tragic – made by people in the past of our sports. The fact that many of these memorials continue to serve as a focus for people's grief years after the events suggests a dynamic relationship between past and present.

Activity 6: The aviator, the casino owner, and the politician

Despite the growing trend of commercial sponsorship of stadiums, many stadiums are also named after people as an act of commemoration. Those honoured are often players, officials, and coaches, but figures from other

occupations — such as business, politics, religion, or the armed forces — also have sports places named for them. Below are a few examples, some sporting, some not. In each case, find out who the person being honoured was, and discuss the reasons why a stadium was named after him.

- Bobby Dodd Stadium, Atlanta, USA
- Casement Park, Belfast, Northern Ireland
- Croke Park, Dublin, Ireland
- Fritz Walter Stadium, Kaiserslauten, Germany
- Mário Filho Stadium, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- Paul Brown Stadium, Cincinnati, USA
- Rod Laver Arena, Melbourne, Australia
- Roland Garros Stadium, Paris, France
- Sam Boyd Stadium, Las Vegas, USA
- Spyros Louis Stadium, Athens, Greece
- The Stoop Memorial Ground, Twickenham, England
- Tofiq Bakhramov Stadium, Baku, Azerbaijan.

2.4 Conclusion

The themes covered in this chapter, and the examples chosen to illustrate them, demonstrate one of the assumptions underlying this book: that sport in the present cares about its past. History is all around us when we engage with sport. This fact informs the sports historian's critical agenda. If any sport's past is left as something taken for granted, then it can never be understood. Therefore, sports history is about looking beyond the myths and marketing, the statues and traditions, and finding out — as far as we can — what sport was like in the past,

and the ways in which the past informs the present. Sports history goes beyond the simple narratives and looks at sport in the round. Having devoted this chapter to the relationship between history and sport, and the ways in which the past informs the present, we shall move on to look in the next chapter at ways in which history as an academic discipline has engaged with sport.