

Sports History

A Practical Guide

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palgrave
macmillan

Warm-Up Exercises

- ✧ History is just as much a legitimate area for sports studies as physiology, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, management, and any other subject traditionally taught in sport departments.

You need to keep these assumptions in mind when using this book, as they underpin it. For now, let us move into the warm-up exercises.

➤ Exercise 1: Positive and negative sides to sport

It is easy for us as enthusiasts of sport – players, followers, coaches, officials, or whatever – to think only positively about it. We can easily recognise such positive aspects of sport as health promotion, socialisation, community building, and identity formation. However, it is sometimes harder to recognise sport's negative features that are the downsides to all of the positives. Below, I have given a number of everyday statements that emphasise the positive face of sport: 'Sport promotes health and well-being', 'Sport creates social mobility', and so on. I have then given a brief illustration of the kind of evidence that can be used to back up the positive statements, followed by a similarly brief illustration of the kind of evidence we could use to prove the opposite case. Your warm-up exercise is to find real evidence to back up each of the illustrations, the positive and the negative. This evidence can come from any historical period or place, or from your own experience and observation of real sport. I have given examples of all of the points to get you started. The point of the exercise is to get you recognising the ups and downs of sport, and appreciating the relationships between them.

Statement 1. Sport promotes health and well-being

Positive: Doctors recommend regular exercise as a preventative step against a wide range of conditions, including obesity, heart disease, depression, and osteoporosis.

Example: In 2004, the British government's Department of Health, in partnership with the Countryside Agency and Sport England, started a £2.6 million project to set up LEAPs – Local Exercise Action Pilots – in various communities. Each LEAP promotes and facilitates exercise and activity for targeted populations, such as diabetes sufferers and people recovering from strokes, as a specific way of improving health.

Before we move into the conceptual and practical guidance that this book is designed to deliver, I am going to put you through an intellectual warm-up routine. Just as you should always warm-up physically before taking part in any sport or exercise, so it is worth spending some time on a mental warm-up when tackling a new area. As will become clear later in the book, working as a sports historian is very different from working in other areas of sports studies, particularly those based on the sciences; and this chapter is designed to help you get yourself into an appropriate frame of mind with which to tackle sports history. Similarly, for history students who have not tackled sport as a subject matter before, these steps will help you set up sport as a legitimate area for intellectual enquiry. These exercises are particularly useful if you are a sports enthusiast who has not approached sport academically before, as they will help you to move beyond a common sense acceptance of sport and into a more enquiring position.

The warm-up steps here are all based on some basic assumptions that you need to recognise when approaching sport historically. These assumptions may well be of second nature to you already, or they may be new: either way, you need to engage with them. They are,

- ✧ Sport is not socially, politically, economically, culturally, or historically neutral. Sport is always linked to the wider settings in which it is played, and to think that it can float free of them – as in, for example, the claim that 'sport and politics should not mix' – is an obstacle to your understanding of sport.
- ✧ Sport has both positive and negative features, and to concentrate only on the former and see sport without reservations as a force for good is to willfully misunderstand it.
- ✧ If you want to understand sport, you have to be prepared to ask awkward questions of it, and to deal with any answers that may make you feel uncomfortable.
- ✧ Sport is just as much a legitimate area for historical study as war, religion, social conditions, politics, and any other subject traditionally taught in history departments.

Negative: Sport causes injuries, ranging from mild sprains and grazes through to serious trauma to limbs, necks, heads, and chests. It can also cause death.

Example: Since the 1930s, at least six British fell-runners have died of hypothermia during competition after getting lost or falling in bad weather conditions.¹

Statement 2. Sport creates social mobility

Positive: Successful sportsmen and women are able to move up the social scale and gain material success.

Example: British boxer Frank Bruno was brought up in a working-class community. He later claimed that sport helped him 'escape the poverty trap. Thanks to the rewards from boxing I am able to offer my wife and daughters a far better future than they could ever have hoped for had I still been stuck as a labourer on a building site.'²

Negative: For every sporting millionaire, there are thousands of also-rans who fail to achieve their sporting dreams, and have few qualifications or skills for other forms of work; and there are also many who are unable to handle the pressures that wealth and fame bring, and who succumb to various escapes – gambling, alcoholism and other substance abuse – that drain both their wealth and health. Social mobility in sport is unevenly distributed and easy to lose, and it can come at a price.

Example: George Best, a glamorous and talented Northern Irish footballer of the 1960s and 1970s, explained his rise and fall from player to pop icon to bankrupt alcoholic thus: 'I spent a lot of money on booze, birds and fast cars. The rest I just squandered.'³ This famous piece of bravado fails to disguise a serious problem. Best died in 2005 at the age of 59 as a direct result of his alcohol abuse.

Statement 3. Sport brings communities together

Positive: Sport's links to geopolitical units – towns, cities, and countries – make it an ideal focus for the idea of community representation, and people who may not otherwise have anything in common with each other can find a shared interest in sport.

Example: When South Africa won the rugby union World Cup in 1995, in the immediate aftermath of the divisive apartheid years,

the trophy was awarded to the team's Afrikaner captain Francois Pienaar by President Nelson Mandela, an icon of the black opposition to minority white rule. The presentation is described on a South African government website as 'a spontaneous gesture of racial reconciliation that melted hearts around the country. A single moment, and 400 years of colonial strife and bitterness... suddenly seemed so petty.'⁴

Negative: Sport's competitive nature and often aggressive character makes it just as suitable for expressing division as for promoting unity.

Example: In the Scottish city of Glasgow, the two leading football teams are strongly linked to two religious communities: Rangers to the Protestants and Celtic to the Roman Catholics. Despite some recent dilution of the sectarianism that has historically characterised these two clubs' cultures, the teams remain a focus for expressions of political, social, cultural, and religious differences within the city and beyond.

Statement 4. Sport makes people aspire towards excellence

Positive: Most people taking part in sport at any level will set themselves goals, ranging from winning an Olympic gold medal through to weight loss or simply beating a personal best. These goals inspire participants to commit themselves to their sport and abide by its laws and spirit.

Example: Rower Steve Redgrave won gold medals at five consecutive Olympic Games, from 1984 to 2000, as well as numerous other international competitions. An enthusiastic promoter of sport and exercise, a diabetic who has excelled despite his condition, an active charity fund-raiser, Redgrave is a model of sporting and personal excellence.

Negative: The pressure to succeed that is embedded in most sports' cultures, and the rewards – financial, personal, political – that can go with sporting success, mean that many people are willing to cheat in order to win. Excellence at any price is not excellence at all.

Example: In 1988, Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson won the men's 100 metres in the Seoul Olympic Games. In a post-race test, he was found to have been using the banned steroid stanozolol, and was disqualified and subsequently banned from athletics.

Statement 5. Sport helps people to socialise

Positive: Sport is an excellent way in which people of all ages, but particularly children, can meet new people and develop social skills – such as communication, taking turns, following rules, making decisions, and adopting leadership roles – that are useful in other areas of life. Sport can enhance confidence and self-esteem.

Example: Employers in the private and the public sector routinely use sports-based activities for staff development and team-building purposes.

Negative: For every child who enjoys sport, there is one who does not. Poor motor skills, uncorrected eyesight, disability, or a simple lack of interest leave many people alienated by compulsory sport at school, and can contribute to feelings of low self-esteem.

Example: Julie Myerson's moving childhood memoir, *Not a Games Person*, captures the feelings of isolation, alienation, and fear that can be caused by school sport and physical education. Her personal account is resonant for anyone who has ever felt this way: 'The swimming pool changing rooms are dark, damp and echoey. Lucky girls have letters about periods and verrucas... Everyone else stands and shivers in a miserable way, feet cold on the wet tiles, as they wait for Mrs Rogers to blow her whistle... If you don't dive in you'll be pushed from behind.'⁵

Working through these statements, and finding your own examples, is a good way to get you thinking critically about sport. Without such critical thinking, your engagement with sports history is likely to be limited. With it, you will be prepared to deal with the realities of sport rather than just its idealised image.

Exercise 2: Putting sport in context

All sports take place in a context. This is a truism that you will find mentioned in most books on sports history and sports sociology, but its familiarity does not mean that you can take it for granted or ignore it. We will be exploring issues of context later on: for now, you need to do a simple exercise designed to help you identify the links between a sport's structure and nature and the wider societal setting in which it takes place.

Quidditch is a fictional sport invented by J.K. Rowling for her Harry Potter novels. It takes place in a magical community, based around

schools of wizardry and witchcraft. The rules are explained in the first novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*; and expanded in the charity spin-off, *Quidditch Through the Ages*.⁶ It is a team invasion game played on flying broomsticks, involving different classes of balls that can act magically on their own volition. This sport is, obviously, a fantasy; yet the links between the context – in this case, a hidden world of witches and wizards, and that community's private school equivalents – and Quidditch's structure and nature are explicit. For this exercise, read the books named above, or watch the Quidditch sequences in the films of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and make a list of all the features of the sport that position it as one that could happen only in that context. When we move on to deal with real sports later on, this exercise will have helped you tune your mind to making links between sport and context.

Exercise 3: Empathy

Empathy is the act of identifying with other people's feelings and points of view. There has been a lot of discussion in history teaching circles about the role of empathy in historical study. The supporters of empathy argue that if we want to understand the past, we need to empathise with the people who lived then. This will help us understand the options that people felt they had, and their motivations for acting as they did. Opponents of empathy argue that it is impossible to empathise, as we cannot recreate past living, intellectual, and emotional conditions accurately enough to get into people's minds. The sources that we have from the past – as will be discussed in Chapter 5 – are too incomplete and subjective for us to reconstruct people's ways of seeing the world and rationalising their behaviour. It is also difficult for us to attempt empathy with people whose beliefs, politics, and actions we find abhorrent. Imagine, for a moment, being asked to empathise historically with a slave-trader, a *Schutzstaffel* (SS) officer, or Joseph Stalin. However, despite its intellectual and ideological challenges, empathy is a useful quality for a historian to keep in mind, and you can warm-up for sports history by trying to apply it. It can help you appreciate opportunities, constraints, choices, and behaviour, and how all of these vary from time to time and place to place. How might you feel about sport if you had the wages, living conditions, and life expectancy of a thirteenth-century peasant? Why did a sportive culture based on the regular killing of people and animals, such as ancient Roman gladiatorial events,

make sense to the people involved in it but seem repulsive to us? Why was religion central to the original Olympics Games but marginal to the modern Olympics? These are all huge questions that cannot be answered by empathy alone, but thinking through the mental world of the people involved, and the wider settings in which they lived, will help you approach the history, and might stop you making anachronistic judgements about sport in the past.

The exercise to help you develop this skill is based not on history, but on your own sporting life. Whoever you are, your own involvement in sport – which may range from elite performer to the kind of alienation cited in Julie Myerson's book above – will have been personal, but it will also have been influenced by such factors as your age, your gender, your social background, your income (or that of your family), where you live, the school you attended, your ethnicity, your ability, your religion, and many other factors. Some of these may seem irrelevant to you – if you are not religious, for example, you may fail to consider the relationship between faith and sport. However, all of these factors can have an influence on our individual sporting lives. Now put yourself in someone else's position, and try to imagine what his or her experiences of sport may be like. Work through the following scenarios:

- **Imagine changing sex.** Would you face discrimination or stereotyping in any sport? Would your opportunities to be involved in sport increase or decrease?
- **Imagine changing ethnic group.** Would your sporting experience change at all in relation to discrimination and opportunity?
- **What would your sporting options be like if you were 30 years older than you are now?** How about ten years younger?
- **If you are a member of a faith that places restrictions on physical activity on certain days,** how different might your sporting life be if you did not hold those obligations? If you are not part of such a faith, or you hold no religious beliefs, imagine taking on such observances. How would this affect your sporting participation?
- **Imagine your personal income increasing by 50 per cent.** What sporting opportunities could this open up to you? Now imagine your income decreasing by 50 per cent. What effect would this have on your sporting life?

To get a sense of these different positions, talk to people from the groups identified, and look at newspaper coverage and club and community websites to see what different sporting cultures are like. Not only will

this give you a generally wide appreciation of the diversity of contemporary sport, it will also give you experience in attempting empathy, which will help your approaches to sports history.

► Exercise 4: Keeping your eyes and ears open

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, we shall explore the diverse range of sources that you should use in your work on sports history. Before that, it is worth pausing to reflect on the ways in which sports history is embedded in the fabric of our communities. The skill to develop here is that of keeping your eyes and ears open to evidence about what sport was like in the past. Look for sports history in your local sports clubs' buildings, in street names (such as Archery Lane, Bowling Green Alley, Golf Course Road), and in the statues and memorials in your community.⁸ Listen for sports history in older people's conversations: what do they mean when they compare a current player to a star from their younger days, or when they complain about declining standards in sport? To what are people alluding when they use idioms from the history of sport in everyday speech, such as 'Say it ain't so, Joe' or 'The best in the Northern Union'? Look for evidence of changing usage in a sports site. Why, for example, is the space that was built as a squash court in your local sports centre in the 1980s now a weights room or a children's play area? Why is there a derelict Victorian swimming pool in your town? Once you get into the habit of looking and listening for sports history in everyday life, you will increasingly appreciate the importance of the past in contemporary sport, a theme that we will develop in Chapter 2.

To warm-up in this area, do the following activities.

1. Using a map of your community, or of a large community near your home, find a road that has a sporting name. Contact the local authority to find out when it was given that name, and use old maps to see what was there before. Visit the area to see if there is any evidence of a continued sports usage.
2. Ask a member of your family from at least the generation above you to talk about what sport was like when he or she was the age that you are now, and to compare it to sport now. You might want to stick with one sport, or to open it up more broadly. Every time your interviewee names a person or a place that you do not know about, ask him or her to explain. End the interview by asking if sport was better then than it is now, and get reasons for this.

► Conclusion

These activities have been designed to help you warm-up for sports history. They have introduced some of the types of questioning you will need to do as a historian, and have given you the chance to explore your own examples, including unique ones from your own family and community history. Keep the skills here in mind as you move into the book, and as you begin your practical experience as a sports historian.

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

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

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 naive 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

- Which of the quotations most closely resembles your view of history? Why?
- With which of the quotations do you most strongly disagree? Why?
- 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.

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 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 multicultural 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 overplay 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.