

Aspirational Reflections: The Future of Sport History¹

Heather L. Dichter, De Montfort University
Wray Vamplew, University of Stirling

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *The International Journal of the History of Sport* on 30 Oct 2017, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09523367.2017.1383901>

SWOT analyses are now old fashioned but hopefully still useful even if simply as a means for organizing ideas. This article will provide a scrambled form of SWOT analysis of the ideas contained in the various contributions to this special issue. Rather than deal with strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities separately, they will be dealt with as relevant to particular arguments. Put simply, strengths can sometimes also be seen as weaknesses and threats can provide challenges but simultaneously also opportunities. How particular factors are regarded can depend on one's state of mind, career stage, place in the academic food chain, or institutional location. A few other caveats. First, notwithstanding the valuable contribution that enthusiastic fact-gatherers and dedicated amateur researchers can make to the subject area, this analysis focuses on academic sport history and its practitioners. Second, some of the aspects mentioned may be peculiar to one nation (such as the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework or China no longer making sport history a compulsory element of an undergraduate degree in Physical Education) whereas others affect sport historians globally.

It is a current major weakness of the profession that we are leaving so many qualified personnel behind, creating a precariat for which our earlier successful expansion bears a responsibility. Our future is 'contingent on the continuity of the appointment of sport historians in academic departments,'² but the market for sport history, pure and simple, is not in good shape as testified for the UK (Leeworthy, Skillen, Stone), Australia (Osmond, Adair), Israel (Kaufman) and China (Liu). Yet we must be careful not to confuse trends in

employment prospects with shorter-term fluctuations in demand. Nor should we conflate national issues with the international situation. One thing is certain: worldwide academia is expanding; surely there must be opportunities somewhere for sport history. Like several of the contributors to this special issue, sport historians may have to be prepared to move geographically to get a job. As well as employment such moves might offer the chance to improve one's abilities as a sport historian: many of the contributors (Bolz, Tsai) have benefitted from time spent studying or researching abroad, in different cultures with different research questions and methodologies.

Equally they may have to shift their disciplinary base. As several contributors (MacDowell, Adair) show, we can take the chance to spread our gospel via positions in other areas such as sports management or one of the various strains of cultural studies, perhaps becoming what Kidd labels 'sleeper sports historians'.³ This action will necessitate devoting time to the teaching of courses that are not specifically sport history but whose curricula can be manipulated to include the subject so as to offer the benefits to other subject areas of teaching through the lens of sport history (Jewett, Straume). It can work. One of the editors is employed in a brand new business school which recognizes the value of sport, including from the humanities perspectives, and the other was an advisor in the creation of and is now external examiner for an MBA in the Thoroughbred Racing Industries.

We should even try to obtain appointments within history departments rather than not applying because we feel rejection is a foregone conclusion. Most of us no longer have to defend sport as a suitable subject for academic study, although in some countries such as India this is still an issue (Bandyopadhyay). Admittedly, to quote MacDonald, sport 'exists outside the daily urgency of livelihood and sustenance' but it is 'simultaneously highly popular, compulsive, a compelling stage for national. Local and community drama and glory; a narrative and a drama that is hard to resist'. However, within academe, sport history still

faces some resistance from more culturally snobbish elements of the history profession. Some of this may die out along with its adherents and we should take heart from Collins's view that 'sport is the great undiscovered country of the historical world' and that recent special issues on sport as well as numerous articles on the subject in leading historical journals show 'that receptivity to the investigation of sport has never been higher in the historical profession'.⁴ Again, as with specialist sport subjects, we may have to accept that we may have to teach some non-sport history topics, but that could be salutary.

Perhaps this opportunity is not as impossible as once previously thought, and some contributors have positions in traditional history departments (O'Bonsawin, Moore). More sport history dissertations are being produced in history departments – even ones without a sport historian. Whereas some of the earlier scholars in the field encountered more resistance to sport history projects (McClelland), that narrative has largely disappeared for the most recent generation of sport historians – surely a sign of progress. Sport historians are drawn to a specific topic and read widely about that time period and geographic area so teaching non-sport history classes should not be that onerous or difficult for sport historians. Besides, we can always include the sport example or story every few lectures to enliven the general history. Many universities in the United States, have been adding a first-year seminar to their curriculum, and these topical courses are one way that academics attract students to their discipline, often using popular culture, sport, or other subjects which interest the current generation of 18-year-olds. These classes might be the way in which sport historians can expand our field, entice students to the broader subject of history (and show them it is not the simply rote memorization of names and dates), and ensure the health and continuation of the field.

Even those of us in academic employment face increasing threats to engaging in our preferred types of scholarship. Too many of us work in institutions whose administrations do

not think 'it is important that faculty members work on projects that excite and sustain them'.⁵ To them that side of our life belongs to our non-working hours: to be a hobby rather than the focus of our 'paid for' research. Excellent scholarship is no longer sufficient to move up the academic ladder as institutional promotional criteria look more to inputs. Some sports historians have obtained (relatively) large-scale grants but these pale alongside those generally available to sport scientists and in any case are few and far between. Some of the potential consequences of more recent changes are very threatening. Departments associated with sport are increasingly becoming dominated by a fixation on 'a science-centric system of metrics' particularly grant awards and *article* citations.⁶ In vain we can argue that grants measure inputs not the quality of outputs. Even in the area of outputs articles are becoming deemed as important as books: the peer-reviewed REF in Britain counts a book at best as equal to two articles but in many science-oriented departments the ratio is one to one, and for the National Academy of Kinesiology 'a book is worth only one-quarter as much as a journal article'.⁷

How can we deal with the situation? First we must be prepared to adapt to change. We might not welcome its implications but we should not ignore it in the hope that it will go away. It will not. The academic world is not static. When one of the editors of this volume was a Pro-Vice-Chancellor he often came across academics who were resistant to change and who wanted to continue to research and teach what they always had and not move outside their comfort zone. Without necessarily donning full neo-liberalism economic livery, sport historians working in academic institutions have to earn their salaries. This does not necessarily mean always doing what they have been told to do, but making a case (in terms understandable to the relevant decision makers) for why they could teach a particular curricula or research particular topics.

We know that the ‘study and teaching of sport is not some idiosyncratic self-indulgent, trivial endeavour.’⁸ The problem is convincing others. Booth notes that we are not obviously exceptional. ‘Sport history competes with a glut of sub-disciplines that can mount equally persuasive and plausible arguments for their presence in the curriculum’.⁹ Should we challenge these disciplines and try to undermine their case and try to grab a larger slice of what appears to be a diminishing cake? We could argue that history reveals how these subjects may have wasted resources in the past, but can we be that sure of our own efficiency? Or is it better to try and accommodate our differences and present an argument that we could both benefit by working together? If so should we nail our colours to the mast of any particular group within the sport academe? Each has its advantages and disadvantages. One editor’s experience with sport sciences while serving on a REF panel was that their practitioners respected our scholarship but wondered why we wrote books rather than six or seven articles. Another opportunity is that we can try to persuade sport scientists that a link with sport history could aid their grant-funded investigations by giving them a time and cultural dimension. This means that we have to accept our presence as almost tokenism and look for crumbs from the scientific dining table. The humanities, particularly history, thought we were esoteric. That said, in her experiences at her institution, Jewett highlights the point that we can collude with classicists, a branch of history that has never underestimated the role of sport in society. Perhaps we should broaden our horizons into leisure history because often sport and leisure activities within a geographical area are more closely aligned than are specific sporting pursuits across the nation. Sport history is a broad church and there is no single accepted way of practicing the subject. Some of us are quantifiers, many are not; some of us apply theory, others rely on empiricism. Hence we should welcome ventures by others into our territory: we could learn as well as teach. As outlined in the preceding articles, many

of us have found working with or alongside colleagues from other disciplines both stimulating and productive.¹⁰

We have an academic weakness to face up to in that much of what sport historians produce is of poor quality intellectually. Honestly do the list of papers presented at NASSH, ASSH, CESH, ISHPES and BSSH conferences really generate excitement among the delegates? There is, to quote Leeworthy, too much ‘empty scholarship’. The same criticism can be levied at other historical sub-disciplines but additionally we bear the cross of being labelled fans with keyboards. [As an aside most of us are sports fans but hopefully not uncritical ones.] One way to deal with this is to bring more imagination to the topics we choose to research (Stone), for instance by looking to some of the major themes of various strands of history and attaching sport to them. We should also seek out new and exciting primary sources for our research. Yes, the International Olympic Committee files and Avery Brundage’s papers are valuable (and more easily accessible), but constantly relying on the same materials can also be a weakness for the field. Many of us (Munkwitz, Anderson, Quin) have experienced the thrill of finding new sources which have never been used – or at least not in terms of sport history.

We must also be aware that historical interests are dynamic and keep up with developments, recognizing opportunities to branch out into new topic areas. This approach might help mitigate another weakness – that our work is unknown to non-sports historians (known to some as the mainstream!) – particularly if we publish beyond our standard sport history outlets. It is pleasing to note that the H-Sport quarterly survey of sport history journal articles published includes a significant proportion from non-conventional sources. In the past sport historians have made contributions, for example, to the debates on race relations, colonial legacies and the historical construction of gender, but our audience has been fellow sport historians rather than historians or sociologists more generally. It is time to change this.

We need to become more international, not just in terms of being willing to cross frontiers to work, but also, as Bolz advocates, by a greater awareness of the progress and nature of sport history outside our own national boundaries. Ikeda notes that “Japanese sport history” does not denote a geographically designated area, and perhaps we should all try to move outside those types of narrow confines and take the broader approach to the field. We must learn from each other’s methodologies, cultural approaches and historiographies to overcome this weakness. De Melo (Brazil) notes the hierarchical nature of sport history journals, dominated as they are by articles required to be written in English. Cleophas (South Africa) shows how black sport history has been marginalized and sources for the study of the subject in his country (and perhaps others) have been racially biased. In addition to conducting research in other countries, many contributors have left their home country to study sport history in countries where it has a stronger presence (Anderson, Tsai).

Reaching out to colleagues in other countries, especially outside the English-speaking world, can also help the field grow in size but also strength, particularly in supporting scholars in countries where very little support for the field exists (Laine, Kaufman). New and creative collaborative ideas are needed to help these scholars and the field at a global level. Perhaps that means engaging more with the organizations with a geographical focus and submitting a sport history panel, possibly sponsored by NASSH, BSSH, or ISHES, to raise awareness for the field. Travel funding is increasingly a challenge, but if the conference can be combined with a few days of research, sometimes additional support can be located. Rather than having a glut of conferences in the same country as a mega-event, conference locations could be selected strategically so scholars can more easily access archival materials.

One way to increase the employability of sport historians would be to raise the profession’s public profile and external relevance. Sport historians need to involve themselves more in the public domain. This runs the risk of antagonizing the most scholarly

of our colleagues who wish to write only for themselves and their peers and also that branch of the populace who prefer the fake news of unrevised mythology. However, public history serves both to get us noticed and to claim impact for our research. More of that research should have a real world perspective and be of interest to a wider audience than our peers in the discipline. This necessitates an abandonment of our ‘consistently academic vernacular’ (McDowell), anathema of course to those isolationists who wish to avoid what they would label ‘dumbing down’. As individuals and collectively we should take on tasks of public citizenship for which our skills and expertise bring an advantage. Perhaps we need one or two celebrity scholars to draw attention to what we can do and offer. We must communicate better: with the outside world to ensure our voice is made relevant to public policy; within our institutions so as to fight our corner in academe; and within the profession to establish networks, encourage scholarship, and offer guidance.

Calls to engage historians in public conversations, sharing our knowledge and expertise more broadly, are being made across the historical profession. The American Historical Association has increased its visibility with statements from its president and other members about actions taken by the current US administration. A recent one-day workshop held at the Miller Center for Public Affairs at the University of Virginia allowed participants to discuss strategies to share their expertise more publicly. In addition, the *Washington Post* launched in June 2017 a new series, *Made By History*, which does just that: providing ‘historical analyses to situate the events making headlines in their larger historical context’, which are written by historians.¹¹ Early *Made By History* columns have included sport history: one placing the possibility of the 2017 NBA championship-winning Golden State Warriors not visiting the White House in the context of the relatively recent history of White House invitations for championship sports teams, and two on Los Angeles’ impact on the Olympic movement with their selection to host the Games for a third time.¹² *Made By*

History and other outlets can provide new opportunities to share our research and demonstrate its importance to the wider public. Social media may also be the way to increase the public profile of the field. As Moore has demonstrated, social media can immediately provide context (albeit in 140 characters) to events happening in the world of sport. Social media can allow academics to connect with journalists who can provide an even greater platform for our work, through retweets or quoting sport historians in their stories. Many of us have commented on the popularity of sport as the rationale for why studying sport history is important. We should use that same notion to convey our messages more broadly beyond the small group of naval-gazing academics. It is up to us to tell the world how exciting and relevant the field of sport history is. If we do not blow our own academic trumpets, no one else will blow them for us.

As individuals our possible aggregate influence is limited but we have our collectives which could prove ‘important rallying points’.¹³ Our learned societies could be more proactive in defence of the subject. Currently most are concerned with organizing annual conferences (which provide ‘the community building so necessary for the sustainability of our field’¹⁴) and publishing (sometimes with commercial organisations) an official journal. Some have attempted to counter the loneliness of the individual researcher by decentralisation and having regional subgroups holding regular seminars, as has occurred in Britain and in Australia with its internal tyranny of distance or more specific topical groups (Quin, Naglo). Skillen has shown what the British Society has managed to achieve in the past decade. Yet more than this is required. The Societies need to involve their membership in both formal and informal political arenas. They need to become lobbyists for the profession, possibly, as occurred in the United Kingdom’s REF, linking up with other sub-disciplines in sport humanities and social science.¹⁵ Certainly they could act as focal points in the promotion of public sport history which has its academic perils but could yield substantial

public relations gains. Howard points out that commercial sport organisations ‘are going to interpret and deploy sport history ... whether historians are involved or not’. Surely it would be better that we should do the job properly rather than leave it to vested interests?

Involvement with sport governing bodies, as Tsai has done, can also help bring about change in the business and governance of sport, which can serve as another opportunity for the reach of our work and knowledge. These experiences may even present new collaborative efforts, research projects, access to previously unseen historical materials, and in countries where impact is measured, opportunities for sport history to appear in impact studies.

If they believe that sport is important (and they should as ‘the economic, spatial, social, political and symbolic importance of sport has never been greater’¹⁶) then sport history societies need to act like professional bodies in other areas of the curriculum and ensure that our voice is heard in relevant government, university and sporting circles. Perhaps they could act in effect as ‘trade unions to safeguard the interests of members’ (Leeworthy). As Kidd says, ‘we need to ensure that our research with implications for public policy – and most of it has – is disseminated to decision-makers and as wide an audience as possible’.¹⁷ We probably do not like the neo-liberal domination of academe but it is becoming the only game in town so, as several of our leading lights have argued, ‘sport historians need to play the game smarter, tactically and strategically’ and ‘remain vigilant and regularly review and adapt their political strategies’.¹⁸

One practical aspect in which these societies could engage is some counting. It might strengthen our case if we knew how many of us there were. Memberships of NASSH, ASSH, ISHPES etc. do not give the full picture as there are economists, sociologists, environmental historians and others who opt to do some research in sports history but might not categorize themselves as being ‘of us’. Some of the contributors to this volume have never been to one of these sport history conferences (Jewett, Anderson, Howard), and the fact that so many of

NASSH's recent monograph award winners have not attended the conference further illustrates this weakness of the field. NASSH, the largest of the sport history organizations, has seen its individual membership drop to about 350, from a high of 434 in 2013, while H-Sport (a free online network) continues to receive new subscribers, with over 1250 scholars as of July 2017.

Several papers in this collection reflect an air of despondency in the world of academic sport history. Yet simultaneously many contributors note how they have gained fulfilment from being sport historians. Many sport historians knew that this was their research and academic path (Ikeda), whereas several other scholars (Osmond, Liu, James, Naglo) have come to the field in a more accidental way, that they have instead fallen into the field, often without having previously knowing it existed. It is important that we as a profession take action so that future generations of sports scholars can also benefit. This will not be easy and there will be setbacks on the way. As Booth puts it:

not every strategy will work. There will be losses and defeats: departments will choose not to replace historians of sport who retire. Universities and colleges will disestablish positions and close departments. These events will be traumatic for the individuals concerned, and our societies can offer support. But they do not need to dominate the narrative of sport history, especially at the expense of acknowledging and celebrating achievements.¹⁹

How, then, can the current scholars provide support in the face of these actions? Serving as mentors to students and junior colleagues in the field – those people already self-identifying as sport historians as well as individuals who work on sport topics but do not consider themselves as part of the sport history world. Supportive mentors, including by historians who do not work on sport but were willing to supervise a sport history project, has been a consistent trope (Liu, Leeworthy) in the contributions here. Moore and O'Bonsawin in particular note the importance of support and mentorship for minority students, which is something that all of us with teaching and advising roles can provide. Networking with scholars in other fields outside of sport history can also be valuable for raising the profile of

the field. One of the editors routinely hears from graduate school colleagues asking for advice for a student wanting to write a history paper on a sport topic or who is considering graduate school in the field. Non-sport history colleagues knowing about the field can also provide that support and mentorship to encourage students interested in pursuing sport history.

One great contribution of history to any debate on sport is the sense of time. This can be to our advantage as history is always expanding simply by the passage of time. History takes us up to yesterday and this is continually moving on, embracing what was new. It is always easy to lament the threats to sport history, as well as to history and the humanities more broadly – and these ideas appear at various points within this special issue. However, the field of sport history also has many strengths highlighted, and opportunities abound for collaborations, public engagement, and supporting our fellow sport historians across the globe. Instead of allowing the external threats and weaknesses to continue to grow, sport historians should draw on the encouraging aspects contained herein and take advantage of our field's strengths and opportunities to develop new and creative initiatives which demonstrate the vibrancy and breadth of sport history.

¹ Authors whose articles appear in this special issue will not be referenced but be referred to solely by name in the text.

² Murray Phillips, 'Sport History, Neoliberalism and Survival', NASSH Presidents Forum 23 June 2016, <https://www.nassh.org/sport-history-neoliberalism-and-survival/> (accessed 12 June 2017).

³ Bruce Kidd, 'Strengthening the Intellectual, Material and Social Conditions for Sport History', NASSH President's Forum, 13 October 2016, <https://www.nassh.org/strengthening-the-intellectual-material-and-social-conditions-for-sport-history/> (accessed 12 June 2017).

⁴ Tony Collins, 'The History of Sport Beyond Sports History', NASSH President's Forum, 5 May 2016, <https://www.nassh.org/the-history-of-sport-beyond-sports-history/> (accessed 12 June 2017).

⁵ Nathan, 'Taking Charge'.

⁶ Murray Phillips, 'Sport History, Neoliberalism'.

⁷ Jaime Schultz, 'Kinesiology, Genealogy, and An (Ephemeral) Quantitative Turn', NASSH President's Forum, 17 April 2016, <https://www.nassh.org/kinesiology-genealogy-and-an-ephemeral-quantitative-turn/> 12 June 2017.

⁸ Nathan, 'Taking Charge'.

⁹ Douglas Booth, 'Negotiating the Fault Lines of Sport History', NASSH President's Forum, 12 September 2016, <https://www.nassh.org/negotiating-the-fault-lines-of-sport-history/> (accessed 12 June 2017).

¹⁰ For a brief note on sport history's relationships with other disciplines see Wray Vamplew, 'History of Sport' in *Social Sciences in Sport*, ed. Joseph Maguire (Human Kinetics: Champaign, IL, 2014), 11-12.

-
- ¹¹ Brian Rosenwald and Nicole Hemmer, “Welcome to Made By History,” *Washington Post*, 26 June 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/06/26/welcome-to-made-by-history/?utm_term=.ef97b4edc5ec (accessed 18 July 2017).
- ¹² Anne M. Blaschke, “Trump snubbed the Warriors. But the Warriors will come out on top,” *Washington Post*, 7 July 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/07/07/trump-snubbed-the-warriors-but-the-warriors-will-come-out-on-top> (accessed 19 July 2017); Heather Dichter, “How Los Angeles can save the Olympic Games – again,” *Washington Post*, 3 August 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/08/03/how-los-angeles-can-save-the-olympic-games-again> (accessed 4 August 2017); Max Felker-Kantor, “The 1984 Olympics fueled L.A.’s war on crime. Will the 2028 Games do the same?” *Washington Post*, 6 August 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/08/06/the-1984-olympics-fueled-l-a-s-war-on-crime-will-the-2028-games-do-the-same> (accessed 8 August 2017).
- ¹³ Kidd, ‘Strengthening’.
- ¹⁴ Maureen Smith, ‘Sport History Beyond 2016: Survive and Thrive. NASSH President’s Forum, 5 April 2016, <https://www.nassh.org/sport-history-beyond-2016-survive-and-thrive/> (accessed 12 June 2017).
- ¹⁵ Malcolm MacLean, ‘Doing Sports History in a Hostile World’, NASSH President’s Forum, 16 May 2016, <https://www.nassh.org/doing-sports-history-in-a-hostile-world/> (accessed 12 June 2017).
- ¹⁶ Kidd, ‘Strengthening’.
- ¹⁷ Kidd, ‘Strengthening’.
- ¹⁸ Nathan, ‘Taking Charge’; Booth, ‘Negotiating the Fault Lines’.
- ¹⁹ Booth, ‘Negotiating the Fault Lines’.