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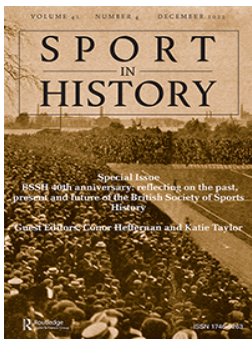
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What do we mean when we say ‘sport’?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving historiography of ‘sport’ vis-à-vis the British Society of Sports History (BSSH), as per fluid and shifting definitions of what the term ‘sport’ means. It begins by discussing broad themes within the previous historiography of UK sport. Afterwards, it roughly quantifies the content of articles the BSSH’s journal *The Sports Historian/Sport in History* during the period 1993–2021, with an emphasis on sporting forms and emerging trends. Finally, the author provides a similar discussion of the topics of conference papers at annual meetings of the BSSH during the period 2011–21. Throughout this article, the author, Chair of the Society from 2017 to 2019, attempts to provide some causal explanations for why certain sporting forms are popular points of discussion, how others are pushing the envelope of the term ‘sport’, and issues therein.

KEYWORDS British society of sports history; sport in history; history of sport; physical culture; leisure studies

Introduction

Members of the British Society of Sports History (BSSH), and attendees of its conferences and events, have some idea of what the word ‘sport’ means. It would take a long time to quantify what all of those definitions are, particularly as the word ‘sport’ no doubt means a lot of things to each and every person. Amongst academics and perhaps the general public as well, the divide has historically, to paraphrase CLR James, been between those who view the action as taking place within the boundary, or outside of it.¹ Historians of sport have overwhelmingly tended towards the latter, a point which Prashant Kidambi, a recent Lord Aberdare Literary Prize winner and Sir Derek Birley Memorial lecturer, made when asking historians to consider how most supporters, fans, and consumers of sport believe ‘sport’ to be the thing which happens *within* the boundary.² Indeed, many battles fought by historians of sport in recent years have been on the damaging

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premise that they are ‘fans’, rather than critical experts in the subject.³ Additionally, amongst academics and heritage practitioners, whether one views ‘sport’ as something involving athletic prowess, a professional job, a popular recreation, some activity in which score is kept, or a social institution, or some mix of these, might depend on which institution they are employed in, and what area they are based within. But, even then, the question remains: what would *we* refer to as ‘sport’?

This article seeks to place the BSSH within the dynamic understandings of what might be ‘sport’. To that end, it first discusses some of the evolution of the history/historiography of sport as an academic field, but does so with an eye towards identifying some of the methodological entry points along the boundaries of what might be considered ‘sport’. The second section more definitively shifts the action towards the Society itself: first, with regard to its journal *The Sports Historian/Sport in History* from 1993 onwards, years which are available online for academics and members of the Society (and others) to access. Here, I attempt (in a somewhat ruthless and rudimentary fashion) to map out the subject matter of what has appeared in the journal, with an eye towards identifying what ‘forms’ of ‘sport’ are discussed within these articles, and the trends therein. The final section takes this idea into the ‘real world’, discussing the content of BSSH conferences since 2011, the papers held at both plenary and parallel sessions, and what invited and accepted papers and, accordingly, Society officers, journal editors, and conference organisers view as ‘sport’. ‘Sport’ here potentially encompasses a wide range of human activity: our work is quite often about what happens beyond the boundary, but ‘sport’ is still the connective tissue that holds a wide, diverse body of research together, and it has never been conceptually static. Besides discussing the evidence regarding which subjects are discussed within the journal and at conferences, I will also attempt to unpack issues influencing the coverage of certain subject matters, and what these issues reveal about the state of the discipline and the field.

The historiography of ‘sport’ and the matter of perspective

In 1975, philosopher Frank McBride warned against a concept of ‘sport’ which was too limiting, believing that any criteria created for such a purpose would fail to account for the dynamic real-world usages of the terms.⁴ That did not, of course, keep Allen Guttman from attempting to do so in 1979’s *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, denoting ‘modern’ sport under a schema which satisfied seven major points regarding sport as a modern, quantifiable, bureaucratic, and theoretically egalitarian (and secular) institution, prompted initially by some level of ‘play’.⁵ Guttman’s criteria, well-cited in the field, was not the end of the matter, and nowhere near the beginning. ‘Athletic’ ‘sport’ was not defined as such in

the *Oxford English Dictionary* until the early 1860s: hitherto 'sport' referred to 'field' sports; and, as former BSSH Chair Wray Vamplew has noted, not everything referred to as 'hunting' meets the stringent criteria of being bureaucratic and quantifiable.⁶ Such confusion is not confined to the distant past, or Anglophone cultures. One 2016 study in Belgium by Susan Lagaert and Henk Roose notes that survey respondents in different socio-economic strata defined 'sport' differently, across a wide range of activities which included/excluded the likes of fitness, billiards, angling, jet skiing, and bridge.⁷ This is before one discusses non-Western conceptions of such terminology. In the context of 2022, this debate is beginning to have profound implications, particularly in terms of where esports are believed to fit in with these myriad definitions and understandings of sport.⁸ The BSSH's journal and conferences have not yet discussed esports, but they are the subject of a recent piece by Zhouxiang Lu in the *International Journal of the History of Sport* (hereafter *IJHS*). Much like the history of many activities on the fringes of typical definitions of sport, 'gaming' (competitive and otherwise) might have a long history which dates back to the mid-twentieth century, but it has only recently interacted with institutions of 'sport', and this is inevitably reflected in the threadbare historiography of the latter on the subject.⁹ A potential means of teasing out this history might be by examining the relationship between 'gaming' and gambling, the latter of which has a much larger historiographical record vis-à-vis sport: that has recently been attempted in a 2021 special issue of *IJHS* which examines fantasy sport.¹⁰

Like the BSSH, I have always taken an expansive view on what constitutes 'sport'. There is no doubt, however, that just as esports are novel to the historiography of 'sport', the literature on 'sport' has inevitably been affected by the entry point of the academics who first studied historical phenomena in sport. In the UK, during the 1970s and 1980s, the dominant strand of the academic history of sport was led by Marxist-trained economic and social historians whose work descended largely from that of EP Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and of course CLR James.¹¹ This included the work of Vamplew, Tony Mason, and Richard Holt.¹² Here, sport was an arena for class and identity conflict and contestation, especially in football, cricket, and rugby. In North America, meanwhile, these early years in the academic study of the history of sport were dominated by physical educators and academics based in sport management areas.¹³ The Marxist-influenced historiography of sport in the UK, particularly as it related to class, was not without its critics, particularly those who viewed the 'marginalisation' of PE-based histories of sport as a missed opportunity, and indeed during the 2000s the history of sport in the UK came to be dominated 'cultural' approaches.¹⁴ This low-key conflict initially did not change the basic methodological tenor of most UK-based work on the history of sport, based as it was on archival

research, although increasingly visual analysis of historical materials was being used during this time.¹⁵ Even archival research, however, came to be dominated by a qualitative approach, with those like Vamplew who adhered to a quantitative one increasingly having to make their case for statistics and ‘counting’.¹⁶

Fiona Skillen and Carol Osborne certainly were not the first UK-based historians of sport to use oral history for their research. But, in a 2015 article in *IJHS*, published when Skillen was the sitting Chair of the BSSH and Osborne its previous Chair, they nevertheless noted that oral history was a potential way of sidestepping the gendered and racial biases of archival material, and a means of recording the rich experiences of participants in sport whose lives were not typically privileged by archival records.¹⁷ Two years earlier, an article in *Sport in History* by Paul Ian Campbell, a trained sociologist, highlighted the value in utilising oral history: Campbell’s article focused 1970s football amongst young Black men in Leicester, some of whom were members of local club ‘Meadebrook Cavaliers’, a fictional name used by Campbell to protect anonymity.¹⁸ Already, though, by the mid-2000s, archival research, or the ‘fetish’ for it, to use Douglas Booth’s words, was coming under attack from postmodern historians. The debate between Booth and Martin Johnes (the latter another former BSSH Chair) in the pages of *Sport in History* in 2006–07 was one of the more productive exchanges regarding historiography, the making of the history/historiography of sport, the problems and limitations of archival material, and how historians redress this (or don’t) in their practice.¹⁹ In previous years, I have assigned both readings for undergraduate and PhD students. Fifteen years later, I still find myself overwhelmingly agreeing with Johnes. However, as I am now in the process of writing a monograph on subject matter Booth is well-known for – the history of surfing, a form of ‘sport’ (and now an Olympic one at that) for which one has to deal with a frustratingly incomplete archive, a litany of well-rehearsed cultural tropes, and continual challenges regarding one’s own positionality²⁰ – maybe we are indeed unwittingly living in the post-modern future for British sport history that Jeffrey Hill predicted a quarter of a century ago.²¹

The forms of ‘sport’ in the sports historian/sport in history

Does an emphasis on cultural history and postmodernism indicate that social and economic history are dead in relation to ‘sport’? I would strongly argue it does not. But, if we accept that the historiography of British sport has moved on a great deal from William Baker’s comment in 1983 that much of British sport’s history had yet to be acknowledged, let alone written about, there are still gaps – not just in our ability to acknowledge activities traditionally thought of as ‘sport’, but in our ability to creatively understand what the

margins of 'sport' might look like.²² Inevitably, there is a relationship between sports themselves, forms of sport, their bureaucratisation and media coverage, and their popularity over time, and this has an effect on the coverage of certain topics and the methodologies of authors. To some extent, I have discussed the *how* of the history of sport: others in this collection will examine the *who*; but here, it is additionally important to examine the *what*. One means of doing this is through analysing the 'sport' content of the Society's official journal, *Sport in History*, known before 2003 as *The Sports Historian*. Here, I have not counted academic books regarding the historiography of sport; from bibliographic reference material put together by others, it has proven difficult, and even more arbitrary, for me to separate 'academic' from 'popular' texts.

By all accounts in 2022 *Sport in History* is in excellent shape. Murray Phillips recently notes that, by most metrics, the journal yields successful ratings in terms of its impact upon the discipline of history, even if these metrics shift depending on the methodology, and *Sport in History* is ultimately unable to match the quantitative reach of *IJHS*.²³ (In terms of declaring interests, I am currently a special issues editor at *IJHS*.) *The Sports Historian* first appeared in 1984; and, up to its sixteenth volume in 1996, the journal only released one issue a year. Next year, in 1997, the journal went to two issues a year; its twenty-fifth volume in 2005, two years after its name changed to *Sport in History*, increased to three issues, and by 2007 the journal was publishing four issues a year. From the mid-2000s onwards, the journal was additionally publishing one or two special issues a year, with guest editors putting together thematic issues on given topics.

In the spirit of 'counting', I have compiled a table on the forms of sport discussed in articles which have appeared in *The Sports Historian/Sport in History* since 1993. (See [Table 1](#).) In doing so, I have self-selected what appears on the Taylor and Francis website and the LA84 Foundation online archive; nothing is currently online between 1984 and 1993, and thus this sample represents both how the BSSH publicly presents its journal, and how non-BSSH members, and non-experts in sport/the history of sport altogether, come to view what the Society and its journal editors view and endorse as 'sport'. (Two issues were printed in 1997 and 2004, but an issue from each year does not appear online. This is noted in the table.) *Sport in History* might be the journal of the BSSH, and thus a 'British journal', but of course it does not just serve the UK's history of sport, nor solely UK-based academics, so it cannot alone purport to represent the *British* historiography on the subject, and nor should it. It does, however, give an indication of what is considered 'sport' by authors, and what is endorsed as 'sport' by editors. Editors-in-chief historically sit on the BSSH's Executive board.

Shinty	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Surfing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fair/festival traditions	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ancient sport	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Real tennis	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sailing/ yachting	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Weightlifting	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Greyhound racing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Table tennis	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bowls	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Curling	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Basketball	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hockey (field)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ice hockey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Wrestling (broadly defined)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Deaf football	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Coursing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Arctic exploration	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Surf lifesaving	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Equestrian sport (broadly defined, not racing or polo)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Figure skating	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bridge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aeroplane sport	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Volleyball	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Canoeing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bodybuilding	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Skiing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gymnastics	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Darts	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Polo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Circus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Roller derby	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Volume (Year)	27 (2007)	28 (2008)	29 (2009)	30 (2010)	31 (2011)	32 (2012)	33 (2013)	34 (2014)	35 (2015)	36 (2016)	37 (2017)	38 (2018)	39 (2019)	40 (2020)	41 (2021)	TOTAL
Total articles	25	32	34	28	28	21	25	26	28	18	23	18	25	25	24	584
Total issues	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	82
Association football/soccer	3	6	5	6	2	4	4	3	14	5	3	2	14	3	3	123
General regional/temporal histories of sport/ pieces which examine non-sport specific phenomena	3	4	0	2	3	6	0	3	3	3	2	4	1	4	4	77
Cricket	0	2	3	2	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	2	0	40
Methodology/historiography/theory	0	0	4	4	10	0	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	37
Athletics (broadly defined)	0	1	0	3	0	0	3	2	1	0	0	3	1	0	1	32
Rugby/rugby union/rugby league	7	0	2	2	0	0	2	0	0	2	1	1	0	2	1	30
Reference works/biographies/addenda	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	30
Modern Olympic Games/ Commonwealth Games/ other sporting events	2	1	0	1	0	7	2	6	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	22
Boxing	0	1	1	0	8	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	2	1	0	21
Horse racing (broadly defined)	0	3	3	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	16
Cycling	0	0	3	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	15
Lawn tennis	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	2	2	0	1	1	11
Education/Physical education (general)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	1	10
GAA (Gaelic football and hurling)	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	10
Swimming	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	9
Climbing/mountaineering	1	0	1	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
Hunting (broadly defined)	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	8
Martial arts (broadly defined)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	8
Golf	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	6
gridiron football (American/Canadian)	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	5
Chess	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	5
Fitness	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	5
Motor sport (broadly defined)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	4
Pedestrianism	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Rowing	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	4
Bullfighting	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	4

Baseball	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	3
Shinty	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Surfing	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Fair/festival traditions	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
Ancient sport	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
Real tennis	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Sailing/ yachting	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Weightlifting	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Greyhound racing	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Table tennis	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Bowls	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Curling	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Basketball	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Hockey (field)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Ice hockey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Wrestling (broadly defined)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Deaf football	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Coursing	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Arctic exploration	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Surf lifesaving	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Equestrian sport (broadly defined, not racing or polo)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Figure skating	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Bridge	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Aeroplane sport	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Volleyball	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Canoeing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Bodybuilding	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Skiing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Gymnastics	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Darts	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Polo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Circus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Roller derby	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Dance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

*only one issue for this year online.

Labelling the 'topics' of these articles proved difficult. Not all articles focused on one sport: and, if an article neatly discussed, say, association football/soccer and cricket, I counted the article as '1' in both the association football/soccer and cricket rows. One row label, 'General regional/temporal histories of sport/pieces which examine non-sport specific phenomena', has many entries: the topics could be reflected as stated in the label itself: for instance, from 13, no. 1 (1993), Laurie Rush's piece on water sports in the St Lawrence River in Canada during the nineteenth century, or (closer to home and published more recently) Liam Dyer's and Dave Day's piece in 37, no. 2 (2017) on the development of *sport in general* in Victorian Crewe (the article features a non-individualised discussion of several sports).²⁴ Also included in this label are articles like Marc Keech's on South Africa and sports diplomacy, from 21, no. 1 (2001), as Keech might have discussed football in a separate section, but I did not include it in 'association football/soccer' because Keech is speaking about *Commonwealth sport as a whole* elsewhere throughout the article; similarly, Richard Haynes discusses many forms of 'sport' (and does not segregate them at all between sections) in his 29, no. 1 (2009) article on the early years of radio sport commentary at the BBC.²⁵

I have additionally created a separate label 'methodology/historiography/theory' which is similarly eclectic: the aforementioned Booth and Johns pieces were certainly included here (they discuss many forms of 'sport', after all), but so too have many introductions to special issues, including Osborne's and Skillen's non-sport specific introductions to their 2010 (30, no. 2) and 2020 (40, no. 4) special issues on women in sport history, David Hassan's introduction to his 2013 special issue on sporting icons (33, no. 4), Jean Williams's introduction to her 2015 special issue on sporting kit (35, no. 1), and my own 2016 special issue on new approaches to the history of Scottish sport (36, no. 3).²⁶ Paul Dietschy's introduction to his 35, no. 4 (2015) special issue on European football, however, is definitely in 'association football/soccer'.²⁷

Most articles which examine the modern Olympics and other major sporting events, but not sport-specific phenomena, are in the category 'Modern Olympic Games/Commonwealth Games/other sporting events', but pieces which focus solely on the likes of the Cotswold Olimpicks are labelled under 'fair/festival traditions', a hierarchy which perhaps gives the IOC's version of history an unfortunate amount of kudos. Rugby historians would additionally be horrified by my creating the label 'rugby/rugby union/rugby league'; similarly, there is 'horse racing (broadly defined)', 'equestrian sport (broadly defined, not including racing or polo)', and 'motor sport (broadly defined)' (the latter includes speedway and Formula One, amongst others). 'Athletics (broadly defined)' is its own category, and 'pedestrianism' is a separate one; so too are 'gymnastics' and 'fitness'.

Additionally, 'lawn tennis', 'real tennis', and 'table tennis' are separate categories – as, in my own judgement, the rules and forms of each are sufficiently different from each other to warrant it. Many articles discuss sport which occurs under the auspices of education and physical education, but for any which move between several/many sporting forms, including fitness and drill, with ease, there is the category 'Education/Physical education (general)'.

My own labels are necessarily utilitarian, and possibly worthy of criticism. But what, if anything, does this table tell us about forms of sport discussed in our Society's journal over the past three decades? For one thing, it hints at the historical, historiographical, theoretical, and media dominance of association football in any discussion of 'sport': nearly one-fifth of the published outputs of the journal since 1993 – 123 peer-reviewed articles – have focused on, either fully or significantly, on 'soccer'. (In this table, I have deliberately not included the recently published 42, no. 1 [2022], all six of whose articles are on football.) No other sport comes close: not cricket (40), not athletics (broadly defined, and obviously excluding pedestrianism) (32), and (perhaps surprisingly, in terms of its centrality towards understanding class in British sport) not rugby/rugby union/rugby league (30). It is important here not to cast aspersions regarding the quantity of material on football: it is a popular sporting form in the UK – stereotyped (prejudicially, I would argue) as being a team sport/recreation overwhelmingly beloved by working-class men – but it is also one which has had significant, consistent, and sustained import outwith the former British Empire, hence the demand (and scholarly expertise) for special issues on the history of European football (men's and women's). Cricket, for instance, certainly has histories in the Netherlands and Denmark – histories worthy of more study, and ones which hint at complicated historical relationships with the UK and its economic and military power – but they are not equivalent to the likes of Italy, Germany, and Brazil in football, nations not formally incorporated into the British Empire who nevertheless went on to disproportionately dominate the sport.²⁸ Rugby union provides a slightly better argument – France has been successful in the men's Four/Five/Six Nations and women's Six Nations, and Italy and Argentina have had some success – but still none of these (great footballing) nations have come close to displacing the likes of New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, or England as world powers in the game.²⁹ It inevitably changes the conversation about the association game, a sport which offers a common language, frame of reference, and scale which others struggle to achieve. Critics would be right to note the potential for presentism. Codified cricket predates football, and it is not the only sport to do so. Other sports perceived to be less popular, and have less grassroots participation, are no more or less 'political', or any more or less socially or emotionally relevant to their participants, spectators,

funders, and detractors. The geographical dominance of football has major historical and present-day exceptions: an exercise such as this would return very different results in the *North American Journal of Sport History* and *Sport History Review*, with potential concomitant issues of over-representation regarding gridiron football, basketball, baseball, and ice hockey. Then again, cricket also does not have an equivalent journal to *Soccer and Society*, nor an equivalent academic field such as 'football studies'.

Football's self-sustaining academic ecosystem, however, has not meant a lack of articles in *Sport in History* regarding other subjects; and, for all of the potential problems with the journal heading to four issues a year, it has ultimately meant that special issues have diversified subject matter on the historiography of 'sport'. The lack of activity in the lower left quadrant of the table hints at this: most 'sports' with only one or two articles in the journal which focus on them have been published after 2004, when the journal first went to three issues a year. Ironically, the table might also show how out of step *Sport in History* has been from other journals in the field. Georgia Cervin et al's 2017 article on the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique is the sole piece which *focuses* on gymnastics *as a competitive sport*, appearing as it does Philippe Vonnard's and Grégory Quin's 2017 special issue on international sporting federations during the Cold War (37, no. 3). The same issue also features Heather Dichter's article on the International Ski Federation, and it is the sole piece which focuses strictly on skiing.³⁰ Folk can lazily make assumptions that this particular collection is dominated by non-British and/or non-British-based authors, perhaps, because the UK is not an alpine country, and that Britons are uninterested in discussing skiing, but that is obviously untrue: in the twentieth-century Scottish Highlands, for instance, skiing has even been politically controversial.³¹ Unbelievably, however, the only article which focuses on polo (though most certainly not the first article written on the subject in either *the historiography of sport* or *the historiography of Britain, the British Empire, India, or central Asia*) came in 2020, courtesy of Luise Elsaesser, an academic who currently sits on the BSSH Executive Board, but is German, and is based in Europe.³²

It is a reminder that, for all someone might decry over-coverage in some sports and a lack of coverage in others, there must first exist authors who are researching these subjects, and these authors need to think that it is worth their while to submit to this journal (and not others), and go through the peer review process. Authorial expertise and agency, as well as the agency of peer reviewers, is inevitably influenced by the backgrounds of these authors and reviewers: the Royal Historical Society has acknowledged that diversity is a major problem in UK academic history, and in recent years the BSSH Executive Board has begun to address its own issues with the composition of its membership.³³ Additionally, subject matter might be dictated

by *institutional* rather than *individual* prerogatives: external funding won to research specific topics (particularly for PhDs), the expertise of PhD supervisors, the ability of experts on topics to eat and pay rent (particularly independent researchers and early-career academics), the ability of archives to preserve records and to obtain funding to do so, and (when discussing the UK) the perceived reward for pieces on certain topics in research assessments administered by central government, and how those topics look in 'history' and 'sport and exercise science' (and 'literature', and 'cultural studies') submissions. Any number of variables are at work here.

There is little doubt, however, that special issues have also managed to produce high-quality research on a variety of sporting forms, and this is visible in the spikes for certain sporting forms in a given volume. The quintessential example would perhaps be the Paul Gilchrist-edited 2012 collection on gender and British climbing histories, itself the product of parallel-session panels at the 2012 BSSH conference at the University of Glasgow (33, no. 3).³⁴ Here, 'sport' was taken beyond the confines of a pitch, of spectators, and of codification. Similar occurred in the 2020 Kay-Schiller-edited issue on martial arts and combat sports (40, no. 3).³⁵ It is debatable whether or not all climbers nor Muay Thai boxers would feel the need to be co-opted (or legitimised, depending on one's politics) as 'sport' by academics who study the subject. However, collectively, we need to acknowledge that *someone* views these activities as 'sport', and that they represent a continuum through which we can understand 'sport', physical culture/activity, leisure, and the broad range of human experiences therein. Some recent articles push the envelope further: Bieke Gils's article in 36, no. 1 (2016) is on trapeze artistry (marked in the table as 'circus'), and whilst Patricia Vertinsky and Aishwarya Ramachandran have had little trouble making the link between sport, dance, and physical education elsewhere, their 2018 article (38, no. 3) on Uday Shankar is the one piece here that uses 'dance' as its focus.³⁶ Conor Heffernan's 2017 article on Indian club swinging (37, no. 1) (noted in the table under 'fitness'), additionally, is similarly part of a growing number of works which are reintegrating physical culture into the historiography of sport. Some would likely argue that it never left, but it is now continually being reemphasised within the journal, and by implication the Society.³⁷

Conferences, forms of sport, and problems therein

BSSH conferences have been a testing ground for new material on the historiography of sport, a chance for authors – professors, lecturers, PhD students, undergraduates, and independent researchers alike – to receive feedback in an environment which (I would argue, anyway) is friendly, supportive, and constructive. In the 2010s, the annual meeting was typically not the

only BSSH-funded, BSSH-branded events held during the course of the year: there were plenty of themed events concerning different issues in the history of sport (or just 'sport'). In the early 2010s, under the initial stewardship of Dion Georgiou, the Society also created regional networks which held smaller conferences and symposia of their own, with a particular drive towards 'sport and leisure' history. These particular meetings, on a participatory, intellectual, and capacity-building level, were a success; my 2016 issue on Scottish sport (36, no. 3) was the product of a 2014 regional network symposium in Inverness. But, by the mid-2010s, the varying commitments, institutional and personal, of those who ran the networks (including myself, who ran the Scottish network from 2013 to 2017 – the year I began my two-year stint as Chair of the BSSH) proved problematic, and lines of succession to other potential organisers were not established. By the mid-2010s, the Society also simplified its event funding procedures, to the point that having Society chapters with bank accounts elsewhere was considered impractical and anachronistic. The main conference is thus still a crucial means of exchanging ideas on the field.

For this section, I employed a similar method of creating a table to examine papers given at the past ten BSSH annual conferences (I do not quantify papers given at other BSSH events), including 2020's online conference, which occurred after the UK's first COVID-19 lockdowns, at a period where vaccines had not yet been distributed, and meeting in large groups was unsafe. I have included papers listed on conference programmes which were either at or near their final iterations; last-minute withdrawals from potential speakers have not been included, and anyway these ungiven papers still received the ultimate endorsement of the conference organisers who accepted them – so thus they still give us hints as to what might have been considered 'sport', or reflective of broader trends. Additionally, I have included plenary speakers: the Sir Derek Birley Memorial Lecture speaker for each year is decided by the BSSH Executive Board, whilst the Lord Aberdare Literary Prize winner is decided on by a three-member jury, with one member stepping down each year, and the vacancy reappointed by the Executive. Conference organisers' processes of accepting or rejecting papers are more liberal than the rigorous quality control regime of *Sport in History*, where editors have great power over decisions on manuscripts and assigning peer reviewers. Editors' latitude to define 'sport' is therefore greater than conference organisers', and this inevitably influences differences in the content of conferences vis-à-vis the journal. BSSH conferences are places to experiment and road-test ideas – the first step of the process – whilst journals publish what is literally a finished article, perhaps the last step of that journey.

Table 2's display of conference papers indeed shows some patterns that are similar to the last ten years of *Sport in History's* articles. In terms of

Table 2. The subject matter of BSSH conference papers, 2011–21 (includes Birley Lecturers and Aberdare Prize winners).

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Total number of papers	39	47	46	43	37	49	60	57	48	10	35	471
Association football/soccer	11	8	14	11	6	17	12	9	8	2	9	107
General regional/temporal histories of sport/pieces which examine non-sport specific phenomena	12	11	7	14	7	8	9	15	8	3	9	103
Cricket	4	2	6	3	8	2	9	4	2	1	1	42
Rugby (union and league)	2	1	0	0	3	1	5	2	2	0	5	21
Athletics (broadly defined)	0	2	3	1	2	1	0	3	2	1	0	15
Climbing/mountaineering	3	6	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	13
Modern Olympics/events	3	1	0	1	0	0	0	4	3	0	0	12
Swimming	0	0	0	0	3	1	3	1	3	0	0	11
Pedestrianism	0	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	10
Education/ physical education	0	3	2	0	1	1	2	0	1	0	0	10
Methodology/historiography/theory	0	1	2	2	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	10
Lawn tennis	0	1	0	2	0	1	2	3	0	0	0	9
Modern Olympics/events	0	0	2	0	0	2	1	4	0	0	0	9
Horse racing	0	1	2	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	8
Basketball	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	1	1	0	1	8
Boxing	0	4	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	8
Hockey (field)	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	0	2	7
Golf	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	0	1	6
American football	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	6
Motor sports (broadly defined)	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	5
Fitness	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	1	5
GAA (Gaelic football and hurling)	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	4
Gymnastics	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	4
Cycling	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	4
Fair/ festival traditions	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3
Hunting (broadly defined)	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	3
Dance	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	3
Chess	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	3

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Continued.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Rowing	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	3
Folk football	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	3
Bowls	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Australian football	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Fencing	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Surfing	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Netball	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Wrestling	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Field sports	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Baseball	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Greyhound racing	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Figure skating	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Curling	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Equestrian sports (broadly defined, excluding racing and polo)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Ice hockey	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Wood chopping	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Clean milk competitions	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Polo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Martial arts	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Gliding	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Tug of war	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

sporting forms, association football dominates, with cricket a distant second, and with 'athletics (broadly defined)', 'climbing/mountaineering', 'Modern Olympics/events', 'swimming', and 'pedestrianism' fronting something of a crowded peloton behind it. The broad swath of physical culture is present here too, in an increasing number of papers on 'fitness' and more on 'dance' than one would see in *Sport in History*. Here, though, it is also crucial to note the prominence of general regional/temporal/phenomenal pieces which do not examine specific sports. This includes Aberdare winners, notably Simon Martin, Kevin Jefferys, and Richard Haynes, whose books on sport in Italy, sport policy in the UK, and the BBC's relationship with sport respectively were not strictly bound by a focus on sporting forms.³⁸ To a large extent, this emphasises that conference organisers and audiences perhaps want to hear papers on 'sport' so that they can learn about a workplace, a city, a region, a nation, a time, a medium, a group of people, a mood. There is a danger that, with an exercise such as mine in this article, too strict a method of individualising 'sports' and sporting forms emphasises that we are, in fact, too invested in what happens within the boundary, and the complete expense of what happens outside of it.

However, what *can* this table tell us about possible directions for our sub-discipline? Here I wish to note two specific instances. First, on the subject of 'wood chopping' and 'clean milk competitions', classifications of mine which do not especially fit the kind of sporting forms familiar to the IOC: unlike tug of war, a former Olympic discipline which saw a paper given on it by Iain Adams at the 2021 conference at Twickenham, the sole conference paper on the sport during the past ten years.³⁹ A category like 'workplace skills contests' might have also worked, but would have obscured the form of these skills. 'Wood chopping' here is in reference to Greg Ryan's paper given in 2015 at Swansea, which examined wood chopping as a professional, competitive sport in Australasia from the 1870s to 1914.⁴⁰ Ryan had previously published on the subject in the *Turnbull Library Record*. Here the 'sporting' implications of the activity were clear: strict rules and codes, professional 'athletes', nationally organised competitions, and governance and administration coming from various national and regional Axemen's Associations. Indeed here, Ryan used this sport to directly challenge the founding myths of amateurism in New Zealand sport, ones which are very loud in a less obscure sport New Zealand is famous for: rugby union.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Laura Newman's paper at the 2016 conference in Edinburgh, went in a very different direction when discussing clean milk competitions in the UK during the period 1920–40.⁴² Here, Newman was more concerned with discussing how the 'sport', whose measures of success revolved around the 'sediment test' for allegedly determining bacteria-free milk, was an arguably failed means of scientists (and science) attempting to impose arbitrary standards over dairy farming. A later version of Newman's paper

became an academia article in *Paedagogica Historica*.⁴³ These were two conference papers given on the frontiers of what we might call ‘workplace sport’, but a BSSH conference audience has room for both, (and treats them both as ‘sport’, in amongst the material on football, cricket, tennis, and the modern Olympic movement).

These two papers were outliers, however; and, perhaps less positively, BSSH conferences over the past ten years have also hinted at our own tensions with the boundaries between ‘sport’ and ‘leisure’, a kind of discomfort that the subdiscipline seems to have less of than ‘physical culture’. Historians of sport have, for the past two decades, lamented the estrangement of ‘leisure’ from ‘sport’, and have noted the centrality of sporting institutions (particularly sport clubs) as centres of leisure and associativity.⁴⁴ Dion Georgiou’s and Ben Litherland’s two special issues in *Sport in History* on the relationship of sport and the leisure industry (34, no. 2 [2014], 35, no. 3 [2015]) were a largely successful antidote to this deficiency.⁴⁵ Some articles in the journal since have successfully bridged that gap, most notably Matti Hannikainen’s 2018 piece on sport in London parks in the interwar years (38, no. 3).⁴⁶ But Table 2’s quantifying of forms of sport, I would argue, still hints at problems.

Why this is the case is worthy of speculation. Wood chopping and clean milk competitions have ‘score’, ‘rules’, ‘governance’, and to some extent ‘rationalisation’, some elements of ‘sport’ as it might be recognised a sport management expert. Forms of physical culture segue into ‘sport’ in a way which might be recognised by an undergraduate physical education student as being connected to coaching, training, diet, and a kind of sporting aesthetic. If one views sport as something which is physical and/or quantifiable, it may be here that ‘leisure’, in a disciplinary sense, is getting squeezed out when mentioned side by side with ‘sport’. This is not just about sporting forms, of course, but one can see hints in the ‘sports’ discussed. It is tough to measure the profit made from the wind in one’s hair when surfing at your secret spot, even if the idea itself is easy enough to market. Public health experts and policymakers who encourage ‘sport’ as a means of staying healthy, many of them our own departmental colleagues, would likely not recommend darts, snooker, skittles, and other sports based in public houses. Darts, snooker, and skittles do not appear in Table 2. Darts only appears once in Table 1, despite a well-regarded academic book on the subject from Patrick Chaplin a decade ago, and despite the significant television coverage of darts and (especially) snooker in the UK.⁴⁷

Connections between ‘sport’ and ‘leisure’, which are patently obvious to any reputable historian, are crucial towards understanding the ‘sport’ elements in their own (let alone the ‘leisure’), but in the UK they struggle with the twenty-first century priorities of higher education, funding bodies, and a media which can easily identify ‘sporting’ success as a national(ist) triumph, but does not do so to any equivalent degree with

'leisure'. Leisure studies areas, long wary of defining themselves as an addendum to 'sport studies', are increasingly under pressure – not just from 'sport management', but also from the growth of 'tourism management', 'event management', and 'hospitality management' as academic areas and degree programmes.⁴⁸ For all of the positive noise in UK HE regarding interdisciplinarity, social phenomena which have always intrinsically been connected, and cannot be understood as separate institutions, are being carved up. This, of course, does not have an immediate effect on those working within history areas, who arguably still have more leeway to not ring-fence 'sport' and 'leisure', or their PhD students, but it does hint at broader issues as to where research ends up being focused and worded, and which journals and conferences certain topics end up within. As we know, however, UK history departments as a whole are under political and financial pressures, and that inevitably affects the ability of the 'discipline' to commune with 'fields', including within 'field' journals and conferences.

My own experience of giving a paper on surfing at the 2017 BSSH conference in Worcester hinted at some of these issues. I was giving a paper in two-paper panel on surfing along with Lydnsey Stoodley, who had co-written a paper with Dario Nardini on how the history of surfing in the Gold Coast of Australia was narrativized.⁴⁹ One member of the audience, a former Chair of the BSSH, praised the very existence of the panel as a ground-breaking event, something that might have been unheard of at previous iterations of the Society's annual conference. A glance at [Table 2](#), however, shows that the presenters of this panel were the only two to present on surfing in the past ten years of BSSH conferences. [Table 1](#) fares much the same, with three articles on the subject in the past three decades; certainly, Joan Ormrod's 2007 article on British surfing periodicals is a major influence on my own research.⁵⁰ Neither table shows any reference to skateboarding, snowboarding, or parkour. Perhaps this is a consequence of a lack of classically-trained historians examining these forms, though it is more likely that classically-trained historians 1) are simply not interested, 2) believe they lack the methodological and theoretical toolkit to be able to perform research on activities. Certainly, *IJHS* has recently published an excellent piece on the history of skateboarding, and Iain Borden's book on urban skateboarding – including in the UK – serves as an entry point for British and British-based historians to explore it further.⁵¹ However, the field of leisure studies has far better conceptualised and discussed these sports/activities at length. Sociologist Belinda Wheaton, who coined the term 'lifestyle sports' regarding these forms, is frequently identified as a leisure studies academic.⁵² Other experts on lifestyle sports work (and publish) within these fields, notably Holly Thorpe and Paul Gilchrist – and significantly, Gilchrist is an historian, a frequent attendee of BSSH conferences, and has published more than once in *Sport in History*.⁵³ It might also be that these sporting forms struggle to be

understood by the BSSH's current members. One need not be a surfer to study it, but certainly a great deal of learning must take place before one even begins primary research on it, especially as some experts on the subject are steadfast in their belief that only insiders can research it.⁵⁴ By that logic, our membership, journal authors, and regular conference attendees are clearly more conversant – and comfortable – with football and cricket, and some proceed with research on the basis of that familiarity.

Conclusion

My role here is not to be overly critical. As much as I do not expect experts in leisure studies to join the BSSH *en masse* to educate us about lifestyle sports, it is unfair to expect the Society's experts in the history of football (many of whom have a significant insider knowledge themselves) to suddenly care about skateboarding, or esports. For sure, the scholarly historiography of British skateboarding is thin; but, despite the sheer volume and breadth on football, *its* historiography in the UK has massive gaps of its own and certain episodes which are overemphasised. Similarly, many sporting forms discussed on both tables sit at neither side of these extremities; and, whilst some 'sports' have one or two authors (or PhD supervisors) who continually produce work on them, this suggests no real intent to 'dominate' their field, but rather structural and institutional issues within the *historiography of sport* which, in twenty years' time, may look very different. As ever, the Society needs to be realistic about what its members and its potential audiences might be interested in, whilst at the same time ensuring that it is welcoming to potential authors and speakers who offer dialogue reflective of current historiography, as well as those who expand the frontiers of what we consider 'sport' – and that also includes continuing to welcome authors who are not affiliated with academia, who might have very different opinions on elements of this 'debate'. The term 'sport' must necessarily incorporate many understandings of the word.

However, historians of sport, in the UK and elsewhere, nevertheless are placed within systems that dictate we work within some kind of artificial disciplinary and professional silos. These structures do not necessarily *mandate* the subject matter authors choose so much as they *imply* it, and this inevitably plays its part in moulding what academics and practitioners in the UK might treat as 'sport' within historic and contemporary contexts. Additionally, the ebb and flow in the fortunes of major centres of study of the history of sport, such as De Montfort University and Manchester Metropolitan University, affects the visibility of our area. Those of us academics who are based outside of these institutions can often still benefit from their organisational support, particularly in terms of conference organisation and funding available for PhD study, and that too affects what labels we allow to be placed on

‘sport’. It reasons that, for the foreseeable future, historians in our field will continue to balance their own definitions of the term with the needs of their own occupational and employment situations.

Notes

1. CLR James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Yellow Jersey Press, 2005).
2. Prashant Kidambi, ‘Blurred Boundaries: Writing the Social History of Sport’, the Sir Derek Birley Memorial Lecture, the annual meeting of the British Society of Sports History, 27 August 2020 (online); Idem., *Cricket Country: An Indian Odyssey in the Age of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
3. Paul Ward, ‘Last Man Picked. Do Mainstream Historians Need to Play with Sports Historians?’, *International Journal of the History of Sport* (hereafter *IJHS*) 30, no. 1 (2013): 6–13; Matthew L McDowell, ‘Sports History: Outside of the Mainstream? A Response to Ward’s “Last Man Picked”’, *IJHS* 30, no. 1 (2013): 14–22; Malcolm MacLean, ‘Cracks in the (Self-Constructed?) Ghetto Walls? Comments on Paul Ward’s “Last Man Picked”’, *IJHS* 30, no. 1 (2013): 23–34.
4. Frank McBride, ‘Toward a Non-definition of Sport’, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 2, no. 1 (1975): 4–11.
5. Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (2nd ed) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
6. Mike Huggins, *The Victorians and Sport* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), ix; Wray Vamplew, ‘Sport Without Rules: Hunting, Shooting, and Fishing in Edwardian Britain’, *European Studies in Sports History* 2, no. 1 (2009): 34–51.
7. Susan Lagaert and Henk Roose, ‘Exploring the Adequacy and Validity of ‘Sport’: Reflections on a Contested and Open Concept’, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 5, no. 4 (2016): 485–98.
8. Seth E. Jenny, et al., ‘Virtual(ly) Athletes: Where eSports Fit within the Definition of “Sport”’, *Quest* 69, no. 1 (2017): 1–18.
9. Zhouxiang Lu, ‘Forging a Link between Competitive Gaming, Sport and the Olympics: History and New Development’, *IJHS* 39, no. 3 (2022): 251–69.
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