INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1938, with no prospect of political preferment in view Mr Winston Churchill was earning good money by writing a series of articles, world copyright reserved, for the *News of the World*. The subject was contemporary Britain. On 4 September his theme was the effect of modern amusements on life and character. By its recreations and leisure the character and development of a civilisation could be judged. Sport was the ‘first of all the British popular amusements’. A typically Churchillian exaggeration: a case for the premier place going to the cinema, the public house or the radio could certainly have been made. Nonetheless the future wartime Prime Minister was right to stress the important role played by sport in the life of Britain in this century.

Its place in the popular culture has been recognised by sportsmen and non-sportsmen, men and women, radicals and conservatives, intellectuals and hearties. In his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* of 1948, for example, T. S. Eliot wrote that it was ‘all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the Twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar’.\(^1\) Eight out of thirteen were sporting. In 1923 J. D. Bernal, eminent scientist and Communist Party member, modestly claimed ignorance of only two subjects, music and sport, but he told a friend that he was studying football and cricket on Party instructions because he had to be able to converse with working men about the things that interested them.\(^2\)

When 400 old soldiers were asked in Burma in 1946 what they liked best about the army 108 put sport in first place. Comradeship and leave came a long way behind. Four hundred young soldiers newly conscripted were also asked the same questions: 104 said ‘nothing’ – but 70 said sport.\(^3\) On the first day of the battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916, Captain W. P. Nevill of the 8th East Surreys provided his platoons with two footballs to kick towards the German trenches. On one was written ‘The Great European Cup-Tie Finals, East Surreys v Bavarians. Kick-off at zero’, and
on the other ‘no referee’. He offered a prize for the first platoon to dribble a ball as far as the German trenches. He did not live to present it.4

Keith Douglas in the western desert in 1942 recalled the delivery of new tanks to his unit. They ‘needed every kind of elementary adjustment and repair, their insides were filthy and they lacked most of the detachable bits of equipment. The men of the other division who brought them up said they had not had time for maintenance because in their units sport took precedence over it. It is a horrible thought that this may have been true.’5

Well before 1900 sport was already an important part of the curriculum in grammar and public schools. In the state elementary schools it had been drill, with its connotations of obedience and discipline which had been provided for the children of the working classes. But enthusiastic teachers had been organising team games and setting up inter-school fixtures two decades before, in 1906, the Board of Education officially allowed sport as part of the curriculum. The state had also encouraged sport by a series of permissive acts which allowed local authorities to equip, maintain, and service facilities such as swimming baths, public parks and playing fields. The link between sport and recreation on the one hand and public health and public amenity on the other was clearly established by 1914. Even during the long inter-war depression local authorities continued to expand their provision of sporting facilities. The Physical Training and Recreation Act of 1937 channelled tax-payers’ money both to local authorities and voluntary organisations to help build more swimming baths, gymnasiums and playing fields. One of the more important clauses of the 1944 Education Act made mandatory the provision of facilities for physical training and recreation by local education authorities for all their schools.

The state also began to notice the cultural importance of sport in an international context. Although the British economy was greatly weakened by the First World War, British prestige was high and her culture widely admired. Sport was an important part both of the culture and the admiration. In the 1920s, for example, the Dutch, French, Germans, Greeks and Rumanians, together with Latin American and Middle Eastern countries, all asked the British Government for information about the structure and organisation of sport and physical recreation in Britain. Increasingly after 1918 the Foreign Office accepted the idea that sport had a role to play in the cultural competition between nations. It could be used to promote trade and cement alliances. The British legation in Athens in 1937, for example, noted that athletics was a promising field for the introduction of British sport and methods into Greece and might be a useful counter-weight to German Olympic propaganda. The expansion of sport as an
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international phenomenon was at least in part a manifestation of the success of the British way and purpose. The number of competing countries in international sporting events doubled in the 1920s compared to the 1900s and doubled again by 1950. By then, another World War had further sapped Britain’s economic sinews. The growth of sporting expertise elsewhere meant that victories in international sport became increasingly rare in the immediate post-war years. Several inquiries culminated in one set up by the Central Council of Physical Recreation, chaired by Sir John Woffenden and entitled ‘Sport and the Community’. In 1960 it claimed that ‘decent living together in society’ owed much to ‘the traditional British love of sport’.\(^6\) It recommended that the government should set up a Sports Development Council to increase participatory opportunity. Four years later the reforming Labour Government established the Sports Council. Since then sport has had its own propaganda agent inside the state’s bureaucratic machine.

If any further illustration is needed of the important place of sport in twentieth-century Britain it can be provided by pointing to the extensive coverage given to it by the media. In newspapers, on radio and on the television screen the amount of space and time allotted to sport has both contributed to and reflected its social significance. A few examples must suffice. The News of the World was giving up 14 per cent of its total space to sporting news by 1900. In 1937 Henry Durant did a survey of the contents of 12 daily newspapers and 11 Sunday newspapers. The daily papers averaged 11.4 per cent of their total space to sport while the Sunday paper average was 17.7 per cent. He had deliberately excluded Monday. According to a Political and Economic Planning measurement in 1955, 46 per cent of the Daily Mirror and 35 per cent of the Daily Mail were filled by sport. Sport remains a predictable and considerable part of most national and local newspapers.\(^7\)

Similarly it became and remains a significant portion of the output of radio and television. BBC radio was providing live commentaries as early as 1927 and Saturday afternoon sporting programmes by the middle of the 1930s. By the end of that decade radio reached into almost every home in Britain. Its coverage of certain key events in athletics, cricket, football, golf, rugby and tennis further underlined the existence of a national sporting calendar. Its treatment of events like the FA Cup Final helped to raise them to the level of an annual national ritual with royalty present and pre-match community singing culminating in ‘Abide with me’.\(^8\) Sport was bound to be popular with television especially in the 1950s and 1960s because it was already popular with the public. Nor was it very expensive to mount and transmit. ITV found it hard to break the BBC’s historical relationship
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with the leading sports organisations. Even by the mid-1980s, when sport was charging television a much higher price for the privilege of showing it, and ITV had managed to prise athletics out of the BBC's grasp, the Corporation was responsible for two-thirds of British TV's sporting coverage. Out of an overall budget of £50 million in 1986, the BBC spent close on £20 million on sport.9

Of course playing and watching sport has always been a minority activity. Overall spectator rates appear to have been fairly steady through the last two decades. According to the General Household Survey between 10–11 per cent of the whole population watch live sport of some sort. A more recent study based on the analysis of time budgets has suggested that the proportion of men in full-time employment watching sport had not changed between 1961 and 1983–4. On the other hand the proportion of women in full-time employment watching sport had risen from 2 per cent to 6 per cent during the same period. The same study suggests more dramatic expansion in the numbers playing sport. Of men in full-time employment 9 per cent took part in some sport in 1961; 31 per cent did so in 1983–4. Of women in full-time employment 6 per cent took part in some sport in 1961; 17 per cent did so in 1983–4.10

We should also notice that such participation varies between social groups, age groups and indeed individuals within such wide categories. It is clear that life and family cycles are important influences on who plays and who watches sport. It is now well known not only that men still play and watch more than women, but that also the young play and watch more than the old, and non-manual workers play and watch more than manual workers. This is not the place to explore all the refinements of these general categorisations. For our purpose it is sufficient to point out sport's status as a minority activity while at the same time emphasising that its importance in the social life of the nation cannot be gauged by counting alone. Sport has always been gambled on, talked about, read about, listened to and casually played to a degree which constitutes an important additional dimension of its social role.

In the middle of the nineteenth century sport very often meant the so-called field sports of hunting, shooting and fishing. But it was also a word beginning to be applied to games played in the open air. Sports in the plural had been the name given to a series of athletic contests 'engaged in or held at one time and forming a spectacle or social event' since the sixteenth century.11 A much greater number of activities are labelled sport in the Britain of the 1980s than at any previous time. For the purposes of this study sport has to be a more or less physically strenuous, competitive, recreational activity. It will usually, but not always, be in the open air
and might involve team against team, athlete against athlete or athlete against nature, or the clock. The ten sports selected for detailed treatment cover the whole century and the whole country in terms of place and class. In terms of playing and watching they have been among the most popular sports. As late as 1960 the National Council for School Sports was only concerned with athletics, boxing, cricket, football, rugby and swimming and all are covered in this book save the latter. Swimming’s absence is unfortunate. We would have liked to have found a place for it, in part because in excess of 6 per cent of the population were swimming by 1980 – more if you include the under-sixteens – and also because of its long-standing role in many communities as a competitive sport from the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately not enough work has been done on the subject.

We have concentrated on competition, physical activity and spectacle. This has meant no place for the pub games of darts and snooker in which extended television coverage has both widened the economic opportunities for the few exceptional players and stimulated a new wave of participation. The popularity of both darts and snooker as a spectacle has been of very recent origin. The coming of colour television was crucial to both. The BBC began Pot Black in 1969 and 1976 was the start of the televised World Championships. The move to the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield took place the following year and 18.2 million viewers saw the 1985 final since when the audience for that event has fallen back.12

Badminton and squash are sports which have never been popular among spectators but whose expansion in the last two decades has been spectacular, owing a good deal to the perceived relationship between good health and physical exercise. In the case of badminton it grew 60 per cent in less than a decade in the 1970s with almost 5,000 clubs and over 115,000 players. There were only 260 squash courts in Great Britain in 1947 and they were mainly the property of about 150 private clubs. Squash became a craze in the 1970s, especially among young men in the professions, and squash courts proliferated in sports centres and were often provided by employers and added to clubs devoted to other sports. One estimate placed the number of players at almost 1,750,000 although it is not clear what level of commitment to the game all these players had. This growth from the bottom has also had the effect of revitalising the elite of professional players. In 1962 the professional championship of the British Isles was discontinued because of lack of entries. Jonah Barrington turned professional in 1969 and a new era for the professionals had begun. Both these sports have tended to be concentrated in London and the south but John Bale warns us against a simplistic middle-class categorisation of the bulk of the
participants. He prefers to see them as part of a lifestyle which defines an ‘outer metropolitan popular culture’. Both sports await their historian.13

Bowls is another omission we would like to have avoided. Its recent history epitomises many of the social and economic changes which have been altering the face of sport in Britain these last two decades. It was long popularly characterised as an old man’s game, a stigma which may have inhibited younger recruits but which contained some truth. In 1955 a fifteen-year-old schoolboy reached a competition final and a schoolmaster refused to play against him. This led the English Bowling Association to wonder when a boy became a man and they decided that no one under the age of eighteen could enter their national championships. Today, most would agree with David Bryant, that ‘bowls is a young man’s game which old men can play’. This is most notably true at the highest levels where colour television and the accompanying sponsorship have transformed opportunities for a gradually growing number of professionals. The scoring has had to be changed to fit television’s lust for the economical ‘end’ and ‘set’ and the number of indoor competitions has expanded to fit the medium’s preference for viewing free from natural breaks. The Alexandra Palace indoor rink in the 1930s was quite a novelty. In the 1980s, England has over 200 indoor clubs, Scotland over 30 and Wales 10.14

Flat green bowls owes most of its early development to Scotland. All British bowlers played to the rules of the Scottish Bowling Association until after the 1914–18 war. Scotsmen were so dominant in the group of leading players before the First World War that when Scotland played England in an international match in 1909 both four-men-a-side teams were all Scots, the English team being made up of Scots who had migrated south for better jobs.

Bowls is also distinguished by another branch of the game with clear regional and social differences from the flat green variety. Crown green bowls is so-called because the green slopes away from the crown in the centre. The ‘jack’, as well as the ‘woods’, is biased and play goes on all over the green. Crown green bowls was centred in the north and midlands and supported a thriving professional sector throughout the whole of the years covered by this book. Men played for wages, often on greens attached to public houses. They were often backed by small businessmen or even syndicates. The tournaments at the Talbot Hotel, Blackpool, became well known for their excitement and large crowds of spectators, the whole fuelled by a very vigorous betting culture. Crown green has not so far been able to take advantage of the opportunities presented to the flat green game by television and commercial sponsorship. But its parochialism makes it a fascinating sub-cultural survival of a way of life that was thought ‘traditional’ not so long ago.
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The history of bowls is also interesting as one of the sites of the struggle of women to carve out for themselves a sporting life. If old men can play then so can old women but they had to meet a good deal of male opposition both before 1939 and after 1945. This was particularly true in the clubs, which were almost always controlled by men. This often led to male monopoly of the greens in the evenings with women relegated to afternoon play. Such obstruction and more general ideological prejudice against women bowlers may have discouraged some. But there were estimated to be 100,000 women flat green players in 1948 and, by the middle of the 1980s, about one-third of the total of half a million bowlers were thought to be women. In 1985, 41,000 of them entered the English Women’s Bowling Association Championship.

Bowling clubs were likely to be found almost anywhere in Britain between about 1905 and the present day. Rugby league clubs have never quite managed to construct for themselves a national place.¹⁵ The image of rugby league remains essentially northern, with the bulk of its 34 professional clubs located in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumbria. But in those towns where the game has played it has played a similar role to soccer clubs elsewhere and has been a leading spectator sport for most of this century. The clubs have been run by the same middle-range businessmen who sat on the boards of so many professional football clubs. Shareholding was similarly thinly spread, such that in the 1960s one of the leading clubs, Wigan, had a share capital of £26,000 contributed by 1,700 largely local people few of whom had more than eight shares each. Like football clubs, dividends were rarely paid and the satisfaction was being part of an important and highly visible local institution. Where the professional rugby league club often differed from its soccer counterpart was that most of the rugby league players would probably be from the local district. Rugby league mattered in places like Wigan and Warrington, St Helens and Widnes, Featherstone and Castleford. During the boom in attendances at spectator sports immediately following the end of the 1939–45 war a quarter of Wigan’s population would turn up for home matches.

The Northern Union was formed in August 1895 when 21 clubs broke away to form the NFU because they were frustrated at the refusal of the Rugby Football Union to allow broken-time payments for working men who had to lose time at their jobs in order to play. The middle-class businessmen responsible for the new grouping did not want out and out professionalism. By 1898 they had to agree to open payments but they insisted that playing rugby should not be a man’s sole occupation. A series of ‘work clauses’ were laid down which stipulated that a man must have legitimate
employment. Unrespectable jobs such as billiard markers or bookies’ runners were not allowed. In the early years of this century these regulations were vigorously enforced. Some players were suspended for a whole season for alleged infringements including a failure to work for the three days immediately preceding a game. The work clauses did have a draconian sound to them and they were abandoned in 1905. But the thrust behind them remained. Full-time professionalism was discouraged. Most players had other jobs, trained two nights a week and were paid a match fee plus bonuses according to results. Before the Second World War backs often received more than forwards.

The Rugby Union never forgave what became, in 1922, the name adopted from Australia, the Rugby League. The RFU was outraged by the open admission of payment and at the changes which the Northern Union quickly introduced to the game in the hope of making it more attractive to the paying spectator: abolishing the line out, reducing the scoring value of goals, limiting direct touch kicking and, in 1906, reducing the number of players per side from 15 to 13 by eliminating two forwards. A faster, more open game without the rucks, mauls and stoppages of rugby union was claimed to be the result. The new game attracted some rugby players in both Australia and New Zealand from which the first combined touring team visited Britain in 1907–8. With the French Rugby League being established in the 1930s the game did escape in part from its parochial origins. But in spite of various missionary efforts, notably before 1914 in Wales, the West Country and the Midlands and after 1945 in part of the south of England and Wales again, the League never managed to obtain a firm foothold outside the English northwest.

This was partly due to the competition with other sports, particularly soccer. It was partly due to the growing problem of finding grounds to play on, especially in city centre areas in the south where land for building was highly valued. It was partly due to the virulent opposition of the Rugby Union which insisted that no amateur could play rugby league without being infected by the professional virus. No amateur rugby league player could be accepted into membership of a union club while still involved in rugby league. Players who might have wished to sample the 13-a-side game may often have been put off by the expulsion from the union code that was almost certain to take place if discovered. It was a hypocritical business which looks no better from the 1980s when a minority of rugby union star players are little short of de facto professionals.

But rugby league seems to have been ambivalent about expanding the game beyond its northern roots. It did move the cup final to Wembley in 1929 but not everyone was satisfied that one of the climaxes to the
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season should be played in London. 1932 saw it back at Wigan although it returned to Wembley the following year and has remained there ever since. This ambivalence was extended towards relations with the rugby union. It was strange that ex-union players received larger signing-on fees than former amateur league players. The reason given was compensation for loss of status. Expansion must also have been made difficult by the insensitive way northern clubs poached union players most notably from Wales. The only time the two codes came more or less amicably together was in the services during two World Wars. If you were good enough to fight with you had to be good enough to play with but when peace returned in 1918 and 1945, the armistice ended.

Professional rugby suffered a similar decline in support at the gate from the mid-1930s to that experienced by other sports. Over 4 million spectators had watched the matches in 1952–3; 20 years later the number had fallen to 1,365,700. In 1970 the receipts from the challenge cup final were twice as much as any club took in gate money over the whole season.

But rugby league also benefited from the expansion in playing sport which was a feature of the 1960s and beyond. Television coverage of top matches may have stimulated interest but another breakaway both reflected and promoted this new participatory growth. In 1973 the British Amateur Rugby League Association was formed in part as a result of discontent at the bottom with elite treatment of the grass roots. Three hundred amateur clubs in 1949 – for whom the broken-time principle had never applied – had grown to 500 clubs and 20,000 players in the middle of the 1980s. Moreover the amateurs had begun to form clubs well outside the traditional heartland of the game. Not only are teams found in many colleges, polytechnics and universities but since 1981 Oxford have played Cambridge in a sponsored annual fixture. Perhaps the day when union and league might recognise each other’s right to exist is not so far off.

Rugby league is a fascinating sub-culture which is only now beginning to be studied. Its contribution to images of the north and in particular to myths of northern hardness are well known. There is much to be said for a game in which, it has been alleged, some teams signalled rehearsed moves by calling the names of pubs. It is unfortunate that a detailed treatment proved impossible. Rugby league has a unique place in any history of twentieth-century British sport.

For each of the ten sports which we have covered we have tried to give some idea of its origins, the power structure within it, the relationship between the participatory mass and the spectacularly eminent. We have also paid attention to the role of women in what was for long thought of as a masculine world. The authors have all tried to take account of
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developments in Scotland, Wales and Ireland as well as England but the existing literature has rarely made this easy and it has occasionally proved impossible. British involvement in the spread of many of these sports to other countries has also been considered. Finally historians, almost as much as sociologists, recognise the danger of using sports to tell the reader about every societal phenomenon except sports. Each essay has tried not to leave out the particular sport itself, but the emphasis has inevitably been laid on showing that sport is part of the society in which it is experienced. Its changes and continuities cannot be understood without some awareness of the wider world. It would be especially rewarding if this book penetrated the world of the sports enthusiasts and added to their appreciation of the game. It is, after all, society that makes sport what it is.

NOTES

1 T. S. Eliot, Notes Towards a Definition of Culture (1948), p. 31.
8 It is not clear how far this was a British ritual. The Scots, for example, had their own cup final and for many years now have held it on the same day as the English. ‘Abide with me’ was first sung at the Cup Final of 1928 apparently because it was the favourite hymn of Queen Mary. It is no longer sung at Wembley. P. C. McIntosh, Sport and Society (1963), p. 4.
9 According to figures compiled by the Henley Centre and published by the Sports Council sport-related economic activity had become the sixth largest employment sector by 1985 with only construction, transport, mechanical engineering, food and drink, tobacco and postal and telecommunications services ahead of it. ‘Sport in the community. Which ways forward? A paper for consultation’ (Sports Council 1987), p. 4.