
1

Introduction

From the dawn of human civilisation, it seems, the need for some form of sporting physical recreation has been almost as imperative to human beings as the need to procreate, work and eat. In practice, of course, the extent to which this need was satisfied varied greatly from time to time and place to place. In some pre-industrial societies opportunities for indulging in sport were often severely circumscribed by adverse demographic, economic or political circumstances. In others, like that of mid-eighteenth century Britain, environmental circumstances were more favourable and levels of participation in sport accordingly much higher. Yet, thriving though it was, the sporting culture of the early Georgian age was in many fundamental respects very different from that which had emerged by 1914. Compared with its Edwardian successor, the sporting world of 1750 was restricted in the number of sports it offered and the percentage of the population it regularly attracted. It was also localised in its geographic range, irregular in its availability and timing and largely devoid of institutional structures and commonly accepted written rules – and disturbingly violent. Admittedly, none of these characteristics were entirely absent from the sporting culture of the Edwardian period. They were, however, no longer sport's predominant features. Excessively violent sports had either almost completely disappeared or, as illustrated by the transition from bare-knuckle prize-fighting to gloved boxing under Marquis of Queensberry rules, been transformed into far less brutal recreations. The range of sports available and the numbers of people playing and watching them had markedly increased. Sport had become extensively institutionalised, codified and commercialised and had spread beyond a purely local or regional arena into national and even international competition.

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Above all, perhaps, the reasons for participating had changed. By 1914 it was no longer considered sufficient to take part in sporting pastimes chiefly, let alone solely, for the pleasure they brought. As never before, the sporting proselytisers of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain had endowed physical recreation with a battery of serious purposes which in combination had gone far towards transforming it from a simple source of fun and relaxation to a device thought essential for the continued success of Anglo-Saxon civilisation.

What follows is an attempt to summarise the efforts of historians and historical sociologists to unravel the detailed chronology and nature of this 'revolution' in sporting culture, the forces which propelled it, and the effects it had on the wider evolution of cultural, social and economic life. Particular attention will be paid to the questions most frequently treated in the current literature. Did the extent of popular sport increase or decrease during the initial surge of urban industrialisation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (chapter 2)? When, precisely, did the new culture of sport first effectively emerge and what were its principal features and the mechanisms responsible for its spread (chapter 3)? What were its underlying causes and the objectives of its supporters, and how far were these objectives attained (chapters 4 and 5)? To what extent did females participate in the sporting 'revolution' and why was their participation so limited (chapter 6)?

As the final chapter will show, a good deal more research, particularly of an empirical kind, will be required before our understanding of one of the most impressive, if until recently neglected, innovations of Victorian and Edwardian Britain can be considered satisfactory. But at least the basis for a fuller understanding has already been laid. This synopsis is dedicated to the scholars who have helped prepare this foundation. To those whose contributions I have drawn upon but, because of constraints of space, been unable to acknowledge directly I apologise unreservedly.

2

Growth or decline? The initial impact of urban industrialisation

Of the many controversial issues that have emerged from the recent burgeoning of academic interest in the history of sport in Britain, one of the most enduring has concerned the effect of economic and demographic change on the extent of sporting activity among the working classes in the period between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Writing at a time when it was fashionable to regard this period as one of revolutionary economic and demographic development, the earliest academic historians of sport were generally agreed that the initial impact of urban industrialisation and population growth on popular sport was detrimental. Most forcibly expressed by Robert Malcolmson, the belief that a once thriving mass sporting culture began to decline during the later decades of the eighteenth century and had largely disappeared by the onset of the Victorian era was shared by all (Malcolmson, 1973: 118–57; Dunning, 1975: 112; Walvin, 1978: 2–3; Dunning and Sheard, 1979: 40–1).

Fundamental to this decline, it was argued, was a multiplicity of factors which, on the one hand, diminished the willingness and ability of working-class people themselves to participate in sport and, on the other, eroded that active, or at least passive, support of the social elite which was assumed to be crucial to the existence of a buoyant mass sporting culture. For some working-class men, imbued with a growing desire for respectability and increasingly disenchanted by their dependence on the paternalism of their social superiors, the decision to abandon customary sporting practices was seen to have been largely self-determined. For most,

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Neil Tranter

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[More information](#)4 *Sport, economy and society*

however, it was explained as an unwanted but unavoidable consequence of what was assumed to be a rapidly changing environment. As small, personal and tightly knit rural communities increasingly gave way to larger, more impersonal and more mobile urban communities, as agriculture became increasingly commercialised and as the balance of employment shifted from agriculture to manufacturing and from domestic handicraft industries to factories, so forces emerged that were inimical to the survival of many established sporting customs.

One of these, we are told, was a reduction in the amount of time available for leisure caused by the requirement of factory industry and commercialised agriculture for longer and more regular hours of work from their employees. A second was urbanisation and the enclosure of waste and common land which reduced the amount of space available for play. A third, feeding on the values of the Enlightenment and Evangelical and Methodist hostility to worldly pleasures generally and Sabbath recreations in particular, was the spread of more sensitive, humanitarian attitudes which condemned cruel and violent sports as creators of brutal, immoral and criminal men and thus as impediments to the progress of civilisation. Another was the establishment of more effective systems of policing and the growing use made of these by local authorities anxious to stamp out those popular sporting pastimes considered inappropriate to the needs of large urban communities where the interests of public order, property security and profit maximisation were more urgent than in the smaller, essentially rural communities of earlier times.

To these explanations for the presumed decline in plebeian sport was added yet another, the widespread withdrawal of aristocratic and gentry patronage. Exacerbated by events in France, it was claimed, the feelings of insecurity provoked among the landed elites by the increasing size and influence of the urban bourgeoisie forced the landowning aristocracy and gentry back into their own largely exclusive social world, thereby depriving the sports of the masses of the patronage on which they had hitherto so heavily relied. In the absence of extensive bourgeois support for working-class sporting recreations, the inevitable outcome was an almost complete vacuum in popular sport. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century a thriving sporting culture persisted only

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among the landed elites whose often no less cruel sports were protected from criticism by the fact that they were practised on private ground by men who were assumed too civilised to be corrupted by the potentially brutalising influence of the sports they pursued (Malcolmson, 1973: 89–117, 158–71; Dunning, 1975: 112; Walvin, 1978: 3–11; Dunning and Sheard, 1979: 41–4; Delves, 1981: 105–8, 113, 115).

Almost from its inception this interpretation of the initial impact of urban industrialisation on working-class sport was subject to criticism. That many popular sports came under increasing attack in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has never been disputed. What has been disputed is the effectiveness of this attack. Recent, more detailed analysis of such admittedly fragmentary evidence as exists has shown that the only working-class sports for which there is indisputable proof of decline were those blood sports involving animals; and even these, it is now believed, survived more extensively than was once assumed (Cunningham: 1980, 22–4). In London the sports of badger-baiting and cockfighting persisted throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Cockfighting continued in some parts of Scotland until at least the 1850s and, though less prevalent than before the 1830s, was still common in mining districts of south Northumberland as late as the 1870s (Metcalf, 1982: 475; Tranter, 1987a: 29). Dogfighting, hare and rabbit coursing and ratting were other animal blood sports which, at least in some areas and among some sections of the working-class population, had by no means wholly disappeared by the middle years of the nineteenth century (Holt, 1989: 57–63).

In the case of most other working-class sporting recreations the weight of such evidence as we have suggests growth or, at worst, stability rather than persistent, pronounced decline. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century sculling and rowing continued to attract working-class participants and vast numbers of working-class spectators to its principal locations on the Thames, the Tyne, the south coast and in Cornwall and north-west England. Between 1835 and 1851 around 5,000 sculling contests are known to have taken place on the Thames alone (Wigglesworth, 1986: 147–51; Halladay, 1987: 40; Holt, 1989: 22–3). Prizefighting, which originated in the seventeenth century, grew in

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Neil Tranter

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popularity from the 1790s and showed no sign of declining until the 1840s, or even later (Holt, 1989: 20–1; Shipley, 1989: 78–9). The number of curling clubs in Scotland increased rapidly from the 1770s and by 1848 the Grand Caledonian Curling Club, the sport's controlling body, boasted 8,000 members and 187 affiliated clubs, nearly five times the number that had existed at the beginning of the century. Shinty continued to flourish in lowland Scotland until the 1840s, though only in Edinburgh and Glasgow did its popularity actually increase. As attested by the construction of the first purpose-built running tracks and the enormous crowds attracted to watch star performers like Captain Barclay, the popularity of pedestrianism (professional athletics) soared between the 1750s and 1860s, by which time it was probably the most extensive working-class sporting interest. Knurr and spell, potshare, or long bowling, quoiting and wrestling were among many other working-class sports which either grew in appeal or, at worst, survived on a healthy regional basis throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and sometimes beyond (Cunningham, 1980: 27; Brailsford: 1982, 41, 44, 47; Holt, 1989: 57–73; Tranter, 1990a). Horseracing remained popular in many localities, cricket continued to expand and even folk forms of football may have persisted outside the confines of the elite private schools more extensively than it was once customary to suppose (Vamplew, 1976: 17–28; 1989: 215–16; Holt, 1988: 70–2; Metcalfe, 1988: 270; Tranter, 1990b: 192–3; Murray, 1994: 10–11; Sandiford, 1994: 19–31).

By focusing too narrowly on the most brutal and turbulent working-class sports with the greatest potential for fostering moral decay and social disturbance the academic pioneers of sport history tended to overlook the very different experience of other working-class sports for which clear evidence of decline is either entirely lacking or less than conclusive. Too readily they assumed that the erosion of animal blood sports like cockfighting, throwing at cocks, bear and badger baiting and bullrunning, and the efforts of the authorities to stamp out particularly violent and unruly sports like football and prize-fighting, were representative of what happened to popular sport as a whole. Recent work, more aware of the resilience of even those traditional sports which did decline, and incorporating a wider range of sports which attracted less opprobrium and showed little or no sign of significant decline, is

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less pessimistic and less inclined to accept the notion of a vacuum in popular sport in the second quarter of the nineteenth century (Golby and Purdue, 1984: 63–83, 89–90; Tranter, 1987a; Speak, 1988: 61; Vamplew, 1988a: 10; 1988b: 40; Holt, 1989: 57–73). On the whole, this latter interpretation sits more comfortably not only with what we now know about the evolution of sport itself but also with current consensus on the general character of the economic and social changes which occurred between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.

As Hugh Cunningham was the first to stress, the twin processes of accelerating rates of population growth and rapid urbanisation created an environment that was as likely to encourage as discourage popular sport. At a time when there is no reason to assume that the working-class desire for recreation was any less acute than it had previously been, the emergence of large urban communities, for most of whose inhabitants real incomes remained stable in the first quarter of the century and rose in the second quarter, opened up new commercial opportunities for the enterprising to exploit. To judge from the renewed vitality of sports like prize-fighting and quoiting and the growing popularity of circuses and travelling menageries, pantomimes, singing salons and theatres, the entrepreneurial response to these opportunities was dynamic (Bailey, 1978: 9–34; Cunningham, 1980: 36–51). Evidence on the geographic distribution of sporting activity in late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth-century Scotland, based on contemporary statements in the Old and New Statistical Accounts, provides further confirmation of Cunningham's thesis. Both in the 1790s and 1830s/1840s outdoor sports were more prevalent in lowland regions of Scotland, where urbanisation and rates of population growth were greatest, than in Highland and Island regions, where urbanisation was negligible and the population more scattered and growing more slowly (Tranter, 1987a: 26–7, 30). In Scotland, at least, the positive effects of population growth and urbanisation on the size of the market for sporting recreations clearly outweighed the negative effects that may have stemmed from shortages of space and the requirements of public order and property security.

There is a current preference among economic historians for seeing the process of economic development in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain as more gradual and piecemeal

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Neil Tranter

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Sport, economy and society*

and less revolutionary and pervasive than it was once thought to be. Accordingly, the belief of earlier historians of sport that popular sporting traditions were undermined by the demands of employers for longer and more regular hours of work no longer seems quite so convincing. As late as 1851 only a small minority of the male labour force was employed in those few factory and mining enterprises where working hours are known to have increased. For the large majority of workers, in manufacturing and mining no less than in agriculture and the services, the organisational and technological nature of employment changed little before the second half of the nineteenth, and there was consequently no serious threat to recreational time. Hence, in London, where manufacturing continued to be dominated by small craft industries, much of the old artisan culture of leisure survived. In rural Oxfordshire the traditional festivities associated with the Whitsun holiday remained largely intact until at least the late 1830s. In Scotland, despite the growing scale and sophistication of agricultural and industrial production, sport was more not less common in the 1830s/1840s than in the 1790s (Tranter, 1987a: 30). Even in Lancashire, where factory methods of production were most prevalent, the traditional wakes holidays and the recreations bound up with them did not disappear until much later in the century. Moreover, instances like the football match played in 1835 between workers from the Blairdrummond estates and the Deanston cotton mills, which the latter were reported to have won partly because 'while the mossmen have had no practice of late, the Deanston boys omit few opportunities of trying their agility in this manly game', indicate that even factory workers were not always precluded from regular participation in sport (Tranter, 1990b: 193).

There are several reasons for questioning the validity of the notion that working-class sports were fatally damaged by the withdrawal of aristocratic and gentry patronage. First, as yet we have far too little quantitative empirical evidence to permit a secure generalisation about overall trends in the extent of such patronage. It is undoubtedly the case that by the early nineteenth century the aristocracy and gentry were steadily reducing their support of those animal blood sports most closely associated with the working classes. On the other hand, motivated by paternalist traditions which regarded patronage as one of the responsibilities of privilege

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and the patronising of plebeian sport as a means of ensuring social harmony, they continued to support a wide range of other sports in which there was extensive working-class involvement – boatracing, cricket, curling, horseracing, quoiting and even some of the more violent recreations like football and pugilism (Holt, 1989: 21–6; Sandiford, 1994: 21). The problem is that in the present state of knowledge we cannot tell whether their support of these latter sports grew more or less rapidly than the decline which occurred in their support of the former. Until this problem is resolved aggregate levels of aristocratic and gentry patronage will remain unclear.

Secondly, even if a general decline in the flow of patronage from the landed elites is confirmed by future research, it is possible that some, or perhaps all, of the resulting void was filled by patrons from other social groups. The significance of one alternative source of support for working-class sport – that supplied by publicans – has already been amply documented for sports such as boatracing, cricket and pedestrianism and its influence was probably no less vital for others such as prize-fighting, quoiting and skittles. Recent demonstrations of a flourishing sports culture in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English and Scottish elite schools and universities, together with examples like the John Hope Football Club of Edinburgh, which suggest that this was sometimes continued into adulthood, also raise the possibility that the urban professional and business elites of early nineteenth-century Britain were neither so hostile to nor so devoid of sporting recreations as it has been customary for most historians to suppose (Anderson, 1987; Chandler, 1988a and 1988b; Tranter, 1993). To date, it is true, there is no evidence to suggest that this interest in sport among the urban bourgeoisie was carried over into an active patronage of working-class sport. But this may be because historians have not yet looked hard enough to find it. Conceivably, Robert Owen's insistence on the inclusion of physical education, games and drill in the curriculum of his school at New Lanark is indicative of a wider sympathy for working-class sport among the urban middle classes that is still waiting to be uncovered.

Thirdly, as Reid (1988) and Flett (1989) note, even in cases like the disappearance of mass football matches from the streets of towns such as Derby, Louth and Worcester, where the withdrawal of traditional sources of patronage was clearly a contributing

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Neil Tranter

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Sport, economy and society*

factor, it was probably one of the least important of a variety of influences which between them determined the survival or demise of individual sports. For urban communities in particular, to assume that working-class sport as a whole was so dependent on the sponsorship of the landed elites that it could not survive without it is to oversimplify the causes of a complex phenomenon. This assumption also both overstates the influence of the aristocracy and gentry and understates the capacity of working-class culture to determine its own character and evolution. That some plebeian sports decreased in popularity in the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was chiefly the result of other factors than the withdrawal of landed elite support.

It was the most brutal and disruptive pastimes like football and prize-fighting and the animal blood sports of the working classes that were most frequently condemned and most prone to decline. This has convinced more recent historians of sport that of all the forces hostile to the survival of traditional working-class sporting recreations the most influential was the pursuit of higher standards of private and public behaviour triggered by a wider acceptance of Enlightenment, Evangelical and Methodist values repugnant to unnecessary violence and cruelty. In their explanations for the increasing opposition of the social elites to street football and the animal blood sports of the masses, sport historians nowadays are more inclined to emphasise the desire for respectability than the concerns of property owners and businessmen for public order and workforce discipline. Lacking convincing proof of radical, wholesale changes in hours and conditions of work, the urge for respectability also helps us to understand why at least some of the more skilled members of working-class society willingly supported authorities' attempts to rid society of its most brutal and potentially most morally degrading pastimes. They, too, condemned the immorality and turbulence associated with some of the old sports and shared the view that, in a more enlightened and humanitarian age, these should yield to more acceptable and uplifting recreations. The reformation in popular manners, and the hostility to some established sporting customs which it helped to generate, was the result of pressure from below as well as from above (Delves, 1981: 106; Reid, 1988; Flett, 1989; Bailey, 1989: 114–15; Holt, 1989: 38–43).