
Sport in contemporary Britain

The cult of individual improvement

For the public-school-educated amateurs of the Rugby Football Union, it was the root of all evil. For the departing members of the Northern Union, as rugby league was originally called, it was what made the world go round.

The men who ran the Northern Union had earned their money not from inheritance or landowning but from industry and business, and ‘their commitment to amateurism was further weakened by their general values’, observed Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard in their *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football*. ‘That is, they were more openly achievement-oriented and acquisitive, and showed a greater tendency to place money value on social relations and personal attributes.’¹

In 1904, nine years after splitting from its amateur cousin, rugby league changed its rules, making it possible for its players to be full-time employees of their clubs, which in turn were financially dependent on admission money paid by spectators. In effect, rugby league became a fully professional sport. It was by no means unique in this respect. Association football had been professional for almost twenty years, and prizefighters had been boxing for money since the eighteenth century. Yet the division of the two rugby codes symbolised a new age, one in which professional and amateur sports would coexist, not always easily but in a stable state that would endure for the next eighty years.

Rugby’s duality mirrored social and cultural changes. Industrialism had introduced *embourgeoisement*, ‘the gradual emergence of the bourgeoisie as the ruling class ... their growing control of major institutions,

and the ... spread of their values through society', as Dunning and Sheard describe it.² Social reform to ensure both the welfare and control of the industrial working class had loosened the rigidity of Britain's class structure, promoting the idea of self-improvement, or 'bettering oneself' through painstaking work and achievement. This was consistent with the ethos of modernity in the organised industrial world. As Alan Fox wrote in his *History and Heritage: The Social Origins of the British Industrial Relations System*: 'The appeal of respectability and the cult of individual improvement probably rendered many working men "vulnerable to assimilation to cultural patterns determined by the middle class"'.³

The enthusiasm for sport had an almost allegorical quality: it represented a transmission of imaginative ideas from higher to lower social levels. While Fox believed this was produced by a shared faith, a common belief in free trade and a distrust of landed interests, a mutual interest in sport also contributed. The 'cult of individual improvement' excited a striving among a newly aspirational working class, and this was replicated in and complemented by competitive sport.

'Fundamentally, British culture is deeply individualistic', declared A. H. Halsey in the 1986 edition of his *Change in British Society*. 'The deeply embedded cultural assumption is that ultimate values are individual, that society is in no sense superior to the sum of the people who make it up; that collectivism can only be instrumental.'⁴

Opportunities in education, industry, politics and elsewhere provided a ladder for individuals born in the lower orders to climb. Improving or bettering oneself became an active ideal to be aspired to. The achievement orientation – the individualistic will to succeed rather than simply to participate – was a dominating feature of both culture and sport that took shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The deeper origins date back to the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century and the attitude of mind that emphasised the power of reason, rationality and, above all, individualism. We should also point to the French Revolution of 1789, which exposed the erroneous belief that individuals were cast by nature to a station where they remain fixed for their whole lives like mice on treadmills. This change in mentality brought with it an inducement to strive for success. This is precisely the motive that came to characterise and give shape to British sport in the crucial years at the turn of the century.

The achievement orientation became more pronounced in sport as the twentieth century progressed. Ends superseded means as the purpose

of sporting competition. Amateur rugby's resentment of professionalism was as much to do with values and attitudes as money. The very word 'amateur' derives from the Latin *amatorius*, for love, and its import is clear: participants were motivated to compete by the affection they felt towards and the joy they took from sport. Competition itself was a respectful order in which players exerted themselves unsparingly, yet not only to win. The idea was to bring all participants to their peak. The disgrace was not in losing but in not trying one's absolute best. Holding back was a violation of fair play as it denied a rival the opportunity to test his mettle. (I use the pronoun 'his' deliberately, of course: women were for the most part, excluded from competitive sports, as we will discover.)

Craving for success

Those who regarded sport in this way were appalled by the achievement-oriented Harold Abrahams, whose Jewish background guaranteed him marginal status in the early twentieth century, but whose uncommon zeal for winning drove him to an extraordinary policy. After a mediocre performance at the 1920 Olympic Games, the Bedford-born sprinter was so determined to make amends that he sought the services of Sam Mussabini, a coach, referee, journalist and publisher, who was active in billiards and cycling as well as track. In 1896, he had been hired by Dunlop to train the tyre company's professional cycling team. It was not unusual for cycle and equipment manufacturers to sponsor their own teams (as is the case today).

Mussabini had studied the work of Eadweard Muybridge who exploited the potential of the relatively new technology of photography to document physiologically precise records of sports action using the most technically efficient means. Yet his prescience in training methods was anathema to amateurs, for whom the very idea of preparing for a competition was a corruption of the Corinthian ideal. Worse still, Mussabini had taken money for his services. While the film *Chariots of Fire* (1981) documented Abraham's ultimately successful pursuit of the 100 metres gold medal at the 1924 Olympics, it downplayed the shame engendered by hiring Mussabini. At the time, there were about 250,000 Jews in Britain, and they generally embraced their integration into the wider culture; the anti-Semitism prevalent in other parts of Europe met with opposition from the British working class. Yet, being a minority-group member probably

fortified Abrahams in his hazard-strewn practice of training with a professional. Mussabini, as the film shows, was not even allowed in the stadium to observe his charge's moment of glory and listened to a radio commentary in a nearby hotel room. Abrahams himself was not remunerated and so protected his amateur status. His triumph was something of a rebuke to athletics' governors: not only had he employed a coach but he also adopted an approach towards winning that contrasted with that of many of his rivals. They might have found gratification in competing; his joy was in winning.

Abrahams' venture, like rugby's split, highlighted the tension between amateurism and professionalism in British sport during the early twentieth century. Association Football had allowed the payment of players since 1885, and several other sports, including cricket, pedestrianism (as athletics were then known) and, of course, prizefighting allowed professionals. All had, in some measure, moved away from their original values. 'It was the educated classes who developed and articulated an ethical code governing the way in which games in general should be played', wrote Tony Mason in his *Association Football and English Society, 1863-1915*. 'It was in essence based on aristocratic notions of chivalry'.⁵

After 1885, the conduct of some professional players fell a good way short of the sportsmanship ideal ... intentional infringements of the law became an increasingly accepted part of the game. Neither did the predominantly working-class crowd, which watched the games, manifest signs that they had imbibed the sportsmanship ethic. Winning was all, or almost all, and the opposition were there to satisfy the craving for success.⁶

Odd as it may seem from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the achievement orientation was a relatively new and, to many, alarming development that did not just undermine amateur ideals but replaced them with principles and standards we now recognise as commonplace. In retaining a professional coach, Abrahams disclosed a self-interest and singularity of purpose that, for many, aligned him with the rugby league and football players who competed with the sole purpose of winning. Would crowds have been interested in watching competitors do anything but?

The answer is, probably not. There was little satisfaction in watching an activity that was intrinsically rewarding to the participants. The transformation of sport from a participant activity to a mass spectator

entertainment form did not just coincide with the arrival of the achievement orientation. And, while it might not have been a case of cause and effect, the two were linked as if by molecular chain. People became engaged with sport as spectators rather than contestants when the players started to compete for something clear, tangible and familiar.

The activity they watched was a microcosm of the world they knew, a world in which initiative, labour, perseverance and self-improvement were exalted and in which achieving as much as one's ability allowed was regarded as a virtue; idleness was discouraged in the industrial society of Britain. The principles that supported and gave purpose to what we now recognise as sport were part of a wider moral code that guided conduct towards individual attainment.

Ruling the roost

Asserting one's predestined superiority and natural right to rule is not action expected of a colonial power, at least not at the height of empire. England did not boast or display arrogance but rather took pride and expressed satisfaction in its role as an agent of civilisation and progress. 'Empire', as Antoinette Burton observes, was 'a fundamental part of English culture and national identity ... [it] entered the social fabric, the intellectual discourse and the life of the imagination.'⁷

Only in the late nineteenth century in the midst of imperial scramble when their power began to wane did the English manifest the bravado, grandeur, nationalism and racist condescension typically associated with the rulers of the Empire. In the nineteenth century, the English and, more generally, the British came to see themselves 'as an 'elect nation', called to carry out a particular, God-given mission in the world'. This is the argument of Krishan Kumar, who in *The Making of English National Identity* suggests that, as their global influence dissipated, the English turned 'inwards towards themselves, and began to ask themselves who they were'.⁸ This was a spur to the kinds of nationalistic belligerence we witness, often in sport, today. As Kumar puts it, 'if others reject you, it is natural to play up your strengths, and to take pride in precisely those things that distinguish you from those others.'⁹

The English answer to the question of identity was crisp and clear: they were special people, blessed by an inheritance and a mission in the world. England was charged with the momentous responsibility of remaking the world in its own image. 'Englishness modulated

into Britishness', wrote Kumar, meaning that, as the English began to emphasise their distinctive place, role and identity, so the other British nations clung to their national identities 'as a kind of compensation for, or counterweight against, the predominant role of the English in the United Kingdom'.¹⁰ Great Britain became something of a theatre, or a stage big enough for several players.

In 1904, seven European nations came together to form the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). This was an initiative scoffed at by England's own Football Association (the FA). After all, the FA was the original governing organisation, founded in 1863 to codify rules, formalise the sport's governance and generally oversee the development of what was to become the world's most popular sport. Three of FIFA's founding nations – France, Spain and Sweden – did not even have organised leagues, and the other members – Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland – were nowhere near England in terms of the sport's advancement. British settlers were responsible for exporting the sport to these and several other countries anyway. Only Italy claimed the sport had separate origins in the renaissance game *calcio*.

British nations had been playing international representative games since 1872 when England faced Scotland. England's mastery of its own game and superiority in all facets of its administration had not been in doubt, and the very concept of an international 'federation' – the term itself connoting an association of independent and equal units – was, to the English, an impertinence.

When Kumar wrote of the English, 'ruling the roost, they felt it impolitic to crow', he might also have been referring to England's FA, which demurred at the fledgling federation without feeling either the need to join or put pressure on it.¹¹ In fact, within two years, the English FA decided to affiliate but, with the other home nations, withdrew after the First World War when FIFA recognised nations that had been enemies during the war. The FA rejoined in 1924, by which time FIFA had become the organiser of the Olympic football event. The 1924 summer Olympics in Amsterdam staged the first international soccer tournament, won by Uruguay, a country that wished to celebrate the centenary of its independence by hosting the first professional world championships.

'Broken-time' payments were monetary compensations for ostensibly amateur players who took time off from work to play for their clubs. The FA abandoned any pretence of amateurism and legalised full and open professionalism in 1885. As organisers of the Olympic tournament, FIFA

decided to admit broken-time payments, a decision the FA believed would reintroduce the abuses and hypocrisy it had removed from the English game. Stung by FIFA's refusal to follow its example, the English FA withdrew its membership. The first world championship was won by Uruguay, though, as Dennis Brailsford writes in his *British Sport: A Social History*, 'the conviction that British football was bound to be the best in the world was not to be disturbed ... by such new-fangled trumperies as a World Cup.'¹²

The English in particular saw themselves engaged in a larger enterprise 'as creators of a worldwide system in which they as it were gigantically replicated themselves, carrying with them their language, their culture, their institutions, their industry', as Kumar put it.¹³ The growth of an organisation purporting to represent the global interests of football and staging World Cups in four-yearly cycles posed little threat to English hegemony. At least not until after the Second World War. But, by 1950, when England eventually agreed to participate in the World Cup competition, the swirling winds of change were gathering. India's independence in 1949 served notice that the Empire was disintegrating, and Britain's hitherto unquestioned leadership was open to challenge. England's suffering in its World Cup debut seemed consistent with its struggles elsewhere.

Unsportsmanlike?

Both the practical and emotional imperatives of the imperial mission depended on the will to succeed rather than just participate in a venture, a feature which was also reflected in the achievement orientation. Imperialism (from the Latin *imperium* for command) is perhaps too utilitarian: it was inspired by the belief in the desirability of acquiring colonies and dependencies. In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said distinguishes between this and colonialism, which was a specific form of imperial expansion based on the practice of implanting settlements on distant territories.¹⁴ In this respect, England's mission was predicated on progress (one of the organising motifs of the period) rather than acquisition alone. The English were to supervise and promote the advancement of non-European peoples.

Sport was an instrument in this service. It inducted colonial subjects into a sphere where rules were of paramount importance and discipline was essential and in which a single arbiter was vested with unchallengeable authority. If they were to advance, they should remain obedient to their

imperial masters. The events precipitated by the formation of FIFA in 1904 are most beneficially understood against this background. Yet it was cricket that provided the most dramatic compendium of the English response to the social and political changes erupting in the inter-war period.

Australians could perhaps be forgiven for thinking Armageddon had broken out in 1932. The visit of the English touring side was quite different from anything that had gone before. This was a team motivated not, it seemed, by the resolve to instruct by example, or even to compete with pluck and spirit, but by an uncharacteristically keen achievement orientation. Known for competing with a straight bat and a stiff upper lip, the English were faced with the indomitable batsman Donald Bradman, who had led the Australians to victory in 1930. Perhaps the memories were still fresh when England's captain Douglas Jardine instructed his fast bowlers to aim at the batsmen's bodies. While the tactic was within the laws of the game, it contravened its spirit in a way that outraged not just the Australian players but also administrators, fans and even politicians.

The Australian Board of Control for Cricket complained to England's governing organisation, the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), describing the 'bodyline' approach as 'unsportsmanlike'. Jardine demanded a retraction, prompting an escalation, which eventually involved Australia's Prime Minister. For a while, the dispute appeared to be developing into a diplomatic incident. An apology followed. Several Australian players finished the series with injuries. The English had played a functional, effective cricket that betrayed their purpose: to win (which they did) rather than to conduct themselves in the dignified manner traditionally associated with the colonial masters. The series was deemed a travesty by the MCC, which disciplined the bowlers involved. But it signalled a change in the imperial relationship, at least as it manifested in sport.

As imperial rulers, the English were unused to losing, whether in cricket, football or any other kind of sport. After all, they were originators of the ennobling practice which had proved to be of great utility in cultivating values and ideals among the subject nations. The paradox of having those subject nations rear themselves up and snap back defiantly, albeit in a symbolic way, was both an affront and a surprise. England's retort redefined sport in a way that we recognise today.

The notion of entering a competition with a rationale that did not include winning is difficult to countenance. Clearly, the point of sport is to try to win. But not the whole point; at least not until the 1930s. Part exhibition, part spectacle, sport was a demonstration too: it showcased

virtues and qualities that were integral to a ruling elite. With struggles for independence revealing opposition to colonial rule, the English were discovering their pre-eminence in sport was under challenge too. The response was to change orientation in a way that conferred honour on trying to win and, crucially, respectability on the methods most appropriate to winning.

Surging popularity

The 100,000 people who attended the first World Cup Final in 1930 were not only spectators, they were also people gathered for the purchase of a commodity – a market. The English were aware of the demand for football: as early as 1897, the FA Cup Final had drawn a crowd of 50,000, revealing interest of a scale unsuspected twenty-four years before when the FA was created. Of course, professional sport has always been predicated on the concept of market demand: if no one was willing to pay to watch sport, whether at the event or on television, there would be no money available to players. But the rising numbers of people flocking to some events invited the prospect of converting what were once leisurely activities played in a spirit of camaraderie, recreation and fun principally for the gratification of the competitors into something that resembled a business. Cricket rivalled soccer in its widespread appeal, though its traditional bifurcation of gentlemen amateurs and professional players precluded an unobstructed commercialisation.

Not so with speedway: strongly supported by working-class fans, the sport – a new but authentic sport, incorporating the kind of machines people habitually used – featured professional riders and attracted five-figure crowds, including a record 93,000 in 1938. ‘Greyhound-racing, too, leapt into sudden popularity in the early 1930s’, notes Brailsford. ‘It was a sport which lent itself to rapid expansion. The competitors themselves could be bred and trained quickly and the capital investment needed to set up meetings was relatively modest.’¹⁵ Crowds exceeding 25,000 regularly attended greyhound racing, the source of the attraction lying with the gambling opportunities it offered. Betting on sport had been regulated by legislation in 1906 and 1921, and the 1960 Betting and Gaming Act introduced street betting shops (though these had existed illegally for many decades before the legislation). The fascination with wagering on animals seems to have persisted since the blood sports of the eighteenth century and earlier. There was also enthusiasm for

betting on horse racing, and, since the 1890s, football, suggesting that the growth of mass spectator sport in the early twentieth century was influenced by a keenness to gamble with discretion and judgement. Horse and dog racing were dependent on followers who were thrilled less by the competitors, more by the gambling. This in itself indicates a growing awareness of the logic of competition. Spectators familiarised themselves with the importance of environmental conditions, injuries and other factors that could influence outcomes. Crowds became knowledgeable. There was some irony in the fact that it was not only self-appointed moral guardians who disapproved of betting but also, as Jeffrey Hill points out, ‘the leaders of most of the sports around which betting occurred.’¹⁶ Football, for example, tried to ban the very pools betting to which it owed some of its surging popularity in the 1930s.

Some sports drifted uncertainly towards commercialism while others headed full-tilt for a business model. Tennis, for example, was traditionally associated with affluent classes and valued its amateur status. Its popularity was widened in the 1930s, especially after Fred Perry’s three Wimbledon titles and his contributions to Britain’s four Davis Cup triumphs. A nascent professional tennis circuit enticed Perry away from the amateurs, starting a trend that effectively denied Wimbledon, and, indeed, the amateur sport, its premier players. It stayed this way until 1968, when the first ‘open’ Wimbledon admitted both amateurs and professionals.

Other sports accommodating a coexistence included cricket, though Australian media magnate Kerry Packer, in 1977, launched his own World Series Cricket and heralded what we might call the modern era of cricket. Televised matches, some played under floodlights, with well-paid professional players wearing varicoloured flannels (i.e. trousers) suggested an alternative to the old English game of yore. In his *Moving the Goalposts: A History of Sport and Society since 1945*, Martin Polley calls this a ‘symbolic moment’ and argues that the embrace of professionalism and the assimilation of overtly commercial imperatives both ‘need to be seen in the context of developments in media coverage of sport, particularly the growth of television from the 1950s’.¹⁷

Tempted by the money

Rugby union, ‘a game that had seemed for long the quintessence of amateurism’, as Hill describes it, was one of the last mass spectator sports to

embrace professionalism. Hill explains: 'faced with the competition of both rugby league and association football, and tempted by the money of television companies looking for dramatic sporting action, rugby union emerged by the end of the [1990s] decade as a professional game.'¹⁸

By the start of the twenty-first century the amateur ethos that had once inspired the competitive pursuits had disappeared from popular sports. Amateur sport was useful preparation for a professional career, but not a legitimate alternative. Sport was synonymous with professional sport. And, of course, the spirit of fair play that once guided sport had given way to a more ruthless win-at-all-costs tendency that was consistent with the achievement orientation.

The change had made it possible for sport to become entertainment. This is not intended to be a critical observation, nor is entertainment meant to connote crassness or theatricality – though, at times, sport has purveyed both. Sport became something that was produced and performed exclusively for an audience. Spectators derived pleasure from watching and perhaps vicariously participating. In return, they were prepared to pay. The infernal article regarded contemptuously by old rugby purists was, by the late twentieth century, the currency of sport. What was once a way of reinvigorating workers after five and a half days of labour or a character-building exercise for the future rulers of empire was part of the entertainment industry, subject to the same vagaries of demand as the cinema, the theatre or even theme parks.

In the late twentieth century, there were several emblematic events that illustrated the changing character of sport. The formal abandonment of what had become a spurious distinction between amateurs and professionals in cricket in 1963 was one. The example was soon followed by tennis and, later, athletics (which, in 1982 instituted a system of subventions to disburse payments to competitors). In 1962, the removal of the maximum wage for footballers created great earnings potential for valuable players and gave football what Arthur Marwick called 'the veneer of classlessness to be found in other branches of the entertainments industry'.¹⁹

While no single event represents the changes perfectly, football's astonishing deal with Sky television in 1992 presents a serviceable motif for the transformation wrought by the media in the late century. Since its decade of rapid growth in the 1950s, television had been regarded by sport with mistrust, the view of sport being that, given the choice of watching at home or actually going to a competition, many would

choose the former. On the other hand, television was growing into such a popular medium in the 1960s that it offered a kind of shop window for sport. An estimated 10 million viewers watched English football's FA Cup Final on BBC television in 1953, over 100 times the number of fans who actually attended the game.

BBC's cosy relationship with football was disrupted in 1960, when the commercial channel ITV – five years after its launch – audaciously bid to broadcast 'live' football. In spite of an agreement with the FA, the clubs themselves protested, and only one game was shown. On reflection, it was an opportunity lost: football slid into a long and seemingly terminal decline. Britain itself had undergone something of a transformation. The traditional industrial, working-class heartlands lost the special economic significance they had held up to the 1950s. A combination of, first, global processes and, from the 1970s, government policies had hastened the decline of manufacturing centres. The impact was many-sided: the character of work, family life and leisure activities all changed – as did football. Writing in 1986, the historian James Walvin mournfully chronicled: 'the game in recent years has plunged deeper and deeper into a crisis, partly of its own making, partly thrust upon it by external forces over which football has little or no control.'²⁰

Violence, racism, decaying stadiums, an indifferent population and two full-scale tragedies had contributed to football's degeneration. In 1989, when yet another calamity visited the sport in the form of the Hillsborough Disaster, football's crisis deepened. (Hillsborough was the name of the stadium in Sheffield where ninety-six soccer fans died after 658 too many spectators were admitted.) Sky television had its own crisis: having launched its telecommunications satellite in 1989 and started transmission, it endured punishing losses, speculated to be about £2 million per month. Its acquisition of the rights to televise 'live' games from the newly organised Premier League for a barely believable £304 million seemed suicidal. Yet, its subscription rates grew and the money filtered through to clubs, which, in turn, recruited high-ranking overseas players. By 1995, football had metamorphosed into an all-star family entertainment – with a new market. Encouraged by its success, BSkyB continued to pay often exorbitant fees for the rights to football and added rugby league, which it converted into a global competition, cricket, golf and boxing to its roster.

Football became an exemplar for market-oriented sport: it fashioned a commodity, created a new demand for it and offered it for sale. Many of the players acquired the status and the earnings power of show-business celebrities. Sponsors, emboldened by the new-found popularity of

football, paid to have their names associated with either the clubs or the competitions. Advertisers paid – often dearly – to persuade celebrity athletes to endorse their products: in 2005, Gillette paid David Beckham a reported £35 million (\$60 million), in a transaction that rivalled Tiger Woods' \$100 million contract with Nike.

Realising the growing popularity of sport in the late twentieth century, manufacturers brokered licensing agreements to produce merchandise bearing the imprimatur of famous athletes or their clubs. Clothes, food, kitchen utensils and practically any article that could be affixed with a name began to display sport-related names or logos. This commodification of sport was regarded by some to be the reason for sport's cultural shift. 'Why has sport moved from the periphery to the centre of popular culture?' asked John Horne in his *Sport in Consumer Culture*, answering in three ways: 'one explanation is the increasing commercialisation and commodification ... A second refers to the increasing concerns about embodiment and the care of the body ... A third approach considers the focus on celebrity.'²¹ The first and third answers are linked directly to the treatment afforded sport by the media, especially commercial television. Our changing understanding of the body has heightened appreciation of the manner in which others use their bodies, though this too has been affected by the media's coverage.

At the start of the twentieth century, money was, for many, a pestilence that would destroy the core value of fair play. By the start of the twenty-first, it could be argued that this was an accurate assessment. Practically every professional sport – and all major sports were professional by this time – had been embroiled in corruption, doping, violence and other activities that despoiled sport's central precept. All had their sources in money. Yet money is arguably the prime mover behind every single development in contemporary sport.

The potential of the sport market was realised in a way that not one of the 100,000 people watching the 1930 World Cup final could have imagined. Instead of gathering the spectators to the events, the market was diffused and the events were taken to the spectators. And the beauty of the arrangement was that they still paid.

More like that of a man

For most of its history, sport has been a macho maelstrom, a large and aggressive whirlpool in which a generation of men rediscovered their foundering masculinity. Organised sport appeared at a time when the

factory system seemed to be replacing men with machines. By the late 1800s, industry was mechanised to the point where the physical labour once performed by men, while still required at some stages in the production process, was largely superfluous. Patriarchal arrangements were based in part on the physical capacities of men to toil in a way women could not. So when those capacities were no longer integral to productivity, men created and refined other pursuits in which to exhibit their physical prowess and so validate their manhood. This is hardly a formal history of sport, but it does present an enlivening subtext: sport as an authenticating apparatus for men alarmed at the prospect of impending emasculation.

The perpetual motion of sport's early development in Britain precluded earnest reflection. No sooner had the main governing organisations appeared than debates about professionalism filled the air. Then the big international competitions brought nationalism into sport. By the 1930s, sport's power to draw the masses had alerted two sorts of people to sport's potential: entrepreneurs and politicians. Both exploited sport. So, by the mid twentieth century, sport had almost developed into the form we recognise today. But there were notable absentees: women.

Pierre de Coubertin established something of a model for modern sport when he introduced the modern Olympic Games in 1896. 'No matter how toughened a sportswoman may be', he famously announced, 'her organism is not cut out to sustain shocks.' Sport was an 'exultation of male athleticism ... with female applause as a reward', according to the visionary Frenchman. Women were later admitted to the Olympics, though only in certain events. Their participation was reflected in other sports, such as golf, tennis and motor racing, none of which involved physical contact or collision. As such they were considered appropriate for 'ladies'. Violet Percy ran a three hour, forty minute and twenty-two second marathon in 1925, but no further records were kept until 1964. When Percy ran, only 10 per cent of married women in Britain went to work; by the time record-keeping began this had risen to 38.08 per cent.²²

It is a popular though misleading argument that women were forcibly excluded from sports for most of the century. This is partly true, but women themselves expressed little desire to enter. There were sound reasons for this. First, females in sport were often regarded as tomboys or hoydens and thought to lack femininity. Helen Lenskyj records that they were seen to represent a moral degeneracy in society. Second, 'too

much activity in sports of a masculine character causes the female body to become more like that of a man', as Lynda Birke and Gail Vines put it.²³ Third, menstruation was regarded as a disabling prohibition: the 'eternal wound', as Patricia Vertinsky called it, handicapped women to the point that entering sport would tax them biologically, possibly harming their reproductive organs. With these cautions circulating in the scientific as well as in everyday discourse, it is hardly surprising that women were not clamouring to cross the threshold into sport.

As these kinds of belief receded, women, perhaps bolstered by their physical efforts during the Second World War, began to demand entry into major sporting events. In the USA, Kathrine Switzer's illicit but iconic marathon in 1967 portended major changes: women were at the time prohibited from competing in marathons, but entering as 'K. V. Switzer', the twenty-year-old Syracuse University student completed the Boston course and so ended the myth of women's frailty. Over the next twenty-five years, women participated in every sport, even combat sports such as boxing, which had been something of a final taboo.

Switzer's run symbolised wider changes affected by and affecting women around the world. Legislation permitting legal abortion, and the availability of oral contraception complemented the legal prohibition of sexual discrimination and mandates for equal pay. More women entered higher education and went on to professional, managerial and entrepreneurial careers, suggesting symmetry between sport and the occupational world. While there was a suspicion that curmudgeonly males were interested only in aesthetically pleasing female athletes, British sportswomen such as Denise Lewis, Kelly Holmes and Paula Radcliffe demanded recognition for their achievements rather than their looks.

For most of its history, sport has remained a male domain. This is understandable: I suggested earlier that its *raison d'être* was to validate masculinity. But cultural changes have been reflected in and perhaps precipitated by the encroachment of women onto hitherto male preserves. Female self-determination manifests on several levels. A woman in an Arsenal shirt, or in boxing gloves, or breaking the tape after over twenty-six miles are all rebuttals of mid-twentieth-century cultural mores. In a sense, they are all doing things learned men once warned were not as nature intended. Horne has argued that women's presence in sport 'helps confirm and reinforce their role and position in society. It offers both liberation and constraint.'²⁴ The same could be said about sport itself: in some ways, it has provided a means through which

marginal groups can find the release that comes with expression and recognition. Yet Horne is mindful that sport constrains, turning us all into consumers of a product that can be bought and sold. This is very far from the ambitions of sport in Britain during the nineteenth century.

Conclusion: why?

Sport, as we have seen, has transmuted from a playful endeavour, an agreeable recreation and a source of intrinsic reward into a tradable commodity. The Corinthian ideal of participation has been in retreat since the 1920s (before that in professional sports), leaving the baser instincts of sponsorship deals and win-at-all-costs to assume an importance that would have seemed monstrous a century ago. In the process, sport has strengthened its power to fascinate, the alliance with television proving both crucial and irresistible: many sports are now genuinely global in their appeal. They magnetise spectators, participants and gamblers, though only one does so uniformly: soccer, of which there are about 3.5 billion devotees globally. This is reflected in Britain where association football attracts 30 million 'live' spectators per year and is played competitively by 3 million men and women.

Cricket is also popular in Britain, as it is in several nations that were once part of the Empire: in total, about 3 million people play or watch cricket. Once regarded as a sport of the affluent, tennis is Britain's third most popular participation sport, though its spectatorship is seasonal, reaching its peak during the Wimbledon fortnight when BBC television viewing figures often reach a cumulative 562 million – over four times the typical television audience for the annual US Super Bowl. For comparison, soccer's four-yearly World Cup Final game draws 1.7 billion television viewers from around the world.

While football is Britain's single most popular participation sport for both men and women, competitive fishing, or angling as it often known, is also popular, as is golf. Gambling is legal in Britain, and betting volume is an index of a sport's popularity. Horse racing, once known as the Sport of Kings because of its association with royalty, consistently heads the list, though the advent of online betting has vaulted soccer into second place. Greyhound racing remains popular with bettors: as with dog racing in other parts of the world, a parimutuel form of betting (in which those backing the first three places divide the losers' stakes) is popular among gamblers.

Sport is live theatre, and its place in British culture is alongside other subdivisions of the entertainment industry, all of which have been subject to corporate power. The influence of corporations over economic and institutional resources has been supported by a strengthening of sport's power to shape popular attitudes and beliefs.

Dr Johnson's comparison of the lady preacher with a dog walking on its hind legs left him wondering not how well the dog was doing, but why it was walking that way at all. We could ask the same question of sport. Why? It has no purpose, save for the suspiciously implausible character-building function, and it has no obvious benefit to the myriad fans who are parted from ever-greater quantities of their hard-earned cash. The days are long gone when sport was a preparation for military conflict, less still a preparation for life in civil society. There again, sport's place in contemporary British culture is not assured by what it fulfils but by what it avoids: crassness and predictability. Sport is now incontrovertibly part of the entertainment industry, and it is a well-made, effectively distributed and often dramatically staged commodity that delivers something that no other form of entertainment can: an incalculable result. We never know what is going to happen. That alone guarantees its permanence.

Yet it would be a mistake to see continuity and tradition where there has been brokenness and change. Sport's relationship to the activities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is tenuous. The competitions resemble each other, but the organisation, structure and status are completely different. British sport is a labour of love turned into a commercial project. It is animated by the desire to achieve and the will to conquer, both elemental features of British culture in the twentieth century, and both characteristic of business endeavours. Given the compatibility, an alignment was perhaps inevitable. Had it not developed into an industry, sport might have retained some of its emotive power, but it would have remained on the cultural periphery, as Horne called it.²⁵

Is it possible to be passionate about sport and stay – perhaps uncomfortably – aware that one is conniving with an enterprise founded on misogynist principles and based on selfishness, which reflects an unswerving historical mission to dominate and is now controlled largely by global corporations? Today's ruthlessly competitive pursuits have no place for humility, altruism, compassion or many other qualities we admire. This might be a harsh evaluation, as the British have often shown sympathy for doughty losers, whatever their nationality,

and have, in some sports, become accustomed to taking defeat with honour: an imperishable enthusiasm for sport remains, despite the paucity of global champions in cricket, tennis and football. Yet the belligerent, one-sided nationalism of soccer fans is not typically evident among followers of boxing, rugby, motor racing, track and field, snooker or other sports in which the British have world champions or contenders. Our enthusiasm for sport and the central place we allow it remind us that we represent the less admirable aspects of culture more faithfully than we dare recognise.

Notes

- 1 E. Dunning and K. Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (Oxford: Robertson, 1979), p. 203.
- 2 Dunning and Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players*, p. 306.
- 3 A. Fox, *History and Heritage: The Social Origins of the British Industrial Relations System* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 143.
- 4 A. H. Halsey, *Change in British Society*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 2.
- 5 T. Mason, *Association Football and English Society, 1863–1915* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), p. 255.
- 6 Mason, *Association Football and English Society*, p. 256.
- 7 A. Burton, ‘Who Needs the Nation? Interrogating “British History”’, in C. Hall (ed.), *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 137–53.
- 8 K. Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 196.
- 9 Kumar, *English National Identity*, p. 200.
- 10 Kumar, *English National Identity*, p. 187.
- 11 Kumar, *English National Identity*, p. 187.
- 12 D. Brailsford, *British Sport: A Social History* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1997), p. 112. (Trumperies are showy but deceptively worthless items.)
- 13 Kumar, *English National Identity*, p. 189.
- 14 E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).
- 15 Brailsford, *British Sport*, p. 116.
- 16 J. Hill, *Sports, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), p. 39.
- 17 M. Polley, *Moving the Goalposts: A History of Sport and Society Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 67.
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- 20 J. Walvin, *Football and the Decline of Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. vi.
- 21 J. Horne, *Sport in Consumer Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 80.
- 22 Halsey, *Change in British Society*, p. 107.

- 23 L. Birke and G. Vines, 'A Sporting Chance: The Anatomy of Destiny', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 19 (4) (1987): 337-47; p. 340.
- 24 Horne, *Sport in Consumer Culture*, p. 154.
- 25 Horne, *Sport in Consumer Culture*, p. 80.