

## Sport and the Military: The British Armed Forces 1880-1960

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In *Handley Cross*, an early Victorian sporting novel, Mr. Jorrocks defends fox-hunting as “the sport of kings, the image of war without its guilt, and only five-and-twenty per cent of its danger”.<sup>(1)</sup> In their co-authored work, Tony Mason and Eliza Riedi examine this interplay between sport and war and illustrate the importance of sport to the British military over the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sports history is a relatively new field of study, instigated by two roughly coterminous developments of the 1960s: the rediscovery of social history and its focus on everyday cultures and the infusion of new scholars into the field with new, broader backgrounds and interests.<sup>(2)</sup> Mason and Riedi’s book adds to the growing literature on the history of sport, as well as our understanding of the social and cultural worlds of the late 19th through mid-20th centuries.

As Mason and Riedi note, sport and sporting conduct have been associated particularly with being British, and their goal is to examine how sport became such an important part of service life in the British military. The book is well organized and arranged chronologically, beginning with chapters on service sport and officer sport before the First World War and finishing with a chapter on sport in the National Service years to 1960. The introduction lays out the organization of the book and situates it in relevant historiography of sport and the military. As the authors note, there has been a lack of sport in historical analyses of the British military, with J. D. Campbell’s 2003 work being the first serious investigation of the role of sport in the British military.<sup>(3)</sup> This book examines all three branches of the armed services, but focuses mainly on the army and football, the first because it provides the best records and the second because it was the most popular of all service sports during this time.

The first chapter examines the growth of service sport from 1880–1914, including the pursuits of boxing, football, and rugby. Mason and Riedi note that conditions of service improved for the military in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but the problems of recruitment and retention, as well as the need for better educated servicemen, remained. The growth of sport in the military was a way to raise the standards of men serving. The authors probe how and why sport became so important to the late Victorian and Edwardian services and how it contributed to military efficiency while also causing new challenges and conflicts. There was a separation by rank in sport, and officer sports and facilities (as examined in chapter two) were quite different from non-officer sport. Initiatives for sport came predominantly from individual interest and organization, but as interest and participation increased, so did the organization of such activities, with the increase of sport in individual regiments encouraging growth in the army as a whole. Sport in the navy was different, largely because of organizational issues at sea, but boxing, hockey, cricket, and football were all popular with seamen, and navy football gained from close contact with port cities like Plymouth and Portsmouth. In addition, the services helped spread sports like cricket, hockey, and football throughout the British Empire, especially in India, where sport was introduced with some success to Indian troops in the 1890s as a means of shaping these men into British models of manliness and efficiency. Did sport really contribute to increasing the efficiency of servicemen before the First World War? Before the outbreak of war in 1914, the authors note, healthy recreational activities like sport helped to foster a sense of cohesion and identity in new units while also keeping men physically fit.

The second chapter examines the role of officer sports during the same period. Born out of a separate article by Riedi, this section focuses exclusively on equestrian sport, which was heavily criticized for wasteful extravagance before the First World War. The officer corps was largely closed and static during this time, composed mostly of aristocracy and landed gentry, since the rates of pay were so low that officers needed a source of private income to fund their service and activities. Officers typically came from an equestrian lifestyle of hunting and racing, supplemented by polo and pigsticking if serving abroad. By the 1880s, many were concerned by this near-obsession with polo and its related costs, with the ensuing debate focusing on the question of expenditure versus efficiency. Polo (like horse sports in general) was recommended for instilling officer qualities of leadership and skill, but its role of serving as a ‘social gate-keeper’ was worrisome (p. 67). Despite such criticism, however, the overwhelming popularity of and support for equestrian sport defied efforts by the War Office to reform it before the First World War. The debate about polo was not about the sport per se, but about the officers’ way of life. As such, it illustrates the survival of aristocratic and chivalric values against those of meritocracy and professionalism, as also seen in the defense of the cavalry and a horse-driven culture against the forces of mechanical modernization.

So it was the Great War that saw sport formally integrated into the military for both training and leisure purposes, as Mason and Riedi argue in their third chapter. The outbreak of war destroyed the largely informal structure of these activities, but such organization was reestablished by 1915 once the military situation stabilized. Sports remained an unofficial, grass-roots effort, with limited facilities and scarce equipment, typically provided by the players themselves, but it was soon embraced by the military as its benefits, especially to a largely civilian army engaged in total war, became apparent. Sport improved fitness levels, relieved boredom, provided a distraction from the horrors of war, built morale, fostered officer-men relations, and solidified unit cohesion and identity. Sport provided a common language and frame of reference for all men, and following the reorganization of the army into platoons in 1916, it helped to form critical loyalty within one’s unit and to the larger group as a whole. Sport was made an official part of the army system by 1916, and helped to smooth the transition to demobilization in 1918. Not only did sport help fill the leisure hours in the shift between war and peace, but it also helped cement good relations with other countries, as exemplified by British participation in the Inter-Theatre of War games in 1919. As Mason and Riedi argue, if sport did not win the First World War, it certainly played a crucial role in the experience for ordinary servicemen. It was a distraction, an amusement, and a link with home and civilian life, and it helped make the war bearable for many.

Despite economic cuts in the military and the uncertainty of the military’s role in peacetime, the years from 1919–39 were ‘curiously propitious’ to such activities, as the authors examine in their fourth chapter (p.

112). In fact, Mason and Riedi argue that the social and sporting atmosphere of the pre-war era was mostly reestablished in these 20 years. This period saw the implementation of amateur ideology and ethics in service sport, with a permanent ban on money prizes and an emphasis on moral values as opposed to the degrading influences of professionalism. This shift was marked by the establishment of the Army Sports Control Board in 1918, followed by similar efforts in the navy and the newly established Royal Air Force. This centralized control was important to instilling discipline (especially for the navy) and emphasizing a corporate identity (as in the RAF), but enforcing these new standards initially proved problematic, as many civilians were more influenced by examples of professionalism that stressed winning than they were by the military's example of teamwork, sportsmanship, and playing a good game. As noted, inter-war sport was marked by competition with foreign teams, but such interaction also illustrated problems with the British focus on amateurism. By the 1930s, Belgian and French teams were far superior to British counterparts because these armies encouraged sporting development along professional lines. Both the Belgian and French armies, which enforced conscription, found their countries' best sporting players serving time in the military, in which they were carefully groomed for competition. The British army, being a volunteer organization, could not compete against such rivals, and this conflict between professional and amateur sporting ideologies led to the British breaking off sporting relations with the French. But sports were a major draw for the British army, in terms of recruitment, against declining pay standards and limited promotion prospects. To support this attraction, the British forces increased funding for sports through non-public service funds, rather than forcing payment through games subscriptions or gate money. As Mason and Riedi conclude, service sport was an important element of the inter-war years as it became better organized and funded, but by the 1930s, the new German threats led to criticism of service sport as a preoccupation and diversion rather than a necessary and valuable training tool. The problem was that as British forces reduced in peacetime, British service sport became less relevant to national sporting life. This distancing was not critical for amateur sports like equestrianism, but it did have serious consequences for games that developed with a strong civilian emphasis on professionalism, like football. As the authors conclude, it would take another war, the Second World War, to bring service sport back into the mainstream of British sport and public life.

Mason and Riedi address the development of modern organized sport in Britain and the importance of civilian-military interaction in the late 19th and 20th centuries in their fifth chapter. Military attitudes toward civilian sport were initially hostile, but sporting activities could improve these working relations, as seen in the example of association football and the figure of Reginald John Kentish. Playing with civilian athletes helped raise military sporting standards, and the military sports control boards' affiliation with their associated civilian governing bodies encouraged the development and organization of service sport. As the authors demonstrate, the importance of improving civilian-military interaction during the years before the Second World War was crucial in resolving tensions inherent in the debate over professionalism in the services while also strengthening the role of sport in the military.

In their sixth chapter, Mason and Riedi examine the role of sport during the Second World War and how it compared and contrasted with the role of sport during the First World War. As a result of its role in the conflict between 1914–18, sport had been accepted as an important part of military routine for both training and leisure purposes. As the authors argue, however, the military's faith in sport as a means to increase morale was encouraged despite the possible detriment to overall military efficiency. The role of sport as a diversion and entertainment was emphasized on both the war and home fronts, especially in terms of spectator matches. British footballers were even sent on tours throughout the Empire to boost morale. But such an overwhelming focus on spectator sport resulted in preferential treatment for some athletes who were removed from action and safely placed in the army's Physical Training Corps. While there was a definite focus on spectator sport during the Second World War, the military's commitment to participatory sport for all servicemen did not entirely disappear, and equipment and facilities were provided as much as possible. Sport was also important to British service men in POW camps; as in the case of Stalag 383, sport was a means for men to fill their time and confirm their identities. How much time was spent on sport varied according to units and locations, but by the summer of 1945, the military began to reemphasize a broader participation in service sport instead of focusing on spectator matches. As with the First World War, sport

was important to smoothing the slow demobilization process and helping to solidify working relations with other countries after the war, as seen in the Inter-Allied Athletics Championship held in Berlin in 1946.

As the final chapter shows, sport had been firmly incorporated into the British military well before the end of the Second World War, but the institution of conscription following the National Service Act of 1947 initiated important changes and challenges. As civilian males between the ages of 18 and 26 were eventually required to serve two years in the armed forces, sport marked an important way to make the experience bearable and positive. As seen during the Second World War, promising sportsmen did receive preferential treatment as they rotated through their service. However, the increase of professionalism in civilian sports meant that not all sportsmen were enthusiastic about participating in National Service sport, since they could make more money playing outside of the service rather than in it. Nevertheless, conscription did lead to important changes in service sport during these years. It improved teamwork and unit cohesion, helped to improve sporting standards in all branches, and strengthened civilian-military ties. While national service helped raise the visibility and importance of service sport to the outside world, there was the question of how to give professional and regular servicemen the same sporting chances. Again the tensions of professional versus amateur ideology surfaced, increased by the fact that there was a wider gap in abilities between professional athletes (often from civilian backgrounds) and ordinary players. The result was that military sport remained a voluntary activity during the national service era, but the practice of such activities paradoxically led to the increased development of professionalism in terms of the military's better facilities and special treatment of promising athletes. Another way in which the national service era helped to redefine service sport was through the inclusion of women following their retention in the military after the Second World War. As Mason and Riedi argue, women's continued work in the military helped provide a context through which their participation in sport was made acceptable. Some criticized such participation for its defeminizing aspects, but the military was quick to stress its benefits for women while limiting their participation to suitable sports. Were the years between 1945 and 1960 the summit for service sport? In terms of providing better facilities, encouraging more opportunities for both men and women, and creating a strong working relationship between the civilian and military sporting worlds, the authors answer in the affirmative. But they also acknowledge that star athletes of this time did not represent sporting levels for the military as a whole, and since turnover was high due to the two-year terms, sporting standards varied during the national service years.

The main goal of the book is to emphasize the ways that sport contributed to the British military from 1880 to 1960, and this the authors do admirably, stressing four major themes. First, they admit that the role of sport as a preparation for war is open to interpretation, but they argue that the importance of sport for the military was less about instilling aggression than about building physical fitness, morale, and unit cohesion. Total war was not a 'sporting' practice, and as the Victorian sportsmen who compared it to a greater game were replaced by those who had experienced the battles of the Great War, the analogy of sport as war (and war as sport) was replaced by admission of sport's tangible benefits for the military, both during war and in peacetime. Second, Mason and Riedi confirm that sports contributed to increasing morale and strengthening esprit de corps in important ways. All three branches of the British military recognized these benefits, illustrated by the formation of sport control boards following the First World War. Third, the authors question whether sport had any tangible benefits for military recruitment and acknowledge that the answer is unclear. While sport may have made joining the military attractive, it is true that there were other perks, though the availability of facilities, equipment, and time to play were certainly appealing. Finally, Mason and Riedi conclude that sport did increase and improve civilian-military interaction. Sport was a bridge between both worlds and the prestige of good sportsmen created a positive public image for the military. There were certainly conflicts about the role of sport in the military, including the level of focus on sport as opposed to military priorities and the tension between professional and amateur ethics, but it was an important part of military life between 1880 and 1960.

Although this book is a fine examination of sport in British service, there are a few minor criticisms. For example, the second chapter examines pre-war officer sport but focuses only on equestrian activities. While these were certainly important, examining other sports played by officers would broaden the themes and

arguments raised in this chapter and continued throughout the book. Also, the context for the development and formation of the Royal Air Force would smooth its sudden entrance into the fourth chapter. And while the end date of 1960 is explained by the end of national service, the somewhat abrupt ending of the conclusion could have been strengthened by a few lines about the role of sports in the military post-1960. In addition, while the role and popularity of cricket is highlighted in other works, discussion of the game is interestingly muted here.<sup>(4)</sup> However, these criticisms are small and should in no way detract from Mason and Riedi's very fine work.

Overall, this book is a strong contribution to the literature on sports and military history. Mason and Riedi's book is a beautiful examination of how sport became so integral to the British military between the late Victorian and the post-Second World War eras. Well-written and well-organized, with lively and engaging prose, this book will be appreciated not only by historians of sport and the military, but also by anyone interested in Britain's social and cultural life throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

## Notes

1. R.S. Surtees, *Handley Cross; or, Mr. Jorrocks's Hunt* (London, 1854), p. 130.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See D. L. Lemahieu, 'The history of British and American sport. A review article', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 4 (1990), 838–4.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. D. Campbell, 'The Army isn't all work: physical culture in the evolution of the British Army, 1860-1920', (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Maine, 2003). See also his article, "'Training for sport is training for war": sport and the transformation of the British Army, 1860–1914', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 17 (December 2000), 21–58.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For example, see Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The authors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

This book is also now available in paperback at a rather more affordable £19.99.

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