

Moving the Goalposts: a History of Sport and Society since 1945

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Author:

Martin Polley

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Jack Williams

Popular interest in sport at present is immense. BSkyB television has three channels devoted exclusively to sport and televised sport has been a crucial element of Rupert Murdoch's attempts to expand his satellite television network in the United Kingdom. The broadsheet newspapers have at least one sport supplement each week. At the end of May Glenn Hoddle's decision to omit Paul Gascoigne from the England World Cup squad was the leading news story on television and in the press and was given precedence over such news items as the detonation of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan. Changes in the social setting of sport mean that there is no way of establishing whether interest in sport is now greater than at other times, but ever since the end of the Second World very many have been prepared to pay to watch or play sport or to read about it. By 1990 sport and sport-related expenditure was estimated to be £9.75 billion whilst the sport sector employed more than 460,000. The preoccupation with sport among such a high proportion of the British population means that assessments of cultural life in Britain since the Second World War cannot hope to be comprehensive unless they pay sufficient regard to sport and its social significance. If one wishes to understand a society it is essential to understand what interested those who lived in that society.

Sports history as a form of academic enquiry as opposed to the accounts of momentous matches and descriptions of famous players which for so long was called sports history is of relatively recent growth. The publication of Tony Mason's *Association Football and English Society 1863-1915* in 1980 and of J.A. Mangan's *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* a year later can be seen as key points in persuading historians that more attention needed to be focused upon what could be inferred from sport about wider society. A steady stream of books and articles upon the history of sport has followed. Two specialist academic journals - *The International Journal of Sports History*, originally called *The British Journal of Sports History*, and *The Sports Historian* - are now published in Britain. This growth of concern with sports history has reflected, and been accompanied by, a burgeoning interest in sport among sociologists. The appearance in 1979 of *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* by E. Dunning and K. Sheard registered this increasing concern with sport among sociologists. It seems unlikely that any historian would now try to write a social history of post-war Britain

without considering sport.

Moving the Goalposts: A History of Sport and Society since 1945 by Martin Polley is an expression of this growth of interest in the history of sport among historians and sociologists. Polley admits that this is a work of synthesis and that it reflects those issues which have so far interested historians of sport. He attempts to assess the relationship between sport and society and to show that sport not only reflects and expresses wider social, cultural and economic forces but by interacting with them, helps to fashion them. Perhaps the title ought to have mentioned that this is a study of Britain, though there are comments upon empirical and theoretical data from North America but surprisingly fewer references to work published in Australia and New Zealand which have been such power houses in the study of sport history.

The book is arranged thematically. The introduction provides a succinct and cogent justification for the study of sport history, reminding us that unless we have academically rigorous studies of sport, 'ahistorical and mythologised invocations of the past will continue to inform our everyday awareness of sport' (page 4). This introduction also emphasises that the study of sport history has been uneven and that some crucial issues, such as the history of the relationship between radio and sport, have been largely neglected. The appendix at the end of the book is a short yet admirably clear survey of the rise of academic sports history in Britain and of other forms of historical writing upon sport including autobiographical accounts of what sport has meant to fans, a genre stimulated by Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*, but it may have been more appropriate to have included this appendix with the rationale for sport history provided in the introduction. The following six chapters all open with a review of theoretical approaches to particular aspect of sport and its social setting. These reviews are clearly expressed, sometimes more clearly expressed than the original work they summarise, and they are related to the discussions of empirical data which make up the remainder of each chapter.

Chapter One concentrates upon sport, politics and the state. It shows that even though the erroneous nature of claims that sport can be kept separate from politics is easy to demonstrate, the view persists that sport becomes sullied through contact with politics. Polley uses the models of state involvement with sport formulated by Lincoln Allison and John Hargreaves as the structure for his assessment of historical writings concerned with the attempts of British governments to exploit sport and with the forms of political conformity and political division provoked by sport. His analysis of the Sports Council and of the activities of Ministers for Sport emphasises that the strength of the voluntary tradition within British sport has meant that in sport the state has tended to act as a facilitator rather than a controller. The level of government interference with the Sports Council, he suggests, has been similar to that with the BBC. Polley rightly stresses the role of local authorities in the provision of sports facilities, but the changes in the level of support at public sector schools for sport is an aspect of state involvement with sport which is rather pushed to one side in this chapter. The political debates surrounding sporting relations with South Africa and the use of sport as an arm of diplomacy form a major section of this chapter.

The political dimensions of sport are recurring themes of the second chapter which concentrates upon 'Sport, the nation and the world.' Polley shows how differing sports have acted in different ways as expressions of English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh identities and considers how far sports have interacted with the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism as political forces in post-war Britain which involves discussion of whether national teams have discouraged a sense of British identity. Much of this chapter concentrates upon the expansion of international sporting competition since the 1950s and shows how this led to an abandonment of the lofty isolationism which had characterised much of British sport in the 1940s. The desire for success in international competition has led to greater awareness of the shortcomings of sport structures in Britain and to the growing numbers of coaches and players from overseas taking part in British sport. The international dimensions of sport are discussed in relation to the concept of globalisation and the differing meanings which this term can have when applied to sport. Polley appraises how far the extension of international sports competitions have brought about greater homogenisation of sports in different countries and the greater movement of players and spectators across international boundaries but at the same time have strengthened national identities and animosities. This is the clearest and most perceptive examination of globalisation and British sport which this reviewer has encountered.

The economic significance of sport is discussed in chapter three which looks at the growth of commercialisation within sport. Polley traces the expansion of the commercial sponsorship of sport and its connections with advertising through the televising of sport. He explains how the decline in the numbers of paying spectators for many sports led to the search for alternative sources of income and that the acceptance of a more overtly commercialised and profitmaximising outlook on the part of sport administrators and players can be related to the avid pursuit of wealth associated with the rise of Thatcherite values in so much of society. Polley provides examples of how sports have changed their rules and consequently styles of play in the hope of attracting larger television audiences and higher levels of sponsorship. Little is included about the escalating earnings of leading professional sportsplayers, a trend which has alarmed many followers of sport, though there are comments, but not much more than passing comments, upon this in other chapters. Polley's analysis of the contribution of sport to the national product in the 1980s and 1990s emphasises the crying need for a survey of what sport has contributed to the economy in the twentieth century. Statistics in this chapter illustrate the main points and never become overbearing.

In the first section of his study of sport and gender Polley examines the main strands in the already vast literature which have considered how the physicality of sport has meant that it has had a crucial role in debates about the use of the body and consequently in the construction of gender identities. Polley shows how so much of sport is taken to be men's sport and that sport has prioritised some expressions of masculinity whilst marginalising others. Sports organised openly for gays, for instance, has been very much a development of recent years. He charts how the numbers of women playing and watching sports since 1945 have grown, how women have taken up sports previously played exclusively by men and how in the 1980s and more particularly the 1990s single governing bodies have assumed responsibility for the female and male variants of their sports. Polley demonstrates that sport remains a site of gender politics.

Chapter Five considers sport, social class and professional status. Polley explains how the different social settings of different sports have meant that different social groups have used them to emphasise their status and social exclusiveness whereas other sports replicate the social order by allocating differing roles to those with different backgrounds. The elitism of sport such as golf and polo have attracted those wishing to climb the social ladder. The weakening of some social barriers in sports, such as cricket scrapping the distinction between amateurs and professionals, and the rise of trade unions or professional associations for paid sportsplayers are assessed as evidence for the spread of professional cultures. Polley casts doubts upon how far the increased earnings of professional footballers have resulted in their embourgeoisement and consequently questions the validity of income as a signifier of class. This chapter says disappointing little about how far and in what respects sports have been a focus for class conflicts, but it does mention the claims that football hooliganism is an expression of working-class alienation and the anarchist resentment against fox hunters, though the anti-hunting lobby seems to be one which crosses class boundaries. There is only passing comment upon how sports can act as a register of class relations and whilst the opening

sections of this chapter note the rise of other identities such as those based upon ethnicity or gender, the issue of whether the social relations of sport indicate that class is dead in contemporary Britain is side-stepped.

The chapter concerned with ethnicity in sport shows how sports have perpetuated assumptions surrounding ethnicity and have been a vehicle for racism in society in general. Polley demonstrates that the high level of success among black sportsplayers in a small number of sports is not proof of the widely-held conviction that blacks have different physical and mental capabilities from whites but that it can be related to economic deprivation, a lack of opportunities in other sports and the beliefs among teachers and coaches that blacks are naturally suited to some sports. Although successful black sportspeople receive much praise, they are often the targets of much racial abuse. Polley shows that on the field of play and within sport administration, non-whites have been underrepresented in positions of authority, though the scale of this has diminished in recent years. Perhaps more could have been said about the level of black involvement with the running of the Professional Footballers' Association, a form of sports administration with a strong black presence. Movements such as Stop the Seventy Tour and the Kick Racism Out campaigns are discussed to show how sport has been involved in attempts to combat racism. Polley very rightly points out that most of the literature concerned with racism and sport in Britain has focused upon those of African-Caribbean descent. Little has been published about South Asian involvement with sport and the comparative absence within sport of South Asian women. One feature of recreational cricket in the North of England during the 1980s and more particularly the 1990s has been the growth in the numbers of Asian cricket clubs.

At several points in this book Polley considers the impact of television upon sport and to a lesser extent the representations of sport by the newspaper press. They have had a crucial part in stimulating interest in sport and in shaping the meanings attached to sport. It can be contended that sport stars and the qualities which they are taken to celebrate have been very largely a construction of the media. Newspapers are a major source for most academic histories of sport. As the media are so vital for an understanding of sport in modern Britain, Polley ought to have included a chapter devoted to the relationship between them and sport. It has already been mentioned that radio sports journalism has been largely neglected by media historians, and many areas of the press and sport are under-researched but sufficient has been written for an assessment of the interactions between sport and television.

With the exception of sport and the media, *Moving the Goalposts* succeeds admirably in assessing the interrelationship between sport and society in Britain since 1945. The strengths and limitations of the literature are evaluated judiciously and presented with clarity. The bibliography is comprehensive and runs to seventeen pages. Only one factual slip was noticed - Len Hutton became England's cricket captain in 1952 not 1953. Those who teach undergraduate modules upon the social and cultural history of sport will welcome this work and have no hesitation in recommending it as the starting point for studying the post-war period but it will also become an essential text for the study of post-war popular culture in Britain

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