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# Amateurism in British Sport: It Matters Not Who Won or Lost?

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There are very few books about amateurism. But it is also true that most books about sport in the century before 1960 are about amateurism because it was the idea dominant in the politics and administration of sport. One can no more ignore amateurism in the development of modern sport than one could ignore religion in medieval politics. That the idea itself should be so little studied is partly because (to repeat a familiar complaint) sport itself had so little academic attention for so long and partly because it was so central to the idea of sport that it was taken for granted and not distinguished from the idea of sport itself. But it was also because, as Richard Holt - one of the contributors to this volume - has put it, it has usually been treated as if it were 'really' something else, usually an expression of elitism or some other form of class prejudice. Yet I would argue that amateurism is a complex and important idea quite apart from the social contexts in which it existed and the social purposes it served. So it is good to see an edited collection of serious studies of the interpretation of amateurism written by established social historians. It is necessarily an edited volume: no single historian could have come close to covering this ground. Five of the ten essays (not counting the introduction) are about particular sports: these are by Wray Vamplew and Joyce Kay on racing, Tony Collins on rugby, Dilwyn Porter on football, Jack Williams on cricket and Stephen Wagg on

rowing. The remaining five are on aspects of the amateur idea: Richard Holt writes on the urban middle-class cult of health and fitness, Martin Polley on the diplomatic use of British amateur values, James Riordan on leftist interpretations of amateurism, John Bale on amateurism as exemplified and interpreted in the career of Sir Roger Bannister and Jeffrey Hill on the fictional character Alf Tupper.

On the whole there is relatively little evidence here to support Sir Keith Thomas's allegation that most contemporary historians are the slaves of defunct social theorists. The major exception is John Bale's account of Bannister's career which uses Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'capital' to demonstrate what Bannister gained from being an athlete. Frankly, this seems like an attempt to create a theoretical mountain out of a conceptual molehill. Is anybody denying that generations of (mainly) boys made substantial personal gains from their prowess at sport?: they were better treated at school, more likely to be accepted by the varsity and more likely, too, to get a start in the City. To dress all this up as the acquisition of 'capital' seems unnecessary and confusing. Status is not capital just as prestige is not power: we need more concepts rather than fewer. In any case, since 'cultural capital' and 'social capital' must exist in every form of society, 'capital' becomes an extremely blurred concept and 'capitalism' ubiquitous.

In contrast to this account of the gains made by a middle-class athlete from amateur sport there are two very interesting essays on working-class amateurism. One is James Riordan's 'Amateurism, Sport and the Left: Amateurism for All Versus Amateur Elitism' which covers a range of working-class and socialist sports organisations. The other is Jeffrey Hill's '"I'll Run Him": Alf Tupper, Social Class and British Amateurism'. Tupper, the 'Tough of the Track', appeared in various comics aimed at a predominantly working-class market between 1949 and 1991. He often had to weld all night before taking on the 'toffs' from the local college who were in full-time training and on specialist diets (Alf ate only fish and chips). A caricature, of course, but the point is well taken that, for all the insistence by public school amateurs that the only true amateur is a 'gentleman', it is also true, in a clear and important sense, that working-class amateurism was a purer form than that of those for whom sport was an enhancer of *curricula vitae*.

For a concept so central to the organisation of sport for so long, amateurism was subject to a wide variety of definitions and interpretations. In cricket, for example, all players in the 'first class' game were known as professionals or amateurs, but there was no definition of the distinction. W. G. Grace, with his massive expenses, and C. B. Fry with his coaching columns in *The Captain* et al., would have wholly failed the very precise tests of 'no material gain' set up by the Rugby Union (and, later, the International Olympic Committee or the National Colleges Athletic Administration in the USA). It was not just definition, but practice, which differed. Though distinguished from each other in a number of ritualistic ways, amateurs and professionals played with each other on the cricket field, as did the very limited number of amateurs who were capable of doing so (including C. B. Fry) in Association Football, and there are a plethora of quotations from the amateurs in both games about what splendid chaps the professionals are (albeit a little bit *too* loyal to each other). In National Hunt racing before 1914, according to Vamplew and Kay, professionals and amateurs competed on equal terms with more or less equal success, though this was never true of flat racing and ceased to be true in any form of racing after 1918. The equestrian traditions of the squirearchy and the military were factors in this and it is also important that hurdles and steeplechases require a good deal of courage as well as technique, whereas the weight requirements are much less stringent than in 'flat' racing.

By contrast, the Rugby Union notoriously outlawed anybody who had ever played any sport for money while the Amateur Rowing Association insisted on 'gentlemanly' status, a necessary condition of which was that a competitor must never have worked manually. This led to the banning of the American J. H. B. Kelly (the father of Grace Kelly the actress and princess) and the Australian Henry Pearce, both of whom were Olympic champions, from the Royal Regatta at Henley. In Pearce's case police work was declared to be manual! The five sports divided along the same lines on the question of changing status. Nobody worried about a cricketer, footballer or rider who had competed professionally choosing to compete as an amateur at a later date, but this was absolutely forbidden in rugby and rowing. It is worth noting that the one sport in which the amateurs were largely on the losing side of the contest with professionalism, Association Football, is the one which, in the post-amateur 21st century, still retains its distinction, albeit in a tiny, ring-fenced, enclave. I refer to the continuing existence of such institutions as the Amateur Football Alliance, the Arthur

Dunn Cup and the Arthurian League.

With all academic collections it is possible to conceive of a more perfectly complete set of essays, an intellectual 'dream team'. This book would be better if it had chapters on racket games and boxing, for instance, and a general account of the working of track and field athletics. But this is the counsel of perfection: I know from bitter experience that you are doing well if you can find scholars to cover 70 per cent of what you want in an edited book, and even then, you are pleased if all of them produce as promised. This is a reasonably comprehensive book and an important text for anyone with a serious interest in the history of British sport. It is also very well written, certainly for a reader who has to read a good deal of sociology and political science. Actually, I think there would be a market among intellectually curious sports fans for it if the presentation and distribution of academic books were done differently. And there ought to be a market among sports journalists, many of whom often demonstrate a sad ignorance of the historical background of the events they are covering.

I have two quibbles, though, and they may be connected. The first concerns the subtitle. 'It matters not who won or lost' is, so far as I know, a common misquotation of:

> For when that One Great Scorer comes to mark against your name,
> He writes - not that you won or lost - but how you played the game.

The quotation is from a poem called 'Alumnus Football' by Grantland Rice, an American writer, and is thus a dubious phrase to use to define British amateurism. The couplet was quoted by Jonathan Miller in *Beyond the Fringe* and attributed to the English poet W. E. Henley. I don't think this is mere pedantry: American defences of amateurism were always edgier and more extreme than those in England - as witnessed by the tenure as President of the International Olympic Association of Avery Brundage between 1952 and 1972. And British amateurs were never taught that, once you were on the field or the water, that it did not matter whether you won or not because victory (in the right spirit and using legitimate methods) was a demonstration of character.

The larger quibble is with certain assumptions that historians make about ideas and their context - essentially, that the former must always be understood in terms of the latter. Thus it is entirely natural to understand amateurism in terms of social class and I would not wish to deny that this is a necessary and important dimension of any understanding of amateurism as a phenomenon. But there is another dimension, which is that amateurism appealed to people precisely because it did not arise from and was not a fit to the society around it. Pierre de Coubertin was so excited by his discovery of Rugby School because what he thought he saw there was a revival of ancient aristocratic values and in a surprising place, the most 'modern' and commercial and technologically advanced society in Europe. Millions of players since have loved their rugby club or cricket club or golf club because it was in an important way a cultural oasis, ring-fenced from the 'normal' world of the market and the state. Amateurism was as much about values and institutions which aspired to be above or outside their social context as it was about social reality. I am not convinced that historians ever fully appreciate that sort of factor.

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