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Sport and American Society: Exceptionalism, Insularity and 'Imperialism'

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At this year's Wimbledon Tennis Championships, Zheng Jie became the first Chinese player to reach the semi-finals of a grand slam tournament. Five minutes after stepping off the court, she was asked yet again to pronounce her name for a global television audience - 'because we've heard it so many different ways this week', quipped the reporter. Meanwhile in Asia, ESPN Star Sports (ESS) employed Mandarin-speaking commentators to overdub the English language feed for its Chinese audience, many of whom stayed up late into the night following Zheng's memorable run. The ESS announcers were amused by the question, and the following day the network also showed Asian fans an English segment in which spectators outside Centre Court took turns trying (unsuccessfully) to pronounce Zheng's name for the camera.

Modern sport is a Tower of Babel, and Wimbledon 2008 was no different. Globalisation continues to transform the ways in which nations and communities use athletics to weave very different, often conflicting narratives. Zheng's accomplishment was a source of nationalism for many Chinese, and other fans around the world probably applauded her as a symbol of tennis's growing diversity. Yet there were those who used

the event to draw racial/ethnic distinctions, often by perceiving different 'styles' employed by players from various countries (as some commentators did when the 'speedy' Zheng eventually lost to the 'more power-oriented' African-American star, Serena Williams).

In *Sport and American Society: Exceptionalism, Insularity and 'Imperialism'*, editors Mark Dyreson and J. A. Mangan have assembled a strong selection of articles that explore how 'American sport contributes to historic and contemporary insularity, exceptionalism and imperialism' (xiii). Not surprisingly, many of the essays confirm that Americans since the late 19th century have had hesitant, paradoxical sentiments about sport and globalisation - the most common example explicated by scholars is the overall failure of professional soccer in the US. And, as Dyreson writes in the prologue, the articles also indicate why American sport will most likely 'continue to promote the nation rather than the global community' (xvii).

Drawn from contributors to anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, and kinesiology, the volume was first published as a special issue of *The International Journal of the History of Sport* and is thoroughly interdisciplinary. It also covers an impressive range - from Linda J. Borish's look at physical activity and rural reform in ante-bellum New England, to Susan Brownell's engaging comparison of female athletes in contemporary China and America. In 'Benevolent America: Rural Women, Physical Recreation, Sport and Health Reform in Ante-Bellum New England', Borish reveals how rural reformers simultaneously challenged and (more often) reinforced traditional femininity by encouraging New England's farm women to engage in non-competitive activities like walking, horseback riding, swimming, ice-skating, boating, fishing, and gardening. Even the more 'progressive' reforms (which sometimes increased the likelihood of mixed-sex gatherings, or required women to wear more revealing clothing) were nevertheless championed by 'farm journalists' as a reaction to the 'wealthy trappings of the city that lured farm youth and jeopardized their moral and physical health' (p. 5).

Another contributor also speaks to sport and 'exceptionalist' reform in the US. In 'Reformist America: "the Oberlin experiment" - the limits of Jack Scott's "athletic revolution" in post-1960s America', Tim Elcombe illuminates Scott's fascinating biography, especially his ill-fated tenure as athletic director at Oberlin College. According to Elcombe, the athletic department's subsequent implosion perfectly exemplified the 'splintering of the American Left' in the late 1960s and early 1970s (p. 116). Oberlin considered itself among the most progressive schools in the country, and led by 34-year-old President Robert Works Fuller, most administrators wanted to completely reformulate 'the meaning of liberal education' (p. 117). Nevertheless, at 28-years-old (even younger than Fuller) the brash, revolutionary Scott clashed with his associates immediately after his hiring in 1972. Among other things, he railed against 'racist, insensitive' coaches, tripled funds for female athletics, hired controversial faculty (like former 1968 Olympian Tommie Smith), and provided students voting power over new coaching hires (p.124). For Elcombe, Scott represented a burgeoning New Left that sought to work outside the system, putting him at odds with the school's 'reform-minded liberal old guard' even though both shared the fundamental desire to drastically overhaul collegiate athletics (p. 116). Not surprisingly, while rural New England farm women continued to ramble, ride and skate, this story of reform ends quite differently - Oberlin fired Scott within 16 months.

Two other authors provide insight into America's shifting relationship with the Olympic Games. Susan Brownell offers one of the more fascinating (if not timely) essays in the collection. In 'Challenged America: China and America - women and sport, past, present and future', she argues that 'China's 100-year pursuit of hosting an Olympics is due to the fact that its national self-image was dictated to it by the West ...'. While the US was able to control the 'making of its own identity', hosting the Beijing games 'involves a great deal of accommodation to Western standards and expectations', with limited opportunities for the Chinese to actually 'disseminate local culture' (p. 229). Brownell reveals how the complex history of modern athletics in China helps us understand sport's unique place in American society - particularly how the US continues to propagate the 'peculiarly Western logic' that 'sporting prowess symbolizes national power' (xiv).

Dyreson himself provides an interesting examination of an earlier Olympic controversy. In 'Aggressive America: media nationalism and the "war" over Olympic pictures in sport's "golden age"', he writes of a time when the US ironically sought to ban the merchandising of Olympic visual material - particularly motion

pictures. At the 1924 Paris Olympics, and again at the 1928 Amsterdam Games, American firms 'vigorously protested' and 'threatened boycotts' over having to bid for what they considered 'public properties' (p. 31). According to Dyreson, these fundamental debates over media ownership 'began a process that eventually made radical changes in the nature of the modern games' (p. 40). A cursory glance at today's numbers certainly affirms that - NBC profited \$75 million from telecasts of the 2002 Salt Lake Games, and bid \$2.2 billion for the rights to the 2010 and 2012 Olympics before even knowing (caring?) where the games would take place. Adding significant insight to the recently published *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism*, Dyreson's excellent study reveals how debates over media rights during the 1920s - conflicts America lost - actually hatched 'the goose that laid the golden egg of Olympic riches'. [\(1\)](#)

Other contributors offer insights that expand the notion of 'insularity' in American sport. In 'Insular America: the NBA began in Akron? The Midwest Conference in the 1930s', Murry R. Nelson argues that fans in the heartland popularised basketball because it reinforced the notion that opportunity made America 'more exceptional, more equitable' (p. 48). Even during the height of the Great Depression, working-class spectators in Indianapolis, Dayton, Fort Wayne, Akron, Detroit, and Chicago embraced the Midwest Conference, spending scarce discretionary income to watch predominately local players - including Indiana's own John Wooden, future coach at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). According to Nelson, the Depression's 'peculiar circumstances' forced conference organisers to design a league model that 'laid the foundation for later prosperity by relying on community-oriented appeal to sell the game of professional basketball' (p. 62). This also meant changing fundamental basketball rules in order to offer a more engaging show - creating the modern, fast-paced game that the National Basketball Association (NBA) would popularise after the Second World War.

Likewise, in 'Community America: who owns Wrigley Field?' anthropologist Holly Swyers notes that midwestern baseball fans forge unique social connections and community ties at Chicago's Wrigley Field - particularly in the famous outfield 'bleachers', where spectators have exerted communal ownership over general admission (non-reserved) seating since 1937. This includes the establishment of social hierarchies based on knowledge of the stadium's physical history and communal memory (do you know where the bathrooms *used* to be?), and even efforts to keep 'non-regulars' out of certain seats. Swyers convincingly proves that Wrigley's bleachers offer a unique social map that scholars can use to understand the sometimes contentious relationships between Chicago's diverse communities.

The collection also turns some attention to race in American sport - although it could have used more, particularly coverage of African-American athletes. The collection does include two linked essays that explore the narrative of Jackie Robinson and the desegregation of Major League Baseball. (MLB) In 'Integrating America: Jackie Robinson, critical events and baseball black and white', Jack Kelly argues that Robinson 'was called to the role of the lonely man, but as a martyr not for God but for an integrating nation' (p. 95). Along with scholars like Henry Yu, Kelly follows the work of Jules Tygiel's definitive Robinson biography in exploring the episode as a 'critical event' - that is, a religious or sociological 'experiment' that provided Americans a simplified narrative of racial integration, complete with a formulaic black-white binary, a clearly-defined 'color line', and a memorable, instantaneous moment of transformation. (2) As Kelly points out, this is certainly why millions of Americans and MLB are so invested in celebrating Robinson today. Yet his most interesting analysis comes in 'Exclusionary America: Jackie Robinson, Decolonization and Baseball not Black and White', where he presses beyond Tygiel and Yu by placing this unique story of American integration within baseball's global context. According to Kelly, the 'Jackie Robinsonization' of baseball history forced an unsuccessful search for the 'Japanese' and 'Latin American' Robinson. More importantly, by considering why Robinson's story cannot be extended to a 'new, global level of integration', Kelly shows how a celebrated, insular narrative of American desegregation helped eliminate the possibility for an alternative, more equitable history of world baseball. This would presumably be one in which MLB did not hinder or destroy foreign organisations by pilfering select Asian and Latin American players, much like it did the Negro Leagues before. (Perhaps, then, the problem is not too much emphasis on the Robinson story, but rather not telling it in its entirety.)

Also writing on baseball's internationalisation, Benjamin Eastman provides a wonderful essay on Adolfo Luque, perhaps the most interesting Cuban ever to play in the Major Leagues. In 'Rejected America: Adolfo Luque, American interventionism and *Cubanidad*', Eastman focuses on Luque's heroic return to the politically-fractured island in 1923, where promotional appearances (including re-enactments of his notorious attack on New York Giant Casey Stengel during a game) became battlefields for political conservatives and reformers. According to Eastman, because Luque embodied the emergent tenets of *Cubanidad* - including a 'notion of racial, cultural and religious mixing recognizable ... as obviously Cuban' and a 'brashness and confidence particularly important in Cuban understandings of machismo' - celebrations upon his return reflected Cuba's larger political crisis (p. 204). Here - perhaps better than any other contributor - Eastman provides this larger context, devoting considerable space to a well-written snapshot of US-Cuban relations coinciding with Luque's memorable 1923 season.

With such clear, well-organised essays from an accomplished set of scholars, there are few points of contention. Perhaps the largest one is the intriguing argument in Sean Frederick Brown's 'Exceptionalist America: American sports fans' reaction to internationalization'. According to Dyreson's prologue, Brown 'suggests that American spectators are perhaps more interested in watching American players than they are in patronising sports with venerable American lineages such as baseball and basketball that have recently been globalised by an influx of foreign players' (xiii). This is accomplished by comparing television ratings with the number of foreign-born players in Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association since 1970. Clearly, television viewership has declined while the number of foreign players has increased. Of course, the definition of 'foreign' is quite slippery. Do we include players born abroad but raised in the US? There are also 'pseudo-foreigners,' like Canadian Steve Nash - born in South Africa, the star point guard is among the league's most popular players.

Meanwhile, two professional sports that have maintained a consistently high percentage of 'American players' - the National Football League (NFL) and North American Stock Car Racing (NASCAR) - continue to draw more viewers. Brown is careful to insist that his study is not a 'causal model', and that the numbers are only meant to challenge the notion of 'path-dependence' and American sport exceptionalism introduced by Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman in *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism* (Princeton University Press, 2001). Nevertheless, the analysis of the data - which is certainly useful stuff, effectively organised and presented by the author - seems to be making this argument precisely, and is echoed again in Mangan's conclusion when he writes that, 'there is every chance ... in the future [American

Sport] will turn its face against sports once but no longer seen as unquestioningly "American" (p. 249).

On the other hand, one could argue that the arrival of foreign players has actually kept the popularity of basketball and baseball from plummeting *even faster*. For some MLB and NBA teams, foreign players are now the face of the franchise - the Seattle Mariner's Ichiro Suzuki (Japan), the Dallas Maverick's Dirk Nowitzki (Germany), and the Houston Rockets's Yao Ming (China) are just three examples. Moreover, foreign players have proven their marketability, often garnering more endorsements than their native-born team-mates - particularly deals that reach beyond the fast food, shoes, or energy drinks many African-American players seem limited to hawking. Ming, for example, has already appeared in television commercials for Visa credit cards and Apple computers, and he even participated in the National Milk Processor Board's 'Got Milk?' advertising campaign. It is hard to imagine what could be more 'All-American' than helping dairy farmers encourage the heartland to renew its exceptional infatuation with cow's milk. Meanwhile, Ming's fellow NBA superstar, LeBron James, was recently embroiled in controversy over accusations that a magazine cover with a white, female model played into decades-old stereotypes linking black male sexuality to primitivism. Clearly, foreign athletes have been largely immune to the kinds of criticism some fans continue to level against African-American players, which are deeply influenced by America's history of racial tension. These range from critiques of 'selfish play' and the red-hot debate over the use of performance-enhancing drugs (which so far has had minimal impact on foreign players), to the condemnations of sexual indiscretion targeted at black athletes since Jack Johnson. In essence, only through a deeper analysis of fan reaction and popular discourse can the case be made that the influx of foreign players is limiting the popularity of some previously 'American' sports like basketball and baseball - not a quantitative comparison of foreign players and Nielsen ratings, and certainly not a case that does not account for the historical treatment and perception of African-Americans in those particular sports.

In fact, most of the articles in *Sport and American Society* offer the important reminder that processes of insularity, imperialism, and exceptionalism transcend the notion that US citizens have historically embraced specific, 'American' sports. Even if only one game existed, played throughout the world - yes, if the US would just embrace soccer already - there are still a myriad of factors that shape concepts like 'exceptionalism' - including differences in media coverage, the cultural meanings of spectatorship, and the perception of various ethnic-nationalist aesthetics or styles. Just as Zheng Jie must pronounce her name again and again for English audiences, the world will continue to listen, observe, and react to a single athletic competition in 'so many different ways' - including the upcoming Beijing Olympics. Along these lines, *Sport and American Society* is a fine collection that helps us better understand some of the particular ways in which Americans have responded.

Notes

1. R. Barney, S. Wenn and S. Martyn, *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism* (Salt Lake City, UT: 2002) p. 31. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (Oxford: 1997); H. Yu, 'Tiger Woods at the centre of history: looking back at the 20th century through the lenses of race, sports, and mass consumption,' in *Sports Matters: Race, Recreation, and Culture*, ed. J. Bloom and M. Willard (New York: 2002), 320-55. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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