

International Centre for Sports History and Culture, De Montfort University

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Was *Sport and the British* a foundational text? The view of the next generation

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Working to a given title for this paper has made me feel like a student again. This is appropriate in some ways, as it reminds me of when I first became aware of Holt's *Sport and the British*. It was in the Student Union bar at Lampeter. I was in the early stages of my PhD, working quite widely on sport in the first half of the 20th century and gradually narrowing it down to diplomacy, when a friend who had graduated the year before me came back to visit. He was working for Oxford University Press, and he told me that a new book on the history of sport in Britain was coming out soon. This gave me the inevitable postgraduate student nightmares about my research being irrelevant and out of date before I even finished it: my first encounter with Holt's text was thus an anxious one.

I had already read Holt's *Sport and Society in Modern France*, and this book, along with seven others, were for me the really foundational texts for me starting out as a sports historian in 1987. Please indulge me and allow me to read out a book list, as I think it is important to appreciate both the small size of the field, and its quality. The other seven were, in order of publication, Wray Vamplew's *The Turf* (1976),¹ Peter Bailey's *Leisure and Class in Victorian England* (1978),² Tony Mason's *Association Football and English Society* (1980),³ Tony Mangan's *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (1981),⁴ John Hargreaves' *Sport, Power and Culture* (1986),⁵ and Stephen Jones' two books, *Workers at Play* (1986) and his posthumous *Sport, Politics and the Working Class* (1988).⁶ These seven, along with Holt's French book, did a number of things that made me feel my sporting research was worthwhile at a time when the kind of networks that postgraduate students now have were only just emerging. These books showed me – and maybe more importantly my supervisors, who came from political and social history backgrounds – that sports history could be done in all sorts of ways: at the thematic case study level of individual sports and institutions; at the national level of a social history; with an E.P. Thompson-inspired focus on class identity; in theoretical ways that made all links between sport, culture, and Gramsci. I

frequently return to all of these books, and stress to students that a book being over a quarter of a century old does not make it irrelevant.

Then along came *Sport and the British*. It was – it is – foundational to every generation of sports historians that has come through since then. I want to pick out four ways in which I have felt this, both as a researcher and a teacher. There are, of course, so many more things I could have picked on, but time is tight.

1. Its very existence served to add credibility and legitimacy to sports history. The early works cited notwithstanding, the range and ambition of *Sport and the British*, and its place as part of Oxford University Press's wider Studies in Social History series, got it noticed in ways and places that the earlier monographs hadn't been. It was reviewed in national newspapers, for example, and you could buy it in high street bookshops. Its purpose as a survey and a work of synthesis brought so much prior research together into a coherent whole, and it showed us big picture themes and small details that, when put together, added depth and weight to what we knew of sports history. The professional-amateur debate, the relative roles of industrialisation and education in developing sport, the significance of sport for empire and identity, and so many other themes were brought together here for the first time.
2. The book is full of great ideas, many of which on their own could form the basis for further research and whole modules. For me, the most influential was Holt's insistence on the importance of both continuity and change in the history of sport. 'To understand how far things did not change is just as important as understanding the extent to which they did'.⁷ This concept has been foundational to my way of looking at a variety of themes in my research: from continuities and changes in British sports diplomacy in my PhD and subsequent work, right through to my current Olympic work that includes the survival of the Cotswold Olympicks and the Much Wenlock Olympian Games: this search for continuities is central to many of my generation's assumptions about sports history. It even influences my active engagement with sport. Earlier this year I ran in the cross-country race at the Cotswold Olympicks, and I was struck by the ways in which the 'old ways of doing things' still underpinned this festival in 2010.

3. *Sport and the British* is written in an exemplary way. One of the big challenges of any history writing is getting the balance between action and analysis, between narrative and themes. It is even harder when the historian's subject is something as emotional, visceral, and ephemeral as sport. There's an old phrase that's variously attributed to Frank Zappa, Elvis Costello, and Martin Mull: 'writing about music is like dancing about architecture'.⁸ Whoever said it was stressing the difficulty of rendering something emotional into the intellectual medium of the written word, and I think that we could apply this to sport, too. This is even more of a challenge when the book covers such a long time span, a large geographical spread, and a multitude of sports. Holt manages this with a style that is light, humorous, ironic, and affectionate, and in a way that gives us a sense of the action, the passion, the emotion, and the meanings that sport had. He also has a fantastic eye for quotations from his primary sources: feast yourselves on such gems from his primary research as 'the hard-riding, hard-bitten, hold-hardening sort of sportsman...who would have ridden over his best friend in the ardour of the chase', the 'cads of the most unscrupulous kidney', or of wasteland football matches in Sheffield where 'if you went down you got up with a lump of cinder in your knee'.⁹ There is a mastery of an incredibly wide range of primary sources here, and the whole is written with drive, pace, enthusiasm, and an impressive style.
4. My final observation on Holt's value is on his exemplary explanation of the structure of the book at the end of the Introduction: 'There are several ways to write a social history of British sport', he writes, and then goes on to justify his inclusions and exclusions.¹⁰ The honesty and transparency of this approach, which includes the self-critique about what he had to leave out, has been helpful to generations of sport studies students who are new to history: it helps them to see the legitimacy of the academic using a first person voice, and helps them to engage with historical methodology in a direct way.

Of course, there are criticisms. The book has been criticised for the relatively small amount of coverage that women's sport get, and Holt's claim in the Introduction that 'the history of sport in modern Britain is a history of men'¹¹ is possibly the most provocative line in the book: but if one of the results of that provocation was a book as rich and ground-breaking as

Jennifer Hargreaves' *Sporting Females* (1994), then it was certainly worthwhile. However, it is worth pausing for a moment to ask ourselves what today's line-up says about this: there are no women among the fourteen speakers who have come today to evaluate this book's influence. Similarly, Holt excused himself on ethnicity being minor to his book, but then expressed this only in relation to black athletes and boxers: there is no sense here of the diverse histories, even in the time period he chose, of sport's role in Jewish migrant communities, in the experience of British Asians, or, indeed, in looking at whiteness as an ethnicity that needs to be studied critically.

But I fear that some of these criticisms may fall into anachronism. As Holt said elsewhere, 'There is nothing like attempting a synthesis to show up the gaps in a subject'¹² and we have to judge the book in relation to what went before, not in relation to what came next. In this, he was clearly foundational, bringing together disparate sources and a nascent historiography to create seminal work. If we then track forward, and look at the projects it has launched as scholars have gone to fill in the gaps identified by Holt, then we can see its legacy. For my own work, I know that *Moving the Goalposts* emerged as it did as a way of filling a gap in Holt's coverage; that *Sports History: a practical guide* was first inspired by Holt's appendix on the relationships between history and the social sciences; and that my current work on the British forerunners to Coubertin's Olympic Games has deep roots in Holt's work on continuities and survivals. Like many sports historians of the post-Holt generations, I can trace the direct influence of *Sport and the British* in my writing and my teaching. It is a foundational text.

¹ Wray Vamplew, *The Turf: a social and economic history of horse racing* (London: Allen Lane, 1976).

² Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: rational recreation and the contest for control, 1830-1885* (London: RKP, 1978).

³ Tony Mason, *Association Football and English Society, 1863-1915* (Hassocks: Harvester 1980).

⁴ J A Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: the emergence and consolidation of an educational ideology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981).

⁵ John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture: a social and historical analysis of popular sports in Britain* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986).

⁶ Stephen Jones, *Workers at Play: a social and economic history of leisure, 1918-1939* (London: RKP, 1986); *Sport, Politics and the Working Class: organised labour and sport in interwar Britain* (Manchester: MUP, 1988).

⁷ Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: a modern history* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), p.3.

⁸ See Alan P. Scott, 'Talking about music is like dancing about architecture', <http://www.paclink.com/~ascott/they/tamildaa.htm>.

⁹ Quotations taken from Holt, *Sport and the British*, pp 52, 99, and 297.

¹⁰ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.3.

¹¹ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.8

¹² Richard Holt, 'Introduction', in Richard Holt, ed., *Sport and the Working Class* (Manchester: MUP, 1990), p1.