This Sporting Life

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Sport and Liberty in England, 1760–1960

ROBERT COLLS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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First Edition published in 2020

Impression: 1

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020932447

ISBN 978–0–19–820833–4

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

For Leo and Rosa, Annika and Eddie, with love

> . . . so much a part of us that we barely notice it is the addiction to hobbies and spare-time occupations, the privateness of English life. We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fans. All the culture that is most truly native centres round things which even when they are communal are not official—the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the 'nice cup of tea'. The liberty of the individual is still believed in, almost as in the 19th century. But this has nothing to do with economic liberty, the right to exploit others for profit. It is the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare time, to choose your own amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above . . . It is obvious, of course, that even this purely private liberty is a lost cause. Like all other modern peoples, the English are in the process of being numbered, labelled, conscripted, 'co-ordinated'. But the pull of their impulses is in the other direction.
>
> (George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn', 1941)

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book would never have been started without a Visiting Fellowship at St. John's College Oxford and it would never have been completed without an invitation to join De Montfort University Leicester. In between, a Senior Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust and a Mellon Fellowship at Yale gave me opportunities to go deep.

My time at St. John's was the best of times. By day, the College allowed me to discover the Bodleian's John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, a truly outstanding source for the social history of this country. In the evenings, David Coleman, Rosalind Harding, Ross McKibbin, and William Whyte were especially good fellows. De Montfort, on the other hand, Leicester's other university, provided opportunities in a place I knew already, giving me the space to pursue my research across a wider range of interests. The Leverhulme Trustees showed extraordinary maturity in dealing with a wilful researcher. I wanted to explore sports history my way and they let me. Nothing more to be said. I hope this repays their Trust. The Yale Centre for British Art was more than a lot of valuable drawings and paintings. It was a six weeks centre of operations for an historian who wanted to learn how to learn, from art. That this was facilitated at every turn, and done so with the utmost grace and forbearance by everybody, every day, was a minor Yallie miracle. Over the road from the Centre, Keith Wrightson's Yale History Seminar survived my early thoughts on boxing and asked questions that were certainly better and probably longer, than the paper itself. At the end of a hard day in the galleries (somebody has to do it) New Haven was a great place for Mr. Mrs. Colls to go honky tonkin' (round this town). Back home, Stephen Hatcher showed me the museum that he built at Englesea Brook. The librarians at Leicester and De Montfort continued to be one of the best reasons for going to these universities, even as their institutions get less and less like libraries. As a try out for one of the chapters, I was glad to give a paper on Tom Cribb and Tom Sayers to one of Ross McKibbin's *festschrift* seminars.

Then there were all those places that looked after me no matter how anonymous the visit, including Abingdon Public Library, the Bodleian Library Oxford, the British Library London, Carlisle Record Office, Cheltenham Ladies' College, Chigwell School, the National Newspaper Library Colindale, Durham County Record Office, Palace Green Library Durham, the Football Association, the Harris Library Preston, Lancashire Record Office, Laygate Lane School, Leicestershire Leicester and Rutland Record Office, the Women's Library at London Metropolitan University, the John Rylands Library Manchester, the

National Archives at Kew, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Archive at Horsham, Newcastle Central Library, Northumberland Estates Alnwick, Northumberland Archive Service Woodhorn, South Shields Public Library, Stamford Mercury Archive Trust, Stamford Town Hall, Sussex University Mass Observation Archive, Tyne and Wear Museums, Uppingham School Library and Archive, and Worksop College.

My week at Carlisle Record Office was a breakthrough and it happened on Matthew Constantine's watch. Julie-Anne Lambert at the John Johnson drew me in at the start of the day and managed to get me out at the end. Chris Hunwick at Alnwick advised on Bill Richmond. Janice Norwood opened my eyes to the *The Brit*, Hoxton. Peter Morritt and Squire de Lisle granted permission to quote from the Quorn minute books. Jerry Rudman at Uppingham found me a quiet corner. As well as being a genial host, Michael Winstanley advised on the Butterworth and Baines Papers in Preston. Many years ago Christine Hiskey found me some wonderful Weardale material in the Durham County Record Office, which I remembered for a rainy day. I had a very nice root round Stamford Town Hall with Bob Williams, and the Town Clerk Patricia Stuart-Hogg got me the painting in a time of lockdown. Paul Rafferty introduced me to the kids at Laygate Lane and couldn't do enough for me, or them. Rachel Roberts at Cheltenham was an unfailing guide and correspondent. Membership of the historians' 'boot room' at the old Newcastle Central Library was a rare privilege. Archivists and librarians tend to prefer anonymity but I thank them all, named or not, archivists or not.

My hometown of South Shields was one of the birthplaces of British social democracy but it was not until later that the idea of writing the history of so-called 'ordinary' people who lived in so-called 'ordinary' places like Shields became clear to me, and Sussex University in the 1960s was the place for that. Stephen and Eileen Yeo provided the push, Donald Winch the pull, and all intellectual currents seemed to flow in the direction of social history. E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* was the book that mattered while, up at York, my doctoral supervisor Gwyn Williams touch lit his own Welsh fireworks display to light up (for me) the regional sky. Gwyn, author of *Proletarian Order*, responded to Jim Walvin's pioneering researches into Proletarian Football with bafflement and wonder. But the message was the same. Look for the people and bring them on.

All this went in various directions until in 2012 I joined the International Centre for the History of Sport and Culture at DMU. The bibliography at the back lists some of the numerous papers delivered by the Centre, and given to the Centre, including important work by Emma Griffin which stretched the time-line of serious sport history, seminars by Dominic Sandbrook and Prashant Kidambi which stretched the imagination on how to think about Wolverhampton Wanderers and Indian cricket (though not necessarily in the same direction), and a powerful set of papers given by Gavin Kitching on the origins of football and

the meaning of things. Then there are all those friends and colleagues at Leicester University whom I played football with over the years who know my own sporting life did not go unblemished. Thanks then to them for the old times, and more recently to my ICSHC colleagues across town for the new: to Neil Carter, Tony Collins, Mike Cronin, Jeremy Crump, Heather Dichter, Dick Holt, Gavin Kitching, Tony Mason, James Panter, Martin Polley, Dil Porter, and Matthew Taylor. Here's the book guys. I hope it adds to the kicking power of a sports history outfit that is already the best in the world.

As usual, the people at Oxford University Press were great to work with. Cathryn Steele was there at the beginning, and at the end. Matt Cotton patiently explained to me what I'd done right. Fiona Tatham found what I'd missed, and some more. Nivedha Vinayagamurthy worked hard in the engine room, Katie Bishop steadied the ship. Together they brought many years work home and I am grateful for their professionalism. For those who like footnotes, there's plenty here. Same for those who like Introductions. For those who don't like, or need, either, I suggest you move straight to Chapter one and stick with the story.

Finally, there's my personal trainers. David Storey wrote the first *This Sporting Life* in 1960 and gave me something to think about in the years in between. Dick Holt got me playing in the first place, and the thanks are all mine. Jeremy Crump put the manuscript through its paces, and made some telling observations. Nobody does it tougher. Ron Greenall explained the real rules of rugby (both types) and much besides. Paul Rouse encouraged me to be audacious and defensive at the same time. My brother Graham saved me from danglers and other literary injuries. As usual, John Gray, out on the wings, has been more influential than he knows. Karl Ove Knausgaard made a late surge into the box.

This Sporting Life is dedicated to my grandchildren Leo Colls Moore, Rosa Kington-Colls, Annika Kington-Colls, and Eddie Colls Moore, and it is offered to Becky and Amy, and to Rosie, my best and most beautiful friend since 1972 and a real cool grandma now. She advised and consented on this book more than anyone else.

Robert Colls

Leicester
1 May 2020

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Introduction

If you say how the world is, that should be enough.
(Ken Loach, BBC2, 30 July 2016)

The human personality is a drama not a monologue.
(Clive James, *Unreliable Memoirs*, 1980)

In 1948 the social research organization Mass Observation estimated that 22 per cent of the population played games of various sorts. If football was the most popular, cricket was the best regarded. A previous report had advised that even though it was impossible to imagine sport in England without gambling, amateurs were the real sportsmen.[1]

My first game of football must have been around 1954 when I was old enough to join the rough and tumble of the back lane. Right by the lane, between our block and the next, was a large patch of open waste which we called 'the back field' but which was in fact an old waggonway that used to run from the local pit to the railway at the top of the street. There was always a game of football simmering here, and all kinds of other games as well—from cricket and hand ball in the summer to chucks and handies, hide and seek, skipping, and roller skating all the year round. Boys dominated the back field, flicked marbles along the gutter, and played 'ciggie cards' against the wall. Girls held their own territory, most of the lane and all the backyards, with a whole medley of games that involved being in or out or up or down. Plenty play involved both tribes as well, including 'chasies', 'kick the tin', and 'in the wall'. One favourite was to throw a ball over the entire block so that what came from the back lane bounced over the roof down into the front street where a posse of kids waited to catch it. I can't remember the girls being any less strong in the arm, or the eye, in this. But for me football was king. Apart from a few weeks' cricket in the warm dusty days of August, we played football all day every day until the ball burst or the Mams appeared out of the dusk to haul us in.

This book has two aims, first to try and say something about England's sporting life as it was lived and played, and second, slightly more formally perhaps, to dwell on what Ross McKibbin meant when he called sport 'one of the most powerful of England's civil cultures'.[2]

[1] University of Sussex, MO Archive: file 3045 October 1948; file 6 October 1939.
[2] McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures* (1998) p.322.

My methods have more or less adhered to what the primary sources have allowed. That said, you will find very few football results and no batting averages in these pages. You will find, however, a tonne of ethnographic description showing the sporting life across a range of 'sports' (usually competitive), and 'sport' (giving pleasure or amusement), over about 200 years. Not exactly 200 years because cultures are no respecters of historical periods, and not definitively 'sport' or 'sports' because I have not spent too long on definitions. I have tried instead to follow what contemporaries meant, whether or not they were consistent.[3] *Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary* for 1908 defines 'sport' as mainly frolic and amusement. At one end of the spectrum, any old bit of fun could be sport. At the other, competitive sport could be serious business. And yet, when the business stopped, the fun went on. The world was hit by coronavirus in 2020 and the business-end of sport with it, but all sorts of new sport emerged from what was near to hand, just like the old times, from forward rolls to toilet rolls. "A whole world of nonsense", according to Andy Bull on April Fool's Day in *The Guardian*.[4]

The idea of *Sport and Liberty* suffuses the whole work. I could have subtitled it something more general like 'Sport and Society' or 'Sport and Culture', words that embrace all aspects of life. Or I could have dropped the subtitle altogether and let the chapters speak for themselves. But I have emphasized liberty because that is what came first. Without it, all other meanings would fall. As George Orwell remarked in 'The Lion and the Unicorn', the liberty of the individual is a natural impulse in England.

There are eight loosely related chapters, each one a case study that widens out to consider the sporting life more generally. If you read the footnotes, please be aware that where there is more than one reference in a single footnote, I have started that note with the last textual reference first.

Chapter one, 'Land of Liberty', starts in 1909 with Minna Burnaby of Baggrave Hall in Leicestershire. No English sporting life was more fashionable than fox-hunting. For over 200 years it identified England to itself and others as a cheery olden-time rural sort of place. But fox-hunting was not just a question of good cheer. In order to hunt, you had to have land or access to land, you had to have influence or access to influence, and you had to have the time and the money. At the very least you had to have a horse. Masters of hounds had all these things, and authority. They rode at the front, made the rules, led the county, and claimed their place in that wider horsey world of pony clubs and gymkhanas, point to point and passing cavalry regiments. Young men would come up from London to show what they could do. Women too. Everybody loved a lord and at the hunt there was every chance of meeting one. The gentry were as devoted to their horses and hounds almost as much as to their acres, and by putting one with the other in

[3] McKibbin, *Democracy and Political Culture* (2019) p.117.
[4] 'From marble racing to balcony marathons':*The Guardian* 1 April 2020.

pursuit of the little red fox, they showed, to their own satisfaction at least, what it was to be free.

The Poor hunted too. If they hunted foxes, it was not for fun and never on a horse. But 'game' they could eat, or sell, or gift. So when the gamekeepers turned up to deny them their sport, hunting turned into poaching and poaching could turn into transportation and exile. Chapter 2, 'Bonny Moor Hen', describes how what was sport for one class could mean the far end of the world for another.

Chapter 3, 'Bottom', gets into the boxing ring early one morning in Hampshire in 1860. A lot of people have come down from London to see two hard men, one English, one Irish-American, fight it out. Billed as one of the first 'international' or 'world championship' contests, this match was driven by newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. Heenan, the American, was younger, taller, heavier, stronger, louder. Sayers, the Englishman, was more experienced, not one for talking much, and known to have 'bottom', said to be a peculiarly English fighting quality much prized in the army and not unknown among Irishmen. Prize fights sometimes happened on the sly at race meetings, or in out of the way corners well away from magistrates, but mainly they take us into a half-world of intense violence and gentlemanly *hauteur*. Along with fox-hunting, prize fighting represented the nation to itself. The heavy-set stoicism of one stood sharp against the showy-red of the other.

Chapter 4, 'Custom', begins in the streets of a Lincolnshire market town. Every November for 600 years (or so), the people of Stamford (or some of them), believed that 'they' (meaning their forbears) had run a bull to death. Attempts by metropolitan liberals in the 1830s to stop it were met with stubborn resistance. Minna Burnaby rode for fun. Sayers fought for money. Stamford ran the bull because that is what Stamford thought it was. It was a straight constitutional question therefore, and when Stamford stopped running the bull many thought it stopped running some part of itself. This is only one example of what happened in many places in many ways to the country's amusements, festivals, pastimes, sports, and so forth, all of them involving profound changes in how people thought about who they were. Once the bull-running was over, Stamford was open to new forms of authority. Once people lost their right to be the People, on the street, according to custom, the constitution opened itself to new forms of interpretation, mainly by lawyers. Once upon a time the middle class had the vote and the people had the constitution. By the 1930s, the people had the vote and the middle class, now called 'public opinion', had the constitution.

Chapter 5, 'Home', begins with Edwin Butterworth on his tour of the Lancashire parishes. Butterworth was using his local connections in the service of Edward Baines, his employer. Baines, editor of the *Leeds Mercury,* was writing a county history. One of his key questions was how parish sports and customs had survived in a county which Marx and Engels were soon to describe as the raging heartland of the world's first Industrial Revolution. By way of the parish, and the legal privileges of 'settlement' which it bestowed, people had reason to think they

belonged. But as parish privileges were removed or forgotten, people lost their old sense of place. Playgrounds were built over, pathways blocked, boundaries eroded, streams diverted, lands and rivers polluted. Not that everyone accepted parish belonging. The Methodists came to declare their own particular war on the parish—an attack from modern Puritans who rejected sports and games, especially when played on Sundays. But the old need to belong never faded. People felt they must belong and modern sport was a way that even the Methodists came to embrace. When in 1992 Nick Hornby explained how he belonged to a football pitch, no less, he was saying something important about a quality of community many thought had been extinguished. And when *Fever Pitch* became a Penguin Modern Classic in 2012, Lambeth Council were learning how difficult it was to evict skateboarders from the South Bank Undercroft. Refusing not to belong, they said it was their 'sanctuary' and 'second home'.[5]

Chapter 6, 'New Moral Worlds', goes to Uppingham School to meet the cricketers. It is 1858 and the headmaster Rev. Edward Thring is struggling to make these boys come to heel. His predicament introduces us to a broader Church of England campaign to change the nature of elite young men. In doing so headmasters and mistresses reinvented two key institutions of the modern world, the school and the university. From horseplay to cadging, the Student Rag blended a public school sense of what it was to be youthful, with a parish festival sense of what it was to play the fool.[6] For over a century, this new moral ethos shaped a large swathe of student life. Less well known is the part students played in that life, the subject of chapter 7, 'Bloods'. Whether they played or not, whether they ragged or not, undergraduates built their identity on college fun and friendship, badges and scarves, 'propping' and 'prepping'—a sporting ethos that co-existed with the altogether more aristocratic notion of being a bit mad, of doing as you pleased, of being a 'Blood'.

The last chapter, 'Moderns', begins with the first football craze. Football was codified in the 1860s by one of the boys we met in the Uppingham cricket XI. He, along with a few other young men representing a number of London clubs, got together to call themselves the Football Association. By 1914 their playing of the game had become a British working-class obsession and by the 1930s it was probably the world's most popular sport. We ask why the girls did not play. Some say it was because football took on industrial forms of labour. But girls took on industrial forms of labour. Some say it was because football lived on the streets and back lanes. But girls lived on the streets and back lanes. Some say it was because the FA banned women from affiliated grounds. But since when did anyone need an affiliated ground to play? Whatever the reason, most

[5] Whitter and Madgin et al., vimeo, *You Can't Move History* (AHRC 2016). Snell, *Parish and Belonging 1700–1950* (2006); Nick Hornby, *Fever Pitch* (1992, 2012).

[6] *The Guardian*, 1 March 1962.

girls did not play football and by the time they were women they had made other arrangements. There were, however, exceptions.

As for the boys, after the factory reforms of the 1850s, and the new FA code from the 1860s, football took off to be *the* game for moderns. The sporting life did not die. Football inherited all the old sporting qualities to be played in a way that made liberty out of movement, that required courage and 'bottom', that was learnt by custom and practice and continued to happen in places—from pieces of waste to old park goal posts—that were accessible and meaningful. No word means more to football clubs than 'Home'. Football teams were new moral worlds too, facilitating new ways of being together and different ways of being violent. At its best, football could be sublime, joyful, fluent, and aesthetic. Men felt more alive. They recalled a beautiful goal better than they recalled a good result.

A more modest title for this book might have been 'eight essays on some aspects of sport and amusement'. But apart from lacking a certain dash, this would not have caught my wider intention to look at the sporting life as something absorbed by whole societies.

I started the research knowing some social history, knowing something about Englishness and suspecting that there was something more interesting to see in sport and national identity than eleven people in national colours.[7] However, unlike national identity, which can be researched through the richly representative institutions of the state, sports reports can look pretty scant. I scanned the football results to little avail. I looked at photographs of boys in blazers and girls in boaters and wondered why. I considered histories of the FA and the MCC and, to say the least, wondered who.

Orwell thought representative institutions misrepresented as much as they represented. He hardly wrote a word about governments, even though he was a prolific political writer. He barely wrote a word about the Spanish Civil War, even though he never forgot his comrades. I wanted to do what he did and catch the flavour of life on the ground. But he, afer all, had his art. All I had were my footnotes.

In one sense, sports historians are spoilt for choice. There are any number of record offices and every modern newspaper has its sports page. But which record office? Which sports page? Which sport? How do you link up a thousand weekend games? That they were all called 'sport' does not guarantee their homogeneity or similarity. Even if it was possible to research them all, and turn them into one thing called 'sport', you would still have to find words to describe what they meant, a task not made easy by the fact that sport expresses itself first in actions.

[7] Hobsbawm thinks not: 'the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people': *Nations and Nationalism* (1990) p.143. Holt wrote the pioneering work on the subject, *Sport and the British* in 1990. See also McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures* (1998) and Rouse, *Sport in Ireland* (2015).

Not everything is measurable and sometimes the best things are only measurable in deeds. I spent the first two months of my research reading other people's histories feeling more and more bereft as to my own.

Then I went to Cumbria on a whim. A few days in Carlisle Record Office while staying at The Oddfellows Arms in Caldbeck convinced me that the project could move forward. I saw, for instance, that although fox-hunting in Cumbria and fox-hunting in Leicestershire were two different things, knowing about one helped me see what mattered in the other. I gave up planning in the head and started putting documents in front of my eyes. I gave up fretting about difference and embraced it. I decided to start with the activity itself, not its place in some idea of what sport is. The idea of living in a 'history' or a 'culture' is supposed to tell us who we are. So it does, but never wholly so because the idea of a history or a culture is never whole any more than we are whole.

Novelists understand how this works better than historians, and prefer to let the people speak first. William Faulkner deliberately built human contradiction and obscurity into his histories. His *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) offers no completed 'history' or 'culture' that was nineteenth-century Mississippi or, if it does, it does so only by tacking back from the present taking in contradictions and obscurities as they were passed down along the way. People expect tricks from writers of fiction in a way they do not expect tricks from historians. I have tried, therefore, to avoid contradiction and obscurity. At the same time, I have tried to build my subject out of different human experiences, out of the detail, putting it together as I went forward rather than looking for it entire as I looked back. (Strangely, that which was most unreliable for contemporaries, the betting, operates as a proxy fact- straightener for historians. The more money involved, the greater the effort to make sure what was said to have happened did happen).

After coming alive in Cumbria, I needed a set of sports rich in detail but not so different or diffuse as to be unmanageable. I needed to remember also that looking is not the same as finding. There was nothing much I could do about the over-bearing weight of historical evidence in favour of men.

Social theories are designed to help us make sense of the detail by positing what is whole. Darbon's five and Guttmann's seven defining features of modern sport helped me think in general terms about what had seemed otherwise hopelessly diffuse. Yet once I came upon an actual sport and tried to identify its defining features, those features only held by not allowing the exceptions to intrude.[8] Huizinga's notion of 'play' for instance, or Geertz's notion of 'deep play,' or

[8] Modern sport is defined by Darbon as universal, institutional, equal, specifically spatial and equally durational: *Les Fondements du Systeme Sportif* (2014). Modern sport is defined by Guttmann as secular, equal, specialist, rational, bureaucratic, skilled, and rewarded: *From Ritual to Record. The Nature of Modern Sport* (1978).

Wahrman's notion of 'playfulness', or Piaget's notion of learning through play, all involve generalizations that overrule the exceptions. As they must. But where does that take the practical historian? Even two sports as alike as Rugby League and Rugby Union are so different in who plays, how they play, and where they play, that you ask what is the point of generalizing? From up in the stands, the two games look roughly the same. Up close, looking roughly the same loses much of its point. It is in the differences that we come see to what matters. All generalizations to some extent anonymize and, when it comes to history, every anonymization is a small death. What is more, historians have to be constantly on the look out for change. Everything changes. Sport itself changes, its meaning changes, and the meanings that are applied to its meanings change. What is vaguely similar one decade can look strikingly different the next, and social theories have no obvious way of dealing with this. At the same time, the historian is charged with making overall sense of something that is supposed to be unchanging.

Academic theories of sport history generally fall into two main camps. First, there are those to do with gradual processes that see sport as evolving into ever more complex or refined conditions of play. Second, there are those that see sport essentially as a controlling or repressive activity carried out in the interests of the existing order.

Theories of complexity and refinement move in evolutionary stages. These can include for instance stages of 'institutionalization' or 'modernization', or 'democratization', or 'commodification', or 'civilization' and the rest, and they all point to an increasing complexity or refinement according to the feature, or the set of features, the theorist has decided to track. Turn of the century sociologists saw modern sport as degenerate because they thought it was destroying the playful element in society. Huizinga wrote in praise of traditional sport as a playful and civilizing counterpoint to modern degeneracy. Elias on the other hand saw modern sport as *re*generative, part of the civilizing process. McKibbin tried to disentangle the various lines of argument to come up with a 'fairly minimalist' theory of sport resting on a crucial distinction between what is 'play' and what is 'system', something Darbon calls 'sportization', another version of the same debate, but still he found definitional difficulties in the difference between sport for the individual and sport for the collective.[9] All these abstract features are only *names* of course and what they feature always contains internal differences. All models are wrong but some are useful, and whether we call them (very properly) 'names', or (very reasonably) 'features', or (very grandly) 'theories', they are all capable of making sense here and there and I have drawn on them as appropriate.

Theories of social control on the other hand tend to explain whole systems acting in concert. For instance, there are theories of control appertaining to sport

[9] Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (1939); Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1938); McKibbin, *Democracy & Political Culture* (2019) p.119.

as alienated labour, or over-disciplined bodies, or stolen rights, or sublimated psychologies, or sport in the service of imperialistic, capitalistic, misogynistic or racist power structures. And so on. At their heart lies a soft Marxism where an overarching theory of economic exploitation has been replaced by an overarching theory of cultural exploitation. Although I was by no means dead to the attraction of applying powerful critical theory to the 1001 peculiarities of England's class-race-gender inflected sporting life, I have to confess that although some of these ideas appealed here and there, no theory of social control appealed across the board. Only very occasionally is sport deliberately controlling or repressive in itself, and even when it is, outcomes rarely match intentions. My point is: not all social theories are easy to apply, and some are not worth applying at all.

In any case, as Gavin Kitching remarked, when we are trying to understand human experience, we should not *apply* anything. We have to communicate instead. It is worth remembering that academics are quite capable of applying descriptions far less useful than those that were used by the people they study.[10]

So, rather than apply a general theory outside my subject (in order to see it whole and value free), I have chosen to step inside and communicate from there. I have tried, in other words, to do without the 'isms', to write about their lives not mine, to be a neighbour not a stranger, to bear in mind the whole and remember that everything counts.[11] Working from the inside-out rather than outside-in appeals to the workaday historian in me and is, in fact, nearer to how most people see their lives. The worst history I have written has directly applied theory or ideology. The best has described how things actually work.

I have tried, therefore, to understand the absorption of sport into our common life and, although I have avoided too many abstract agents ('Culture', 'Power' 'Progress' 'Urbanization', etc) along the way, I have tried to pick up on any patterns or syndromes that seemed helpful. Some will be obvious to the reader. There is evidence of 'institutionalization' and 'modernization' (the founding of the Football Association for instance). There is evidence of 'democratization' and 'commodification' (the new leisure economy for instance). There is evidence of repression and control, or at any rate the *intention* to repress or control (aspects of fox-hunting for instance, or the game laws, or women's sport). But there is also evidence of the breakdown of institutions, of times when the things that should have died out did not die out, when women found their liberty, when modern sport stood for drive and passion, not control.

[10] Kitching, 'Mrs Thatcher, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Social Science', Ms paper, ICSHC, DMU, January 2019.

[11] David Storey's *This Sporting Life* (1960) goes inside that which, he says, presented itself to him as something immediate and exterior: *The Times*, 23 November 1963. For anthropological insights for historians see: Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', *Past & Present* 24 (1963) p.4, p.17.

Other syndromes presented themselves. I noted that in spite of Darbon's theory of sport and 'sportization', there never was a time when people played without some sort of system. What was done traditionally in the name of custom, for instance, was itself a system of expectation. Another syndrome is the way in which sport was seen as constitutive of the country and its people. Many saw it as fundamental to being 'freeborn' just as they saw being freeborn as fundamental to being English. Sport was therefore a means of self expression, of affiliation, of showing that everything wasn't just politics and politics wasn't just words. Like everything else in life sport lives off words. When play is over and the bat and ball have been taken away, sports journalism has claim to be the first modern writing, sportsmen the first modern celebrities.

Most striking of all perhaps, there was no sudden transition from the 'traditional' to the 'modern'. There is a sense in which football helped invent the modern world but there was no obvious rupture, for example, between what we might label 'pre-industrial' and 'industrial', and it was never clear at either point where the future lay. There was change yes, but only when seen from two points on the map. England in 1960 can still be regarded as a land that saw itself as free, where 'bottom' or what we would now call 'heart' remained widely regarded, where many aspects of life were still learned by custom, where play continued to harbour strong feelings of belonging, where the need to create close moral bonds and friendships was still a social given, and where football had never stopped standing for what was mass and modern. Most people in these islands continued to see themselves as national peoples although by the 1960s they seemed to have surrendered their sense of entitlement to the constitution. In the end, the biggest syndrome was sport as an expression of liberty and belonging—only names of course, and not always naming the same thing, but powerful undercurrents all the same.

The book was built up from a wide network of sources, at the last count including the histories of over 60 schools, over 120 newspapers and journals, and over 30 primary collections covering everything from personal diaries to national newspapers, to courts and commissions, to walls and walls of some of the most valuable oil paintings in the world at Yale, to boxes and boxes of scraps of paper miraculously saved, stamped, and made available to the public in the Bodleian.

This project came alive when I stopped worrying about diffusion and learned to love peculiarity. In order to explore part of what it felt like to be alive, in England, between 1760 and 1960, *This Sporting Life* is a detectorist not a drone. Not in ideas but in things. At first I struggled with old photographs of men in shorts and girls in boaters. Now that I can put some meaning to them suggests at least that something has been achieved.

I played my last game of football on 12 December 1993 for Leicester Academicals in the local Sunday League. I took a heavy challenge in the sleet and the mud and

that, as they say, was that. I was 44 years old and the surgeon told me to take up something more civilized, like rugby.

Everybody knows a sporting story or two. They might be light on the facts, heavy on the detail, and not know the difference between a leg break and a broken leg, but chances are they can tell the story or at least voice an opinion, which is a story of sorts.

Sport is a story the country tells itself but it is not the only one and not the most important one. At times I must confess to wondering how my mention of the young Stanley Matthews kicking a football with a tea cosy on his injured foot dared inhabit the same intellectual space as histories of war and peace, death and disease, trade and technology. Reading David Edgerton's superb *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation* (2018) provoked doubts in me about the significance of the foot in the tea cosy. Then we went to the match and spun new stories out of old after it without so much as a mention of GDP or ECB or WTO or any of the big stuff that is supposed to matter when it comes to what we tell ourselves. Even as we know sport to be trivial, we know we are trivial, or can be, and so, *ergo*, are some of the histories we write. It's not as if the economists do not tell stories. Our capacity for play, for nuance and swerve and taking on opponents, stretches beyond sport. Sport is only a physical contest in the first place. It becomes a story immediately after and stories, as any poet will tell you, know how to play. Even this book comes out to play sometimes. For six hours before the Battle of Trafalgar, one of the greatest in Britain's long history, Stephen Taylor's Sons of the Waves tells us how Nelson's fleet cruised in the breeze while ship bands played and sailors danced the hornpipe.

'Jack Tar' was eighteenth-century England's foremost patriot—a heart of oak and a hero. But a people's hero only. Maritime art did not include him. Like the poachers and the pugilists whose company he kept, Jack existed not in art but in cheap pot and print, in tickets and tattoos, in songs and stories. *This Sporting Life* has given me the opportunity to delve into his world in order to put its dog-eared ephemera up against the official record, and the official record up against him. I wanted to salute these sort of people and the things they knew and the life they made, and show how aspects of that life shaped them to think of themselves not as victims or inferiors, or God forbid, inert masses, but winners, the people on whom the country depended for its strength and liberty.

The sporting life is one of those things in our history that has been neglected by scholars out of all proportion to the love and attention lavished on it by those who lived it. Now that they have gone and the coal and the ships and the regiments have gone with them, I am drawn to these people first because once upon a time they were alive like I am alive and now they are not; second because I am curious about the life they lived and what they thought of it; and third because I am interested in civil society for all sorts of reasons, not all past participle. Which is to say, I wrote this book first for them, second for me, and third for all of us. I hope it works for you.