

Between Memory and Oblivion. Contributions to a Strategy for Material and Documentary Conservation in the History of Sports

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I would like to begin this presentation with a thank-you, a statement and a warning that all seem necessary. First, I would like to thank the organization of this 1st International Seminar on Sports Archives for including me here today in Girona. My more than twenty five years of dedication to researching and writing about the social history of sports has allowed me to have a close relationship with the archives (and the archivists, of course) related to the world of sports and its primary figures. This has led me to think about and write about, at times, its often under-appreciated significance. Second, I need to point out the relevance of this international seminar being held in Catalonia. The overall growth of both the institutional sports world and of the historiography of sport, and the interest in this area, makes it necessary for us to stop and analyze, from within the professional fields of archiving and historiography, the specific policies that need to be put in place in order to preserve the documentary memory of sports. The fact that this reflection is being made in Catalonia seems relevant to me and helps to understand this country's awareness and traditions towards sports, culture, archives and historiography. Finally, before beginning with the presentation, I want to warn you that this has been created from a historian's perspective, academic and research-based. Don't mind that I worded it that way, in front of an auditorium with many professional archivists. My vision is that of a professional historian who uses the archives and understands their importance in recovering and preserving the memory of the sport, but it is not the same vision as an archivist's. I believe that both of them, undoubtedly, complement one another and share a common objective.

Sports and History

A large part of the new academic historiography of sports—for the past two decades of the 20th century—has put an emphasis on studying modern sporting activities as a “mass cultural and social phenomenon”, that is the product of a determined social and cultural context that was clearly identified in England during the first Industrial Revolution,

between 1750 and 1840¹. This innovative historiography put the emphasis on a “modernizing” perspective—that sport is the product of the rationalist breakdown in the contemporary world, after the 18th century²—in opposition to the evolution vision, that had traditionally linked sports activities to Classical Greece and the historical evolution of those ancient activities. Seen from this point of view, the sports phenomenon overall—as a human activity linked to an organized and structured system, an industry, a communicative and cultural system—must be treated as a complex social phenomenon that pertains to us as members of a complex society. As such, the institutionalized versions of sports, from creating the rules to the system of values involved, including its organizational aspect in terms of creating clubs, leagues, associations and other different types, are a product and reflection of the contemporary, rationalist, liberal Western society. The extension—or globalization, as it is usually explained today—of these sporting events and their consumption as a spectacle is a reflection of the expansion of the values in this society.

The study of the history of sports activities in a social and cultural context, without a doubt, allows us to better understand this society and its values, and finally we can say that it allows us to reconstruct and better understand our history. This fact, important from a cultural, academic and historiographic perspective, which can be seen thanks to the expansion of new trends in this historic discipline³, should raise the question regarding the need to preserve the history of the sport. If we keep in mind the different dimensions of the sports phenomenon—regarded by many authors as a “completely social action”, as stated by Marcel Mauss⁴—, we realize that by studying it from a social and historical perspective we can learn very valuable information about how we play, how we relate with others, how we feel, how we convey ourselves in public, how we establish identities, how we treat one another and discriminate, how we educate, how we cooperate, how we fight, how we think or how we win and lose. However, given the social responsibility of a historiography committed to the most invisible parts of society—a story of freedom, for some⁵—, it seems obligatory to also stress that the conservation of the historical memory of sports can help us turn sports into an activity that helps in the building of a more just, cooperative, helping, inclusive, educational and free society.

¹ HOLT, Richard. *Sport and the British. A Modern History*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.

² GUTTMANN, Allen. *From Ritual to Record. The Nature of Modern Sport*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

³ See the introduction by: PUJADAS, Xavier. *Atletas y ciudadanos. Historia social del deporte en España (1870-2010)*. Madrid: Alianza, 2011.

⁴ MAUSS, Marcel. *Ensayo sobre el don*. Madrid: Katz Editores, 2009 (1924).

⁵ COCK, Laurence de [et alii]. *L'histoire comme emancipation*. Marseille: Alianza, 2019.

Memory

As Bertrand During already discussed in 1981, the historiography of physical activities and sports must be in line with the new tendencies in general social and cultural history, in which the historian constructs a timeline of the object being studied and builds on the significance the object has in explaining the past⁶. In this building of knowledge, the access to the records of the memory and the document sources is a fundamental process for the historian. However, from the perspective of the current sports historian—and in line with what we pointed out in the first section—the perspective on these memory elements cannot be anything other than holistic, keeping in mind its link with the society and the culture where it is developed, and putting an emphasis on the continuities (in other words, a more institutional and official vision) and even more so on the discontinuities (an invisible or popular vision). As such, this memory is presented in various forms and it is created by a wide range of agents, groups and individuals, whether it is voluntary or involuntary. In addition to the more traditional types, public documents, private documents, images, newspapers, materials archives, buildings, audiovisual records, art, etc., we need to add, which will undoubtedly make the conservation process more complex, other types of manifestations, such as verbal sources, intimate correspondence, food journals, autobiographies, and very soon, other materials related to new computer technologies and the visual and digital culture.

The creators of the memory then, are multiple and varied, something that strays us away from the traditional, rather institutional vision. Therefore, along with the classical instances of the institutional sports system—clubs, leagues, high-performance centers, public and government sports institutions—, we need to take into consideration other agents such as media institutions, diplomatic organizations, academic institutions, those in charge of management and sporting regulations, coaches, referees, doctors, educators, reporters, industries, fans, and so many other groups and individuals that are in contact with sporting activities as a social phenomenon.

Oblivion

When man delves into the memory, and in this case, the historic memory, it is inevitable to reflect on the oblivion. In regards to the history of sports, the loss of memory has been very important in two areas: one linked to the material elements—and their conservation—and the other in relation to the content—the oblivion was selective. In the

⁶ DURING, Bertrand. «Les historiens de l'éducation physique et des sports». In: *Des Jeux aux Sports. Repères et documents en histoire des activités physiques*. Paris: Vigot, 1981.

first case, we need to keep in mind that during the 19th century and the first third of the 20th, sports were primarily managed and driven by private groups, which led to a diverse range of resources and strategies—when there were any—to preserve them. In the second case, we need to remember that sporting activities, by their classic competitive nature, have tended to foster a memory focused on the result—the record of the event—and the competitors—usually the winners. Obviously, this has led to a tendency to forget about a big part of the sport as a social phenomenon. The reasons for such a unique oblivion, considering the social and even economic importance of sports, are various. Here I will only mention the reasons that I consider the most repetitive, like now the lack of historiographic tradition in the study of sports, the tendency to primarily only record the result, the nature of the sports institutions—often lacking awareness of archive conservation—, the lack of resources dedicated to building archives or document centers for private sports organizations, for recreational purposes, and in short, a lack of historical conscience.

In following the logic about the two spheres to oblivion that we alluded to previously, we see the existence of *double oblivion* in certain cases that involve, or have historically involved, sectors of the sports world that are particularly invisible, the study of which can undeniably help us to better understand the social dynamic in the contemporary world through sports. We are referring to sectors such as women athletes, working-class sports (whether they are institutionalized by trade unions or registered organizations), racial and national minorities and the use of sports to protest or gain freedom, the history of handicapped athletes, less-common sports and those which are not shown on mass media or the LGTB athletes and sexuality in sports in general.⁷

In any case, the consequences of the evident deficiencies in the conservation of the material and immaterial memory of the history of sports extend beyond the professional sphere of historians and researchers, of the clubs and leagues, the public organizations or the athletes themselves. In reality, these deficiencies have very seriously damaged the knowledge, cultures and the ability for societies to change and improve.

⁷ Some of these areas are already considered emerging in the historiography of sports: EDELMAN, Robert; WILSON, Wayne. *The Oxford Handbook of Sports History*. Oxford, 2017. Pay special notice to Part VIII, about areas of emerging interest.

Conclusions: Conservation Strategies

The need to establish one or more strategies for improving the material and documentary conservation in the history of sports seems obvious and, from my point of view, needs to consist of an interdisciplinary work group combining archivists, historians, professionals and public administrations. To limit the possible strategies worth exploring, we could focus on seven different areas:

- a) Working to improve the collective conscience of the sports world in regards to conserving documentary and historical material;
- b) Encouraging, from public administration and those responsible for managing the archives, policies for preserving and displaying archives related to sports;
- c) Creating educational and awareness programs for sporting events;
- d) Proposing local policies for conserving historical archives related to organizations and people in the local community;
- e) Encouraging academic and doctoral studies about sports collections, archives or good international practices;
- f) Creating, presenting and developing competitive local research projects with interdisciplinary teams;
- g) Creating, presenting and developing competitive international research projects with interdisciplinary, mixed-country teams to encourage actions at the European level.

From this perspective, it will be necessary to create a common goal among the different groups involved in forming alliances using existing institutional networks (European or Catalan sports history and archiving associations, personal contacts, etc.), in order to start working on some of the previously mentioned strategies, to pressure the public and private institutions and begin, if necessary, to create an international project—preferably European and competitive, perhaps through an EU program—that brings together thoughts from different people and places on policies for preserving, conserving and displaying historical material and immaterial sports archives.