A WHOLE NEW GAME: EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE HISTORY OF SPORTS

Conference at the GHI, October 30-November 1, 2008. Conveners: Uta Andrea Balbier (GHI Washington) and Stefan Wiederkehr (GHI Warsaw). Participants: Sandra Budy (Helmut Schmidt University), Brian D. Bunk (University of Massachusetts), Robert Edelman (University of California, San Diego), Christiane Eisenberg (Humboldt University, Berlin), Gerald Gems (North Central College), Allen Guttmann (Amherst College), Melanie Henne (University of Erfurt), Erik Jensen (Miami University), Nikolaus Katzer (Helmut Schmidt University), Barbara Keys (University of Melbourne), Alexandra Köhring (Helmut Schmidt University), Britta Lenz (University of Bonn), Jürgen Martschukat (University of Erfurt), Anke Ortlepp (GHI Washington), Gertrud Pfister (University of Copenhagen), Steven W. Pope (West Virginia University), Kay Schiller (University of Durham), John Soares (University of Notre Dame), Markus Stauff (University of Amsterdam), Christian Tagsold (University of Düsseldorf), Corinna Unger (GHI Washington), Richard F. Wetzell (GHI Washington), Jean Williams (De Montfort University), Chris Young (University of Cambridge), Manfred Zeller (Helmut Schmidt University).

“Sports for all,” as governments across the developed world increasingly put it after the Second World War, is not a maxim that has mapped easily onto the historical profession. Largely ignored by diplomatic and political historians, it remained for a long time strangely undertreated in social history and remarkably unaffected by the cultural and linguistic turns. That is not to say there has been no historical study of sport, only that it takes place within an oddly textured and uneven field. Sports history exists, much of it good, most of it ignored by “mainstream” practitioners. In doing so, they miss out on a great deal. As a leisure activity enjoyed by millions of active participants and spectators in almost every society in the world, sport requires no justification as a valid and necessary object of historical study. It is a global language that creates, interacts with, and transports values, norms, and social concepts. Sport informs and is informed by race, gender, hierarchies, the public sphere, media, and communication; it impinges on and is impinged upon by ritual, health, sexuality, aesthetics, consumption, lifestyle, space, urbanity, and architecture. Finally, in its encounter with political, social and cultural structures at local, national, and international levels, sport forms new identities, fosters emergent ones, and preserves even the outmoded in an age of unprecedented global development.

At any rate, there is now a palpable sense that sports history is moving into a new phase. “Maverick” historians are peeling off from their day jobs to look
at sport in closer detail and are turning to those who have already spent long careers laboring in the field. It is precisely this moment that this conference, organized jointly by the German Historical Institutes in Warsaw and Washington, sought to capture and promote. While its title “A Whole New Game” might have been conceived with some spin, it is certainly true—to stay within the sporting metaphor—that new balls were called for and hit with skill and accuracy. Sport, as conveners Uta Balbier and Stefan Wiederkehr noted from the outset, “is now finally seen as what it is: a field that different subdisciplines within the field of history can make use of; and a field that reflects social reality as much as it constructs and produces cultural reality.” The time was ripe for considering what the agenda for a newly invigorated sports history should look like, and colleagues from the U.S., Europe, and Australia with a productive mix of experience and professional persuasion were invited as presenters and commentators.

In her opening lecture, Christiane Eisenberg considered the limits of sport as a social system by teasing out the present tension between the leveling off of participation and spectatorship, on the one hand, and the inexhaustibility of media reproduction, on the other. Her richly illustrated examination of the changing ways in which the press has generated images of sporting heroes across time produced a number of important findings: Although sport’s rise coincided with that of the media and photography, concrete images were initially less important than the words of journalists and actors themselves. Even after the advent of advanced photographic techniques in the 1930s, the mental image of the everyman hero retained its validity until television entered the majority of German households in the 1960s. Moreover, the flood of images produced from the 1970s onwards provided the public standards against which to judge contemporary heroes and find them lacking. Sport, as this first paper showed, is located in social networks but can function both inside and outside their technical parameters. It also developed with less help from the media than is often assumed, but is now very much under its emotional influence.

The first panel picked up on these themes by focusing on competition, media, and fans. Barbara Keys called for a re-examination of Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the Olympic Games, from the perspective of diplomatic and international history. The Games and other international sports competitions helped propel new conceptions of human relationships at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and deserve to claim center stage in the history of the creation of a new global consciousness based on universalism and empathy. As such, the rise of sports needs to be seen in the context of intellectual history and, vitally, the history of emotions. Emotions
and their construction formed the focus of Markus Stauff’s thoughts in a paper which showed how, in media sports, the face functions as a blurred boundary between the specifics of sports and all other, non-sporting human activity. Sports, as seen through and produced by the media, are marked by, and live off, this tension in an ongoing process of articulation that both restricts and opens them to other discourses and practices such as politics. Manfred Zeller switched attention from the media to fans in order to emphasize the relation between global events and local culture (glocalization). In his study of international championships and the development of stadium culture in the Soviet Union between 1960 and 1985, he showed how a fanatic subculture, based on the Western, mainly British, model, developed in the 1970s and spread across the country by the mid 1980s, but retained important local meanings and points of interaction with the specifics of late Soviet culture. The Soviet case presents an important caveat in the history of sports: For although sport has become what it is today in large part due to the media’s increased influence over the last thirty years, following soccer on television was a distinctly second-rate activity for the serious soccer fan.

The second panel continued to examine the intricate impact of international forms of competition on local, national, and transnational identities. Steven W. Pope’s paper echoed Barbara Key’s call for greater understanding of the diplomatic networks in which early sporting competition arose by outlining the genesis of the Davis Cup in terms of early twentieth-century American imperialism. The competition, which became dominated in the late 1920s by the French and after 1945 by the Australians, is an example of the way in which Americans indigenized a cultural sporting import (British tennis), created a nationalistic, international sporting competition, and effectively exported it back to Britain within the wider context of a burgeoning, imperial rivalry on the world stage between two sporting and political rivals. In addressing the case of Poland, Britta Lenz focused on a country whose sporting identity depended greatly on the international structures and competitions created by foreigners. Research on Polish soccer, conducted mainly by national sports historians, has concentrated on administration and statistics, with cultural aspects being largely neglected. Soccer, however, received a substantial boost on the foundation of the independent state after the First World War. International associations and their competitions (FIFA and the IOC) provided essential forums in and through which the new state could present itself abroad and configure the contours of its character at home. Sandra Budy explored a similar theme by examining the first All-Union Spartakiade in Moscow in 1928 as a media spectacle and analyzing press articles and photographs that sought to project images of the socialist body and way of life. The International Red Worker Sport event
was used to promote the advantages of socialist culture over its bourgeois counterpart (the Amsterdam Olympics were taking place at the same time), and to foster identification with the regime through some world-class performances and the participation of athletes and performers from across the Soviet republics.

The third panel focused specifically on ethnicity in the international sports arena. Brian D. Bunk discussed how boxing defined Spanish-speaking racial identities during the interwar period, when the sport became an obsession in the Atlantic world. As foreign fighters traveled to America to seek fame and fortune, they became cultural heroes in their countries of origin. In the same period, racial and ethnic identities were intensely debated, with boxing proving perhaps the most racialized sport of all. A differentiated study of images of the Argentine fighter, Luis Firpo (who fought Jack Dempsey in 1923), showed how sport helped construct popular notions of Spanish-speaking identity across the Atlantic. Immigrant communities formed the focus of Melanie Henne’s paper, which took the Chicagoland Sports Congress of 1931 (attended by several thousand athletes participating in gymnastics exhibitions, mass drills, and various ball games) as a starting point to examine the Sokol movement and its shaping of body concepts and identity. In the United States, the 1920s were characterized by institutionalized politics enforcing a complete cultural assimilation and Americanization of immigrants, and the American Sokol duly obliged by stating that its purpose was “to make better American citizens and not Czech patriots.” However, such promotion of good American citizenship—not least by supplying fit bodies to defend their new home country—did not sacrifice former national ties. The movement, its physical spaces, and activities transformed and remodeled its members’ relation to their ancestors’ culture as well.

The fourth panel turned to the codification of gender norms in international sports in Germany and the United States. Erik Jensen used reactions to the women’s 800 meter race at the 1928 Olympics—introduced as part of the first women’s track and field competition in the history of the event, won in a dramatic and exhausting finish by German star Lina Radke-Batschauer, and promptly banned by the IOC for a further thirty-two years—to explore the highly contested nature of the female athlete in Weimar Germany and the figure of the New Woman more generally. Through a series of debates about how women’s new physical and social roles could be reconciled with their capacity to bear children, Weimar Germany progressed towards an enlightened but still limited position on female participation. Jean Williams asked whether women’s sports could be seen primarily as a catalyst for change as part of a feminist agenda or as a continuing arena of restraint of
trade for female athletes. An overview of the development of women’s soccer in Germany and the U.S. demonstrated that “soccer” and “women’s soccer” are culturally rather than biologically constructed examples of difference and that “equal but different” policies are potent instances of institutional sex discrimination. Gerald Gems focused on masculinity, arguing contrary to Elias and the linear progression of civilized manhood, that its American sporting manifestation departed from the British ideal of the gentleman-amateur and regressed into an aggressive, even violent, form. A sweeping analysis, from the late nineteenth century to the present day, from Babe Ruth to Michael Jordan, showed how men of the working and middle classes underscored the physicality of their athletic performance to differentiate between the genders, a sporting habitus which has promoted and established itself via the media internationally as a particularly American form.

The final panel featured three papers that looked at modernist sports architecture and landscape design at different stages of the Cold War. Alexandra Koehring examined the dynamics of Moscow’s Luzhniki stadiums, which were constructed (1954-1956) during the Krushchev reforms as a representative object to launch a rejuvenated and modernized socialism. While participation in international sports involved new consumption patterns that partly undermined socialist ideals, the stadiums created a site where the representation of socialist sporting bodies projected imagined international space, satisfied the demands of an enlarged national media public, and fashioned Moscow as a sports metropolis. Kay Schiller and Christopher Young examined Munich’s Olympic Stadium, which was conceived in the following decade to showcase the Federal Republic as a peace-loving democracy at the 1972 Games, as a site that both transcended and benefited from its 1936 Berlin predecessor. On the one hand, the work of designer Otl Aicher and garden architect Guenther Grzimek reflected a discourse of individual freedom and participation that characterized the changes in values of West German society in the 1960s: affirmative of technology, industrial and urban society, relaxation and positive human interaction. On the other hand, its perfectly planned and executed Gesamtkunstwerk simultaneously drew on the problematic legacy of Berlin. Staying in the same period, Christian Tagsold’s study of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics (with comparative glances at Munich and the Rome Games of 1960) showed Japanese event organizers in a similar double bind: wishing to construct and project their modernity onto international audiences, they presented the emperor, who had presided over the ultranational disaster of the country’s first modernity, as a peaceful head of state. Via subtle spatial links to previous eras and traditions, the Games sought not simply to deny or forget the past, but rather to find the right way to recapture the unfulfilled promises of prewar modernity.
The richness and diversity of the papers demonstrated that sports history has much to offer general history on many fronts. At the same time, the interconnections between the presentations showed how fruitful it is for sports historians to harness their efforts to the common cause of the subdiscipline. The tension between the need for sports history to speak to and participate in wider debates in history, on the one hand, and the necessity of treating the specificities of sports within more narrowly defined parameters, on the other hand, became the subject of lively discussion in the final round table. Ultimately unresolved (and indeed irresolvable), such conversations underline the vitality of the field: The passionately argued desire both to do sports justice and integrate its many facets into the story of modern society bodes well for its future in the discipline. In the field of history, sport is no longer a game.

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