

Introduction: Reflecting on the Past, Present and Future of the British Society of Sports History

Introduction

As the Chair of the British Society of Sports History during its 40th anniversary year, I was delighted to be asked to write the Introduction to this special issue, celebrating four decades of our existence as the BSSH. I want to emphasise at the outset, though, that the hard work which has gone into conceiving, commissioning, collating and editing the articles which appear in the following pages is that of the special issue editors, Conor Heffernan and Katie Taylor.

It was in the first year of my term as Chair, November 2019 - back in the era before 'social distancing' became a regular part of all our vocabularies - that I had the good fortune of being sat next to Professor Richard Holt at a dinner in Leicester. Towards the end of the evening, Dick leaned back in his chair, looked over at me, and remarked that he felt sure the 40th anniversary of the Society would soon be approaching, and what would we be doing to celebrate? Truth be told, I had given it very little thought; had it not been for that fortuitous conversation, this special issue (and the surrounding 40th anniversary activities) might well never have come to bear. Not for the first time, the field of British sports history finds itself in enormous debt to Professor Holt.¹

When I went away to read up on the history of the BSSH, I found that - in common with many sports - there is some dispute as to the exact founding 'date' of the Society. J.A. Mangan has it as March 1983; but Carol Osborne and Dil Porter's recent hunt in the BSSH archives has uncovered an 'inaugural meeting' of BSSH dated 21 March 1982, as part of a conference at the University of Liverpool organised by Richard Cox.² After discussion, we as a Board of Trustees were nonetheless content to settle on 2022 (40 years since the first BSSH conference took place) as the year in which to focus our anniversary celebrations.

During our 2020 BSSH AGM (held virtually, thanks to Covid-19 lockdowns), it was suggested by Malcolm Maclean that a Working Party be assembled to organise anniversary activities, and a group was subsequently convened, consisting of Maclean, Lydia Furse, Conor Heffernan, Dil Porter, Pearse Reynolds and Katie Taylor.³ This special issue was conceived by the Group as part of a wider spectrum of activities which have included podcast interviews with key members of the Society; the gathering of archival materials relating to the founding of the BSSH; and a special keynote delivered by Professor Holt at our 2022 conference, hosted by the International Centre for Sports History and Culture at De Montfort University. The articles which follow reflect on various aspects of both the BSSH and of British sports history as a discipline.

The fear of undertaking a reflective activity like this 40th anniversary celebration is always that it becomes self-congratulatory. It is true that the state of sports history is unrecognisable from when the BSSH was founded; and I believe it is fair to say that as a Society we have done much to help advance the field. On the other hand, as Maclean reminds us in his article in this issue, British sports history 'remains largely blind to the colonised, to sport's mutually sustaining relationship with imperialism and colonialism, and as a consequence the field's blinding Whiteness'. As one of the leading academic societies in the field, the BSSH must take some responsibility for the omissions and blindnesses of sports history, as well as its advances. It is pleasing, therefore, to see that the articles in this special issue do not fall into the trap of focusing only on the BSSH's strengths, but acknowledge and attempt to address our limitations. Only in this way can

British sports history continue to thrive as a discipline; and the BSSH continue to support its development.

The evolution of BSSH

As detailed below (see Osborne and Porter in this issue), the BSSH was set up in response to the growing academic interest in the social history of sport which occurred in Britain (and across the world) in the 1970s and 1980s. At that stage, with interested parties hailing 'from practically the whole spectrum of academe in the United Kingdom, as well as from overseas', the Society aimed simply to bring together like-minded scholars in an annual conference, as well as providing outlets for them to publish their work. 4 Over the years, as sports history has evolved as a discipline, the role of BSSH has had to evolve with it. Back in 1983, the majority of those involved in establishing British sports history as a discipline were physical educationists working in PE departments. By the time I joined the Society eleven years ago, sports historians were so firmly ensconced within Sports Studies departments and Sports History Centres across the UK that it was possible for Martin Johnes to write that sports history had 'developed too much into a 5 self-contained subdiscipline'. 5 Arguably, the Society's role has shifted over time from establishing the legitimacy of sports history, to supporting and promoting the work of those who currently practise in the field.

The extension of our grants and prizes has therefore been a key recent shift. 6 As a Society, we are keenly aware of the need to foster the next generation of sports historians, hence the introduction of specific Early Career Researcher (ECR) and postgraduate research grant schemes in 2019, to go alongside the existing small events fund (inaugurated in 2012). In 2019 we also introduced Conference Panel grants, designed to support multiple members of the BSSH presenting at a conference other than our own - addressing the critique of parochialism which has sometimes been levelled at sports history. Other BSSH grants and prizes are discussed in the Katie Taylor, Fiona Skillen and Margaret Roberts article in this special issue.

Perhaps the biggest legal change in our role came about in 2018, when - after unanimous approval from our membership via an online ballot - we successfully achieved registration with the Charity Commission for England and Wales. This was carried out with the aim of 'mak[ing] the Society more accountable', allowing for 'external supervision of our funds '7 for the first time. 7 The process was led by Pearse Reynolds, and involved no small amount of work, including entirely rewriting our constitution to conform to the Charity Commission's regulations. I highlight this change for two reasons. One, because there is perhaps no better summary of our current activities as a Society than that provided on the Commission's website:

Promoting study and research into the history of sport through: providing grants for research activities, sponsorship of research projects, sponsorship of events, holding conferences and workshops, publishing a journal (Sport in History) and awarding prizes in the field of sports history. 8

Two, because the work which went into this process behind the scenes, undertaken on an entirely voluntary basis, points to the Society's reliance on members who are prepared to give up their time freely in order to ensure the continuation of our work. Some might (not unfairly) offer a neo-liberal critique of this state of affairs, but it seems to me to be a testament to the ethos of the Society that its members are prepared to devote time and energy to supporting its activities.

Despite BSSH's evolution over the past 40 years, our annual conference has remained the epicentre of our activities. Finding the time and the funding to attend academic events is no easy task when undertaking a self-funded doctorate; the fact that since I started my PhD in 2011 I have not missed a single BSSH conference is testament to Matt McDowell's assertion in his article in this issue that:

BSSH conferences have been a testing ground for new material on the historiography of sport, a chance for authors – professors, lecturers, PhD students, undergraduates, and independent researchers alike – to receive feedback in an environment which... is friendly, supportive, and constructive.

I have many happy memories of BSSH conference dinners concluding late into the night - not least in 2013 in Crewe, when I won the Richard Cox prize for best postgraduate paper, and all and sundry wanted to buy me a drink to celebrate. For me, it is continuing to foster this sense of community and friendship which has motivated me to serve on the Executive Committee (now the Board of Trustees) since 2015, latterly as Chair.

The future of BSSH

What of the future of BSSH, and the discipline of sports history? In their own way, each of the articles in this special issue touch on this question. Porter and Osborne's excellent history of the Society, using both archival material and their own recollections, concludes with the recommendation that researchers explore the new BSSH archive at the Kimberlin Library, De Montfort University, Leicester, to tell their own histories of BSSH. They also demonstrate how in its early days the Society 'effectively privileg[ed] male voices', with at least some female members feeling 'ignored, patronised, and talked down to' by their male colleagues. They label the 2010s as a 'decade of change', with the election of Osborne as the first female Chair in 2011 something of a watershed moment for the Society, but argue that tackling other entrenched inequalities remains a challenge for BSSH.

As the third female Chair of BSSH since 2011 (following Dr Osborne and Dr Skillen), I would suggest that it is probably no longer fair to say, as Johnes did in 2008, that BSSH is a 'very male and very middle-aged' organisation'.⁹ At our most recent conference in Leicester in August 2022, 30 (one third) of the delegates were ECRs or postgraduate students. Nonetheless it would be naive to overlook the fact that the market for sports history is a difficult one in the UK, with much talent lost due to the paucity of permanent positions in UK Higher Education (HE) in our subject area.¹⁰ Many of those working in HE are the sole sports historian in Sports Management or Sports Sociology departments; the function of BSSH as a place where we can be amongst those who understand our work is therefore becoming ever more crucial.

For BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) individuals, the problems are even more acute. As Kalwant Bhopal, Martin Myers and Clare Pitkin have shown, racist practices within UK universities mean BME students carry with them the 'baggage' of a 'specialisation of consciousness', which shapes their experience as undergraduates and means they are less likely to make the transition into postgraduate study, let alone into the specialism of sports history.¹¹ It is difficult to know how we as BSSH can begin to tackle the persistence of racial inequalities within HE; but the first step, as Maclean reminds us in this issue, must be to acknowledge the (often unstated) 'blinding whiteness' of British sports history. Maclean's critique of our field in this special issue is a damning one, but it is also a must-read for all those seeking to get to grips with difficult issues of diversity, inclusion and belonging within sports history.

As Amanda Callan-Spenn sets out in her article, the adoption of new policies around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is a priority for BSSH at this 40-year juncture. A number of the articles in this special issue reflect the variety of ways in which we need to conceive of 'diversity' as an organisation. McDowell's thought-provoking discussion of the definition of 'sport' highlights the need to embrace greater diversity in our subject material, stretching and challenging existing definitions. In his analysis of BSSH's journal (1993-2021) and conference programmes (2011-21), McDowell shows that our subject has been dominated by work on a handful of sports (not least soccer), leaving swathing gaps. He argues that BSSH must welcome those who seek to 'expand the frontiers of what we consider "sport"'.

Another aspect of this work relates to how the Society can best support sports historians who are not working within the HE context. As Gary James highlights in his article in this issue, BSSH has a history of embracing those who consider themselves to be independent researchers, and our conference has often been a place where they have been keen to present their work. In turn, BSSH has benefitted greatly from their contributions. James outlines a number of 'alternative sites of sports history' in his article, and adds a pertinent warning to academic historians: 'We must never become blinkered or snooty about how people engage with sports history.' Given the precarity of the HE sector, it seems inevitable that more and more sports history will take place outside of the academy in future years; the question is how BSSH can best support this work.

Finally, the concepts of 'public engagement' and 'impact' are increasingly shaping the framework in which we as historians conduct our research. ¹² In their article below, Taylor, Skillen and Roberts highlight the critical importance of raising the public profile of sports history, and discuss a number of ways in which we as sports historians could better engage the public with our work, not least via the online sports and leisure history magazine *Playing Pasts*, which was launched in September 2016 and receives over 30,000 hits a month. This relates of course to our individual subject matter; digital engagement with BSSH as an organisation has also increased in recent years. This is thanks in particular to the work of Dr Geoffrey Levett in launching our BSSH 'Sport in History' podcast, and of Dr Lisa Taylor in revamping our BSSH website (www.sportinhistory.org). Our 2020 conference was hosted entirely online, while recent keynotes at our conference have been made available in podcast form, increasing public access to our activities.

Nonetheless I still wonder whether we might do more to increase awareness of BSSH - both as an organisation and as a conduit for our members' expertise. I am often struck in my work as a sports journalist by the lack of knowledge of our Society amongst writers and broadcasters. It seems incredible to read (in Porter and Osborne's piece below) that both a BBC producer and a representative from the Sports Council were present at that 1982 conference where BSSH was founded! ¹³ How might we replicate that in 2023 and beyond?

These are all big questions and challenges, for BSSH and for the community of sports historians within and beyond the UK. This special issue adds to a growing literature on the place of sports history within and beyond the academy. It serves not just as a celebration, but (I hope) a starting point for discussion. Here's to 40 more years!

Endnotes:

1. I am referring, of course, to Richard Holt's *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

2. J.A. Mangan, 'The Social History of Sport: Reflections on Some Recent British Developments in Research and Teaching', in David V Vanderwerken (ed.), *Sport in the Classroom: Teaching Sport-Related Courses in the Humanities* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 63.
3. Minutes of the BSSH AGM, 27 August 2020, online via Zoom.
4. Gerald Redmond, 'Sport History in Academe: Reflections on a Half-Century of Peculiar Progress', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 1:1 (1984), p.34. DOI: 10.1080/02649378408713536.
5. Martin Johnes, 'The Historiography of Sport in Britain', in S.W. Pope and John Nauright (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Sports History* (London: Routledge, 2010). My emphasis.
6. See <https://www.sportinhistory.org/categories/funding> (accessed 30 August 2022).
7. Minutes of the BSSH AGM, 2 September 2016, University of Edinburgh.
8. Charity Commission for England and Wales, <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5100678/full-print> (accessed 19 August 2022).
9. Martin Johnes, 'British Sports History: The Present and the Future', *Journal of Sport History* 35:1 (2008), p. 66.
10. Heather Dichter and Wray Vamplew, 'Aspirational Reflections: The Future of Sport History', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 34:5-6, p.462.
11. Kalwant Bhopal, Martin Myers and Clare Pitkin, 'Routes through Higher Education: BME Students and the Development of a "Specialisation of Consciousness"', *British Educational Research Journal* 46:6, p.1322.
12. Laura King and Gary Rivett, 'Engaging People in Making History: Impact, Public Engagement and the World Beyond the Campus', *History Workshop Journal* 80:1 (2015), pp. 218–33. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbv015>
13. See for example Dichter and Vamplew, 'Aspirational Reflections'; Murray Phillips, Douglas Booth and Carly Adams (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sport History* (London: Routledge, 2021); and the Sport in History podcast, 'BSSH 2020 Roundtable: The Future of Sports History', August 2020.