

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Don Morrow, Kevin Wamsley. *Sport in Canada: A History.* Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2005. x + 318 pp. \$44.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-541996-2.

Reviewed by Matthew Barlow (Department of History, Concordia University, Montreal)

Published on H-Canada (April, 2006)

Perhaps it was fitting that within a week after receiving this book for review from H-Canada I was cross-checked by an opposing defenseman while standing in front of the other team's goal, trying to screen the goalie. As I spent the next three weeks lying on the hardwood floor of my study recuperating my sprained back and reflecting upon the myriad injuries I have accumulated over the years playing hockey, football, and soccer, I read this book, and spent a lot of time reflecting on the sections dealing with the body and the discipline and training required to participate and excel in sport.

To my mind, the focus on the body that has become vogue amongst sport historians in recent years best reflects the promise of the burgeoning field of sport history. Sport historians have problematized the body and the attendant discipline the athlete's body requires in a manner that suggests we are finally heeding the 1983 call of Richard Gruneau to view sport as a cultural text.[1] While Gruneau did not have such concepts as gender and the body in mind when he made this connection—he was more focused on class—it would seem to me that sport historians must take up Gruneau's challenge in order to properly understand sport and culture. This makes inherent sense, I would argue, as sport *is* a manifestation of culture, and sport's meanings come out of the dialectic between sport, culture, and the actors who participate in, comment upon, and view sport.

It is this dialectic that Don Morrow, the dean of Canadian sport historians, and Kevin B. Wamsley, both of the University of Western Ontario, examine in their new undergraduate textbook *Sport in Canada: A History*. Quite simply, this is an excellent book, and one that can be read by both undergraduates and specialists in the field with equal excitement. Morrow and Wamsley's writing

is lively and engaging, even if it veers into sports journalism at times. Moreover, the authors make a special effort to embed sport and leisure, and its meanings and manifestations, into the culture from which they arise. For example, Morrow and Wamsley spend a good deal of time situating the leisure forms of the French *coureurs de bois* in the rough-and-tumble world of the fur trade frontier. These leisure activities, which do not conform to our modern visions of sport, nonetheless served the same purpose, as a means of escape and relaxation from the physical, taxing, and occasionally violent work these men engaged in during the day, and that, moreover, these leisure forms *arose out of* these forms of work.

But while Morrow and Wamsley do weave sport and leisure quite skilfully into the landscape of Canadian culture since the pre-contact aboriginal era, they are also quite adept at not lapsing into banal Canadian mythology, in particular with hockey. Despite my own bias towards this sport as both a player and an historian, in popular culture hockey too often gets reduced to banalities that equate it with Canada (think of t-shirts, bumper stickers, and the like which declare that "Canada is Hockey"), or it is used to explain the differences in culture between Canada and other nations, most noticeably the United States.[2] Morrow and Wamsley, however, de-privilege hockey in the narratives of Canadian sport history and instead focus on athletes such as the figure skaters Louis Rubinstein and Barbara Ann Scott, or the strongman Louis Cyr, or sports such as baseball and lacrosse and their development in Canada. All of this is not to say that hockey is ignored, but I would suggest that this more nuanced approach allows for Morrow and Wamsley to examine sport, culture, and myth in Canada in a much more fluid manner, and to analyze the place of sport absent the simple banalities.

Indeed, it is in this kind of approach to the place and meaning of sport and athletes in culture that Morrow and Wamsley are most successful, as they effectively flesh out questions of gender, ethnicity, and class. Their discussion of gender, especially as it related to Cyr and Scott, is particularly well developed. In the case of Scott, they are particularly adept in their focus on her gender and sexuality as both an amateur and professional figure skater. In discussing Scott's "doll-like image," Wamsley and Morrow write that it "flowed almost naturally from Scott's appearance, the media attention to her appearance, and the sport of figure skating itself, which combines the precision and beauty of dance with the athletic skills of the gymnast. Yet more than anyone else, Barbara Ann Scott was the media's vehicle for a re-entrenchment (or new wave) of traditionalism that encouraged female domesticity at the expense of competitive involvement" in the aftermath of World War II (p. 145). Also of note is the fact that Scott's shopping sprees in Paris garnered more attention from the Canadian media than did her three consecutive Lou Marsh Trophies as the Canadian athlete of the year in 1946-48. Morrow and Wamsley argue that this served to keep Scott's femininity "carefully contrived.... It kept her an athlete in disguise. Barely mentioned were her qualities of sacrifice, tenacity, determination, her lonely quest for athletic excellence through thousands of practice hours, a real person working towards an admirable human achievement" (p. 147). This public/private dichotomy is central to their analysis of Scott, and, to a lesser extent, the three male athletes they focus on (the great oarsman Ned Hanley, figure skater Rubenstein, and Cyr), and is a useful tool for exploring the sexualized images and bodies of elite athletes, especially women, both historically and in contemporary society (for example, think of the images of the Russian tennis players Anna Kournikova and Maria Sharapova). Yet, it is precisely this layered and subtle gendered analysis of Scott and her career that make Morrow and Wamsley's insistence on referring to her as "Barbara Ann" throughout their discussion all the more frustrating. None of the male athletes discussed in *Sport in Canada* are referred to by their first name, a practice which serves to infantilize and patronize not just the female athlete, but her accomplishments as well.

This brings me to my major quibbles with *Sport in History*. Some of these are no doubt attributable to the fact that this book was designed as an undergrad textbook, as it falls prey to some of the problems of this genre. The most noticeable is an attempt to be all things to all people, which can lead to a rather scattershot and journalistic

approach in spots. For example, in the discussion of baseball in Canada during the twentieth century, Morrow and Wamsley's discussion of the feats of the Toronto Maple Leafs of the old International League tends towards a simple descriptive recounting of the team's pennants and home runs. Similarly, in discussing the death in 2004 of the Montreal Expos, Canada's first major league baseball club, they write the following: "The major reason was the ever-present problem in most Canadian professional sport enterprises—too small a population base to support big league sporting franchises consistently" (p. 124). While this may have been the case with the decampment of the Quebec Nordiques to Denver or the Winnipeg Jets to Phoenix (or, for that matter, the move of the Hartford Whalers to Raleigh, North Carolina), it was not the case with the Expos. Montreal, according to the 2001 census, is a metropolitan area of 3.38 million, which makes it a larger urban center than most "large" American centres such as Boston, Miami, Denver, and, indeed, Washington, the city to which the Expos moved.

Sport in Canada also suffers from an Ontario-centric approach to the history of sport in Canada. Morrow and Wamsley seem to downplay the central role of Montreal in the development of modern sport in Canada. It was in Montreal that sports as diverse as hockey, lacrosse, and Canadian football were popularized, and while the authors do acknowledge this, they seem to do so as a means to getting onto the story in Toronto and around southern and southwestern Ontario. This focus carries all the way to the late twentieth century and can be seen in their discussion of large baseball stadiums in Canada: "Today we have Montreal's Olympic Stadium and Toronto's gigantic outdoor/indoor SkyDome" (p. 125). Leaving aside, for the moment, the question (or joke, depending on how one looks at it) of the Big O's roof, which is also supposed to be retractable, it remains that it is the larger than the "gigantic" SkyDome.

In the same vein, Atlantic Canada, the Prairies, and British Columbia (to say nothing of the North) are largely absent from the discussion and analysis of sport in Canada. To some extent, this can be expected, as modern sport (i.e., organized, rule-bound sport) radiated out from Montreal, and later, Toronto, across Canada. However, sport was also central to the development of Canadian culture and society across the entirety of the nation, as Colin Howell has ably demonstrated with baseball in the Maritimes [3]. Or, to take the case of box lacrosse, the sport underwent a boom in the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island in British Columbia throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, when I was growing up in Van-

couver in the 1980s and early 1990s, much attention was focused on the feats of the New Westminster Salmonbellies, Burnaby Lakers, and Vancouver Burrards in their attempts to capture the national box lacrosse championship. Today, nearly 150 years after the decline of field lacrosse as a major sport in central Canada, box lacrosse remains a popular sport on the West Coast, despite the failure of the new National Lacrosse League's Vancouver Ravens, who folded after a single season. At any rate, this box lacrosse boom out West is barely commented upon by Wamsley and Morrow. Indeed, one need look at the index to discover this central Canadian focus: there are nineteen separate entries for Montreal and Montreal-based clubs and phenomena, nine for Toronto, and only three for Vancouver, all of which deal with the city's recently successful bid for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

This Ontario-centric approach to the development of modern sport in Canada is perhaps the most frustrating aspect of *Sport in Canada: A History*. This may reflect a similar problem I note with the generalist undergrad Canadian textbook, which is the disproportionate focus on developments in Ontario, and to a lesser extent, Québec, and the concomitant lack of focus on the other

regions of the country.

All this aside, however, it remains that Morrow and Wamsley have offered us an excellent contribution to Canadian sporting history and Canadian culture. The manner in which the authors weave their multifaceted analysis of gender, class, and ethnicity into not just the sports they examine but Canadian culture as a whole makes this book a worthy addition to the discussion of not just sport in Canadian history, but Canadian history in general.

Notes

[1]. Richard Gruneau, *Class, Sport, and Social Development* (Windsor: Human Kinetics, 1999).

[2]. Michael A. Robidoux, "Imagining a Canadian Identity Through Sport: A Historical Interpretation of Lacrosse and Hockey," *Journal of American Folklore*, 115/456 (2002): pp. 209-225.

[3]. Colin D. Howell, *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: Matthew Barlow. Review of Morrow, Don; Wamsley, Kevin, *Sport in Canada: A History*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11634>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.