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# Public history and the British Society of Sports history: opportunities and challenges

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the importance of sports history societies sharing their research with a broader audience. It draws on our own experiences and highlights examples of the work done by other British Society of Sports History members to disseminate their research through ‘traditional’ methods such as films, radio, and exhibitions and digital means, for example, *Playing Pasts*. However, the paper’s aim is not simply self-congratulatory; it also focuses on the need to broadcast sports history to a younger audience, including those studying in further education. In considering how to ensure the survival of sports history as a subject, we, as members of sports history societies, need to engage the next generation of sports historians. This article considers the importance of doing so and the difficulties of this. With universities under increasing pressure and history departments facing significant cuts, ensuring the relevance and importance of our subject has never been more critical. This article makes some suggestions of how to do this and challenges sports history societies to reflect on what else they could do.

**KEYWORDS** Impact; engagement; BSSH; public history

## Introduction

Since its foundation in 1982, the British Society of Sports History (BSSH) has sought to promote the study of sport in Britain and across the world. The BSSH website mentions that the work of the organisation includes activities such as collaborating with the heritage sector and museums, promoting the study of sports history in higher, further, and secondary education, as well as engaging with the media and the broader public, yet it mentions little about these activities.<sup>1</sup> This article highlights BSSH members’ work to ‘broadcast’

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sports history to a broader audience and challenges the organisation, and others like it, to go further. Sharing knowledge with the public will help societies avoid Dr Heather Dichter and Professor Wray Vamplew's critique that many of the 'learned societies' of sports history are mostly 'concerned with organizing annual conferences ... and publishing (sometimes with commercial organizations) an official journal'.<sup>2</sup>

Dichter and Vamplew are not the only ones to problematise sports history societies. For example, Kevin Moore states that grouping sports historians into organisations such as the BSSH and the North American Society of Sport History creates 'isolation'.<sup>3</sup> Moore acknowledges the good work done by sports history organisations but believes that the work of sports historians has 'largely only transformed *academic* knowledge of it, not that of a wider audience'.<sup>4</sup> The gulf between academic historians and public awareness that Moore highlights are evident in a 2011 Cambridge Public History Seminar that sought to discover why 'professional historians have tended to overlook the beautiful game'.<sup>5</sup> The seminar organisers' lack of awareness of the extensive work on this topic suggests that Moore might be correct in his assertion that 'there is a huge gulf between the academic and the public history of sport'.<sup>6</sup> He challenges sports historians to close this gap and impact sport today. This call has not gone unheard by BSSH members, as we will see in this article, but there is still more to be done.

Sports history, indeed, any history, is not just about the past. It can shed light on topical issues, providing the background and context to news stories.<sup>7</sup> Professor John Tosh argues that citizens need this kind of historical knowledge because 'The health of a representative democracy depends in part on the citizen's readiness critically to examine issues ... which are in the public interest'.<sup>8</sup>

Dr Gary James notes the mutually beneficial relationship that academics can gain by engaging with non-specialist groups, sports clubs, companies, and governing bodies. Sports historians demonstrate the significance of their work through such work while also providing the collaborating organisation with academic rigour. De Montfort University's partnership with Leicester City Football Club that sees sports history included as part of the matchday programme is a fine example of what can be achieved. With financial and personnel cuts to history departments and what Professor Martin Johnes calls an 'antipathy towards studying sports history from the so-called proper or mainstream historians', raising the public profile and importance of sports history is critical.<sup>9</sup> The research that academics carry out should have a broader interest than just fellow sports historians to demonstrate the broader societal importance of their work.

## Public engagement

It is a commonplace expectation now for academics to embed ‘impact’ and ‘engagement’ within their funding bids for the major UK funding bodies, and indeed it is now a significant part of the Research Excellence Framework, which assesses the value of academic research across the UK.<sup>10</sup> As recently as 10 years ago, there was minimal emphasis on meaningful public engagement, but now it is a vital part of many research projects. The definitions of impact and engagement vary between organisations, but their application is broadly the dissemination of research and interactions with those outside of the academy; some organisations have called these interactions public history.<sup>11</sup> Some BSSH members have pursued this aspect of their research for many years, often well before it became part of the academic discourse. Perhaps this is because of the diverse backgrounds and disciplines that many of us come from? Or perhaps it is due to the nature of the subjects we study? Sport as part of everyday culture and as characterised by a range of activities ensures that our research has an in-built relatability to it across social groups. However, as some researchers will attest, the issue of sport being perceived as ‘popular culture’ and therefore of less intrinsic value to society than that perceived as high culture can sometimes work against us.<sup>12</sup> This section explores how members of the BSSH have pursued various paths of public history through different types of engagement and dissemination with their sports history research over the years, something which has increased in profile and quantity in recent years. This is not an exhaustive account of all of the inspiring work of our members, but rather the intention here is to highlight the range and breadth of those contributions and consider their impact and potential future activities.

## Radio, television, and podcasts

Perhaps one of the most obvious outlets for academics is the media, and members of the BSSH have contributed to many newspaper articles and radio and television features. Several significant programmes have developed around the research of individuals or groups of researchers. The most substantial of these was the ground-breaking series *Sport and The British* on Radio 4. The 30-part series, presented by Claire Balding, aired between January and March of 2012.<sup>13</sup> It explored the relationship between sports history and broader British history, demonstrating how they are intrinsically interlinked. The programme took three years to produce and was developed by members of the International Centre for Sports History and Culture (ICSHC) at De Montfort University, including Professor Richard Holt and then Centre Director, Professor Tony Collins, with contributions from

several BSSH members within and beyond the ICSHC.<sup>14</sup> The series was broadcast each weekday at 13.45 GMT, a prime schedule slot. The episodes are now available in audiobook format and as an online podcast on the BBC website, ensuring that many more people across the globe can hear them.<sup>15</sup>

While *Sport and the British* stands out as a landmark series with sports history as its focus, many more radio programmes have drawn on the expertise of BSSH members.<sup>16</sup> Most recently, *Sporting Heroines of History* on the BBC World Service explored the role of women in sport through history.<sup>17</sup> It featured the work of BSSH members Dr Michelle Sikes and Dr Fiona Skillen. The programme was then made available on BBC iPlayer. It was selected as 'Pick of the Week' on Radio 4 and re-broadcast on that channel too.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that many of these programmes have been developed in the build-up to and broadcast during large sporting events. As often happens in the media sector, the commissioning and broadcasting of programmes are aligned with topical news, therefore it stands to reason that there are more sports-related programmes during such times. More sports historians are contributing to these types of programmes; it is unclear if that is due to recognition amongst producers and the wider public of the importance and richness of sports history in exploring ideas in contemporary sport or whether it is that we as sports historians have become more savvy at promoting our research agendas. Perhaps it is both!

Across the UK, many programmes have been made focusing on or featuring aspects of sporting history underpinned by our members' research and expertise. In Scotland, the award-winning documentary filmmaker Margot McCuaig and her production company PurpleTV have produced several important sports history documentaries for BBC ALBA over the last ten years. It is worth noting that the prohibitive cost of moving-image archive material has meant sport historians provide important narrative content to McCuaig's documentaries, which are often supplemented by re-enactments of sport history which are based on academic research.<sup>19</sup> McCuaig's documentaries put the research and the researcher at the heart of production, ensuring that the final documentary not only tells a good story but that it is underpinned by careful research, as such working with McCuaig and her colleagues at PurpleTV provides sports historians with an opportunity to get their work into the public domain in an exciting and engaging way. Starting with *Honeyballers* in 2013, which explored the development of women's football in Scotland and drew on my, Richard McBrearty, and Professor Jean Williams's expertise.<sup>20</sup> The documentary was influential in promoting the hidden history of women's football and was seen as part of a wider national recognition of the women's game in Scotland.<sup>21</sup> McCuaig has also produced documentaries on *Jock Stein*, *Jim Baxter*, *Jimmy Johnstone*, *Third Lanark*, *Tommy Burns*, *Motherwell F.C.*, *Glasgow City F.C.*, *Elena Baltacha*, and *Rose Reilly*, which featured Dr Karen Fraser.<sup>22</sup> Her most recent

film, *Iron Women*, focused on the history of women's golf in Scotland and drew on the research of Dr Skillen, Lauren Beatty, and Hannah Fleming.<sup>23</sup> The BSSH showed the film at their Annual Conference in 2021 as part of a Q&A with the director. The documentaries are commissioned and broadcast on BBC ALBA, which highlights the benefits of having a broader channel spectrum coupled with a decision by the channel to attract a wider audience beyond native Gaelic speakers to a minority language channel, something which has been discussed by Ramon and Haynes in detail.<sup>24</sup> These documentaries have contributed to the growing recognition of sports history and heritage in Scotland, particularly celebrating the rich histories of women's sport in this area.

Outside of Scotland, Professor Tony Collins has been the historical consultant and interviewee on BBC Wales' 'The Rugby Codebreakers' documentary in 2018, which looked at Welsh rugby union players who moved to the north of England to play rugby league, the historical consultant to 'Alfie Allen's History of Football' for the History Channel in 2017 and the New Zealand series 'The History of Rugby' in 2019.<sup>25</sup> By working with the media, researchers can disseminate their work to a much wider audience in an accessible way and impact people's understanding of history, and influence everyday culture.

Often academic involvement in television productions has been initiated by an invite from a production company or researcher. But that is slowly changing and increasingly academics seeking out opportunities to present their research on television. This has been helped greatly in the last four years by developments at the International TV Festival held in Edinburgh, which has hosted a series of events under the banner AHTV.<sup>26</sup> Sponsored by UKRI, these events are aimed at providing networking opportunities between academics and television producers. These events vary in format from year to year but have included discussions with panels of academics and industry professionals on successful collaborations, presentations from academics who have consulted or written for television and film and even 'speed-dating' events where academics can pitch their ideas to production companies.<sup>27</sup> This is a great environment for those researchers interested in working with television to get involved as it provides valuable insight into how the industry works, the trends and often the opportunity to make connections with producers and editors.

A new, rapidly growing platform has emerged in the last ten years, podcasting. A recent Ofcom survey revealed that fifty-five percent of males and forty-five percent of females in the UK listen to podcasts weekly, with the majority of the listeners being between 16–65 years old and most popular with those 16–34.<sup>28</sup> Sports history and sports historians have found their place within this growing media platform. The platform's benefit is that it is freely available to anyone to produce programmes themselves, provided

they have the necessary equipment and technical knowhow. It also offers flexibility. Free from the restrictions of mainstream media, podcasts can be made as frequently as required and can last for as long as required. Professor Tony Collins was one of the first British sports historians to establish a regular podcast, *Rugby Reloaded*.<sup>29</sup>

*Rugby Reloaded* began in March 2018 as a weekly, ten-minute podcast looking at aspects of rugby history and the other football codes. The concept was to offer scholarly discussion of sports history in a popular accessible format that was easy to digest.<sup>30</sup> The first episode looked at the implications of the William Webb Ellis creation myth and has gone on to cover topics such as the evolutionary paths of rugby and football, rules of the games, art and poetry, gender, war, and pretty much anything else relating to rugby. In 2019 the format was expanded to include guests discussing their work, and interviewees have ranged from Dr Melissa MacMahon on amateurism in Vichy France to Professor Heidi Norman on Aboriginal rugby league in Australia. Now approaching its 200th episode, *Rugby Reloaded* has a modest reach of 1,500 regular listeners but has established a loyal and engaged audience stretching from academics to sports fans who are enthusiastic about their sports history.<sup>31</sup>

The first episode of the *Sport in History Podcast* was uploaded in June 2019 as an offshoot of the BSSH's seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research (IHR) in London.<sup>32</sup> Taking place at 5.30pm on Mondays in Bloomsbury, convenor Geoff Levett was conscious that it was difficult for many of those interested in sports history to attend. He notes that 'podcasting our speakers seemed a natural way of increasing the reach of the seminar and getting our speakers' work out into the world'.<sup>33</sup> The first episode featured then PhD student Lydia Furse talking about her work on women's rugby. One of the podcast's key aims has been to feature both up-and-coming researchers and established academics. Over time the remit of the podcast broadened from just papers given at the seminar series to include interviews with non-BSSH researchers, papers from the Society's conference, and news updates on the Society's other activities. Geoff was joined by Dr Katie Taylor, who focuses on postgrads and ECRs, while the geographical range was extended when Dr Conor Heffernan joined the team during his time at the University of Texas, Austin.

As of early 2022, the podcast has around 80 episodes with downloads of around 300 per week from SoundCloud and a similar number from the other channels.<sup>34</sup> The podcast team is 'proud that their guests show a true reflection of the rich diversity of our research community'. In relation to the BSSH, the significant benefit has been the increased reach it gives to guests' research outputs and provides a means of collaboration with other organisations such as the IHR, the British Library, The Cricket Society,

and individual universities whereby joint events can be publicised and recorded.<sup>35</sup>

### **Exhibitions**

‘Playing for Scotland’ was a National Galleries of Scotland exhibition which was on display at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery from December 2011 until March 2017.<sup>36</sup> The exhibition was one of the re-opening displays at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery following a three-year £17.6 million refurbishment. Curated by Imogen Gibbon, BSSH member and Deputy Director and Chief Curator of Portraiture, the exhibition explored how ‘Modern sport has its origins in the nineteenth century when migration from countryside to cities, together with increased leisure time and the advent of the railways, encouraged mass participation.’ Exploring this transformation of sport from informal and irregular to organised and formalised participation in this period, the exhibition covered a range of sports and included many significant works. Amongst those featured were *The Golfers* by Charles Lee, *Leith Races* by William Reed, *The Grand Match of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club* by Charles Lee and *A Highland Landscape with a Game of Shinty* by Daniel Cunliffe and A. Smith of Mauchline.<sup>37</sup> A series of public engagement events accompanied the exhibition, with talks from authors, photographers, artists, and historians, including Dr Joyce Kay on suffragettes and sport. The highlight of the series was a co-produced families event with Scottish Curling to celebrate the long-term loan of Charles Lees’s *Grand Match* painting – this was an Indoor Curling event in the Great Hall of the Portrait Gallery, attended by Team GB Men’s Curling Team Olympic silver medallist Michael Goodfellow.<sup>38</sup> The exhibition was visited by 618,482 people throughout its run, bringing Scottish sporting history to the fore with this celebration of the rich cultural heritage.

Another popular exhibition was ‘Playing By The Rules: Sport and The Law’, which ran from July-Sept 2012 at the Supreme Court in Parliament Square, London. Professor Tony Collins and Professor Jean Williams curated the exhibition in conjunction with the British Association for Sport Law and the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom.<sup>39</sup> Through panels, objects, and interactive displays, it charted the history of law and sport, exploring a range of perspectives from ethics, branding and commercialisation to the role of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) and anti-doping measures. The exhibition was granted the use of the Inspire mark, which recognised it as ‘innovative and exceptional’ and directly inspired by the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.<sup>40</sup> As touched on earlier, these sports heritage exhibitions and events often occur in sync with significant sporting events in a way that is arguably less commonplace with other subject matters. That said, these events perhaps provide sports historians and

heritage specialists with an opportunity, or leverage even, to develop exciting and engaging exhibitions, and their topicality is just what is required to start the conversation or pique funders' interests? From the data gathered for this paper, it seems that since 2012 there have been more sports history exhibitions and heritage events than before. But it may not simply be that funders and institutions are more amenable to proposals on sports history at these key times, but we would suggest that 2012 was a watershed moment for many British sports historians, realising the potential for public engagement in their work.

In 2014 Professor Richard Haynes and archivist Karl Magee from Stirling University Archives researched and curated the 'Hosts and Champions' exhibition. It was developed as part of the Culture 2014 programme which ran alongside the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.<sup>41</sup> The exhibition traced the growth and development of the Commonwealth Games from its origins up to the 2014 Games. After a successful run at the Glasgow Fruit Market during the Games, the exhibition was developed further and toured across Scotland, visiting 20 venues over 83 weeks. The exhibition later travelled to Australia as part of the 2018 Games. Over 200,000 people visited the exhibition. The impact of this exhibition cannot be overstated.<sup>42</sup> The archives at Stirling University grew by 205% through donations and acquisitions relating to the Commonwealth Games due to 'Hosts and Champions' and their partnership with Commonwealth Games Scotland.<sup>43</sup> The archive has also developed relationships with other sport and tourism bodies and is now recognised as one of Scotland's largest repositories of sporting heritage. The exhibition resulted in two conferences, 'Pass It On: Celebrating Scotland's Sporting Heritage' in 2017 and 'Kick Off! Engaging With Scotland's Sporting Heritage' in 2018, both events included papers from academics, heritage practitioners, and representatives of sports organisations. Haynes and Magee have been, and continue to be, at the forefront of championing sporting heritage in Scotland and were founding board members of the Scottish Sport Heritage Consortium in 2019.

### ***Digital broadcasting and Playing Pasts***

There has been a rapid change in the way that the digital age has, perhaps inevitability, altered how history is broadcast. The time-honoured ontological, epistemological, and methodological thinking that once privileged the academic historian over public historians, and academic histories over public histories, is being diluted. Digital technologies and platforms have accelerated the involvement of the public both as researchers and creators of history, promoting their own meaning about the past without the intervention of professional historians. This popularisation of history emphasises

the living, ongoing, and dynamic aspect of the genre and, for the sports and leisure historian, seeing history through such a lens can broaden and change methodological practice.<sup>44</sup>

In June 2015, in response to these changes in the environment, Manchester Metropolitan University's Sport and Leisure History (SpLeisH) research team hosted a seminar on the future for sports history as a sub-discipline of history. This event saw academics involved in researching and teaching sport and leisure history joining together with non-academic researchers and sporting heritage practitioners to reflect on the status of the field. The consensus was that the sports history community needed to do something different. This agreement was reinforced shortly afterwards with the publication of a special issue of *The International Journal of the History of Sport* on methodologies, subsequently published as a book, which explored the range of research tools and approaches currently available to sports and leisure historians.<sup>45</sup> This publication stimulated further thinking about ways to disseminate research more widely and how the field could be extended to encompass both academic and non-academic interest groups. The online sports and leisure history magazine *Playing Pasts* emerged as a result.

*Playing Pasts* was launched in September 2016 with the broad aim to provide a platform for all sports and leisure history constituencies. As a fully open access online magazine, it was designed to make more extensively available the research of British and international colleagues, most of which was being published in academic journals not easily available to a worldwide community who were becoming increasingly interested in the subject. In addition, since a significant proportion of the international sports history community operates outside of academia, the magazine further intended to engage and encourage independent, non-academic researchers and facilitate their activities through extending their networks and providing an outlet for their work. Additional motivations for introducing *Playing Pasts* included recognising the urgent need to develop a higher status for our field of research, stimulate further research perhaps from outside the hallowed arena of academia, and educate about this area of history. A key goal was to make visible the many issues surrounding gender and minorities in sport and reveal hidden histories connected to place and identity. Therefore, the overall aim was to generate a truly collaborative arena, widening knowledge through different networks of the importance of local histories, identifying lost individuals and communities, and connecting with international researchers and interest groups.<sup>46</sup>

Margaret Roberts has been responsible for the content on the website, a volunteer role that includes the preparation of contributions, presentation of the website, advertising, creating social media posts, and liaising with authors. The editing of the various research contributions, be they from

world-renowned academics, non-English speaking colleagues, non-academic practitioners, or fledgling researchers, has been both demanding and rewarding; it has also provided Roberts with the chance to offer hitherto unprecedented opportunities for the dissemination of such research globally in a freely accessible and readable format. One of the attractive features of the magazine is that there is no set writing format; contributors can submit in whatever style suits them and their work; the watchword very much being inclusivity. *Playing Pasts* has by these processes helped to transform those individuals and communities, all too often disconnected from Higher Education research agendas, from passive audiences into active participants and further empowered them to create, shape, and share their histories.

Although there are several academic journals dedicated to the area, *Playing Pasts* differs in that it is presented solely as an online publication. While many of the featured articles are underpinned by rigorous research, they are presented in a shortened form, accompanied by numerous illustrations, allowing the reader to explore and engage with a range of different ideas and research. The magazine also contrasts with other publications as it is not divided into discrete issues or volumes, but rather material is added weekly, so there is always something fresh and novel to read while existing material is archived into easily accessible sections. The whole enterprise offers a visually arresting and modern format that appeals across the sports history spectrum.

*Playing Pasts* then, propelled by a desire to intervene in traditional historiographical practice, has undoubtedly succeeded in providing a bridge between the more rarefied world of academic publications and the wider public.<sup>47</sup> The opportunity for burgeoning scholars and non-academics to bring their research into the public arena is novel in history in general and sport and leisure history in particular. *Playing Pasts* has been an instrumental catalyst in this arena. Examples include volunteers from the Hockey Museum who have carried out extensive research concerning the acquisitions on display but had limited scope to disseminate their findings. The magazine published this research in a series of articles, complete with illustrations of artefacts, newspaper clippings, postcards, and photographs. The articles soon began to gain further engagement via the comments section of the website and the *Playing Past* social media platforms. This increased public awareness resulted in several connections with people who had memorabilia or family stories and, more importantly, previously unknown or forgotten family involvement. This work further added to the field's history and which, without the engagement with *Playing Pasts*, would be lost to the hockey world forever.

One of the other aims of the magazine is to engage with postgraduate students and early career researchers. The initial rationale was to allow an opportunity, early in the research process, to publish some research

aspects, enable democratic commentary and engagement, and provide a place to reflect on their findings with others, perhaps away from the close-knit environment of their supervisory team. It is gratifying to see the number of students who took up the opportunity, but, more than that, *Playing Pasts* offers a stage on which to present the research that inevitably fails to make the final PhD thesis. *Playing Pasts* has serendipitously found itself the home of everything from football-playing elephants and pioneer pedestriennes to reports of the spectacle of young women in rowing shorts being distracting to the male competitors. Such novel and possibly tangential facets of research have often elicited the interest of radio or newsprint media. Several contributors to the magazine have found themselves being invited to explain the story further and thus have publicised the more serious aspect of their studies to a broader audience.

An exciting and significant partnership related to this strand of *Playing Past's* work has been developed with the BSSH. One of the objectives of this new enterprise is to provide an outlet for all the thought-provoking work that BSSH members are carrying out, and to that end, there is now a dedicated section on the magazine website where all articles written by BSSH members can be found. The most important aspect of this collaboration is the institution of the annual *Playing Pasts* Postgraduate and Early Career Researchers Prize, and the inaugural awarding will occur at the 2022 BSSH Annual Conference. All work published by BSSH postgraduate and early career researcher members on the *Playing Pasts* website within the twelve months preceding the conference will automatically be eligible.

A series of articles has showcased work from undergraduate students at the Department of History and Archaeology at the University of Chester, who undertook a module introducing them to archival research linked to *Leisure and Sport History*. *The students created a research poster which they then adapted to write a Playing Pasts post. Through the power of the magazine's social media presence, one student had her article noticed and the museum in question subsequently invited them to join forces to create, among other items, a series of information posters.*

*Playing Pasts* identifies itself as the global platform for sports and leisure history and that is not only demonstrated by the multiplicity of the themes and topics covered and the inclusion of international authors who write about a range of pursuits, but it is most markedly exemplified through the 2020 formal association negotiated between *Playing Pasts* and the Italian sport history society, *Società Italiana di Storia dello Sport* (SISS). This collaboration has allowed SISS members to publish their work in English and, therefore, bring it to the attention of a new audience.<sup>48</sup>

The scholastic collective that is *Playing Pasts* has expanded from its original focus on the written word to now include podcasts and video presentations, as well as publishing a series of SpLeisH publications in open access

format. These edited volumes are collections of conference papers, permitting those outside the purview of the academic conference circuit to access what is often fledgling research, and some very beneficial collaborations and crossing points of ideas have resulted. Authors of books and papers are encouraged to submit details for inclusion within the website's new books/publications segment. In response to emerging areas of interest to sports and leisure historians, several new sections have been introduced, including a partnership with Alexandra Park, Manchester, to study the various sporting aspects of the Park's history and create a series of sporting biographies. Work researching Bertha Crowther, in which Roberts teamed up with family members by exploring their archives, photo albums and other records, has enabled the family to understand Bertha's importance to the athletic world at a time when women were only just achieving a degree of recognition for their efforts. It has also added to the body of comprehensive biographies of similar individuals that *Playing Pasts* features.

The question as to whether *Playing Pasts* is achieving its aims to provide a conduit and stimulate discourse for the exchange of research findings, ideas, and general commentary between academics and non-academics, while also engaging with new audiences and encouraging the significant development of a global community, can be answered by the interrogation of the statistics behind the website. During the magazine's five years, its popularity has steadily grown in terms of contributors and readers. To date, over 120 individuals from different scholarly constituencies have showcased their research. The monthly visit/read count is currently over 30,000 and rising, with an international reach – USA, France, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands being the top five non-UK countries engaging with the site.

*Playing Pasts* is a genuinely innovative website since there was no global digital outlet for the public history of sports and leisure before its inception. The impact of *Playing Pasts* on the genre derives from its ability to allow scholars who gravitate towards it as an outlet for their work not only a warm welcome and a sympathetic ear but the ability to co-produce their research in a way not offered by traditional journals. The magazine has not only allowed for the intellectual exchange between academic and public historians to thrive, but it has also brought their work to new audiences, enabled democratic commentary and engagement through social media, and increased the credibility of the subject by highlighting its massive international popularity within communities around the world.

## **Sporting heritage**

A further means of broadcasting sports history is through partnerships with other organisations. During the past decade, sports heritage has received growing recognition, with 2012 and the build-up to the Olympics in

London being cited as the turning point.<sup>49</sup> *Sporting Heritage*, a not-for-profit community interest company, has been at the forefront of much of this development.<sup>50</sup> Through their work with funding bodies, they have advocated for greater recognition of the value and use of sporting heritage across the UK. A vital aspect of their work is advising groups on the day-to-day aspects of caring for collections and how to preserve, catalogue, and protect them. Critically too they identify and publicise funding opportunities and support those writing applications to ensure the preservation and use of existing and emerging collections. They help promote collections through their growing network and events, such as National Sporting Heritage Day held annually in September.<sup>51</sup> This campaign encourages archives, museums, and private collections to share posts and images of items in their care relating to sports history on social media and to host events around the theme. This day has done much to promote 'hidden' sports archives and collections, encouraging connections between heritage organisations, sports organisations, and researchers.

Recently, *Sporting Heritage* has successfully established national advisory boards to help facilitate conversations and collaborations at a local level in Scotland and Wales. They have also worked closely with the BSSH. Presentation and discussion panels have been run by *Sporting Heritage* and the BSSH at their respective conferences to encourage greater interaction between academics, researchers, and heritage practitioners. At the heart of this network is the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships awarded to *Sporting Heritage* from 2016 to 2019. These studentships ensured that relationships between academic institutions and heritage organisations were formalised around the study and understanding of aspects of sports history. *Sporting Heritage's* role in managing the studentships on behalf of the AHRC has ensured that overlooked areas of sports history have been explored; projects have included detailed studies of women and minorities' participation in sport.<sup>52</sup>

The students awarded these fully-funded PhD Studentships are embedded within a museum or heritage collection whilst writing their thesis and are supervised by members of both the university and the heritage organisation. The studentships contributed to public history through their involvement with exhibitions and educational programmes within their heritage partner organisation.<sup>53</sup> The scheme provided students and staff with a fantastic opportunity to develop new skills and networks across sectors, a significant opportunity in today's demanding job market. Many of our members have been supervisors in this scheme and have introduced their students to the BSSH. Our organisation is undoubtedly richer for the new scholars that this scheme has developed and for the new members from the heritage sector who have joined us. However, we also need to engage students in the further education sector to ensure the next generation of sports historians.

## Education and inspiring future sports historians

It is not uncommon to find Some A-level and BTEC students approaching the history of sport negatively when they come to learn about it as part of their studies. They believe history to be boring and not relevant to them. However, when taught well, the subject can inspire students, but they need to understand its relevance today. As Dr Gary James states, ‘our subject is called sport *history* but to me it is actually sport *relevance*. It has relevance to life and experiences today, not simply the past and we must never forget that’.<sup>54</sup> Making those connections with students helps them develop a deeper understanding of sport and the importance of its history.

We need to find ways to engage students of this age with a passion for sports history, ensuring the next generation of sports historians. Traditional modes of broadcasting sport history include historians’ work with museums, the media, and sports organisations, an element of public history are significant. However, as Tosh notes, public history is ‘not only consumed by ordinary people but is also researched and disseminated by them’.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, one way to engage students in further education is to support their own sports history research, encouraging them to delve deeper into a topic that interests them.

In 2019 the BSSH created a new prize for A-level students, the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) Award. Any student completing an Extended Project on a topic related to sports history is eligible, and the winner gets year-long BSSH membership, £100 of Amazon vouchers, and the opportunity to present at the annual conference. Originally the EPQ was part of the 14–19 Diploma offered to students between 2008 and 2013. However, it later became available to all Level 3 students, a decision that was partly due to criticism that the curriculum failed to promote autonomy and was an attempt to ‘combat disengagement and underachievement’.<sup>56</sup> The qualification allows students to study a topic entirely of their choosing, either writing an essay, completing an investigation, or creating an artefact such as a model, piece of music, or a play, amongst other possibilities. The qualification’s aim is to encourage students to undertake self-directed learning and develop the research and writing skills that universities require.

The award encourages students to pursue sports history as a topic, but it also puts them in touch with an organisation that will encourage and support their interests. Increasing membership numbers and encouraging a younger demographic can therefore benefit the BSSH.

The BSSH’s claim, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, that they promote the study of sport in further education has some historical merit. However, there has been a move away from this work in recent years. In 1997, Dr Frank Galligan, a physical education teacher and sports historian, joined the BSSH committee as a dedicated Schools Liaison Officer. This

move was a concerted effort to increase the Society's membership. From 1995, Galligan was involved in the publication of the Philathletic newsletter. Originally founded by Bob Davis, the first Chief Examiner of A-Level Physical Education (PE), the newsletter was distributed to all A-Level PE centres. Galligan ensured that each edition included membership details for the BSSH. In 2001, under Galligan's editorship, the BSSH published *Sports History for A Level Physical Education*, a guide to the sports history aspect of the PE syllabus, an element often neglected in exam board textbooks. This book, written by prominent sports historians, provided detailed information on the sports history topics that were required elements of the various exam boards' specifications. Galligan was also the course tutor for the socio-cultural studies part of the revision sessions and summer schools run by the British Association of Advisers and Lecturers in Physical Education. As with the newsletter, this allowed him to promote the BSSH and its activities. In this way, there was a direct connection between the Society and those teaching the subject to A-Level students.<sup>57</sup>

In 2005, Richard Boddie took over as the Schools Liaison Officer. Like Galligan, Boddie was a school teacher who could publicise the BSSH whenever he was working or delivering training courses. As part of his role, Boddie oversaw the Schools' Essay Prize, which required students to submit an essay of approximately 1,500–2000 words on an aspect related to sports history. As with the current EPQ Award, the winner received a prize of £100 of book vouchers and the opportunity to present at the annual conference. However, the role petered out with the reduction of sports history content in current A-Level PE syllabi.

Does this mean that organisations like the BSSH should no longer continue connecting to secondary schools and further education colleges? Sports history societies have a wealth of knowledge that could make a real difference to teachers and students. Many A-level Physical Education and BTEC Sport teachers lack awareness of the BSSH's existence. Some teachers struggle to teach the topic, while students often approach sports history with a negative mindset, believing it uninteresting and unimportant. There is no doubt that the expertise of sports history organisations could help overcome these issues. There are students with a genuine interest in the subject, but they are likely unaware of how they can pursue the topic further or where they can go to find out more.

If we, as members of such societies, want to see the subject thrive and grow, we first need to ensure its survival. It is possible that the sports history content of A-Level syllabi will continue to shrink. Yet, we cannot fully understand today's sports issues without understanding the past. We should be advocates for our subject, which might mean working with exam boards or even the exams regulator, Ofqual, to ensure that the topic remains relevant. We need to promote the subject in higher education,

where emphasising the subject's importance and interest to students and senior management would be beneficial. As James comments, 'Using sport, historians can tackle difficult topics and engage with hard to reach communities, disenchanted youths and disadvantaged individuals'.<sup>58</sup>

As academia demands more from staff, the ability to conduct voluntary work becomes increasingly difficult. However, if societies like the BSSH want to grow and survive, they must consider how to do this. One way is to link with organisations with shared interests, such as Sporting Heritage. BSSH members, including Dr Lydia Furse, have contributed to *Sporting Heritage's* education resources.<sup>59</sup> Sporting Heritage's dedicated Education Lead, Derek Peale, spoke about the possibilities of closer relationships between the two organisations at the BSSH Annual Conference in 2021.<sup>60</sup> Without *Sporting Heritage's* funding, it is difficult for societies like the BSSH to create similar resources. However, finding a way to encourage those teaching sports history, especially those in schools and sixth form colleges, to become members and support these educators could be hugely beneficial. Sport history organisations face a two-pronged challenge: 1) Ensuring the survival of a subject that we are passionate about and has real-world implications and importance, and 2) Finding a way to engage future sports historians and the education sector.

As far back as 2006, discussions began at the BSSH about how to change the demographic of the Society's ageing membership. Work by Professor Martin Johnes, Dr Malcolm MacLean, and others aimed to make the Society attractive to younger members. The development of new awards, funding schemes, and the creation of regional networks and conferences were designed to appeal to postgraduate students and early career researchers. This work has undoubtedly been successful. However, we remain predominantly a society of current or retired academics. We need to find a way to attract more independent researchers and school and sixth-form college teachers to ensure that we are relevant to a broad group of people and viable as an organisation.

The accessibility of *Playing Pasts* should make it a valuable tool for schools, especially students who are researching sports history as part of a qualification such as the Extended Project. The documentaries, radio programmes, exhibitions, and podcasts would also be of significant value to those in educational settings. However, we need to find a way to make students and staff aware of these resources.

## Conclusion

There are many ways sports historians can and do contribute their knowledge to the wider community. It has only been possible to highlight a few examples here, and there are many more we could have discussed. Our

members contribute to public history in many ways, such as regular features in matchday programmes, commenting on sporting events, writing features for newspapers, contributing annual entries for the *Oxford National Dictionary of Biography*, working with playwrights and recording the occurrence of sports statues across Britain.<sup>61</sup> Public history is a growing area that thrives on interdisciplinary collaborations. Because of the nature of what we study, sports historians often take an interdisciplinary approach to their work and therefore have valuable experience to offer this sector, not just in terms of the content of their research.<sup>62</sup> Of course, the time and effort needed by unpaid members to undertake such work is a barrier and cannot be underestimated.

The historical knowledge and expertise of members of organisations like the BSSH and other similar organisations need to be shared, not just for the survival of the societies, but for engaging more people in the subject, including A-Level students. One possible outlet for such research is Wikipedia. As Murray Phillips notes, 'Wikipedia provides the opportunity to describe the unique situations and contributions of athletes, coaches, and administrators with a level of detail that cannot be achieved in books with limitations on word length' and that it can 'tell untold or marginalized stories'.<sup>63</sup> Phillips explains that through a group of 60 editors, 800 new Wikipedia articles about Australian Paralympic athletes, administrators, and coaches 'were viewed almost two million times during the 2012 London Paralympic Games'.<sup>64</sup> These statistics demonstrate Wikipedia's influence. Recently we have seen similar but smaller initiatives in the UK. BSSH members are involved in the 'Play Like a Lassie' initiative that trains individuals to increase the number of biographies of Scottish sportswomen on Wikipedia.<sup>65</sup> Training BSSH members to edit Wikipedia and post new pages would increase the amount of sports history available to the public. Creating more high-quality, citable references can strengthen those stories and reduce systemic and institutional bias.<sup>66</sup> Wikipedia editing would align with Johnes's view that 'We cannot rely on some vague notion that the research we produce automatically feeds or trickles into popular knowledge and understanding. We have to facilitate that'.<sup>67</sup>

We also need to be acutely aware that much of the work highlighted above has focused on a narrow demographic. We need to consider how we can amplify all voices and stories in sports history. Broadcasting the histories of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic sports people, and those of indigenous athletes, and other minority groups is essential. This is a key area of concern for all sports history organisations and one discussed within this special issue.

As evidenced in this article, BSSH members work hard to promote their research. But what of the future? Can we rest on our laurels? Or should we, as Dichter and Vamplew comment, 'become lobbyists for the profession ...

linking up with other sub-disciplines in sport humanities and social science’?<sup>68</sup> Certainly, broadcasting sports history has become an integral part of what we do as members. We must all view it as a means to ensure our subject’s very survival by providing a platform to introduce sports history and encourage others to be as passionate about it as we are.

## Notes

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contributed to several programmes such as *Beti a' i Phobol* and Dr Fiona Skillen has contributed to various programmes for BBC Radio Scotland and *Let's Hear it For the Girls*, RockSport Radio and *Victoria Derbyshire*, BBC Radio Five Live. Further details can be found here <https://martinjohnes.com/about/and> <https://martinpolley.co.uk/work/> and <https://researchonline.gcu.ac.uk/en/persons/fiona-skillen>.

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