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# Telling the Story: Museums and Libraries Partner to Make Sport History Live

by Jim Sumner

**W**here do sport history, museums, and libraries intersect? The answer: in a well-researched, well-documented, well-interpreted museum exhibit on some aspect of sport history.

To see how we get there, I wish to start with a brief discussion of sport history. The study of sports is a part of a broad post-World War II movement in American history sometimes referred to as The New Social History. To oversimplify, historians have increasingly moved away from their traditional focus — politics, war, economics, and foreign policy, all usually from the perspective of famous people — to studies that include race, gender, social customs, and the lives of ordinary people. Sport history, as a distinct field of academic study, came of age in the United States in the 1970s. The struggles of John Rickards Betts, generally regarded as the founder of American sport history, illustrate the distance traveled by sport history after the war. Betts completed his doctoral dissertation, *Organized Sport in Industrial America*, in 1951. Yet his work was met with disinterest in the scholarly world. He was unable to find an academic market for his studies until the late 1960s. He began work on what would be published as *America's Sporting Heritage* in the late 1960s but died before its completion. It was published in unfinished form in 1974.<sup>1</sup>

By the time of Betts' death, sport history was being taken seriously for the first time. In 1971 the American Histori-

cal Association devoted a session to papers on sport history. Two years later the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) was founded and began publishing a juried academic journal, the *Journal of Sport History*. Several years later, two founders of the group, John Lucas and Ronald Smith, published the first widely used academic textbook for sport history classes.<sup>2</sup>

In the ensuing quarter century, sport history has become part of the academic scene in both America and Europe. This makes sense. After all, millions play sports and millions watch sports, sometimes with great emotional involvement. Sport is big business. Many of the twentieth century's great social battles have been fought on sporting fields. The study of sport can and has been approached through the prisms of technology, higher education, gender, economics, race, labor, community, international relations, and many others.<sup>3</sup> NASSH, the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), the Popular Culture Association, the America Culture Association, the International Centre for Olympic Studies, and other organizations have encouraged research, created college courses, and published scholarly and popular publications on a wide range of sport history topics. *The Journal of Sport History* has been joined by *the Journal of Popular Culture*, *the Canadian Journal of History of Sport*, *the Journal of American Culture*, *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Social Policy Perspectives*, and *the International Journal of the History of Sport*, as outlets for sport historians to

disseminate their latest research. Journals as varied as the *Maryland Historical Magazine*, *History News*, *Virginia Cavalcade*, and *Now and Then: the Appalachian Magazine* have devoted entire issues to sport history.<sup>4</sup> State history journals and popular history magazines, such as *American Heritage* and *Smithsonian* routinely carry articles on sport history. Ken Burns's popular PBS series on baseball brought solid sports scholarship to huge audiences, while movies such as *A League of Their Own* and *Cobb* are light-years away from the typical hagiographic sports movies of the 1940s and 1950s. Subjects such as the reintegration of major league baseball after World War II, the rise of spectator sports in the 1920s, the use of sports as an instrument of the Cold War, the struggle of women to gain access to the sporting pie, and the commercialization of the Olympic Games are all examples of how the nature of a society can be studied through sport.

There is no reason why history museums cannot join the fun. A history museum basically has two broad purposes: to collect, preserve, and study historical artifacts, and to make its collection and subsequent research available to scholars and the public.<sup>5</sup> Although interactive exhibits, virtual museums, Web sites, and other accoutrements of the modern age of computers and bytes are increasingly becoming part of the museum experience, the exhibit is still the primary way of communicating with the public. Exhibits are more than just displays. Good museums don't just dis-

play artifacts. Exhibitions require interpretation, and interpretation requires research and thought.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the great thing about research is that it can be used in so many different ways. The same research that informs an exhibit can be used in a computer interactive exhibit, a Web site, or a publication.

The first thing a museum must do for an exhibit on sport, or anything else for that matter, is acquire artifacts. History museums don't collect artifacts randomly, and they don't accept everything offered. Many museums have broad collection plans based on geographical lines, such as a state, county, city, or region. Others are chronological, focusing on a specific time period. Still others focus on a certain subject area, such as technology, agriculture, or aviation. Within these broad areas, many museums define areas in which they wish to specialize, based on the history of their region, the availability of a particular class of artifact, or even the interest and expertise of the curators. Based on these variables, along with space and conservation requirements, a museum must decide whether to acquire artifacts as part of its permanent collections or whether to borrow them for the duration of a particular exhibit.

Whether to collect an artifact in an appropriate classification depends in large part on how this artifact compares to others in the collection and to possible additions to the collection. In order to accomplish this, the museum may need access to basic studies of artifact classes. Once the decision is made to acquire a specific artifact, the next step is to study it. Research on an object is both internal and external. Internal research includes basic documentation: size, shape, material, color, and so forth. More important is to determine how this artifact relates to others of its type. How does it fit into a technological framework? Was it mass-produced or made in

the home? Is it typical or atypical? Is it at the beginning of a line of development or at the end? When and where was it manufactured? Who owned it and how was it used? This kind of research may involve manufacturers' catalogs, instruction manuals, advertising materials, photographs, maps, and city directories.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to recognize that an artifact is also a primary source. It should be made available for study to scholars both inside and outside the museum. Most museums display only a fraction of their holdings at any one time, but all artifacts need to be conserved. Smaller museums may not be able to afford full-time professional conservators, so the staff may need access to books on museum conservation.

Artifacts become public when they are placed on exhibit. Again, it is crucial to understand the difference between a display and an exhibit. A display is created by simply arranging a group of unrelated artifacts, with an identifying label, but with no attempt to link them together. Many museums have exhibits known as "visible storage," where artifacts are displayed in this way. There are valid reasons for this, including showing a popular artifact not otherwise scheduled for exhibit.

Exhibits are something else entirely. Exhibits are artifacts interpreted, artifacts placed in context. Exhibits are the primary way museums educate their public, the primary way museums use their artifacts to tell a story. In the words of Roy Brigden, the "basic job of a curator is to interpret artifacts in context."<sup>8</sup>

This research is where libraries and museums have their most fruitful interactions. Larger museums have their own libraries and professional librarians. Smaller museums may well have to depend on those books in the personal collections of the staff and a close cooperative relationship with the local library. Regardless of where this is done, the product of this research must meet several criteria. It must be relevant to, and understandable by, a broad public. It must be based on solid scholarship. Most of all, it should fit together in such a way that stories are told, points are made, insights are gained.<sup>9</sup> Casual visitors to a museum frequently have no idea how much research goes into a major exhibit. One of a curator's jobs is to distill mas-

sive amounts of research into succinct label copy, all the while communicating the key elements of an artifact and putting the artifacts and the label copy together in such a way that the story is told.

Many of the primary sources widely used by researchers are generally found, not in mainstream public libraries, but in manuscript repositories typically found in universities or in government offices or archives. These include diaries, letters, account books, and official records such as deeds, wills, tax books, and census returns. Since this kind of material is rarely available through inter-library loan, a librarian's job in this case will probably be to point a researcher in the right direction; however, many libraries have local history collections and such published primary sources as city directories.

Secondary sources are another matter. Relatively little sport history has made it into state, county, and local histories. For example, the most recent academic North Carolina history text, William S. Powell's *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, contains one paragraph on sports, a description of colonial sports related to militia muster.<sup>10</sup> Most county histories older than a few decades will have little or nothing on sport and many newer studies follow suit. Jean Anderson's *Durham County* is an example of a more recent county history that does include sport history.<sup>11</sup>

Much sport history has been written in the form of biography. Among the large number of sport biographies available, many fall into the as-told-to autobiography category. Despite the wealth of valuable material in these books, they must be approached with caution. Histories of teams, franchises, and leagues are common, but are usually written for fans, not scholars.

Scholarly works on sport date largely from the last 30 years. Much of this has been published in journals and magazines. In order for researchers to use this material, they need access to first-rate bibliographies and they need the ability to acquire the articles. Librarians should note that the *Journal of Sport History* regularly publishes annotated bibliographies of sport history articles appearing in a variety of journals.

The most popular sport from an historical perspective has been baseball. There are several reasons for this. Baseball predates the Civil War in much of the country, giving it a history unmatched by newer sports such as football or basketball. Even in North Caro-

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lina this northern import was widely played by 1870. In addition to age, it also has universality. Hardly a community, college, or school is without a tradition of baseball. Baseball seems to speak to some basic aspects of the American experience, hence its designation as the "National Pastime." There are organizations devoted solely to baseball history and research and numerous publications devoted to the sport.<sup>12</sup>

Two types of primary sources are invaluable for sport historians. One is oral history. Some libraries may well have strong local oral history collections, but in most cases a librarian's job again will be to point the researcher in the right direction. Equally crucial are contemporary periodicals: newspapers, magazines, programs, brochures. I know of few sport histories that don't rely heavily on newspaper accounts. Museum curators studying sports will most likely have to depend on microfilm copies of old newspapers. Their libraries' ability to procure these will prove crucial to a project.

With the growth of the Internet, the ability of a librarian and a researcher to surf the Web will become an increasingly important component of a well-conceived research plan. The accessibility of any journal is increased dramatically if it is in electronic form. The Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles archives numerous sport history titles at its Web site, including the *Journal of Sport History*. Equally valuable is the North American Sport Library Network (NASLN) site.<sup>13</sup>

Of course there are numerous sport-specific halls of fame. The best known are probably the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York, the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, and the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts. These and others have broad constituencies, which range from the most casual fans to the most serious scholars. Their Web sites have useful information and point the way to future research.<sup>14</sup>

The collaboration of museum curators, librarians, and sport scholars promotes effective sports history exhibits through a combination of informed artifact acquisition, supported by primary and secondary research, conducted in libraries and online, and augmented by oral history interviews. The result is a sport history exhibit that informs and engages visitors.

#### References

<sup>1</sup> John Rickards Betts, *America's Sport-*

*ing Heritage: 1850-1950* (Reading, Mass., et al: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1974). Biographical information on Betts can be found in the book's foreword and preface.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport* (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> See Steve Geitschier, "Collecting Historical Material Devoted to Sport," *History News* 47 (March/April 1992): 5, for an archivist's take on sports history.

<sup>4</sup> Also see *Maryland Historical Magazine* 87 (Summer 1992); *Now and Then: the Appalachian Magazine* 9 (Fall 1992); and *Virginia Cavalcade* 48 (Summer, 1999) for examples of local journals devoting all of most or an issue to some aspect of sport history.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary E. Allan, "Research: Social History — a Case Study," in John M.A. Thompson (ed.), *Manual of Curatorship: A Guide to Museum Practice* (London: Butterworths, 1984), 179. For definitions of a museum see G. Ellis Burcaw, *Introduction to Museum Work* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975), 9-12.

<sup>6</sup> Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 159-65.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Brigden, "Research: Social History Collection," in Thompson, 170, 171; Alexander, 159.

<sup>8</sup> Brigden, 170.

<sup>9</sup> Gaynor Kavanagh, *History Curatorship* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 54-58.

<sup>10</sup> William S. Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries* (Chapel Hill: Uni-

versity of North Carolina Press, 1989). For North Carolina sport history, see Jim L. Sumner, *A History of Sports in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1990) and Charlie Harville, *Sports in North Carolina: A Photographic History* (Norfolk: Donning Company, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County: A History of Durham County, North Carolina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> The Society for American Baseball Research, commonly known as SABR, was founded in 1972. The organization has thousands of members and publishes several annual surveys on various aspects of baseball history. Although written for a popular audience, much of SABR's research is of high quality and is essential for an understanding of baseball history. Further information can be found at <<http://www.sabr.org>>. SABR has a lending library for members.

<sup>13</sup> The URL for the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles is <<http://www.aafa.com>>. The URL for the North American Sport Library Network is <<http://www.sportquest.com/naslin>>. Also useful is <<http://www.baseball-links.com>>.

<sup>14</sup> The National Baseball Hall of Fame's URL is <<http://www.baseballhalloffame.org>>. It has extensive baseball archives. The Pro Football Hall of Fame's Web site is <<http://www.profootballhallof.com>>, while the basketball hall is at <<http://www.hoophall.com>>. Other sports have comparable organizations and sites.

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