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

by Jim Sumner

Where 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 1974.¹

By the time of Betts’ death, sport history was being taken seriously for the first time. In 1971 the American Historical 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.²

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.³ 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.⁴ State history journals and popular history magazines, such as American Heritage and Smithsonian routinely carry articles on sport history. Ken Burns’ 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.⁵ 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-
Exhibits are the primary way museums educate their public, the primary way museums use their artifacts to tell a story. This research is where libraries and museums have their most fruitful interactions.
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.2

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.3

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.4

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
1 John Rickards Betts, America's Sport-}

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