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Towards a critical dialogue between the history of sport, management history, and sport management/organisation studies in research and teaching.

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Abstract

This article discusses possibilities for a critical dialogue between the history of sport, management history, and sport management/organization studies. Many historians of sport will find themselves employed in sport management programmes, and these programmes allow the potential to interpret historical perspectives on sport, as well as historical research methods in sport management. This offers possibilities in terms of research as well. However, if historians are to engage in a research and teaching dialogue with sport management, they must also remain critical of some of the discipline’s (and practice’s) central tenets.

At the time of writing, the employment situation, at least within a transatlantic context, is such that many who have PhDs in history, with thesis topics which examine the history of sport and recreation, will end up finding employment in either sport management or sport business degree programmes. The history of sport has always been a highly interdisciplinary field that has evolved differently within British, European, North American, and Antipodean contexts and many sociologists, ethnographers, and physical education practitioners came to the history of sport after receiving their PhDs in their trained subjects; so, in effect, the present state of affairs is nothing new.¹ Sport studies/management/business represent an additional, and possibly necessary avenue of employment for academic historians of sport: a PhD in ‘the history of x, y, and z’ might often mean windows of opportunity in x, y, or z degree programmes which are unavailable through presumed ‘mainstream history’ routes (deeply problematic as the conceptual ‘mainstream’ is in relation to the history of sport, and other areas of history).² Nevertheless, only some of the material written on the historiography of sport seeks to bridge the gap of understanding between history and the
business-orientated arms of sport and their academic study. What follows is an attempt at fostering dialogue between the history of sport, sport management and organisation studies, and the history of management in the hopes of not just encouraging potential research, but in situating the history of sport and historical research methods within the teaching programme of sport management degrees. To an extent, it builds upon work by Johnes, who discusses his experiences in teaching a sport history module on an undergraduate sport studies programme, and MacLean and Pritchard, who provide a primer on history for sport coaches, and why history is relevant to those coaching within sporting organisations.¹ This is, however, not an uncritical dialogue: there is still a need for historians to challenge the foundational mythology of management, quite a bit of which is in thrall to the dubious theories of ‘great men’, and which has contemporary implications for management pedagogy. Likewise, there is also the need for historians to translate their practices and the relevance of their research towards students and practitioners who do not see permanent employment in academia as the endgame of their careers, and who consequently see theory and evidence – and ‘use’ history – from an altogether different perspective.

The irony here is that sport management owes a debt to historians. Sport management, comparatively speaking, has been institutionalised only recently as a (sub)discipline within the broader academic management continuum: Seifried credits the more formal institutionalisation of the field to the foundation of the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) in 1985, and equivalent European and Australian/New Zealand societies were not founded until 1993 and 1995 respectively.² However, prior to World War II courses in sport management had existed at a few American universities for the purposes of better managing intercollegiate athletics. In the intervening years, a number of PhD theses at other American universities utilised historical research towards critiquing contemporary management practice, most notably Earle Zeigler’s 1951 Yale University thesis, which concluded that American athletic administrators over the past century ultimately did not learn from historical practice.³ Indeed, tension has always existed within sport management between the needs of commerce, the post-education employment of students, and the truth. One ‘story’ about the first US undergraduate sport management
curriculum was instituted at Ohio University in 1966 by James G. Mason, who in turn was given the idea for such a degree by Brooklyn/Los Angeles Dodgers owner Walter O’Malley. Another ‘story’ has the first degree course in sport management being that of Florida Southern University’s degree in baseball business administration, instituted in 1949. In both incarnations, sport management degrees were created to serve – not critique – the needs of the industry. Indeed Trevor Slack, in a 1984 letter calling for the foundation of the NASSM, stated that a new society was necessary largely because its forerunner, the Sport Management Arts and Science Society (SMARTS), was intellectually compromised by its overwhelming association with professional sporting organisations and their profit-driven objectives. (Slack and Parent’s Understanding Sport Organizations: The Application of Organization Theory, perhaps not coincidentally, is one of the best and most critical introductory textbooks for sport management students.) There is, as far as I can find, no equivalent ‘history’ written for academic sport management in the UK.

Management, as a discipline, is fair game for criticism, especially in the way that it is taught, and historians who work within management programmes should air this critique in their research and teaching. As far as the latter is concerned, this is especially true in the way that management, as an academic discipline, historicises itself, and the classical theories that allegedly underpin management, most notably those of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Max Weber. 1974 and 1978 articles from Wrege and Perroni and Wrege and Stotka concluded that large portions of Taylor’s late twentieth-century works were appropriated from another author, Morris L. Cooke, and that anecdotes given by Taylor on observations relating to his ‘scientific management’ theories were at best exaggerated. As Bluedorn, Keon, and Carter noted in 1985, however, Taylor’s stories were recycled as foundational truths by many of the era’s introductory management textbooks, which viewed ‘Taylorism’ as a crucial theoretical threshold in the development of management as a practice and discipline. In 2015, many generic management and sport management textbooks continue to have little to say on the veracity of Taylor’s claims, whilst nevertheless making sure that criticisms of scientific management (in terms of treating humans as part of larger machines) are aired out. But, perhaps like any discipline (just as in history), management loves its founders, and Taylor is still largely credited with having institutionalised the field as an area of
Hough and White even advocated using ‘stories’ – in particular, those of Taylor – to teach ‘lessons’ regarding management, and doubled down on Taylor’s critics.14 This is, of course, problematic: at the outset of the institution of many total quality management (TQM) regimes in the early 1990s, Boje and Winsor theorised that the new TQM was, in effect, recycling Taylorism for a new generation.15 TQM, however, is now the standard order of practice in many sporting organisations and universities, despite its resting on what might be a potentially faulty historical premise. More recently, Cummings and Bridgman have critiqued the way in which Max Weber has become a leading figure within management ‘history’. In particular, Weber is credited with introducing the idea that the creation of bureaucracies can be beneficial to managers, and has thus largely been divorced from his broader social theories. The authors believe that this has happened as an expedient drive by management’s grandees to make Weber relevant to contemporary management trends.16

The ‘Great Man Theory’ (and, in management, the names ascribed to theories are always male17), long discredited in history, is still largely unchallenged in a discipline that essentially encourages its students to learn how to become good leaders.18 This echoes Rojek’s critique of a field related to sport management, event management: that, whilst practitioners essentially envisage the work they are doing as bringing the world together for a ‘good cause’, they may be uncritically reproducing a heavily ‘technocratic bias’ which is in turn highly reactionary.19 Even in behaviouralist theories of management, resulting from Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of needs’ and other concepts which placed the emotions of individuals at the centre of managers’ presumed duties, there is a distinct lack of discussion about how trade unions, political pressure, and litigiousness (in the form of tribunals and lawsuits relating to unfair dismissal and racial/sexual discrimination) have historically moulded the rights and expectations of workers, and the contours to which managers must adhere.20 Management’s self-historicisation reflects an assumed overall power dynamic which privileges managers over workers, and essentially runs counter to the wide-ranging canon of labour history which proves otherwise (as Taylor discusses here). It is not history from below.
So, with this major caveat in mind, is there anything that sport history can learn from sport management? The answer is undoubtedly ‘yes’. Sport history, whilst not necessarily engaging directly with management or management history a great deal, has certainly engaged a great deal in recent years with related topics. Many scholars, including McDowell, Gilchrist, and (in an older study) Korr have examined the place of sport within some of Britain’s paternalistic industrial regimes, although they have done so via labour history perspectives. Carter’s and Day’s works engage with the leadership elements of sport management in their work on coaches and administrators. Additionally, sport history is increasingly moving towards a rapprochement with business history, especially true in the work of Williams’s recent special issue of Sport in History examining sporting fashions, including brand names via the existence of corporate archives. Indeed, it is in this direction where there is probably a great deal of scope for collaboration: that is, if historians study the history of sporting organisations, broadly defined. Using this rather elastic term can certainly include a variety of works which have examined the histories of sporting events. One recent special issue of IJHS, for instance, focused on the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, and featured a number of articles which heavily overlap with management subject matter. Then there are the governing bodies of sport. The work of two sociologists, Sugden and Tomlinson, and a historian, Eisenberg, probably best defines this direction, at least in their works on FIFA. The recent work of Zimbalist, an economist, on the office of Commissioner of Major League Baseball, too, grounds contemporary developments within the historical. However, Sugden, Tomlinson, Eisenberg, and Zimbalist have been more concerned with governance – the strategic – rather than with the day-to-day operations of their organisations. In these works, chief executives and middle managers are nowhere near as relevant as the likes of Sepp Blatter, Bud Selig, or other high-profile figures who command media attention (in the case of Blatter, not usually for the right reasons).

Working on the terms of management and organisation studies scholars and practitioners, however, requires a reorientation on the part of historians. Stewart’s 1989 article provides historians with a basic template for positioning sport and its history within the emergent management order, in particular with regard to Taylorism and mass production (‘Fordism’), the former whose quantification of worker efficiency effectively mimics the win/loss binary
stakes of sport. However, few articles have appeared within management, sport management, or management history journals which examine the history of sport. One exception is Laudone et al’s recent article on the Howard Head archives, tracing as they do Head’s ‘brokering’ – rather than individualised ‘creation’ – of innovative skiing and tennis equipment during the post-War period. In this, the article does little to talk to historians; it does not mention the historiography relevant to tennis and skiing, but offers a direct challenge to the ‘Great Man Theory’, at least in terms of management’s privileging of individual initiative, rather than team effort, in the creation of sporting technology. This is history, but the audience is different. This symbiosis between history and management, however, is not always a natural one: in contrast, Taylor’s and Bedeian’s two articles on Frederick Taylor’s relationship with sport have all the hallmarks of the ‘Great Man Theory’ in action. Whilst the two authors admittedly posit some intriguing biographical information on Taylor’s innovations in golf club and course design (albeit without reference to the considerable historiographic canon on golf), another article is dedicated towards disproving a myth that Taylor did, in fact, cheat at a game of baseball whilst at the Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire in 1874. Regarding the latter, no effort is made to explain 1) why this is relevant to the fields management academics or managers work in; and 2) why this piece of history is relevant to society as a whole. In context, ‘Taylorism’ itself might be a far bigger, more pernicious myth than the one about whether or not Taylor pitched overhand in one game. By contrast, Bedeian’s piece on Frank B. Gilbreth and Walter C. Camp’s innovations in the motion studies of golf might suffer from the same hero worship, but nevertheless concerns an examination of technology in sport that would rarely appear in a sport history journal. Scientific management certainly has been influential within the historical evolution of coaching, whatever its foundations.

Historians, indeed, cannot dismiss all contact with management, sport management, and management history simply because the nexus between these fields is an uneasy, newly-created one. They will, however, need to reorient themselves to a different way of writing. For instance, as an article in the Journal of Management History (JMH), at least superficially Laudone et al’s piece looks and reads nothing like a history article. Management abstracts have subheadings which list writers’ purposes for writing an article, their research
design/methodologies, and their findings. Additionally, the article’s structure includes sizeable sections for discussing the methodology and discussing the ‘findings’ of the research. This is, of course, recognisable to those who teach undergraduate sport studies/management research methods courses, but would be largely alien to those teaching within history programmes, where authors’ own rigour and critical analysis of archival material is largely assumed, rather than explicitly stated. In part, this is because the ‘report’ format is considered relevant to the world of employment and policy, rather than the ‘essay’ format which is typical within undergraduate history courses. McQuarrie’s 2006 article in Management and Organizational History (MOH), detailing a critical corporate history of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), has a nine-page methodology which appears after the main body section which discusses the kinds of primary sources used, and a small sub-section whose concerns include how to write an interesting history of the WWE within the limitations of the form. Not many self-respecting historians would be caught admitting that they were attempting to write something that other people would actually read, but such considerations regarding validity are crucial in a discipline that is heavily indebted to practice-based research. Taylor, Bell, and Cooke note that, whilst many historians of management (most notably Jacques) complain about being marginalised within ‘mainstream’ management, their lack of attention to such theoretical considerations often isolates them within the broader discipline. (Being isolated from the historical ‘mainstream’ is not often discussed as a concern in these pieces.)

Whatever the merits of this criticism, if history is to enter into a dialogue with sport management/organisation studies, it needs to meet the discipline halfway, in terms of the construction of published work and research. It is indeed possible, too, that trained historians will find a receptive audience. Upon the foundation of MOH in 2006, Booth and Rawlinson noted the development of what they referred to as an ‘historic turn’ which had been taking place in management academia during the early- and mid-2000s. However, this was not necessarily noted within sport management: Pitts, in 2001, stated that sport management had up until then been unable to critically historicise itself – despite, in the case of the NASSM, establishing its own official archives. This creates methodological issues for the discipline, in terms of marginalising the place of history in sport management
research vis-à-vis the kinds of quantitative research which quickly became the norm in the field. Whilst it might be a stretch to encourage a kind of ‘academic entryism’ with historians entering sport management programmes, there is certainly a lot that historians might be doing to encourage two-way traffic.

How does one go about creating this dialogue? One schema recently constructed by Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker provides possible means of doing so, especially in terms of the history of organisations. These authors state that, by and large, organisation studies scholars view history as an enterprise where ‘theory’ is sacrificed at the altar of ‘craft’: ‘narrative history’, in particular, is viewed with deep suspicion, and is sometimes viewed as rubber-stamping organisations’ own ‘stories’. Historians, of course, need temporal determinism, and are often loath to apply theories applicable in the contemporary world to historical phenomena. Aside from history’s alleged lack of theory, organisation scholars are also suspicious of archival data: it is assumed not to have the validity or reliability of primary data collected through researchers’ own designs (particularly via qualitative interviews and fieldwork observations), and is (as historians often complain) assumed to chronicle organisation leaders, rather than the other people who work within organisations. Conversely, the authors state that management scholars are unused to the chronological constraints of history: namely, that the limitations of archival data require both deep textual analysis and triangulation of archival sources, and a need to reconstruct the past from an often-blank canvas – which, again, sometimes requires a narrative of events to assist in organising this data. All of these ‘dualisms’ lead to Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker proposing that history and organisation theory can meet on four very different categories of organisation histories: corporate history, analytically structured history, serial history, and ethnographic history.

But even if some ground rules may already exist, why should sport historians meet sport management academics halfway? It potentially offers a means of engaging with new audiences for sport history, on both its critical and heritage ends: in particular, practitioners and students who may be unfamiliar with the cultural and political relevance of history in the fields in which they work, or in past examples of organisation behaviours and structures
and decision-making. This was previously noted by Van Fleet and Wren, who in 2005 discussed the precipitous decline of business history being taught within business schools of the three previous decades. Mirroring history’s broader marginalisation within management, Bell and Taylor furthermore noted that historical research methods, as a whole, were neglected in management’s primary research methods. There is potentially a great opportunity for historians here: Polley, of course, has written the primary guide on historical research for students within sport studies programmes, and Skillen and McDowell have recently written a chapter on the importance of historical research in events studies. However, as long as historians continue to be employed within sport management areas, and indeed enough – if not necessarily all – experts in (sport) management view historical research as a potential means of providing new, challenging perspectives to students, historians should continue to find ways of integrating history into research methods courses on their degree programmes. Ideally, within sport management programmes, some historians will have the freedom to design research-led modules on the history of sport, but not all employed within these contexts will be given that latitude. Nevertheless, whilst historians must continue to be critical about its potential weaknesses, sport management offers a new possible route of collaboration and dissemination, and potentially a new and enthusiastic audience of students and practitioners. It additionally makes our work relevant beyond the academy.

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5 Ibid., 86; E. F. Zeigler, A history of professional preparation for physical education in the United States, 1861-1948, (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1951).
6 Ibid., 86-87.
8 Seifried, ‘NASSM’, 82.
17 For a critique of this, see Mary Phillips and Ann Rippin, ‘Striving to uncover a lost heritage: Reclaiming women in management and organization history’, Management and Organizational History 5, no. 3-4 (2010), 283-95.
20 A.H. Maslow, in general, is considered to have had significant influence on behavioural theories of management: ‘A Theory of Human Motivation’, Psychological Review 50 (1943), 370-96.


Pitts, ‘Sport management at the millennium’, 6.

Seifried, ‘NASSM’. Seifried’s piece shows no greater knowledge of sport management’s own history; and, fifteen years after Pitts’s comment, was a paper which called for reintegrating history into sport management.

39 Ibid., 252-54. See also Terrance G. Weatherbee, ‘Caution! This historiography makes wide turns: Historic turns and breaks in management and organization studies’, *Management and Organizational History* 7, no. 3 (2012), 203-18.


41 Ibid., 258-59.

42 Ibid., 259-69.


44 Emma Bell and Scott Taylor, ‘Writing history into management research’, *Management and Organizational History* 8, no. 2 (2013), 127-36.