RESEARCH NOTES

TAking care of sports archives—Who’s responsibility?
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Sport and archives—an impossible combination?

Articles dealing with matters concerning sports archives are very rare—even in sports historical journals. This becomes clear even after a very brief look in some international sports history journals and index publications during the last ten years. Most of the published articles contain presentations of certain archival holdings rather than questions concerning the value of the material or principles of collecting and handling it. It is therefore, as a professional sports archivist, a pleasant surprise to see somebody engaged in these kinds of questions.

Only by chance did I recently get hold of an article written by the Australian Richard Fagan, entitled “Aquisition and Appraisal of Sports Archives”, published in the Bulletin of the Australian Society for Sport History (1992). Fagan presents a survey of the current situation of sports archives in Australia, where they can and could be found, why there has been such a lack of interest in sports documents—i.e. both among archivists and sports administrators—and what could possibly be done to create improvement in this field. He claims that “nothing positive will happen unless there is a general raising of awareness among both the archival community and the sporting community” (p. 42). I can easily agree with this, but I think Fagan has left out one important group of responsible professionals, namely the sports historians and related researchers. The lack of interest in and knowledge about sports documents among archivists and sports administrators can at least partly be explained by the status of sports history as an academic genre. If sport, as Fagan puts it, should be understood as an “archival obscurity”, then it is because sports history has been regarded as an “academic obscurity”. It is one big task for researchers on sports topics to tell the archivists what kind of documents are especially valuable for their work. Even though archivists to a large extent have a historical background—something that was criticised in some papers during the last International Congress on Archives 1992—they can not be made solely responsible for the acquisition and appraisal of sports archives. They have been educated by academic scholars with little or no interest in sports history. Much the same applies for sports administrators. Without enough knowledge about the value and importance of their documents it must be a difficult task for them to create functioning systems of records management and take responsibility for the appraisal of
documents. Here, as Fagan correctly points out, they will need education from archivists. But here again the sports historians should not be left out of the process. What we need is a dialogue—or should we call it a triad—between sports historians, sports administrators and archivists (in some cases specialized sports archivists) about the value of different kinds of sports documents. While so little is written about sports archives in different publications, it is difficult to get a clear overview of the archival situation in different countries, but it seems that there are as many solutions as there are countries involved.

The Sports Archives of Finland—a functioning model?

In Finland we are lucky to have a specialized sports archives since 1985. Many of the problems and solutions, that Fagan has suggested for Australia,—but which could be applied also elsewhere,—have been dealt with already in Finland, at least to some extent. The Sport Archives of Finland has the support of the government, the sports organizations and the archival administration. We keep the archives of all our central sports federations (National Sports Federation, Workers Sports Federation, Finnish Football Federation and Finland's Swedish Sports Federation), many of their local administrations, the records of sports clubs, sports administrators and sportsmen. One of our archives central tasks, besides normal archival routines, is the one Fagan is appealing for, namely to educate sports organisations in archival matters. The Sports Archives of Finland is a part of the Sports Museum Foundation of Finland, together with the Sports Museum and Sports Library of Finland. Thus we form a kind of “all-encompassing sport information centre”, as Fagan calls it, especially as we are keeping registers in a mutual computer system, where each institution has access to the others’ registers.

Still there is a lot to be done and problems with acquisition and appraisal will be actualized, especially concerning modern archival material like computer disks etc. Implementing archival programs within the sporting organisations, including policies on appraisal and disposal of documents, will surely be an ever more important task of any specialized sports archival institution. Not only would it ensure acquisition of organized archives, but it would also be a means of reducing the ever increasing production of written documents, even in sports organizations.