

Ageing Bodies, Ageing Sport Historians, and the Choreographing of Sport History

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I said “we were not sticks and stones”—’tis very well. I should have added, “nor are we angels.” I wish we were—but men cloathed with bodies governed by our imaginations. (Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*)

There are very few historical narratives of sport, exercise, and aging, even though those who write narratives about sporting bodies are often themselves distant in time and place from the sporting pleasures of their youth.¹ While old age has appeared as a new section on the library shelves of educational institutions and in public bookstores in the last three decades,² we have not seen a corresponding spurt of interest in stories about elderly sport heroes, sporting prowess among grandmas, or fitness endeavors tried by the aging in the past.³ Even though the health and exercise needs of aging bodies are increasingly articulated by public health experts and in popular health and self-help literature,⁴ from the sport historian’s perspective the participation of elderly people in sport and exercise, as well as social and cultural attitudes toward the aging body and its physical potential, remain relatively unexplored.⁵

One would think that aging sport historians would want to know more about bodies like theirs, that they would seek to yield versions of historical bodies “whose relation to one another is determined as much by [their own] body history as by the times they represent.”⁶ After all, the sport historian also has a body with a past and is affected by the knowledge that today’s creaking knee is not yesterday’s knee running, kicking, and scoring! The most compelling ideas about aging are those deriving from encounters with it. However, in evaluating fragments of past sporting histories, the aging writer’s body (of the sport historian) often imagines the body written upon in another time and place, avoiding the perspective that age and experience could provide. Emancipation from society’s infatuation with youth may permit the choreographing of sport history in quite a new way.⁷ So too might a revision of mechanistic views of the body,

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which have historically fostered negative rather than positive stereotypes and images about physically inactive elders at sport and play. Yet while many of us might agree that the body belongs at the center of all sporting discourse, and would not completely dismiss the potential impact of our own experiences and conceptions of the body, nevertheless it is the youthful and vigorous, machine-like, masculine body that remains the focus of most sporting historical narratives and that underlies the grand narrative encompassing the body's relationship to sport.⁸

As demographers point out, however, it is the aging body that we now need to accommodate within this grand narrative. The aging body, one of the most important potentials, is an inevitable one in light of increased longevity and the aging of western society.⁹ Our appreciation and criticism of sport will need to take cognizance of it. Like others in the pioneering fields of social history, sport historians will need to confront the mass of popular and scholarly stereotypes that get in the way of a deeper understanding of aging in the past and into the present.¹⁰ After all, the value of an historical approach to aging is that it provides us with benchmarks against which we may measure current attitudes and approaches to the body, and it poses models of past changes that may sensitize us to the forces transforming attitudes and structures in the present.¹¹

Nor can we ignore the fact that while age and aging are certainly real, they do not exist in some natural realm independently of the ideals, images, and social practices that conceptualize and represent them.¹² Aging (like gender) cannot be viewed as exclusively biological or pathological, but must be seen as a socially constructed and historically specific process.¹³ Within this context, attitudes toward the elderly body in regard to sport, exercise, and recreation need a closer reading by sport historians to understand the context and development of negative metaphors and stereotypes about the weakness and obsolescence of old age, which have had a major impact upon the health of western society and sporting possibilities for older people.

My suggestion is that these images are difficult to change in a society that still "reads" sport as the prime domain of men, especially young and strong men, and still conceives of the body as a machine that wears out and becomes increasingly useless as it ages. If nations that idealize youthfulness and masculine strength continue to stigmatize their old people, what happens to notions of sport and exercise when they must confront the reality that age, rather than youth is in the ascendancy? As aging women multiply (in comparison with men), what happens to that "essence" of national identity that has traditionally been reflected in the body of the youthful male athlete or soldier? And what happens in the parallel discourse suggesting that if the body of its citizens can be shaped and strengthened by hard exercise and disciplined sport, the social body will be correspondingly strengthened and made more fit? In a rapidly aging and more global society, can the capacity of the chest, as Sir Duncan Gibb of the London Anthropological Society insisted a century ago, still "count for something very considerable as an indication of national power?"¹⁴ Or, in a technologically advanced society, will the cyborg replace the human body (the last site of hu-