In Defense of the Historians of Physical Education

Bruce L. Bennett

May I first of all express my gratitude to Dick Crepeau and Jack Berryman for giving me this opportunity to speak to all of you at a general session of this 15th convention of NASSH. It shows again that nice things will happen to you if you live long enough. Mabel Lee was 90 years old when the University of Nebraska finally got around to naming a gymnasium for her, which had been completed a decade earlier and had been promised to her 43 years before that. I am also delighted to see that the program includes a special recognition of our 15th anniversary by Hal Ray tonight.

What is a historian of physical education? For the purposes of this paper, I define a historian of physical education as a person who has written a history book using only physical education in the title. Therefore I am talking about Edward Mussey Hartwell, Fred E. Leonard, R. Tait McKenzie, George B. Affleck, Emmett A. Rice, Clarence A. Forbes, Dorothy Ainsworth, Norma Schwendener, Deobold B. Van Dalen, Elmer D. Mitchell, Bruce L. Bennett, Mabel Lee, John L. Hutchinson, Arthur Weston, Charles W. Hackensmith, and Ellen W. Gerber. These names are listed roughly in the chronological order in which their books appeared. The only Canadian historians of physical education are Frank Cosentino and Maxwell L. Howell, co-authors of a very brief history of Canadian physical education.

I have been able to collect slides of many of these individuals, so let me give you a chance to become visually acquainted with some of them.

[Showing of slides for about five minutes.]

It is my feeling that the writings of these historians of physical education have been overlooked or ignored by most sport historians today. When contemporary historians refer to earlier periods in our history, they usually turn to John Allen Krout’s Annals of American Sport, or to Foster Rhea Dulles’ A History of Recreation, or sometimes Robert Weaver’s Amusements

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and Sports in American Life. I am certainly not critical of anyone using these references, but I must point out that there is also a vast amount of useful research and information about sports in the histories of physical education. The term physical education was commonly understood to include not only sports and games, but also recreation, dance, and even health education. It was unnecessary and even redundant to write or say “physical education and sport.” Sport historians do have an excuse for concluding that there is no information on sports in the World History of Physical Education written by Van Dalen, Mitchell, and myself. To save time, the indexing for the first edition was done by the publisher in New York City. Imagine our great embarrassment and chagrin to find that the topic of sports was completely omitted by these indexers.

Most of our historians of physical education are deceased; only a handful remain. Those still living are Van Dalen, Weston, Gerber, and myself. Cosentino and Howell are still active. I am therefore serving as a spokesman for the departed and living souls. I have talked with Van Dalen and had a fine letter from Weston. Gerber did not reply to two letters. Some of what follows will necessarily be personal and include my own experiences and observations.

May I first of all emphasize the fact that up until around 1970, the task of recording the history of physical education and sport was assumed by physical educators because general historians looked with disdain upon this area and considered it unworthy of their time and effort. Only within the last twenty years have history departments in our universities and colleges come to accept sport as a legitimate area for research and teaching. For example, Foster Rhea Dulles never taught a course in sport history at Ohio State. Even mighty Harvard University, that stalwart bastion of academe, now has its first student writing a dissertation, entitled “Alpinism in Britain in the 19th Century.”

With the enormous outpouring of sport literature of all kinds in recent years, it is hard to realize that comparatively few books on sport were written before 1910. The only market for writing a history of physical education was as a textbook for major students. This immediately imposed certain restrictions as to length, content, writing style, documentation, and so forth. Furthermore, the number of book publishers was limited to a few major companies who were not willing to produce books which would not be financially profitable. A.S. Barnes & Company was a notable exception.

These physical education historians are sometimes criticized today for a lack of scholarship and training in the methods of historical research. Of course, there is some truth to this charge because they were first of all physical educators. But they were highly motivated to write history, and many of them had had some experience with historical research techniques. The scholarship historians like Fred Leonard, who read both Swedish and German, D.B. Van Dalen, and Ellen Gerber is above reproach.