Judging Jack: Rethinking Historical Agency and the Sport Hero

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Sport history, like other humanities fields, has undergone dizzying (aesthetic, cultural, linguistic, visual, and postmodern) “turns” in recent years that have opened space for projects that challenge the field’s conventional epistemes, contents, and potentialities.1 Accordingly, some sport historians are hard at work contemplating these theoretical and methodological twirls, which, they hope, will alter the nature of the discipline and lead to innovative, inspiring, and creative advances, and, challenges, to its futures. A particular feature of their undertakings has been the revision/deconstruction of sport figures, idols, and heroes and heroines,2 which in turn, has attended to larger historical concerns about the centrality of agents and agency in historiography. Agents (those individuals and groups assigned centrality within historical projects), Callinicos remarks, are a substantial component of the framework of narrative making.3 Historians’ selections and use of agents, for instance, bears heavily on the narrative contours and the meanings readers deduce about the historical moment(s) under investigation. This process is evident in sport history scholarship.

Similar to mainstream history, sport historians typically select agents who have, for potentially innumerable reasons, affected some sort of political, social, or cultural agency in their life and/or work (boxers Muhammad Ali, Jim Jeffries, and Jack Johnson; tennis player Althea Gibson; Hawaiian surfer Duke Kahanamoku; and runners Roger Bannister and Ben Johnson are all popular choices).4 Such individuals, and even whole groups, such as female cyclists in the early nineteenth century,5 are crafted as integral characters in historical plots, protagonists or provocateurs of progress, and are often treated (appropriately or otherwise) as hagiographic subjects. For the likes of researchers such as Bale, Hughson, Nathan, and others (whom I discuss below), the focus is on developing better appreciations for, and scholarly sensitivity and sensibility toward, the reconstruction, evocation, meaning, and fallibility of historical figures. Encouraged by these directions, and bearing in mind current disciplinary deviations, this article advances arguments about reconsidering the primacy afforded certain agents and their agency, and that ignored of others within sport history. The specific interest here is with John
Primary details of Lovelock’s life have already been well documented. To rehearse key contextual facts: Lovelock was born on January 5th 1910 in Crushington (a minute mining town in a rural part of the South Island of New Zealand’s West Coast). In 1924 his educational trajectory took him to Timaru Boys High School, where displayed not only academic aptitude, but also superior athletic talent. Lovelock’s scholarly prowess and sporting proficiency were further developed during his studies as a medical student at the University of Otago, Dunedin. In 1931, Lovelock was awarded a Rhodes scholarship that he undertook at Exeter College, Oxford. As at Otago, Lovelock matched his studies with participation in the University’s and United Kingdom’s amateur athletic scene. Following his graduation in 1934 as a medical practitioner, Lovelock concomitantly continued participating in international athletic events over the 1500 m and 1 mile distances: most notably, the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games, the 1934 British Empire Games in London, and the 1936 Olympic Games. Following his gold medal 1500 m win in 1936, Lovelock embarked on a tour of America, and then a government-sponsored trip to New Zealand during the southern hemisphere summer of 1936/37. This point effectively marked the end of his athletic career. Lovelock subsequently served as a Major in the Royal Army Medical Corps during World War II and then relocated to the United States, where he continued medical work in New York City. He died on December 28 1949 after falling from a subway platform.

The article begins with an examination of agents and agency in historical narratives. Within histories of sport organizations, such as NZOC, attention is often given to prominent administrators who can be identified as protagonists (or sometimes antagonists) from archival records. Their related agency, particularly in affecting stability or change, is also usually easier to discern than that of other, perhaps more peripheral, characters. Accordingly, this article treats Lovelock as a somewhat obscure agent—never an official administrator, but a proficient 1930s New Zealand track athlete and doctor. Of particular interest to the discussion on agency is the significant role Lovelock served as NZOC’s informal, well-respected, athletics advisor. I evaluate Lovelock to make a case for challenging the definitional scope of agents, and concomitantly, acknowledging possibilities for agency to be found among a wider array of characters and/or groups (rather than the usual administrators). Lovelock was well respected on account of his sporting prestige, and his status as one of the country’s sport heroes, coupled with his scientific/scholarly expertise, meant that he was frequently listened to by the upper echelons of athletic administration. Lovelock’s career as an athlete and medical professional, for instance, enabled him to contribute to NZOC’s philosophies, policies, practices, and ethos and objectives during the interwar years. Drawing on his northern hemisphere experiences, Lovelock also forewarned NZOC of some of the possible challenges it was likely to face in the future (such as the need for more rigorous training regimes). While Lovelock has been revered for his track triumphs, his administrative agency has received little attention.

I contend here that the ability to rethink/remake Lovelock as a different sort of agent, and accepting his place within a broader understanding of agent, rests on first transcending the myopia of the heroic Lovelock, and allowing alternative renderings to come to the fore. I present an example of such an approach from...