Sport History Review: A Retrospective

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It is an honor to be asked to contribute this commentary, because I have not always considered myself a sport historian. When I began graduate work in physical education in the mid-1960s, my supervisor was the late Max Howell, who encouraged my interest in sport history. I wrote a history thesis, but from the early 1970s onwards, my main interest was in sport sociology, bringing a feminist analysis to the sociological study of sport. In the mid-1990s, however, I began a mammoth research project—a history of women’s sport in Canada. Now, some twenty years later, with several completed historical projects and more on the go, the label sport historian is appropriate. When I retired and downsized my office, the one journal I kept was Sport History Review. I have every issue from Volume 1 (1970), when it was called the Canadian Journal of History of Sport and Physical Education. Incidentally, the cost of a year’s subscription (two issues) in those days was one Canadian dollar. I recently went through the journal again, issue by issue, and noticed that many articles were heavily underlined, with much scribbling in the margins. I have read, and keep reading, this journal with much respect.

Under Alan Metcalfe’s able leadership as founding editor, the Canadian Journal of History of Sport and Physical Education was aimed primarily at a Canadian audience in the hope it would also be of interest to colleagues in the United States and elsewhere. Alan, his colleague Mike Salter, and eventually an editorial board worked hard to solicit contributions. About one-third of the published articles were devoted to the history of Canadian sport and the remainder were focused elsewhere. Beginning in 1981 (Vol. 12, No. 1), and without explanation, “Physical Education” was dropped from the title and the journal became the Canadian Journal of History of Sport / Revue canadienne de l’histoire des sports. Up to this point, only four articles (3 percent) had been published in French, and the change in title clearly signaled that the journal would become more bilingual. Between 1981 and 1995, ten more articles (6 percent) were published in French, mostly from sport historians in Quebec. Thierry Terret, a sport historian from France who has published several articles in the journal over the years, describes this period in its life as “very artisanal in its functioning.”¹ In other words, the Canadian Journal

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of History of Sport / Revue canadienne de l’histoire des sports was a high-quality journal, assembled by hand on the Metcalfes’ kitchen table, with a subscription list of between 400 and 500 distributed in 50 countries. It worked well. As Terret points out, the journal was economically stable and survived for 25 years without experiencing too many problems.

Since 1996, with the move to a commercial publisher (Human Kinetics), the journal has been called the Sport History Review (SHR). The journal’s mission statement clearly indicates that “the editor and editorial board are committed to addressing topics and issues of international interest. Therefore, articles whose method of analysis or application and appeal is more universally or fundamentally relevant to an international readership are of particular interest to SHR.” How has this worked out? Of 168 articles published between 1996 and 2014, 39 percent were about Canadian sport history, 21 percent concerned the United States, and 40 percent were “international,” meaning they were about somewhere else in the world or focused on a topic with no national boundaries. There were 23 articles in French, almost all from France, representing 14 percent of the total. In a recent global analysis of academic sport history journals, Terret suggests that SHR has the potential for international recognition. However, compared, for example, with the Journal of Sport History, International Journal of the History of Sport, Stadion, and Nikephoros, it has not quite reached the same level.

Feminist sport historians, including me, have complained over the years about the slow inclusion of women and gender within the field of sport history. Generally, women’s history is about girls and women, whereas gender history takes gender, as a social category of power relations, centrally into account. Women’s history has not been displaced by gender history, but there is an overlap and interplay between the two. With these definitions in mind, how has SHR fared? Again, of the 168 articles published between 1996 and 2014, 30 percent were either written or co-authored by a female scholar, but not all of these wrote about women or gender. Here is where the statistics are not so great. Only 18 (11 percent) of the 168 articles were about girls or women, and only 16 articles (10 percent) were even partially about gender. However, this was certainly an improvement over the 1970–1995 period of the journal, when only 19 percent of the articles were written by women, 7.5 percent were about females, and 2.5 percent were about “gender” (very broadly defined).

I have several suggestions for the new editor, Carly Adams. First, consider changing the name to Sport History Review / Revue d’histoire du sport to reflect the bilingual nature of the journal and to attract more contributions in French from both Canada and around the globe. Second, consider more special issues with guest editors in order to focus on a specific topic, which will also allow for commentary and debate. Third, find ways to encourage female scholars to contribute to the journal, especially in French.

Finally, I have admired Don Morrow’s stewardship of SHR since 1996, and I have thoroughly enjoyed being a member of the editorial review board. Thank you, Don, for all your hard work and a job exceedingly well done. Good luck to Carly.