Power and Privilege in Historiography: Constructing Percy Page

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Several methodological issues emerge when one writes the history of individuals. Philip Abrams, in his insightfully titled chapter, "The Historical Sociology of Individuals: Monsters and Heroes: Careers and Contingencies," has argued that the "wall of self" around "great individuals" quickly collapses when confronted with an appropriately self-conscious analysis. In other words, the historian can play a distinct role in constructing the "great" individual beyond what is demonstrated in empirical evidence. In providing accounts of the lives of people, it has often been suggested that there are different types of history, such as narrative-descriptive or story-telling, analytically or theoretically based, or a combination of these approaches. Abrams's analysis makes clear the notion that the organizing ideas of historians have a fundamental impact on the way history is remembered. He suggests that presuppositions are deeply embedded in history indicating a problem of "structuring," which is the result of limitations in the research problematics of historians and sociologists. The problematic, as cited from Johnson, is "a field of concepts which organizes a particular science or individual text by making it possible to ask some kinds of questions and by suppressing others." The historian, then, must be aware of his/her interpretive arrangement of the "facts."

Recent attempts have been made to address methodological issues in sport history, exploring the possibilities of interdisciplinary connections, and debates about "how to do sport history" have been extant for decades. An important insight has emerged from such debates, raising the issue that story telling and positivist history—seeing historical reality only as that which is available to the senses—are more problematic and less "objective" than they might seem. Gruneau and Whitson's Hockey Night in Canada and Kidd's The Struggle for Canadian Sport are two examples of historical work through which the authors demonstrate a distinct awareness of their interpretive arrangements of empirical evidence. Kevin B. Wamsley is with the School of Kinesiology at the University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, N6A 3K7.
Roxborough's *Great Days in Canadian Sport*, on the other hand, represents a clear example of "telling stories" through which empirical data is presented as "fact." To be fair, Canadian sport history for the most part, until the emergence of more critical interpretations in the past few decades, has been about athletic accomplishments, epochal events in Canadian sport, the performance of athletes, and the detailed chronicling of the emergence of sport. One of the outcomes of nonreflexive history, or a lack of awareness of interpretive arrangements, has been a 'privileging' process and also an inherent gender bias in some subject matter which can be traced to the research problematic or the problem of structuring in some Canadian sport history.

For some significant areas of Canadian historical interest—more specifically the study of individuals, such as Percy Page, famous coach of the Edmonton Grads basketball team—the methodologies employed tend toward empiricism or "stating the facts." This has resulted in a specific interpretive ordering of the data through which Page has been constructed as a "great" individual in Canadian sport history but, at times, at the expense of the Grads themselves.

When their story is interpreted in a traditionalist sense, with the winning "characteristics" of the "team" in mind, the Edmonton Commercial Graduates basketball team, playing matches between 1915 and 1940, was one of the most successful sporting teams in the modern world. With a win/loss percentage of 93 and winning streaks of 147 and 78 games, respectively, the competitive success of these women is undisputed. The often-quoted statistics and other competitive achievements of the Grads are representative of the accumulated descriptive data—the prevalent foundation of Grads history—documented in numerous articles and books. Viewed in relational terms, however, the Grads appear as a multi-faceted team comprised over a 25-year period of a total of 49 players who lived through many changes occurring in their community, in the sport of basketball, in the operation of the teams, and in the prevalent social values that they encountered during their lives.

With a focus primarily on the "success" of the team and listings of various accomplishments attributed to strict coaching, training, and the players' adherence to rigid codes of behaviour, there is little attention directed toward the experiences of the historical subjects. Therefore attempts at discerning the influences of significant social structures or historical forces during the period remain limited. Power and privilege in society as aspects of social understanding remain undisclosed and in effect become naturalized through the historiographical process. This paper analyzes some of the methodological approaches that have been used in documenting the history of the Grads and, briefly, demonstrates some of the possibilities of alternative interpretations of Grad history through the posing of more subject-centred questions. As will be evident, however, even though alternative kinds of questions are posed, and other interpretive possibilities are