Sport Historiography in Europe: A Comparative Perspective and Heuristic Model

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Sport History With a Fist

The first time I met Alan Metcalfe was in July 1973 in Zürich, Switzerland. In the company of his colleague Mike Salter, he was attending the 2nd International Seminar on the History of Physical Education and Sport. All the participants were squeezed into narrow school forms in a classroom of a technical state school. This was a cheap gimmick to cope with one of the dearest cities in Europe.

It was during this seminar that local organizer Louis Burgener launched the idea to establish HISPA: the International Association for the History of Physical Education and Sport. His initiative severely upset several members of the International Committee for the History of Sport and Physical Education (ICOSH) who were present—and who realized that Burgener was planning a coup in the international sport history scene. ICOSH had been founded in Prague in 1964, and it consisted of a limited group of sport historians acting as a committee within the International Council of Sport and Physical Education (ICSPE). Anyhow, HISPA, born on 12 July 1973, was proposed as “...an independent society which furthers the study, teaching and research in an important area of cultural history.” Reading between the lines, this mission statement actually implied that ICOSH was not considered to be “independent.” Furthermore, HISPA was meant to offer a western alternative to an organization, which (in Burgener’s view) was nothing other than a private committee under eastern-bloc influence. Most of the participants, among them many newcomers like myself to the sport history area, were unaware of these backstage politics. Louis Burgener was elected president, David McNair of Manchester University became vice-president, and Manfred Lämmer of the Sport College of Cologne was appointed general secretary. Probably because I was the only Belgian present, I was elected as one of the

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council members. Alan Metcalfe of the University of Windsor in Canada and Marvin Eyler of the University of Maryland in the United States were registered as first-hour members of the new association. Eyler had only recently been elected president of the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH), which had been founded only two months earlier. The NASSH members were vigilant then and also later, and they made it clear that they did not want HISPA to invade their newly conquered territory. This explains why the editorial of the first HISPA Bulletin mentions diplomatically, "HISPA has a European emphasis, but welcomes members from the whole world."

I have always argued this point with Alan, whom I have met almost yearly at consequent HISPA seminars and congresses. It was hard for me to understand why a feisty Geordie from the industrialized North of England and a first-generation Canadian immigrant would react with such insularity in defending the North American boundaries against possible invasion from European sport history. When chairman Burgener (during a lecture tour in Canada) arranged for the University of Québec in Trois-Rivières to organize an international sport history seminar in 1976, the event was not surprisingly boycotted by most of the anglophone NASSH sport historian. This was probably why this event has never been listed as an official HISPA seminar. Although Alan had not participated in the seminar, one of his idiosyncratic contributions, Working Class Physical Education in Montreal, 1860–1895, appeared in the later proceedings. My argument in this Metcalfe versus Renson debate had always been that the aim and scope of such an international association as HISPA was to bring together sport historians from different countries and continents under a common scholarly umbrella. Alan’s point was less underpinned but loud and clear: HISPA should stick to Europe!

Looking back, not in anger, I think that I can ground my original contention with two historical facts. The first is the merger of ICOSH and HISPA in 1989, during the thirteenth HISPA congress in Olympia, Greece. This resulted in the creation of the International Society for the History of Physical Education and Sport (ISHPES), for which I served as first president. The second fact, in which I had no involvement at all, was the founding of an independent European Committee for the History of Sport (CESH) in 1996.

Now that I have taken the opportunity to formulate my academic revenge without Alan's being able to strike back immediately, I would like to dedicate this contribution to his Festschrift by paying tribute to his pioneering role in the development of sport history.

The present article focuses on a theoretical model for the analysis of sport history in Europe. It can be seen as a paraphrase of Alan's first HISPA contribution in 1973, which was entitled A Theoretical Model for the Analysis of Sport History. From that moment on, Alan has always impressed me—and many other colleagues—by his commitment and scholarly quest for truth, by his critical analysis of sport history, rather than providing merely vain hero worship and uncritical narrative. Indeed, when Alan raises his warning finger, as he often has done in his lectures, it is widely perceived as if he were raising a fist.