The Unexceptional: New Zealand’s Very Ordinary Early Olympic History

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The establishment of the New Zealand Olympic Council (NZOC) in October 1911 was one particular event in the country’s Olympic history. The event marked a new phase for amateur athletics in the Dominion of New Zealand and the country’s participation in future Olympic games. Nearly 100 years on, the event has become a significant cornerstone for the contemporary NZOC. The council frequently purports its enduring links to its foundation and the early days of the modern Olympic movement. However, a closer examination of contextual conditions at the time reveals that there is nothing especially radical or unique about NZOC’s formation. In this article, I suggest that the emergence of NZOC and the local Olympic movement was both inevitable and unexceptional, given the multifarious global and national conditions of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and the ideological (capitalist and middle-class driven) persuasions of the agents involved. The establishment of NZOC was simply the result of a convergence of well-known social-cultural factors (agents, ideologies, events, and actions) at the time. These conditions were not unique and indeed were common among sporting organizations here in the Dominion and abroad. By examining the emergence of NZOC and its relatively ordinary character, I argue that historians should reconsider the country’s early Olympic history as un-exceptional, that is, no more distinguishable, profound, praiseworthy, or historically remarkable than other sporting or cultural institutions.

Central to my argument that the foundation of NZOC was quite ordinary is the notion of convergence. I employ the term to describe the anticipated coalescence between agents, ideologies, events, and actions that interrelate to produce, or inhibit, certain social, cultural, or political outcomes. Convergences provide a historiographical tool to appraise the exceptionality of specific historical events by locating them within broader historical and cultural contexts and comparing them with similar occurrences elsewhere. For example, I juxtapose the development of NZOC with Daly’s assessments of sport in colonial South Australia and Lansley’s examination of amateur athletics in late-nineteenth-century Canada. In this article, I examine the convergences of four sociocultural conditions in the Dominion around the turn of the nineteenth century as the context in which a group of middle-class agents laid the groundwork for the development of the Olympic movement and the establishment of NZOC. These conditions are class and amateur sport, the shifting
social position of women, the influence of Federation in trans-Tasman relations, and finally, the place of indigenous athletes in the Dominion’s sport culture. I have chosen these particular conditions on the grounds that they allow us to question whether the country has a particularly long, proud or, most significantly, an extraordinary history of engagement with the international olympic movement. I especially encourage historians to rethink the all-too-frequent use of exceptionalism in their narratives. I begin by discussing the evolution of unexceptionalism within history.

History, Unexceptionalism, and Sport

Markovits and Hellerman, and Pope, have explored the links among sport, exceptionalism, and national history. They are highly critical of exceptionalism in history. Focusing on the United States, they challenge the ideological framework of American Exceptionalism, which proponents claim contributed to the expansion of specific forms of modern sport, such as baseball, and the nondevelopment of soccer. According to Markovits and Hellerman’s thesis, the enfranchisement of white males, less rigidly defined class structures, geographic mobility, land ownership, the egalitarian myth of the American dream, and a multiethnic population all fed the exceptionalist mind-set of the American people. Furthermore, within this context, modern sport was “deeply rooted in other exceptionalisms that constitute essential features of modern American life” and emerged to reaffirm hegemonic aspects of a developing national culture. These distinct qualities of American life allegedly explain why soccer failed to emerge as part of the dominant sport culture.

Pope notes how “Americans have imagined themselves to be fundamentally unique, special, or ‘exceptional’ [and that] this historical amnesia of the nation’s past stems from the hold of popular historical narratives of American ‘westward expansion’ and ‘manifest destiny,’ which have portrayed a benign, often romantic story of ‘aggrieved innocence.’” In discourses of American imperialism, Pope contends, sport culture has been a prime conduit for a national exceptionalism, but this relationship has become disrupted as new historical narratives have shifted away from nation-centered approaches. Drawing on Bender and Tyrrell, Pope suggests “the legacy of exceptionalism can only be properly laid to rest by overcoming a strictly national focus and embracing a transnational mode of analysis. . . .” After accounting for more complex global structures, forces, and convergences, Pope argues that sport in colonial American culture does not seem particularly exceptional when compared with that in other colonies. Pope, and Markovits and Hellerman, offer ways to rethink the significance of sport and national culture. Their thesis that exceptionalism fails when compared with the complexity of historical social and cultural forces and the similarities across other western countries is particularly useful for remaking the history of the olympic movement in New Zealand and highlighting its more ordinary character.

Exceptionalism in New Zealand culture has recently received attention from Miles Fairburn. He comments that “since the beginning of colonization, New Zealanders had believed that theirs was a unique society.” He argues that a case for New Zealand exceptionalism derives from its consumption and reproduction of select aspects of British, Australian, and American cultures rather than an organically grown unique culture. Fairburn disputes the notion of New Zealand as a “social