Sports History in Brazil:
An Overview and Perspectives

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Introduction¹

Although Wiggins and Mason² suggest that sports history still lacks prestige and recognition and is often considered as insignificant or of little relevance within university history and physical education departments, the field has unquestionably consolidated its status at an international level, with a host of dedicated journals, professional societies, and numerous university presses publishing sports history titles every year. Most of the research initiatives come from North American and European researchers, as well as from Australia and Canada. For various reasons, including language barriers and funding difficulties, there is a dearth of Latin American and African researchers working in this discipline.

Nonetheless, there are historians working on sport in Latin America and Africa, where sport occupies important social space. This is especially true in Brazil. Against this background, we provide an overview of sports history in Brazil.

By sports history we mean the professional field of historical research that has developed over the last few decades in Brazil and that includes traditional historians and researchers from various academic disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, who contribute to the theoretical and methodological debates pertaining to the history discipline. After considering the shape of sports history in Brazil, we will highlight certain aspects that may contribute to improving research initiatives and consolidating the discipline.

In this introduction, we also wish to make clear what we mean by the term sport, which is an often imprecisely labeled cultural expression. Although this is not a primary objective of this article, we believe that there is a need for greater precision and consistency with regard to naming sports history as a research field.³ In our definition, we include the history of organized bodily practices and consider cultural expressions, such as sport, physical education (seen as both an area of study and of knowledge), gymnastics, dance, “alternative” physical activities (eutony, yoga, etc.), and similar phenomena that were practiced before the Modern Era, for example, Greek practices, Roman gladiators, medieval tournaments, and a

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substantial number of recreational events that existed over long periods of time. In short, in our definition of sports history we include the history of physical education, gymnastics, and sports generally understood around organized bodily practices.

The History of Sport in Brazil: An Overview

In Brazil, studies related to sports history can be divided into five periods. The first encompasses the pioneering publications at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1893, one of the first authors to write about the historical aspects of horseracing observed curiously, “Better late than never. It’s not too late to write about the history of Brazilian horse racing, history, that as a result of a lack of eye witnesses and . . . documents, may end up being invented in the future.”4 In the case of rowing, Alberto Mendonça, who wrote one of the first books on the history of nautical sports in Brazil, expressed a similar concern in 1909:

The great difficulties we would have in compiling historical events about the history of this sport, as well as collating documents which refer to it, are obvious. Until now the lack of publications on our sports movement has been all too well known; however, luckily the area is now undergoing remarkable development.5

These works were written by former sportsmen and/or sports lovers who closely followed developments in their sports. Yet, although important, they were nothing more than isolated efforts to preserve their memories and with no concern for contextualization.

The second phase, from 1920 to 1930, is characterized by an interest in the history of physical education and gymnastics, although it was still very embryonic in nature. Brazilian publications were rare, with local historians drawing on imported material. Work by Laurentino Lopes Bonorino et al.,6 the first specialist publication of its kind written in Brazil, and the contributions of Fernando de Azevedo7 stand out. Both highlight global approaches and encourage reading of classical era and European history.

These publications laid the foundations for a limited approach that characterized sports history for two decades. It was an approach based on restricted sources; excessive concern with dates, names, and events; a discourse grounded in abstract concepts; narratives centered mainly on the experiences of the great exponents; and the adoption of periodizations determined by general political criteria rather than the periods that related to the objective of the study.

An increase in productivity characterizes the third phase (1940–1970). In this period, the work of Inezil Penna Marinho, one of the most important scholars of the history of physical education and sport in Brazil, deserves to be highlighted. Even if his initiatives do not represent a complete departure from the characteristics of the previous phase, they are nevertheless subtly different, especially with respect to his understanding of theory and methodology.

Initially, Inezil’s historical studies were grounded in a rigorous empirical approach, but his use of diverse sources in sports history8 stand out. Later, he adopted a more critical perspective and interpretation of history.9 This period is also marked by significant works written by journalist Mário Rodrigues Filho, whose O negro