



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

One Yankee's opinion, from the outside looking in

Citation for published version:

McDowell, M 2017, 'One Yankee's opinion, from the outside looking in', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, pp. 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1383391>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/09523367.2017.1383391](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1383391)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The International Journal of the History of Sport

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The International Journal of the History of Sport on 25/10/2017, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09523367.2017.1383391>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



One Yankee's opinion, from the outside looking in.

Matthew L. McDowell, University of Edinburgh

(This is the text of a pre-publication print of: Matthew L. McDowell, 'One Yankee's opinion: from the outside looking in', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, pre-published online 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1383391>. There may be small textual differences between this version and the published version. Any reference made to this paper should refer to the published version.)

I have been at the University of Edinburgh for four years. My formal position is 'lecturer in sport policy, management, and international development', and I signed my permanent contract almost three years at the time of writing (May 2017). I am certainly not a product of the sports industry, however, nor was I raised on Scottish/British sports culture. My contribution to this volume focuses on my coming from outside of the UK to examine Scottish/British (and, more recently, Manx and Falkland Islands) subject matter, my residence in Scotland, and my being comfortable with being an awkward fit within a sports management area (and why historians should be fine with that).

My ambition in life was to be an historian, not an athlete or a ballplayer. I knew it from about six years old: I enjoyed reading maps, and I had fun memorising the flags of the world. Growing up in New York's western suburbs, across the Hudson in New Jersey, I was certainly a consumer of sport – a big New York Yankees fan, and I watched a considerable amount of American football as well – but all baseball and soccer (and even basketball) I played was on teams with no try-outs, or in physical education classes. On any teams at school, I was always one of the last picked. I had lead feet, and (perhaps an even worse trait in the world of US sports) slow hand-eye coordination. Nevertheless, I was a fairly active child, mainly because of my involvement with the Scouting movement: a lot of camping, a lot of hiking, and – as I got older – many summers spent living in the Appalachians without air conditioning. My being awarded the rank of Eagle Scout in 2000 happened parallel to my graduating from high school, and being accepted into the BA History programme at The College of New Jersey. When I went abroad to Scotland the following year, I did so on a summer camp exchange programme within the Scouts. While I knew I wanted to be an academic historian, I was not instantly aware that my experiences in Argyll that summer

would prompt me to want to me to return to Scotland. I spent the last two years at TCNJ thinking that I was going to be an historian of Latin America. (My Spanish is admittedly now falling into disrepair.)

However, I did return to Scotland. My first proper introduction to the highs and lows of Scottish football came in 2003, during my semester on exchange at Strathclyde University in Glasgow. One of my flatmates was from Linlithgow, a staunch supporter of the Scottish national team and his local 'junior' club, Linlithgow Rose ('junior' being the typical term used for a grade of semi-professional football in Scotland). I soon discovered what being a Scotland supporter entailed: it meant trips to Hampden to watch the national side – in this case, in the dark days of Berti Vogts' tenure as national manager – but also, in one instance, a trip up to Maryhill to Firhill Park to watch the Scotland and Northern Ireland future teams take on each other, in the cold of March, to an audience that cannot have topped a few hundred. While these were the sort of football matches that I attended, Glasgow's pub culture was all about the 'Old Firm', and 2003 certainly featured plenty of drama, in both Celtic's appearance in the UEFA Cup final (with the Hoops eventually being defeated by Boavista) and a down-to-the-wire title race between Celtic and Rangers (with the latter eventually winning). These were certainly enlightening experiences, if not quite yet the inspiration for a PhD thesis on early west of Scotland association football. Since I know a few other Americans have made similar journeys across the pond, my experience is not wholly unique. However, it is interesting how other Americans become exposed to what they think is an 'authentic' British football culture: when I lectured on a course on British sports culture at Kingston University Summer School in 2012, quite a few of my students (all Americans) noted their previous knowledge and enjoyment of *Green Street*, the sensationalist 2005 'hooli-porn' movie featuring Elijah Wood as a Harvard student who becomes immersed in the world of West Ham United ultras.¹ It is rare for any of my BSc Sport and Recreation Management students at Edinburgh, most of whom come from the UK, the EU, or East Asia, to have ever heard of the movie (and thus any attempts to make jokes about its quality fall flat), so one might assume that it, along with the more widely-transmitted stereotypical elements of British football culture, functions as catnip for a certain kind of American tourist.

Needless to say, I did not share many experiences with Wood's character during my ten years of residence in Glasgow (2005-2015), the first four years of which were spent completing my PhD. It was the experiences outside of Glasgow University, however, that continually alerted me to my status as an outsider. Typical advice that international students receive when studying in Glasgow includes being told never to discuss football in pubs. Nevertheless, I *had a job* at a pub in Glasgow for six years, and that ideal never really worked in practice once the 'So, what are you doing over here?' question was asked of someone with my accent. The (overwhelmingly male) punters lived and breathed football, on either side of the Old Firm divide, with quite a few Dundee United, Partick Thistle, and St. Mirren supporters in the mix. In retrospect, I was quite fortunate to only once be threatened with violence on the subject of football (for mentioning the words 'Celtic' and 'Irish' in the same sentence): I received some (understandable?) anti-Americanism, but most invitations to a square go revolved around 1) my getting an education; 2) more typical anti-immigrant tropes about stealing jobs from Scots/Brits. It was a reminder that, no matter how much research I did in the microfilm of nineteenth-century newspapers, or on the writing of paternalist industrial tycoons like Alexander Wylie, I was never going to be one of my punters, and a detached approach towards my subject meant that the thesis (later book) that I ended up completing was going to be very different from one that some of them might want to read.² By the time I quit working in the pub, two years after I received my PhD and in the midst of a personally and financially rough period for myself, I was barely watching football. Saturdays were spent with my partner. Some things were clearly more important, and I had compartmentalised my study of sport as 'work' rather than 'leisure'. I was certainly not willing to have a fistfight over it.

My six years working in the pub taught me very little about the kind of workplace academia was, but it did introduce the central dilemma that every historian faces: what is the point? Is the task of historians to make crowd-pleasing books, or is that caving in to the confirmation bias of consumers and the press? Are historians looking to the shift the contours of public and political debate, and can they really claim to do this if they talk in a consistently academic vernacular? My positions on these debates are indelibly influenced by my background. I was not there for Scottish football's greatest hits, and neither were my family: when I think of 1967 in my head, I do not necessarily think of the Wembley Wizards or the

Lisbon Lions. As an historian, however, and as someone whose parents lived through that era in the US, I *do* think of Martin Luther King Jr., Richard Nixon, Vietnam, and the Black Panthers. And, when it comes to Scottish/Irish/UK history during the period, my knee-jerk reaction of associations is still one of a trained historian, rather than a sports fan: Harold Wilson, slum clearances, 'rivers of blood', The Troubles, North Sea oil, Apartheid, etc. It seemed more logical for me to write an article on Clyde's and Kilmarnock's 1969 and 1970 tours of Zimbabwe (then known as Rhodesia) than it did on the Lisbon Lions.³ To me, these tours say a great deal about Scottish society's past and present inability to face up to the more unsettling aspects of its internationalism: the goals scored and the quality of play were barely of any concern to me at all. It might be someone's job to discuss the heroism of the likes of Jim Baxter and Jimmy Johnstone, but I do not necessarily view that as *my* job.

Coming across Kilmarnock's 1970 tour was, in part, the result of research that I was completing with Fiona Skillen on the 1970 and 1986 Commonwealth Games, both held in Edinburgh.⁴ Some of this interest, of course, was based on the 2014 Games being held in Glasgow: our research made an intriguing juxtaposition with the event itself, as one of my abiding memories of 2014 is of the security cordons surrounding Kelvingrove Park (near where I lived) for the bowls event and spectatorship. Nevertheless, once again, I was also intrigued by the Commonwealth Games because they were a televisual experience that I never lived through as a child. As a four-year-old in Paterson, New Jersey in 1986, not only would I not have had a perception of the Caribbean/African/Asian boycott of the event (in protest of the Thatcher Government's relationship with South Africa), but I never would have even understood that the ground that I lived on as once part of the same Empire that was being celebrated in a sporting competition half a world away. I had never heard of the Commonwealth Games until I had been to the UK.

I am often curious of what the politics of my 'outsider' status are with regard to some of the topics I am currently exploring. One project involves examining the history of surfing in the north of Scotland. The other looks at the history of the Island Games, which began in 1985 on the Isle of Man. Both of these projects are moving beyond archival research, and into the realm of interviews. I have never surfed nor (unlike many of my classmates back home) skateboarded; and, whilst I spent my summers working in the New Jersey countryside, I

have never permanently resided in a rural environment, nor on a small island. I find it psychologically easier to examine phenomena that I have no personal connections to or recollections of; and my focus, as with my previous work, will inevitably coalesce around the relevance of sport towards understanding changes within broader society. Whether someone who lives in Thurso or Douglas views my work as a valid representation of their lives, their politics, and their aspirations is up to them. I imagine there will be plenty of scope to critique a work written by someone without lived experience of a place.

Inevitably, my career in academia has not fit into any particularly neat boxes. For five years at Glasgow, I tutored undergraduates and postgraduate in survey Scottish and European history courses. This included one-off lectures on the history of Glasgow's parks and the history of recreation in the west of Scotland, but mainly examined a variety of more 'mainstream' topics, from Mary Queen of Scots to the early Scottish National Party (SNP). I previously mentioned my month-long stay at Kingston, where an American lecturer on British sports culture no doubt held a certain amount of appeal for my employers. But, in 2013, I was employed full-time as a maternity-cover lecturer at Edinburgh University in sport and recreation management, with my contract being made permanent in 2014. By the end of 2012, I had begun to realise that it was inevitable that my future employment would be in a sport area, rather than a history one: all five of my academic job interviews from late 2010 to 2013 (out of 140 applications) had 'sport' in the title, only one of which was based within history. (I will leave it up to others in this collection to discuss how a thesis topic on 'sport' inevitably alters the calculus of how one goes about applying for academic posts, but I have discussed it previously myself.⁵) My increasing focus on sporting events meant that, when looking around for other jobs at the assumed end of my maternity-cover contract, I was also interviewed for some events management posts. I applied for jobs everywhere within the western world, and even touted my ability to learn languages if need be. I was interviewed for one position in Denmark. A few months before I got my maternity-cover post, I even got interviewed for a temporary position back in the US. Both the Denmark and US jobs might have jeopardised my ability to get an indefinite visa in the UK (I am now a UK citizen), but I had no real idea that I would not have to move far to get my current job. I lived for three years around the breadline, often supported by my partner (contrary to folk belief, non-EU citizens cannot access the benefits system), so *not* applying for any and all

jobs that were available was not initially an option. This was all while arranging work outside of academia, and trying to push on with publishing my work and submitting grant applications. A lot of effort was expended on treading water, and the challenges that historians of sport face are not particularly different than those faced by historians in any other sub-field.

In fact, if historians of sport think laterally, we might even have opportunities for different kinds of platforms: with regard to the never-ending saga of the Research Excellence Framework here in the UK, there have been relatively few pressures within 'sport and exercise sciences' to publish in the so-called 'high-impact' 'history' journals that are commonly touted as shortcuts to getting a permanent job as an historian. In turn, maybe some of us should stop thinking about academics and practitioners within the broad swath of 'sports studies' (and leisure, recreation, and tourism studies) as second-class audiences, and drop the according snobbishness that goes along with trying to please some imagined community of 'real' historians. After I have been working on sport management degrees for four years, I see no real need to alter the basic philosophical approach of my work, nor change my exercise or dieting regimes simply to fit in. I am never fully sure what my students – many of whom have been immersed in sport from a young age – think about myself or history, but I do know that an audience of future practitioners potentially gives historians' work relevance towards making fundamental changes within the sports industry. The other, more public audience exists parallel to the one in our classrooms, and where we want to go with that depends on what kind of stories we want to tell, or possibly, what sort of narratives we think we should be subverting.

¹ Emma Poulton, "'Lights, Camera, Aggro!': Readings of "Celluloid Hooliganism"', *Sport in Society* 9, no. 3 (2006), 403-426; Idem., "'Fantasy football hooliganism" in popular media', *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 1 (2006), 151-164.

² Matthew L. McDowell, *A Cultural History of Association Football in Scotland, 1865-1902* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2013); Idem., 'The origins, patronage and culture of association football in the west of Scotland, c. 1865-1902' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2010).

³ Idem., 'Scottish football and colonial Zimbabwe: sport, the Scottish diaspora, and "white Africa"', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 37, no. 1 (2017), 73-99.

⁴ Fiona Skillen and Matthew L. McDowell, 'The Edinburgh 1970 British Commonwealth Games: Representations of Identities, Nationalism and Politics', *Sport in History* 34, no. 3 (2014), 454-475; Matthew L. McDowell and Fiona Skillen, 'The 1986 Commonwealth Games: Scotland, South Africa, sporting boycotts, and the former British Empire', *Sport in Society* 20, no. 3 (2017), 384-397; Fiona Skillen and Matthew L. McDowell,

'The 1970 British Commonwealth Games: Scottish reactions to apartheid and sporting boycotts', *Journal of Sport History* 44, no. 2 (forthcoming 2017)

⁵ Matthew L. McDowell, 'Towards a Critical Dialogue between the History of Sport, Management History, and Sport Management/Organization Studies in Research', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, no. 15 (2015), 1750-1758.