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The Development of Sport in Museums

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Sport as a topic for museum collection, display, and interpretation has gradually developed over the last 100 years. However, until recently, there has been very little discussion or examination of the material culture of sport within the literature. Consequently, there is a misconception that sport in museums is relatively new, little is understood about the role and value of sporting heritage, and sporting collections are rarely used to inform historical study. In turn, the museum sector would benefit from more opportunities to work with sports historians whilst developing and delivering their sporting provision. Therefore, this paper examines the development of sport in museums, explores the current activity being developed in the field including the work of the Sport in Museums Network and the National Sporting Heritage Day, and offers practical information about how partnerships between academics and museum practitioners can be established to create a better understanding of the history and heritage of sport.

Keywords: sport; museum; heritage; impact; partnerships

The development of sport in museums has, until recently, been largely ignored in the literature.¹ Although many sporting exhibitions have been delivered over the last 100 years, there have been few examinations of sport in museums, the impact and value of sport in museums, and, consequently, its relationship to the study of sporting history. In academic terms, the interest in how the history of sport is reflected by museums and other organizations began to grow in the late 1990s led by Vamplew, and Moore with increasing interest at the turn of the century, for example Phillips, Wood, and Hill.² Although small, the contents of the literature demonstrates there is a value in sporting collections to historical study. However, the authors often discuss the limited relationship between the practical and academic sectors which ultimately impedes that very historical study.³ Indeed, it is possible to see examples of academic papers which would have benefited from a greater understanding of the museum sector, and, no doubt, museum activity which would be greatly supported by more involvement from sports historians.⁴ As recently as 2013, the director of the National Football Museum and museum academics, Kevin Moore, asserted that if the two sectors could work more closely together, so much more would be achieved in the quality, understanding, and interpretation of the history of sport.⁵ Wray Vamplew asserts that the lack of interest on the part of sports historians has often been due to a misconception that sport in museums promotes the celebratory aspects of sport, rather than narrate a factual history.⁶ Whilst true in a handful of cases, on the whole, sport is handled by museum professionals using the same methodology as any other subject.⁷ Moore argues that the lack of

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interest stems from less validation being placed on material culture than the written word, a kind of hierarchy of historical matter.⁸ The absence in the literature, then, suggests that sport in museums had been non-existent until the very recent past, whereas in reality, sporting exhibitions are not new and have much to tell us not only about the historical study of sport, but how sport is placed within the development of wider societal and economic contexts of the UK history.⁹

Sporting exhibitions records date back to nearly 100 years ago.¹⁰ Originally, exhibitions were delivered outside of formal heritage venues, often to support social cohesion, and there was even a call for a national museum of sport in 1922 by Walter Sparrow.¹¹ By the 1950s, the idea of sport in museums, and sporting museums, had become a clear concept with many activities taking place including the 1948 *Sport in Art* exhibition as a part of the Olympic Games of the same year, Walter Hutchinson's short-lived creation of the National Gallery for Sporting Past-Times in 1949, the partnership between the Football Association and the Arts Council to deliver a touring exhibition programme in museums across the country in *Football and the Fine Arts* in 1953, and the creation of the first museum of a specific sport at Marylebone Cricket Club also in 1953.¹² For unclear reasons, this momentum slowed between the mid-1950s and the early 1980s. Several new sport specific museums were established, for example, the Wimbledon All England Tennis Club in 1977 and the World Rugby Museum in 1983, however, they tended to focus on sports connected to the middle-class and affluent sectors of society, more wealthy, more used to visiting museums, and, therefore, more likely to create a museum as a consequence. The newfound interest in history from below in the late 1970s and 1980s, marked a change in emphasis in the use of sport as a subject matter for museums, signalling both an increased interest in the topic, and a greater interest in sports typically associated with the lower classes such as football, rugby league, and boxing.¹³ During the 1980s and 1990s, sporting heritage activity slowly increased with exhibitions delivered in venues across the country including Liverpool Museum's *Football Crazy* in 1984, and Stuart Clarke's *Homes of Football* in 1992.¹⁴ In addition, from the early 1980s, museums of sport began to develop as part of sports clubs, albeit with a focus in the first instance on celebratory heritage, for example, the development of a museum at the Manchester United Football Club.

However, the development of sport in museums up until this point had been sporadic with no overarching understanding about what collections existed. In 2006, the Sport in Museums Network (formally the Sports Heritage Network) sought to rectify this situation by commissioning Annie Hood to map the sporting collections held in museums in the UK.¹⁵ Hood discovered a wealth of collections, but states that they were often unused and little was known about the objects.¹⁶ The collections uncovered varied from major national designated collections held by sports specific museums, such as the National Football Museum and the National Horse Racing Museum, to smaller, focussed collections of local sporting figures, sporting events, traditions, and scientific discovery, for example, often held in local and regional museums. The breadth of collections identified includes trophies, equipment, kit, programmes, oral histories, photographs, film, and memorabilia and demonstrates that the objects held are not just about the winning and losing of sport. Hood also highlighted that many sporting collections are not held in museum venues, and are instead owned by individuals, sports clubs, community groups, and governing bodies.¹⁷ For many museum professionals, then, establishing a successful exhibition or permanent gallery with a sporting theme is reliant on creating partnerships between themselves and those holding sporting collections and with those who hold sporting history knowledge. The experience of how to

preserve, conserve, and provide access to collections is often held in museum venues, but the knowledge about the collections themselves is more frequently held, especially in terms of smaller museums, externally, and includes sports historians. To ensure collections are properly maintained and understood, there must, therefore, be an information share between these partners on a local, regional, and national scale. 5

With so many collections in existence in so many venues nationally, there are plenty of opportunities for organizations to support major sporting events by developing complementary exhibitions. Major sporting events have been shown to have an impact on the use of sport in museums, however, the extent of activity which surrounded the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was on a scale never witnessed before.¹⁸ The 2012 Games is an example of the potential and restrictions placed on sport in museums. In terms of benefits, the 2012 Games witnessed a significant increase in the delivery of sporting exhibitions in museums across the country. The Sport in Museums Network alone delivered a national exhibition programme, *Our Sporting Life*, at over 100 venues with over 1,000,000 visitors and demonstrated a huge appetite amongst all sectors of the public in the nation's sporting heritage.¹⁹ In addition, during 2012, two new sport-specific museums were opened, the British Surfing Museum, Devon and the Hockey Museum, Woking. However, despite this extensive level of delivery, sporting heritage did not feature at all in the formal Cultural Olympiad programme or indeed any of the 2012 Games planning, demonstrating that the understanding, perception, and, ultimately, funding for sport in museums is still, if not non-existent, limited. The Cultural Olympiad focussed on delivering arts and heritage provision with little relationship to sport, whilst sporting heritage programmes fought for what small funding opportunities they could find to tell the story of British sport in spite of the constraints placed against them.²⁰ 10
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To better understand these barriers affecting the sector and how to remove them, the Sport in Museums Network commissioned a scoping study in 2012 to evaluate the position of sporting heritage.²¹ The study highlighted several areas in need of urgent support including the increased need for funding, better support for partnerships to establish, and develop at a local level, greater opportunities for knowledge exchange amongst individuals and organizations from different sectors, and an improved understanding of the impact of sport in museums on wider agendas.²² These recommendations formed the foundation of the Sport in Museums Network's successful application for funding to Arts Council England and a subsequent programme of activity to be delivered between 2015 and 2018, including the development of the National Sports Museum Online.²³ This activity is the part of a wider development of interest and application of sport as a subject matter for museums in the UK in 2015. The National Sporting Heritage Day, for example, was created in 2014 to provide an ongoing, annual focussed event with the specific aim of raising the profile of sporting heritage and supporting a continual interest in the sector.²⁴ At the time of writing, the event is just about to celebrate its second year and organizations across the nation are due to take part, including museums, libraries, archives, schools, sports clubs, and universities. In addition, many discreet sporting heritage projects are being developed including Rugby League Cares, the charity body associated with rugby league, which has appointed a heritage manager and aims to create a museum to tell the story of the sport; Nottinghamshire County Cricket Club who have secured funding to investigate opportunities for museum development at the Trent Bridge; and the National Paralympic Heritage Trust which recently gained Heritage Lottery Funding to explore the potential for a Paralympic museum.²⁵ 30
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The key to the success of these programmes is often in the partnerships developed. The ability to create a group of organizations willing to work together, secure funding, and successfully deliver a programme which has a wide impact on the public as well as increasing our knowledge and understanding of the sector is paramount. In the current economic climate, which sees museum cuts reaching all-time highs, there is an increased need to work with wide-ranging partners to demonstrate impact against external agendas and demonstrating value is critical.²⁶ This is not to say that the collections are not important in their own right, but when the majority of funding for museum delivery is drawn from public sector funding, there is a necessity to demonstrate the value of that funding.²⁷ Evidence already exists to suggest that sport in museum programmes engage new audiences with heritage, create strong and sustainable partnerships between museums and other organizations, support learning opportunities including directly linking to the national curriculum, and encourage social cohesion.²⁸ In addition, recent research has shown that sporting heritage has an impact on tourism and increasing participation in sport.²⁹ As a consequence, more organizations are recognizing that delivering programmes with a sporting theme not only opens up access to collections, but delivers wide-reaching impact which can, in turn, increase their likelihood of sustained funding. Funding bodies are aware of this potential too, for example, the Heritage Lottery Fund dedicates a section of their site encouraging bids for sporting heritage projects.³⁰

However, much of this activity is still embryonic and still very much at risk primarily due to financial factors, but also attitudinal constraints about the place of sport as a subject matter for museums an historical study.³¹ To date, there are still only two academic texts which explore the relationship between the historical study of sport and material culture.³² In addition, inconsistent methods of evaluation make establishing the role and value of sport in museums difficult which, in turn, affects the ability of museums to prove outputs and impact.³³ In short, the use of sport in museums is growing, but it would benefit greatly from more, better, and bigger partnerships with sports historians and other academics to increase not only the knowledge and understanding of the history of sport, but also the role, value, and impact of sport as a subject matter for museums. Ultimately, it will be this that increases the priority placed on sports history and heritage and, with it, greater access to funding and sustainability in the long term.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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J. Reilly managed learning and outreach programmes for the National Museums, Liverpool, the National Media Museum, Bradford, the BBC, and the Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council in the north before completing a collaborative PhD in Sport, Museums, and Cultural Policy. She now works as a consultant project manager in the field of sporting heritage and museums more generally. She currently manages the Sport in Museums Network and the National Sporting Heritage Day.

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