
Sport, Anthropology, and History

SPORT HAS OCCUPIED A TENUOUS position in anthropology since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Until the new millennium, there was no “sport anthropology”—that is, a critical mass of scholars who focused on the topic and recognized the relevance of one another’s work. There was instead only a small number of anthropologists who studied sport. There was no journal of sport anthropology, no international association, and no section or interest group of the American Anthropological Association. In 1974 a handful of interdisciplinary scholars mobilized around the concept of play and established the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play. This led to the publication in 1985 of *The Anthropology of Sport* by Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Cheska, the first—and for another decade and a half, the only—attempt to define the field. When anthropologists made excursions into the topic, they did so as part of their interest in certain theoretical paradigms or broader issues and then moved on to other topics. With a few notable exceptions, sport was not recognized as a topic that led to major theoretical breakthroughs in the discipline, unlike topics considered more central, such as religion, social class, and nationalism. Thus, this chapter is not a history of the anthropology of sport so much as an overview of those moments when sport received anthropologists’ attention. Any attempt to generalize about the “state of the field” runs into the problem that the anthropology of sport was not a unified field that underwent a clear theoretical development but rather one that drafted off the winds of leading topics in the broader discipline as they shifted over time.

By the time anthropology began to emerge as a discipline and discover sport, there was already a body of scholarship on ancient sports loaded with heavy Western-centric baggage. As the Industrial Revolution brought distant peoples into closer contact, a cultural geography of the world began to cohere among both Western academics and their popular audience, a geography in which the primary categories were “Western civilization” and its heirs, “Orientals” (with the primary focus on Europe’s closest cultural and military rival, the Ottoman Empire), and “savages” (everyone else). Before the late nineteenth century, there was only one form of elite (and, of course, male) education in the West, and that was one focused on the Greek and Roman classics. Oriental studies emerged in the late eighteenth century to study the Orientals, and the discipline of anthropology emerged in the mid-nineteenth century to study the savages. The West’s studies of Oriental and savage Others helped to strengthen a shared identity among educated men who had received a classical education and believed themselves to represent the attainments of “Western civilization.”¹

This shared identity emerged in an era when the old social order based on monarchs and the Catholic Church was collapsing, and in its place the system of modern nation-states was arising. The remaking of the social order was accompanied by some of history’s most brutal wars. Classically educated elite men noted the parallel between warring ancient Greek city-states and warring modern nation-states. They knew that, in antiquity, athletic games had been important forums for interstate diplomacy, and so they conceived of reviving the ancient Olympic Games to solve the political ills of their times. Perhaps the first call to revive the ancient Olympic Games appeared in 1790 in France, where the foundational thinkers of the French Revolution had linked sports with ancient Greek democracy.²

In 1875 the largest archaeological excavation to that point was undertaken at the site of the Olympic Games in Ancient Olympia, Greece. It was led by Ernst Curtius, a professor of classical archaeology at the University of Berlin, and funded by German emperor Wilhelm I. Archaeology had become a tool of the Western powers, which sought not only to extend their control over physical territories through colonialism and imperialism but also to exert symbolic control over the past by claiming the most spectacular archaeological sites. Governments and wealthy elites funded expeditions in search of archaeological and ethnological artifacts. At a time when millions of artifacts were expatriated to Western museums to symbolize the commitment to

civilization and progress claimed by their possessors, the excavation at Olympia was unusual in that Curtius negotiated an arrangement with the Greek government in which all artifacts except for selected duplicates would remain in Greece.³ Curtius was perhaps the first to see ancient Greek sports and games as emblematic of the restless, competitive spirit that made Westerners the masters of history and everyone else their subjects, or so he claimed. Curtius and prominent classicists who followed him asserted that the ancient Greeks valued competition more than any other peoples, that their competitive spirit (“agonal spirit,” after the Greek *agon*, “contest”) was a defining feature of “Western civilization,” and that this spirit explained why the Greeks invented democracy and why the heirs of their tradition would inevitably shape the course of world history. The Olympic Games were said to be the quintessential expression of this competitive spirit.⁴

The wider neoclassical revival, in which archaeology played a key role, formed the context in which the first modern Olympic Games were founded in 1896, spearheaded by Pierre de Coubertin, a classically educated French aristocrat. For the next two decades, the Olympics served as the original world championships for a number of sports, cementing the link between modern sports, democracy, and Western colonial and imperial supremacy.

In the realm of sport, the past weighs especially heavily on the present because of the way in which history has been used to legitimize different kinds of sporting practice. These processes of legitimization were part of large-scale dynamics whereby a particular construction of history served to justify the power of certain regions of the world over others. But as anthropologist Eric Wolf demonstrated in his Marxist-inspired opus *Europe and the People without History*, the world, including its seemingly isolated regions, has in fact been deeply interconnected through trade and other dynamics since 1400 CE.⁵ He argued that Western intellectual traditions viewed Europeans (the “people with history”) as the driving force of historical change, and “primitive” societies (the “people without history”) as pristine, unchanging survivals from the past. Wolf advocated a new global anthropology to overturn Western-centric history, insisting that world history had always consisted of a two-way interaction between the Western and non-Western areas of the world. If scholars properly recognized the interconnections between the world’s peoples, their works would demonstrate that “the global processes set in motion by European expansion constitute their history as well.”⁶

To this day the International Olympic Committee still claims that ancient Greek humanistic “Olympic values” underpin the modern Olympic

Movement.⁷ Contemporary Olympic sports are given a mythical attachment to the ancient history of “Western civilization,” which is supposed to be located in ancient Greece rather than in other logically possible locations, even though ancient Greece was a crossroads of many cultures both “eastern” and “western,” which was a major source of its vitality. In fact, the ancient Olympic Games emerged as an institution at the end of the eighth century BCE, a period of increasing interactions among the civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East. This is known as the “Orientalizing period” because of the large number of motifs in Greek art borrowed from the then more developed states of Syria, Assyria, Phoenicia, Israel, and Egypt. The Greeks came to be maritime traders with colonies throughout the Mediterranean, where Greeks not only interacted with their Others but also were occasionally ruled by them. From the sixth to the fourth century BCE, the Greeks’ main Other was the huge Persian Empire, stretching from what is today northeastern Greece to the Indus valley in India. These interactions funneled cultural influences back toward the mainland, with the quadrennial gathering of freeborn Greek athletes at Olympia acting as a centripetal force to pull in new ideas and practices. In antiquity, as in the modern era, “sporting cultures traveled by trade and colonization, as well as by conquest and empire.”⁸

In the classical era, the Olympic Games provided a common ground for warring city-states, helping to create a unifying Hellenic identity. In the end they were patronized by Macedonian and Roman conquerors to display their power as well as their admiration of Hellenic culture. In fact, the Olympic Games reached their grandest scale not in the era of city-states but in that of the Romans, when participation was no longer limited only to freeborn Greeks, and all the best athletes of the Mediterranean could compete. Integration into a much larger empire disseminated Hellenic art, culture, and ideals to a much broader segment of the world’s populace.

Given the Olympic Movement’s romantic linking of the modern Olympic Games to the ancient ones, it is not surprising that both the scholarly and popular imaginations have tended to draw a direct line from the ancient Egyptians to the ancient Greeks to the Roman Empire to British and American sport and finally to contemporary global sport.⁹ That the complexities of the archaeological record from millennia ago are frequently simplified is not surprising, since the ambiguous nature of the evidence allows historians and archaeologists considerable leeway in their interpretations—which, more often than not, have been shaped by their own assumptions.



FIGURE 3. The Nemean Games Revival in 2012, showing ancient *hysplex* starting mechanism and starting pose, with coauthor Susan Brownell fourth from left (Ancient Nemea, June 23, 2012/Susan Brownell).

While they focus on the Greco-Roman era, they are largely informed by very modern concerns: nudity, athletic events, athletic ideals, games in society, women, athletes, education, and the relationships among sport, spectacle, political power, professionalism, and nationalism. These discussions are not just dull descriptions of material remains; rather they increasingly attempt to draw a connection between the silent arenas of the past and the roar of contemporary sport. In so doing, more recent works are invoking cognitive archaeology's material engagement theory, which considers the minds of the maker and user of archaeological objects as integral to an understanding of the physical object.¹⁰ Recent works by historians of the ancient world have combined literary criticism with contextual historical analysis to provide some of the most informative and illuminating analyses of ancient sport.¹¹

For example, Stephen Miller has utilized a unique ethnographic tool to aid his analysis of ancient sports—reenactments. The “revival” of the ancient Nemean Games that he initiated after two decades of excavations at the site has become a quadrennial event attracting hundreds of competitors, many from other countries (figure 3). Miller's reconstruction of the preparation, organization, and operation of the Nemean Games allowed him to make experimental archaeological observations about spectators, lane markers, and the benefits of olive oil to capture the spectacular environment of an athletics event. He also addressed how the *hysplex*, a kind of starting gate, was used to ensure fair starts to races.¹² Susan Brownell personally experienced the

hysplex when she won her age group in the *stade* (length of stadium sprint) in the 2012 Nemean Games revival—wearing a tunic, running barefoot, and anointed with olive oil.¹³

“THE PEOPLE WITHOUT SPORT HISTORY”

That sport was practiced by other civilizations besides the Greeks and Romans has not gained nearly as much attention from scholars. In much of the archaeology of sport, it is virtually impossible to move beyond the Mediterranean world, widely assumed to have served as the cradle of Western civilization. Like a long line of historians of ancient sport before him, Nigel Crowther in his 2010 book *Sport in Ancient Times* provided only brief chapters on China, Japan, and Korea and did not engage at all with South Asian sport.¹⁴ He did acknowledge Mesoamerican civilizations, but not the North American areas of Cahokia, the Southeast, and Great Lakes city-states, where early forms of stickball games were apparently played.¹⁵

One of the enduring legacies of nineteenth-century biases has been the continued life of the idea that the ancient Greek concept of *agon* is a defining feature of Western civilization from the Greeks until today. The notion that a cultural focus on contests was unique to the ancient Greeks is still accepted today to some degree by prominent classical scholars.¹⁶ One of the few scholars to dissent with the stereotype of Western competitiveness was Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), a Dutch medieval historian and author of a foundational theory of play. Impressed by French sinologist Marcel Granet’s interpretation of ancient Chinese culture, he argued that “the agonistic principle plays a part in the development of Chinese civilization far more significant even than *agon* in the Hellenic world.”¹⁷ Huizinga was decades ahead of his time; his contributions to the study of play will be discussed below.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Germany had been the world center for classicism, and much of the leading scholarship on ancient sports in the classical world had come out of its universities. In the wake of Germany’s romantic and ultimately catastrophic obsession with ancient Greece and “Aryan civilization,” postwar German scholars were most incisive in criticizing the omission of non-Western cultures from the history of ancient sports. One was Wolfgang Decker, who demonstrated for the first time that Egypt had a rich sports tradition before Greece (nineteenth-century classicists considered Egypt an “Oriental civilization”). Another,

Ingomar Weiler, criticized classicists' fixation on the Greek pursuit of individual excellence—expressed in Homer's proverb *Aien aristuein*, "Ever to excel"—arguing that it played a role in racist scholarship that denied the existence of competition and sport among non-Aryan races.¹⁸

Henning Eichberg was the only scholar to enter into the debate from an anthropological perspective. A German scholar based in Denmark since 1982 and trained in history and sociology, he conducted fieldwork on sports in Indonesia and Libya. He sharply criticized what he considered to be neocolonialism in sport studies, observing that "by thinking in terms of an 'absence' one tends to reproduce the colonial inequality on a new level: modern sport remains the measure—the others 'don't have it yet.'"¹⁹

However, almost none of these works have been translated into English, except for a few of Eichberg's essays.²⁰ As a result, the question of Western-centrism in ancient sport history has not been seriously taken up by anglophone scholars; furthermore, while the subfield of classical sport history has borrowed many anthropological theories, few trained anthropologists have published in the field. The history of Greek and Roman sports as a whole could benefit from closer collaboration with anthropologists.

GAMES, SPORT, AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE VICTORIAN CULTURE OF DISPLAY

Anthropology emerged in this context, and much of its early history was intertwined with classicism and classical archaeology. Thus, US-based archaeologists sought to find spectacular sites in the Americas that could produce artifacts to rival those dug out of the classical sites that had already been claimed by Europeans. The disciplinary divide between classical and anthropological archaeologists remains today. Moreover, both classical and anthropological archaeology were intertwined with the growth of mass popular culture. P. T. Barnum is often considered the originator of "popular culture," commodified entertainment ventures that earn their profit by attracting very large and not particularly educated audiences who pay small admission fees. Opened in New York in 1841, Barnum's American Museum (which was not a museum in today's understanding of the word) displayed ethnological artifacts along with exotic animals, historical artifacts, paintings and sculptures, waxworks, freak shows, and other curiosities, drawing the idea from the Enlightenment-era "cabinet of curiosities" but making it

available for mass consumption. After his museum burned to the ground in 1870, Barnum took his first circus on the road.²¹ In the United Kingdom, a Victorian “culture of display” emerged through newly created public museums. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in London in 1851, often referred to as the Crystal Palace Exhibition, was the first exposition that aspired to be international, kicking off the fashion of “world’s fairs.”²² In the early years of anthropology the novel institutions of museums and world’s fairs provided the financial underpinning for professional positions. Circuses and world’s fairs mixed Greco-Roman reenactments such as chariot races, gladiator contests, and wild-animal shows with boxing contests, equestrian and rodeo performances, and acrobatic performances, as well as displays of humans from Asia, Africa, and North America who occasionally engaged in sport-like activities.

Building on the circus tradition, in 1883 William F. Cody, or Buffalo Bill, invented the Wild West show, reenactments of battles fought against Indians on the American frontier or in the imperialist expansion into Mexico and around the world. The shows included riding, roping, shooting, and dramatic narratives, and advertisements claimed that the performers included army scouts, soldiers, cowboys, and Indians who had taken part in the actual events. Wild West shows provided employment for many “show Indians” who otherwise would have been stuck on the reservations. They were wildly popular in the United States and Europe, and they helped forge the imagined cowboy-and-Indian past that became an important element in American national identity. Moreover, Indian schools trained their pupils in sports in an attempt to guide their assimilation and took them on tours to compete against Euro-American schools.²³ The vexed relationship between Indians and sports boiled up in the twentieth century when activists began to protest the use of Indian symbols as mascots for sports teams, arguing that they expressed white infatuation with Indian stereotypes combined with an unwillingness actually to understand Indian culture. A lawsuit against the Washington Redskins football team claimed that its name violated the law against using pejorative names in trademarks, but the judgment against the team was overturned on appeal.²⁴ Clearly, in the realm of sport symbolism, some non-Indians are just as attached to fictional Indians who live in an imaginary past as are some non-Greeks to fictional ancient Greeks and their imaginary Olympian past. These fictions are part of the great symbolic systems that give meaning to the times in which we live—in ways that are often problematic for disadvantaged populations.

At the 1893 world's fair in Chicago, Stewart Culin, one of the founders of the American Anthropological Association (established in 1902), organized an exhibition of world games. This was an extension of his interest in games that resulted in more than a dozen articles and two books on the subject published between 1889 and 1925.²⁵ Culin linked games primarily with religious beliefs and divination practices. He was also interested in using the similarity of games from distant parts of the world as proof for cultural diffusion—for example, finding evidence that “the higher culture of the New World had its source in Asia.” In addition, he found these similarities to be proof of the “psychological unity” of the human race, that is, that all human minds share a set of similar fundamental capacities, an idea with roots in Enlightenment-era philosophy that became a central tenet of anthropology thanks to the influence of Adolf Bastian and his student Franz Boas (see chapter 3).²⁶

Culin's encyclopedic work on games did not, however, extend into the realm of sport. The only sports displays by natives at the Chicago world's fair occurred when the revenues were not on pace to repay the financial backers, and so in an attempt to attract paying spectators, boat races and swim meets were arranged between the Zulus, South American Indians, Dahomeans, and Turks inhabiting the re-created “ethnological” villages along the carnivalesque strip of attractions outside the fairgrounds.²⁷

From the discipline's very beginnings, anthropologists paid much more attention to the games played by people around the world than to sports. However, for a long time, the study of games was little more than the cataloging of equipment and rules, and they were often regarded as children's pastimes. It was not until the 1970s that greater analytic thought was given to attributing a significant social role to those games, as we discuss below.

Perhaps the most interesting convergence of anthropology and sport occurred at the world's fair in St. Louis in 1904, when native sports were incorporated into the “scientific” investigations undertaken by WJ McGee, director of the exposition's Division of Anthropology.²⁸ McGee had just been forced out of the position he had held since 1893 as ethnologist in charge of the Bureau of American Ethnology, but he had become the first president of the newly formed American Anthropological Association in 1902, confirming his status as the most powerful man in American ethnology. He responded to a challenge from James Sullivan, head of the fair's Division of Physical Education and organizer of the third modern Olympic Games held in conjunction with the fair, on the question of whether “savages” were



FIGURE 4. "Spear throwing contest of Igorrote Warriors" (original caption; the preferred spelling today is *Igorot*). Philippine Reservation, Department of Anthropology, 1904 world's fair (Louisiana Purchase Exposition: St. Louis World's Fair Albums. Jesse Tarbox Beals, from the Missouri History Museum collections).

athletically superior to civilized men. McGee agreed to organize the natives on display in St. Louis to take part in sports events so that their performances could be measured and compared with those of the athletes who would take part in the Olympics. As ridiculous as this seems today, McGee was somehow able to conceive that it was sound scientific methodology to line up a group of "natives" from around the world, explain the rules to them in English (which many of them did not understand), and then measure and time their performances in running races, high jump, broad jump, shotput, javelin, baseball throwing, tug-of-war, and pole climbing for comparison with the best-trained athletes in the United States (figure 4). The event, called Anthropology Days, was enough of a failure as a scientific experiment that no academic reports were ever published on it, but this did not stop McGee from organizing a second event one month later in an attempt to generate more revenue, having concluded that the fair organizers had not given the first event enough publicity to attract the numbers of paying spectators that

he had expected. For the second event the participants were provided with some advance training and with interpreters who spoke their languages; they also performed wearing “native” dress. About thirty thousand spectators attended, of whom almost three thousand paid ten to twenty-five cents to sit in the bleachers erected for the occasion. While McGee claimed that the performances improved, no record remains, and again no academic paper was ever published.²⁹

MESOAMERICAN AND NORTH AMERICAN SPORT IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Sport also appeared on the radar screen of anthropological archaeologists. With the excavation of the great ball court at the Mayan center Chichén Itzá in 1923, archaeologists had their equivalent of the ancient Greek games. It is in Mesoamerica where archaeological evidence for sport’s central spectacular role is apparent due to the durability of the stone-built Olmec, Aztec, and Mayan architecture. Ball courts as old as thirty-six hundred years and rubber balls as old as thirty-five hundred years have been excavated. Murals depicting contests and rulers adorn important architectural structures. The ball court was formed by high walls in the shape of an I. Balls were made of solid rubber weighing up to nine pounds. Rubber trees being indigenous to South America, early Spanish observers were astounded by the bouncing balls and wondered whether they were animated by spirits. Spectators watched from above as two teams of two to four players tried to score points by keeping the ball in play by hitting it only with their hips. Blows from the fast and heavy balls could cause severe bruising and even be fatal, so players wore protective headgear and large hip pads. Rulers were often depicted wearing the iconic ballplayer dress, demonstrating the game’s role in reinforcing political authority. Some ball courts also had two stone rings protruding from the center of the long wall, sometimes nearly twenty feet from the ground. Sending a ball through the ring, which must have been a rare event, may have resulted in immediate victory.³⁰

The evident grandeur and scale of Mesoamerican ball games rivaled the circus spectacles of Rome or Byzantium. The Mesoamerican ball game clearly played a central role in the display of theocratic authority and social hierarchy, as evidenced by the spatial architecture, urban planning, various art forms, murals, ceramic figurines, stone statues of ballplayers, and myths and

legends recounting the sporting prowess of gods and heroes. Ball games appear to have played a pivotal role in the transition from relative social and political egalitarianism to a rank-based society, in which hereditary leaders claimed divine origins and controlled the labor of others. Prehistoric statuettes depict men of chiefly rank wearing ball game protective gear, and the Mayan cosmological text *Popol Vuh* describes the creation of the world as a ball game that pits mortals against gods. Ball games and the attendant activities played an instrumental role in establishing early forms of government. Sport for the ancient inhabitants of the region was serious business.³¹ (The link with Mesoamerican cosmology is further described in chapter 3.) While ball courts were a common feature of central plazas in Aztec and Mayan cities, they were actually widespread and found among such cultures as the Hohokam culture in what is now Arizona.³²

Other sports in North America also played significant social roles. One such sport was *chunkey*, in which a contestant tossed a smooth stone disc several inches in diameter so that it rolled across the ground, and then he and his opponent tried to hit it by throwing long poles up to eight feet in length. It was typically the occasion for gambling. Archaeologists have found evidence of this sport spread throughout much of Mississippi valley and the Southeast. One scholar has argued that envoys from Cahokia, a ritual center near present-day St. Louis, carried *chunkey* stones in one hand and war clubs in the other as they traveled into the Midwest, South, and Plains seeking political alliances and eventually establishing a region-wide *Pax Cahokiana*.³³ The spatial organization of mounds, state houses, or pyramids fronted by an open plaza in settlements throughout the US Southeast, the Mississippi valley, and Mexico is suggestive of the importance of spectacle in those settings.³⁴ Without asserting any causal relationship, we may conclude that sport played a central role in the emergence of complex societies in North America and Mesoamerica, given that these societies all engaged in sport-related spectacles, *chunkey*, stickball, or ball games. The degradable materials of North American settlements have left behind less evidence, but wherever found, the sports associated with these spaces demonstrate the same links among spectacle, athleticism, and political power.

Archaeology contributes a great many things to our understanding of early complex societies but does not help us to understand sport outside the practices of the more powerful elites. The archaeology of sport lacks sources on informal sports and games, which may have been a popular part of everyday life. Instead, the focus is on the links among politics and sport, state

formation, and the practices of the elite. In contrast with Mesoamerican civilizations, those of the Mediterranean appear not to have embraced team sports, according to the archaeological record: the Panhellenic Games, the Roman circuses, and Byzantine races emphasized *mano a mano* competition and individual achievement. Apparently, city fathers did not believe that ball playing prepared citizens of these societies for any meaningful civic responsibilities. What is evident, then, is that sport can take numerous forms even as its apparent singular purpose, the linking of sport to sociopolitical power, cuts across the diverse range of sport found in antiquity.

RETHINKING ROMAN SPORT

As a legacy of their link to Western colonialism and imperialism, most popular and historical writings about the evolution of modern sport follow a historical narrative that reflects, if not wholly reproduces, the dominant narrative of modernity, demonstrating the inevitable progress of modern sport out of its antiquarian forms. This ideological linkage does not reflect the values, organization, or structures of sport as it was then, but mirrors the core beliefs about humanity, the world, and civilization in the scholar's own era.³⁵ Despite presumptions about the uniqueness of modern sport, the politics of pageantry, spectacle, and celebrity making seem to have crossed the centuries when we consider the ancient Greek games and the various entertainments of the Roman and Byzantine Empires. In earlier interpretations of archaeological remains, the "progress" and "civilizing" discourses of sport were seen to be confirmed by various archaeological findings, heavily influencing our understandings of antiquarian sport, most especially in the Panhellenic world and of the Olympic Games in particular.³⁶ Much more recently, these assumptions have been scrutinized critically in a large body of works rethinking the role of sport and other spectacles held in grandiose spaces of stadiums, amphitheaters, and plazas in reinforcing the political legitimacy of rulers and the state.³⁷

Continuing a bias from the early founders of Christianity, who demonized Roman spectacles with legends of martyred Christians, nineteenth-century classicists produced a positive stereotype of Greek sports and a negative stereotype of Roman sports: Greek sports were characterized as admirable, pure, participatory, amateur, noble, and uplifting; Roman spectacles were decadent, vulgar, spectator, professional, sadistic, and debasing.³⁸ Coubertin

subscribed to this stereotype, and that was why he insisted that Olympic Games should be awarded to a host *city* rather than a *country*, imitating the status of the Greek city-state as the main political unit; this remains the case today, although most people are not aware of it (on this point, Olympic Games differ from FIFA World Cups, which are awarded to countries). In an era when European nation-states were threatening to gobble up each other and parcel out other continents between themselves in the process, Coubertin stated that there was a “latent eliminatory conflict” between the principle of the Roman state and that of the Greek city, and he feared that the future favored the Roman state, while he himself preferred the Greek city.³⁹

It was not until the 1980s that scholars started “taking the Greeks down from their pedestals and raising the Romans from their ruins.”⁴⁰ The purported “amateur ideal” of ancient Greek sports, which had been much cited by, in particular, British elites wishing to exclude laborers from their sports, was overturned when David Young documented that ancient Greek athletes were well-remunerated professionals. Similarly, the purported exclusion of women from sports was invalidated when it was revealed that contests for women in honor of Zeus’s wife, Hera, had been held at the Olympic complex.⁴¹ Not surprisingly, both of these facts were rediscovered by scholars when the reality of elite sports had changed: it was an open secret that star Olympic athletes were clandestine professionals, and by then women had achieved a modicum of acceptance in sport. It is interesting that more accurate scholarship followed the emergence of new social practices rather than preceding them, so that it appears that sportspeople forced scholars to remove their blinders and not the other way around.

In the new millennium, scholarship on Roman sports utilizing anthropological perspectives on rituals, cultural performances, and gift exchange revealed that Roman sports were embedded in social, economic, and political structures in complex ways.⁴² Gladiator combat was not as brutal as Hollywood would have us believe, although it still surpassed the threshold of tolerance of the contemporary world. It is interesting to point out the variation in thresholds of tolerance across cultures: while the Romans eventually embraced Greek athletics, they had to overcome initial resistance because of the association of Greek sports with homosexuality, and they never embraced athletic nudity. The Roman masculine ideal, unlike the Greek, was somewhat prudish and paranoid about effeminacy, so spectators who delighted in watching men slaughter each other would have been offended by male nudity. Gladiators were, paradoxically, both admired for their quintessential

masculinity, exemplified in their physical prowess and acceptance of death, and held in contempt for their low social status. Most were non-Roman prisoners of war, and they were assigned specific kinds of armor and weapons that signaled “barbarian” ethnic identities. There was no “Roman type” because that would have risked the defeat of a gladiator representing Rome by a barbarian, and gladiator shows were about glorifying Roman martial prowess.

Gladiators were enslaved to private owners who supplied them with food, medical attention, training facilities, and a trainer. Even if they earned their freedom, they were permanent outsiders classified as *infamia*, a status that included actors, criminals, debtors, prostitutes, and gravediggers, all of whom had restricted legal rights. In the Republic of the third century BCE to the first century CE, gladiator contests were organized by a producer, an elite man who presented them as a “gift” to his constituents in order to win their support. He financed the show and contracted the gladiator troupe. Combat was not uncontrolled slaughter; rather it was highly choreographed and overseen by two referees. Fights were brief and ended when one fighter acknowledged defeat by dropping his weapon and raising his finger (a gesture adopted from the Greek mixed martial art *pankration*). The referee made sure that the victor stood back and awaited a decision from the spectators, who signaled either a reprieve by a closed fist or two fingers pointing out, or death by thumbs turned toward the throat and shouts of “Kill him!” The crowd’s reaction was based on the quality of the fight and the fame of the fighter. The final decision was indicated by a gesture from the producer, who sat in the stands and assessed the crowd’s reaction. He could defy the crowd, but that would controvert the purpose of the event, which was to display his generosity and gain their support. If he saved a gladiator, they might feel he was being cheap: producers were reluctant to give the thumbs-down because every gladiator represented a substantial financial investment—some contracts even specified a rental fee of eighty sesterces if the gladiator survived, but a compensation of 4,000 sesterces if he was killed or maimed. A gladiator could be worth more than the annual salary of a Roman soldier (about 12,000 sesterces), despite price-control regulations. Between 20 and 50 percent of fights ended in a death, with the rate increasing from the first to third centuries. A gladiator who survived three years was released from the arena, and after five years he was granted full freedom. Free Roman citizens were not supposed to fight in gladiator games, but the fact that some did (including one emperor, Commodus) is indicated by repeated imperial decrees trying to stop them;

they were unpaid and were not stigmatized by *infamia*. Women very occasionally became gladiators who fought other women or beasts.⁴³

Arena games were so integral to politics that Augustus took greater control of them as he strove to turn the Republic into an empire with himself as emperor and “father of the country” from 27 BCE onward.⁴⁴ He regulated games held in Rome to ensure that rivals could not organize games to gain popular support: gladiator schools were moved under imperial sponsorship, limits were set on shows that magistrates could produce while in office, and the state provided the funding so that magistrates could not buy supporters with extravagance. Augustus himself was featured as the producer in centralized games that reinforced his authority. In Rome gladiator games were the grand finale to a day of performances in the Colosseum provided free of charge to as many as fifty thousand spectators.

Chariot racing was the most popular sport from early Rome into the Byzantine Empire, with the number of races reaching an average of one every five or six days in the fourth century CE.⁴⁵ At its peak, the Circus Maximus held one hundred and fifty thousand spectators. Males and females intermixed in the stands, offering opportunities for courtship. The sport was organized by circus factions, privately owned and operated businesses that owned the chariots, charioteers (slaves of mostly Greek or Hellenistic origin), horses, stables, and equipment. *Factiones* also was the label for the spectators who wore different colors associated with their faction to distinguish themselves in the stands, and whose frequently zealous support was aided by massive betting. The lives of the charioteers (and probably those of the horses) were often short because of the danger of crashing, either from bumping into other chariots (which was allowed) or crashing into the barrier or turn posts. However, they received a portion of the prize money, and so, if they survived long enough, they could purchase their freedom. When the Republic became an empire, the emperors took control of the arena itself, but the factions continued to organize the sport in a kind of public-private partnership until the third century CE. The bodily presence of the emperor at the events was symbolically very important, not least because this was an occasion when organized protests by the citizenry demanding food or tax relief were normally (but not always) tolerated, providing a vent for public discontent.

The rethinking of Roman sport gives us much food for thought about modern sport. Too many elements are uncomfortably familiar. Sports celebrities from outsider ethnic backgrounds were regarded with simultaneous admiration, contempt, and fear; they possessed limited legal rights, were

owned by private groups of wealthy male elites, and were sometimes eroticized by elite women. Their condition is far too similar to the status of black and African athletes in contemporary sport (discussed in chapters 2, 4, and 8). As the early Christian writer Tertullian put it with disgust, “The perversity of it! They love whom they lower; they despise whom they approve; the art they glorify, the artist they disgrace.”²⁴⁶

The use of sports in local politics by elite owners who hosted games to win popular support for their political ambitions is hauntingly similar to today’s professional sports clubs—although increasingly the elites who own them are no longer locally based but members of transnational networks, making them less responsive to their local fan base. The incorporation of state-sponsored sport spectacles into the rituals of the state echoes the link of sport with modern nationalism (discussed in chapter 7) and the political symbolism attributed to sport mega-events today (chapters 6). Clearly, one can hear echoes across the millennia indicating that sports are a significant tactic of power in whatever form they take. Another lesson is that although the inspiring ideals of the ancient Olympic Games may be more present in the popular imagination today, the social, political, and economic organization of contemporary sports has more in common with Roman sports—as much as we might prefer not to think about it.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF PLAY

The abundant evidence of the presence of sport in ancient cultures demonstrates that sport as an activity (as opposed to a cultural concept) is not a modern invention or even an invention of Western civilization. Yet it is not a human universal, either, because it clearly varies according to the particular historical, social, and political contexts in which it is practiced. While sport as it is defined today is not universal, play, a human activity that is central to the emergence and organization of most sport, appears to be a human universal motivated by biological, and thus pan-human, imperatives.

In other species, prey and predators engage in play, albeit not together (although some predators use prey to play). Pronghorn fawns engage in fast running interspersed with twists and leaps. Their play strengthens the skills required to evade predators. Those that play more have a greater chance of surviving their first month than those that do not play as much. Similarly, wolf cubs’ main form of play is mock predation, which helps them develop

the individual and social skills required for hunting in packs. Play tones muscles, builds coordination, hones skills useful in hunting, and helps young wolves establish their place in the pack hierarchy. But that does not explain why adult wolves also play. For wolves, humans, or any other social creature among which play has been observed, the rules are the same: if a participant becomes too aggressive, play ceases abruptly. One cannot play with a partner one cannot trust. For any living being whose livelihood and survival depends on a social group, a solid foundation of trust is critical.⁴⁷ Understood in this manner, play emerges as an inherently biological condition in which a set of actions is set off from the other contexts of life. Play is adaptive in that, through it, the young learn the requisite skills and knowledge required for survival, and it helps to maintain social cohesion among the grown members of a social group. Play is thus biologically important, but it is also one aspect of human life in which the biological and the cultural are intertwined. Why human beings engage in play—and by extension, games and sport—is much more complex than a simple manifestation of a biological imperative.

In 1930, New Zealander anthropologist Raymond Firth published a classic analysis of a dart match on the isolated Polynesian island of Tikopia in the Solomon Islands. His analysis moved the focus from the material aspects to the social functions of games, in step with the search for “function” that dominated British anthropology at the time. Firth proposed that “sport as an integral feature in the life of many primitive peoples, offers a number of problems for investigation. Some of these are concerned with questions of organization, of the nature of the factors which differentiate a vague play activity from a regularly established game with clearly defined procedure, hemmed in on every side by rules of strong sanction.”⁴⁸ He went on to explore motivations and emotions, physiological patterns, and the activity’s overall relationship to the rest of life, especially religious affairs, economics, and aesthetics. Nevertheless, the article reproduces the rigid view, later developed by Roger Caillois (discussed below), that games are activities rooted in play, culturally sequestered, and consequence-free.

In his foundational *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga suggested not only that play is primary to and a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of the generation of culture, but also that culture exists as a form of play only because it presupposes the understanding that it is “enclosed within certain bounds freely accepted.”⁴⁹ Play then is not so much an activity separate from the world but a disposition toward the world. As a creative force, play marks the agent as ready to improvise and practically equipped to act, successfully

or not, amid novel circumstances. This disposition acknowledges that a being may affect events, but its agency is not confined to its intent or measured by it. Rather, play allows for unintended consequences.

In *Man, Play, and Games*, French scholar Roger Caillois challenged Huizinga's emphasis on competition in play, recognizing that it was only one of a range of values that could be attributed to play.⁵⁰ In particular, he divided play into four discrete categories of games along a continuum of two poles between utterly open fantasy (*paidia*) and strictly controlled efforts, skills, and knowledge (*ludus*). Those four categories recognize the difference between games of skill (*agon*) and games of chance (*alea*) as well as taking on pretense (mimicry) and altered perceptions (*ilinx*). While play informs all these categories, Caillois surmised that modern sport arose out of a combination of both *agon* and *alea*, and this is where he disagreed with Huizinga. Caillois also argued that gambling is a game "like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph." For Caillois, gambling is a game of chance, particular to humanity, based on luck with specific kinds of risk that shape a distinctly human form of play.⁵¹ Huizinga insisted that gambling was the corruption of play, in which "fatality" should not be involved.⁵²

A growing focus on the creative force that is play developed in anthropology to challenge the materialism that prevailed at the time. Whether a game was essentially a social activity and enabled a winner to triumph was not a problem for Caillois. He considered that play is best described by six core characteristics: it is free, or not obligatory; it is separate from the routine of life, occupying its own time and space; its outcomes are uncertain, thus requiring human initiative; it is unproductive, in that it creates no wealth and ends as it begins; it is governed by rules that suspend ordinary laws and behaviors and that players must follow; and it involves make-believe that confirms for players the existence of imagined realities that may be set against "real life."⁵³

One of the most creative minds of the twentieth century, Gregory Bateson, saw the need to completely rethink play after observing two young monkeys at the San Francisco Zoo unequivocally "playing, i.e., engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as those of combat."⁵⁴ He realized that play could occur only if the monkeys were capable of "metacommunication"—communication about communication. In this case the monkeys were engaging in behaviors that looked like combat, but they had somehow communicated the message "This is play." The

paradox of play was that a playful nip denotes a vicious bite—that is, an action that is play denotes an action that is not play. This meant that the animals were communicating about something that did not exist (the vicious bite) and were capable of distinguishing metacommunicative frames—in this case, play from not-play.⁵⁵ If animals were capable of such complex mental constructs, then how much more complex must be humans' mental constructs, that is, their "fantasies"? Bateson proposed that human rituals were a similar type of metacommunicative frame. Humans are capable of a further paradox in which metacommunication about a symbol denoting something that does not exist indicates that the symbol is nonetheless real; he used as an example the fact that men will die to save a flag, signaling that the flag is a "metaphor that is meant."⁵⁶ John MacAloon later incorporated Bateson's notion of metacommunication into his theory of performance frames, as we discuss in chapter 6.

As mentioned above, the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play served as a takeoff point for the development of the anthropology of sport. It produced ten annual conference proceedings in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the number of anthropologists in the association decreased over time, and in 1987 the word "Anthropological" was dropped from the name of the organization; the reborn series, "Play and Culture Studies," continues to the present.⁵⁷

Despite Caillois's attempt, definitions of play and game remained open to debate. A 1976 review article pulled together the existing studies of children's play to outline the state of a fragmented field in which there was "clearly no single agreed-upon definition, classification, or metaphor/reduction of play available."⁵⁸ It described four approaches in ethnographies of children's play. The first saw play as form of socialization through role-playing and mimicry. Various forms of play were presumed to be differences based on culture rather than in biological makeup. The second focused on children's play, especially in relation to its material culture—games and toys—at the expense of the social processes of play. The third examined children's play from a psychological standpoint in which play revealed anxieties and fears. The fourth treated play as essentially a trivial activity barely warranting notice despite its acknowledged human universality.

One scholar who attempted to provide an anthropological definition of play was Edward Norbeck.⁵⁹ Drawing on the work of Huizinga, as almost all scholars investigating play do, he proposed that play is never imposed by physical necessity. Instead, a person engages in play because the activity is intrinsically rewarding, not because the activity is a means to some end out-

side the activity. Play is separate from what one considers “real” life, although within its own boundaries, it can proceed with the utmost seriousness. But Norbeck’s efforts make it abundantly clear that play is one of the more difficult behaviors to pin down precisely because of its amorphous, ambiguous contexts of engagement. No firm definition of play has emerged since the mid-1970s despite regular, recurrent anthropological research on the topic.

Play’s freedom, its “bracketing” from everyday life, and its independence from material interest makes it appear antithetical to all that is held dear in modern capitalist society. The “escapist” potential of play rests on the idea that individuals in a leisure-based modernity are “free” to play.⁶⁰ The obligation to spend leisure time “wisely,” however, is not a human universal but a specific cultural norm rooted in capitalism.⁶¹ Nevertheless, Huizinga clearly separated play from work, arguing that modern sport is not play because it is rooted in industrial capitalism and thus embroiled in material concerns. The regimentation and systematization of modern sport have pushed it away from the playful disposition: “The spirit of the professional is no longer the true play-spirit; it is lacking in spontaneity and carelessness.”⁶² The tightly scripted spectacles and regimented labor found in sport do nothing for humanity. Thus, for Huizinga, sport has nothing to do with play, though playful elements can unintentionally emerge during sporting activities.

Yet to play a game is to embrace a specific cultural framework that reinterprets the context in a new, and often comprehensive, system of meaning. Games are specialized activities composed of symbolic packets of play, as both Huizinga and Caillois contend. The rules of any game coordinate the terms of engagement and help participants reach a conclusion or a moment of disengagement. In this way games provide play with circumscribed, often linear, qualities that play outside of a game might otherwise lack. Players may grow tired or bored, or may otherwise wish to quit the game even as each player is normatively expected to finish it; they are encouraged to complete the game by its very structure. This structure orders time and space, helping turn “mere behavior” into a bounded and complete “event.” A game has a beginning and an end, which bracket it from other activities and encourage distinctive behaviors that alleviate the drudgery of life while simultaneously confirming the salience of that everyday world. Elsewhere, these same insights became important in ritual theory, as we will discuss in chapter 6.

The assumption that play is trivial has dominated the general attitude toward play in the discipline of anthropology and spilled over into its attitude toward sport. While children’s play has been treated as an object of

anthropological inquiry, adults' play typically has not, although online games and other forms of Internet play have attracted some recent ethnographic attention.⁶³

RITUAL, TRADITION, AND MODERNITY IN SPORT

The realization that sport is not play still leaves open the question of what sport is and what anthropology can contribute to an understanding of it. In the 1970s historians began to assert that the modern, Western conception of sport is unique in world history and fundamentally different from the "traditional" sports of historical and non-Western peoples. One aspect of the debate was the attempt to identify which criteria should be used to define a sport as "modern." An area of sustained inquiry was the concept of the sports record as a best-ever, measured performance.

Historian Allen Guttmann's paradigm-changing *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* argued that "traditional," premodern sports had a ritual character that disappeared with the emergence of industrial society and was replaced by an emphasis on achievement, as manifested in sports records.⁶⁴ Although there was no causal relationship between them, modern sports developed at the same time as industrial capitalism; both were driven by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the mathematical discoveries of the eighteenth century. The emergence of modern sports manifested the development of an empirical, experimental, mathematical worldview.⁶⁵ In refusing to declare a causal relationship between an industrial economy and sports, Guttmann disagreed with Marxist historians who argued that modern sports arose along with capitalism because they facilitated the capitalist exploitation of workers by keeping the workers fit and docile (Guttmann was located, after all, on the capitalist side of the Cold War).⁶⁶

Challenged by Guttmann, later researchers found sports record keeping in other cultures and epochs, leading some to argue that sports records are not a distinctly modern practice.⁶⁷ Even if a preoccupation with record keeping and quantification per se is not modern, what *is* decidedly modern is a bureaucratic system designed to keep records on local, national, and global scales. At this point, an anthropological contribution to the discussion might help resolve its current impasse—we need to better understand who keeps records, why, and whose power interests records serve.

Henning Eichberg agreed that sports records involved capitalist-style production—the “c-g-s production” of centimeters, grams, and seconds—but he disagreed with Guttmann’s unilinear evolutionary scheme (“from ritual to record”), arguing that although modern sports fetishize the production of records, the ritual aspects of sport continue to flourish in the modern context—modern sports are a “ritual of the record.” Borrowing from Michel Foucault’s concept of the “epistemic break,” he eschewed the search for the “origins” of sport, before it “evolved” into its modern form, preferring to see a historical discontinuity between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when one configuration of space, time, and interpersonal relations gave way to another. Before the break, a person’s social place was determined by an ascribed status contained within a bounded hierarchy; after the break, a person’s social place was based on “achievement” in an open economy oriented toward productivity. The “from ritual to record” theory continues to be a topic of heated debate and still has its adherents.

The notion of “traditional sport” in much of the sport studies literature effectively presupposed a temporal distance between the secular, “rational,” contemporary practices of modern sport and the premodern, “irrational” practices of traditional sport, which were said to be based on superstition, religious belief, and other nonscientific ways of understanding the body, what it means to be human, and humanity’s place in the cosmos. The label “traditional sport” implies that the activity is not “civilized,” not secular, and not scientific. In effect, these are physical activities and embodied practices embedded in a worldview that differs from the modern, secular rationality inherited from Western Enlightenment. Implicit in this perspective is the unilinear evolution and belief in inevitable progress and constant improvement of humanity that so drove the Enlightenment and the concomitant expansion of European power.

VICTOR TURNER’S RITUAL THEORY

In a completely independent effort in the same time frame, Max Gluckman and his student Victor Turner were developing a new brand of ritual theory that, like Guttmann’s, subscribed to the then-prevailing modernization theory, which held that there are clear differences between “traditional” and “modern” societies. Guttmann and Turner were not aware of each other’s work. Applications of ritual theory and the other theories that it inspired to sports events will be discussed in chapter 6.

Here we will observe that Turner incorporated some of the insights that came out of the works on play into his ritual theory. For him, the most creative human spaces were found along the margins or interstitial zones of social structure, frequently sites of frolic, play, and joking. The performative, display-oriented, or representative aspects of an event, most especially the symbolic presentations and re-presentations typically associated with “ritual,” mingle with experience-oriented qualities central to “play.” Turner was particularly interested in the highly focused and pleasurable mental state associated with play, which psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi labeled “flow.”⁶⁸ Ritual shares with sport, theater, and other performative genres a playfulness from which new expressive possibilities of self-representation emerge, although play is constrained by conventions and rules. This returns us to the earlier points made by Huizinga and other theorists: play is that wholly voluntary, creative force in life that is not conscripted by social conventions. Play coalesces the emotional, cognitive, and moral dimensions of existence into sharp, distilled instances. Through such activities, human capacities are diversified and thickened, and societies are made stronger, and in that sense play deepens social life.

Play is, then, what Turner called (originally in reference to initiation rituals) a “liminal” activity, one that is both part of and removed from normative everyday life, in a “betwixt and between” state.⁶⁹ “The dominant genres of performance in societies at all levels of scale and complexity tend to be liminal phenomena. They are performed in privileged spaces and times, set off from the periods and areas reserved for work, food, and sleep.”⁷⁰ The commonalities between play and ritual were clearly a significant concern for both Huizinga and Turner, although the two approached the same activities from different angles.

CLIFFORD GEERTZ’S “BALINESE COCKFIGHT”

Probably the most read article written by an anthropologist about a sport (if one considers its subject a sport) is Clifford Geertz’s “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.”⁷¹ While it was the product of the general intellectual milieu that included Bateson, Norbeck, Gluckman, and Turner, the article cited none of the key thinkers of the time other than Erving Goffman, the founding father of the symbolic interactionism school of sociology, which would have an important impact on the social sciences in years to come. Like

Geertz's work in general, it stands apart from the discipline, but its enduring appeal lies in his clever storytelling and compelling writing.

As widely read as the essay is, it is hard to pin down whether it imparted a legacy of a theory or method that other scholars could utilize. The opening of the essay narrates the abrupt breakup of a cockfight in rural Bali, an island of Indonesia, by a police raid and the need for everyone (including the anthropologist and his wife) to flee and hide because the Indonesian government considered cockfighting and gambling illegal. The article advanced the concept of "deep play," "play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from [a] utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all."⁷² The higher the status of the men involved, the deeper the play and the more interesting the cockfight to the spectators. The basic argument was that, in Bali, cockfighting and the betting practices around it were extremely important to Balinese men at the time of Geertz's fieldwork, even though the Indonesian government had outlawed it as a cruel, antimodern practice. The cockfight makes nothing happen, and thus it does not have a "function." It renders everyday experience comprehensible by removing the practical consequences of acts and objects. It makes those acts and objects meaningful; it displays social passions, but does not assuage or heighten them. Status is at stake, but only symbolically—a man might be momentarily affirmed or insulted, but his status will not actually be altered. For Geertz, cockfighting is "a story the Balinese tell themselves about themselves" (by which he really meant Balinese men). These metaphors have found some purchase in sport studies: sports as a mirror for society, an expression of a culture as a whole, a story that we tell ourselves about ourselves, or a text that the anthropologist strains to read and interpret.

Geertz's Balinese cockfight came to be the canonical exemplar of a particular kind of anthropology that held considerable sway in anthropology and other disciplines in the 1970s and 1980s, but it also came to represent all that was problematic with the approach it espoused. Criticism of the essay has implications for anthropological approaches to sport that were largely unexplored at the time. For example, in one of the trenchant critiques that Geertz's article provoked, William Roseberry outlined a number of theoretically consequential problems in Geertz's reading of the Balinese cockfight.⁷³ One is the fact that, despite the article's opening vignette depicting the police raid, the author ignored the power of the state in defining what counts as possible, legitimate, and important in people's lives. The state and its institutions have considerable effect on how sport is organized on a local level all

over the world. Women, who are in charge of the marketplaces where men bring their animals to fight, are largely excluded from cockfights in Bali, and in fact their attempts to carefully monitor family finances are frequently turned upside down by husbands' and other male relatives' betting all the household income and savings to save face; Geertz's inattention to gender presages the general lack of concern about the marginalization of women and the way in which sport naturalizes masculinity in many societies of the world. Balinese men are known to lose their family savings in cockfight betting, yet for Geertz this is only a matter of saving face, and hence of symbolism, an interpretation he obviously did not check with Balinese women. We cannot ignore the implications that cockfights have for material concerns, in the same way that we must ask about the material implications of winning or losing in elite sport. Finally, history is completely absent from Geertz's reading of the Balinese cockfight, yet the practice had long been outlawed by the Dutch colonial administration, among others. This critique reminds us to look at history for an understanding of what we witness at the present moment, including the constitution of sport.

THE POSTMODERN TURN

In the 1980s cultural anthropology began to turn away from the kind of universalizing grand theories that had characterized most of the theory described earlier (with the exception of Geertz, who certainly did not offer a grand theory). A variety of theoretical approaches and topics entered the scene, providing new contexts in which sport could be situated—postcolonialism, postmodernism, feminism, the body, modernity, nationalism, the state, citizenship, transnationalism, globalization, and gender and sexuality. The new focus on globalization brought attention to the fact that the institutions that govern sport crosscut local, national, regional, international, and global structures in ways that highlight important theoretical issues.

In the 1990s, Alan Klein wrote three important ethnographies, which placed him at the forefront of the anthropology of sport for two reasons: he was the first anthropologist to systematically explore sport via the theories that had emerged since the 1980s, and he was the only anthropologist with such prolific output on sport. *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream* (1991) examined issues of nationalism and resistance to US cultural imperialism in baseball, applying Antonio Gramsci's theories of hegemony

and resistance; *Little Big Men* (1993) analyzed gender in bodybuilding; and *Baseball on the Border* (1997) developed an original theory of nationalism, which incorporated gender, based on fieldwork with a team that represented both Mexico and the United States.⁷⁴ Although he framed all these works within the cutting-edge paradigms in the discipline at the time, Klein's work failed to attract the attention from other anthropologists that it probably deserved. After years of being marginalized by his own discipline, he found an intellectual community in the North American Society for Sport Sociology (NASSS), which elected him president for 1998–99. The weak reception of this solid work might have been a measure of the degree of resistance to sport in the mainstream of the discipline. Many sport anthropologists have had no choice but to look toward interdisciplinary networks with sociologists, physical educators, and historians. Intellectually, this is not necessarily a bad thing, but the reality of academic politics meant that anthropologists lacked a power base in their own discipline. Klein continued to be prolific, writing three more books in the new millennium, one of which won 2015 Book of the Year from NASSS.⁷⁵

The remainder of this book will take up the various themes and topics opened up by these developments without trying, as was common up until the 1990s, to fit sport into a one-size-fits-all conceptual frame. We will demonstrate the contribution that the study of sport can make to the theories and debates that have been central in the discipline since the 1990s, and we will also show how these theories and approaches provide new insights into sport.

Chapter 2 analyzes sport through the lens of postcolonial studies and anthropological critiques of colonialism. Chapter 3 examines the relationship between sport, health, and medicine, utilizing a perspective derived from critical science and technology studies. It points out that Western biomedicine shapes international sport in definite ways that are usually not questioned, and that there are other non-Western configurations of exercise and health that have a more holistic vision of the body and its connection with the natural environment. The chapter also discusses the future of the biomedical body as seen in futuristic sports medicine technologies such as genetic enhancement and high-tech prostheses.

Chapter 4 uses sport as a particularly rich field for elucidating the practice theory put forward by Pierre Bourdieu, since it helps makes visible the often-hidden mechanisms by which social class, ethnicity, and race are reproduced at the level of daily practice. Chapter 5 illustrates sport's value for feminist and anthropological critiques of sex, gender, and sexuality, demonstrating the

culturally constructed nature of all of these—even in the realm of sport, which is popularly believed to separate men from women on the basis of biology.

Chapter 6 returns to the ritual theory of the 1970s and 1980s discussed briefly above, identifying the aspects of the theory that we now find outdated, while also finding aspects of the theory worth preserving. In particular, ritual theory is still being used by scholars to understand the world's two biggest sport mega-events—the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup in soccer. This chapter closes the circle with this chapter's discussion of ancient sport in its examination of mega-events as spectacles embedded in global economic, social, and political networks.⁷⁶

Chapter 7 illustrates the multiple ways in which sports fit theories of nationalism that emerged in the 1980s and afterward, producing concepts such as the “invention of tradition” and “imagined community,” and the recognition that gender and nationalism are thoroughly intertwined. Chapter 8 analyzes international and Olympic sports as a global system, showing that sports deserve to be considered in the growing number of approaches critical of various aspects of globalization, including North–South labor migration, the development aid sector, and the worldwide multiplication of nongovernmental organizations. The international sports system is also an excellent site for comprehending the growth of transnationalism since the end of the Cold War.

Sport is both a performance genre that exhibits qualities of play, liminality, and storytelling, and a unique nexus of the body, multiplex identities, and multilayered governance structures from local to global scales. Recognizing its complexity means acknowledging that no one theory can completely explain its nature and the enormous appeal it has for a broad variety of people around the globe. Placing sport at the center of anthropological theories reveals that while each theoretical approach may explain only a limited aspect of our world, taken as a whole they are starting to come together into a more complete explanatory framework than we had at our disposal in previous decades.