

Scoring goals for fun: but where's the history?

The intention here is to explore the historiography of football – especially British football – and to ask why the history of the grass-roots game has been so neglected. Writing of working-class men in the North-East of England in the nineteenth century, Alan Metcalfe (2008) observed: 'Sport was not just a diversion from the more important things in life but to many it was *the* most important thing in life'. This idea now resonates more powerfully with historians than it once did, not least because it is so widely accepted that sport has a role in the construction of identity. Yet, arguably, historians are still scratching at the surface and remain primarily focused on elite sport and what it has meant to those who follow it rather than on those who participated at lower levels; on professionals rather than amateurs; on the stadium rather than the recreation ground; on football's winners rather than its losers. Why is this so?

Ironically, at least part of the answer to this question lies in how sports historians have dealt with the important concept of amateurism. It will be argued here that most historians of football, especially those in Britain, have adhered – consciously or unconsciously - to a version of amateurism shaped by the 'gentlemanly', socially-elite amateurs of the nineteenth century. Their tacit acceptance and continued uncritical use of this period-specific, socially-exclusive concept has made it difficult for them to understand the many thousands of *de facto* 'amateurs', mainly working-class men and women, for whom football was essentially an unpaid, recreational activity. Thus a cultural practice which was often '*the* most important thing in life' has not received the consideration that it merits.

It will be suggested that recent work on football in Germany – notably Alan McDougall's *The People's Game* (2014) – as well as reference to those who have written about their experiences of grass-roots sport more generally – points to ways of addressing this problem. In addition, it will be argued that we need to develop new ways of categorizing those who participate in sport primarily – though not always exclusively – for recreational purposes.

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