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Life stories of seemingly uninteresting athletes offer a deeper understanding of the conditions that formed modern sport in Britain and Europe

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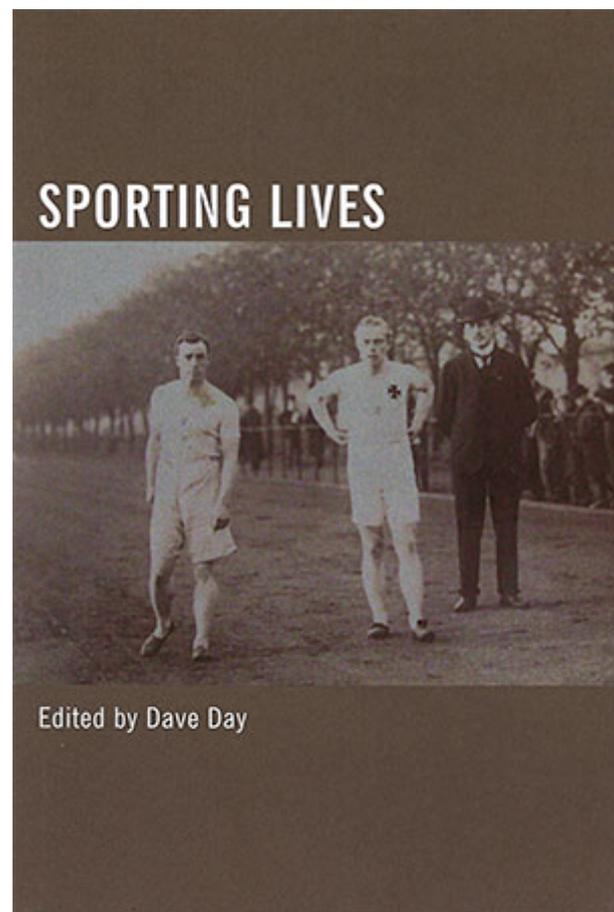
April 21, 2021

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Can a person's life and career ever be summarized in a biography? Can the truth of an individual ever be captured in a narrative, written, spoken or in any way performed? These questions form the introduction of the anthology *Sporting Lives*. It is a collection of papers on the life stories of eleven individuals connected with modern sports, from its early days in the 18th century to the 1960s. The central theme is said to be the question of whether it is possible to tell the true story of a historical person. As many biographers and authors have pointed out, the narrative of a person can only be a representation of that person, limited by perspective, by plot or simply by lack of sources.

The question of truth in a biographical work is relevant to historian John Bale in his paper on sport scientist Ernst Jokl, who has been acknowledge as one of the fathers of American sports science. In his paper Bale describes how his initial fascination over Jokl's many talents, both as an athlete himself but mainly over his works as a sports scientist who published a number of scientific papers on anthropology, kinesiology and physiology. But Bale's fascination took another turn when his research on Jokl revealed a mounting number of questions about his career. Was he ever part of the German 4 x 400 meters relay team in the 1928 Olympics, as he claimed? And did he actually study the Rwandan high jumpers on which he wrote several papers? Bale's research suggests that he did neither, and that many other of Jokl's



Dave Day (ed.)

Sporting Lives

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Research 2011

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accomplishments were built on the works of others or maybe did not even happen. The truth of Ernst Jokl's life and career seem elusive. The more you dig into the sources, the more questions pop up.

Bale's paper on Ernst Jokl is inspired by Norman Denzin's idea that you can never tell the truth or the whole story about a person. Instead, you will always find new facts and new perspectives that might overthrow your initial understanding of that person. In short, any biographical work needs to consider many layers of truth about the person in focus.

If the idea of many layers of truth was ever meant to be a theoretical frame for the stories in the collection, then the rest of the writers must have missed out on that information. The idea of layers of truth is not employed or mentioned in any of the other stories. Instead, they form a collection of life stories which, at first glance, are hard to connect and comprise in a meaningful whole. They are just eleven stories of, at least to a non-British reader, unknown persons connected to sport.

Read as singular papers, the stories in *Sporting Lives* are moderately interesting to be honest. Yes, each of them describes people who can be said to have had interesting lives in sport. But you must have a special interest, the same interest that I imagine the writers have, to be intrigued by their life stories. They aren't the kind of athletes that are interesting in themselves. They are historical characters that for the most part have been forgotten.

We have already seen the statistics and read the protocols, but it is through microhistorical works like this that history comes to life.

No, it is not so much the persons portrayed in the papers that spark my interest, but how the stories of them offer a personalized and authentic perspective on some of the big themes in the history of modern sport. Read together the eleven papers offer a deeper understanding of the conditions, possibilities and obstacles that formed modern sport in Britain and Europe. They deal with questions of class, gender, amateurism, migration, professionalization, and entrepreneurship in the formation of modern sport. If anything, it is the concept of microhistory that binds this collection of life stories together. Microhistory as a method aims to examine history from the point of view of an individual, a small society or a single event. The method has the potential to contribute with a different understanding of history than that of the grand narratives. And as Cronin (2007) puts it, the attractiveness of microhistory is that its participatory narrative, much like detective fiction, allows the reader to join the author in the process of understanding information and interpreting evidence.

Keith Myerscough's paper on the swimmer Joey Nuthall is a perfect example of this. Nuthall's career as a speed swimmer in the late Victorian age is a tale of a working-class athlete in an upper-class sport, professional ambitions versus amateur ideals and the opportunities created by the growing entrepreneurship connected to sport in this era. Fourteen years old Nuthall worked as a coal hawker during the days and went swimming in the local public baths. As it turned out, Nuthall proved to be an exceptional swimming talent and soon gained a reputation as a formidable speed swimmer. His fame drew large

crowds to the variety of exhibitions and challenges that were arranged as a popular form of entertainment. These events were very profitable and offered the opportunity for Nuthall and the likes of him to earn a living from swimming, much to the dislike of the Amateur Swimming Association which largely controlled competitive swimming in Britain at the time. For some years the ASA actively tried to prevent Nuthall from competing in the amateur competitions as a way of showing their dislike for the excesses of professionalism. In the end the ASA let Nuthall compete against the best amateurs and for many years he dominated the sport.

Through the life stories of individuals like Joey Nuthall, the reader is offered an understanding of the development of modern sport from the perspective of people who actually experienced it. We have already seen the statistics and read the protocols, but it is through microhistorical works like this that history comes to life.

On the negative side, the collection of stories in *Sporting lives* is dominated by male biographers and male athletes. Jean Williams paper on the show jumper Pat Smythe is the only representation of a female sporting life. Her life in equestrian sports and the way she influenced the sport during the 1950s and 1960s is well worth telling. But there are of course many more stories to tell about women who fought their way into the patriarchal world of modern sport. It is therefore a bit disappointing that such a fine collection of sporting life stories does not contain more examples of female athletes, and indeed not more than one female writer. In a way it says something about the domination of men in British sport, but this collection of life stories was never meant to offer a statistically correct representation of modern British sport in any fashion. A few more portraits of women in sports would have greatly improved the collection.

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Reference

Mike Cronin (2007) The Gaelic Athletic Association's Invasion of America, 1888: Travel Narratives, Microhistory and the Irish American 'Other', *Sport in History*, 27:2, 190-216, DOI: [10.1080/17460260701437011](https://doi.org/10.1080/17460260701437011)

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