

[Sport and Leisure History Seminar - 10 Feb: Professionalism, the Sporting Field, and Wrestling, 1850-1950](#)

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[Fields and Stages: Professionalism, the Sporting Field, and Wrestling, 1850-1950](#)

Speaker: Benjamin Litherland (University of Sussex)

Speaking to a local radio station in the 1960s, with the glitz, glitter and glamour of televised professional wrestling at its height, one old, retired Cumbrian wrestler declared that 'wrestling...was a game for the field not the stage'. This statement could stand in for the questions this paper, based on my PhD thesis, will ask: why did wrestling develop as a performed 'sporting entertainment'? More interestingly, why did no other sports develop in this way? Where does wrestling belong? Why fields, why stadiums, why stages?

Using Bourdieusian field theory alongside the insights established in sports history and cultural studies, this paper will argue that professional wrestling developed in a manner that other sports might have done had it not been for the sporting field and the amateur ideal in the nineteenth century. In so doing, it will assess the unique factors that contributed to wrestling's growth as a music hall sport in Edwardian period and a performed spectacle in the interwar years, audience pleasures, and the continued efforts of sport governing bodies, muscular Christians and local government's attempts to curb and 'rescue' the sport from professionalism and entertainment. As such, the paper will posit how power and control can be studied in the sporting field.

Benjamin Litherland is currently undertaking a PhD on the history of wrestling in the School of Media, Film and Music at the University of Sussex. His work has been published in the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* and in Rebekka von Mallinckrodt and Angela Schattner (eds), *Sports and Physical Exercise in Early Modern Europe* (2014). He is also currently co-editing a two-part special edition of *Sport in History* on 'Sport's Relationship with other Leisure Industries' with

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Dion Georgiou.

Time and Date: 5:15 PM, Monday, 10th February.

Location: Athlone Room (102), Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU

All are welcome. For more information about this seminar, or the BSSH South network in general, please contact us at bsshlondon@gmail.com.