Clevenger on Levett, 'Sport in History Podcast'

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Since 2020, the British Society for Sports History (BSSH), self-described as the United Kingdom’s “leading scholarly society for the history of sport,” has produced a podcast titled Sport in History Podcast. As of this writing, the Sport in History Podcast offers listeners over eighty episodes highlighting recent academic research on the history of sport, as well as the society’s scholarly activities and events (for example, recordings of paper presentations at the BSSH’s annual conference). The podcast provides listeners access to historical research on a variety of sporting topics from both respected and fledgling historians and scholars of sport around the world. Check out some of the most recent episodes and find such topics as the significance of sport during the Irish Civil War, the impact of World War II on the soccer industry as a historical counterpoint to the shutdown of sports during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the contested and complex meaning of Māori Haka practices in New Zealand rugby. What links the episodes is an overall focus on sport in its varied, complicated, and dynamic forms, underscoring the significant role of sport in world history. In this academic review of the podcast, there are important issues to consider, including the podcast’s overall form and approach, as well as its relation to related academic communities (in this case, the field of sport history). However, the BSSH should be commended for using the podcast to make research and historical knowledge on sport more readily available beyond the traditional confines of academic publishing and presenting.

Without any knowledge of the podcast’s listening numbers, it seems reasonable to term the Sport in History Podcast as an academic podcast due to its primary focus on interviews with researchers affiliated with universities or other scholarly institutions. Episodes also tend to highlight some of the recent research published in the society’s journal Sport in History, as well as Soccer & Society and other sport-related academic journals. This highlights a key aspect of the podcast: the episodes provide an alternative, arguably more accessible method of communicating the latest research in sport history. For example, one of the most recent episodes focuses on the class and social politics of cricket in nineteenth-century Britain. The episode presents an interview with John Fisher, a retired historian and economics scholar from the University of Newcastle, Australia. Fisher also published a research article on the same topic a few months before in the journal Sport in History. However, while the article can only be accessed through a subscription to the journal or through an expensive and restrictive library database, the podcast episode is freely available online via Google Podcasts, Spotify, and multiple other streaming platforms. Compared to paywalled academic journals and databases, the relative accessibility of podcasts make them a useful medium for communicating their research to online publics and beyond traditional academic circles.
In addition, with each episode *Sport in History Podcast* listeners hear about the complicated meanings of sport and sporting experiences from the researchers themselves. Listeners learn about not just the object of study but also the contexts that surrounded the research process: the reasons why the researcher chose to study their topic, the researcher’s intentions and hopes in conducting the research, and unforeseen issues or difficulties that arose during the research. In the episode described above on the history and social politics of cricket, the listener learns about the deeply personal and human dimensions of Fisher’s research experience. After being prompted by the interviewee—in this case, the sport and physical culture historian Conor Heffernan—Fisher talks about how, following the death of wife, he started spending more time in the village where he grew up in the UK. With the arrival of COVID-19, Fisher found himself spending a great deal more time in the UK, and his research topic emerged when he and his friends were examining an inscription in a village graveyard. As Fisher continues to discuss his research project in his own voice, revealing the interweaving of his own personal experience with the process of developing a historical research article, the listener is drawn into an affective soundscape generated by the intonation and cadences of the recorded voice(s). Combined with the discursive nature of interview formats, the listener is given an opportunity to learn about the history in a way that enlivens, rather than obscures, the felt and experiential aspects of researching and producing historical knowledge. This approach to interviewing and discussing research, in which the listener learns about the historian’s research experience and process in addition to the content of the research itself, is one of the strengths of the *Sport in History Podcast*.

A couple of things came to mind while listening to a few episodes and writing this review. First, we should not forget the important benefit in the podcast as a tool for amplifying the research and voices of both early career researchers and researchers from marginalized communities. This is something that the *Sport in History Podcast* has, to date, already pursued to a certain extent. A good example of this is the September 21, 2021, episode in which sport historian Katie Taylor interviewed the early career scholar Sarah Hardstaff about her research on the politics of identity and representation in children’s football fiction. The podcast has also devoted more than a few episodes to replaying the paper presentations of scholars, including early career scholars, at BSSH events. Though podcasting arguably (and, I would argue, increasingly unjustifiably) remains peripheral to book and article publishing and the traditional outlets for communicating research, this creates an opportunity to use podcasts to promote research and researchers that are hampered by limited opportunities for promoting their work. Diverse perspectives can help make such academic podcasts more dynamic by multiplying ways of discussing and representing research. Academic podcasts should not just be vehicles for promoting new books published by university and corporate presses. They can also be vehicles for creatively experimenting with how academics do and represent the knowledge they generate through their research.

From the standpoint of using podcasting to promote current research, the BSSH’s *Sport in History Podcast* provides a valuable service both to the field of sport history and to scholars and readers interested in sport. By complementing recent published articles with podcast episodes and author interviews, the society helps make important historical knowledge on sport available beyond the paywall of expensive publishing outlets and library databases. The interviewer-interviewee format arguably limits in particular ways each episode’s storytelling possibilities, for it confines the process to that which can be articulated through voice and conversation. The intensely felt dimensions of sport and physical activity compels researchers to explore other ways of representing such
experiences beyond writing (or, rather, typing) and talking about what we have written (or typed). However, this is not a criticism of the Sport in History Podcast but rather the articulation of an idea generated from the experience of listening to the podcast. By providing an opportunity to think about sport history and historical research, the podcast has provided a valuable service for this early career academic.


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