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### Citation

Taylor, M. (2008). Class and sport in Britain, 1850-1939. *Leidschrift : Brood En Spelen. Sport Als Kracht In De Samenleving*, 23(December), 25-37. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72928>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Class and sport in Britain, 1850-1939

*Matthew Taylor*

It is difficult to deny the imprint that class made on the development of modern sport in Britain. The idea of a Victorian sporting revolution, involving the invention and codification of new sports and an explosion in the numbers of those playing and watching, is now firmly established. Although we should not forget the continuities that existed between old and new ways of playing, the transformation of sporting culture impacted upon society at all levels.<sup>1</sup> The perspective of the first generation of leisure and sport historians was to view much of this transformation through class spectacles. The predominance of socially exclusive clubs and the restrictions of amateur regulations suggested the creation of separate middle-class and working-class sporting spheres. Where it existed, middle-class interest and involvement in workers' sport was seen to have an instrumental purpose. Sport was promoted to improve or reform the morals of the workers, or else could function as a form of social control, increasing efficiency and productivity in the workplace and shifting the attention from more dangerous political concerns. In common with other aspects of their recreation, the working classes were not denied agency here. Sport became a means by which the lower orders were able to shape and strengthen their own experiences and identities. Along with music halls and brass bands, sport became an important vehicle for the articulation of class feeling. Indeed by the First World War certain sports, such as football and rugby league, had become synonymous with the working class in the same way that golf, cycling and tennis were identified with the middle class.

The decline of class as a master category from the 1980s informed new interpretations of the role of sport in British society and prompted criticisms of its privileged status.<sup>2</sup> There were two main dimensions to these critiques. First of all, detailed examination of sporting culture and ideologies revealed the fault lines that ran across classes and the subtle social demarcations that complicated class-based approaches to sport. The notion that cultural forms like sport could be neatly allocated to distinct class

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<sup>1</sup> See: Neil Tranter, *Sport, economy and society in Britain, 1750-1914* (Cambridge 1998) chapter 3; Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: a modern history* (Oxford 1989).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed exploration of the debates over class see: Dennis Dworkin, *Class struggles* (Harlow 2007) chapter 5.

categories was also questioned. Secondly, a range of collective identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, age and locality were examined in greater depth and considered to be every bit as significant as class. Although the impact was less sharply felt among historians of sport than in other spheres of social history, new studies began to emerge which were attuned to the importance of language and culture and recognized that sporting identity was not fixed solely around class but could be multiple, situational and fluid.

Nonetheless, the concept of class has not been easily shed. The principal reason for this has not been the theoretical myopia that some critics have claimed.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it is argued here that class remains important because it played a key part in the relationships, controversies and discourses surrounding British sport in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This article examines three key aspects of the relationship between class and sport. First, it looks at the degree to which rules, regulations and accompanying ideologies divided sport along class lines. Secondly, it considers the importance of civic pride and citizenship in relation to sport. The third and final section explores the role of the state in determining and regulating sporting activity.

### **Class sport and social division**

Much scholarly discussion has been devoted to the tension between middle-class 'amateur' sport and its supposed working-class 'professional' antithesis. There is no doubt that a number of nineteenth century sports and clubs established barriers to the admission of social inferiors, and that the playing and watching of many sports reproduced broader social distinctions. Revisionist accounts, however, have regarded this as a misleading dichotomy that underplays the frequency of cross-class sporting relationships.<sup>4</sup> Few sports were class exclusive. Most professional footballers were drawn from the ranks of the skilled artisan but there were a sprinkling of players from white-collar and professional backgrounds and some middle-class amateurs continued to feature at the highest level of the sport even after the First World War. In cricket, the classes mixed, albeit on

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<sup>3</sup> See for example: Doug Booth, *The field: truth and fiction in sport history* (London 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Mike Huggins, 'Second-class citizens? English middle-class culture and sport, 1850-1910: a reconsideration', *International journal of the history of sport* 17 (2000) 1-35.

different terms, on the field and in the grandstand.<sup>5</sup> Horse racing was characterized not only by a mingling of social groups but also by a tendency for class allegiances to be discarded when the situation demanded it in favour of temporary vertical alliances between punters, jockeys, trainers and owners. Robert Roberts felt that in Edwardian Salford racing 'bound the labourer with a cap-touching loyalty to the aristocrat. There were those who would back only King Edward's, Lord Derby's or Lord Rosebery's horses. Winning, they felt for a brief moment a glow of unity with the greatest in the land'.<sup>6</sup> A target by the mid-nineteenth century of legal restrictions and moral condemnation, pugilism nonetheless continued to appeal to a range of social groups. It was reported that 'every class of society', from labourers and soldiers to statesmen such as Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, attended the famous 'world championship' fight between the London bricklayer Tom Sayers and his American opponent John Heenan in April 1860.<sup>7</sup> Even fox hunting, an activity often associated with a privileged elite, was in certain contexts capable of promoting social interaction and binding together diverse sections of the rural community.<sup>8</sup>

The social exclusivity of upper- and middle-class sporting clubs and institutions is rather more difficult to dispute. Organizations in all parts of Britain and in a range of sports adopted a variety of strategies to limit membership on class lines. Some simply set high subscription rates or rejected applicants on the grounds of occupation. Many adopted blackball systems for election to membership, which allowed existing members to easily exclude undesirable newcomers. Membership to the most select bodies, such as the Marylebone Cricket Club and the Henley Royal Regatta, could only be secured by recommendation and invitation.<sup>9</sup> Exclusion was also secured through the restrictive amateur regulations of governing bodies. The most famous of these, adopted by bodies such as the Amateur Athletic Club (AAC), the Amateur Rowing Association and the Bicycle

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Taylor, *The association game: a history of British football* (Harlow 2008) 91; Keith Sandiford, *Cricket and the Victorians* (Aldershot 1994) 122-123.

<sup>6</sup> Mike Huggins, *Flat racing and British society, 1790-1914* (London 2000) 15; Robert Roberts, *The classic slum: Salford life in the first quarter of the century* (London 1971) 163.

<sup>7</sup> Elliott J. Gorn, *The manly art: bare-knuckle prize fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY 1986) 152-153; Mike Huggins, *The Victorians and sport* (London 2004) 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> David C. Itzkowitz, *Peculiar privilege: a social history of English foxhunting, 1753-1885* (Hassocks 1977) 25-26, 176-177.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Wigglesworth, *The evolution of English sport* (London 1996) 94, 105.

Union, specifically barred mechanics, artisans and labourers on the basis that their occupations provided them with a physical advantage over 'more delicately nurtured competitors'. A *Times* leading article from 1880 found such class discrimination entirely justified: 'The outsiders, artisans, mechanics and such troublesome persons can have no place found for them. To keep them out is a thing desirable on every account. The "status" of the rest seems better assured and more clear from any doubt that might attach to it, and the prizes more certain to fall into the right hands'. The regulations were not left unchallenged. The expansion of athletics from below in the 1870s and 1880s, for example, led to a campaign to delete the so-called mechanics' clause. A member of the London Athletic Club spoke up for the 'common republic of sport' and the intermingling in other sports of 'the lord, the lout and the merchant'. Pressure from provincial associations eventually led to the dissolution of the AAC, to be replaced by the more democratic Amateur Athletic Association in 1880.<sup>10</sup> There were of course many sports, associations and clubs, especially in parts of the north of England, which were always more democratic than these examples suggest but such amateur exclusivity was hardly rare in late nineteenth century Britain.<sup>11</sup>

The existence of distinct sets of middle-class and working-class sporting values has been more rigorously challenged. In this view, classes were no more united and homogenous in their attitudes to sport than they were in other arenas of social life. Perspectives and behaviour varied according to location, age and context. In particular, Mike Huggins and others have stressed that middle-class sport was not always defined by its attachment to morality and respectability. Disreputable activities more often associated with the working classes, such as excessive drinking, gambling and violence, were in fact 'an integral part of manly sports'.<sup>12</sup> Boisterous

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in: Peter Bailey, *Leisure and class in Victorian England: rational recreation and the contest for control* (London 1987) 143, 148.

<sup>11</sup> Bailey, *Leisure and class*, 139-144; Wigglesworth, *Evolution*, 94-99. Huggins, 'Second-class citizens', 22-24, argues that the exclusivity of 'middle-class' sports clubs has been exaggerated.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Huggins and J. A. Mangan, 'Prologue: all mere complexities' in: M. Huggins and J. A. Mangan, ed., *Disreputable pleasures: less virtuous Victorians at play* (London 2004) ix-xx, quotation xiii. See also: Mike Huggins, 'More sinful pleasures? Leisure, respectability and the male middle classes in Victorian England', *Journal of social history* 3 (2000) 585-600.

and rowdy behaviour, on and off the field, was as characteristic of middle-class athletes, especially young unmarried males, as it was of the lower orders, although in the former case it caused less concern and was often dismissed as 'high spirits'. Likewise, violence and abuse of the rules among rugby teams composed of 'gentlemen' was common and tolerated, but was considered unacceptable by the game's leaders when practiced later by working-class teams. Partisanship and disruptive conduct was also observed among supporters located in the grandstands of football grounds. Visiting teams at Derby apparently suffered verbal abuse from the 'well-dressed Johnnies that bellow from the pavilion steps...who from appearances should be models of propriety'.<sup>13</sup>

Shared sporting pastimes and certain similarities in attitudes and behaviour did not, however, necessarily equate to a smoothing over of class distinctions. On the contrary, the contrasting ways in which different classes engaged with sport could harden divisions.<sup>14</sup> In this respect it was not dissimilar from an institution such as the music hall. Even though music hall audiences broadened out from the 1890s to include a significant, though far from substantial, middle-class clientele, the classes remained segregated in the sense that they visited different types of halls or else sat in separate areas and used different entrances.<sup>15</sup> Much the same was true of mass spectator sports such as football and cricket. Soccer crowds were not static in their social complexion but were still overwhelmingly working class throughout the period. Even when the impact of unemployment is taken into account, the widening working-class base of spectatorship was probably more notable than any increased bourgeois presence between the wars. Inside the boardrooms, middle-class professionals and industrialists were important, holding considerable power as directors, shareholders and

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<sup>13</sup> Huggins, 'Second class citizens', 26; Tony Collins, 'Violence, gamesmanship and the amateur ideal in Victorian middle-class rugby' in: Huggins and Mangan ed., *Disreputable pleasures*, 172-184; Huggins, *Victorians and sport*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Borsay, *A history of leisure: the British experience since 1500* (Basingstoke 2006) 104.

<sup>15</sup> Dagmar Höher, 'The composition of music hall audiences, 1850-1900' in: P. Bailey ed., *Music hall: the business of pleasure* (Milton Keynes 1986) 73-92; Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian music hall: culture, class and conflict* (Cambridge 1996) 67-68; Paul Maloney, *Scotland and the music hall, 1850-1914* (Manchester 2003) 191.

administrators.<sup>16</sup> But for recreational players, spectators and the vast numbers who gambled weekly on the pools, football remained ‘the quintessential working-class sport’.<sup>17</sup> A national sport with a cross-class appeal, cricket was nonetheless similarly divided. The traditional county game, played over three days and taking little account of working hours, drew a largely middle-class audience, whereas league cricket in the north and the midlands attracted large crowds of workers who bet, drank and supported their local team vociferously. What is more, in county cricket the boundaries between amateurs and professionals were strictly enforced. They had separate changing rooms and entrances to the ground, stayed in separate hotels and even dressed differently. Working-class professionals were expected to address their amateur teammates as ‘Mr’ or ‘Sir’ and were almost never allowed to captain a side. Cricket’s ‘caste system’ was deeply entrenched (it stayed in place until the 1960s) and remains difficult to square with the notion of a unified sporting culture.<sup>18</sup>

### Community pride, citizenship and sport

Sport often acted as a focal point for loyalties and identities that lay above class. From the late nineteenth century, spectator sport became an important feature of the urban landscape of Britain. A number of studies have stressed the important symbolic meanings that the simple act of supporting a local sports team could engender. Richard Holt has suggested that, in the case of football, its attraction lay ‘in its expression of a sense of civic pride and identity’. In small industrial towns, and particularly among the diverse populations of the expanding nineteenth century cities, it helped to provide a meaningful sense of belonging. It made real a feeling of community identity through which supporters were able to achieve a form of ‘symbolic citizenship’.<sup>19</sup> The same was true of rugby league and league

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor, *Association game*, 92-93, 137-138; Douglas A. Reid, “‘Mass Leisure’ in Britain” in: B. Moore and H. van Nierop ed., *Twentieth-century mass society in Britain and the Netherlands* (Oxford 2006) 132-159, 145.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew August, *The British working class, 1832-1940* (Harlow 2007) 217.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Hill, ‘League cricket in the North and Midlands, 1900-1940’ in: R. Holt ed., *Sport and the working class in modern Britain* (Manchester 1991) 121-141; Ross McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford 1998) 332-336.

<sup>19</sup> Holt, *Sport and the British*, 166, 172.

cricket. The growth of cup competitions associated sport in the public mind with local pride and civic honour. Inaugurated in 1877, rugby's Yorkshire Cup led to an explosion in attendances, heightening club and town loyalties and stoking up rivalries. Interest in the progress of 'our team' or 'our boys' often seems to have been more powerful than the allegiances of work, region or nation. The local press had an important role to play in this, measuring sporting achievement in terms of the 'glory', 'honour' or 'reputation' of the town and its population.<sup>20</sup>

Notions of civic pride were particularly meaningful for the Victorian middle classes. Sport became incorporated into a much wider agenda of civic culture, involving the construction of grandiose town halls, and other public buildings such as concert halls and museums. Sports stadiums and the clubs themselves became symbols of community identity, articulating a sense of civic unity that was then projected outwards to rival elites in competing towns and cities.<sup>21</sup> Rugby football clubs represented 'the recreational medium for municipal and trade rivalry' in the textile districts of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Civic pride certainly motivated founders of the Halifax club in 1873: 'We saw reports in the papers of football matches being played in Leeds, Bradford and elsewhere, and we thought that Halifax ought to have a club also'.<sup>22</sup> In a similar way, the lack of a club that could represent the town on a regional stage despite the local popularity of rugby led a coalition of leading civic dignitaries and businessmen to form Leeds Cricket, Football and Athletic Club in 1889. Members of parliament, mayors and councillors were called upon both to lead civic celebrations that followed success and to encourage local patriotism when results and finances dipped. Returning from their 1883 FA Cup final triumph, the Blackburn Olympic soccer team was entertained to dinner by the town's

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<sup>20</sup> Tony Collins, *Rugby's great split: class, culture and the origins of rugby league football* (London 1998) 22-24; Huggins, *Victorians and sport*, 197-199.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Taylor, 'Soccer and the city: urban development, identity and the rise of football', *Informationen zur modernen Stadtgeschichte* (2006) 54-69, 65, 67; Jack Williams, '"One could literally have walked on the heads of the people congregated there": Sport, the town and identity' in: K. Laybourn ed., *Social conditions, status and community, 1860-c.1920* (Stroud 1997) 123-138, 130-131.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, *Rugby's great split*, 17.

two MPs and when Burnley made the 1914 final the local MP felt the club 'had made the town famous throughout the country'.<sup>23</sup>

For all this, historians have perhaps overplayed the civic cohesiveness of sport. It was not, in truth, usually considered a definitive element of urban culture.<sup>24</sup> Despite the considerable traditions and achievements of clubs from Blackburn, Burnley and Darwen, sport played no part in the local celebrations for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 and sports organizations were not included in any of the connected civic processions or fund-raising activities.<sup>25</sup> In the midlands city of Coventry, the local elite was slow to appreciate how soccer could be appropriated to build civic loyalty among its particularly diverse migrant population. The early successes of the Singer's Bicycle company works' club (later to become Coventry City) in the 1890s were marked by the spontaneous celebrations of working-class supporters but an absence of municipal involvement. Local councillors later took up prominent positions as directors and were quick to connect the club's upward trajectory with Coventry's civic progress. But elite attempts to recruit sport to the wider cause of social citizenship only achieved partial success. The evidence suggests that, in Coventry and probably elsewhere, the popular and class-specific forms of citizenship that sport conveyed were the organic creation of workers on the ground.<sup>26</sup> Class identity did not dissolve in the presence of town or city loyalty. Neither was support for a local sports club any guarantee of commitment to the wider civic project.

From the birth of modern sport (if not before), individuals and teams have operated as surrogates for their communities.<sup>27</sup> Some Victorian and Edwardian athletes achieved national renown through word of mouth and the burgeoning sporting press but most were celebrated as local figures. Professional rowers such as Harry Clasper and James Renforth drew substantial crowds for challenge matches and championships and successfully defended the prestige of Tyneside against the crews of the

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<sup>23</sup> Collins, *Rugby's great split*, 104-105; Williams, 'Sport, the town and identity', 127-128.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Lees and Lynn Hollen Lees, *Cities and the making of modern Europe, 1750-1914* (Cambridge 2007) 223-224.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, 'Sport, the town and identity', 131.

<sup>26</sup> Brad Beaven, *Leisure, citizenship and working-class men in Britain, 1850-1945* (Manchester 2005) 76-81.

<sup>27</sup> Borsay, *History of leisure*, 138.

Thames and beyond. Clasper's popularity with 'miners and keelmen alike' guaranteed huge crowds on the streets of Newcastle for his funeral procession in 1870; an estimated 150,000 turned out when Renforth died a year later.<sup>28</sup> Boxers were particularly powerful emblems of community pride. Billings always carried the boxer's locality after their name and the best fighters enjoyed substantial neighbourhood support. Born in Bermondsey, south London, for example, Tom Causer lived in the locale throughout his life, as a youth, fighter and publican. His success in the 1890s secured his status as a working-class hero for the dockers, carters and railwaymen of the area. Causer's fame 'belonged to Bermondsey' but increasingly sports stars, boxers included, were an amalgam of identities.<sup>29</sup> When Tommy Farr fought Joe Louis in New York for the World Heavyweight Title in August 1937, he was representing his home community of Tonypandy where he was born and had worked as a miner.<sup>30</sup> But he was also regarded as a symbol of Wales and a 'hero of British boxing'. His courageous defeat was said to 'have earned the gratitude of all Britishers'.<sup>31</sup> Multiple and overlapping identities of this kind were commonplace in British sport. Detailed studies have shown how Northumberland miners followed local teams against neighbouring villages yet set these rivalries aside to support Newcastle United. Likewise, for the cricket-loving middle classes of Yorkshire, the county club formed the basis of a series of interlocking geographical loyalties – to locality, county and the north. Yet in such cases, class still mattered. It was rarely buried altogether beneath identities of place, and often positively complemented community pride.<sup>32</sup> Heroes and clubs could 'belong' to a town or a region but they, and

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<sup>28</sup> Harvey Taylor, 'Sporting heroes' in: R. Colls and B. Lancaster ed., *Geordies: roots of regionalism* (Edinburgh 1992) 113-130, 118-120; Holt, *Sport and the British*, 23 (quotation).

<sup>29</sup> Stan Shipley, 'Tom Causer of Bermondsey: a boxer hero of the 1890s', *History workshop journal* 15 (1983) 29-59, 53 (quotation).

<sup>30</sup> Dai Smith, 'Focal heroes: a Welsh fighting class' in: Holt ed., *Sport and the working class*, 198-217, 201-204.

<sup>31</sup> Jimmy Wilde in *News of the world* 19, 5 September 1937.

<sup>32</sup> Alan Metcalfe, 'Football and the mining communities of East Northumberland, 1882-1914', *International journal of the history of sport* 5 (1988) 269-291; Dave Russell, 'Sport and identity: the case of Yorkshire County Cricket Club, 1890-1939', *Twentieth century British history* 7 (1996) 206-230.

the sports themselves, also operated on another level as expressions of class solidarity.

## Sport and the state

The historical relationship between sport and the British state is a complex one. Its defining feature has often been identified as a long-standing tradition of voluntarism, whereby clubs and associations have been free to order and regulate their activities without state intervention or political control. Up to the Second World War, at least, the autonomy of sport and sporting organizations had, it is generally thought, rarely been tampered with or challenged. What is more, the social complexion of central government and the civil service – dominated by ex-public schoolboys and Oxbridge graduates schooled in the tenets of amateurism – highlighted an ingrained institutional resistance to the politicization of sport.<sup>33</sup> In sport and leisure as in other areas, however, some have dismissed *laissez-faire* as a myth. Stephen Jones, for one, argued that the emphasis on voluntarism led historians to overlook parallel traditions of municipal and central government funding. Focusing on the inter-war years, Jones showed how the state was increasingly prepared to intervene in matters such as physical recreation in schools and the provision of parks, playing fields and swimming baths. The 1937 Physical Training and Recreation Act was particularly significant here, providing a framework for the allocation of funds to local authorities and the wider encouragement of recreational sport. Likewise, in foreign policy the authorities increasingly intervened in sporting affairs as a means of protecting and promoting British interests.<sup>34</sup>

This view of the considerable and increasing involvement of the state in the shaping of sport is a persuasive one. Its influence can be identified in terms of central legislation, public funding and bureaucratization as well as the surveillance of the police and magistracy. Yet it is simplistic to regard

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<sup>33</sup> See: Holt, *Sport and the British*, 344-346; Richard Holt and Tony Mason, *Sport in Britain, 1945-2000* (Oxford 2000) 146-147.

<sup>34</sup> Peter J. Beck, 'Leisure and sport in Britain, 1900-1939' in: C. Wrigley ed., *A companion to early twentieth-century Britain* (Oxford 2003) 453-469, 465; Stephen Jones, *Workers at play: a social and economic history of leisure* (London 1986) 91-95; Peter J. Beck, *Scoring for Britain: international football and international politics, 1900-1939* (London 1999).

the state, here as elsewhere, as a straightforward agent of bourgeois interests. It was not of course a singular entity but 'an ensemble of practices and institutions'.<sup>35</sup> It could be encountered in a myriad of ways, as an upholder of law and order, an employer of millions of people, a provider and administrator of welfare provision, and so on.<sup>36</sup> As far as sport was concerned, the central and local authorities did not simply advance the interests and concerns of the ruling classes and 'their' sports while seeking to repress and mould working-class sport. Rather, there is evidence that despite increased state intervention, workers and their representatives could be successful in retaining control and autonomy over popular forms of sport.

A couple of examples, both relating to inter-war sport in London, are helpful in illustrating this. In 1922, the London County Council (LCC), under pressure from influential Sabbatarian lobbyists, made the decision to ban organized football matches from its pitches on Sundays. Its rationale, that as well as degrading the Sabbath, Sunday sport encouraged noisy and disruptive crowds, betting and the exploitation of employees, was rejected by the communist-inspired British Workers' Sports Foundation (BWSF), which organized a campaign against a policy that it saw as depriving workers of the opportunity to enjoy sport on the one free day available to many of them. Led by Michael Condon, a former top-level footballer and secretary of the BWSF-associated London Workers' Football Council, the BWSF publicized its case effectively in the working-class press and was able to count on the support of nearly 600 teams and thousands of players by the time it convinced the LCC to consider its case in 1933. Although the Council made some concessions, by the following summer a formally constituted Sunday League Football Campaign Committee claimed to be backed by over 30 active leagues and 25,000 members. Under such pressure, and aided by increased sympathy as a result of Labour Party gains at the 1934 municipal elections, the LCC finally relented and in July 1934 acknowledged 'that the large majority of Sunday players is labouring under a deep sense of grievance on account of the action of the Council in

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen Jones, *Sport, politics and the working class: organised labour and sport in interwar Britain* (Manchester 1988) 130.

<sup>36</sup> See: Ross McKibbin, 'Introduction' in: Lawrence Black *et al.* ed., *Consensus or coercion? The state, the people and social cohesion in post-war Britain* (Cheltenham 2001) 1-11, 3.

prohibiting games of this character' and agreed to rescind the ban.<sup>37</sup> Further concessions were also made to increase the space available and improve the amenities for organized working-class sport in London.<sup>38</sup>

The intervention of the LCC was also keenly felt in the case of boxing. Prompted by police reports of overcrowding in boxing halls in the East End of London, the LCC's Theatres and Music Halls Committee recommended in 1929 to include premises used for public boxing contests in its licensing scheme.<sup>39</sup> The LCC's new powers caused considerable concern among boxing promoters, enthusiasts and supporters. Because the facilities of existing venues were often below the standards normally required by the Council, owners were forced to undertake costly building work, or else close down entirely. *Boxing, racing and football* accused the LCC of 'harass[ing] boxing promoters' and of interfering 'to curtail the relaxations of the public'.<sup>40</sup> One of the venues affected was The Ring, in Blackfriars, one of the most famous boxing halls in the capital.<sup>41</sup> Although its owner, Bella Burge, attempted to avoid closure 'as my goodwill would be absolutely ruined'<sup>42</sup>, The Ring was shut between June and September 1931 and reopened with a reduced capacity of just over 2,000. It continued to operate but was plagued with financial difficulties through the 1930s, promoting wrestling and staging theatrical productions to stay in business. Although intervention may not have been popular, however, in this and other cases the LCC was not insensitive to the concerns and interests of the sport. In practice, negotiation was a feature of the Council's treatment of boxing licensing as it had long been of the music hall system.<sup>43</sup> The Entertainments Licensing Committee regularly solicited the views of the boxing authorities and was mindful of balancing the opposition of local critics of boxing with the demands of the sport's employers, employees and

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<sup>37</sup> Jones, *Sport, politics and the working class*, 151-154.

<sup>38</sup> *Daily worker*, 16 October 1934; Jones, *Sport, politics and the working class*, 154.

<sup>39</sup> London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), LCC/PC/ENT/2/17, Control of premises used for boxing contests and boxing exhibitions, 12 July 1929.

<sup>40</sup> *Boxing, racing and football*, 17 December 1930, 26 August 1931.

<sup>41</sup> See LMA, GLC/AR/BR/07/0473, Building Act case file, The ring, Blackfriars.

<sup>42</sup> LMA, LCC/MC/4414, LCC Entertainments (Licensing) Committee, committee papers, 24 June 1931, Bella Burge to LCC, 21 May 1931.

<sup>43</sup> See: Susan Pennybacker, "'It was not what she said, but the way in which she said it': The London County Council and the music halls" in: Bailey ed., *Music hall*, 118-140.

patrons. The result of this was that far from small hall boxing in London being suffocated by the regulations of the LCC, it remained healthy and in many cases prospered. Permanent annual boxing licences increased from three in 1931 to twelve by 1937, and dozens of occasional licences were granted to other venues every year.<sup>44</sup> Regulation here was not a blunt instrument of social control but could be influenced and shaped in significant ways by the sports authorities and the working-class audience.

## **Conclusion**

This brief survey has demonstrated the complexities involved in any consideration of the class dimension of British sport. We know of course that the sporting world was not homogenous. There were many sports with a range of social constituencies that could alter and shift according to changing circumstances and prevailing economic and cultural influences. Whether we see sport as defined by class relationships depends to some degree on the perspective taken. It is not difficult to identify instances in which sport appeared to represent a unified and shared culture. FA Cup finals, cricket test matches and classic race meetings could all be regarded as major social occasions in which economic and cultural divisions were set to one side and the British became a united nation at play. Yet the same sports, and often the very same occasions, were also frequently built upon distinctions and social prejudice. Here too, examples are not difficult to find. Finding a balance between these approaches is a tricky task. Yet it is ultimately difficult to deny that interpretations based on class still remain compelling. Without doubt, our understanding of the role of sport in society has benefitted greatly from an increased focus on the use of language in newspapers and sporting literature. Similarly, the emphasis placed on intra-class divisions and the 'layering' of identities has helped to qualify one-dimensional approaches to sport and society. But all this has not rendered class redundant. In a society in which class relationships figured prominently, it is hardly surprising that the experiences and relationships formed around sport often invoked class. Even if class was far from the *only* social identity of significance, in many cases, and in certain contexts, it was undoubtedly the most prominent.

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<sup>44</sup> See: LMA, LCC/PC/ENT/2/11, LCC Theatres and Music Halls Committee, printed papers, 1929-1935.