PART I

History
Much discussion has taken place in the last decade or so over the significance of sports history within the wider discipline of history. In an interesting intervention in 2013, Paul Ward, a political historian, argued that the so-called ‘ghettoisation’ of sports history was largely self-imposed. His assessment of the narrow horizons of sports history, the tendency of its practitioners to resort to ‘presentism’, and its failure to engage effectively with the ‘mainstream’ of the discipline, though in some respects unoriginal and in others ill-informed, nonetheless constituted a timely critique for a subdiscipline that was becoming increasingly inward-looking. Sport, Ward admitted, provided good historical examples of the ‘diversity of cultural identities’ but he thought there was a danger of its significance being overplayed. This was partly a result, it was suggested, of the public visibility of sporting events: ‘the physical presence of large crowds of supporters tends to make sport seem more important in British society than it actually is’ (Ward, 2013: 10). Football, in particular, Ward and others have claimed, had garnered more than its fair share of historiographical attention (Cronin, 2002: 101). Yet was it really of more significance to past societies than, say, angling or stamp collecting? Its ubiquity in contemporary societies across the globe might be as much a factor here as its perceived historical significance. If sport, as Hare (2003: 6) noted, was ‘the flavour of the decade’, then football was ‘the flavour of the moment’. Increasingly absorbed into everyday life, football has become recognised as an important factor in shaping individual and collective senses of self-meaning and belonging, a point which Ward’s emphasis only on the public dimension of spectator sport appears to miss.

When the first academic histories of football were being researched and written in the 1970s and 1980s, however, the game was neither ubiquitous nor particularly popular. In Britain, Walvin and Mason wrote about football while working within history departments, at York and Warwick, which had both been important in pioneering new approaches to social history. Drawn to the subject from wider interests in popular leisure and labour history, both were nonetheless mocked by some for taking on a topic assumed to be frivolous and marginal. The reluctance of historians to study football was more pronounced still in France, where intellectual elitism meant that football could be written off variously as a pointless, socially disruptive and ideologically suspect activity. Despite the important work of pioneers (Wahl, 1989; Wahl and Lanfranchi, 1995), it was not until the late 1990s that this view was seriously challenged, with the 1998 World Cup, and its associated conferences and publications, acting particularly as a
Matthew Taylor

fillip. One could outline similar chronologies in Germany, Italy and other countries in Europe and beyond, with scepticism slow to break down and the serious study of football by academic historians boosted by the increasing global and cultural pervasiveness of the game as well as wider disciplinary and publishing trends (Hare, 2003; Holt, 2014).

Because the history of football (as with sport more generally) developed largely in the context of the emergence of social history in the 1970s, it can be argued that it is currently a well-established part of the academic landscape (Porter, 2011). In Britain, certainly, it is now rare to find broad works of synthesis on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain which do not include some reference to football. And some popular histories, such as Kynaston’s multi-volume series on post-war Britain (2008, 2010, 2013), are positively brimming with references to the role of football in local and national life. Yet for all this, scholars of the game have been somewhat slow over the last 20 years to contribute to cutting-edge debates emerging from the ‘cultural turn’ and discussions relating to gender, or to engage with emerging global and transnational approaches. There may be some truth in McKibbin’s (2011: 167) suggestion that ‘contemporary cultural history does not readily lend itself to the study of sport’ but the methodological conservativism of a good number of historians of football has surely also been a factor. Plenty of innovative research continues to be produced, but historians of football, as those of sport more generally, find themselves still regularly having to justify the relevance of their topics in the research projects, books and articles they author. Demonstrating how football has acted historically as a constitutive element in the formation of collective and personal identities, defining the ‘cultural’ as much as the ‘social’, ‘economic’ or ‘political’, is one of the many tasks that scholars of the game now face.

This chapter outlines and explores recent developments in historical writing on football, critically analysing some of the key methodologies, themes and approaches which have characterised and helped to shape the literature. It is impossible, in a relatively short chapter, to cover every angle, and so the focus here will be on three broad and interrelated areas: texts, sources and archives; places and spaces; and emotions and meanings. The academic history of football has become a genuinely global enterprise in recent years, a development which this chapter will try to reflect. The linguistic limitations of the author, as well as the need to make the discussion coherent and manageable, nonetheless necessitate a primary focus on British and European literature. It also reflects the fact that the historiography of football, like the game itself, developed earlier in some parts of the world, and so the coverage is uneven, with histories of certain cities, regions, nations, networks and social groups still waiting to be written.

**Texts, sources and archives**

Until relatively recently, the source base of much football history was fairly conventional. Official state records and the archives of clubs and governing bodies, some held in public record offices but the bulk retained privately, have both been important. In Britain, the National Archives, often the first port of call for social as well as political historians, has only recently begun to be widely utilised by historians of football. Much work has been done in the papers of the Foreign Office, and more recently the Home Office and Department of the Environment, but numerous files relevant to football still remain unused across a range of government departments (Taylor, 1999; Bebber, 2012). This is particularly evident from the 1970s onwards, when central government took an increasing interest in the game and its perceived ‘problems’, as Jefferys’ (2012) study of sport and politics in post-1945 Britain has demonstrated. Although the situation varies from place to place, federations and clubs have probably become more open to historical research in the last two decades. Many more clubs and federations have placed their
archives in public record offices; some have begun to work closely with academics on their heritage and history; while others, such as Everton FC in England, have gone as far as creating a free digital online collection, including minute books, programmes and other ephemera (Dunbar, 2012). At an international level, the records of FIFA have been deeply mined but far from exhausted (Darby, 2002; Eisenberg, 2006; Dietschy, 2013); with some exceptions, the archives of continental confederations seem barely to have been touched. If we add to this the manuscript records of amateur, recreational, youth and schools football, then it becomes clear that conventional written sources still offer considerable scope for exploration, notwithstanding continuing problems of access and availability.

Newspapers and other popular publications have invariably been the most important sources for historians of football. In most local and national cases, the world of sport and newspapers were closely intertwined. The reporting of football matches, and commentaries on the fortunes of favoured clubs and players, helped to sell newspapers. Specialist sporting newspapers emerged in most countries and the journalists who covered football were often also instrumental in organising competitions and running clubs and federations. Numerous tournaments, from the English Football League in the 1880s to the European Cup in the 1950s, were inspired or created by journalists eager to publicise a game which they enjoyed but which also generated considerable copy (Taylor, 2005; Vonnard, 2014). In cases such as Italy under Fascist rule, the print media was crucial in helping to create a desired popular image of the regime and the nation through football. Journalists, as Martin (2004: 12) has argued, ‘were as important as the champion athletes, many becoming household names’. It should be noted that new methodologies and cross-disciplinary perspectives have made historians only too aware of the need to treat the press as much more than a straightforward source of information. In the formulation of identities in relation to locality, city or nation, for instance, the press was no neutral observer. Rather, it was, as Hill (2006: 122) has suggested, ‘complicit in the whole process … as both reporter and accomplice’. Newspapers were key agents in constructing and articulating ideas and narratives: they were never simply transparent conveyors of information and data, passively reflecting ‘real’ events that existed beyond their pages.

If the press and official sources still dominate the bibliographies of books, articles and theses on the history of football, there has been a notable broadening of the range of research sources. Visual sources are now much more extensively analysed than used to be the case. In part, this reflects a gradual reformulation of history as a discipline anchored in the printed word to one ‘dominated and defined by the image’ (Moss, 2008: 6). Given that most people, students included, are now more likely to glean their historical consciousness from film, television and the internet than from printed books, there has been a major re-evaluation of ‘the impact of the visual’ both to contemporary and past societies (Moss, 2008: 13). In the study of football, this has meant exploring the meanings audiences could derive from feature films, paintings, posters, newsreels, cartoons and comics, for example. This exploration of football’s visual culture is still in its infancy but it has already yielded promising results. Recent articles on the published sketches of late nineteenth-century international matches and the representations of football in African postage stamps (Adedze, 2012; Leese, 2014), to take just two examples, demonstrate the potential here of applying ‘similar but not identical’ skills as those used for textual sources (Jordanova, 2000: 189). They also indicate the importance of acquiring the necessary skills to properly understand the constructed nature of visual representations of football and to adequately contextualise their meanings (Huggins and O’Mahony, 2011). Connected to this, the need for a wider consideration of the material culture of the game is increasingly becoming acknowledged by historians. Jackson’s (2011) doctoral work, for example, demonstrates how trading cards, games, comics, and scrapbook and autograph collecting all contributed to a vibrant juvenile
consumer culture that flourished beyond the football ground itself, and helped shape the everyday lives of numerous boys and young men in England before the 1960s.

Increasing the range and type of source materials might also go some way towards addressing the traditional absence of gender perspectives and women’s voices in the writing of football history. It is no surprise that as most historians of football have been male, they have tended to research and write about men and to do so through a male lens. What they have generally failed to do, however, is to problematise the masculinity of the male game and to treat the male camaraderie and sociability of the dressing room, training ground, boardroom and terrace as a topic worthy of detailed exploration. Similarly, only recently have (mainly female) scholars begun to seriously assess the role of women in men’s and women’s football. Often this has meant paying attention to the type of sources – diaries, letters, oral interviews, women’s magazines, and so on – where women are generally less marginalised (Noakes, 1996). The best of this work has revealed much that was previously hidden about the social history of the game. Pope’s work on female spectators from the 1960s onwards, for example, drawing mainly on oral interviews, has outlined the complexities of identification, with many respondents aligning themselves closely to assumed English working-class qualities such as toughness and masculinity (Pope, 2010; Pope and Williams, 2011). Elsewhere, Elsey (2011: 190–4) has excavated the voices of women in more traditional source material, showing how female involvement as supporters and players in barrio football in Chile prompted a range of complex reactions, in which hostility was often countered by a feminist and Marxist emphasis on the value of women’s football liberation for both sexes.

Places and spaces

Historians of football have focused a great deal on the importance of ‘place’ as units of analysis and sites for the formation of identities. As clubs began to form around, first neighbourhoods, before taking on the names of wider localities and of towns and cities, with teams subsequently being sent out to represent ‘the nation’ in international competition, so these have been considered the most obvious and important locations for the construction, articulation and testing of place-based loyalties. Regions, within and across nations, have generally been seen as less vital. This may be an oversight. Gehrmann’s 1997 collection on football and regional identity in Europe led to few imitators but it did contain a number of thought-provoking explorations of football’s capacity to ‘influence … the cultural identity of regions’ (Gehrmann, 1997a: 11). Studies of the Ruhr region in Germany, the Brabantine province of the Netherlands and the western Mediterranean basin showed how clubs grounded in local cultures nonetheless developed regional and then supra-regional outlooks (Gehrmann, 1997b; Lanfranchi, 1997; Tolleneer, 1997). Sympathies and allegiances could cut across administrative boundaries, providing what one historian has called ‘a kind of local identity by proxy’ that could build into larger subregional and regional loyalties (Russell, 2004: 247). Although often difficult to pin down, it is more important than ever for historians to try to make sense of the type of ‘communities of sentiment’ that Holt examined in his work on football and the north of England: ‘a sense of the city that goes beyond the city … an “emotional conurbation”, a kind of “hinterland in the heart”, less remote than the region and more extensive than the town’ (1997: 49). The case of the Basque Country in northern Spain and southern France reveals the intricacies of identity in an area where shared perceptions of Basque footballing unity concealed a variety of tensions and rivalries between clubs, cities and provinces; and where regional loyalties could become expressions of Basque nationalism (Walton, 2005).
History and football

The expression of community and urban identities through football has been a common theme in histories that chart the game’s rise in industrialising regions. Scholars have explored the connections between football and notions of urban citizenship and civic pride in a variety of historical and geographical settings (Holt, 1989; Hare, 2003). Some of the best examples of this work have focused on Latin America. In São Paulo, for instance, football emerged in the context of widespread urban change, stimulated by an escalation in immigration and the construction of enclosed communal housing or workers’ villages with their own social, health and leisure activities. The upsurge in the numbers of grounds and clubs ‘followed the fast pace of urban expansion’, with football increasingly ‘providing a space for new immigrants to give meaning to their lives and create communities around shared physical endeavours’ (Brown, 2014: 107). Similar scenarios have been outlined in many rapidly urbanising Latin American cities. In Lima, football offered the working classes a new form of ‘living space’ in an uncertain urban environment; a theme taken up by a number of writers (Stein, 1988; Biriotti Del Burgo, 1995: 53). If we focus, however, mainly on big cities and the role of urbanisation in the emergence and spread of football, there is a danger of underplaying the importance of community belonging and identity in small towns and rural hinterlands. Dias (2013) has made this case in relation to Brazil, where the historiographical predominance of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo has arguably led to a neglect of the multiplicity of paths in the game’s dissemination and the centrality of football in the daily lives of those people living in non-urbanised and sparsely populated areas. More generally, it is vital that histories of football engage with the increasingly nuanced understandings and chronologies of ‘community’ being developed by cultural historians, sociologists and geographers (Jones, 2012; Ramsden, 2014).

The nation has proved to be by far the most important setting for exploring football histories and the identities that the game has constructed and revealed. Most historians, already operating within national disciplinary frameworks and focusing on national units of analysis, have tended to perceive football as an essentially ‘national’ sport. Some have seen it as the quintessential ‘game of nations’ (Duke and Crolley, 1996: 1), partly due to its status as ‘the national sport’ in the majority of countries across the globe, but also significantly because football’s dissemination coincided with the rise of nationalist sentiment and ideologies in many parts of the world. The work of Hobsbawm and Anderson, both key reference points for academics of football across disciplines, stressed the constructed nature of nationalism, and the way in which nations were ‘imagined’ or ‘invented’ through the media and popular cultural rituals (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Football teams have been considered a crucial part of this imagining throughout the twentieth century, sometimes channelling nationalist sentiment away from issues of political power and representation and in other instances helping to stoke up national loyalties. As more work has been undertaken on a nation-by-nation basis, the significance of football in constructing and capturing an idealised self-image of a nation has rarely been questioned (Smith and Porter, 2004; Dine and Crosson, 2010).

How senses of national belonging might have related to broader cross-national and continental relationships has still to be adequately addressed. There is currently some innovative research being conducted, for example, on the emergence of European competitions and what has been termed a European football space from the interwar years onwards (Mittag and Legrand, 2010; Quin, 2013). Whether the creation of first regional, and then European-wide, competitions, inter-European broadcasting arrangements, and the establishment of a Europe-based administration network encompassing FIFA and UEFA impacted significantly upon how football was popularly imagined, however, remains to be explored. Most general studies of European society have failed adequately to account both for football’s cultural ubiquity and its complex and layered identities. Tony Judt, for example, recognised that football was one
cultural form that had helped to ‘unite Europe’ by the early twenty-first century. Yet he contrasted this, somewhat unsubtly and erroneously, with an earlier parochial, inward-looking Europe of domestic leagues, home-grown players and military-based rivalries, in which supporters and players ‘from different European countries were quite unfamiliar with one another’ (Judt, 2007: 783).

For all the interest in football as a focal point for the development of a sense of place at neighbourhood, city, regional and national levels, the so-called ‘spatial turn’ in history has had a surprisingly limited impact on histories of the game. Until fairly recently few studies dealt explicitly with spaces – whether it be stadiums, coffee shops, squares and other public venues, towns and cities more generally – as active parts of the construction of cultural and social identities. Work such as that of Sorez on the creation of a ‘sports space’ consisting of practice grounds, meeting places and club headquarters in the Seine Department during the Third Republic, and Piercey on the interactions between individual football club members and geographical spaces in Rotterdam, demonstrate the potential that can come from approaching spaces as sites around which identities are assembled and articulated (Piercey, 2011; Sorez, 2011).

More nuanced approaches to notions of place and space, along with a reassertion of the local, also underpin an emerging trend towards transnational studies of football, particularly in relation to its initial dissemination and the circulation of knowledge and ideas about the game. In seeking to emphasise the complex and multi-directional routes that the game took, and the various cross-border exchanges that accompanied its movement from place to place, historians are increasingly challenging the national frameworks within which histories of football have traditionally been written (Rinke and Peters, 2014; Brown, 2015; Lanfranchi and Taylor, 2015).

**Emotions and meanings**

Critiques of academic studies of football, and sport more generally, often bemoan the absence of analysis of the sensations and emotions considered fundamental to its popular appeal. McKibbin (2011), for instance, has queried why historians have not seriously probed the emotional experiences of those who play and watch sport. In what can indeed be ‘the most emotionally inarticulate of games’ (Goldblatt, 2014: 15), there seems to have been widespread acceptance that players and fans have simply not expressed what they felt during a football match, or through their everyday engagement with the sport. The sources don’t exist, it has been claimed (Holt, 2011: 178). One could argue, however, that we are just not trying hard enough. Although they may not be immediately apparent, emotions are often ‘hidden in the texts’ (Rosenwein, in Plamper, 2010: 250) that all historians use.

There are, one could suggest, a number of ways in which emotions, feelings and personal experiences could be written into the history of football. First of all, more attention could be paid to the emotional narratives enshrined in the autobiographical accounts of players, fans and administrators. While it could legitimately be claimed that emotional reflections appear limited in football memoirs before the emergence of more confessional books during the 1970s, close and sensitive readings of even supposedly formulaic accounts might reveal what Roper has called the ‘emotional clues’ (2010) that could help us to gain a greater understanding of the connections and relationships within the ‘football world’ and beyond. Expressions of anxiety, fear and joy, for example, can be detected in numerous first-person accounts of professional footballers. Likewise, careful consideration of the supposedly familiar descriptions of triumph and despair in the oral testimonies of supporters might allow historians to build a picture of the ways in which football has related over time to the wider emotional lives of individuals and even to the emotional ‘regimes’ of societies and nations.
Second, close and detailed analysis of the changing language and gestures used to express emotion in sport could pay dividends. Charting the development of particular terms associated with cultures of football support – such as ‘fever’, ‘mania’ and ‘fanaticism’ – is one way of doing this. This is what Klugman (2013) is attempting in his comparative study of the ‘emotional cultures’ that developed around spectator support in Melbourne, Manchester and Boston from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Reports of crowd behaviour, from newspapers, police or government authorities, also have considerable utility here. Representatives for the British social research organisation Mass-Observation, for example, were certainly interested in how and why football stimulated emotional responses in spectators. One report from a match in Bolton from the 1930s noted as follows: ‘All ideas and feelings all rapidly changing – up comes fury, exaltation, sarcasm’; the observer concluded that the match was ‘the only place men can shout’ and ‘the only place they can be really free’ (Mass-Observation Archive, 1938). At a wartime international at Wembley, supporters ‘wanted to cheer and shout as though to deliberately forget everything else. At times it was almost hysterical. Whether they were cheering wildly or oh-ing with disappointment it really made no difference’ (Mass-Observation Archive, 1942). Here football was being interpreted as a refuge from the fears and concerns (especially in wartime), as well as the emotional constraints, of everyday life. Such an interpretation might be seen to fit closely with the idea of sport as an ‘emotional safety valve’ in capitalist societies (Guttmann, 1986: 154). More intensive studies would surely allow us to contextualise these isolated examples, analysing the complex and shifting emotional patterns connected with sport, and exploring the more nebulous moods and sentiments as well as the visible and audible ‘passions’ of a football crowd.

Rosenwein’s idea of ‘emotional communities’ might prove particularly useful in all this. Her focus on uncovering the ‘systems of feeling’ existing within different social groupings – whether they be families, neighbourhoods or institutions – and ‘the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate and deplore’, seems to be appropriate to understanding what is often regarded as the emotional essence of football culture (Rosenwein, 2002: 842). Considerable sociological and anthropological research has already been undertaken in this vein. Detailed ethnographic studies have outlined the complicated emotional reactions prompted not only by a favoured team’s victory or defeat but also by attachment with a stadium, or certain sections of a stadium, or a particular player. Bromberger et al. (1993), for example, have examined the ways in which the emotional lives of the most passionate supporters at clubs in France and Italy were structured by their attachment to ‘their’ club. Archetti’s Argentinian respondents similarly talked of the intense feelings of ‘joy and pain’ – the ‘emotional disorder’ – they considered fundamental to being a football supporter, and the particularly extreme feelings connected with their national idol, Diego Maradona (Archetti, 1997). Trying to identify the existence of similar sentiments in previous eras is inevitably problematic. But it isn’t futile. If existing histories have focused on the identities and behaviours of earlier generations of fans, future research might benefit from concentrating more specifically on the emotional landscape of the game. By doing so, scholars would surely come closer to capturing what it was like to watch, play or follow football at particular periods of time (Johnes, 2008: 68–9), and it would allow them to assess whether or not the emotional community of football was bounded by nation or transnational in scope.

**Football and the historians**

This chapter began with a fairly pessimistic assessment of the state of football history. The view that scholarly research has invariably been framed too narrowly and failed to penetrate beyond a sports history ‘ghetto’ is neither uncommon nor without justification. While the optimists
among us can point to a sprinkling of references in key textbooks and popular histories, there remains a tendency for authors to limit their horizons, submitting papers to separate ‘sports history’ and ‘soccer studies’ journals and presenting at small subdisciplinary rather than at larger history conferences. Thus while a large number of scholarly articles on the history of football are published every year, only a small percentage of these are likely to be read by non-specialists; with an even smaller number subjected to the most rigorous peer review in the most influential history journals. If in some countries, conservative-minded historians who see no value in studying a ‘mere’ game are becoming increasingly scarce, this is manifestly not the case everywhere.

For all this, there are signs that football is becoming increasingly accepted by historians, as it long has been by sociologists, as a conduit for the expression of a range of social and cultural identities. In Britain, for example, doctorates on the history of football are increasing in number. The Institute of Historical Research’s online database recorded just four Ph.D.s solely devoted to the subject in both the 1980s and 1990s. By contrast, 14 such theses were completed between 2000 and 2013, with a further six recorded as ‘in progress’. These included studies of the game in Fascist Italy, socialist Yugoslavia and North and South Korea, alongside theses on different aspects of the game across the British Isles. Elsewhere there have been a number of exciting and innovative transnational developments. The Football Scholars’ Forum, based at the History Department of Michigan State University, has been hosting internet seminars and discussions between international groups of scholars, writers, graduate students and journalists since 2010. The interdisciplinary Football Research in an Enlarged Europe (FREE) project, funded under the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission between 2012 and 2015, had a significant history component. Two of its main strands, on ‘Competitions’ and ‘Memory’, were organised by historians, and its projected publications include a history of European football (authored by Paul Dietschy) and an edited volume entitled The Origin and Birth of European Football. In 2013, the English National Football Museum’s ‘Football 150’ conference, marking the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Football Association, included 68 papers from scholars drawn from at least 20 nations. Such gatherings are proof not only that a large amount of good research is being produced but also that scholarly work on the history of football is now an international endeavour, with peer-reviewed articles and books on national, regional and international football cultures being produced across the world every year.

Good history can emerge from any institutional and disciplinary context. Most academics who write on the history of the game do not do so from within history departments, and many would probably not consider themselves historians first and foremost. Interdisciplinarity is always healthy, allowing the cross-fertilisation of methodological and conceptual approaches and often creating dynamic synergies between individuals and teams of scholars otherwise constrained by disciplinary ‘traditions’. There is a real danger, however, of football history written within a ‘football studies’ or ‘sports studies’ framework becoming increasingly narrowly defined and introspective. There is little doubt that the type of ‘intellectual “tunnel vision”’ Walvin (1984) warned sports historians of over 30 years ago has had a negative impact on some of the most high-profile debates in the history of football, particularly those surrounding its nineteenth-century origins and hooliganism and crowd unrest. The best histories of the game avoid becoming lost in a ‘football history’ ghetto by painting themselves against large historical backdrops and locating themselves within wide historiographical contexts. But they also do so by showing how football could operate as an actor in key political, economic and cultural struggles and become a primary agent in the construction of social and place-based identities. We should avoid overestimating the game’s significance, remembering of course that many people disliked it, were disinterested in it, or simply bemoaned its cultural pervasiveness. Yet by
History and football

showing what it has meant in the everyday lives of individuals and societies over time and across space, such work is slowly ensuring that football will become an essential part of future histories of leisure, entertainment, business, citizenship, nationhood, and so on.

References


Matthew Taylor


History and football


