

MUSEUMS^{ETC}



The State of Museums

Voices from the Field

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MuseumsEtc

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE STATE OF
THE PLAYING FIELD

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IN A WORLD OF NEVER-ENDING media sports debates, museums can become a safe space for difficult and emotionally complex discussions. Sports museums and exhibits can exist as more than a repository of the great objects and moments. In fact, they can reflect the work of thought leaders in their specific industries. Sports museums, exhibits, and educational programming can be used to engage dialogue amongst disparate groups. Sports have a unique way of bringing people together, at the same time, museums function as the trusted source of education and information. As such, museums have a platform to create deeply relevant material that illuminates the intersection of the sporting past with the present and inspires a better future. This chapter will explore these issues and offer solutions to provide a more complete understanding of our sports' interpretative models in hopes that the New England sports museums can do their part to foster an open, inclusive, and societally engaging environment.

Sports and New England are synonymous. They are part of our fabric, our identity, and our culture. Iconic images and experiences connect the region season after season: running of the Boston Marathon on Patriot's Day, Harvard defeating Yale in their annual football game, Bobby Orr scoring on a slap shot from the blue line, Bill Russell blocking an opponent's shot and starting another Celtics fast break, David Ortiz hitting a game-winning home run in the bottom of the ninth inning at Fenway Park, and Tom Brady throwing a touchdown pass to win another football game. These moments and many more are seared into our memory, part of a retelling that is passed down from generation to generation. They are also celebrated in sports museums and college athletic centers throughout

New England, giving further credence to our status as a sports-crazed region.

In the past several decades, sports and sports coverage have moved beyond the game and into the realm of current events and societal concerns. The business of sports, labor disputes, the effects of concussions, performance enhancing drugs, cheating, and kneeling during the national anthem have, in many cases, surpassed the achievements on the playing fields. America's collective understanding of sports is changing to something more nuanced, complicated, and unsettling. The country's historically unhealthy obsession with glorification and victory worship leads to prioritizing winning at all cost. Inevitably, this value system has led to the emergence of various off-the-field issues that are leading even the most die-hard fans to be downright angry when following their favorite players and teams.

While highly publicized changes are occurring with greater frequency in the sports community, New England sports museums have yet to reflect these shifts in their interpretation. The sports museums in the region continue to celebrate sports achievements and history, but have yet to address contemporary concerns and subsequent effects. These institutions exist in a large interpretive void without any apparent desire or plan to address the gap between the exhibited narrative and the currently evolving landscape of sports. Further, non-sports museums rarely tackle an athletics-centric topic; yet cultural institutions are often in a better position to confront the harder issues that lie at the intersection of sports and society.

Sports history

No other region in the United States can lay as great a claim to the rich and storied tradition of sports as New England. From its founding to the present, New England has been at the national forefront in terms of introducing, popularizing, celebrating, and communicating a national sporting legacy. Highlights of the late 19th and early 20th centuries include:

- In 1876, polo was played in America for the first time in Portsmouth, Rhode Island.
- The first US Nationals tennis tournament was played in 1881 at the Newport Casino, in Newport, Rhode Island (Figure 1).
- The first organized ice hockey game in the United States is widely believed to have been played in Concord, New Hampshire in 1883.
- In 1895 the first US Open golf tournament was played at the Newport Country Club.
- The annual running of the Boston Marathon began in 1897.
- Basketball was invented in December 1891 in Springfield, Massachusetts.
- Newport proudly hosted the America's Cup sailing races for 50 years.
- Volleyball was introduced for the first time in 1895 in Holyoke, Massachusetts.
- Bucky Lew became the first black basketball player to play in a professional league in 1902 when he played for Lowell, Massachusetts.
- Francis Ouimet, the first great American golfing cham-



FIG. 1: The International Tennis Hall of Fame was the site of the first US Nationals in 1881.
Photograph: courtesy of The International Tennis Hall of Fame.

pion, won the US Open in 1913 at The Country Club in Brookline, MA.

Throughout the 20th century, New England continued to witness inspiring sporting moments and powerful advancements. The Beanpot tournament, held annually since 1952, features the top four collegiate hockey programs in Boston. The Boston Bruins were the first hockey team to integrate when they signed Willie O'Ree in 1958. The Head of the Charles regatta started in 1965, and the Red Sox achieved the "Impossible Dream" in 1967. Raising championship banners and hoisting trophies while riding the iconic duck boats through historic downtown Boston has become a nearly annual ritual since 2000 as the punctuation to successful seasons. The Boston Celtics, Bruins, Red Sox and New England Patriots have all led successful campaigns to become the best team in their respective sports. Further, the achievements on the playing field, gridiron, rink, and courts are matched by an unparalleled tradition of reporting and writing. Writers such as Timothy Murname, Harold Kaese, Bud Collins, Peter Gammons, Bob Ryan, Dan Shaughnessy, Will McDonough, Leigh Montville, Jackie McMullan, Larry Whiteside, Glenn Stout, Gordon Edes, Nick Cafardo, Tony Massarotti, Steve Buckley, Sean McAdam, Michael Holley, and Bill Simmons have all written elegantly and deeply about the New England sporting tradition, past and present, and its continuing appeal.

Sports museums

The history of sports museums and halls of fame in the United States started in the 1930s with the founding of the United



FIG. 2: The Super Bowl Experience highlights the five Vince Lombardi trophies the New England Patriots have won. Photograph: courtesy of The Hall at Patriots Place, presented by Raytheon.

States Golf Association (USGA) Museum, named Golf House, in 1935. A year later, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum was founded in Cooperstown, New York, and opened in 1939. Over the ensuing decade, more halls of fame opened, but the 1950s witnessed a significant acceleration in the founding of sports halls of fame and museums. Since then, there continues to be a steady growth, with some dedicated to sports or teams while others focus on individuals or are affiliated with colleges and associations. Today, there are thousands of sports halls of fame and museums around the world.

A number of professional and collegiate sports museums, halls of fame, and interpreted historic sporting sites chronicle New England's great moments and individuals. The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame (Springfield, MA), the International Tennis Hall of Fame (Newport, RI), the Sports Museum of New England (Boston, MA), the Volleyball Hall of Fame (Holyoke, MA), Fenway Park, and The Hall at Patriots Place (Foxborough, MA) are among some of the notable and larger sports history attractions (Figure 2). Many others, large and small, dot the New England landscape. Vermont is home to the American Museum of Fly Fishing, the National Museum of the Morgan Horse, and the Vermont Ski and Snowboard Museum. The Museum of Yachting, The Herreshoff Marine Museum, and America's Cup Hall of Fame reside in Rhode Island. New Hampshire hosts the New England Ski Museum and the North East Motor Sports Museum. Maine is home to the Ski Museum of Maine and the Outdoor Sporting Heritage Museum. Many colleges and universities feature halls of fame designed to celebrate their students' athletic achievements. In Connecticut, the Werth Family UConn Basketball Champions



FIG. 3: *The Art of Baseball* exhibit in the Wallace Kane Gallery at the Concord Museum.
Photograph: Mary Orr.

Center celebrates both men's and women's basketball successes while serving as both teams' current training facility. In addition to college halls of fame, many cultural museums and historic sites have included sports in their exhibits, either permanent or temporary. The Boston Public Library hosted a one-year commemorative re-exhibiting of the Boston Marathon Bombing Memorial. The Concord Museum in Concord, Massachusetts created *The Art of Baseball* (Figure 3), while The Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History in Middlebury, Vermont presented a vintage bicycle exhibit *Pedaling Through History: 150 Years of the Bicycle*, in 2006 (Figure 4).

Consistent with evolving national museum trends, as sports museum methods evolve, so do the ways in which they interpret their subject matter. In their first few decades of existence, these sports museums tended to focus on building their collections, displaying objects, and providing a rather simplistic approach to commemorating achievements. In recent decades, exhibitions have evolved as the museum field has shifted its focus to exhibitions, nuanced interpretation, and the inclusion of technology, audience development, and multi-faceted learning. Sports hall of fame and museums are now more vibrant, with experiences that include multimedia presentations steeped in research and scholarship. Many are positioning their subject matter within the broader context of American and world events. This trend of development and engagement is consistent with the growth of New England sports museums in the past several decades. Many have undergone major renovations in recent years, making their facilities more fan-friendly and modern.

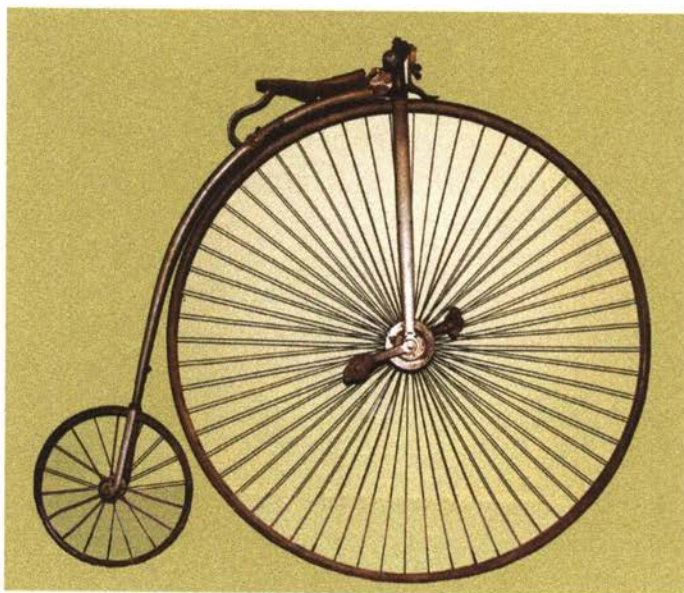


FIG. 4: Penny-Farthing Bicycle, 1884-1885. Pope Manufacturing Co., Hartford, CT.
Collection of the Henry Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, VT.
Photograph: courtesy of The Henry Sheldon Museum.

Current challenges

Culturally, sports are intricately intertwined with the highs and lows of the human experience, yet sports commemorative practices lend themselves to a more tepid middle space that does little to reflect the full impact of the sporting world. Sports interpretation is typically celebratory in a way that keeps the visitor distanced from their idolized sports heroes. Moreover, museums and historic sites rarely confront the more difficult topics that plague every facet of modern society and permeate all manner of athletic endeavors. Presenting a chronological approach to their sport's history, New England's historical sports institutions provide only the first layer of interpretation. They adequately document athletic achievements through objects and memorabilia used to achieve those historic milestones or memorable moments. The racquets, bats, balls, uniforms, and gloves are on display and make that first connection with the visitor. And yet, something is missing.

New England is spoiled in its riches of sporting success and the general enthusiasm its citizens feel for their teams and heroes, yet the region's sports museums and historic sites have not fully captured that enthusiasm. The region is also not immune to the challenges and struggles that athletes, coaches, teams, and their surrounding communities face. In recent years, sports has been embroiled in issues such as kneeling during the national anthem, domestic violence, cheating, drugs abuse, labor disputes, and illegal actions perpetrated by athletes. However, rarely does sports interpretation address these subjects or provide a public space for open discussion of these and other contested topics.

From the games of early civilizations to the extreme

competitions of today, sports have left an indelible mark on the fabric of American culture. Today, sports are a multi-billion dollar industry, with social media providing a never-ceasing forum for discussion, celebration, and criticism surrounding sports. At its core, athletics provides an opportunity to look at the surrounding world through the lens of competition, social interaction, and community building. Society viewed through the lens of sports can provide a key educational tool to understanding issues of race, gender, class, business, globalization, and American identity, sparking a wide range of conversation. However, sports interpretation is often relegated to anecdotal content, statistics, and images of victory. The sports museum's agenda and visitor expectations often line up with the latter, leaving a missed opportunity for additional interpretive depth.

Staying relevant

New England sports museums have an opportunity to begin a timely and important conversation. Sports museums can become relevant beyond storylines that climax at the winning score or final play. In fact, this very step towards relevancy would fulfill a longstanding and deeply impactful obligation, one that allows society at large to find a safe place to discuss contested and universally applicable narratives. Becoming and staying relevant is not a one-step process; rather, it is part of a larger, well-rounded approach to governing an organization, realizing a mission and vision, engaging the community, and addressing current topics. The steps below provide an introductory road map for creating an engaging and in-depth sports dialogue in museums, a dialogue that, if handled properly, would likely expand the audience into the realm of non-traditional sports museum visitors.

1. Comprehensive historical content

Building a solid research base will allow the museum or historic site to explore a full range of engaging topics in order to appeal to both the victory narrative as well as more contextualized subject matter. An effective sports exhibit emerges from a comprehensive collection and content. This includes traditional athletic equipment paraphernalia and statistics. However, narratives of athletes, fans, coaches, and communities are incomplete when defined merely in terms of a win/loss record, passion (or disdain) for the game, or affiliation. All of these participants have lives that intersect the sports they play, enjoy, or observe. As such, it is essential to look beyond the surface and conduct a research process that analyzes the far-reaching impact of the sport or sports figure in question.

Comprehensive research includes a full range of document and object research as well as becoming immersed and well versed in the topic and the scholarship related to that subject matter. Begin with a thorough research plan to verify the breadth and depth of both the facts and the various approaches to the sports topic and the ways in which it intersects with the surrounding culture. Include primary source research, such as documents and images, found in archives, libraries, and repositories, including sports museums and halls of fame. As much as possible, consult scholarly academic research regarding your topic, and do not take anything for granted. Double-check your sources and cross-reference their footnotes with your primary source research. Even simple facts, such as statistics, can be easily misprinted or difficult to accurately locate. If at all possible, take some time to play the game or games that sit at the center of your exhibit's subject matter. By playing the game,

you and your staff will likely gain new perspectives on challenges faced by the athletes, fans, coaches, and the community.

2. Consider and engage your audience

Most museums design sports exhibits with a built-in audience in mind: the fans, coaches, athletes, and surrounding communities that participate in the games. Sports exhibits are often written for an audience that is actively engaged or participating in a present-day sport. When developing your exhibit, analyze the impact that participants can have on the content of a sports history exhibit or program. Fans, coaches, and athletes play a particularly active role in sporting culture. These cultures often rally around the public display of their team's history, even claiming a stake in the way their collective identity is discussed and how memory plays a role in its interpretation. These sporting communities often form bonds that, at times, appear to be as strong as family ties. This loyalty can be a promising prospect for visitorship, as sports museums will likely attract those who are closest to the sport. However, these visitors often come with a certain expectation or agenda, one that the museum may feel obligated to entertain for fear of alienating key visitors. This fear is likely misplaced. Our research challenges these concerns and reveals encouraging data to suggest that fans, coaches, and athletes are likely to attend their sports' exhibits regardless of the perspective.

Sports often insight a far-reaching impact; thus, a sports exhibit audience may stretch beyond a fan base, going deeply into your museum's surrounding community. The shared sporting experience connects communities and unites disparate groups in a unique fashion, which often applies to

both fans and non-fans alike. Depending on your region and the topic, this subset of the population could be quite large. After all, most Americans play or watch some kind of sport and can relate to the intersecting universal themes. In this way, museums can attract non-traditional sports exhibit visitors by addressing larger societal issues confronted by their communities because of, or through the lens of, the sports topic.

Athletics ultimately intersect with nearly every avenue of societal life, which presents an opportunity to engage new and diverse audiences. Sports history can be a powerful tool to help communities find their identity and learn about a shared past. Think of a sports exhibit audience in broad terms by considering all the possible avenues of diversity that exist within your surrounding community. This includes various generations, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, races, genders, religious affiliations, socio-economic levels, political affiliations, and sexual orientations. While sports topics are often interpreted through a fairly narrow lens, they actually intersect with each of these groups. As such, consider how your exhibits engage, reflect, or exclude any given group in this list. Take this concept further by creating talkback areas throughout the exhibit where visitors can leave their thoughts via sticky notes or recorded on a video. This will allow space for visitors to feel more connected to one another, insert their voice in the larger narrative, and begin a dialogue in which other members of the community can engage.

3. Considering agendas

Sports history interpretation presents a challenge unlike most other historical topics, in that athletic participants, fans, and

branding agencies are actively and heavily invested in a sports narrative that involves their sport, team, or community. These visitors are actively engaged in the business of sports. They buy tickets to games, own stock in athletic teams, and give large sums of money to sporting ventures. The business of sports is often driven or influenced by a sponsorship or promotional agenda, not necessarily historical accuracy. In terms of colleges and universities, these experiences serve as a recruiting tool for prospective athletes and alumni giving. Active sports participants often approach the historical narrative with a real or perceived agenda. Fans like to see their team win and love to relive victory moments. Brands use history to positively appeal to their customers and constituents. Coaches and athletes are invested in the success stories of their careers.

Tending to the sports history agendas presents a careful balancing act for the public historian. While the craft of interpreting history for the public calls us to sacrifice agendas while prioritizing the pursuit of historical accuracy, our field also reminds us that our work interacts with an active public, embracing and grappling with role of history in their personal lives. Deeply held sports perspectives are not to be overlooked. Fans, coaches, athletes, and brands intertwine their identities with a sports narrative that may span a person's entire lifetime and overlap with their deepest familial and cultural relationships.

A key method for achieving a balanced sports interpretation is to engage the memories and identities of those who are closest to the sport while also taking into account the perspectives of those who take issue with or reject the business of sports. Deep passions and entrenched historical memories are the

hallmark of New England's sporting culture and are components that can be found in the fabric of your communities. Fans are generally eager to engage with their personal sports history. Their victory narratives and long-suffering losses are an important part of the region's sporting culture. These stories can be sourced for inspiration relating to perseverance, overcoming adversity, teamwork, and breaking belief barriers. At the same time, the New England athletic culture contains plenty of viewpoints that are often excluded from the traditional sports tropes. Use your professional skills to challenge official narratives, introduce overlooked perspectives, and create a call to reposition outdated agendas.

Those who are married to their team or sport are not necessarily immovable forces. They are, after all, our neighbors, our friends, and, in fact, they are each of us. They are New Englanders and Americans who are searching for meaning in the everyday joys and struggles of life. Sports history offers an indelible lens through which to examine the most fundamental patterns and values of our society. When writing sports interpretation consider the agendas as they are presented, and then search for spaces to challenge traditionally held motivations that interrupt the greater values of society. Consider carefully the best ways to delicately walk that tight rope so as to attract the widest audience and engage them in a deeply meaningful conversation that creates a lasting effect on the sporting agendas in your community.

4. Create educational programming

Beyond the exhibit, educational programming is an ideal way to engage community members of all ages in a conversation

about the valuable and complex intersection between sports and life. Sports centric museums can offer ongoing comprehensive school programming. Historical societies and museums can also create a temporary or seasonal school program as a stand-alone project or to enhance the impact of an exhibit. Innovative sports history programs are opportunities for students and teachers to explore collections, personal stories, and primary sources while connecting them to historical themes. New England and American sports history connects to a wide range of K-12 compliant themes including technology, social and cultural history, mathematics, nutrition, and scientific advancement. Educating through the lens of athletics is an effective and engaging tool that invites students to engage within a space they so frequently occupy in their daily lives. In addition to student programming, adult educational offerings can also be an effective way to approach broad and complex sports topics. Consider adult forums, tours, live interpretations, workshops, lecture series, art exhibits, or book signings. Interactive game playing or community-wide sports endeavors can also be a fun way to attract all ages, educate visitors on the evolution of the sport, and promote health, exercise, and community engagement at the same time.

Brands, corporations, and associations often welcome partnership opportunities through which your institution can attract new audiences or develop deeper relationships with current visitors and members. Think broadly about the possible connections. Every major sport in America has a national hall of fame that may be willing to participate with your institution, either through loaning objects, promotion, or some form of game participation. Professional teams, celebrity athletes,

and coaches are often willing to attend special events. This may include both those who are currently playing and popular historical sports figures. Local and regional sporting associations may be willing to sponsor a community competition, skills tutorial, or outing that highlights the joys and challenges of their sport. This could also be combined with a workshop about the historical evolution of the sport, which would likely be mutually beneficial and enjoyable for museum-goers and the partnering associations or corporations.

5. Approaching complex discussions

In America's current political climate, all roads point to cultural relevancy, and sports is no exception. While athletics can, and often do, provide an escape from, or inspiration, from the rigors and struggles of daily life, they also involve the lives of human beings. Even the greatest on-the-field heroes are not immune to personal strife, social pressures, and cultural implications. As such, the study of the role of sports presents an opportunity to gain perspective on the historical lessons and current pitfalls of the sporting world.

Museums can reach beyond the expected sports story by conducting research that connects universal themes of humanity and applies historical theoretical models. Perhaps race, class, and gender present obvious (though still often overlooked) inroads for interpreting sports history. Beyond the core of this theoretical model lies an opportunity to engage topics of religion, ethnicity, immigration, rights and justice movements, the LGBT+ communities, indigenous cultures, American exceptionalism, regionalism, nationalism, and international relations. These topics provide a weighty reality to a subject that is

often interpreted with over-glorification or too much credence in hearsay to be believable. Further, an exhibit or program that is weighted too heavily in statistical data might be deemed less interesting to a larger or more socially-engaged audience.

Museums have the opportunity, if not the obligation, to become the safe space for difficult sports discussions. While contested sports narratives may challenge some visitors, others will find a welcome outlet. Currently, few museums address controversial sports-related topics. These discussions are more often relegated to the media, which is neither an education-based resource nor a welcoming and inclusive platform. This leaves the general public without a safe place to talk about concussions in football, angry parents at little league games, institutional “too big to fail” issues, young athletes who are exposed to sexual assault or harassment, the ongoing college debate of “pay to play,” performance enhancing drugs, or any number of other social issues that cross into the world of sports. As museum professionals, we are trained to navigate murky waters and engage disparate perspectives. We have the space, the organizations, and the missions that support this call to action.

Conclusion

If we will take this challenge, the result will likely be profound. Life is not just reflected in sports; sports reflect life. The popularity of athletics presents an untapped opportunity to attract a large audience that is hungry for a meaningful discussion around topics that plague our region and nation. That is no truer than in New England where sports passions run high and cultural awareness runs deep. This region loves our Red Sox,

Bean Pot, Marathon, Patriots, and the like. That love is not misplaced. The victories are worth celebrating. The success gives us great inspiration. Taking this call is a chance to give back to the sports we love and to sustain thriving and healthy athletic environments.

New England sports museums and halls of fame have a great opportunity and the necessary gravitas to provide a more comprehensive understanding of sports and its impact on society. Consulting the recommendations above, your institution can create an environment where the totality of their sports are presented, discussed, and debated. Through this platform perhaps the New England museums can help foster education and discussion that promotes a safer, more inclusive, and lasting sporting culture.