

There is much talk about the commercialization of sports; not least in the columns of *idrottsforum.org*, in articles, book reviews and in other forms, is this noticeable. There is a tendency to date that, in many people's opinion, unfortunate development to some time after WW2; other researchers, often considered more daring, claim that those tendencies were established already at the close of the 19th Century, and fully developed by the end of the Great War. Enter Adrian Harvey, British sports historian who made a name for himself with the book *The Beginnings of a Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain, 1793-1850* (Ashgate). Daniel Arvidsson, being a sports historian himself, and with a special interest in the marketization of modern sports, was duly impressed with Harvey's pioneering work. However, Arvidsson is not entirely positive, and unsurprisingly it's the lack of theory at the bottom of Harvey's analyses that disappoints him. All in all, though, he finds the empirical data of the utmost importance for an understanding of the continuing process of commercialization in our own time.

Early shapes of things to come

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Adrian Harvey

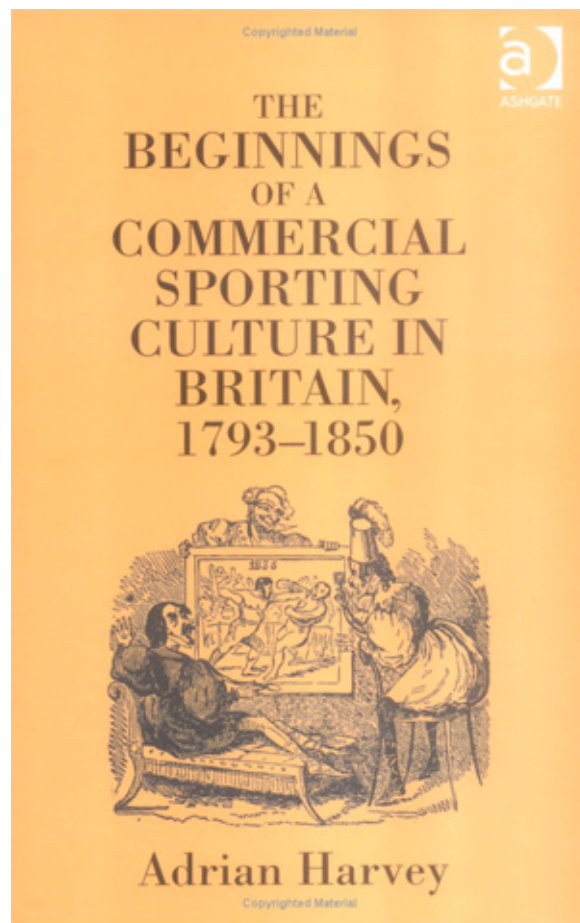
The Beginnings of a Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain, 1793-1850

264 pages, hb.

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The historian Adrian Harvey has written *The Beginnings of a Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain, 1793-1850*. The aim of the book is to study the growth of the commercial sporting culture in Britain. Harvey employs sport journals, newspapers and other periodica which provide him with data to measure the volume of sporting activity at both a broad and a specific level. Harvey breaks with sports historians before him in at least two ways. During this period sporting culture was *not* in retreat and the "sporting revolution" of the late 19th century was not a revolution but a consequence of a pre-existing commercial sporting culture. The book is divided into two chronological parts, 1793-1815 and 1816-1850. It is an important book since it sheds a new light upon the professionalization of the sporting culture in the first half of the 19th century. Here Harvey detects a lively and popular market-based sporting culture and obsession with record keeping, enthusiastically embraced by working-class people. Horse racing, boxing, cricket, rat races in sports bars were among the celebrated events, some of which had more sophisticated rules and codes than others.



It was important to the sporting press to create an interesting image of sports and sporting women and men. Journalists helped to create a cult of sporting celebrities. In *The Sporting Magazine*, sportsmen were described as brave and beautiful, especially those who had made a career from the lower classes. The number of leisure and sports events increased after the French wars. Pigeon shooting was really popular, accompanied by rowing, sailing and wrestling, just to mention a few. Geographically the intense expansion of sports events started in London and the Home Counties (Essex, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex) but eventually sporting events, as Harvey documents, were to be staged all over Britain.

Sport was segregated. Sportsmen and sportswomen from different social classes could practise the same sport but in separated spheres. Boxing and wrestling were sports for men from the lower classes while cricket and tennis were aristocratic sports. Some ethnic groups were excluded from sports. Jews and negroes could only participate in boxing. Women were not allowed to compete against men but most of the sports, except for boxing and wrestling, were open to them. In contrast to this, women showed an increasing interest in sports during this period. Conservative forces also endeavoured to cultivate the sports of the lower classes with appropriate moral behaviour and military skill. But sports events “for all” were exclusively rare.

The infrastructure of sports was established before 1793. (We do not get the answer to when it was established in this book, if there is an answer to that question.) An increasing number of spectacular events developed the commercial potential of sports. Spectators were attracted by both the sport and the sale of refreshments, which in turn generated money and ancillary services. Of course a commercialised sport attracted criminals and corruption. Gambling sometimes led to sabotage and if a pugilist was ordered to lose, and didn't comply, he could be put in jail. This split the sporting culture in two fields, one traditional and one commercial. In this context we can understand the modern meanings of the terms “amateur” and “professional”. These terms were of less importance during the French wars. Amateur was synonymous with “gentleman” and professional referred to profession, professor or professed, and were used interchangeably. After 1830 a professional was often a person from a high social rank who competed for financial rewards and an amateur became someone who did not earn money and therefore was “clean” from commercial elements and the risk of being corrupt. In this story of transformation of attitude Harvey's arguments are interesting and convincing.


Adrian Harvey's book is fascinating reading and gives an understanding of the complexities of mass culture. It has a descriptive and telling style, which makes it enjoyable. But this is also a weakness. The volume lacks a theory driven analysis that would have produced a deeper understanding of historical development he describes. Harvey finds that rule-based sport existed before 1793 but leaves the interpretation of how we should understand the changing of the codifications and rules of sports to the reader. Were rule-based sports developed as a form of “social control” top-down, a conservative strategy to teach the working class to play by the rules? Or was it a movement from below, or what was it? The history of mass consumerism is complex and historians need analytical tools to understand the change of sporting cultures and the sporting mentality.

There is a gender perspective in the book but it is not, in my opinion, active enough; it would have benefited from a more consistent use of theory. Masculinities could also have been further problematized. It would have been interesting, for example, to read an analysis of the homosocial or homological masculine strategies in clubs or at certain events. These are problems for future sport historians to solve. All in all, this detailed book has a lot to give to Swedish sports historians interested in the early cultural and commercial aspects of sports.

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