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Senses and Emotions in the History of Sport

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Like most historians, sport historians have generally emphasized the visual and cognitive dimensions of human experience while neglecting the sensorial and the emotional. This essay suggests that the rapid expansion and the growing sophistication of historical study of senses and emotions have created exciting opportunities for sport history. More systematic attention to the role of senses and emotions in shaping perceptions of and meanings derived from sport could enrich our understanding of the history of sport. The essay offers some suggestions as to how such issues might be further explored.

Imagine, for a moment, watching the championship game of a major professional sport . . . in total silence. On the television, the entire game goes by with the mute button on; at a live event, you hear and feel nothing of the sounds in the arena. You see the players and the action, but you partake of the event only visually. The experience would surely be different, and diminished, from the usual one that combines visual and auditory stimuli. At the cinema, a film watched without sound—no music, no voices—loses

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emotional appeal, flavor, and meaning. It would be more difficult and less pleasurable to follow the storyline of a movie only by seeing it. The same is true of sports events. Their auditory qualities impart much of the texture, depth, and meaning of the experience of spectatorship (and of participation as well).1

We know that our perceptions of the world around us are shaped by all of our senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching.2 But as scholars, in sport history as in other fields, we are ocularcentric. Few scholars of sport have attended, except in passing, to the sounds of sport, or to its tastes, smells, and tangible qualities. We have also neglected feelings, privileging cognition over emotion. Our studies are attuned to the intellectual layers of human behavior far more than to the feelings that underpin them. The aim of this essay is to suggest that attention to both the sensorial and the emotional dimensions of human experience has much to contribute to the history of sport.

Although senses and feelings may appear biologically determined and culturally universal, they are in fact historically conditioned, vary across time and place, and hence cry out for historical analysis.3 This is not to say that there is no biological basis to feeling and sensing. Indeed there is. But, as social constructionists convincingly argue, different cultures have different rules and vocabularies for perceiving, expressing, and giving meaning to senses and emotions.4 In the case of emotions, historian and cultural anthropologist William Reddy has offered an influential perspective that suggests that feelings are universal, at least in a neurochemical sense, but the language used to describe the resulting sensations depends on historical context. Because all humans have the capacity to experience the same feelings, politics is in part about determining which feelings can and should be expressed in which ways by which social groups. Every political order establishes an “emotional regime” that disciplines emotions.5 More generally, historians have embraced the view that senses and emotions are experienced and categorized in subjective ways that vary in different cultural contexts and therefore are not merely manifestations of biological processes but vectors for the exercise of social and political power.6

Older models envisioned both senses and emotions as essentially passive and therefore fundamentally different from cognitive acts such as judging. Recent findings in neurology and psychology, however, suggest that emotions resemble judgments in that they require cognitive evaluations.7 In other words, we have reasons for our feelings. We may think of emotions as “uninvited, troublesome intruders, distracting us from carrying out our best intentions, thwarting an ‘objective’ view of things, and compelling us to behave in regrettable, or at least irrational, ways,” but the notion that there can be thought without feeling is fundamentally wrong.8 As historian Frank Costigliola puts it: “Thought integrates cognition and emotion through constant feedback between the brain, bodily states, and culturally conditioned perceptions. The brain does not distinguish between cognitive and emotional thought, between concluding that Wednesday follows Tuesday or that rape is repugnant. Emotion is necessary to rational decision making. . . . In charging events and experiences with value, emotions help form and strengthen beliefs.” In modern Western cultures, however, the polarity between reason and emotion is so deeply embedded in the ways people map out their mental states that it is often useful and even necessary to analyze behavior as though the two were separable modes of thinking.9
Both senses and emotions have been the subject of growing interest within history, cultural studies, and the social sciences more generally. If, for the purposes of a forum on sport history and popular culture, they cannot be said to constitute trends in the study of popular culture, they are nevertheless fruitful, exciting, and increasingly powerful areas of inquiry that hold great potential for the study of both sport and popular culture. Most scholars would likely agree that senses and feelings play central roles in the experience of sport, for participants and for spectators, yet these topics are rarely treated explicitly and systematically. Understanding the meanings attributed to sport and how it is made intelligible requires engagement with the ways that sport is mediated through senses and emotions.

Varieties of Experience

Consider two different events. The first: Jersey City, July 2, 1921. In what was billed as “the most important bout in ring history,” American Jack Dempsey and French war hero Georges Carpentier fought for the world heavyweight boxing championship. The event took place in a purpose-built open-air arena that had required the labor of 500 carpenters and 400 workers, who for three months had dug and hammered and nailed, using 2.25 million feet of wood to build the large octagonal structure. On the day of the bout it sat just over 90,000 spectators, at the time the biggest crowd ever assembled for a sporting event in the United States. They were arrayed in tiered seats, the price of the seat depending on its distance from the center of the ring. Ticketholders had come from all over the United States and from many other countries as well, filling special event trains and flooding New York City’s hotels.10

The experience of these 90,000 viewers was shaped by their physical encounter with the environment of the arena: its tactility, its smells, and its sounds, including those produced by direct and indirect contact with the other people present, extending in time well beyond the opening and closing bells of the match. The fight was not an hour-long or even a day-long event but constituted a major feature of many people’s lives for weeks and months. A voluminous stream of information and gossip about the fight had dominated the newspapers since late spring. By late June, according to Dempsey’s biographer, the fight “was the biggest story in the world.”11 For days most attendees had battled crowds in the city, stayed in sold-out hotels, and jammed together in trains and buses. When the day itself came, from nine o’clock in the morning, when the gates opened, until three o’clock in the afternoon when the bout began, a steady stream of spectators tramped across the muddy fields to the wooden arena. Their path was lined with soft drink and sandwich stands and street vendors selling programs, miniature boxing gloves, and buttons and flags. Many attendees had lunch parties on the muddy ground outside the arena. Some spectators stood in line for so long in an effort to get seats, forgoing food, that they fainted when the preliminary bout started. During the second round of the main event, several hundred men and women ran out of the mid-priced seats on one side of the arena when the rickety structure seemed about to collapse. Everyone felt the sultry summer heat. The scent of fresh-cut pine, a reminder of the transience of the venue (erected with an anticipated lifespan of six months), mingled with the odor of tobacco, mud, and sweat. One unexpected absence was the smell of bootlegged alcohol: reports of the fight noted that
few of the spectators seemed to be drinking. Drinkers and nondrinkers alike were kept in
check by a large, highly visible contingent of 400 police officers and more than a thousand
firefighters.12

The composition of the audience testified to boxing’s increasing respectability. Only
recently excluded from such events, women appeared in relatively large numbers, perhaps
2,000 in total, of all ages and in all kinds of dress, though invariably accompanied by male
escorts. The male contingent represented a noticeably truer cross-section of American
men than appeared at most other entertainments. As one news report noted, it included
“clerks and bankers, crooks and clergymen, lawyers and day laborers, businessmen and
gamblers,” as well as military men from all services and ranks. As was typical in these years,
the match was in part a venue for the rich and famous to mingle and advertise their status.
J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Teddy Roosevelt, and Douglas Fairbanks were merely the most
well-known representatives of the worlds of finance, business, politics, and entertainment
who came to see and be seen. Flags or ribbons worn to signal the nationality of the wearer
made the audience visibly international. Many American fans of Carpentier showed their
allegiance by pinning miniature French flags next to the Stars and Stripes. Some forty
thousand people without tickets to the event lined the major entrances to the expensive
seats, hoping to catch a glimpse of the glitterati—spectators to spectatorship. When the
match ended in a knockout in less than an hour, the large crowd surged to the exits, their
orderly egress overseen by police and firefighters in the aisles. There was a distinct lack of
emotional expression as the crowd dispersed. The sympathy of most of the audience had
been with the Frenchman who lost: Carpentier had received a more enthusiastic cheer on
entering the ring, but the emotional valence of the exiting hordes was low. They seemed
lacking in both exuberance and distress.13

The second event took place just a few miles away, in Manhattan’s Times Square.
Crowds of several thousand often gathered there for coverage of sports events displayed on
temporary bulletin boards. On the afternoon of July 2, 1921, the crowd that gathered for
the Dempsey-Carpentier match numbered around 8,000, about twice the size of the typi-
cal congregation during a World Series game. “Packed together as tight as subway travel-
ners” and sweltering in the heat, according to news accounts, they watched with faces turned
upward toward the board as news of the fight flashed across. Those closest to the loudspeakers
could hear the announcements just before they hit the screen. One newsman described
the scene:

The upturned faces were like whitecaps on a choppy sea, that swayed back and
forth under the pulse of an exciting moment, and from which came a deep-
welded roar such as must have assailed the ears of those in the great arena across
the river. . . . A cry would go up from those in the front of the throng. There
would be anxious stretching of necks, a palpitating moment when those farther
away longed to know what happened, and then as the bulletin was posted the
cries went up louder than ever from all over the square.14

One observer said the crowd throbbed with “primitive emotion,” and when the bout
ended with a knockout, the crowds dispersed chaotically, a sharp contrast to the orderly
exit at the arena. “Then the crowd exploded,” a news report described. “There is no other
word to describe it. The closely packed, perspiring mob, its nerves on edge with excite-
ment, swayed and broke under the bursting influence from within, where everybody pushed
at once. Men broke from its edges in ones and twos and in groups, like fragments of a
bomb, to run before the avalanche behind them. Back of this fringe men stepped on each
other’s feet, stumbled, almost fell down, were spun round and round by the uncontrolled
forces working around them." The handful of women in the crowd were lifted or carried
by men to prevent their being trampled; fights broke out; people were pressed against
windows with such force that glass threatened to break.15

These were two distinctly different events. The Jersey City event was expensive to
attend, a social affair in which men of different classes and nationalities mingled in the
same area, even though seats were segregated along class lines. The presence of significant
numbers of women affected the tenor of the event. The visibility of women and the rela-
tive absence of alcohol promoted the observance of respectable middle-class behavior. In
Times Square, far from the boxers but not from the experience of spectatorship, the virtu-
ally all-male event was far more egalitarian in that the best positions were accorded to
those who came early rather than to those who paid more.

Decades of scholarship on the social history of sport have prepared us to grasp readily
the class and gender valences of the two events, and to a less obvious extent, possible racial
valences as well. Our capacity to make productive use of these categories of analysis is well-
developed, as is our critical vocabulary. We are far less experienced at reading the sensory
and emotional elements of the events, although they would have shaped the experience of
the spectators in central ways. The chaotic and unruly mass in Times Square was governed
by different cultural rules for the verbal and physical expression of emotion than the or-
derly spectators in Jersey City. The contrast between the two events points to ways that
sports spectatorship shapes norms of sociability and emotional regulation. It is not just
that hearing of an event at a remove might have very different emotional valence than
seeing and hearing it live, but also that myriad circumstances, including environmental
factors such as heat and social factors such as the gender composition of the audience,
come into play in determining the emotional repercussions of a viewing/hearing experi-
ence. Moreover, if societies have “sensory regimes”—modes of ranking senses and deriving
meaning from them—sports events in modern societies are surely an important site for
creating and enacting such regimes.

There was in fact a vast array of ways to experience the Dempsey-Carpentier fight.
Halls and theaters up and down the East Coast hosted crowds like the one at Times
Square, with perhaps half a million people joining in such gatherings.16 As many as 300,000
Americans listened in homes, barbershops, and train stations equipped with radios, for the
occasion constituted the first radio “broadcast” of a sporting event. Historian Douglas
Gomery calls it “the Big Bang of broadcasting, when people in the USA learned about and
paid attention to mass entertainment over the airwaves.”17 Three ordinary telephones had
been placed at ringside at the Dempsey-Carpentier fight and were used to send news to
wireless stations in Hoboken, whence the largest aerials in commercial use relayed the
details to receivers within a radius of several hundred miles.18

The event was also experienced in varied ways around the world. At Covent Garden,
London’s principal opera house, hundreds of British fight fans resisted the allure of test
cricket, Wimbledon tennis, and the Henley regatta to hear the boxing championship
announced as the ticker tape results came in. Both sexes attended, in formal attire as was
the custom, but their enjoyment was sharply curtailed, for the results of the first round had only just been read out when the news came through that Dempsey had won.¹⁹ Other Londoners cheered in the streets as they saw the news when the Daily Mail plane, by previously announced signal, flew over London, dropping a white light first to identify the fight results and then a red light to indicate that Dempsey was the victor.²⁰ As Paris waited for the results, the boulevards were “black with people,” with key points near newspaper offices so crowded that traffic was brought to a halt. They learned the result from white lights dropped by planes to signal a Dempsey victory, from sirens and megaphones, and from green leaflets printed by the Petit Parisien fluttering from the sky. The bitter disappointment of the French at the defeat of their hugely popular national hero was marked by listless silence.²¹

These experiences involved sound and sense as well as emotion, collective and individual. In turn sound, sense, and emotion created divergent interpretations of the fight and its social meaning. We think of a sports event as a single phenomenon, but it can usefully be regarded as a multiplicity of events depending on the medium of consumption. Watching, reading, listening, alone or in groups, at home or in special venues—there are many variables that affect perception and the attribution of meaning. The growing literatures on senses and emotions in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history are beginning to provide us with entry points for unpacking these meanings.

Senses

The booming literature on the history of the senses suggests the importance of “intersensoriality”: the ways that we make sense of the world through the interrelation of all our senses.²² A corollary of this observation (see how one slips so easily into the language of sight!) is that only by attending to all the senses can we reconstruct the experiences of people in the past, including the experiences associated with sport. To limit ourselves to sight is to neglect essential routes to perception. As sports scholars, we need to attend not only to what spectators see of play—the scoring, the tackling, the running, the throwing—but also to the myriad other sensory inputs that shape that experience: the salty crunch of popcorn, the smell of hot dogs, the feel of the turf or the ball or the hard plastic seat, the roar of the crowd, the orchestration of feeling and order by buzzers and whistles.

But how exactly do we study the senses? Here, as everywhere, definition is the first point of contention. What are the senses? Western tradition identifies five, but Aristotle classified taste as a variant of touch and suggested a sixth quasi-sense as a mediator among the others. Today’s psychologists of sensation have differentiated additional senses, including those of heat, weight, effort, lightness, and speed. We also traditionally assume that the senses can be divided and that they form a hierarchy, but senses are rarely if ever experienced in isolation.²³ (We are all familiar with the ways that taste, smell, texture, and appearance work together in the experience of eating.)

Sensory “regimes” are intimately tied to political orders and to the constructs of race, gender, and class. In studying connections between senses and imperialism, historian Andrew Rotter notes that race was constructed in part through senses: inferior races were discerned not only through sight but also through smell and sound. The senses are gendered,
with the so-called “lower” senses of taste, touch, and smell often associated with women and aligned with class. Particular smells and patterns of speech have often been used as markers of class. In applying the concept of sensory regimes to imperialism, the work of Rotter and others suggests that sport historians might deepen their understanding of sport and colonialism by looking at a variety of senses. The metropole's inculcation of modern Western sport among colonial peoples was a matter of disciplining behavior, in part through teaching “sonic manners”: when to call, cheer, and applaud, for example. Whistles and bells in games might be considered part of efforts to create a “civilized soundscape,” an imperial “auditory regime.”

The “empire of the senses” is also bound tightly to issues that have been of great interest in popular culture studies: commercialization and commodification. What people want to buy and why are both surely bound up with appeals to the senses and hence best understood by assessing the full range of ways in which the senses are engaged. Sports events can be viewed as commodified sensory environments in which preferences for tastes, smells, and sounds are transmitted and changed, not only at the local level but also through national and international networks.

We think of vicarious participation in sports events as “spectatorship,” a word whose etymology embeds it as a visual experience: the Latin specter means to watch. Yet the viewing experience is profoundly affected by other senses, perhaps most strongly by hearing. Rhythms, volumes, patterns, and combinations of sounds at a sport event create an auditory ecoscape. In film and media studies, the traditional assumption that the visual is the primary site of meaning, identification, and spectator pleasure has been challenged since the 1990s by tremendous growth in studies of the role of sound. It is now a given that the musical score in a film, along with dialogue and other sounds, shape the ways the viewer/listener (again, we need a new vocabulary!) interprets meaning and perceives the film. In history more generally, the huge range of topics that fall under the rubric of sound history offer a map of sound’s pervasive role in social and cultural life. We now have histories of concert audiences, telephones, speeches, and films; we have histories of theories of hearing.

Surprisingly little overt attention has been paid to sound in sport, considering that sound has been critical to the articulation of meaning in sports events, to the creation of identities, to the sense of pleasure, and to the building of communities. (Movement is necessary both to sport and to sound: we do not hear objects but rather the vibrations of air caused by moving objects.) A single sound can evoke an entire range of experiences associated with particular sports. The sound of leather against willow, for example, can call forth an array of feelings and memories associated with cricket. It is important that much of what we hear in a sporting event is created and heard by collectives. Chants, cheers, and applause are collectively produced and experienced. The volume of sound events can affect the structure of the built environment, creating vibrations in seats, for example. This physicality, the reverberation of sound in the body or the environment, can have profound effects on the emotions of the individual and the group, shaping a collective mood.
The tonal and emotional qualities of sports broadcasting, both on radio and television, are essential to understanding its appeal. The spread of radio was linked to the “golden age of sport” in the West in ways we have yet to explore fully, with due attention to the act of listening. As scholars of radio have long noted, the spoken word conveys far more meaning than the written word. In his 1936 study of radio, Rudolf Arnheim put it this way:

In every art it is the most elemental and primitive means that achieve the most profound effects. The most elementary aural effects, however, do not consist in transmitting to us the meaning of the spoken word, or sounds that we know in actuality. The “expressive characteristics” of sound affect us in a far more direct way, comprehensible without any experience by means of intensity, pitch, interval, rhythm and tempi, properties of sound which have very little to do with the objective meaning of the word or sound.30

The voices of sportscasters, their timbre and tone, the rhythm of the commentary, and the sheer familiarity of particular voices become integral to the enjoyment of spectatorship.

Music and sport have a profoundly important relationship, as Anthony Bateman and John Bale argue in their pioneering collection, Sporting Sounds (2009). Music is essential in some sports, such as synchronized swimming and ice skating; in others, and perhaps in most professional team sports today, music has become an integral part of sports events in the form of terrace songs and chants, often accompanying scoring.31 Sport has also influenced and been incorporated into music. Yet with the exception of the pioneering work of Steve Redhead, who identified music as integral to changes in English football, sports scholars have paid little attention to music.

Sporting Sounds suggests a range of possible connections. Athletic training regimes draw on identifiable psychophysical effects of music in sport, including “improved mood, pre-event activation or sedation, reduced perceived exertion, enhanced work output, improved skill acquisition, flow states, [and] dissociation from feelings of pain and fatigue.”32 Jeffrey Segrave views Pietro Metastasio’s eighteenth-century libretto, L’Olimpiade, as a carrier of a particular conception of the Olympic games that later influenced Pierre de Coubertin’s rationalized Olympic ideology. Henning Eichberg, in a typically original chapter, suggests, among other things, that Danish sports festivals create a form of rhythmic autohypnosis that contributes to popular identity building.34

Coubertin, of course, was convinced of the relationship between art, including music, and sport. He saw music as most able “to provide direct support for sports.” Music was part of the first Olympic games, and in 1912 Coubertin began running art competitions, which coexisted with the sporting events until 1948. (The difficulty of proving that the competitors were amateur artists was responsible for the art event’s discontinuation.) “Music still adorns Olympic rituals, encoding and transmitting Olympic ideology,” as Bateman and Bale note.35

The ephemeral nature of sound makes it methodologically challenging to tackle, but taste, smell, and touch pose even more difficulties for historians.36 They typically leave few traces in the historical record. But touch and tactility—whether players touch each other, how they touch each other, whether spectators rub shoulders (literally)—are important symbols and manifestations of relationships among individuals and groups. Which senses are used and which sensory inputs are valued (what is defined as sound versus what is
noise) in sporting environments can tell us both about the sensory regimes of particular moments in time and about how sport might reinforce or subvert such regimes. All of these issues and more deserve further study.

**Emotions**

The study of emotion suffers from a set of biases strikingly similar to those that worked for so long to marginalize the study of sport. Like the Western privileging of work over leisure and the “serious” over play, historical scholarship has emphasized the study of reason and intellect over the study of feelings. To some extent this neglect is a result of methodological problems. Like sound, taste, and feel, emotion is an internal state that typically leaves opaque and ambiguous traces in the written record. It is difficult to distinguish between deeply felt emotion, highly transient emotion, and emotion feigned for instrumental gain. Emotion is a capacious term, comprising moods; reflexive reactions such as fear and anger; longer-term affective commitments such as trust; and emotions that arise out of moral awareness, such as pride and shame. Nevertheless, understanding the role of emotion is critical if we are to grasp the full dimensions of human behavior, for cognition is only part of the story of how the mind works.

In the last couple of decades, findings in neuroscience and psychology have suggested that understanding and explaining behavior only by reference to cognitive factors provides a fundamentally incomplete and inaccurate picture. We know now that in neurological terms, reason and emotion are entwined. Cognition is profoundly influenced by feelings. The reverse is also true: emotions require an assessment of relevance and effects; hence, emotion is often shaped by cognition. Rationality and emotion are thus interlinked processes. We might think of rationality without emotional “contamination” as a goal and conceptualize rationality and emotionality as distinct and opposed processes, but that is not how the human brain works. In recognition of the ever-present role of emotion, cognitive and social psychology have been undergoing an “emotional revolution,” which in turn has influenced economics, consumer research, and decision research. It has begun to influence political science approaches to understanding behavior and motivation and has helped to produce an “emotional turn” in the field of history.

This growing interest in emotion has as yet been little felt in the history of sport, despite emotion’s centrality to the experience of sport. Emotion is embedded in the very definition of popular culture, including sport. If high culture is deemed to involve reflective thought, the suppression of emotions, and intellectual engagement, popular culture is understood to elicit a bodily, emotional, immediate, participatory response, not mediated by distance or reflection. High culture is difficult, whereas popular culture can be consumed without thought or training; it is accessible “in an emotional and immediate way.” (As Alan McKee and others argue, however, these are false binaries, and “there is some element of reflection, of distance, involved in even the most embodied and emotional responses to culture.”)

To be sure, sport scholars have studied emotions in particular contexts. There is a mind-bogglingly vast literature on the psychology of athletes, which includes emotional elements such as competitive anxiety, anger, joy, burnout, and “flow” as they relate to athletic performance. Most of the thirty million hits produced by Googling “sport and
emotion” probably fall in this domain, and most of the more than 11,000 results the same
search terms pull up in my university’s academic database relate to how emotions affect
sport performance.44 Interest in how participation in sports affects emotional regulation
has a long history. Nineteenth-century social reformers, for example, tried to use sport as a
means of channeling potentially harmful working-class emotions into healthy pursuits.
The connections between sport and nationalism, itself an emotionally charged form of
identification, have also been the subject of substantial scholarly interest, though the emo-
tional links are rarely tackled explicitly or systematically.45 A long-standing debate has
been waged over whether sport increases or diffuses feelings of aggression.46 Some sociolo-
gists see sport as an emotional outlet from “civilizing processes” that have increasingly
subordinated emotion to reason and control.47 Others have pointed to the ways that sport
inculcates gender norms, including those having to do with the expression of emotion.48
Yet in many other ways, the emotional dimensions of sport and sport’s connections to
broader emotional regimes have been overlooked. Part of this inattention stems from
sport history’s broader neglect of spectatorship and of pleasure in general.49 In our eager-
ness to make sport serious and to bring it into the realm of the intellect, we have perhaps
forgotten to pay sufficient attention to the most basic sources of sport’s power and influ-
ence. (This is not to say that sport spectatorship is synonymous with pleasure. As writer
Nick Hornby has brilliantly described, fandom is as much about agony as ecstasy.)50
That the specific feelings elicited by sports spectatorship are little understood may be
in part because they seem obvious rather than historically variable.51 It is possible that
advertising companies have a deeper grasp of the emotions elicited by sport than do schol-
ars, for advertisers are highly attuned to sport’s emotional valences and have grown fond of
using sport images and myths with the express intent of eliciting and harnessing specific,
powerful feelings.52 Sporting contests call forth the full range of emotions. Hatred, hostil-
ity, love (including erotic attachments), solidarity, loyalty, anger, grief, loss, sorrow, out-
rage, indignation, shame, trust, respect, compassion, cynicism, defiance, enthusiasm, pride,
envy, resentment, fear, dread, joy, hope, and resignation: there is not a single emotion on a
comprehensive list that does not have a ready place in sport.53 But varying combinations
of emotions, how they are expressed, which ones are valorized and which ones are cen-
sured, and the social and psychological consequences of emotions are among the issues
that are worth understanding.
To suggest one example, much attention has been devoted to sport’s globalization but
very little to the emotional factors that might influence it or result from it. The emotional
factors that undergirded the growth of a collective, global identity among sport advocates,
organizers, fans, and athletes have thus far been ignored, but emotions were surely impor-
tant to the creation and development of an internationalist sensibility in sport. Attention
to these factors may help us to connect sport to other important developments. What
intellectual historian Samuel Moyn has called an “emotional regime of sympathy” is argu-
ably a critical factor underpinning the concept of global international sports competitions
that arose at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.54 An
understanding of emotions—and in particular of sympathy, pity, compassion, and empa-
thy, all of which helped to shape an understanding of a common humanity of all peoples—
may help to explain the origins of the idea that all peoples should compete on the same
playing field.
The study of emotional regimes may yield useful insights into the internationalization of sport in several ways. First, it may be worth examining the development of an assumption among spectators and organizers of international sports events that the emotions generated through sport are universal. When we watch an athlete win or lose a hard-fought competition, we think we understand what that athlete is feeling, regardless of the athlete’s cultural or national background. (Whether that assumption is valid or not is largely irrelevant: the question is how such an assumption arose and developed.) In contrast, one can watch other people practice yoga and not be sure what they are feeling. The dramatic and competitive elements in sport, and sport’s homologies with what are perceived to be universal elements of human struggle—loss, disappointment, failure, achievement—make it appear universally “readable.” This assumption of sport’s cross-cultural emotional readability may in turn have allowed international sports events to promote a shared understanding of humanity over the twentieth century. In this way sport may have had a role in expanding humanitarian sentiment in the twentieth century, for we are more likely to feel concern and responsibility for other people if we believe we share their emotional responses to events.

A second central relationship between emotion and internationalism in sport relates to the ways that international organizations such as the International Olympic Committee and the international soccer federation have used emotions. These organizations have appealed to, aroused, manipulated, and sustained emotion in order to build a constituency for international sport. Cultural concepts such as identity, including national and pan-human identities, are not purely cognitive but are constituted through emotions as well as through ideas. Social scientists have slighted the emotional aspects of society in favor of the cognitive dimensions, but as sociologist James Jasper writes, emotions “are as much a part of culture as cognitive understandings and moral visions are.” Just as the emotions surrounding sport have been important in nation-building exercises so, too, has internationalism in sport been tied to the development of fondness for places and symbols associated with international sport and the forging of collective identities patterned by affect. Sport’s contribution to international affairs has been forged in part through its role in generating affective dispositions that shaped attitudes about other peoples and about humanity in general.

Olympic enthusiasts encouraged people around the world to invest emotional energy not only in sports competitions but also in the claims of brotherhood and mutual understanding with which the games were imbued. Olympic organizers did not merely stage sports competitions. They also pushed people to rethink their relationships with the rest of the world and created opportunities for people to participate in forging new relationships. The organizers of the Olympics, and of myriad other international sport competitions, conceptualized new global links and provided opportunities for others to develop new transnational affiliations. International sports bodies imbued these international, transnational, and global affiliations with powerful emotions, by allowing spectators to vicariously experience the emotions of others, by spreading and shaping emotional patterns and interpretations of feelings, and by creating shared symbols of a common humanity.

Because emotions are culturally constructed, international sports events have arguably been of major importance in inculcating new ways of expressing and representing
feelings on a global scale. Emotional displays of athletes have been relayed on the pages of newspapers, over radio airwaves, and now on television and computer screens to millions of indirect participants, offering potentially new cultural models that favor certain forms of expression while restraining others. Perhaps even more powerful than the emotional expressions of athletes are the emotional reactions of spectators. The emotional displays of spectators, conveyed by television to distant fans in other cultural milieus, have surely influenced norms and acceptable modes of expression for feelings and behavior around the world in ways that can be studied and analyzed.

Linking Senses and Emotions

Though I have treated senses and emotions as distinct categories of analysis, the two are profoundly entwined. Feelings engage our senses and sensing evokes feelings. We feel emotions. Some philosophers have even suggested that emotions are a form of perception, like the senses. Because senses and emotions work in tandem, approaches that integrate attention to both, and to their interactions, could prove especially powerful.

One example of an avenue for linking senses and emotions is the study of sports broadcasting. By using their voices to interpret sports events, sports broadcasters can develop a deep, intense, emotional bond with fans. (As journalist Nicholas Lemann observes, Ronald Reagan honed this skill in his early career as a radio baseball announcer.) The convention in television broadcasting is to provide two commentators operating in tandem, one doing a play-by-play analysis, the other providing “color.” The pair, in Lemann’s words, “offer up emotional guidance and surrogacy. . . . The play-by-play man tells you what just happened, and the color man offers up your feelings; your own reaction and that of your friends, gathered in front of the screen, are cued and shaped by the intricate interplay of their reactions.” The announcers mediate and intensify the relationship between the sports event and the audience. They do this not merely through words but through qualities of tone, pitch, volume, cadence, and silence. Voices are finely tuned instruments for the evocation of human feelings.

Take the case of Howard Cosell, who became America’s best-known and enormously controversial radio and television sports broadcaster from the 1950s through the 1970s. Is it a coincidence that he had an unforgettable voice and speaking style and also was the broadcaster who generated the most deep-seated emotional responses among fans? He was, as Lemann notes, “a star for three decades . . . a ubiquitous figure in American culture.” He played himself in two Woody Allen movies and in episodes of the situation comedy, The Odd Couple. “He couldn’t walk down the street anywhere in the country without drawing a crowd. No self-respecting comedian could fail to have a Cosell impression in his repertory. He frequently testified before congressional committees.” In the 1960s and 1970s most Americans put him near the top of their lists of best known, most liked, or most hated figures in the country.

At least one biographical treatment has tried to explain his extraordinary success without mentioning Cosell’s voice. One may just as well write a biography of U.S. President Barack Obama without mentioning that he is African American. Cosell’s popularity and emotional impact cannot be explained without reference to the tonal and rhythmic qualities of his speaking style. His celebrity status sprang less from what he said than how he
said it, though the brazenly hectoring content of much of his commentary mattered a great deal. His distinctively nasal voice, his Brooklyn accent, and a staccato delivery that put equal stress on each syllable of every word were the features that seared Howard Cosell into the minds of Americans for over two decades. The psychological and emotional effects the particular qualities of his voice, cadence, and articulation had on his listeners are crucial to explaining his unique hold on sport and popular culture.67 “He . . . could . . . go . . . all . . . the . . . way!” now a trope in football announcing, was a Cosell trademark from his Monday Night Football years.68 His call in the 1973 heavyweight boxing championship between Joe Frazier and George Foreman became legendary and is still a part of popular culture: “Down goes Frazier! Down goes Frazier! Down goes Frazier!” bellowed at full throttle. As a journalist described the moment:

Very few people can do what he did, paint a picture that can take you there. That moment happened so quickly, so shockingly. Joe Frazier had never been down. What else do you need to say—“Down goes Frazier! Down goes Frazier! Down goes Frazier!” But how many people would be able to do it that simply and say it all? With simplicity and emotion. Not once, not twice, but three times, because any less would be too thin and four times would be shtick.69

Cosell never played professional sports but was inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame for the drama and excitement he imparted to the sport.70 As biographer Mark Ribowsky describes, “It was possible to feel winded just listening to Cosell’s call,” so intense were the emotions that he conveyed.71 For two generations of American sports fans, a single word overheard in that utterly familiar voice triggered a universe of associations and feelings. These were very powerful feelings, for Cosell elicited not just affection among some but virulent hatred among many others; it was impossible to feel neutral about him. Cosell haters were legion, and some of them sent him death threats and bomb scares.72

Cosell is an extraordinary case, but he is not unique. The similarities between sport and religion have often been noted but rarely with attention to sensory and emotional underpinnings.73 The soundscapes of sport conjure up the liturgical power of church services, and familiar expressions (think “fourth and ten” in gridiron football) are not mere combinations of words but powerful invocations. Fans do not merely have a relationship with a sport and its athletes; they have relationships with those who speak the sport and provide its soundtrack. In the case of sport broadcasting, if seeing is believing, hearing is feeling.

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In a recent forum on the “emotional turn” in history, Alan Confino comments that what must be asked about a new approach is: “does it reveal factors previously unobserved?” For emotions and sensibilities, he answers firmly in the affirmative. “I wonder whether there is [any] source that does not reflect, in some way or another, something about human emotions,” he comments.74 The centrality of bodily sensation and emotions to the experience of sport is undeniable. Scholarship has not entirely overlooked these factors, and recent interest in embodiment is one manifestation of scholarly recognition that sport cannot be separated from the physical vessels that participate in it and consume it. As with the broader profession however, and perhaps exacerbated by the subfield’s quest for respectability, sport historians have neglected the study of important realms of sensation and feeling in favor of a kind of intellectualization of sport. We have much to gain
from attending more systematically to the less intellectual, more visceral aspects of sport. Studying senses and emotions requires the use of new sources and new interpretive methods as well as familiarity with new literatures in diverse fields, but the effort promises rich interpretive rewards. We begin by asking new questions.

**KEYWORDS:** emotions, senses, sound, fandom


2. The five senses are not a biological reality but a social construction. For example, including senses about internal bodily states (pain, thirst, hunger) might produce a system of eight senses, and different cultures have categorized the senses differently. On the complexities of categorization, see Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, and Simon Gottschalk, *The Senses in Self, Culture, and Society: A Sociology of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5-7.


8. Ibid., 8.


15. Ibid.

17Ibid., 3.
23Steven Connor, “Introduction,” in The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies (I), ed. Michel Serres, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 2-3. Contemporary psychologists tell us that most of the information that feeds into our perceptual system is visual, suggesting that there might be biological reasons for privileging vision.
31Bateman and Bale, “Introduction,” 2.
32For some useful starting points, see the “methods” section in Greg Goodale, Sonic Persuasion: Reading Sound in the Recorded Age (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 138-153. See also the chapter on “the sound of the stadium,” in Steve Redhead, Post-Fandom and the Millennial Blues: The Transformation of Soccer Culture (New York: Routledge, 1997), 65-79.
33Bateman and Bale, “Introduction,” 5.
34Ibid., 4-7.
35Ibid., 3.


Ibid., 209.

See, for example, Yuri Hanin, ed., *Emotions in Sport* (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 2000); and David Lavallee et al., eds., *Coping and Emotions in Sport* (Hauppauge, N.Y.: Nova Science, 2004).

I looked only at the first 100 hits, almost all of which related to athletic performance.

To cite but one example: Grant Jarvie, *Sport, Culture and Society: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 114-115.


For a call to research pleasure, see Douglas Booth, “Politics and Pleasure: The Philosophy of Physical Education Revisited,” *Quest* 61 (2009): 133-153. As Matthew Klugman notes, most studies of fans have been in sociology and cultural studies and have focused primarily on violence. Klugman, “‘Loves, Hopes and Anxieties: Suffering and Joy in the Seasonal Lives of Australian Football Followers’” (Ph.D. diss., University of Melbourne, 2008), 5.


It is notable, for example, how little attention is paid to identifiable emotions in Allen Guttmann’s survey *Sports Spectators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), see esp. 175-185. The situation is different in sociology, where a number of studies have examined emotion and spectatorship. For a recent


55 This section reprises ideas presented at the German Historical Institute in 2008 at the conference “A Whole New Game: Expanding the Boundaries of the History of Sports.”

56 Although competitive games are now widespread, they are not a part of many cultures. For one suggestive anecdote about the reaction of a Mentawaian on Sumatra to a Dutch archery competition (he did not understand why prizes were distributed on the basis of shooting accuracy rather than according to clan ties), see the provocative essay by Johan Galtung, “The Sport System As a Metaphor for the World System,” in Sport . . . The Third Millennium: Proceedings of the International Symposium, eds. Fernand Landry, Marc Landry, and Magda Yerles (Sainte-Foy, Que.: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1991), 151.

57 John MacAloon’s biography mentions in passing Coubertin’s idea that different peoples shared emotional reactions to epic events such as the Olympic games. John J. MacAloon, This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 267.

58 On claims that the practice of sport is itself a human right, see Richard Giulianotti and David McArdle, eds., Sport, Civil Liberties, and Human Rights (New York: Routledge, 2007).


60 On affection for the places sports are played, see, for example, the interesting study by Ed Mainwaring and Tom Clark, “‘We’re Shit and We Know We Are’: Identity, Place, and Ontological Security in Lower League Football in England,” Soccer and Society 13 (2012): 107-123.

61 In this paragraph I am applying to sport Christina Klein’s argument about twentieth-century middle-class Americans. Klein, Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 7-8.

62 One could similarly argue that the spread of modern international sport has influenced conceptions of virtue and justice, given emotion’s centrality to ethics. For examples in a local context, see Simon Robinson, “Spirituality, Sport and Virtues,” in Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction, eds. Jim Parry et al. (London: Routledge, 2007), 173-185.


65 Ibid.

66 John Bloom, There You Have It: The Life, Legacy and Legend of Howard Cosell (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010). The book does have much of interest to say about Cosell’s personality and the history of broadcasting.
69 Jerry Izenberg, quoted in Ribowsky, Howard Cosell, 306.
70 Ribowsky, Howard Cosell, 436.
71 Ibid., 202.
72 Ibid., 324-326.
73 I thank Matthew Klugman for this point. For a recent review, see Annie Blazier, “Religion and Sport in America,” Religion Compass 6 (2012): 287-297.
75 For an excellent survey of works on the body, sport, and pleasure that emphasizes the intense corporeal qualities of many emotional experiences, see Matthew Klugman, “It’s That Feeling Sick in My Guts That I Think I Like the Most’: Sport, Pleasure, and Embodied Suffering,” in Critical Sport Histories: Paradigms, Power and the Postmodern Turn, eds. Richard Pringle and Murray G. Phillips (Morgantown, W.V.: Fitness Information Technology, forthcoming).