

# THE NEW HISTORY OF SPORT IN LATIN AMERICA

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## Introduction

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### Five Keys in the Scholarly Literature

Thirty-five years ago, at a time when few were undertaking academic studies of sport and society in Latin America, the historian Joseph L. Arbena argued that sport could provide a window into the regional experience in the Americas. He also argued that the subject of sport had only received “limited systematic analysis.”<sup>1</sup> To a large extent, that is no longer the case. Ruminating on that change, Gregg Bocketti recently affirmed that “now it is a rare season that does not see the publication of at least one academic work on Latin American and Caribbean sport, as scholars have joined athletes, coaches, journalists, and fans in acknowledging the immense scale and broad scope of sports in the region.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, since Arbena’s gloomy diagnosis, in most social sciences and humanities disciplines, over the past fifteen years in particular, researchers with an interest in the historical analysis of society have opened Arbena’s metaphorical window and have emphasized five key sets of issues, among many. Their approach has often been inter-disciplinary and not necessarily inclusive of history as a discipline.<sup>3</sup> We identify below these five problem sets and illustrate each with an example from the growing body of literature.

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Michael Donoghue's "Roberto Durán, Omar Torrijos, and the Rise of Isthmian Machismo"<sup>4</sup> represents a body of scholarship focused on understanding power politics, social movements, political transitions, and national identity through the lens of sport. In the case of Donoghue's subjects—the boxer Roberto Durán and the Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos—the problem is framed (as is often the case in the current scholarship) as the link between a leader's *machismo* and their political fortunes. There is in addition a public rendering of that masculinity through sport, where athletics play a vital role in the rise or fall of a political leader or the vagaries of a political movement. By contrast, José Cairus' analysis of Brazilian Jiu-jitsu stresses a more complex relationship between sport and political movements, where in the case of 1950s and early 1960s Brazil, military leaders came to view the sport, and the Gracie family members who publicly represented its success, as anathema to Brazilian values and to the political objectives of the armed forces. In the early 1960s, their adoption of judo for self-defence training in the military marked both an explicit rejection of Brazilian Jiu-jitsu as promoting base, selfish values, and the promotion of judo as more cooperative, less individualistic, and, as such, more appropriate to Brazilian and military cultures.<sup>5</sup>

A second area of research has expanded an understanding of sport that encompasses theoretical and empirical work on spectacle, the body, and ideals of masculinity and femininity in athleticism. In *Deco Body, Deco City: Female Spectacle and Modernity in Mexico City, 1900–1939*, Ageeth Sluis ties physical exercise to the performance of gender, the migration of women from rural areas to the city, transnational influences in how the female physique was celebrated, and what she describes as a "mestizo modernity" in regard to a nationalist pride in Mexican women's physicality at the time of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

A third focus of research in the scholarly literature has also stressed performance, but on a much larger scale, from mega sporting events to neighborhood stadiums. Cristóbal Andrés Jácome Moreno's "Fábrica de imágenes arquitectónicas. El caso de México en 1968" underscores this scholarly emphasis and the attention it pays to sport triumphs in and of themselves, grand architectural projects as spectacle, urban development (and decline), and the larger social impact of mega-events on communities. Jácome Moreno reasons that for political leaders in Mexico, preparations for the 1968 Olympic Games provided an opportunity to project a set of optimistic ideological messages to the public on Mexico's putatively bright future modernity.<sup>7</sup>

A fourth scholarly approach to sport in Latin America has emphasized how sport has educed an understanding of race, ethnicity, region, and nation in the construction of identities. Joshua Hotaka Roth's "A Mean-Spirited Sport: Japanese Brazilian Croquet in São Paulo's Public Spaces" is an analysis of gateball,

a sport derivative of croquet. But far more than that, Roth is as interested in the spatial, ethnic, racial, and cultural features of the game significant to gateball players (as well as to those the game has excluded) as he is in the sport itself. Gateball is a sport played for the most part by older Japanese players, and players of Japanese ethnicity in Brazil and elsewhere. Play and its social contours evoke the post-Second World War US occupation of Japan in that gateball is an offshoot of croquet, played by occupying US soldiers. In São Paulo, gateball marked not only an assertion of Japanese ethnic identity and authority over public spaces, but functioned in a manner that helped confirm to Japanese-Brazilians the parameters of their ethnic and racial presence in larger Brazilian urban and national contexts.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, enormous scholarly attention has been devoted to violence as a defining feature of sport, broadly conceived to include fans as well as the organizations and societies that promote and organize sport. In “UnBolivable Bouts: Gender and Essentialism of Bolivia’s Cholitas Luchadoras,” Nell Haynes examines the violence of so-called *cholita* wrestling in El Alto as an iconic manifestation of the discriminatory trope portraying Aymara women as violent and disordered. But in addition, she explains the non-traditional sporting violence represented in the bouts—in the essentially Indigenous space of El Alto—as Indigenous protest against the policy and actions of a corrupt government. The wrestling ring transforms the political power of Indigenous street protest into violent spectacle. And in a further layering of the violence of the sport, Haynes suggests that the wrestlers assert social status and gender equality by way of violent conflict in the ring.<sup>9</sup>

### **Dossier Contributions and the New History of Sport in Latin America**

The articles in this dossier typify this range of key emphases in the new history of sport in Latin America. In “Sporting Violence in Argentina during the Interwar Years: The Cases of Boxing and Fencing,” Cesar R. Torres cites the Italian fencer Aldo Nadi as having compared fencing to boxing. The latter, argued Nadi, was a contact sport. Fencing, though, was distinct in that it involves “a contact of steel, not of fists or bodies.” The backdrop for the article is Argentina’s participation in Olympic competition, but the focus is on other elements of the five keys. Beyond Nadi’s primordial comparison (and the article’s review of each sport’s long-term origins and juxtapositions), Torres establishes that in Argentina, the construction of a national ideal is tied to the evolution of how the public imagined the two sports as combat. Boxing, and its early twentieth-century prohibition in Argentina, corresponded to a middle-class and upper-

class vision of the sport as antithetical to the building of a modern, civilized republic. Fencing, by contrast was, in Torres' characterization, regulated by a "strict decorum" that dovetailed with elite Argentine (and later, middle-class) ideals of European modernity in how narratives about the sport sidestepped references to pain or violence.

Like tango, boxing was transformed from a subject of scorn as savagery, to an acceptable and even laudable pastime, as it came to be practiced in Buenos Aires and other cities by elites—most notably the famous aviator, Jorge Newbery. Boxing came full circle, understood as a working-class pastime, then as an elite vocation, and by the 1920s, practiced once again across class lines. Through the mid-twentieth century perceptions of fencing were always influenced by its European air of dignity, tied to military professionalism, and the preserve of a narrow elite that understood its role as stewarding the country into the mid-twentieth century on a nineteenth-century democratic liberal course. Both sports were not only male sporting preserves, they underlined robust masculinity as a sought-after identity trait for young men, especially in regard to how athletes were meant to represent the nation at international events. In addition, media gave constant attention to Argentine boxing and fencing triumphs highlighting them as inherently pedagogical, as examples for how (male) citizens (of different social backgrounds) might reasonably comport themselves in a civilized society.

In many parts of Latin America, local and national sporting federations were part of political efforts driven by the middle-class and elites to clean up violent and unregulated street sport that included bare-knuckle fighting and violent versions of football. Organized sport, whether driven by the state or by the private sector, as a civilizing pastime, often accompanied municipal efforts to eradicate diseases like cholera through massive sanitation projects and to end street crime by lighting urban avenues. Drawing on the literature on sport and political movements, Shunsuke Matsuo argues in "Sports Policy, *Battlismo*, and the Complexity of Party Politics in Uruguay (1911-1933)" that a national reform movement prompted the formation of the Comisión Nacional de Educación Física (National Commission on Physical Education [CNEF]) in early twentieth-century Uruguay. In CNEF, José Battle y Ordoñez and *battlismo*, the movement his followers founded, built a state enterprise that was in keeping with other nationalist state bodies designed to promote Uruguayan citizenship, national identity, and economic independence. CNEF ordered, through state intervention and in the context of a political movement, many of the sorts of links that Torres explores between sport and the crafting of a modern nation. Matsuo notes that Battle's political capital derived in part from his reputation as a young man dedicated to the healthy and manly pursuit of sport, and his early celebration of athletic pastimes that included, but extended beyond,

boxing and fencing. In its early years, CNEF focused on enhancing the state's involvement in physical education pedagogy with the aim of building a healthy citizenry, and on a problem considered by Hotaka Roth in reference to gateball: the administration of public playgrounds, which became an emblematic symbol of state intervention in urban life for the hundreds of young people from local neighborhoods who participated in state-sponsored athletics.

As *battlismo* weakened in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the state defunded CNEF and as a result, like many state institutions in twentieth-century Latin America in service of political and social objectives tied to a particular political movement, the organization's influence waned, as did the connections it wove between the state, urban development, and the promotion of sports as healthy endeavors tied to a modern and prosperous nation. As Matsuo writes, "once praised as a unique, innovative, and progressive institution, [CNEF] rapidly degenerated into a conservative, mediocre, and inefficient bureaucracy."

Fausto Amaro's "A carta de Raul do Rio Branco e a formação do campo olímpico brasileiro" is founded in the close reading of a single document, a letter by a prominent member of the Brazilian *haute société* highlighting the significance of the Olympic Movement for Brazilian elites. Here again, sport emerges as a potentially civilizing process, but with a more explicit transnational emphasis than in the cases explored by other articles in this dossier. Rio Branco believed that the expansion of the Olympic Movement in his country was justified by the civilizing might of sport and could serve to regenerate the Brazilian nation. The newspapers of the country's elite echoed this message, claiming that sport would create a virile Brazilian race as well as a strong and patriotic people mimicking European ideals. Brazilian elites conceived the practice of sport and the concomitant participation in the Olympic Games as a project capable of taming the violent impulses of working people and imparting them moral lessons.

The analysis of Rio Branco's letter is also relevant to highlight and explore the increasing role that communication and its evolving technologies played in the formation of different social practices such as sport and related endeavors but, more generally, in the political process. As Amaro points out, it is impossible to fully understand the development of the Olympic Movement in Brazil if the complex intersections between sport and the media are neglected. This, in turn, requires teasing apart how the different actors (journalists, politicians, officials, athletes, fans, and readers—most, if not all, of whom were men at the turn of the twentieth century) functioned in relation to each other. In addition, it is also important to highlight that, given the difficulty of obtaining access to archival sources on the early Brazilian Olympic Movement, journalistic accounts become even more significant to make sense of the manner in which events

were interpreted at the time that they occurred. Amaro's article illustrates that the media was, and continues to be, far from neutral. It catalyzed the elite's desire to plant civilized Brazil on the Olympic map.

Ana Laura de la Torre Saavedra's "Los desfiles deportivos en la Ciudad de México: Una escenificación de liderazgo regional, 1929-1938" charts a performative, mass spectacle tie between sport and a political movement, distinct from *battlismo*'s bureaucratic links to athleticism, and a world apart from Rio Branco's elite visions of sport and civilization. Sport and grand spectacle became a vehicle after 1920 for the consolidation of the linkage between pedagogy, physical activity, and a healthy citizenry. But in addition, sport parades functioned to consolidate the Mexican Revolution as an ideological standard-bearer for the nation. There is a subtlety to the political process as presented in sport. After 1930, for example, Mexican political elites organizing sport parades tried to use them to place distance between their objective of building a modern new nation, and the earlier, violent revolutionary generation of Pancho Villa and other military leaders, whom popular culture portrayed at times as heroes or as villains.

Despite revolutionary leaders' hopes that sport spectacle would distance the new Mexican modernity from an authoritarian past, De la Torre Saavedra notes overlapping objectives between pre-revolutionary and revolutionary societies and the celebration of sport. In October 1913, for example, President Victoriano Huerta used the spectacle of a student athletic festival featuring thousands of participants to bolster his political fortunes after having recently dissolved the national Congress and as he faced growing military unrest from multiple insurgent groups in different parts of the country in what were still the early stages of violent revolution. "It was evident," De la Torre Saavedra writes, "that Huerta, a military officer and now president [of Mexico], was aware that physical culture had anchored daily life in the capital city and was an effective mechanism by which links could be generated between authorities and society."

With objectives similar to those of Uruguayan *battlismo* in the 1910s, though with an overtly Christian emphasis linked to equivalent movements in the United States (including an occasional emphasis on the ills of alcohol consumption), after 1920 Mexican government officials (some with membership in the local Young Men's Christian Association) promoted ideas of muscular vigor. Beginning in the late 1920s, the federal government sponsored massive sporting parades and other spectacles. Celebrations in 1929 included a gymnastics demonstration by 700 women workers from the Establecimientos Fabriles Militares, reasserting through sport spectacle the link between civil government and military authorities that Huerta had espoused much earlier. After 1930, the Mexican military continued to sponsor prominent sporting events in order to celebrate heroic moments of the past, such as the Battle of Puebla (May 5, 1862) which ended

with the defeat of the invading French forces. Here, sporting spectacle served to commemorate a past transformative historical moment as heroic and as part of the story of the Mexican Revolution. And just as Matsuo tied a political reform movement in early twentieth-century Uruguay to sporting culture, De la Torre Saavedra highlights the role of Secretary of Public Education José Vasconcelos in the 1920s as a force behind the structuring of a new, revolutionary nationalism through sport.

If the dossier articles examined to this point reference nation-building, sport, and an imagined civilizing process before the mid-twentieth century, David M. K. Sheinin's "Boxing Cultures and Perceptions of Violence in Venezuela" explores a more sombre rendering of the connections between sport, modernity, citizenship, and society. In the generation after the mass spectacles examined in Mexico by De la Torre Saavedra, most nations—through public opinion, across class lines, and in political movements—had come to accept what Latin Americans before 1930 had not. The promise of a prosperous, civilized modernity was now irrefutably complicated by long-term economic instability and decline, political unrest, and racist discrimination. Sheinin notes that Venezuelans had long been aware of the connections between sport and political violence that came to the fore in the 1963 kidnapping of the Argentine football great, Alfredo Di Stéfano, in Caracas for example. At the same time, and as in other Latin American societies, there was a growing middle-class perception that cities were becoming more violent as a reflection of stalled modernization processes. In the early twentieth century, civic and political leaders in Latin America had grappled with boxing as a violent threat to civilized progress and, alternatively, as a potential civilizing force under the ordered management of a state institution or private clubs. But by the 1950s and 1960s, and likely as a function of persistent economic and political crises, such important political or civic discourses tying boxing to larger problems in the pursuit of a civilized society had nearly vanished (though in Venezuela, there were less modest government initiatives in the promotion of sport, education, and public health than in some other Latin American countries).

Sheinin holds that despite widespread fears of violence in Cold War-era Venezuela, and in contrast to the elite conceived fears of the putative link of violence in boxing to barbarism a generation earlier, the media and fans constructed boxing violence apart from local social concerns and largely in keeping with transnational narratives from the United States often reproduced in translated media stories. Those narratives included iconic, global boxing stories of severe physical punishment and the purported moral bankruptcy of many athletes (accounting for their stunning falls into poverty and ruin). Through the early 1980s, they ignored the grossly exploitative quality of a sport whose promoters

enriched themselves at the expense of the athletes they represented. It is only with the political dominance of *chavismo* after 2000 that sport, spectacle, violence, and political movements began to intersect again in political discourses and the popular imagination, where in the figure of the boxer Edwin Valero, jailed in 2010 for killing his wife, some found in boxing the threat to civilized society that had been evoked in many countries a century earlier.

To conclude, we would also like to underline the linguistic diversity of the articles in this dossier as well as the diverse origins and trajectories of the contributors. This is also a sign of the increasing and vibrant interest in Latin American sport not only within the region's borders but also beyond. Clearly, but not without some hesitation, scholars "have come to realize that it is essential to understand sports if we are to understand the region, in part because they have come to understand sports' connection to many other parts of life, from the building of political movements to the region's position in the global economy."<sup>10</sup> This dossier is another testimony that Latin American sport is no longer a subject of limited systematic analysis. In turn, this change in scholarly attitude and production, should serve as motivation to keep enlarging the set of key issues by which the literature analyzes the history of Latin American sport and sport in Latin American history.

## Notes

1. Joseph L. Arbena, "Sport and the Study of Latin American History: An Overview," *Journal of Sport History*, 13:2 (1986), p. 92.
2. Gregg Bocketti, "Sports Culture and the Varieties of Latin American Identity," *Latin American Research Review*, 52:1 (2017), p. 157.
3. Pablo Alabarces, "Tres décadas de investigación sobre deporte: las nuevas direcciones en América Latina," in Carlos Vergara Constela and Eric Valenzuela Martínez (eds.), *Todo es cancha: Análisis y perspectivas socioculturales del fútbol latinoamericano* (Santiago, Chile: Cuarto Propio, 2014), pp. 21-40. See also Cesar R. Torres, "South America," in Steven W. Pope and John R. Nauright (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Sports History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 553-570 and Cesar R. Torres and Daniel G. Campos, "Philosophy of Sport in Latin America," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 37:2 (2010), pp. 292-309.
4. Michael Donoghue, "Roberto Durán, Omar Torrijos, and the Rise of Isthmian Machismo," in David M. K. Sheinin (ed.), *Sports Culture in Latin American History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), pp. 17-38.
5. José Cairus, "The Gracie Clan and the Making of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu: National Identity, Culture and Performance, 1905-2003," PhD diss., York University, 2013. See also, Averell Smith, *The Pitcher and the Dictator: Satchel Paige's Unlikely Season in the Dominican Republic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018); Diego Vilches Parra, "Del Chile de los triunfos morales al 'Chile, país ganador.' La identidad nacional y la

- selección chilena de fútbol durante la Dictadura Militar (1973-1989),” *Historia Crítica*, 61 (2016), pp. 127-147; Cesar R. Torres, “Solving ‘the Problem of Argentine Sport’: The Post-Peronist Olympic Movement in Argentina,” in Antonio Sotomayor and Cesar R. Torres (eds.), *Olimpismo: The Olympic Movement in the Making of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2020), pp. 111-130; and Jorge Vidal Bueno, “Auge y caída del fútbol-empresa en Chile: la intervención militar-financiera de Colo Colo 1976-1978,” in Raanan Rein, Mariano Gruschetsky and Rodrigo Daskal (eds.), *Clubes de fútbol en tiempos de dictadura* (San Martín: UNSAM Edita, 2018), pp. 77-99.
6. Ageeth Sluis, *Deco Body, Deco City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); Claire Brewster and Keith Brewster, “Women, Sport, and the Press in Twentieth-Century Mexico,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 35:10 (2018), pp. 965-984. See also Gabriela Garton and Nemesia Hijós, “‘La deportista moderna’: género, clase y consumo en el fútbol, *running* y *hockey* argentinos,” *Antípoda. Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, 30:23 (2018), pp. 23-42; Maria Thereza Oliveira Souza, André Mendes Capraro and Larissa Jensen, “‘Olhos Masculinos Nascidos Para a Contemplanção Do Belo’: A Relação Entre Esporte e Mulher Na Crônica Esportiva Brasileira,” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Do Esporte*, 39:4 (2017), pp. 355-361; and Kristina Wirtz, *Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
  7. Cristóbal Andrés Jácome Moreno, “Fábrica de imágenes arquitectónicas: El caso de México en 1968,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, 32:96 (2010), pp. 77-107. See also David M. K. Sheinin, “The 1971 Pan-American Games and the Search for Colombian Modernities,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 33:1-2 (2016), pp. 147-163; Guilherme Nothen, “Paving the Olympic Dream: The Politics of the 2007 Pan-American Games in Rio de Janeiro,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 33:1-2 (2016), pp. 203-216; Roy Hora, *Historia del turf argentino* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2019); and Guido Carelli Lynch and Juan Manuel Bordón, *Luna Park: El estadio del pueblo, el ring del poder* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2018).
  8. Joshua Hotaka Roth, “Mean-Spirited Sport: Japanese Brazilian Croquet in São Paulo’s Public Spaces,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, 79:4 (2006), pp. 609-632. See also Raanan Rein, *Fútbol, Jews, and the Making of Argentina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); David M. K. Sheinin, “Boxing and the Making of a Colombian Costeño Identity,” in David M. K. Sheinin (ed.), *Sports Culture in Latin American History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), pp. 139-160; Enrique G. Encinosa, *Azúcar y chocolate: Historia del boxeo cubano* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2004); Antonio Sotomayor, “The Triangle of Empire: Sport, Religion, and Imperialism in Puerto Rico’s YMCA, 1898-1926,” *The Americas*, 74:4 (2017), pp. 481-512.
  9. Nell Haynes, “UnBolivable Bouts: Gender and Essentialism of Bolivia’s Cholitas Luchadoras,” in Alex Channon and Christopher R. Matthews (eds.), *Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports: Women Warriors Around the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 267-283. In a reflection of the cultural and economic power of *barras bravas* in many Latin American cities, there is an unusually significant literature analysing the nature of their violence. See, among others, Camilo Améstica, “La gente que nunca falla: construcción de nosotros en el hincha viajero regional de un club de fútbol chileno,” in Vergara Constela and Valenzuela Martínez (eds.), *Todo es cancha: Análisis y perspectivas socioculturales del fútbol latinoamericano*, pp. 179-208; Rodrigo Daskal and José Garriga Zucal, “Elias en La 12. Una aproximación eliasiana a la

- violencia en el fútbol en la Argentina,” *Revista del Museo de Antropología* 8:2 (2015), pp. 187-192; Guillaume Fleury, “Carrières et engagement au sein d’un groupe de supporters de foot en Équateur,” *Cahier des Amériques Latines*, 74 (2013), pp. 93-115; and John Alexander Castro Lozano, “Cuerpos con aguante: festividad y violencia en una barra brava de Bogotá,” *Revista Colombiana de Sociología*, 43:1 (2020), pp. 193-214.
10. Bocketti, “Sports Culture and the Varieties of Latin American Identity,” p. 157.

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