

An Introduction to “50 Years: The North American Society for Sport History (NASSH)”

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As with most facets of life, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the annual North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) convention. The abrupt onset of the pandemic forced the cancellation of the 2020 meeting, the first time NASSH did not convene since its inaugural conference in 1973. The continued severity of COVID-19 required NASSH to meet online in 2021, with members signing on to a virtual platform to share their work and engage with colleagues and friends. Yet, despite the challenges of online meetings and digital presentations, for many the essence of NASSH remained unchanged. President David K. Wiggins captured this in his closing commentary at the 2021 meeting: “I have been reminded on an almost daily basis, perhaps even more intensely and poignantly during the seemingly never ending pandemic and on-going struggles around the world . . . that NASSH truly is an organization with a heart.”¹ Although the organization has undergone significant transformations throughout its fifty-year history, the warmth, generosity, and collegiality of its membership—NASSH’s heart—has remained unchanged.

The original 1973 NASSH Constitution notes, “The purpose of the Society shall be to promote, stimulate and encourage study and research and the writing of the history of sport.”² A look at the numerous articles, books, conference presentations, blog posts, and podcasts authored by NASSH members verifies the continuation of this mission. The supportive nature of the organization has similarly been a hallmark since its formation. Writing in 1989, Terry Todd and John Hoberman commented that “[t]he people in NASSH have always been the sort with whom we have felt at home. . . . One of the things we like so much about . . . NASSH is the friendliness of the members—their genuine warmth and

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collegiality.”³ In this special issue, Ronald A. Smith explains that NASSH is his favorite organization because “it has always been a confirming group,” and Steven A. Riess recalls that, in the members, he “found a nurturing community that valued what I was doing.” Former NASSH president Maureen M. Smith likewise reflected that, for her, “NASSH offers an academic space that is challenging, comforting, and critical.”⁴ As the authors in this special issue illustrate, NASSH has remained supportive of scholars while fulfilling its mission.

As we commemorate the past and think toward the future, we need to consider NASSH’s history as well as opportunities for its growth. Since its first meeting in 1973 at the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, our organization has undergone significant changes. The membership has increased numerically and geographically, from a dedicated contingent of North Americans to a collegial group of scholars from around the world. Those involved in the organization have also expanded in terms of academic disciplines. Whereas physical educators with an interest in history, along with historians with an interest in sport, largely comprised the first meeting, NASSH today hosts scholars from an array of disciplines, including American studies, communications, history, kinesiology, philosophy, sociology, and sport management, to name a few. The organization has also endured tribulations over the years, perhaps the most significant being the shift to an online format in 2021 so the annual convention could still take place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Along with such internal transformations, the organization has also fostered changes more broadly over the past fifty years. NASSH members helped crystallize sport history as a valuable academic subdiscipline. In encouraging robust, well-researched studies of the past through a sporting lens, NASSH and its corresponding *Journal of Sport History (JSH)* shaped sport history into a viable scholarly pursuit.⁵ NASSH has also occasionally added its clout to pressing political issues. The organization moved the 1994 convention out of Colorado due to the state’s anti-LGBTQ legislation, passed a resolution in 2017 condemning the use of Native American mascots, and issued a statement in 2020 to support Black Lives Matter. As the *Los Angeles Times* aptly surmised in 1995, “They take their games seriously at the North American Society for Sport History.”⁶

However, like many historical claims, this rosy picture is both partial and potentially dangerous. Yes, we are a collegial and supportive bunch who take (studying) sport seriously. But we are also collectively responsible for a field that has often failed to interrogate the *kinds* of histories told and by whom. Our organization and the field of sport history are guilty of and complicit in the ongoing silencing of stories, perspectives, and worldviews from outside “the canon.” As we grapple with this and contemplate how to move into our next fifty years, we must consider how we are a product of our sociocultural contexts, of the times in and about which we write. We must recognize our complicity in *producing* the field of sport history, one that continues to value and privilege masculinity, whiteness, able-bodied/mindedness, and more. As Trisha McGuire-Adams so powerfully writes, “[T]he stories we tell about ourselves and each other matter. They inform how we make sense of our realities, our experiences . . .” and, in the case of a commemorative special issue such as this, our organizational and disciplinary possibilities.⁷

The timeline, articles, and conclusion that comprise this special issue provide readers an opportunity to look backward and forward as NASSH celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. In

the “Reflections and Tributes” section, authors reflect on the formation of the organization and its role in shaping the study of sport history in North America and beyond, as well as their own experiences in that fifty-year process. As evidenced by these reflective pieces, many sport historians hold warm memories about the history and legacy of NASSH. A common theme across the reflection articles is the role key individuals, including a core of engaged graduate students, played in the formation of NASSH. These articles suggest a serendipitous meeting of the minds, particularly through the National College Physical Education Association for Men (NCPEAM), but also the significant efforts individuals exerted in forming the organization. Ronald A. Smith points out in his article that Guy M. Lewis was the driving force in the creation of NASSH. Influenced by Marvin Eyler and Carl Bode, Lewis conceived a sport history society that included an annual conference and connected publications, thereby drawing the blueprint for the organization. Smith also shares his experiences in helping create and grow the organization as secretary-treasurer for over four decades; his dedication to the organization cannot be overstated. As represented in the naming of the Sue and Ron Smith Service Award, Smith is a paramount figure in the history of NASSH.

Other individuals were also key in the foundation and flourishing of the organization and field, including Alan Metcalfe. In their article, Victoria Paraschak and Robert Kossuth offer a touching tribute to the University of Windsor professor, incorporating interviews with Metcalfe and his wife Heather and reminiscences from Canadian sport scholars and Metcalfe’s past students. As a former NASSH president and the first editor of the *JSH*, Metcalfe was a leading figure in establishing the study of sport history in Canada and an influential voice in the development of NASSH. His scholarship shaped the field while his editorship and mentorship ushered in an era of robust, scholarly work on sport.

A cohort of dedicated graduate students also played an important role in NASSH’s history. In an autobiographical essay, Jack W. Berryman shares his experiences as a graduate student who studied during the burgeoning years of sport history. In completing postgraduate degrees under Marvin Eyler and Lewis, NASSH’s first and second presidents, Berryman both witnessed and assisted in the progression of the field. His remembrances offer unique insights into the collegiality of the faculty and students that became, and continues to be, a fundamental characteristic of NASSH.

Despite such efforts, one of the major obstacles to the growth of sport history—noted in several articles—was the status of the field in the 1960s and 1970s. Authors in this special issue document the lack of respect for those who studied sport and physical activity, stemming from historians’ perception of sport as inconsequential and many physical educators’ reluctance to conduct rigorous archival work. Steven A. Riess traces the perception of sport history from trivial to meaningful and documents NASSH’s role in this transition. He suggests that the rise in social history opened new avenues for the critical study of sport in the past and illustrates the ways in which NASSH amplified historical scholarship.

The influence of NASSH also extends beyond North America. In their contribution, Kohei Kawashima and Geng Zuo discuss the influence of NASSH on Japanese and Chinese scholars, journals, and societies. Using Mark Dyreson’s historians of sport-versus-sport historians framework, they document the rise of each group in Japan and China, as well as the mark NASSH made on Japanese and Chinese scholars. They highlight Yuzu Kishino, one

of the influential founders of the *Japan Journal of Sport History*, for example, who discussed the foresight of North American sport historians in attaching the field to the developing trends of social history.

In the “Calls to Action” section, the contributors commemorate the fiftieth anniversary by considering future directions the organization and field can and should take. Of particular importance is expanding the gender and racial diversity of NASSH leadership and scholarship, as well as embracing new areas of study. Moreover, the authors argue that we must consciously challenge the kind of “add diversity and stir” approaches against which Sara Ahmed and others argue so passionately.⁸ It is not enough to work for more scholarship by and about those who have too rarely graced the pages of our journals and conference programs; we must interrogate and dismantle the structures and practices that allow our field and organization to continue to perpetuate anti-Blackness, ableism, transphobia, and more.

Women remain underrepresented in NASSH and sport history, despite noteworthy efforts to advance toward greater gender equality. As one person wrote when reviewing an article for this special issue, the “early days come across loud and clear as an old boys club.” While the number of women NASSH members have increased, leadership positions within the organization remain largely held by men. For example, eight presidencies out of twenty-five were held by women; just two women, compared to nine men, have served as editor of the *JSH*, with Alison Wrynn named the first woman to this position in 2012.

In her article, Patricia Vertinsky underscores this discrepancy—past and present. She also points out the tendency to celebrate the efforts of men, at the expense of women, in discussions about the foundation of the organization and field, a phenomenon some could argue is on display in this special issue. While NASSH provided a receptive outlet as feminist sport historians grappled with the meaning of sex and gender in the sporting past, successfully pushing scholarship beyond descriptive accounts of exemplary women, it nonetheless remained the preserve of men. Moreover, these accounts, while enhancing the scholarship on women’s sporting accomplishments, did little to unsettle the whiteness of the field. Vertinsky argues that, although feminism has not lost its historical political mission, emerging feminist sport history scholars are renewing and reinventing feminism, rethinking ways of knowing and being. Vertinsky concludes by noting that NASSH “faces some extraordinary challenges related to addressing ‘Black Lives Matter’ and indigeneity,” calling on sport historians to reckon with “the urgent need to focus much greater attention upon the complexities of race and class in combination with gender in our historical research on sport history.” We must engage in intersectional analyses that center “the complex interrelated and fluid character of power relations as they are constituted along the axes of ability, class, gender, nationality,” race, age and other factors.⁹

Mirroring trends in the field of sport history, NASSH leadership, membership, and scholarship historically was and still is predominantly white. Black, Indigenous, and all people of color remain severely underrepresented in our field and organization. Jeffrey T. Sammons described this trend in 1994, lamenting the paucity of scholarship on Black sport history in the *JSH*. He suggested that, in looking at the pages of the journal, “one learns what scholars in the field see as important.”¹⁰ Although the number of articles dedicated to Black athletes has increased since Sammons’s writing, the number of nonwhite sport

historians has not risen in tandem. Moreover, as Amira Rose Davis recently identified, there is a “glaring absence of Black women in the scholarship” as most accounts focus on Black men.¹¹ Similarly, as the editors of a recent special issue of the *JSH* dedicated to Indigenous sport history explain, “Indigenous history is scantily represented” in the field.¹² The authors in this special issue recognize this organization’s and the field’s shortcomings on these fronts and offer suggestions for transformation.

Ornella Nzindukiyimana argues that the narratives made available to large audiences about Black athletes in Canada offer oversimplified stories that relegate racial issues to the past. She suggests that “the challenge is in dismantling current incomplete narratives as we introduce new ones.” To do this, Nzindukiyimana calls for meaningful collaborations between academics and public sport-history outlets that produce innovative counternarratives, beyond the written word, to better educate the public on the significance of Blackness in sport history.

In their contribution, Amanda Schweinbenz and C. Keith Harrison offer a provocative paradigm to change the racial dynamics of sport history and call for an unsettling of the whiteness of the field and NASSH as an organization. They argue that most works on sport in the past were and are written by white scholars, suggesting that such scholars lack the lived experience of racialization and, as such, fail(ed) to understand racial injustice from an “insider” perspective. To counteract this tendency, Schweinbenz and Harrison draw on their own experiences and perspectives to outline inside/outside collaboration as one way to expand scholarly knowledge, (re)center ways of knowing too often marginalized in the field, and work toward equity. While it might be argued that this provocation could go further to trouble essentialized understandings of race and the racial politics of our scholarship, we echo Schweinbenz and Harrison’s call for sport historians (us included) to reflect on our own relationships to white supremacy and anti-Black/anti-Indigenous racisms, particularly as they relate to the scholarly work we read, teach, and write. Who—both “subjects” and authors of research—are we teaching in our classrooms? Do we cite only those scholars with whom we are familiar/comfortable? Or do we follow Ahmed’s suggestion and “create a crisis around citation, even just a hesitation, a wondering, that might help us not to follow the well-trodden citational paths.”¹³

Kathleen Bachinsky also looks to broaden the field by putting forward a public-health approach as an important direction for consideration. She calls on sport historians to incorporate public-health frameworks more explicitly in their work to help people make sense of the actual health impact of sports programs and physical activity regimens. The intersection of sport history and population health is not only ripe for scholarly analysis but was made all the more necessary by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Underscoring many of the points raised in the articles, Andrew D. Linden and Alison Wrynn conclude the special issue with a history of the *Journal of Sport History*. Because NASSH and the *JSH* are linked, a relationship purposefully established during the first NASSH conference, they share many characteristics. Linden and Wrynn document the importance of the *JSH* in establishing sport history as a credible academic field, as well as the overrepresentation of white men as leaders and authors. The “calls to action” put forward by the authors in this special issue thereby also hold true for the journal.

In looking back and looking forward, this special issue documents the history, significance, and future of NASSH. The authors share their memories, experiences, and hopes about the organization and field of sport history. As Wiggins commented at the close of the virtual NASSH 2021 conference, “NASSH is an organization that continues to look towards the future, but never loses sight of who went before us and led the way.” It is vital that we do not simply hearken to *the* future but work collectively to ask ourselves *which* future(s) we wish to build and how best to do so.



NOTES

1. David K. Wiggins, “Closing Comments,” North American Society for Sport History Convention, 31 May 2021.
2. NASSH 1973 Constitution.
3. Terry Todd and John Hoberman, “Understanding Sports Can Be an Important Step to Humane Ends,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 11 June 1989, C17.
4. Maureen M. Smith, “Will the Real Sport Historians Please Stand Up? Shadow Boxing with an Absent Presenter,” *Journal of Sport History* 43.1 (2016): 91.
5. Mark Dyreson, “Sport History and the History of Sport,” *Journal of Sport History* 34.3 (2007): 405–14.
6. “List of the Day,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 May 1995, B2.
7. Trisha McGuire-Adams, *Indigenous Feminist Gikendaasowin (knowledge): Decolonization through Physical Activity* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 1.
8. See, for example, Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
9. Mary G. McDonald and Susan Birrell, “Reading Sport Critically: A Methodology for Interrogating Power,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16.4 (1999): 284.
10. Jeffrey T. Sammons, “‘Race’ and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination,” *Journal of Sport History* 21.3 (1994): 239.
11. Amira Rose Davis, “New Directions in African American Sports History: A Field of One’s Own,” *The Journal of African American History* 106.2 (2021): 189.
12. Murray G. Phillips, Russell Field, Christine O’Bonsawin, and Janice Forsyth, “Indigenous Resurgence, Regeneration, and Decolonization through Sport History,” *Journal of Sport History* 46.2 (2019): 143.
13. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (London: Duke University Press, 2017), 148.