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NCPH Working Group: “Public History and the Potential of Sports History Museums”  
Case Statement

Outline of Project: Arizona State Sports Project

We are in the process of establishing the Arizona State Sports Project, a public history program focused on sports-related subjects in the Southwest region, at Arizona State University in the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies. Our first undertaking is an oral history project on ASU intercollegiate athletics. This project will focus on diversity and access.

The issues of racial opportunity and exploitation in college sports have been hot topics since at least the 1960s, and football forced institutions of higher education to confront the issue of access much earlier. These stories are largely hidden from public view. Sun Devil fans likely would take pride in the knowledge that Arizona State Teachers College integrated the Southwest region when Emerson Harvey joined the football team in 1937. Arizona State also forced other schools to confront the issue of race when the team refused to adhere to the “gentlemen’s agreement,” an unwritten rule that “integrated” teams leave their black player(s) at home when traveling to play all-white teams. Exploring the school’s racial history through sport, primarily through oral interviews, will bring to public the complexities surrounding race, sport, and education in a state with a Southern and segregationist—but also Western and liberal—heritage.

A relatively hidden history also exists regarding women in college sports; many remarkable stories have not reached broader audiences. While most people today are aware of Title IX’s role in the dramatic growth of girls’ and women’s opportunities in school sports, the celebratory stories which point to how far women’s sports have come tend to overshadow an important history of struggle to gain access and legitimacy. While one cannot deny that Title IX revolutionized women’s sports, women played before the passage of the law, and opportunities

did not appear overnight. At Arizona State, women like Linda Vollstedt played important roles in the development of women's sporting opportunities. Vollstedt played golf for ASU in the 1960s, coached at a Phoenix high school in the 1970s, and began an illustrious career coaching the Sun Devils for twenty-one years beginning in 1980. Her story illuminates both the struggle and the incredible achievement of women in college sports.

The oral history project will provide a platform for athletes, coaches, and administrators to share their stories. The end goal of the Arizona State Sports Project is to create large oral history archive that presents a rich, complex history of Sun Devil intercollegiate athletics. Building this oral history archive will serve multiple purposes and opens doors to many possibilities. If shared in an open, digital space, other institutions could follow ASU's lead and help to establish a national oral history archive of college sports.

This project also could lead to the creation of a new iteration of the sports history museum. As institutions of higher learning, colleges are ripe for innovation by blending sport spectatorship and educational experience. If the Department of Athletics sees value in the project, interview excerpts could be incorporated into interactive spaces in the newly-renovated Sun Devil Stadium. College sports present a unique opportunity to incorporate educational activities into sport-spectating spaces. Interactive exhibit spaces could exist throughout the concourses, ramps, stairwells, and other areas inside and outside the stadium. History could be all around the spectator rather than contained in a separate, isolated traditional museum space. How great would it be if a group of students or family attended a college football game, enjoyed the athletic event, and also—perhaps even unintentionally—learned some history at the same time? The game space itself would transform into a museum; the game-day experience into an educational experience.

Fans would embrace the opportunity to learn more about the history of their team.

College sports teams experience high turnover of talent; star student-athletes play for a school for only one to four years. Many powerful stories are lost because of this turnover. This issue is exacerbated by the tendency of sports fans (and participants) to focus on the current moment and immediate future of the team. At the same time, knowledge of team history is a cornerstone of true fan (and player) identity. The longer history of the program that could be near-seamlessly added into the game-day experience would bring formerly hidden stories into light. These stories matter to fans, students, players, and the college community. They could strengthen fan identity and school spirit, and introduce complex historical topics as well.

Thoughts on the connection between sport and public history (to develop working definition of “public sports history”); Preliminary ideas for Working Group outcomes

One approach to create of a working definition of “public sports history” is to define public history and then explore the ways in which attending to sport presents special opportunities and challenges. While I am not a trained public historian, my understanding of public history is informed by Peter Stearns’s definition, and Noel Stowe’s concept of “reflective practice.” Stearns emphasizes that public history at its base involves “the use of history outside the academic context.” He provides a consensus definition from his review of the journal *The Public Historian*:

Public history includes the entertainment and edification of adults through museums and preservation efforts, media presentations, and group or institutional memorial histories that contribute to a sense of identity.<sup>1</sup>

Stowe writes, on the topic of public history practice:

The practitioner operates abstractly; actions are based in cognition.... Learning, thinking, reflecting, and responding intersect as the practitioner works to establish intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> Peter N. Stearns, “Applied History: Policy Roles and Standards for Historians,” in Daniel Callahan, et al, *Applying the Humanities* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 227.

control in a practice situation in order to create a disciplined approach that will lead to choices from which to select and determine outcomes. The framework of activity involves a stream of actions that fold in on one another, informing the practitioner through the process of reflective practice.... In this manner the fundamental principles of the discipline emerge from a practice that embraces learning drawn from the literature of the discipline and developed and honed [in experience.] These learned principles create a coherent pattern of practice in the career paths followed by public historians who in their work must deal with and work through the tensions inherent in the concrete public practice of the discipline.<sup>2</sup>

Taken together, Stearns's and Stowe's ideas are useful for the public sports historian. Stowe's concept of reflective practice serves as a reminder that the historian carries the responsibility of informed decision-making to best present the stories of the past and their complex meanings for present-day audiences. Many of these stories contain contested narratives, ripe for interpretation by professional practitioners capable of peeling back the layers of analysis.

Sport, because of its immense popularity and powerful role in individual and group identity, provides a unique opportunity for public historians to capture large audiences and introduce critical approaches to history. At the same time, largely because of the culture of fandom, sports historians face unique challenges when envisioning sports history for public consumption and interaction.

My preliminary ideas for outcomes of the NCPH Working Group, "Public History and the Potential of Sports History Museums," are that we establish two (overlapping) sets of best practices: for sports historians interested in public engagement, and public historians interested in sport.

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<sup>2</sup> Noel Stowe, "Public History Curriculum: Illustrating Reflective Practice," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 2006), 51.

2016 NCPH Working Group Discussants  
Public History and the Potential of Sports History Museums

*Tough Transition: How the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum is Abandoning its  
Conservative Roots for Greater Social Impact*

By Sarah Calise  
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There are hundreds of sports museums throughout the United States preserving the stories of amateur, semi-professional, and professional athletes. Nearly every professional sporting arena or stadium for football, baseball, basketball, and hockey features exhibits or museum space to honor the home team. Of course, these four professional sports and many others also have their own stand-alone hall of fame buildings. The exhibits found within halls of fame are meant to glorify the athletes, coaches, and executives inducted into the institution. In *Representing the Sporting Past in Museums and Halls of Fame*, Kevin Moore argues historians tend to dismiss the value of sports museums due to “an academic view that sports museums present an uncritical, celebratory history.”<sup>1</sup> Critical interpretations of racial and social history are rarely employed at sports museums and halls of fame because they are perceived to be in direct conflict with the celebratory vision. Sports museums find it easier to simplify stories of social progress and provide tidy happy endings.

For ten weeks during the summer of 2015, I interned full-time in the curatorial department at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum (abbreviated NBHOF for this paper). Tasked with assessing and photographing every exhibit in the museum, I came to know the three floors of exhibit space and formed relations with the museum’s curators and staff, including curator emeritus Ted Spencer. Like other sports halls of fame, NBHOF focused much

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Moore, “Foreword,” in *Representing the Sporting Past in Museums and Halls of Fame*, ed. Murray Phillips (London: Routledge, 2011), xii–xiii.

of its energy and exhibit space for “honoring excellence” since it opened in 1939. Under the curatorial leadership of Spencer, however, the history museum began to separate itself from the Hall of Fame section of the institution.

Beginning in the 1980s, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum started an interpretative transformation that demonstrated greater inclusion and representation of marginalized groups. The exhibit *Diamond Dreams: Women in Baseball* opened in 1988. *Pride and Passion: the African American Baseball Experience* opened in 1997. An exhibit on the history of the game in Latin America and the Caribbean, called *¡Viva Baseball!*, opened in 2009. In the same year, the museum dedicated an exhibit to the life and achievement of Hank Aaron that also documents the vile racism he endured while on the path to breaking Babe Ruth’s home run record. An exhibit on baseball in Asia is said to be in the works for the future. The museum continues to expand and reinterpret outdated exhibits. In November 2015, the curatorial department revamped the timeline exhibit featuring stories from the 1970s to the present day. The new space is called *Whole New Ballgame*. One of the interactive features in this exhibit asks the public for their opinion on controversial baseball debates surrounding the designated hitter and performance-enhancing drugs. Considering the sterile interpretation of decades past, NBHOF has recently made great strides in the creation of a museum with larger impact. Yet, the museum still falls short of fully addressing major social issues and fails to provoke the public to see how issues in baseball reflect society’s larger problems.

Currently, NBHOF is stuck between promoting the idyllic, nostalgic setting of Cooperstown and pushing the boundaries of social commentary. Much of the former holds back the latter. The exhibits on women, African Americans, and other marginalized groups are, at most, only an acknowledgement of difficult histories. The narrative utilizes a heroic progression

rather than a complex engagement with modern social issues such as patriarchal systems and sexism, institutional racism, and exploitative labor practices. For example, although *Pride and Passion* features a side-by-side timeline for African American baseball history and American history, the exhibit does not reach far beyond the signing of Jackie Robinson; it does not discuss the modern relationship between baseball and African American communities, including the lack of front office and coaching positions filled by African Americans or people of color. Other issues—like homophobia and the racism of Native American mascots—remain absent from interpretation. Instead, the museum tries to maintain an appeal to nostalgia, which can be a dangerous narrative to uphold since it often entails false ideas about the past (because the “good ole days” were really only good for a select members of American society). Thus, the museum is stuck between two worlds. NBHOF is transforming from its conservative roots and still deciding what it wants to be—a Disney-like tourist attraction or an academically-praised cultural heritage institution.

The potential of public sports history is that these museums should be able to be a fun, entertaining tourist attraction that also provide critical social commentaries. One of the main reasons that academic historians and public historians should take sports museums seriously is because of the wide appeal of these institutions across multiple demographics and generations. The 2015 Super Bowl averaged 114.4 million viewers per minute, making it the most watched event in American TV history—the potential audience for sports museums is impressive. Annually, the NBHOF draws over 300,000 visitors, which is quite a feat for a village of 1,800 residents tucked away in middle-of-nowhere New York with the closest airport nearly an hour and a half away. The museum’s Hall of Fame weekend induction ceremony averages 50,000 visitors each July. These visitors expect to see artifacts from Hall of Famers and famous

moments in baseball history as well as an exploration of statistical greatness. Museum visitors have also driven the transformation for more profound inclusion of social issues, and recent NBHOF exhibits allow the public to give their input on controversial topics. These are positive signs for growth in the future.

A few final points of discussion on the relationship between public sports history and sports museums should be addressed. How can public historians convince sports museums and halls of fame that engaging in complex narratives and difficult histories is beneficial for the museum, and that these narratives will not conflict with the business of entertainment and nostalgia? NBHOF will continue to draw crowds due to its reputation as a necessary pilgrimage for baseball fans. The museum can use Cooperstown's romanticism to its advantage to connect back to the need for conversations on social issues; use the nostalgic setting to exemplify why complex exhibits are so vital. What kinds of strategies and practices can sports museums adopt to transform the simplistic progress narratives and hero-worship? One major suggestion I would give to NBHOF for improving the interpretation is to increase their collaboration and partnerships with external communities. One way to counteract the silencing of the past is to actively pursue involvement from historically marginalized groups. A serious concern of mine while interning at NBHOF was the lack of diversity on staff and how much the work environment reflected the white male dominance of the sporting industry. An inclusion of multiple voices would disrupt and challenge the museum's status quo in the development of exhibits and public programs, and aid the museum in their transition to an institution with greater social impact.



## **NCPH Annual Meeting 2016**

### **Case Statement for “Public History and the Potential of Sports History Museums”**

**Charles Chamberlain, University of New Orleans History Department/Historia**

In regards to the issue of greater potential for sports history museums, the title implicitly raises the question: what potential is not being met by many sports museums across the U.S.?

My experiences with sports history museums comes from my time as Museum Historian at the Louisiana State Museum, where I curated the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame’s “Sports Paradise” exhibit for their brand new museum which opened in 2013 in Natchitoches. For political reasons, the museum is actually a hybrid of a regional history museum (Northwest Louisiana History Museum) and sports museum (the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame [LSHOF and Sports Museum]).

The Sports Hall of Fame exhibit and the Sports Paradise exhibit both required some curatorial efforts in terms of design, organization, artifact selection, media and interactive design, and interpretation of history. In the process of planning all of these issues, I immersed myself in the world of sports museums across the United States to understand their various organizational designs, media interactives, artifact selection, expenses, and their general visitation and popularity within their markets.

I discovered that sports museums faced a number of challenges. These basic challenges include

- a) lack of visitation or interest by the broader public
- b) high cost of media especially for sports interactive media pieces
- c) a lack relevance or connection of sports history to the public’s love of live or contemporary sporting events at all levels from little league to the pros
- d) sustainable funding for operations and marketing

First let me address the lack of visitation.

#### **A) Visitation Research**

In part, the lack of visitation is related to a lack of professional marketing research on the potential popularity (or lack thereof) for sports museums to the general public. When the LSHOF was approved through political efforts by the state, the Louisiana Sports Writers Association based their agenda on the fact that Louisiana was the only southern state that did not have a sports hall of fame.

Unfortunately, there was no professional effort to do any market testing to determine if there was a sustainable market for such a museum. The conventional wisdom was that Natchitoches as a tourist town would naturally draw visitors, who would then want to visit the museum once they were there. Natchitoches' tourism is based mainly on cultural and historical visitation to the historic downtown and nearby plantations. The assumption and argument was that all of the husbands of the women drawn to the plantations would now have something that spoke to their "male" interests.

The Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame provides an example of the creation of a sports museum driven by a perceived need and in part through political pressure, without really providing a professional research-based visitation study that would justify their existence.

How many sports museums are also based on this impulsive desire for documenting sports history without actually doing the research on what aspects of sports history would attract visitors?

The questions are raised: How many sports museums actually do market research to see what the public is interested in? How can they integrate the public's interest into their exhibits and programming?

## **B) Media Costs**

In reviewing the challenges of many state-level Sports Museums and Halls of Fame, one would find similar situations. The museums include some amazing artifacts and feature sports stars of the highest level of recognition and accomplishment, but the public – for whatever reason – is not pouring into these sites enough to justify their existence financially.

Now let me address the media costs using examples of the Sports Museum of America and the NBA and NFL Halls of Fame. The Sports Museum of America was a museum in lower Manhattan that was dedicated to American sports history. The overall cost was close to \$200 million and much of that cost was based on very high tech media interactives that simulated activities from a variety of popular sports. It opened in 2008, and closed permanently 9 months later due to high costs and lack of sustainable financial support for the museum. Part of the financial challenge was based on the very high costs of the media, in tandem with a lack of visitation for various reasons such as location, signage and lack of interest.

While the SMOA was a model for integrating very exciting interactive media in general, the high costs of these interactives illustrated to many professionals in the sports museum industry that fun and expensive interactives do not in themselves, and can in the long run be detrimental to the sustainability of a museum. As for the NBA and NFL Halls of Fame, they also include some of the more interesting and technologically advanced interactives related to sports. However, their operations costs are funded by corporations that view the museums as a vital marketing tool, and thereby are willing to underwrite their operations even if the visitation fees do not cover these costs.

On the flip side, I use the example of the LSU Sports Hall of Fame. Curator and director Bud Johnson informed me that in the Pete Maravich exhibit, people spend about 10 seconds looking at the artifacts (his trademark floppy socks), and will spend 5-10 minutes watching videos of Maravich's ball-handling highlights. So highlight videos are not expensive to run. But often times the licensing agencies do require an expensive fee for the access and use – hence another cost challenge to any sports museum that may not have a huge budget for media.

So the questions are raised: Can sports museums integrate exciting media and interactives that can be justified in terms of the cost versus incoming admission fees/fund raising efforts? Or how can they integrate affordable media to improve their chances of sustainability?

### **C) Connection of live sports to sports history**

That brings up the issue of sports museums and their challenged relationship to live sports. Americans are generally obsessed with sports for a variety of reasons. However, sports museums have trouble making the connection from live performance to history and cases filled with static artifacts. Part of the problem is that sports history is presented as a rather fact and statistic-based history that often fails to convey the human or social stories behind the statistics. For that reason, the public does not view the museum visits as an activity with the same level of unpredictability and excitement as live sports – whether on tv or in person.

This issue raises the questions: How can sports museums create a level of excitement for the topic that rivals the live action? Can this even be accomplished?

### **D) Sustainable funds for operation and marketing**

Fundraising is often a challenge for many museums as they attempt to achieve a sustainable existence based on their admission fees, membership dues, donations, grants and even government subsidies. If a sports museum has low visitation numbers, that lack of interest is generally a reflection of a lack of connection to the larger community.

This problem raises the question: if a sports museum has a low visitation rate, and a meager marketing budget, how can they turn their operation around to create more interest and therefore increase their funds for marketing?

While every sports museum is different, these questions are food for thought and can apply to many sports museums that face visitation and funding challenges. Many sports museums employ professional fundraisers, programmers and curators who are well aware of all of these challenges, and make a concerted effort to make their institutions the center of their community, and sustainable. I hope we can hear some stories of success from some of these institutions so that other museums that face these challenges can implement changes for improvement.

**Balancing Stakeholders: Academic History, Sport History, and Public History at *Sport in American History***

Andrew McGregor

Purdue University

In May 2014, I launched the group blog *Sport in American History*. The blog is comprised of mostly academics, and publishes articles that respond to current events, share new research, review new books and films, and discuss teaching with sport. Since its launch, it has become an increasingly important place for people interested in sport history. This is because the site serves three purposes: 1) to promote and popularize the study of sport history, 2) to provide a space for multidisciplinary scholarly communication about the history of sports, 3) to engage with the broad public by publishing accessible and informative articles related sport history. Reflecting on these purposes and the website's success, I hope that the blog and I can serve as a conduit to facilitate discussion amongst historians from various backgrounds interested in the study and presentation of sports to public audiences.

*Sport in American History's* central goal is to serve as a place to publicize and advance the historical study of sport, offering readers a glimpse into the field. This is necessary because, like public history, sport history is either overlooked or misunderstood by many academics, despite the fact that scholars, such as Elliott Gorn and Michael Oriard, have repeatedly encouraged their colleagues to take sport seriously. With the goal of asserting the presence of sport history among other historical subfield, the blog serves as a space to heed Gorn and Oriard's advice with critical and engaging pieces on the role sports plays in American life.

With the primary goal of building and advancing the study of sport, the second role of the blog is to create a cohesive community of scholars. This is important because the field of sport history itself is splintered and scattered across various academic departments, many who do not traditionally speak to each other. *Sport in American History* acts as an important meeting place for scholars interested in and already studying sports. It is a site where they can share or read about a variety of perspectives side-by-side, serving as a disciplinary middle ground that bridges some of their differences.

Finally, the blog represents an attempt by scholars to engage with the public. Sports are a popular subject and their history attracts the interest people who might not be interested in other historical topics. Engaging with current events, recent films, and new books helps people interested in sports learn more about their history. Thus, unlike traditional journals, openly accessible blogs are an ideal place for sport historians to provide insight and depth into sporting events and sports stories. As a testament to this impact, the *New Pittsburgh Courier* and ESPN's "Outside the Lines" have drawn upon the expertise of our contributors and blog posts in their coverage.

As I monitor the traffic and views on *Sport in American History*, I have tried to look for trends to explain why certain posts are more popular. Although it is an imprecise science, I have found that those that attract the most views engage with some sort of current event or share a little known story. Our readers seem to prefer stories that either provide a historical explanation or give them new or interesting facts. It is not surprising then that our posts that lean more towards academic sports history – such as discussions of teaching, theory, and book reviews – are less popular. To me, this means that we need to

be delicate as we distill academic research for public consumption and be clear about what we want visitors (or readers) to takeaway.

My work with *Sport in American History* makes clear that sport history and public history make a good pair. The popular appeal of sports requires sport history scholars to become proficient and engaging storytellers, both orally and in writing. It also demands that they become aware of the contested nature of memory and how the nostalgia embedded in sports myths is central to people's understanding of America. Scholars sometimes forget that fans often (naively) view sports as an escape from the complications of life.

As scholars we are aware that sport is a critical component of the American way of life and plays an important pedagogical role in teaching and reinforcing American cultural values. We recognized that sports myths and the stories of sporting heroes contain subtle political ideologies that instruct fans on how to live by modeling behavioral expectations of masculinity, leadership, loyalty, work ethic, and more. Our critiques of these mythologies, however, prove challenging for public historians because deeper understandings of the history and context of the myths potentially threaten the worldview of sports fans. This delicate relationship between the public's interest in sports and the history and meaning of sports demands that we work diligently to parse academic sport history into palatable narratives and displays.

I am not suggesting that "public sport history" must be less critical but rather that it needs to be more strategic in how it goes about bridging the gap between scholar, fan, and stakeholder. I have wrestled with these issues in my own research. I interviewed Billy Mills for my master's thesis. Developing trust was a central part of the interview process

because he has a vested interest in his legacy and how his story is told. It put pressure on me to consider his reaction and ponder the limits of my interpretations. This is a concern for public sport history as well because many of the sports figures we discuss are still living or have living family members and we sometimes rely on them for donations of items. Furthermore, leagues, teams, and other organizations also have a vested interest in how we present them. How exactly we go about striking this balance while maintaining academic standards this is something I hope we can think through in this working group.

This working group also presents an opportunity to develop strategies and guidelines that can help sport scholars reach larger audiences. More scholars need to become aware of the tools and practices of public history, especially those who study popular topics. As a result of this working group, I am hoping to come away with some ideas and techniques that I can take back to my students and colleagues interested in doing public sport history.

Returning to the goals of *Sport in American History*, I am also eager to find ways that the blog can aid public historians in navigating the complex and disjointed subfield of sport history. The blog's biggest strength has been fostering scholarly communication across disparate fields and I believe that it is uniquely positioned to help facilitate conversations that go both ways. I am optimistic that this working group will be the beginning of a series of discussions about the relationship between sport history and public history. Moreover, I hope that the blog might serve as a model for museums and other public history institutions on how to use their sports collections to engage scholars, fans, and other publics beyond their physical walls.

As sport becomes an accepted historical topic, academics have no choice but to acknowledge the roles of fans. Interactions between fans and athletes constitute the countless factors that make studying sports historically relevant. Fans create and carry out the rituals that promote sporting events as instrumental pieces of human life, rituals that can cross boundaries of gender, race, and class. Historians note these connections and are more accepting of the part that technology plays in the process. Nearly all fields are forced to realize the growing influence of technology, including those working at museums and education centers.

My intent for future research is to analyze the path that fandom has taken through media, specifically with the relatively recent advent of social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Sports fans have always enjoyed their passions through the newest format, including sports sections in newspapers, radio announcements, and independent cable channels. These options were distinguished by the ownership that media producers held over the material. Now, games are merely a piece of the sportsfan picture. The ways that fans consume sports, how they relate to teams and players, and how they associate themselves with other fans has changed in the last few decades, forcing a reinvigoration of the historical relevance of sport.

Rather than waiting for articles from sports section analysts, fans are reporting on teams to larger audiences at a much faster pace. Social media presents the news about scores, players, and schedules the way ESPN does. Instant gratification of replaying an amazing dunk less than twenty seconds after its occurrence has people refreshing their Snapchat Stories instead of fighting for a prime TV spot. Live games hold excitement for some fans, but their function as a piece of sport has changed. Sorting through the important plays in mere seconds allows snippets of events to encapsulate whole contests to tech savvy followers.

Beyond viewing the activities, social media has also made it simpler to present personal identities configured around sports. Individuals use media to create their own versions of what



followers have to look, think, and act like to be a true fan. Courtside pictures with players, Snapchats of new jerseys, and up to the second tweets have oftentimes taken the place of knowing player and team statistics. Fair-weather fans are abundant throughout the social world, and recognizing a diehard devotee becomes a challenge when everyone can publicly attach themselves to an organization.

Due to the connectivity found in fandom, seeing a fellow fan in a different city will produce instant friends, and likewise constructs enemies from opposing teams. Large groups easily connect online to form collective fan bases around the world. Each form of technology that evolves allows visibility of support to grow. Connection is easier, and so is separation. The makeup of sports fanbases is exclusionary, the way that associated masses denigrate rivals with fierce passion that is not only condoned, but expected. Publicly denouncing rival teams is simple with a “meme” or “Gif” of fans crying in stands or players making huge mistakes. The instant spread of information has made identifying team and player allegiances simple.

As a student of public history, I am learning the ways that the field has been pushing for extensive acknowledgement of the audience in museum settings. Interaction with visitors has become a commonplace goal. Phone applications provide secondary or sometimes primary interpretations. Visitors are asked about their experiences upon leaving the exhibits, and feedback is frequently expected to be taken into consideration. Rather than leaving interpreted artifacts and ideas to sit until the exhibit is moved, museums are pushed to evolve and cooperate with the public. While there are issues that need ironing out as the field expands, it is clear that technological has taken a stronger hold.

Technological evolution is necessary for museums and hall of fames to provide up to date and exciting opportunities for audiences. Applications, reformatted websites, and live tweets often provide newfound connections to the public. It is no longer revolutionary to state that

social media outlets are expanding the outreach capabilities for public historians. However, their success cannot be solely attributed to novel formatting. The relatability that each application addresses allows people to draw on information they care about or understand. It is therefore necessary to understand the process of self-curation found in the success of social media. Applying this to public history situations will allow development of new techniques for portraying sports.

Sports museums and hall of fames should draw from public history connections to the audience to avoid the exclusionary aspects of sports fandom. The ESPN *30 for 30* series of documentaries finds success in the personal connection of life stories. By taking athletes off of their pedestals of achievement, museums create a relationship between visitors and athletes. In reality, these teams and players are vastly different than their fans in many ways, having lived as heroes to their fans. Attendees may cross the continent to dote on their favorite players and teams, yet they often pass over the deepening cultural and societal significance that can be gleaned from the stories of famous athletes. This working group has the chance to focus on what commonalities bring people closer to their athletes, and in turn expand the sport hero role beyond athletics.

For sports history to become more public, it must be appealing and relatable for a wider audience. As someone who originally learned sports and history are unconnected, I was amazed to discover the ways that my favorite teams and players are influencing or were affected by historical events. The ESPN *30 for 30* series does an exceptional job of relaying to audiences how athletes are equally challenged by their experiences with the realities of the world we live in. Given different opportunities, many of these athletes are household names, who fans superficially connect to through sports. The series finds success through tangible connection with viewers through promotion of relatable stories.

Social media such as Instagram and Twitter offer the conceptual groundwork of connectivity that can integrate public and sports history. These allow for all fans to be their own curators, limiting what they will sort from a mass of outside sources. Using them can improve the visibility of museums and halls of fame, but understanding their reason for success will allow public and sports historians to move beyond those technologies. The opportunity for learning and understanding grows when an individual can find their own story in the life of another. Sports museums can simply improve interpretation by giving visitors a card that details the life and various experiences of a player, about whom they can quickly learn a few facts about and follow throughout the exhibits. If the player is unfamiliar, visitors may gain respect and knowledge about opposing athletes. Family members just tagging along have their own goals and ownership of a piece of that sports history. Audiences can then take away more than how many home runs or assists a player had in their career. They may have a greater understanding of how and why athletes have become influential members of the world.

These men, women, and teams are exceptional, so they are rightly revered in halls of fame. Sports and public historians can collaborate to utilize their visibility for a greater overall learning experience. History can be taught through sport, and sport can make history interesting. Even those who immediately denigrate history as a boring topic most likely know the last time their favorite franchise won a championship or recognize the name Jackie Robinson well enough to connect him to baseball. Tapping into the personal stories make athletes a relatable piece of history and learning tools for visitors.

**Working Group Case Statement:**  
**“Public History and the Potential of Sports History Museums”**  
NCPH 2016: Baltimore

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My Work on Public Sports History

Personally, my interest in this topic goes beyond museums to consider public interpretation of sports histories in a variety of forms and settings. At the moment, I’m working with ideas for two potential research projects that incorporate sports history. Both projects would involve a community-engaged research process and result in some sort of public interpretive product(s). Both of them focus on boxing.

In one project, I want to research the history of Golden Gloves boxing programs in Native American communities in the Upper Midwest/Western Great Lakes region. I’m interested in the participation of Native youth in these programs, their impact on participants’ lives, how they’ve influenced individual and collective identities, and the role they’ve played in Native communities. The research would include oral history interviews, and engagement with youth and communities currently involved with Golden Gloves programs. I imagine the project resulting in a digital exhibit, as well as a physical traveling exhibition, that might travel to local, county, or state museums as well as reservation and urban Indian communities in the Upper Midwest. I’d also like to publish a general-audience book on the topic.

My other project idea would explore boxing gyms in Belfast, both during the Troubles and in the “post-Troubles” period. I’m interested in how boxing has both reflected and resisted local

sectarian and other social divisions. I'm particularly interested in how, in the post-conflict period, people in Belfast have used boxing (especially among youth) to work against these divisions and to provide alternative options for the formation of individual and collective identities, as part of efforts to (re)build a shared society. This project would involve oral history interviews, and I imagine it producing a digital exhibit, as well as a local physical exhibit. I also would be interested in having this research provide resources for curriculum development for use in local schools.

These projects reflect my larger interest in exploring the potential for interpreting Indigenous and settler colonial histories through the lens of sport. Sports narratives can reveal the impact of colonization on Indigenous cultures and communities. They can demonstrate Native peoples' creativity and resilience in navigating their changing worlds. They can illuminate the ways that Indigenous and settler peoples have influenced each other and how they've negotiated the societies they've built. Sports stories remind us that Indigenous people continue to exist, adapt, and construct complex identities in the twenty-first century. They help us understand how colonial histories continue to shape the structures and social relations of contemporary settler societies. They also help us see how citizens of those societies work to unsettle colonial legacies in their communities.

In the United States, boarding school sports teams served as agents of assimilation, sources of Native pride, and building blocks for self-determination. In New Zealand, the All Blacks national rugby team has constructed a version of national identity that draws selectively from the complex history of Maori and European interactions. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Golden Gloves boxing programs have built self-esteem and cultivated leadership in reservation and urban Indian communities as well as inner-city immigrant and African American neighborhoods. During the Troubles in Northern Ireland, boxing was less segregated than other, more sectarian sports, and

Belfast boxing gyms have become sites of cross-community reconciliation as citizens grapple with the legacies of settler colonialism that continue to shape their society.

### Sports History & Public History

I think that sports topics have great potential for interpreting the past in ways that draw, interest, engage, entertain, and educate diverse public audiences. Sports history can be intimate, emotional, intensely personal, and profoundly human. It also can illuminate broader social, economic, and political context and reveal patterns of change over time. It can be aesthetically powerful and intellectually provocative. Historians can tackle some of the big issues—gender, race, ethnicity, class, identity, power—in ways that are concrete, grounded, humanized, and accessible, rather than abstract or theoretical. I also think that sports lend themselves particularly well to exploring and revealing connections between past and present.

Source materials for sports history can include photographs, sound and video recordings, evocative objects, and ephemera, all of which lend themselves to engaging interpretation. Sports history makes great stories, and lends itself to crafting compelling historical narratives. I also think that sports history offers opportunities for historians to work within a research *process* that is participatory and community-engaged.

### Possible Working Group Outcomes

I'd be very interested in collectively compiling a sort of annotated bibliography of sports history projects that have resulted in particularly creative, thought-provoking, innovative, or effective public interpretation, as museum exhibits/public programs or otherwise, including online.

It would be useful to compile whatever documentation and information we could on these projects & interpretations, and perhaps conduct some analysis of them, so that they could serve as models or case studies for our own work. Ideally we might also make available to others, for use and for additional contributions ... perhaps via a website?

I'd also be interested in collectively compiling a bibliography of relevant/useful readings on the topic and making it available to others, for use and for crowd-sourced contributions. Perhaps we could create a group Zotero library? or .... ?

## Case Statement for “Public History and the Potential of Sports History Museums”

### Deaf Players in Public Sports History

The Working Group asked us to consider the following: “How are sports museums interpreting the marginalized past? Are they? Are there limits to interpreting the marginalized past in sports museums that are not present in other museums?”

This case study applies these questions to the example of deaf players in major league baseball. Deaf baseball players were the first disabled people to be integrated into professional sports. Deaf men have been playing baseball professionally since the nineteenth century. The first deaf player was Ed Dundon, who played in the American Association (colloquially called the ‘Beer and Whiskey League’) in 1883. He had come to the league out of the Ohio School for the Deaf, where he had been a pitcher. OSD was an early adopter of baseball into its physical education program among schools for the deaf and it would produce another major leaguer, Dundon’s OSD teammate, William Ellsworth ‘Dummy’ Hoy.

Hoy is the most famous deaf player in major league history, playing from 1888 to 1902, for teams in the American League, the Players’ League, and the National League. He ended his career in the Pacific Coast League in 1903.

But Hoy was not alone. The early twentieth century was the Deafest time for the majors.

Luther ‘Dummy’ Taylor pitched for the New York Giants from 1900-1908, and remains the only deaf pitcher to achieve success in the MLB. But Taylor was not the only deaf player in the Giants’ bullpen. In 1901, William ‘Dummy’ Deegan pitched briefly for the team, together with George ‘Dummy’ Leitner. As baseball moved into the twentieth century, it boasted the most deaf players it ever had, or, as it turns out, it ever would again. After Taylor retired, there would be a drought of deaf players in the twentieth century. Herbert ‘Dummy’ Murphy played 9 games at shortstop for the Phillies in 1914. The next deaf player, Dick Sipek, would not appear until 1945, for the Cincinnati Reds. No deaf player would be seen in the majors after Sipek until Curtis Pride debuted with Montreal Expos in 1993. There are no deaf players in the MLB in the twenty-first century.

Hoy and Taylor are still celebrated and known today, in the Deaf community. But they are not well remembered in the hearing world, even by baseball fans. More broadly, Deaf players have received very little attention in histories of baseball or in sports museums that cater to hearing audiences.

This is unfortunate because, of all majors professional sports, baseball has been the most integrated, in terms of disability. For comparison’s sake, there have only been 3 deaf players in NFL history, the first of whom, Bonnie Sloan, played four games for St. Louis in 1973; he was followed by Kenny Walker (Broncos 1992 and 1993), and Derrick Coleman (Seahawks 2012-present). And this in spite of the fact that there is a long history of deaf men playing football at schools for the deaf, and despite the deaf



community contributing a lasting legacy to the game, the huddle, which was invented at Gallaudet University in 1892. There has only been one deaf player in NBA history, Lance Allred (debuted March 17, 2008 with the Cavaliers, and played the rest of that season), and one on the NHL, James Kyte (who was drafted in 1982 and went to play 13 seasons in the NHL). Baseball has been different, and more welcoming.

And ironically, it was most welcoming at the point when American culture was more hostile toward deaf people. In the early twentieth century, deaf people faced enormous social pressure to abandon their language, American Sign Language, and to speak. The educational method that sought to teach them to speak, oralism, was driving classrooms out of schools for the deaf during these years. And eugenics was targeting deaf people as genetically defective inferiors who ought not be allowed to marry. As Alexander Graham Bell warned in his 1884 essay, "Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race," allowing deaf people to marry unchecked would lead inexorably to a separate human race of deaf defectives. Yet, 'Dummy' Hoy and 'Dummy' Taylor rose to prominence as deaf players, proud to be deaf, and proud users of sign language. Like other ethnic groups before them, the deaf used baseball to try to propel their representatives as positive role models and heroes in America's national pastime.

This is a rich history that offers the sports museum the chance to explore important questions of assimilation, difference, language, disability, discrimination, and normalcy with the public.

How do we include conversations about disability in exhibits about sports?

How can public history embrace disability as a compelling and important story?

How can we press sports museums to engage sports fans with considerations of bodily difference in sports history, beyond the history of race?

Since deaf fans already know this history, how do we persuade hearing fans of the relevance of this history to them? How do we integrate deaf history into the history of sports, as hearing people generally know it?

When we ask, "Are sports museums 'held back' by the hall of fame style of interpretation?" we must see how this may be especially true for disability sports history. Neither Hoy nor Taylor are in the Hall of Fame. Yet their representation of their community at a critical time in its history was enormously important to Deaf Americans. Can we make their story gripping to a wider audience?

Can we use this sports history to cleverly introduce a wider general audience to Deaf history more broadly? To the insights of disability studies?

Does sports history, given its popularity, offer a way forward on these fronts, and if so, how would we envision that project working? And where? Who are the likely partners for such a mission?

How do we work with Deaf partners to bring this history to the public? How do we identify Deaf curators to shape an inclusive atmosphere in the work world of sports history museum professionals?

**Elyssa Ford: Case Statement**

Working Group: Public History and the Potential of Sports History Museums

*Work that I have done and has brought me to this topic:*

The field of sports history and sports studies interests me for a number of reasons. First, my own work focuses on a topic in the field of sports history. I also would like to see sports history, as a field, broadened and taken more seriously within the larger area of historical studies. There is so much that sports history can offer to interpretations of the past. For instance, my work on the rodeo allows me to connect that event – something often tied to solely the American West – to issues of identity not just in the West but in the United States more broadly. I examine five different types of race- and group-specific rodeos. Each of these groups has its own relationship with the American West and with the rodeo. In this, you must examine the rodeo itself, for it is different in each group context, but it is the relationship that individuals and even entire groups have with the West and the rodeo that is so important to understand because it reveals a larger story that is not just about the rodeo or even about sport more broadly. It is a story about America, about development, and about belonging. In this way, looking at rodeo is not just sports history; it is cultural history, and it very much is American history.

This is what I mean when I say that the study of sport needs to be broadened – we need to see it has more than just the sports niche for sports fans or sports fanatics. For many scholars, it is not seen as serious study or as anything more than a niche topic, and yet sport has so much tell us about our past and our present. Scholars in other fields have already recognized this, and to find some of the best work on sports and even sports history, you often have to look to gender studies, sociology, anthropology, and kinesiology. With these divisions by field, I actually see some similarities between the study of sport and public history. Public history, too, is a field that really is an umbrella that encompasses – or can encompass – so many other areas: anthropology,

sociology, museum studies, architecture, and so much more. We have struggled for many years in public history to understand what this means as a field, and I see the study of sport as being in a similar place. This working group is an opportunity that we have to encourage historians to be a part of this process, and, because we are having this discussion at the NCPH, it also is an opportunity for us to go even further and to think about how we can and should present this very complex topic (perhaps surprisingly so to some people) to the public.

*Connections between sport and public history:*

As a scholar of sports history and as a public historian, I am particularly interested in how sport, such as something like the rodeo, is presented in public, be that films, books, or museums. I have an even more personal reason for this because I came to my research interest through an internship at the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth, Texas. In looking at the hall of fame inductees and at the applications for the 1999-2000 cycle, I began to question the incredible whiteness of almost all of the women there and wondered why women of other races were not included or acknowledged. My own work began as a way for me to tackle that very issue, though it has moved in a different direction since then. After that experience, I also began to question how an institution like the Cowgirl Museum depicts rodeo. This museum is an interesting place because rodeo is simply one part of the museum's message. It is more a museum of the West or a museum of women than it truly is a sports museum, and yet women as rodeo cowgirls is often the idea many people have when they hear the word cowgirl. To reinforce that idea, rodeo is the first section visitors see when they enter the exhibit space. From there, visitors move into ranching and finally into Hollywood conceptions of the cowgirl. All of these are Western in focus, which makes rodeo appear more

as a part of the West and of Western culture than as a true sport. While it would be inaccurate and incorrect to completely sever rodeo's ties to that past and to that geography, the reality of rodeo as a sport today is something quite different and something much more national (as a side note, to take this back to the scholarly research, this is not really all that different than how some of the individual groups also use rodeo; that involvement and their presence in the West helps to legitimize them as Americans, their role in American history, and their presence in America today).

In many ways, this almost constant connection of rodeo to this mythic Western past makes it less a sport and more this temple to that past, and this is something that rodeo really struggles against. How can it be recognized as a legitimate sport when it is always seen through the Western lens? Films, books, and museums have all played very key roles in promoting that Western lens, so public historians certainly have the opportunity and the power and create real change here.

Though I have specifically mentioned the rodeo in my examples above, these are issues that many sports museums and hall of fames encounter.

- How do you get at the competitive part of that sport – to see it as a sport – and also to look critically at its background, its meaning, and its evolution, rather than simply creating a temple to the sport as a whole or to the individuals enshrined within that space?
- How can we talk about the uncomfortable parts of the history of that sport, be it injury and long-term disease (such as in football, soccer, and wrestling) or racism and discrimination (such as the separate leagues in baseball and the separate rodeo circuits of the 20th century)?

- How do we bring together the academic community that studies these topics with the museums and hall of fames that may be run more by enthusiasts and, thus, can be interested in a very different and less complicated message?

*Preliminary ideas for outcomes of this working group:*

This has been the hardest question for me to conceptualize and to formulate a strong response.

Should we create a list of questions, concerns, or even guidelines to make available for museums (or other places) involved in the presentation of sports, sporting individuals, and sports history to the public? We could provide questions or ideas on how to complicate the idea of sport, to broaden the idea of sport, to question it, to.... (insert your ideas here!).

Perhaps we could begin by raising questions, such as I have above, that we have about the presentation of sport. We could think about what we would like to see in museums and how museums could get there. If we do so, it also would be important – at least in my mind – to brainstorm the way in which the public could react to a reimagining or resituating of sports, which likely would be unsettling to many, especially if directed at sports that are legendary in the American imagination or at individuals seen as sport gods.

## **Interpreting Art in an NFL Stadium and the Potential of Sports Museums**

As an art fellow, my primary duty is to help people appreciate the contemporary art collection that the Hunt family has installed on the club level of Arrowhead Stadium – the home of the Kansas City Chiefs Football Club. My experience with art collection visitors and others on general stadium tours has led me to believe that framing is a key problem facing many corporate hall of fames and sports museums. By drawing narrow boxes around athlete and team accomplishments, well-meaning exhibit curators prevent sports museums from situating sport within its broader cultural context. In learning how to best interpret fine art in a sports-centered stadium environment, I stumbled across a discussion-based tour style that that could help nudge the corporate sports museum towards critical cultural engagement.

The Arrowhead Art Collection stands out among other stadium-based art collections for its professional curation, regional focus, and educational mission. Sharron Hunt and the Hunt family established the Arrowhead Art Collection in 2012 to engage the Midwestern arts community for the benefit of the residents of Kansas City. The Chiefs recruited an arts council comprised of prominent collectors, art educators, and museum directors. This arts council used an intensive jury process to select the most promising regional artists from a pool of over 400 proposals. The collection has steadily grown since its inception, and now includes 32 pieces from a diverse group of artists working in a variety of media.

One of the primary goals of the collection was to add an arts component to the existing educational opportunities at Arrowhead. Approximately 20,000 students a year visit the Chiefs Sports Lab, an interactive space that educates students about healthy eating strategies, the benefits of exercise, and how to live an active lifestyle. The Chiefs have hired and trained a staff of guides to lead Sports Lab and stadium tours. Each stadium tour gives an overview of club

founder Lamar Hunt's biography, the history of the franchise, and provides a behind-the-scenes look at the stadium. In terms of interpretive style, the standard tour script is predominately comprised of didactic mini-lectures focusing on Chiefs franchise facts.

This fact-based, call and response style works well for stadium tours, but the art fellows felt that using a similar approach would not encourage visitors to think meaningfully engage with the artwork. From a previous museum experience, I had a passing familiarity with Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). VTS tours use a non-judgmental, dialogue-based discussion strategy. The tour guide asks visitors a broad question about the artwork; typically "What can you see?" Visitors then look at the work and offer their observations. The guide acknowledges all responses equally, without affirming or denying any particular visitor's assessment. (Maintaining neutrally avoids visitor's tendencies to search for "right answers" using the guide's reaction as a barometer.) The guide follows up on each visitor comment, asking them to identify what specific aspect of the artwork inspired their observation. Through this process, visitors learn to support their observations by citing visual evidence.

While it was clear to the art fellows that VTS could be an effective way for visitors to engage the art, the tour guides took some convincing. In addition to teaching visitors about Chiefs history, the didactic stadium tours also provided guides with a consistent, replicable tour format. Unlike the stadium tour, VTS art tours require audience participation to generate discussion. Asking open-ended questions transforms the tour guide from an all-knowing sage into a helpful facilitator. Initially, the guides found this this loss of conversational control a bit intimidating.

Despite some initial hesitance, the VTS model has been a success. Reports from our guides suggest that, while there are the occasional comedian comments, most visitor groups

settle down into thoughtful discussions. Even frequent stadium visitors discover new things about the art when they stop and really look at a work. By sharing their personal reactions with their peers, the groups are collectively able to reach new understandings of each artwork. Once visitors get comfortable talking about what they see and how it makes them feel, they realize that their reactions are valid, defensible, and that they can support their observations with evidence.

SO, what does all this art analysis through VTS have to do with the potential of sports museums? It points to the untapped potential to engage in serious cultural analysis at many sports museums. I want to propose that this sort of open-ended discussion model can be a new way to get visitors talking about sports *outside the lines*. Sports museums often suffer from a “hall of fame syndrome.” They venerate the exceptional few that stand out from a group of already remarkable athletes, celebrating their feats of athleticism but often ignoring crucial cultural context. This myopic focus may serve the interests of the corporate sponsor, but it also elides a deeper and potentially more satisfying look at interrelationship between sporting and non-sporting culture.

The corporate sports museum’s emphasis on athletic achievement also limits the discussion to non-controversial topics. As the guides giving our didactic stadium tours can attest, there is a comforting control when the discussion is limited to enshrined statistics, player hagiographies, and facile team mythologies. Sure, debates take place in many hall of fames, but they tend to be comparative in nature – arguing about how to judge athletes from different eras, or the obsession with superlative “Top Ten” lists. What would it look like to talk about other aspects of sport, specifically topics that delve into the sometimes-uncomfortable triumvirate of race, class, and gender?



This “sports museum as site of broader cultural analysis” aspiration is not without its critics. Setting the agenda outside the lines will inevitably lead to accusations of interpretive activism, of operating beyond the sports museum’s scope. There is also the undeniable fact that many sports museums are corporate spaces with defined profit goals and carefully crafted marketing messages. The Chiefs “Hall of Honor,” for instance, not only promotes a narrowly construed, football-centric club history, but it is also revenue generating through a corporate sponsorship. It seems unlikely that this sponsor would invite a controversial exhibit about, say, concussions or domestic violence. But visitors are likely familiar with these topics, capable of engaging them, and may note their conspicuous omission. One of the most profound insights from my experience leading art discussions in the stadium is that visitors are capable of much more critical analysis than I had initially imagined.

As interpreters, we control the frame for discussion during tours. We can plant seeds with questions designed to get visitors thinking about not only what is presented, but also what is absent. Drawing attention to the gaps in sports commemoration invites the visitor to become a more critical exhibit consumer, and (hopefully) whets their appetite for discussing broader cultural topics. The activist tour guide at an overly celebratory exhibit could intentionally interpret *against the grain* of the overarching narrative, enlisting the help of the visitor in identifying the missing elements. Who knows? If visitor interest in conspicuously absent or controversial content makes its way into museum feedback, there might eventually be enough support for broader cultural analysis that even corporate museums would be willing to expand their exhibits beyond “hall of fame” style commemoration.

*Matthew Reeves*  
*University of Missouri-Kansas City*

Zach Klitzman  
NCPH Working Group – Sports History Museums  
Case Statement

### The Dream of a D.C. Sports History Museum

Throughout my life, I have always been passionate about sports. Ironically, my Kindergarten teacher, not my parents, inspired me to play and watch sports. However, my parents instilled in me a separate passion for museums, especially history museums. A native of Washington, D.C., I also am proud of where I grew up and where I live today. Combining these facets of my identity, I have often dreamed of working at a hypothetical museum dedicated to Washington sports. While this case statement can only sketch the museum in its broadest strokes, I hope that by participating in the NCPH Working Group on Sports History, I can better determine if this abstract vision has any potential.

The District of Columbia has developed a reputation as a bad sports town, especially in recent years. Not one but two baseball teams left, leaving the city without the national pastime for over 30 years. Even while the Senators still played in Washington, their record was abysmal, leading to the joke that the city was “First in War, First in Peace, Last in the American League.” Meanwhile, since a successful decade in the 1970s, the Washington Bullets (now Wizards) have had a fairly pedestrian history on-the-court. Off it, their lowest point came when two players brought guns into the locker room after a game of cards got out of hand. The Washington Capitals only won a single division title in their first 25 years, and while they’ve had regular season success in the subsequent 15 years, the team has failed to make a deep run in the playoffs, let alone win the Stanley Cup. Lastly, while the Washington Redskins have had the most impressive success of any D.C. sports team, their last Super Bowl win came 25 years ago. In the interim, they’ve had high draft picks notoriously flame out, their owner continually appears on “worst owner in sports” lists, and Native Americans, as well as much of the general public, have derided their nickname as derogatory and racist. This checkered history has led to a neglect of D.C. sports nationally. The introduction to a recent anthology on D.C. sports history stated: “For a city

routinely thrust into the national spotlight, Washington has had a strange history of being ignored by big-time professional sports.”<sup>1</sup> Washington might be Hollywood for ugly people, as the old saw goes, but it is not viewed as a sports mecca.

Yet, despite the lack of titles, Washington, D.C. sports still has a fascinating history—with parts both laudatory and unflattering. “The fact is, sport has been an essential part of the city’s character almost ever since the late nineteenth century,” the editors of the anthology cited above state. “Washington is more than just a government town. It is also a city in which sport occupies an equally important place. In many ways, to understand Washington is to understand its sport history.”<sup>2</sup> For instance, professional baseball in the city dates to the 1870s, well before the Senators left town. The Washington Wizards participated in the first championship game of any North American sport with two Black coaches, while the Redskins were the last NFL team to integrate. The Capitals participated in longest Game 7 in Stanley Cup playoffs history while the Nationals hold the same record for MLB playoff games.<sup>3</sup> D.C. United has won the most trophies of any MLS team. The city also has a long history of nonprofessional sports. Georgetown University’s basketball team dominated the 1980s, and perhaps the most famous high school basketball program in the country, DeMatha, plays their home games just outside the city limits. A Washington sports history museum would cover all these teams and more.

Washington, D.C. could benefit from more locally focused museums.<sup>4</sup> The city is known for its nationally orientated museums of the Smithsonian, National Park Service and related sites on the Mall. Yet there also is importance in keeping its local identity separate from its function as national capital. Just like the perception of Washington, D.C. as a backwards sports town, there’s a perception that no

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<sup>1</sup> *D.C. Sports: The Nation’s Capital at Play*, eds., Chris Elzey and David K. Wiggins (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* xviii-xix.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately both were losses for the D.C. team.

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, many great museums and historic sites already focus on D.C.’s history. Yet few directly cover sports.

one is “from” Washington; the city is full of transplants. A museum dedicated to the sporting history of Washingtonians would show otherwise. Local museums inherently have the power to shape perception of communities. Well-run museums that are “local” in scope, do not inherently limit their potential audience. In the foreword to *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America’s Changing Communities* David Kyvig writes, “Reasons for visiting museums are often strongly linked to a sense of place, whether one’s own community or one that sparks curiosity. The desire to connect to a locale, to understand it, identify with it, or simply enjoy its distinctiveness is a common impulse that a close-by museum serves to satisfy.”<sup>5</sup> A D.C. sports history museum would not just be a minor attraction for locals, but also would be a place where visitors from across America could learn about the city’s unique sporting history.

After all, sports has a unique power to bring together large sections of America. Sports historians and social scientists alike have analyzed what attracts people to sports. One theory postulates that the decline of the cohesion of the American family and rise of mobile populations has led to an increase in the attractiveness of sports affiliations.<sup>6</sup> Fans with a common history and sense of the past create their own bonds. This is the power of sports history. Similarly, sports public history also can serve as a lens into a kaleidoscope of American society. As S.W. Pope has written, sports “provide a dynamic, accessible window into politics, economics, gender, race, class formation, ideology, religion and virtually any other topic.”<sup>7</sup> A Washington sports history museum would hopefully tackle all these issues.

Fortunately, a base for this hypothetical museum already exists. Currently, there is a Washington, D.C. Sports Hall of Fame. Founded in 1980, the Hall of Fame, according to a press release

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<sup>5</sup> David E. Kyvig, foreword to *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America’s Changing Communities*, edited by Amy K. Levin. (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard O Davies, *Sport in American Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing 2007), 444.

<sup>7</sup> S.W. Pope, Introduction: American Sport History—Toward a New Paradigm, in *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives*, edited by S. W. Pope, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 1.

announcing the Class of 2014, “pays special tribute to men and women who have brought honor and recognition to the Nation’s Capital as a result of their outstanding achievements in the sports world.” It is chaired by local public announcer Charlie Brotman, and Comcast SportsNet’s Andy Ockershausen. Each year, a 10-person panel including Washington Nationals principal owner Mark Lerner, and local sports media members such as former *Washington Post* Sports Editor George Solomon select several figures for entry. The 125-plus inductees participated in all types of sports, at different levels, or were owners, sportscasters and sportswriters. Inductees include Walter Johnson, Sammy Baugh, Dominique Dawes, Shirley Povich, Sonny Jurgensen, Harmon Killebrew, Sugar Ray Leonard, Vince Lombardi, and Patrick Ewing.<sup>8</sup> However, there is no actual “hall of fame” museum. In fact, all that actually memorializes the group of inductees is a large banner covering a garage just past leftfield of Nationals Park.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a dedicated museum to the history of sports in the nation’s capital would provide the perfect place to house a real-life interactive Washington D.C. Sports Hall of Fame.

Of course, there are practical considerations before my dream can become a reality. I do not have a concrete funding plan, though my goal would be to get the direct involvement of the local sports teams. Yet that comes with certain pitfalls, as these multimillion dollar businesses obviously would want to protect their precious brands. Still, I think using the collaborative base of the Washington Sports Hall of Fame shows that cross-sports unity could be marshalled to create a memorable museum in the city. Hopefully one day, my dream could become a reality.

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<sup>8</sup> “Povich Center’s George Solomon Named To Dc Sports Hall Of Fame,” University of Maryland [http://merrill.umd.edu/2014/04/solomon\\_hall\\_of\\_fame/](http://merrill.umd.edu/2014/04/solomon_hall_of_fame/); Dan Steinberg, “Washington D.C. Sports Hall of Fame will finally induct its first D.C. United player,” *Washington Post*, December 22, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/dc-sports-bog/wp/2015/12/22/washington-d-c-sports-hall-of-fame-will-finally-induct-its-first-d-c-united-player>.

<sup>9</sup> See this image from Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/amandarykoff/7445795994>.