Globalization in the 1930s?

There has been an explosion of research on globalization and sport over the last five years, most of which concentrates on the expansion of sport since the middle of the Twentieth century. Barbara Keys’ book on sport’s role in globalization, however, examines the decade of the 1930s as the “critical period in the expansion of sport” (2). Even after the worldwide depression that could have led to the demise of international sport, the 1930s nonetheless saw the solidification of the importance of the Olympic Games and the creation of soccer’s World Cup. Keys concentrates on the dominant position of the United States in particular as the host of the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles; Nazi Germany and the impact of the Berlin Olympics in 1936; and the internal battle in the Soviet Union between athletic isolation and participation in international competition. With these three countries and their roles in developing what Keys calls “the imagined world of international sport during the 1930s” (2), Globalizing Sport offers a cohesive comparative element often lacking in sport history. Representing three vastly different political ideologies, the three countries Keys examines not only played a large role in shaping the world of international sport within the 1930s and throughout the rest of the century, but they were also highly isolationist in their general stance towards foreign policy (5). Even with this tension between internationalism and isolation, Keys nonetheless argues that three generally influential countries combined to shape modern sport.

In her introduction and first two chapters, Keys expands on sport’s role as one of the most effective aspects of mass culture in driving globalization. Sport has the ability to bring together the far corners of the world, in this case, onto the same athletic field playing under
the same rules. Thus, the national and the international mutually reinforce each other through sport as countries face one another at international meets, especially the Olympic Games (4, 9). Keys traces the early connections between sport and the state, demonstrating how modern sports (based on a codification of time, records, and rules) edged out more local or nationalist sports (in particular gymnastics) to become the basis of international sport based upon mutual understanding (39). With the creation of international sport governing bodies such as the International Olympic Committee in 1894 and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association in 1904, the ideas of national representation and rivalry became formally instituted within the world of sport as countries directly competed against one another. At the same time, however, these mega-events also promoted a universalist idea of sport for all with the creation of standardized rules (62-3).

Keys then uses the three countries to demonstrate that “the nationalism and internationalism of sport operated in tandem, as nationalist aspirations served to propel the internationalization of sport culture” (63). While baseball and football dominated the twentieth-century American sport landscape and the country has been largely unsuccessful in accepting for the world's most popular game of soccer,1 Keys argues that the idea of the American century does hold true for sport if one includes amateur sport and construes sport culture rather broadly (64-5). By participating in international sport the United States helped spread the “American way of life” and ideas of democracy to other countries. With these same events the Americans involved as both participants and spectators came to believe that sport exchanges “promoted peace and mutual understanding” (74). Americans routinely beat competitors from other countries on these sport tours, but their most significant contribution was in its commercialization or “Americanization” of sport. This is demonstrated most vividly with the hosting of the 1932 Summer Olympics by the city of Los Angeles. Keys’ research reinforces the work already done on the 1932 Games,2 though she does place it within her wider argument regarding the intersection of nationalism and internationalism. The Olympics became an event for the masses with the commercialization of the Los Angeles Games, while the expansion of international sport, fueled by the Olympics, helped draw the United States out of its isolationism.

---

1Andrei Markovits and Steven Hellerman argue that soccer was crowded out from above (with football and, to an extent, basketball) and from below (with baseball) and has thus been unable to secure a place within the dominant sport culture in the United States. Markovits and Hellerman do acknowledge the prominence of basketball as the second-largest global game today, but in the first half of the twentieth century, when sports were securing their space in the American landscape, there was no room for soccer, a game also seen to represent the “old country” when many immigrants were attempting to adjust to life in the United States. Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman, Offside: Soccer & American Exceptionalism (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Turning to the next Olympic host, Germany, Keys then explores how National Socialism co-opted sport to achieve its goals, particularly in the realm of foreign relations. Again, Keys' conclusion that Nazi Germany used sport in the most concerted effort to achieve foreign policy goals (132) reaffirms older literature.³ Keys does, however, show how the Nazis went from initially disregarding international sport to utilizing it to further their aims, though they never fully accepted sport because of the uncertainty of the outcome. Max Schmeling’s 1938 loss to Joe Louis and the dominating performances at the Berlin Olympics by Jesse Owens and other African-American athletes brought into question the legitimacy of the Nazi racial theories. For as much as the 1936 Olympics showcased the Third Reich, the concessions granted “the virtues of internationalism and the achievements of other races” a place within Nazi Germany, however briefly they might have lasted (157).

Lastly, in her most original chapter, Keys brings to light the tensions between the leaders of international sport and the Soviet Union in the 1930s, with repeated rapprochement and rebuke throughout the decade. The accepted view that the Soviet Union’s isolation after the October Revolution, reinforced within sport by the country’s withdrawal from the Olympic movement until 1952, is based from James Riordan’s pioneering work on communist sport.⁴ Yet the documents that Keys has uncovered in the archives concerning soccer and the Soviet Union’s attempts to join FIFA but on its own terms, demonstrate that the U.S.S.R. was not nearly as isolationist in sport as previously believed. Even with limited participation in international sport, Soviet sport culture nonetheless transformed from the Sportintern (the sport organization created as an adjunct to the Comintern) and its promotion of worker sport to the creation of leagues for soccer and other sports modeled on the western European structure.

While Keys expounds upon the interconnectedness of nationalism and internationalism in sport during the 1930s, she does not demonstrate as fully the globalizing nature of sport in the decade. Perhaps the publisher preferred “Globalizing” within the title to appeal to a broader audience than Keys’ dissertation title – “The Dictatorship of Sport”⁵ – which more accurately describes the nature of the leading countries in changing sport during the 1930s.


⁴Russia last participated in the Olympic Games at the 1912 Games in Stockholm. The Soviet Union did not participate in any of the interwar Olympic Games, the 1948 Olympics, or the 1952 Winter Olympics in Oslo. The Soviet Union did, however, send observers to the 1948 London Olympics. On the IOC’s acceptance of and reservations regarding the Soviet Union, see James Riordan, “To Be Or Not To Be: Soviet Entry Into the Olympic Movement,” in The Olympic Games Through the Ages: Greek Antiquity and its Impact on Modern Sport, ed. Roland Renson, Manfred Lämmer, James Riordan, and Dimitrios Chassiotis (Athens: Hellenic Sports Research Institute, 1991), 371-81; James Riordan, Sport, Politics and Communism (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991); Alfred E. Senn, Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1999).

The United States, though a democracy by political structure, pioneered many aspects of modern sport, including the commercialization of sport with Hollywood's influence on the 1932 Summer Olympics and the necessity of running the Games without financial assistance as a result of the Great Depression. Its dominant position as the leading country in the furthering of training methods, the morality of sport, and the homogenization of sporting rules show the intent of the United States to assert its control over the international sporting community. In addition, the three countries on which Keys concentrates her study can all be considered part of the western world; Asian and, even less frequently, Latin American or African countries are hardly used to support the globalizing nature of sport in her work. Keys briefly discusses Japan with respect to its success at the 1932 Olympics and its selection as the host of the 1940 Games. However, a chapter or two devoted to Japan's sporting success and its preparations for the 1940 Olympics (ultimately cancelled because of the World War) would have strengthened the argument of globalization and carried it through the end of the decade. While language limitations obviously prevent such a comparison, an in-depth examination of Japan would have furthered the ideas of both a dictatorship of sport as well as demonstrate the full impact of globalization of sport during the 1930s.

Overall, *Globalizing Sport* presents an interesting comparison of the sporting cultures within three politically opposite countries to demonstrate the pervasiveness of sport at both a societal and political level. While only the chapter on the Soviet Union presents ground-breaking work, Keys nonetheless brings together the sport history of three important countries that shaped the 1930s not only in the history of the world, but also the direction of modern sport. Yet sport cannot be studied on its own; it is a reflective aspect of society that demonstrates, in the case of the 1930s, the important relationship of international organizations and structures and national identity (189). By using sport in framing the discussion of a larger issue confronting the interwar world, Keys has produced a worthwhile book for a wide variety of scholars with an interest in sport or simply the issues, ideas, or decade addressed within *Globalizing Sports*. 

Copyright © 2008 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.