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# Sports Reporting

Amy J. Lloyd

University of Cambridge

Various source media, British Library Newspapers



At the beginning of the nineteenth century, sport garnered little coverage in the press. However, with a modern sporting culture emerging in Britain during the Victorian period, there was a concomitant growth in sports reporting, with a specialised sporting press emerging and newspapers allocating increased space to sporting news. With the press also playing an important role in the development of sport and sporting culture in Britain during this period, this essay will consider the expansion and significance of sports reporting in nineteenth-century Britain.

During the early nineteenth century, with the Stamp Duty effectively serving to limit most newspapers to four pages, sport often garnered limited coverage in most newspapers; moreover, those few articles which were published primarily related to horse racing. A handful of newspapers and periodicals during this period did, however, provide more substantial reporting on sporting activity and events in Britain. Firstly, there were several weekly newspapers which regularly allocated a sizeable amount of space to sporting news. One of these papers was the *Weekly Dispatch*, which devoted a whole page to sport each week during the early nineteenth century. Secondly, after 1792, readers with a shilling to spare could purchase *The Sporting Magazine*—a monthly magazine that was aimed at the middle and upper classes. Reporting on a wide variety of sports and selling around 3,000 copies per month by 1795, it provided its readers with extensive and wide-ranging sporting news and information—from detailed results of sporting events, to background information to aid the placing of bets, to advice and tips on playing sports, to sporting rules and codes of law, to a detailed almanac listing forthcoming sporting events; readers

were also invited to contribute to its 'Sporting Intelligence' column. Much of the content which was offered in *The Sporting Magazine*—thought to be Britain's first sporting periodical—was replicated in sporting periodicals throughout the rest of the century.

Much of the sporting material published in *The Sporting Magazine* and newspapers during this period was provided for the purpose of gambling. Indeed, betting on sport was an increasingly popular activity in Britain during the early nineteenth century, with a large expansion of betting facilities. As a result, by the 1820s, more and more newspapers had begun to grant increased space to sport—particularly to horse racing intelligence. Weekly newspapers which devoted significant space to sport also became increasingly popular during this period. By 1820, the *Weekly Dispatch* had established itself as the principal sporting newspaper in Britain. However, its dominance was challenged after 1822 when the weekly paper *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* commenced publication and quickly reached sales of 25,000 copies per week. When the *Weekly Dispatch* abandoned sporting news in 1834, *Bell's* was left as the premier sporting newspaper in Britain.

Indeed, by the 1830s, the position of *The Sporting Magazine* had weakened significantly. It now not only faced considerable competition from weekly newspapers in the provision of sporting news—which were moreover better able to provide timely reports and results, and could also foster a more intimate relationship with their readers—but also from a number of new monthly sporting magazines. These new competitors—such as *The New Sporting*

*Magazine*, founded in 1831—competed for *The Sporting Magazine*'s elite readership and concentrated primarily on field sports (a focus which *The Sporting Magazine* eventually adopted.) However, the position of these monthly magazines deteriorated—wholly surpassed in circulation by weekly sporting newspapers—and by mid-century they were struggling to survive.

By contrast, *Bell's* thrived during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, with its circulation hovering between 20,000 and 30,000. Appealing to a primarily elite audience, its sporting news covered such activities as pugilism (boxing), field sports, pedestrianism and horse racing, and surpassed that of many other sources in its comprehensiveness and quantity. *Bell's* particularly served as a focal point for gambling on sport, becoming the leader in publishing racing intelligence. Wanting to provide accurate, up-to-date sporting information, it started to employ "expert" writers to cover particular sports and send journalists to cover sporting events. As with a number of other newspapers during this period, it also made an effort to regulate and supervise sporting activity in Britain, publishing challenges that were offered and accepted by sportsmen, acting as a stakeholder for sporting contests, and deciding disputes; it also sometimes organised events.

*Bell's* supremacy as the premier sporting newspaper in Britain remained unchallenged until the 1850s. During the second half of the nineteenth century, fed in part by rising incomes and increased leisure time, there was a huge expansion and development in sport in Britain—

with the range of sports increasing; the number of people playing, watching and following sport growing dramatically; a number of sports being transformed into national and even international activities; and increased commercialisation, professionalism, codification and institutionalisation. There was also a growing enthusiasm for gambling on sport. As a result, when conditions in the late 1850s and early 1860s finally permitted the publication of cheaper newspapers in Britain, a new breed of sporting paper—aimed at the masses and reporting exclusively on sport—sprang into existence to meet a growing desire for sporting news, information and commentary. Improvements in communication technologies during this period—with the electric telegraph becoming more widely used—also facilitated this growth, allowing for the more rapid reporting of sporting results.

The first of these new sporting newspapers was *Penny Bell's Life and Sporting News*; starting publication in 1859, issued twice weekly and quickly changing its name to *Sporting Life*, it was the first penny paper devoted to sport. It was quickly joined by the *Sporting Telegraph* (1860), *Sporting Gazette* (1862), *Sporting Opinion* (1864) and *Sportsman* and *Sporting Times* (both 1865). During the 1870s, new sporting papers also began to be published outside London, including the Manchester-based *Sporting Chronicle* (1871) and *Athletic News* (1875). While usually covering a wide range of sports—from team games like cricket and football, to pastimes like golf and tennis, to the more elite sports—most of these new papers concentrated in particular on horse racing, offering their eager readers the latest betting intelligence, starting prices and race results, and employing tipsters and training-area

correspondents who provided advice and tips, forecasts of races and recommended horses to follow. Moreover, these new papers continued the practice of promoting, sponsoring, organising and administering sport—particularly activities of lesser spectator interest, such as swimming and billiards. Thus, by the 1870s, a cheap sporting press had emerged which catered for an increasing market of readers who desired the latest sporting news from a growing world of sports. Many of these papers attracted large readerships; indeed, such was their popularity that by the 1880s *Sportsman*, *Sporting Life* and *Sporting Chronicle* had started to publish daily and had circulations of over 300,000.

By the 1880s, sport had also begun to receive increased coverage in the wider newspaper press. Halfpenny evening newspapers were the first to start capitalising on the rising popularity and regularity of organised sport in Britain, providing more content by the 1880s, particularly on horse racing and football. Indeed, their coverage of sport became one of their primary selling points. Some evening papers even offered a number of editions from the mid-afternoon onwards which brought readers the very latest sporting results. With football rapidly rising in popularity during the 1870s and 1880s, readers interested in the results of football play on Saturdays could also from the 1880s onwards purchase Saturday night football "specials", which were published by weekly and evening papers; rising from four in the 1880s—including the Bolton *Evenings News*, *Football Field* and *Sports Telegram*—they were ubiquitous after 1900. As for the rest of the newspaper press, sports coverage generally increased steadily during the second half of the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, many newspapers had a regular

sports column—covering all manner of sport—and some had even started to employ their own sports staff. This was especially the case with the mass-circulation papers. For example, *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*—which, in 1896, was the first British paper to reach a circulation of one million—devoted almost a page and a half to sport by the end of the century.

Finally, after mid-century, new varieties of magazines devoted to sport were also established. Firstly, new general interest sports magazines were founded which were aimed at a wide readership and reported on a large range of sports, including *Baily's Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* (founded in 1860) and *Badminton Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* (founded in 1895). The latter in particular featured a very wide range of sports—from football and cricket to cycling and golf—reflecting a sports world in Britain that had become by this period much more varied. Indeed, such was the growth of people participating in and following sport in Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century that the market was able to support a number of specialist newspapers and periodicals which were devoted to individual sports, including *Fishing Gazette* (1877), *The Cyclist* (1879), *Cricket* (1882), *Golf* (1890) and *Cycling* (1891). With growing numbers of (particularly middle-class) women participating in sport by the late nineteenth century, female sporting magazines had also appeared by the end of the century, including *Lady's Cyclist* (1895), *Ladies' Field* (1896) and *Hockey Field* (1901). Indeed, by the late nineteenth century there was increased attention paid to women's sport in both the general and sporting press. For example, between 1862 and 1892, *The Times* mentioned

women's sports only once or twice per year; however, from the early 1890s, reports on women's sport multiplied, with coverage of women's participation in such sports as tennis, cycling, golf and hockey.

Thus, over the course of the nineteenth century—and particularly after mid-century—sport became extremely popular in Britain and increasing numbers of people desired to read about it. They not only wanted to know the results of particular sporting events, but also about the inner workings of the sporting world—particularly about the lives and personalities of its many heroic participants. The press in Britain met this increased demand for sports reporting, with many specialist sporting periodicals (upwards of 150 by 1901) appearing and with ever-growing reporting on sport in the wider press.

This increased coverage of sport in newspapers and periodicals exerted a strong influence on the development of sport and sporting culture in Britain during this period. By conveying sporting news across the country, the press contributed to the creation of a national sporting culture. Moreover, increased coverage of sport in newspapers and periodicals served to stimulate the growth and popularity of many sports—expanding their audiences and participants and thus increasing their commercial viability by providing publicity and advertising, stimulating and fostering excitement, and creating, moulding and intensifying readers' loyalties to particular sports, teams and players. Indeed, many in Britain first encountered numerous sports not by watching or playing them, but through coverage in the press; readers were drawn into

an imagined sporting community, and could choose to become either active or passive participants. Moreover, in the issues that were raised and how sports were represented, the press influenced the way the public viewed sports. Finally, some newspapers and periodicals even tried to foster and organise commercial sporting activity, and their efforts played an important role in increasing the number of sporting events and in the development of commercial sport. Thus, the press played an important role in the emergence of a modern sporting culture in Britain during the nineteenth century.

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