

Editor's Introduction: Korean Sports History

Seok Lee*

Many scholars habitually begin their books or papers with a complaint about how their research area has been sidelined compared to others. I cannot avoid this cliché in starting my editorial introduction; sports have been the most overlooked topic in the Korean history field as this special issue is the first one centered around sports among any academic journals in the field of Korean history for both Korean and Anglophone audiences.¹ I implore intellectuals to consider sports as a serious subject for investigation, which is replete with reflective scholarly questions. Even American and European academia, the epicenter of sports studies, have only recently received the critical acclaim of mainstream academic legitimacy during the past few decades. Prior to the 1970s, writing about

* Associate Director of the James Joo-Jin Kim Program in Korean Studies, University of Pennsylvania

1 There is no consensus on the origins of modern sports among scholars. Allen Guttman, influenced by Weber's rationalization thesis, provides a list of modern sports' characteristics: secularism, equality, rationalization, specialization, bureaucratization, quantification, and the quest for records. Some scholars of figurational sociology have highlighted how sports became less violent and more democratic from the eighteenth century onward hinged upon the theory of civilizing processes. See Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1979).

sports history was a killer for an academic profession as a historian. Historians had to conceal their interest in sports or be employed in other departments to advance their sports-related research.²

The crucial dynamic in the expansion of sports history discipline has been linked to wider intellectual trends and social upheavals in Europe and North America. "Total" history, advocated by the French-based Annales School, included within its ambit all aspects of social, economic, cultural, demographic, and environmental history beyond the chambers of high politics. While the exponents of the Annales School such as Fernand Braudel, Marc Bloch, and Georges Lefebvre did not concentrate on sports, their attempt to broaden the subject area of history later affected the birth of the sports history discipline. Such British Marxist-influenced scholars as E.P. Thompson, George Rudé, Eric Hobsbawm, and Rodney Hilton formed new social history with the label of 'history from below.' Like the Annales School, their main interests were not sports, but their approach to the role of human agency and class struggle in leisure time pursuits and popular culture of all groups, including industrial and agricultural laborers, shaped the prototype for sports history. At the University of Birmingham during the 1970s, Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and their colleagues, inspired by Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, created a new field of cultural studies that devoted intelligent and rigorous attention to less "high-brow" forms of culture: chart music, television programs, film, advertising, sports, and many other ordinary pursuits. Anthropological and sociological concepts inexorably linked to sports history were expanded by various thinkers from Max Weber, Clifford Geertz, Norbert Elias, and Michel Foucault.³

2 Steven A. Riess, "The New Sport History," *Reviews in American History* 18, no. 3 (September 1990): 311.

3 Martin Polley, *Sports History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 44-8; Robert Edelman and Wayne Wilson, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sports History*, ed. Robert Edelman and Wayne Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-12.

Affected by the European intellectual trend, American sports history scholarship transformed dramatically as a recognized subdiscipline in the early 1970s when the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement destabilized the dominant consensus in progress and prosperity in both academia and American society. It was within this period of intellectual ferment that a broad swath of young historians shifted their consideration from political events and elite-centered ideas to collective processes and the experiences of everyday life, including sports. The establishment of the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) in 1972 met the needs and interests of a growing body of scholars interested in studying sports history along with its *Journal of Sports History* first published in 1974. Sports history became regular courses for undergraduate and graduate students in the following decades. A growing number of scholarly monographs on sports began to appear through academic publishers, making the 1980s the golden age of sports history. Since the late twentieth century, sports history has become part of mainstream history.⁴

Unfortunately, sports history is still an uncharted territory of little interest or value to broader parent disciplines in Korea. Most mainstream history journals and publishers seem to be unaware of or unconvinced by the academic relevance of sports studies to major historiographical themes. Even today, it is difficult to find any scholar who received a Ph.D. in sports-related topics from a history department, not to mention tenured faculty members. Any courses for graduate and undergraduate students of history do not embody sports as even a minor topic. Only a handful of articles germane to sports can be found in most conventional academic journals such as *Jindan hakbo*, *Yōksa hakbo*, *Yōksa pip'yōng* and *Yōksa wa hyōnsil* in the Korean history academe. We can trace the emergence of

4 S. W. Pope and John Nauright, "Introduction," in *Routledge Companion to Sports History*, ed. S.W. Pope and John Nauright (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3-11; S. W. Pope, "Introduction: American Sport History—Toward a New Paradigm," in *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. S.W. Pope (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 1-5.

cultural studies in South Korea to the late 1980s due to democratization and the Korean wave phenomena, but sports are still invisible. The complete neglect of sports by the Korean history academe stands in sharp contrast to Western counterparts who acknowledge sports as a subdiscipline within the history department. There is no specific theory on why persistent apathy has slowed the integration of sports into broader cultural contexts in the curricula of the humanities and social sciences in Korea, in particular history. Korean historians' reticence to reflect upon sport might stem from intellectual snobbery, career concerns, or a conviction that detailed analyses of sport would not further new knowledge and elucidate imperative historical inquiries. Even in the U.S., the parameter, purpose, role, and status of sports history is still a thorny issue in academia. At least, however, there are intense discussions and debates on epistemology and theory in the mainstream history domain.⁵

Apart from Korean history academia's unawareness of or insolence to sports history, the Korean physical education discipline's monopoly on this field makes it prosaic. The beginning of research on physical education history in Korea coincided with the end of the Korean War in 1953 when the Han'guk ch'eyuk hakhoe (Korean Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance) was established. Na Hyönsöng, professor of physical education at Seoul National University and the trailblazer of Korean physical education scholarship, published *Han'guk süp'ooch'ü sa* (Korean Sports History) in 1958, which became the standard textbook for many years. Not until the 1960s did the number of scholars, research centers at universities, academic conferences and associations grow. With the creation of the Han'guk ch'eyuksa hakhoe (Korean Society for History of Physical Education, Sport and Dance) in 1994 and *Han'guk ch'eyuksa hakhoe chi* (Korean Journal of History of Physical Education, Sport and Dance) in 1996 came a turning point in Korean

5 For instance, in the June 2014 issue of the *Journal of American History*, which included a forum titled, "State of the Field: Sports in American History," seven scholars tackled the question of sport's place in the historical academy.

physical education studies in terms of the number of researchers and published articles.⁶ Even though their research on Korean sports history is chronologically and thematically interwoven with Korean history, there has been no collaboration between the two academic branches.⁷

A more fundamental issue in physical education studies in Korea lies in the dubious quality of publications in substantial numbers. At least in terms of quantity, their unadorned empirical bricks contributed to the academic sub-discipline status of sports history, but much of the work produced in the physical education domain is uninspired for many reasons: the lack of primary sources and the ability to interpret them, few interdisciplinary approaches and comparative historical perspectives, and an absence of social theory.⁸ For instance, their research on the sports history of colonial Korea is mostly based on a simple nationalistic frame touting a constructive role of Korean sports for independence in a cultish manner. Most are untrained as historians resulting in narrative rather than analysis and failing to catch up with the mainstream academic trend.

The evolution of the sports history discipline in the U.S provides some implications for the forthcoming direction of the Korean sports history field. The physical education discipline predates the history department with publishing pioneering historical volume of American sports history since the late nineteenth century. However, it vouchsafed a shallow narrative chronicle of the role of sport in American culture. Stimulated by methodological sophistication and analytical rigor from the mainstream

6 Pak Cindy, "Han'guk ūi ch'eyuksa yŏn'gu ūi tonghyang mit kwaje (A Study on the Trend and Assignment of the Sport History in Korea)," *Han'guk ch'eyuksa hakhoe chi* 19, no. 4 (December 2014): 15-31.

7 Sim Sŭnggu and Choi Yŏmi, "Han'guk ch'eyuksa ūi hoego wa chŏnmang-Han'guk ch'eyuksa hakhoe chi (2006-2015) rŭl chungsim ūro (Retrospect and Prospect for Korean Sport History: Focusing on the Korean Journal of History for Physical Education (2006-2015))," *Ch'eyuk kwahak yŏn'gu* 27, no. 4 (December 2016): 691-704.

8 Sim Sŭnggu and Choi Yŏmi, "Han'guk ch'eyuksa ūi hoego wa chŏnmang-Han'guk ch'eyuksa hakhoe chi (2006-2015) rŭl chungsim ūro." 691-704.

history field, a new group of physical educators transformed the old paradigm and began to churn out first-rate works in the 1960s and 1970s. Concomitantly, historians concerned with a new wave of intellectual trends jumped into this new field around this time. The development of the aforementioned NASSH founded in 1972 was possible due to the physical education domain's openness to traditional historians. The uneasy conflation of the two groups attracted inquisitive scholars from other fields such as anthropology, sociology, communication and so on.⁹ As Polley aptly points out, "Sport is just as much a legitimate area for historical study as war, religion, social conditions, politics, and any other subject traditionally taught in history departments," and "(h)istory is just as much a legitimate area for sports studies as physiology, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, management, and any other subject traditionally taught in sport departments."¹⁰ This historical context of the sports history field informs us that without inter- or trans-disciplinary approaches, sports history in Korea will remain in limbo.

All the same, I do not underestimate the growth in the fledgling Korean sports history field. The unreceptive environment notwithstanding, seminal works on Korean sports history as a multifaceted historical phenomenon tackling various topics from a legion of disciplines began to appear: tradition, religion, colonialism, national identity, transnationalism, dictatorship, international relations, class, race, gender, body culture, hygiene, commercialism, journalism, and urbanization, among others. Not only has our understanding of Korean sport been enriched by a vast array of disciplines, but the study of sport has also shed new light on major historical issues.

9 Murray G. Phillips and Alexander Paul Roper, "History of Physical Education," in *Handbook of Physical Education*, ed. David Kirk, Doune Macdonald and Mary O'Sullivan (London: Sage, 2006), 123-25; Mark Dyreson, "The United States of America," in *Routledge Companion to Sports History*, ed. S.W. Pope and John Nauright (New York: Routledge, 2010), 599-605.

10 Martin Polley, *Sports History*, xiii-xv.

The three articles in this special issue intend to stimulate further discussion and provide new interpretations of Korean sports history. By presenting Lee Sang-beck (Yi Sangbaek)'s engagement with Olympic movements both for Imperial Japan and postcolonial South Korea, Guoxian Jin and Younghan Cho offer a new insight into cultural politics of the Olympics in East Asia. Lee was a towering figure in the Korean sports community as an elite sportsman graduating from Waseda University, a prominent scholar in history and sociology academia, and the second South Korean member of the IOC. In this paper, Jin and Cho show Lee's transition from colonial elite to postcolonial founding figure based on key narratives of Lee's variable, contested, and contradictory Olympic movement: "sport for amateurism," "sport not of nation but of state," and "sport through internationalism." Lee's multifaceted participation and conception on sports illuminates "the colonial and the Cold War regimes as more than separation and therefore of penetrating the dis/continuity between the colonial and the Cold War eras." In terms of the role of a sports administrator transcending the (post) colonial era, this paper reconsiders the conventional periodization of Korean sports history following major political upheavals: The Preliminary Stage (1890s–1910), Colonial Korea (1910–1945), Nationalist Modernization after Liberation (1945–1979), the 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Summer Olympics (1980–1988), and the Era of Liberalization (1989–present).¹¹

Sports have provided dramatic occasions for both ruptures and repairs in the volatile relations between Seoul and Pyongyang. The officials from both Koreas first engaged in a talk with each other to discuss a unified team for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games since the Geneva Conference of 1954, the international meeting dealing with the problem of the divided Koreas and Vietnam. Jong Sung Lee discusses the multilayered origins and aftermaths of rivalry between the two Koreas during the 1964 Tokyo Games. He offers a historical background of North Korea's attempt to participate in the Games and withdrawal from the Games, and the ideo-

11 Lee Hangnae, *Han'guk ch'eyuksa yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Kukhak Charyowŏn, 2003).

logical split and rivalry between two Korean residents' groups in Japan, *Choch'ongryŏn* and *mindan*. The Games were the crucial site where the two Koreas sought to claim legitimacy over the entire Korean peninsula. In addition, his nuanced analysis reveals Japan, as the first Asian Olympic host nation winning a number of medals, was not only a former colonizer but also a role model of South Korea to catch up with. The Games caused and shaped the two Koreas' sports system and rivalry during the Cold War.

Brian Bridges scrutinizes the precarious balance upon which the inter-Korean relations teetered during the cases of the World Table Tennis Championships in 1979 and 1991. While the so-called Ping-Pong Diplomacy between the United States and the People's Republic of China is well known, table tennis in the imbricated inter-Korean relationship has received scant attention. He shows that discussions and cooperation surrounding these two competitions between the two sides were not strong enough to provide a solid ground based on mutual trust for continuous conversation in the Korean peninsula and culminated in a one-time event. Including the recent Unified Korean ice hockey team in the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, most Korean public and mass media tend to have high expectations of the role of sports as an architect of peace for the Korean Peninsula. Bridges' view is in accordance with George Orwell's famous description of sport as "war minus the shooting" and skeptical of the idea that sport can create peace and friendship for divided nations.

In his magisterial study of colonial era West Indian cricket *Beyond a Boundary*, C.L.R. James, Trinidadian historian and Marxist political activist, urged his academic colleagues in 1963 to take sport seriously, lamenting: "If this is not social history what is? It finds no place in the history of the people because the historians do not begin from what people seem to want but from what they think the people ought to want."¹² James' audacious assertion in one of the most celebrated of all sports

12 C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993 [1963]), 184-85.

books has not yet resonated with the field of Korean history. I hope this special issue serves as a meaningful starting point to lead scholars to recognize sport as a crucial dimension of Korean history.

