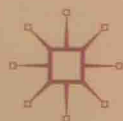




KEVIN
JEFFERYS

SPORT AND POLITICS IN MODERN BRITAIN

The Road to 2012



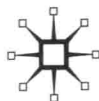
Sport and Politics in Modern Britain

The Road to 2012

Kevin Jefferys



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‘A timely and impressive book that will become essential reading on many Sport History and British Politics courses.’ – **Martin Polley**, *University of Southampton*

Sport has a huge social and cultural significance in contemporary Britain. This insightful study provides the first exploration of the causes and consequences of the increased interaction between sport and the state since 1945.

Kevin Jefferys sets policy towards sport within the evolving socio-political context of post-war Britain and balances an appreciation of continuity and change from the ‘austerity Games’ of 1948 through to the multi-billion pound extravaganza of the London 2012 Olympics. Ideal for students, historians, social scientists and sport enthusiasts alike, *Sport and Politics in Modern Britain* provides the fullest assessment yet of this important topic, bringing sport sharply into focus as a contested domain in public and political debate.

Kevin Jefferys is Professor of Contemporary History at Plymouth University. His previous publications include works of political history such as *Retreat from New Jerusalem: British Politics, 1951–1964* (also in the British Studies series). He has published articles on sporting themes in the journals *Sport in History* and the *International Journal of the History of Sport*.

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Abbreviations

AAA	Amateur Athletics Association
AAM	Anti-Apartheid Movement
BOA	British Olympic Association
BRS LC	Bristol Region Sports Liaison Council
CCPR	Central Council of Physical Recreation
CCT	Compulsory Competitive Tendering
CDS	Committee for the Development of Sport
CIPFA	Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting
DCMS	Department of Culture, Media and Sport
DES	Department of Education and Science
DNH	Department of National Heritage
DoE	Department of the Environment
FA	Football Association
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FO	Foreign Office
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOC	International Olympic Committee
LEA	Local Education Authority
LTA	Lawn Tennis Association
MCC	Marylebone Cricket Club
MHLG	Ministry of Housing and Local Government
NGB	National Governing Body
NHS	National Health Service
NPFA	National Playing Fields Association
PE	Physical Education
PSC	Parliamentary Sports Committee
RAF	Royal Air Force
RCSR	Regional Councils for Sport and Recreation
RSC	Regional Sports Council
SARD	Sport and Recreation Division (of the civil service)

SDC	Sports Development Council (advocated by 1960 Wolfenden Report)
STST	Stop the Seventy Tour
UGC	University Grants Committee

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Introduction

In July 2005 the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, flew to Singapore, where the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was meeting to decide the venue of the 2012 Olympics. Blair later wrote that there was a 'fierce debate' among his advisers about whether he should go in person to Singapore. Although recently returned to power, securing an unprecedented third successive Labour election victory in the spring of 2005, Blair's popularity had taken a battering because of Britain's involvement in the Iraq war. He also faced considerable behind-the-scenes pressure to step down and pave the way for his brooding heir apparent, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, to assume the reins of power. The Prime Minister knew that to go to Singapore risked further damage to his authority and credibility. Informed observers believed that, although the organizers of London's bid had done everything in their power, Paris remained the front-runner in the race to host the 2012 Games; unlike the British capital, Paris had the advantage of a main Olympic stadium and many of the required facilities already in place. After much agonizing, Blair decided he would make the trip, primarily for political reasons: the danger of being humiliated was outweighed by his desire 'to avoid being criticised for not trying hard enough'.¹

When the Prime Minister arrived at Singapore airport, he was met by the head of the London bid team, former Olympic athlete Sebastian Coe, who greeted Blair with the words that the IOC could still be swayed, but 'it's down to you'.² Without pausing for a break, the Prime Minister was whisked to a hotel, where he engaged in hours of back-to-back individual meetings with about 40 of the 115 IOC members who were due to vote. Exhausted from his endeavours, Blair left ahead of the IOC vote to prepare for a tricky summit of G8 world leaders due to meet in London, with personal calculations still prominent in his mind. 'I was more and more conscious of the double-whammy possibilities of failure', he

wrote in his memoirs: 'lose the Olympics, screw up the G8.'³ The Prime Minister was back in Britain when the news came through on 6 July that his efforts had been worthwhile: London defeated Paris by the narrow margin of 54 votes to 50. As joyous celebrations got under way in Trafalgar Square, it was quickly agreed that Blair made a decisive contribution to the outcome. A former IOC Vice President, Dick Pound, was reported as saying that London owed its success to a great collective effort in which Coe had been a fine figurehead, straight from 'central casting', but it was the Prime Minister who 'made the difference', swinging just enough votes to tip the balance in London's favour.⁴

By taking the risk of high-profile intervention, Tony Blair scored a major political triumph, followed by some of the best newspaper coverage of his entire ten-year premiership. The victory for London announced in Singapore was widely treated as a marker of international prestige, giving Britain the right to stage the world's premier athletics festival for the first time in more than half a century. Under the watchful eye of a 'Minister for the Olympics', lengthy preparations were soon under way to ensure that London 2012 became the most spectacular Games in living memory, likely to be followed on television by over two-thirds of the world's population. Massive sums of public money, in excess of £9 billion, were committed to ensure the construction of a range of state-of-the-art sporting and media venues, improved transport links and purpose-built housing for competitors on the Olympic site in East London.

It had all seemed so different when London previously hosted the Games in 1948. At that time, Britain was still recovering from the ravages of the Second World War. Much of the capital continued to bear the hallmarks of Nazi bombing and the population remained in the grip of rationing and everyday shortages. There was no prospect of building a new Olympic site, and venues that had escaped war damage such as Wembley Stadium had to be hastily adapted. Accommodation arrangements for competitors were also improvised in a spirit of 'make do and mend'. While BBC radio coverage ensured an international audience for the Games, television was in its infancy; the number able to watch in Britain was put at about half a million, most of these living within a forty-mile radius of London. The idea of lavish government investment in 1948 was a non-starter; the Labour government of the day

made it clear that Olympic organizers had to cover all costs from a modest budget. Not surprisingly, the 1948 Games are commonly remembered as 'the austerity Olympics'.⁵

There are some intriguing parallels between the Olympics of 1948 and 2012. Both have a common backdrop where the British government faced in 1948, and is facing now in 2012, crippling public debt at home and dangers aplenty overseas. But the contrasts are more striking than the similarities, not only in the scale and cost of the two events – one put together hastily at a time when much of world sport was unpaid and based on amateur principles and the other meticulously planned in an era of commercialization and professionalism – but also in the degree of involvement by political leaders. Before the post-1945 age of the welfare state, Britain was characterized by limited central government intervention in much of the nation's economic, social and cultural life. Sport was a largely voluntary enterprise, freely entered into by enthusiasts and overseen by individual national governing bodies (NGBs) responsible for running hundreds of separate sports. What happened on the athletics track, the tennis court or the football pitch was not considered to be the preserve of the state. Direct and sustained interest of the type shown by Tony Blair in the framing and winning of the 2012 Olympic bid was unimaginable in the era of his 1940s predecessor, Clement Attlee, although as we will see, Attlee's government provided important moral and practical backing to London's cause.

It would be misleading to suggest that sport and politics operated in entirely separate compartments before 1945. The machinery of the central state was not extensively deployed for economic and social ends, but at the same time Britain had a tradition, stretching back to the Victorian period, of local authorities providing (on an optional and so variable basis) parks and other recreational facilities such as swimming baths. And with the spread of international competition in the first half of the twentieth century, government ministers and Whitehall civil servants sometimes found themselves embroiled in unwelcome diplomatic disputes arising from sporting controversy. In the wake of the bitter dispute over the tactics of the English cricket team battling the Australians for the Ashes in 1933, J. H. Thomas, the Dominions Secretary, remarked: 'No politics ever introduced in the British Empire ever caused me so much trouble as this damn Bodyline bowling.' After

Hitler blatantly used the Berlin Olympics of 1936 to showcase Nazi ideology, the Conservative-dominated National administration in Britain responded with the first large-scale initiative in sport dictated by central government. Looking to improve standards of fitness as the prospect of war came closer, a Physical Training and Recreation Act was passed in 1937, prompting the unfolding of a 'National Fitness Campaign'. This went some way towards stimulating new local schemes, though critics felt it was half-hearted compared with Hitler's methods of training young people and in the words of the leading sports administrator Stanley Rous, the whole campaign faded away unlamented in 1939, an 'early casualty of the war'.⁶

The reality remained that, in an age when the role of the state was much less intrusive than today, it was commonplace to assume that sport and politics did not mix. Politicians might be unavoidably drawn in at times, but this was mostly as a result of one-off international crises, and sport was generally left to run its own affairs. The contrasts between then and now – epitomized by the sharp differences between the 1948 and 2012 Olympics – point us towards the main concern of this book, which is to examine the greatly increased interaction between sport and politics since the Second World War. This interaction can be gauged in various ways, among them the manner in which, by the end of the twentieth century, prime ministers were routinely expected to lend support to efforts to bring major sporting events to British shores. Tony Blair was not the first, or the last, national leader to put his reputation on the line in the interests of sport. His Conservative predecessor John Major pulled out all the stops in supporting an earlier Olympic bid made by Manchester, and in December 2010 Prime Minister David Cameron travelled to Zurich to personally lobby (alongside Prince William and David Beckham) on behalf of England's failed attempt to secure the right to host the 2018 football World Cup. Far from being dragged reluctantly into proceedings, as before 1939, the contemporary politician is often found showcasing the virtues of international sport.

Domestically, the relationship between sport and politics has also converged. One key illustration of this trend has been the development of administrative machinery, both local and central, devoted to sport and recreation: minimal in 1945, today leisure departments are commonplace in local government and sport

features (as it has since 1997) in the title of a Whitehall department, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). There has also been a steady rise in central government funding for sport. This was almost non-existent at the end of the Second World War, whereas hundreds of millions of pounds are now channelled annually through the DCMS and distributed via several sports councils, established to drive forward improvements in sport from the grass roots to the elite level. Large sums are also provided by other Whitehall ministries, notably the Department for Education, which funds sport in state schools. The value placed on sport in political circles by the beginning of the twenty-first century was illustrated when, despite embarking on rigorous spending cuts to reduce Britain's bloated public debt, the coalition government elected in 2010 left untouched the multi-billion pound budget earmarked for the London Olympics. The starting point for this book is thus to pose some historical questions: in what ways and for what reasons has the relationship between sport and politics in Britain become closer since 1945? And what does the historical record tell us about the place of sport in contemporary British society and politics?

To an extent, these questions have already been addressed by scholars from a variety of academic disciplines. The lead has been taken by social and political scientists and sport policy experts, notably Lincoln Allison, John Hargreaves, Ian Henry and above all Barrie Houlihan, the last of whom has published a string of key works on the policy-making process in contemporary sport.⁷ Among sport historians, there have been valuable contributions by the likes of Martin Polley, Richard Holt and Tony Mason and Jeffrey Hill.⁸ Between them, these authors have illuminated the varying forms of state intervention in sport since 1945: legislative, administrative, regulatory and fiscal. They have also outlined many of the broad underlying causes of the growing association between sport and politics, including pressure on politicians applied by the media and sports lobby groups; political responses to the relentless rise of sport as a cultural and economic phenomenon; and the likelihood that political leaders were drawn towards sport 'not least' because of a perceived cross-party 'commitment towards developing and sustaining ... welfare state ideology'.⁹ Some of the published research, however, has been broad brush in approach or strongly polemical in tone, as in the case of the quasi-Marxist account of

sport as a vehicle for social control presented by Hargreaves. The main focus of the literature has also been 'present-centred' rather than historical, with a concentration on developments in the recent past and not the post-war period as a whole.

Despite the quality of much of what has been written (and this author's debt to existing scholarship is acknowledged in the Notes which follow the main text), it remains the case that until now there has been no systematic long-term historical study of the relationship between sport and politics in Britain from 1945 to the present day.¹⁰ In particular what has been missing from earlier accounts is any detailed assessment of the motives and actions of British politicians, those serving as ministers in successive governments (supported by the civil service in Whitehall) and those found representing the major political parties in parliament at Westminster, both in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Official attitudes to sport have usually been explored through the scrutiny of documents ranging from the influential 'Wolfenden Report' of 1960 to Sports Council publications and DCMS strategy papers. Important though these set-piece statements are, more can be done to place them within their prevailing socio-economic and political context, and efforts are also made in what follows to explore behind and beneath the surface of official reports by drawing on the evidence of government papers held at the National Archives (hitherto largely unused) as well as a range of other primary sources such as private papers, party records, election manifestos, newspapers, diaries and autobiographies. *Sport and Politics in Modern Britain* therefore aims to provide the fullest account yet of this important topic, balancing an appreciation of continuity and change on the road to 2012 and bringing sport more into focus as a contested domain with the mainstream of British politics.

In employing the historian's standard empirical methodology and attempting to capture development over time, the main chapters following this Introduction range chronologically from a consideration of sport under Labour's 1945 administration through the creation of an advisory Sports Council under Harold Wilson in the 1960s to John Major's direction of substantial National Lottery funds to sport in the 1990s and the importance attached to sport by 'New Labour' after 1997. Integrated within these chapters is consideration of the many suddenly occurring high-profile

crises that brought sport to prominence in the nation's political consciousness, varying from football hooliganism and its links with working-class culture to the controversies generated by fox-hunting, traditionally associated with the most elite sections of British society. Discussion of sporting concerns at different spatial levels – local and regional, national and international – is weaved in at various points, though separate thematic chapters have also been included to provide fuller consideration of the evolving links between international sport and British diplomacy (a dimension traditionally dealt with by the Foreign Office) and the key role played by local authorities in the provision of parks, playing fields and swimming pools for everyday use.

A few caveats about the scope of the coverage might be noted at the outset. The first is that 'sport', which comes in an enormous number of guises, embracing the individual and the collective, the competitive and strenuous to the recreational and less physically exertive, can only be selectively assessed within the constraints of a single book. The spotlight throughout will be on those areas and issues that have most directly concerned politicians. Hence some popular sports that hardly ever surfaced in political debate barely feature (golf and cycling, for instance), whereas others are more prominent: notably athletics and other Olympic sports in the first decades after the war when amateurism still characterized much top-level sport, and football, which fully supplanted cricket as Britain's 'national game' in the ensuing era of rampant commercialization and globalization. In addition, much of the focus in what follows centres on Westminster as the executive heart of British politics; Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland deserve and await fuller treatment in their own right. A further caveat is that while attention is given to sporting interest groups such as the British Olympic Association and to the various sports councils created since the 1960s (the delivery agencies of government), these are looked at primarily in terms of how they interacted with ministers and party politicians. While these bodies drive much of the detailed, day-to-day development of sport, distributing grants for community projects or to elite athletes, the main stage here is occupied by the political classes, with the intention of showcasing extensively for the first time what contribution to sport has been made by prime ministers, cabinet ministers, MPs, peers of the realm and Whitehall civil servants.

The concern in the following pages with politicians and officials enables some of the prevailing assumptions about sport-state relationships to be elaborated upon, adapted or challenged. In looking at the nature of political involvement, for example, it becomes possible to provide a fuller assessment than hitherto of the shifting balance between reluctant activity (occasions when political leaders had no choice but to intervene in sport, as in the case of football hooliganism) and more creative efforts to shape and influence sporting development. In relation to timing, there has been a tendency to think in terms of a linear, steadily advancing closeness in the relationship between sport and politics. But this view needs to be amended in the light of the sporadic, uneven interest in sport by politicians from 1945 onwards; links between sport and politics were ruptured and regressed at times, rather than always proceeding smoothly to an agreed final destination. Above all, the contention that the growing entanglement of sport and politics reflected a cross-party consensus around 'welfare state ideology' requires revision. Sport did not somehow stand above and apart from party politics, and, as will be seen, while there were areas of agreement there were also some sharp differences between the main parties at Westminster over sport: a function of contrasting shades of ideological commitment as well as varying perceptions about the value of sport in political and electoral discourse. This book attempts to bring out the richness and complexity of the maturing bond between sport and politics, though it also cautions against exaggerating the extent to which the two have become natural bedfellows. In his recent book *Sport in History*, Jeffrey Hill discusses the many ways in which 'sport matters' in contemporary society.¹¹ As the extravaganza of London 2012 illustrates, sport is without question important to political leaders and parties today, but the approach of post-war politicians towards sport has also been characterized in places by prevarication, ambiguity and hostility. Sport matters, but in the light of fresh spending cutbacks projected beyond the 2012 Olympics the depth of the commitment of British politicians remains questionable.