

# H-Net Reviews

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Heather L. Dichter, Andrew L. Johns, eds. *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations since 1945*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014. 496 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-4564-8.

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

“Sport has the power to change the world.” Nelson Mandela’s famous words speak to the potential of the relationship between sport and international affairs. As editors, Heather L. Dichter and Andrew L. Johns have no less noble, if perhaps less grandiose aims in the recent publication of *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft and International Relations Since 1945*. This anthology of essays addresses the “nexus of sport and foreign policy since the end of World War II” (p. 4). It does so with considerable aplomb in thirteen chapters, including ones on sport within East Germany (Dichter) and the socialist bloc (Evelyn Mertin), on Cold War rivalries in basketball (Witherspoon) and hockey (John Soares), on decolonization in Africa (Aviston D. Downes, Pascal Charitas), and perhaps most intriguingly, on surfing and travel (Scott Laderman). Importantly also, in doing this it includes sport at different levels from professional to amateur and from spectator to “consumer.” When reviewing such a collection, to provide a précis of each chapter is redundant in light of the constraints of space; therefore, and to avoid replication of Tom Zeiler’s thoughtful concluding chapter, the review will concentrate on three reflections that illustrate the valuable contribution the volume provides.

Reflection number one: the relationship between sport and foreign relations is underexplored and warrants the attention here. Co-editor Andrew Johns argues in the introduction that the collection makes a “compelling case for the utility of using sport as a lens to better understand foreign relations and vice versa” (p. 4). On a related point, Johns considers the separation of sport and politics to be a fiction, despite the protestations of many politicians or sportspersons. Johns cites Barbara Keys in noting “the politicization of sport reached an apogee” in the aftermath of the Second World War (p. 4). That the two are related is clear from what follows.

Reflection two, the collection serves as a basis for further study. Johns acknowledges that the essays here are

“designed to stimulate and increase scholarly attention” (p. 8). It is therefore equally a criticism of the rest of the academy (this author included) and the volume that there are omissions here which are considered presently.

There are a few marginal criticisms which fall into three areas. First, in terms of approach, the volume could have engaged in a more reflective analysis of the mode of history being deployed. That is not to disparage the historian’s craft exhibited, and that of the likely readership of this review, but to consider what approach to history best serves analysis of “sport and foreign policy.” As co-editor Dichter recently outlined in a most worthwhile account of the relationship between sport history and diplomatic history, the study of sport history “is not a new field.”[1] Thus, as the history of sport has itself evolved we might also have a greater discussion about the mode of historical analysis employed. For self-evident reasons, sport would seem ripe as a theme to utilize the tropes of “global history” for example, but also transnational history.

The second concern, again marginal, is of space and time—space in terms of a geographic spread of material in the volume and time in terms of the post-Second World War environment. Despite the worthy efforts of the editors to include episodes from across the world in their “global approach,” the United States and the West still loom large. In related fashion the volume’s temporal concentration on the post-1945 era risks focusing too narrowly on the era of the super-power struggle. Of course, though the United States and the West, which are not synonymous, have been important to world affairs since 1945, their centrality has been challenged by the likes of Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War* (2007). Zeiler’s concluding chapter suggests negative connotations arise more often than not from “global” influence on the local, and the scandal engulfing FIFA in June 2015 clearly speaks to that. As antidote, and pleasingly, the volume avoids thinking of sport and foreign relations in terms of caricatured and isolated examples—those of

the 1936 Berlin Olympics, ping-pong diplomacy of the early 1970s, the tit-for-tat boycotts of 1980 and 1984, and the apartheid-inspired boycott of South Africa. Indeed the manner in which the latter is addressed in Downes's chapter on the Commonwealth and apartheid is revealing of the ingenious way in which the scholars here have gone about their business.

The third area of unease comes from the absence of explicit discourse on gender. The topic, much discussed within academia, is touched upon but not directly addressed. This is a shame, beyond any emancipatory opportunities, because as Zeiler suggests (pp. 433-434) gender and sport has the capacity to engage a range of social issues that are marginalized. In the same way other areas warrant attention, such as the securitization of sport, sport and the (urban) environment, and sport as a tool of public policy and not just public diplomacy (of which more explicit discussion of its relations with state behavior would be welcome, as Zeiler suggests).

A final reflection: this volume provides its contribution to an increasingly broad-ranging, and interdisciplinary, discussion of where (else) sport manifests itself in society and to account for those histories: what of the relationship between sport and "diplomacy"; of sport and

'society', for instance? Questions remain unanswered, even unasked as yet, but anyone reading this book would be hard-pressed not to come up with some of their own. As Johns suggests the nexus of sport and foreign relations "touches on numerous intriguing historical questions" (p. 4).

Overall, the editors and the authors collectively deserve to be commended for identifying and addressing a range of issues that have been for too long marginalized. The book is in a number of ways akin to the eclectic mix of the world's "youth" that gather quadrennially for the Olympic Games. The endeavor for the participants to reach the pinnacle of performance at a specific time across different events, at different locations in different disciplines will see many "succeed" but only a handful of gold medal winners. As such the volume here is a resounding success, with the prospect of another gathering, or book, in four years' time.

#### Note

[1]. Heather Dichter, "Sport History and Diplomatic History," An H-Diplo State of the Field Essay No. 122, December 17, 2014, <http://h-diplo.org/essays/PDF/E122.pdf>, accessed April 23, 2015.

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