The Sport of Kings and the Kings of Crime: Horse Racing, Politics and Organized Crime in New York 1865-1913

By Steven A. Riess. Published in 2011 by Syracuse University Press (446 pp., $45 US)

Reviewed by Wray Vamplew, Universities of Stirling and Central Lancashire, UK

Surprisingly, in the light of it being the first major sport in early America and the most attended one there at the end of the nineteenth century, until now there has not been a significant academic study of horse racing in the United States. In this detailed study, Steven Riess fills the gap, at least for the part of America that offered the most outstanding racecourses—which attracted large crowds of race goers, and offered the greatest prize money—which attracted the finest racehorses. However, Riess is not just interested in showing that the state of New York, particularly its metropolitan area and the resort of Saratoga Springs, became the center of American racing after the Civil War but how and why that occurred: his explanation, pursued at length, is that it was the involvement of corrupt politicians and organized crime that protected and promoted horse racing, often because it was the gambling sport *par excellence*. Racecourses connected the underworld with Tammany Hall, enabling illegal off-track betting to develop on a significant scale. Organized crime, machine politicians, and corrupt police cooperated to protect (and benefit from) this illegal activity.

He provides biographies of the men who developed racing, and he meticulously traces the often-complex links among them—the politicians (usually Democrat) and crime bosses and the working out in the political and economic arenas of the results of their relationships. The story was far from straightforward: alliances changed, effective political power switched between parties, newcomers entered the scene. To his credit, Riess is able to pick his way through the morass of primary source material and explain what happened and why.

The work is one of outstanding research scholarship. Empirically it is exceptionally strong. Riess has plowed through newspapers, the sporting press, several archives, and a host of government documents. And yet the result is disappointing. His preface outlines the conclusions that the rest of the book substantiates. His first chapter provides a long-awaited brief history of American racing, but after that at times the detail becomes overwhelming. Although it would be unfair to accuse the author of not being able to see the wood for the trees—as he is well aware of the conclusions to which the evidence is heading—Riess seems determined not to let a fact go unmentioned, sometimes when they seemingly do not add anything to the argument. I was constantly asking, “so what is the significance or relevance of this information?” The book has been two decades in the making and perhaps this shows in the repetitive nature of much of the discussion, as though a chapter has been put aside and some of its content forgotten.
I am no expert on American racing and must accept Riess’s analysis of its history, although even within America he fails to explain why steeplechasing never really developed. It is also difficult to understand why a scholar of Riess’s stature accepts that a victory of one horse over another could be seen as affirming the way of life of white southerners or that racing could demonstrate the manliness of horse owners rather than their jockeys. Moreover, he is content to give information on prices and prizes without any mention of inflation. His view of British racing can certainly be criticized. Where he got the idea that the racing at Newcastle attracted a crowd of only a few hundred is a mystery; it can only be supposed that he has confused Newmarket, the aristocratic home of English racing, with the northern course that hosted the Pitmen’s Derby. He acknowledges Sandown’s success as Britain’s first fully enclosed course in 1875 but ignores the failure of others such as Whyte’s Hippodrome at Bayswater in the late 1830s. Nor does he ask why the illegal nature of most gambling in Britain apparently did not result in the same level of political corruption and criminal activity within racing as in the United States.

The book is an exemplar of empirical research and achieves its aim of establishing the interconnection between sport, politics, and crime. However, perhaps because of the detail uncovered, it fails to communicate the excitement of racing, the thrill of gambling, and the threat of crime and corruption.

**Understanding the Olympics**

By John Horne and Garry Whannel. Published in 2012 by Routledge (239 pp., $44.95 US)

Reviewed by MacIntosh Ross, Western University, Canada

*Understanding the Olympics* by John Horne and Garry Whannel is a broad, but dense, treatment of the sociology and history of the Olympic Games from their origins in Ancient Greece to the upcoming 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. John Horne is professor of sport and sociology at the University of Lancashire, England. Horne is the author of *Sport in Consumer Culture* (2006) and coeditor of numerous collections focused on topics including the FIFA World Cup, football in East Asia, and sports mega-events. Garry Whannel is professor of media cultures at the University of Bedfordshire, England, and author of *Culture, Politics and Sport: Blowing the Whistle Revisited* (2008), *Media Sport Stars: Media and Morals* (2002), and coeditor of *Five Ring Circus: Money, Power and Politics at the Olympic Games* (1984).

*Understanding the Olympics* is organized into three sections, encompassing ten chapters and a conclusion. In section one, Horne and Whannel focus on the economic, political, and cultural contexts of the upcoming London 2012 Olympic Games. Chapter one focuses on the organizational structure of the Olympics, explaining the functions of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), National Olympic Committees (NOC), and International Federations (IF). The London 2012 bid is explained in terms of competing bids (Paris, Madrid, New York, Moscow), British politics, public enthusiasm, and media support/criticism. In chapter two, the authors address the typical structure of a bid; the costs of preparing a bid; and the social, cultural, and economic benefits/drawbacks of winning a bid. The third and
final chapter of section one explains the impact of radio, television, and Internet broadcasting of the Olympic Games, focusing largely on the commercialization of the Games.

Section two of *Understanding the Olympics* explores the history of the Olympic Games, providing an overview from Ancient Greece to the 2012 London Games, including a survey of the historical sporting cultures of Europe—Germany, France, England, Sweden, and others—predating and influencing the first “modern” Olympics in 1896. This overview of Europe is followed by a biographical sketch of Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the IOC, focusing largely on Coubertin’s admiration of English public schools, and in particular their emphasis on “sport and moral education” (p. 79). From Coubertin, Horne and Whannel turn to the philosophy of Olympism, Olympic Games as sideshows at World’s Fairs (i.e., St. Louis 1904), alternative Olympic events (i.e., workers’ sport), and the transformation of the Games into global mega-events (i.e., Beijing 2008).

Section three, “The Spectacle of Modernity: Towards a Postmodern World?,” represents nearly half of *Understanding the Olympics*, featuring numerous topics and including the Olympics as an international political platform; security and surveillance; spectacular legacy; and social equality/inequality. According to Horne and Whannel, the Olympics can be interpreted as a “symbolic contest between nations” (p. 109). Chapters six, seven, and eight represent this “symbolic contest” line of inquiry and could, for simplicity’s sake, be condensed into a single chapter. Olympic boycotts, for example, represent the authors’ main examples of symbolic contestation and are discussed in chapters six and seven, leading to considerable overlap. Chapter eight treats several topics, including the Olympics in terms of festival, spectacle, and carnival; “symbolic political acts” (p. 155) in the context of terrorism and security technologies; and the link between the 2012 London Games and consumption. Although the portions of chapter eight dealing with spectacle and symbolic political acts follow smoothly and coherently from earlier chapters in section three, the authors’ discussion of consumption feels disconnected from the rest of the section. Horne and Whannel’s discussion of consumption at the 2012 London Games, it seems, fits more neatly within section one of the book—“The Olympics and London.” Chapter eight is followed by an excellent chapter on race, gender, class, and disability in the Olympics, placing equity issues within historical and sociological contexts. Lastly, chapter ten focuses on Olympic legacies, urban development, and architecture.

*Understanding the Olympics* is a well-written introduction to the Olympics, firmly situated within the relevant Olympic scholarship of John MacAloon, Helen Lenskyj, Richard Mandell, and others. The title, however, is somewhat misleading. Most of the book focuses on the 2012 London Olympic Games and the history of the Olympics in Britain. With this in mind, one can easily see why the 1908 and 1948 London Olympics receive a disproportionately large portion of the book’s historical analysis. The prominent position of the London 2012 Games also impacts the book’s organization. By making “The Olympics and London” the opening section of the book, the authors leave the reader without historical context. The history of the games is not addressed until section two, sixty-seven pages into the book. This creates a disjointed feeling, taking the reader from the future, back into the past, then—via a discussion of the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games—even further into the future. Aside from organizational issues, however, *Understanding the Olympics*
is a thorough social and cultural introduction to the Olympic Games, particularly the upcoming 2012 Games in London.

**Sport, Bodily Culture and Classical Antiquity in Modern Greece**

Edited by Eleni Fournaraki and Zinon Papakonstantinou. Published in 2011 by Routledge (192 pp., $133 US, hardcover)

Reviewed by Dikaia Chatziefstathiou, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

First, it should be noted that this book was previously published as a special issue of the *International Journal of the History of Sport*. Thus, it constitutes a collection of essays on the key theme of the special issue with the same name. The book is not concerned with the broader understandings of the Hellenic heritage in relation to sport and the body. Neither is it offering a philosophical interpretation of sport in classical antiquity. What the book is negotiating are the different ways that modern Greece has constructed and reconstructed sport and bodily culture(s) of classical antiquity in their modern national, gendered, and class identities. At first, I thought that it was rather challenging to include in the same book contributions that dealt with different examples of modern Greek identity (such as female bodily cultures, military displays) drawn from very different historical periods (e.g., 1930s, 1970s, and 2000s). However, after having completed the reading of the book, I was rather convinced that such a collection provides an insightful and diverse outlook into several components of modern Greek identity, always in relation to sport and the body in classical antiquity.

The book consists of a prologue and an epilogue written by one of the editors, Zinon Papakonstantinou, and five main chapters, as follows: chapter two, “From Antiquity to Olympic Revival: Sports and Greek National Historiography (Nineteenth–Twentieth Centuries)”; chapter three, “Bodies that Differ: Mid- and Upper-Class Women and the Quest for ‘Greekness’ in Female Bodily Culture (1896–1940); chapter four, “Resurrecting” Ancient Bodies: The Tragic Chorus in Prometheus Bound and Suppliant Women at the Delphic Festivals in 1927 and 1930”; chapter five “Rallying the Nation: Sport and Spectacle Serving the Greek Dictatorships”; and chapter six, “Fanning the Flame: Transformations of the 2004 Olympic Flame.” Chapter 2 sets the scene of the evolution of the historiography of Greek sport from the foundation of the Greek state in 1830 until 1982 and explores the incorporation of sport as a substantial part of the Greek national identity during this period. The significance of this chapter lies in the fact that sport had been neglected from authors of the Greek national historiography for many years; thus, it constitutes one of the few accounts that deal with the role of sport in national historiography of modern Greece. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the representations of female identities in bodily cultures as expressed in the establishment of the Lyceum of Greek Women in 1911, focusing on the *Ladies’ Journal* (Chapter 3) and in the so-called Delphic festivals (Chapter 4). Both accounts raise issues of intersections between gender and social class and provide interesting arguments in relation to a rather classist reinterpretation of the ancient values of sport in the context of
modern Greece. Chapters 5 and 6 address issues of national identity and explore how modern constructions such as the military displays (Chapter 5) and the torch relay (Chapter 6) have been used by the modern Greeks as a means for accentuating their Hellenicity in a discourse of historical continuity with ancient Greece.

Overall, the book is appealing and can be a useful source for historians, sociologists, cultural theorists, and (more broadly) social scientists who have an interest in the building of modern Greek identity, and more specifically in the role of sport in this process. However, if you are mostly interested in examining ancient Greek sport and bodily cultures, this book would not be a relevant one to read. There are several other books that specifically offer in-depth analyses of sport in classical antiquity (e.g., *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*, third and expanded edition, written by Stephen G. Miller, and *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, by Donald G. Kyle). A final remark is that there is a dominant Greek presence of authors in this volume (six authors from Greece out of seven total contributors), which is not surprising given the topic. Nevertheless, there are several non-Greek authors who have contributed to accounts in relation to sport in classical Greece (e.g., see authors stated above), as well as in relation to the building of the Greek national identity (e.g., *Byzantium and the Modern Greek Identity*, by David Ricks and Paul Magdalino). Therefore, it would be interesting if future contributions on this topic were made by authors of a more diverse national background.

**The History of Motor Sport: A Case Study Analysis**

*Edited by David Hassan. Published in 2012 by Routledge (142 pp., $125 US, hardcover)*

*Reviewed by Daniel J. Simone, Monmouth University, USA*

Auto racing scholarship has increased dramatically over the past fifteen years, and the scholars included in this collection have produced some of the finest academic treatments of motor sport history to date. David Hassan and his eight contributors clearly show that an examination of various motor sports provides insight into larger social, cultural, political, and environmental questions.

The first four essays examine racing at the national level. Éamon Ó Cofaigh’s well-detailed article “Motor Sport in France: Testing-Ground for the World” serves as an appropriate green flag to the collection. He specifically focuses on the emergence and development of French motor sports during the Belle Époque. In addition, he provides a brief history of racing at Le Mans, site of the world’s first Grand Prix in 1906. Ó Cofaigh stresses that “. . . Le Mans holds a singular place in motor sporting history but the automobile tracks stretch back even further in the history of the town. . . .” (p. 12).

Belgium’s extensive motor racing tradition also dates back to end of the nineteenth century. In their exceptionally footnoted article, Thomas Ameye, Bieke Gils, and Pascal Delheye connect auto racing with the emergence and development of Belgian industry and technology during the Belle Époque. They also explain how racing provided both male and female thrill seekers with opportunities for upward social mobility.
Turning next to post–World War II Spain, Teresa González Aja contributes a fine discussion on the emergence of top-level motorcycle racing during the Franco regime. She also places considerable attention on the saga of motorcycle racer Angel Nieto, who rose from poverty and became the first Spanish world champion. Victor Andrade de Melo’s well-researched “Before Fittipaldi, Piquet, and Senna: The Beginning of Motor Racing in Brazil (1908–1954)” is another fine national case study. He delves into the early upper-class origins of auto sport in South America’s largest country and indicates that “the decade from 1910 to 1920 was marked by a large number of races, with different formats, in different states, even between cities and countries” (p. 72).

The book’s editor endeavors, in the prologue, to “challenge the reader to consider the full extent of motor racing’s impact in the modern world” (p. 3). Hassan and Philip O’Kane show how motor sport can present tremendous off-track challenges in “The Great Race Across the Sahara: A History of the Paris to Dakar Rally and Its Impact on the Development of Corporate Social Responsibility Within Motor Sport.” Throughout its history, the race extended over national (and tribal) boundaries and presented numerous domestic and international political hurdles. Furthermore, this lengthy rally disrupted and harmed fragile desert ecosystems, and the co-authors discuss the efforts of race organizers to minimize environmental consequences. This grueling race also took its toll on humans and machines; numerous drivers never lived to tell about their experiences. Moreover, as Hassan and O’Kane point out, non-spectator fatalities reportedly stemmed from race-related incidences in Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. Because race organizers and corporate sponsors faced an increasingly difficult battle, the annual event has not occurred in Africa since 2007.

O’Kane also produced a solid essay on the history and significance of the Indianapolis 500, Monaco Grand Prix, and the Le Mans 24 Hours—motor racing’s Triple Crown. His brief, but illuminative, history of the annual street-circuit race—Formula One’s most prestigious event—stands out. O’Kane also touches on the profound impact that the sport’s worst tragedy had on auto racing throughout the world. After over eighty people perished in a fiery crash at Le Mans in 1955, the Swiss banned motorsports and Mercedes ceased factory support. The German manufacturing giant instituted a long-time departure from auto racing.

Motor sport also faced increasing political and social opposition in the United States, and the disaster at Le Mans influenced the course of American racing. In “NASCAR Stock Car Racing: Establishment and Southern Retrenchment,” Ben Shackelford rightfully stresses that “with the withdrawal of factory support in 1957, NASCAR focused less on expanding nationally and more on consolidating growth in regions most amenable to stock car racing” (p. 121). The organization transformed its “Grand National Series” schedule, and NASCAR’s top brand of stock car racing emerged as the American South’s premier major-league sport throughout the 1960s.

Hassan assembled a strong collection of scholarship, and this book is an excellent addition to Routledge’s “Sport in the Global Society” series. Racing historians will most certainly find interest in this compilation, but it should also appeal to scholars in other disciplines.