A History of British Sports Medicine
By Vanessa Heggie. Published in 2011 by Manchester University Press
(222 pp., £60.00)

Reviewed by Ian Ritchie, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

A significant gap exists in sport history, in the sense that the medical and scientific aspects of sport and physical movement have been understudied. Part of the reason for this may be that the parent disciplines of history and philosophy of science have tended to treat sport in the same manner as other parent disciplines: “merely fun and games.” But it may also be the case that the practices of sport science and medicine have themselves been confusing and at times incoherent. So difficult has it been in creating institutional legitimacy for themselves that few would even think to ask questions about the history of sports medicine or sciences in the first place. Indeed, one of the major contributions of Vanessa Heggie’s *A History of British Sports Medicine* is to demonstrate just what a long road trip it has been for British sports medicine to reach its current destination of legitimation. Difficulties in being accepted by the medical community at large, internal organizational conflicts, changing conceptions of what the “object” of study should be, and the impacts of various forces in international sport have all played significant roles and are discussed in detail by Heggie.

*A History of British Sports Medicine* is a well-written and researched book that will be seen as the authoritative source on British sports medicine for some time to come. The central thesis that Heggie defends is that sports medicine could only be legitimized as such when the athlete came to be defined as a human “type” that was abnormal or supernormal, and warranted specialized attention. Only then could sports medicine stake its claim. However, defining the athlete as fundamentally different was no simple matter. The construction of “the athlete” required (at least) two significant steps: organizations with increasingly vested interests in defining and treating athletes had to convince others that the athlete was unique and achieve institutional legitimacy in turn, and certain forces in international sport in the twentieth century had to, and did, coalesce to create the idea of the elite athlete as extraordinary.

Heggie recounts British sports medicine’s history chronologically, starting at the turn of the twentieth century and ending in 2005, when sports medicine received its formal status as a specialty by the British government. Correcting many former accounts that locate sports medicine’s beginnings only with the advent of formal organizations themselves, chapter 2 discusses practices from 1900 to 1927 that started to carve out a niche for British sports medicine, even if it was not yet defined as such. The sportsperson had yet to be defined as “abnormal,” yet practices emerged, such as “scientific massage,” that had similarities to practices defined as sports medicine later on. Throughout this period, “moderation” and “individualism” pervade the thinking and practices of practitioners, thus catering individual needs.
to a basic, healthy lifestyle. However, things begin to change dramatically between 1928 and 1952, the period covered in chapter 3. Although sports medicine was not formally organized per se until the very end of this period, with the creation of the British Association of Sport and Medicine (BASM), a growing body of disparate professional and amateur practitioners began to study and treat the athletic body. Wartime interest in soldiers’ physical needs, which have at times striking similarities to those of athletes; a movement to enhance the health of civilians and productivity of workers; and, finally, the heightened emphasis on performance and nationalism in international competitions, especially the Olympic Games, all played equally significant roles.

This heightened competition reached rarified heights during the cold war, and chapter 4 covers the period from 1953 to 1970. Besides the formation of the most important organizations, specifically the BASM in 1953 and subsequently the Institute of Sports Medicine and the British Olympic Association’s Medical Committee, the most important development during this period was ideological: the athlete’s body was redefined to be abnormal or supernormal and therefore in need of dedicated attention, which in turn justified the specialists who could treat elite athletes for injuries and help them enhance their performances. Interestingly, two “boundary-defining” topics pervade this period, which both define what the “normal” athlete ought to be (and they continue to do so to this day): drug testing and sex testing. Chapter 5 discusses the ongoing push to legitimization but with a new twist: between 1970 and 1987, sports medicine redefined itself once again to include both the athlete’s body alongside that of the general public, who exercise for fitness and health. Reflecting a late-twentieth-century concern for the body politic and populations “at risk,” organizations and practitioners sought greater legitimacy by treating both elite athletes and the general public, the latter of which takes the form of “prescriptive” sport, or the idea that sport and fitness can be thought of as a curative, like medical drugs. Finally, chapter 6 culminates in the full legitimacy of sports medicine in Britain, as mentioned earlier, and makes the claim that, contrary to many other historical accounts, British sports medicine was not as far behind other countries in terms of its development as has been assumed.

Two aspects of Heggie’s book stand out. First, her text moves far beyond the limitations of attempting to understand the history of sports medicine by studying the formal organizations alone. Her discussion of everyday practices and those that might not be typically thought of as “sports medicine” per se help redefine what we think of when we use those terms. The discussion of massage in chapter 2 is a good example. Second, Heggie does not make the mistake of assuming, teleologically, that because organizations and attendant practices exist now their existence was always therefore inevitable. Indeed, avoiding this pitfall is stated explicitly as a goal right from the start. The organizations and human agents that helped create what we now take for granted as sports medicine could only have been successful under the specific historical, social, and political conditions described by Heggie. Drug and sex testing provide terrific examples of this: they are topics that are obviously of great relevance today, but ones that Heggie shows us became “boundary definers” for what was—and what still is—considered the “natural” athlete only under specific circumstances. And that is exactly why A History of British Sports Medicine should be read and appreciated: it has great relevance today and reminds us that “sport” should not be taken for granted.
The Grads Are Playing Tonight: The Story of the Edmonton Commercial Graduates Basketball Club

By M. Ann Hall. Published in 2011 by the University of Alberta Press (261 pp., $23.99)

Reviewed by Christiane Job, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Ann Hall’s latest contribution to the cannon of sports history is a well-written all-encompassing examination of the legacy of the Edmonton Commercial Graduates basketball team. The Edmonton Commercial Graduates team (the “Grads”) maintains the most outstanding winning record in the history of basketball. According to Hall, the team’s legacy spanned from 1915 to 1940, and they played approximately 412 official games and lost only 20, for a winning average of 95 percent (p. 193). These young women, who were almost all exclusively students who graduated from a local high school in Edmonton, travelled more than 125,000 miles in Canada, the United States, and Europe, competing in world championships and expedition games to promote and showcase the sport.

Hall’s thoughtful examination is extensive in scope, eloquently bringing together primary and secondary resources to provide a masterful collection of statistics, oral histories, photographs, commentaries, and newspaper accounts. Her account is the first book to provide an in-depth examination of the importance of the Edmonton Commercial Graduates basketball team across several domains of study: sports history, the sport of basketball, women’s sport history and sport organization/administration. Hall’s work effectively takes the reader beyond the “story” of the Edmonton Commercial Graduates team, and their charismatic coach Percy Page, and weaves together a history that maps their individual contributions and experiences to suggest reasons for the team’s success, victories, and continued legacy. In doing this, she also provides an engaging account of the development of the sport of basketball for women in North America, highlighting the “deeply embedded controversy over rules” (p. 170), the expanse of the commercial basketball leagues, and the plight of women athletes striving for recognition and opportunities to compete on an international stage.

The organization of the book reflects the latitude and depth of Hall’s research. Hall acknowledges that the “story would be dull and boring if it were presented chronologically because, with only a few exceptions, the Grads were a winning team” (p. xxi). Thus she organized the book thematically to offer a thorough account of the cultural and political reasons for the Grads’s success. It is in this context that Hall’s position as a feminist historian is most clear, as she actively acknowledges the heterogeneity of those who participated on the team and how individual experiences construct the framework of the collective experience.

The organization of the book serves as both its strength and weakness. It is evident to the reader that this collection is well researched, yet because of her desire to offer much more than a basic “story” of the Grads’s success, the eloquence and candor of her account becomes disrupted at times by her attempts to piece together life histories with sparse information. This is certainly one of the challenges of conducting this type of research; however, the readers may find themselves craving more information, as some of the players’ histories warranted pages of description...
whereas others were only mentioned in a paragraph or two. Perhaps Hall was alluding to this challenge when she acknowledged in her foreword that in some instances gathering biographical information required a “considerable effort” (p. xxii). Despite this, the remaining chapters are rich in descriptions about how the team was formed, the commitment and honor the team members showcased, and the experiences and challenges of playing in front of thousands of fans, in addition to the economic challenges presented from a sports organizational perspective during the interwar years while the challenges of supporting a team as the national sporting system in Canada continued to evolve.

The story of the Edmonton Commercial Graduates cannot be told without significant attention paid to coach Percy Page and his efforts and vision as to how the game could be mastered by women. Rather than focusing on how sport has historically perpetuated male dominance and female oppression, Hall presents the Grads’s experiences as empowering and supported by a strong leader in Page and a community of followers from all genders and social classes. Hall refreshingly directs a great deal of attention to his contributions and provides the readers with a history where women are situated in relation to men, working with men yet are heralded for their strengths and interpretation of the game on their own terms. The role of “Papa Page” as written by Hall highlights how “there was no deliberate effort on the part of Page or his wife to “feminize” his players, and he did not need to lay down any rules of conduct (p. 235).

In this production of knowledge, Hall provides a provocative look at how social class, ethnicity, and gender coalesce without overtly asserting her position as a feminist historian. Importantly, this book highlights the fact that there is clearly more to be learned from detailed studies of women who experienced great athletic accomplishments yet moved on in their personal and professional lives. This book would be a welcome addition to both the avid sport history scholar and the general population. Hall’s writing, explorations, and explanations are highly accessible across disciplines and to those wishing to simply learn more about this outstanding basketball team. The strength of Hall’s writing resides in the moments where she beautifully loses herself in her narration, captivating the reader with descriptive accounts where she weaves together the cultural significance of the Grads’s sporting pursuits, the unwavering strength and direction provided to the women of the organization, and the impact of coach Percy Page.

**Curt Flood in the Media: Baseball, Race and the Demise of the Activist-Athlete**

By Abraham Iqbal Khan. Published in 2012 by University Press of Mississippi (224 pp., $55.00)

*Reviewed by Robert Elias, University of San Francisco, California, USA*

In the early 1970s, Curt Flood refused to be traded by the St. Louis Cardinals, and challenged the legitimacy of baseball’s reserve clause and its exemption from anti-trust enforcement. Although Flood lost his U.S. Supreme Court case, his resistance sparked free agency, which liberated not only baseball players, but all professional
athletes. Flood’s activism raised an intriguing question: even though the reserve clause affected all ballplayers, was Flood nevertheless provoked by race, and not merely concerns about economic justice? In *Curt Flood in the Media*, Abraham Iqbal Khan analyzes press coverage and Flood’s own writings to address this question, and ultimately to analyze the role of the black activist athlete.

In assessing Flood’s motivation, Khan contrasts the ballplayer’s public position with his more private thoughts. Flood deplored the hypocrisy of the baseball owners, who prospered while expecting the ballplayers to make all the sacrifices necessary to “protect” the game. He felt the clubs were running a slave system in which the players created the value while the owners reaped the profits, and in which blacks were exploited most of all. Publicly, however, Flood was in a bind. While he might benefit minimally by hitching his case to the emerging black identity movement, admitting race as a motivation would automatically doom his initiative in America’s white society. Thus, when using the slave metaphor (a “well-paid slave”), Flood did so only symbolically, as a defense against complaints that he was too well compensated to be complaining.

Despite this hedge, most of the white mainstream press opposed Flood, joining owners in condemning him for jeopardizing the game’s survival. A few liberal journalists supported Flood, as did the black press. But that backing was carefully constrained. Khan and others critique black newspapers for their accommodating approach. While Flood’s black experience was clearly a force behind his sense of exploitation, and while the shortfalls in racial progress remained huge, the black press nevertheless clung to an integrationist perspective, embraced by the small black middle class but increasingly irrelevant to the actual lives of most African Americans. By this time, Jackie Robinson had bitterly complained about the sham of integration, yet most black journalists rejected the emerging black power perspective, insisting that Flood’s quest be colorblind. With their assistance, Flood’s blackness disappeared.

In Flood’s time there were other models of resistance, embodied in athletes such as Mohammed Ali, Jim Brown, Bill Russell, and the Olympians John Carlos and Tommy Smith. Critics such as Harry Edwards championed their more militant and race-conscious protests, hailing the arrival of the black activist athlete who challenged the integrationist impulse as token, illusionary, and degrading. Motivated by “black rage,” it was believed that African-American sports activists could push white America (and even the small black middle class) beyond piecemeal reform toward more revolutionary change.

More recently, observers such as Shaun Powell (*Souled Out?*) and William Rhoden (*Forty Million Dollar Slaves*) have complained about the narrow limits of black progress in sports, arguing that while a relative handful of African American athletes have prospered, they still operate at the mercy of white owners. Even when they may have gained some relative power or independence, contemporary black athletes, such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, care only about their own commercial brand and refuse to stand up for racial justice. Critics lament the demise of black activist athletes, and decry their failure to live up to their “obligations.”

But Khan isn’t so sure. The decline of African American sports protest may have happened shortly after it began, embodied in the experience of Curt Flood. With the complicity of the black press, race was squeezed out of sports activism when it had its greatest potential. According to Khan, critics may have exaggerated
the extent to which idolized black athletes understood their “obligations.” Athletes motivated by “black rage” were the rare exception.

So why blame contemporary black athletes for not being what most previous black athletes never were either? Khan, too, seems to lament the absence of the black activist athlete, but he wonders why we would blame the athletes themselves. After all, aren’t they the natural evolution of the integrationist model they’ve been told to pursue? Isn’t their “obligation” supposed to be a colorblind, apolitical quest for material success? In Khan’s words, blacks need to “…find ways out of the cycle of blame and accusation that results in labels of malicious cowardice and instead . . . come to grips with the racialized political culture that leaves us grasping for heroes.”

While Curt Flood in the Media presents a fascinating argument, it has some drawbacks. The overuse of jargon and extended rhetorical analysis needlessly complicate the narrative. That, and some excessive repetition, sometimes interrupt the story Khan tries to tell. Even so, it’s a book well worth examining, especially in the ways it helps illuminate the Flood story and the situation of the contemporary black athlete.

Pay for Play: A History of Big-Time Athletic Reform

By Ronald A. Smith. Published in 2011 by the University of Illinois Press (360 pp., $30.00)

Reviewed by Andy Doyle, Winthrop University, South Carolina, USA

The use of the term reform in connection with intercollegiate athletics should make any knowledgeable fan, let alone a sport historian, check to see if his or her pocket has been picked. Ron Smith’s Pay for Play provides ample reason for continuing cynicism. This relatively brief book fills a significant gap in the historiography of intercollegiate athletics, providing an excellent history of the many, mostly unfulfilled, reform efforts that have occurred over the past century and a half. Smith necessarily covers many well-studied subjects in just a few pages each, but he does so in a way that skillfully combines the relevant secondary literature with his extensive knowledge of archival material.

Smith demonstrates that the system has been most successful in establishing standards of competitive equity that protect the self-interest of athletic programs. Reforms promoting academics or curbing commercialism have been far less effective. College presidents have borne a century and a half’s worth of misplaced reform hopes, but virtually all have been unwilling or unable to effect serious change. Smith dismisses most presidents as cheerleaders for big-time athletics, and he documents case after case bearing this out. The 1991 Knight Commission report was “wishful thinking” by a group of former college presidents “who had done little to reform athletics when they were in a position to do so” (pp. 237–238). Robert Maynard Hutchins was one of the rare exceptions, but his elimination of the University of Chicago football program made him more an icon of “athletic eccentricity and intellectual elitism” than of athletic reform (p. 77).
The NCAA fares as badly in Smith’s analysis. He links its formation with the concurrent wave of Progressive reform efforts, noting that it marked the beginning of the imposition of federal control over a system of institutional autonomy that was akin to states’ rights. The centralization of power occurred at a snail’s pace, however. For half a century, the NCAA was a mere “debating society . . . lacking status, unity, or real power to lead athletic reform” (pp. 51–52). Smith devotes most of the second half of the book to the more powerful version of the NCAA that emerged after World War II, but he finds much to criticize there as well. The failure to enforce the Sanity Code in 1950, the adoption of the first national academic standards for recipients of athletic scholarships in 1965 and their abandonment less than a decade later, the intricacies of Proposition 48 and its various amendments and revisions, and the adoption of the Academic Progress Rate in 2004 represent a continuing saga of one step up and two steps back. Grand proposals, comprehensive solutions, delays, backtracking, unintended consequences, and new solutions are all repeated in an endless loop. Smith provides many examples of the ever-increasing levels of commercialism in intercollegiate athletics, but he offers only a limited discussion of the underlying ideological conflict between English aristocratic notions of amateurism and American notions of meritocracy and bourgeois individualism.

The two most significant reforms have been the dramatic movement toward equality for African Americans and women, which were imposed on the system by federal legislative and judicial actions. Smith discusses the race issue more extensively; Title IX and its aftermath are covered in a single chapter, which represents the only significant deviation from his focus on revenue-producing men’s sports. Federal initiatives clearly provided the impetus for the desegregation of southern athletic programs, but Smith should have at least given a nod to the grassroots African American activism that forced the hand of a reluctant Senate and White House and pushed white southerners to abandon massive resistance. Nor did federal pressure force coaches throughout the nation to advance beyond mere tokenism—they dramatically expanded their recruitment of African Americans in order to tap a previously underutilized pool of athletic talent.

Pay for Play is a valuable and thoroughly researched addition to the literature, but a reader can be distracted by writing glitches that pop up like a series of dissonant notes in a musical selection. Examples include “lightening rod” (p. 140), “financial straights” (p. 148), “lesser influential” (p. 147), “the Chinese Confucius School of pre-Christ times” (p. 193), and more than a few others. Copyediting shortcomings aside, Ron Smith has produced a first-rate book that will fill gaps in the knowledge of virtually all sport scholars, provide students and lay readers with an extremely useful overview of a broad and complex topic, and offer challenging perspectives and reflections to all.