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Special Issue: Oral History and Sport

Title: Crafting critical echoes in sport organizations: Oral histories of, and possibilities for, the New Zealand Olympic Committee

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Abstract:

Digital spaces (e.g. organizational websites, fanzines, blogs, electronic repositories and social media) are, potentially, rich empirical terrain in which sport narratives may be (re)presented, mobilised and challenged.¹ Sport organizational websites also offer ideal platforms to voice and disseminate sport history content to wider audiences.² Drawing on the context of New Zealand's participation in the Olympic movement, and the national Olympic Committee's recent efforts to embrace historical thinking, we consider the confluence of oral and digital approaches.³ More widely, the paper examines how sport organizations might utilise oral histories and digital spaces to engage audiences more effectively with critical understanding of the past. To note, progressive shifts in museum and heritage studies have advocated ideological and institutional redirection, critical reflection and radical departures from traditional representational practices. In these processes, the promotion of oral histories have been identified as a key means to these ends (notably, in re-orientating the construction of historical narrative and democratising knowledge ownership).⁴ While sport historians have echoed this ethos,⁵ sport organizations have been slower to realise connections between oral history, narrative making and public heritage praxis. Presenting vignettes constructed from interviews with sport participants, this paper considers these intersections and possibilities.

Key words:

Critical museology, heritage studies, digital history, New Zealand, Olympic

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Title: Crafting critical echoes in sport organizational websites: Oral histories of, and possibilities for, the New Zealand Olympic Committee

Introduction

Sport historians' gradual embrace of the digital turn has presented new opportunities for theoretical innovation, empirical analysis and scholarly production.⁶ Scholars now work on, with and in an array of digital spaces (e.g., electronic archives, organizational websites, visual and artefact databases, blogs/fanzines, podcasts, and social media).⁷ Such spaces provide new and novel historical content, yet also challenge existing tropes and discourses, and create modes of (re)presentation and narrative making for historians to explore. Additionally, sport organizations' digital sites can reveal 'something' about the continuities and discontinuities of collective belonging, identity and loyalty, the utility of electronic engagement, and the power of nostalgia and affect.⁸ Sport organizations also often draw audio and visual content for their websites from their members. In this process, decisions are taken within respect to politicized memory making; namely, whose and what stories are told, how they are told, and how they are aligned to organizational agendas beyond the historical.⁹ In this paper we focus on the New Zealand Olympic Committee (NZOC) to demonstrate the crafting of histories that are sanitised, hagiological and nationalistic, and (mal)aligned to corporate-influenced organizational ideals and values.¹⁰ The reification of hagiography within the Olympic movement is, we respect, well-founded and has been effectively interrogated by several scholars.¹¹ Adopting varied inter/national, temporal and political foci, this work has examined the extents to which hagiographic discourses within the movement have contributed to organizational myopicism, hegemonic reinforcement, marginalisation of voices (particularly the dissenting, countervailing or 'problematic'), and served to maintain the institution's power over historical narrative and meaning-making. Taken in totality, this sustained historical critique of the Olympic movement, in accord with additional institutional scepticism across disciplines and sectors, has illustrated that there is need and value in continued reassessment of sport (organizations) and their assumed and entrenched public and moral 'good'. This paper builds upon this scholarship and ethos.

We argue there is merit in exploring how sport organizations might better appreciate ways oral history might re-orientate historical representations toward more critically-orientated (reflexive, democratic, progressive and transformative means and ends). In adopting this position we recognize, and are encouraged by, concomitant movements in museum and heritage studies that call for organizational redirection, critical reflection and radical departures from traditional representational practices.¹² Within these imperatives, oral history has been a fundamental tool in the recrafting of historical narrative, the demonstration of organizations' ethical responsibilities, and the democratisation of knowledge production and ownership.¹³ Although reflected in Sport Historians' practices,¹⁴ work remains for sport organizations in forging connections between oral history, (digital) narrative making and public heritage. Subsequently, this paper investigates how sport organizations might engage with oral histories as part of critical digital development. We begin by briefly considering underpinning scholarly intersections and our methodological

approach. We then present three vignettes to showcase oral histories are politically ‘on message’, and we conclude by highlighting the difficulties that may exist for scholarly and organizational disruption.

Oral, digital and critical history intersections

For academics, the continued proliferation of digital modalities, and increased connections between (digital) public content, sport and historical craftsmanship, have generated possibilities to advance critical interrogations of sport.¹⁵ Moreover, in the quest for greater representation and diversity in scholarly analysis of sport, alternative avenues to disseminate sport history to wider audiences, and improved public dialogue, digital spaces yield exciting possibilities. One of which is the ability for the memories and experiences of an array of sport participants to be captured, collated, shared more regularly and publicly than ever before. By extension, digital innovations (particularly the likes of integrated social media platforms, imbedded hyperlinks, wikis (open-authored information repositories), augmented and virtual reality, memes, hashtags and handles) now, potentially, bring audiences ‘closer’ to historical content. Moreover, such technologies are also working to challenge modes of doing history and decentre authorial/narrative processes from historians to their audiences. In the context of this paper, and in keeping with calls for Sport Historians to challenge hegemonies within the discipline,¹⁶ these initiatives are useful; creating new data, methodological tools, analytical approaches and publication modes.

Sport Historians may welcome these possibilities, yet digital spaces can present difficulties. Sport organizations’ digital spaces (which may include an amalgam of website, social media, public communication and marketing outputs), for example, are not, inherently historical. Nor, admittedly, are they designed to necessarily serve historical purposes, or cater for historians’ empirical or analytical desires. In addition, and notwithstanding the formation of some effective working relationships with historians,¹⁷ sport organizations’ approaches to critical sport history and oral history methodologies remain inconsistent. Sport organizations do not, necessarily, intend to operate as digital museums, and as such rarely (if at all) appear to apply the same rigor in content selection, subject narration, contextualisation, and ethical and social responsibility.¹⁸ Scholars have, however, identified the new possibilities intertwining oral history and digital spaces have for the storage and retrieval of archival knowledge, and presentation, narrative-making and consumption. This acknowledgement rehearses arguments made by digital and museological scholars regarding ways digital developments are prompting radical rethinks in research methodology and critique.¹⁹ Here, the point need only noting that sport websites, such as NZOC’s, are enriched with content ripe for historical analysis, but also constitute constructed spaces in which the organizational representational strategies (e.g., homepage, audio, visual and textual content, browsing options and navigational routes) all provide mechanisms for narrative making. In previous research the lead author of this paper has evaluated a previous iteration of NZOC’s website (www.olympic.org.nz).²⁰ In addition to critiquing the organization’s practical use of its website, and although not explicitly interested in oral history per se, the examination appraised the utility of historical creation in ideologically and politically suturing connections between NZOC’s past and present.

This paper adopts a different tact. We contend that as empirically rich as organization spaces may be for Sport Historians, they also present possibilities and frustrations for those scholars specifically interested in oral histories. At present, NZOC's website contains elements of oral history (e.g. accounts of former, current and aspiring Olympic athletes). These are not, however, narratives subject to historical rigor or the craftsmanship of historians attuned to context, critique and nuance. Rather, the inclusion of oral history elements enables the organization to have 'a voice', meet its obligation to provide athletes a public platform, fulfil moral obligations to its past, and maintain a favourable public image.

The subsequent organizational change we advocate throughout this paper may thus be welcomed by academics. Yet, we argue that there is an organizational utility as well. NZOC have already been acknowledged as a progressive National Olympic Committee (evidenced in winning the inaugural IOC Women in Sport award, its public outreach campaigns, innovative bi-cultural/indigenous-based Games team management culture, athlete contract development, and direct comments made by former IOC President Jacques Rogge). Moreover, in the past decade NZOC have established a distinct reputation within the country, and among other NOCs and International Federations, as a conscientious organization attentive to public opinion and the country's underlying moral compass (witnessed, for example, in its commemorative acts, apologies for political errors in judgement, embrace of cultural values, support for sport development in the Pacific region, and commitment to integrity in governance and athlete voice).²¹

Therefore, while it serves NZOC to continue telling its stories in ways it sees 'best fit' with the organization and its values, the social and political context in which it operates, its values, and sport more generally, have been and are in flux. Moreover, global shifts and sensitivities in sport culture vis-à-vis athlete welfare, organizational expectations, ethical responsibilities and duties of care, have precipitated greater scrutiny over organizational power structures, athlete-organization relations, parity of athlete representation, and wider questions of social justice.²² As such, if NZOC is to retain effective relations with its stakeholders (whether athlete, sponsor, public or member organization), and specifically manage amiable athlete interactions, the organization must position itself appropriately within these debates. NZOC's current approach allows audiences (or 'stakeholders') to connect to the historical continuity of the organization and, by proxy, its role within the fabric of national life. In this task, NZOC are particularly fortunate. They have a wealth of athletes, administrators, journalist and politicians who have benefited from their patronage and power and, subsequently, are well placed to contribute to a collective positive chorus that fortifies the organization and its work. It is to some of the members of this choir that we now turn.

Our approach

Data was collected through a series of interviews with Olympians, broadcasters, politicians and government officials. The oral histories collated formed part of a larger research project on the history of New Zealand's Olympic participation and its contribution to national identity. Subsequent to University ethical approval, and with assistance from NZOC who acted as gatekeepers to Olympian contacts, a participant cohort was identified. In the first instance, NZOC contacted every living Olympian held in their database and called for volunteers to be

interviewed. Approximately 32 Olympians responded. Interviews were conducted by the second author and took place in multiple locations within New Zealand over the course of 2015-2017. While some Olympians ultimately declined to be involved, or a suitable time was unable to be found, 15 Olympians were subsequently interviewed. Olympians who participated as far back as the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, through to the Rio 2016 Olympic Games were interviewed. The diversity of the participant cohort provided a range of perspectives on the country's Olympic involvement and highlighted some nuances within critical junctures of the organization's development. The overall intention of the historical collection was to illustrate how prevailing discourses of the country's Olympic participation are fed by an accord of voices that galvanise the political and cultural value of NZOC and the Olympic movement. Beyond this, however, the project also aimed to demonstrate how such histories are an echo-chamber, subservient to a self-perpetuating logic of historical amelioration, political sensitivity and sensibility, and organizational mediation.

Members of the broadcast community were also interviewed. These were selected as many anchored Television New Zealand coverage of the Olympic Games, dating back to the 1972 Munich Olympic Games. Additional participants included two previous Government Ministers with responsibility for sport, the Chief Executive of Sport New Zealand (the Crown entity responsible for governing sport and recreation), and the Chief Executive of High-Performance Sport New Zealand.²³ For those participants who were not present within New Zealand, the interviews were conducted via Skype. Interviews were approximately one hour in duration. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. All transcripts were approved by the participant.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed that focused on the participant's role within the Olympic Movement, the memories of key periods in the nation's sporting histories, and reflections on the broader political and popular meanings of the Olympic to New Zealand culture and identity. Interviews captured emotive aspects of participants' experiences and recollections with questions covering, variously: general attitudes and beliefs about national character, sport and the Olympic movement; assumptions about national identity, public and personal memory and collective celebration; New Zealand's international relations and sport status; political tensions; cultural inclusivity; and, key historical continuities and discontinuities. Questions also explored the social roles (if any) of Olympians to national identity and culture, the privileging of rugby discourse within the national narrative, and general thoughts on organizational culture. We focus below on three key themes: national identity, politics, and moral altruism and civil service (associated playfully to lyrics from New Zealand's national anthem). These themes were the most frequently occurring across participants' narratives, were best supported by substantive empirical data, and directly addressed the research aim. The initial analysis also uncovered several other pertinent themes including, international relations, athlete-organization tensions, professionalisation, bi-culturalism and legacies of participation. These revealed additional nuances in participants' experiences and how the (re)construction of the country's Olympic is subsequently layered in meaning. These further themes have been interrogated and considered, where appropriate, in the subsequent analysis.

'In the bonds of love we meet': Constructing organizationally-orientated oral histories

To address our broader concerns vis-à-vis oral history, we interject the collations below with analytical interrogations related to prevailing historical hegemonies, nostalgic influence and contextual considerations. Ultimately, our interest transcends the dissemination of participant voices to issues of representation, the absence and mitigation of counter narrative, and romanticisation and public memory making. In identifying these characteristics within oral accounts we can understand some of the difficulties that both scholars and sport Organizations might encounter answering calls for the sorts critical museology and democratisation of digital spaces that large parts of the sport, heritage and public domain now demand.

'Hear our voices, we entreat': National identity

Congruity between sport, nation making, nationalism and national identity has been firmly established in both scholarly and public domains. Moreover, in the quest for public and political legitimacy, and as part effective marketing practice, sport organizations capitalise on these connections by aligning commercial and management imperatives to sport jingoism. For NZOC, not unlike many other sport organizations, such discourse not only forms an innate part of how the body sees itself, but also characterises ways its membership frame their experiences and organizational relations.

'Sport defines New Zealand on the world stage. Make New Zealand the underdogs and they can beat anyone. But make New Zealand favourite we struggle – why? Because we don't want to let anyone down. Sportsmen and women place higher expectations on themselves in New Zealand because of the importance New Zealand society places on sport. This can be motivational as New Zealand has a proud sporting history. They aspire to those things that matter to us as a nation.' (NZOC Team Official #2)

'Kiwis are known in my sport around the world at being some of the best. Always trying to be the best and willing to get into to it and give it a shot or a try. Willing to try and fix anything and using anything to win. I think this part of our history whether it was steaming on a ship for 3 or 4 months to get to the Olympics or a rugby game, we don't use these things as excuses. It's a get on with it approach. For sure you can see the NZ presents at the games and they do a good job of this.' (Olympian, 1992, 1996 & 2000 Olympic Games)

'New Zealand is very well received internationally. The United States Olympic Committee also look to help and talk to New Zealand at events. This is largely, I think, because we punch above our weight and (they) don't understand how we can win so many medals. It is also because we are not-aligned (to adversaries), not corrupt and are humble people. New Zealand also has a big advantage because we are honest brokers' (1976 Gold medal Olympian #2)

These emotive accounts reflect strong connections to place, collective belonging, assumptions about national life and cultural character. Participants spoke positively of Olympic Games involvement and collective feelings of belonging in being associated with the

national team. Feelings of nationalism, pride, representation, duty, privilege and honour are substantive. Coupled to this are strong associations to a sense of unique and distinctive culture, clichés about domestic life, and contrasts of perceived national difference. As one athlete remarked, “the country’s success is very important as it lifts spirits and brings people together as a Nation, especially as we are a small isolated nation going up against the bigger, more populated and better funded nations” (1976 Gold medal Olympian #1).

‘I was 19 years old at the first Olympic Games in 1968 and it was the first time out of New Zealand. The focus was on playing sport and in 1968 I had no idea about the wider issues of sport and politics in the Olympic Movement. It was about attending and playing for the country...Of course, I felt proud competing for New Zealand at the Olympic Games, but, ultimately, we were there to beat the opposition...The pride in competing for New Zealand came before and after the competition...I competed in the amateur era – we were expected to have to do things for ourselves...The focus was on administration support rather than elite performance...there was a lot of support from New Zealanders. The Olympic Games have always held universal appeal. We sold bumper stickers to send the team to the Olympics, and New Zealanders widely supported fundraising appeals to send the team to the Olympics.’ (1976 Gold medal Olympian #2)

Echoing these sentiments, the same athlete added:

‘The Olympics are hugely important to New Zealand and Olympians. Schools get involved in following the Olympic Games and also looking at the history of the Olympics...the Olympic Movement is about story telling.’ (1976 Gold medal Olympian #2)

Voices here evidence a sense of evolution of collective spirit over time and illustrate that such a bolstering of spirit by beliefs about the imbedded social and cultural value of sport to national image, identify and pride. This said, within participants’ Olympic memories, discourses of shared national identity sat in juxtaposition with tensions about the organizational commitment to team culture, perceived antipathy of public support, and changes to national profile with the onset of professionalism. In relation the building of distinct national team culture, one 1960s-1970s Olympian remarked, ‘if it was visible I was not aware of it’:

‘(There was) not much NZ culture but good camaraderie on the team sundeck...We had great support at many of our matches from the Rowers...No NZ culture other than what we created ourselves within our hockey team...lots of support from our own supporters (mainly family, work, colleagues, friends)...’

As participants variously remarked, the construction of a collective national identity, or at the very least, a shared team culture, was not *a fait accompli*. In NZOC’s case the current character of the organization, and the current ways it approaches the manufacturing of its history, is a distinct product of its contemporary business practices. “In 1992 it was a much lower key event as far as support goes than it is now”, one Olympian noted, “We didn’t even have our own coach for the games and as I mentioned we paid for a lot of the campaign

ourselves and didn't get paid. Now I believe the athletes are much better funded" (Olympian, 1992, 1996 & 2000 Olympic Games). Whether participants' memories here comprise accurate characterisations of New Zealand's inherent qualities, or NZOC's national-identity building practices, is moot. The point is that this repetitive discourse has been embraced by the organization to not only fortify a sense of prestige and exclusivity in belonging to the nation's Olympic history, but has also, as considered later in this paper, been strategically built into team culture and management, marketing and public relations work.

'From the bonds of strife and war': Political pressures

Concomitant with the reconstruction of nationalistic tropes, many participants situated their experiences in relation to New Zealand's involvement in international relations. Here, again, dominant narratives prevailed; specifically, with regards to the country's connections to the 1972 Munich Olympic massacre, the anti-New Zealand-related boycotts of the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games, and athletes partial boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics.²⁴ Individual proximity for some individuals generated lingering and evocative memories and added value and meaning to the significance of their Olympic participation. As one participant mused about Munich:

'We knew something was happening, there was talk...there was something happening in the Olympic Village. Yet, there was minimal security, and the Germans wanted to do a good job. New Zealand was told not to leave quarters, Israeli's were next door. We saw bodies and terrorists, heard shots. They were taken out the back of the village...Munich was a very disappointing result for New Zealand hockey after just missing the semi-finals in Mexico.' (NZOC Team Official)

In 1976, participants' experiences in Munich were exacerbated by additional political turbulence. As one athlete noted, "African teams were leaving as New Zealand entered. It was a distraction for the team. But, athletes didn't hold a grudge; it was about politics. However, boycotts don't work." For some athletes, the geo-politics were personal.

'The hockey team in 1976 were amateurs and were certainly not expecting a gold medal. They did feel they were the best ever New Zealand trained team that had gone to a games, and we certainly felt New Zealand was behind the team and the Olympics. There were huge changes in security. Though now we never fully felt safe at the games' (1976 Gold medal Olympian #2)

While the global political frictions may have been complex, the practical and emotional consequences for individuals were equally so. As one Vice-Captain of one Olympic sport team noted of the 1980s boycotts,

'I had been to the games before and I thought that (not being able to go) was bad luck and I felt bad for those athletes who had never been before...the Government put a lot of pressure on sports to pull out. I was a teacher at the time and felt my job was at risk if I went...In the end, the team pulled out in June after talks throughout the year, so it didn't come as a surprise. It was hard to watch the Aussies and Brits

competing at the Games and the four New Zealand athletes who competed under the NZOC flag’.

Reflections such as this, echoed by other participants, have contributed to a prevailing ‘version of record’ among the country’s older sports constituency that has now become constructed and maintained by the organization.²⁵ While instances of disruption are possible (e.g., in the one-off limited case of the 1980 boycotts revisited by NZOC in 2010), participant narratives consolidated an iteration of the country’s Olympic history that has hardened over time (as evidenced by organizational behaviours and events, e.g. NZOC’s website contents and historical commemorations). Notwithstanding the ability of older participants to provide critical commentary, where critique is levelled, narratives still fall within a nostalgic version of ‘sport in a different time’.

Yet, there are signs in critical nuance in the recollections of more recent Olympic participants and team members. These recollections also reflect changes NZOC has made in recent years to embrace a team culture model integrating indigenous concepts and ideals. Cultural shifts have involved co-option of cultural advisors within the team management, continued development of a ‘one team, one spirit’ campaign’, and use of Māori symbols and concepts including the ceremonial Kakahu (cloak), pounamu (greenstone), fern, haka (ritual dance) and mana (pride). These changes were, for some participants, the source of strong memories and contributed to a distinct sense of collective identity.

‘...wearing the uniform all the time, the welcome, the haka for returning medallists, the greenstone pendant we were given and the communal lounge where we mixed with the other athletes – all contributed to the greater sense of a larger team...Like a returning hero – I was made to feel really special even though we hadn’t won a medal. The team did better than expected and people were telling us how much they enjoyed watching us and about how people were getting up in the night to see the games.’
(Olympian 2012 Olympic Games)

The Haka has become emblematic of NZOC’s cultural redirection, but also embedded within collective memory making.

‘The Haka formed a distinctive statement of welcome and union for the Team in Athens. As each unit arrived at the Village no matter when they arrived or how many there were they were greeted by those already in residence by a Haka followed in traditional fashion by every person arriving being greeted individually by each Team member already there (by handshake, kiss on the cheek, or hongi)...This ritual was a very symbolic statement of identity, support and unity both for those arriving and reinforced each time for those doing the greeting.’ (NZOC Team Official, 2004-2012)

Haka affectations were not, however, universal. “Personally”, one multi-Olympian noted, “I think it is too much, sorry but too many hakas [sic] and it kind of dilutes the effect of it” (Olympian, 1992, 1996 & 2000 Olympic Games). Such critique was isolated in the oral histories we collected, though does cohere with domestic media criticism.²⁶ Given NZOC’s careful orchestration of its public profile, and the tightening constraints around current team members speaking out, and the risk for athletes in jeopardising Olympic participation, roles

beyond sport, or potential sponsorship, it unsurprising that such critical and dissenting voices are rare. Irrespective of whether such voices exist to be recovered, current memories such as those detailed serve in a potential myopathy toward the country's Olympic participation has been about; essentially, a sanitised, linear narrative that is easy to accept, reproduce, disseminate and market.

'At thy feet': Moral altruism & civil service

Memories we collated were largely positive and/or reflect 'fairly' on the organization and its capacities. In addition, key themes have emerged; namely, the politics of national identity and representation, acceptance of organizational faults, regurgitation of clichés and, lastly, strong sentiments sport and morality and public duty. As one participant noted regarding social expectation, "(there is a need) to share our experience to inspire younger people to have their own Olympic dream...Also to the wider population as people like to associate with successful sportspeople...and they have contributed with tax dollars to support the teams...so they deserve a return on their money!" (1976 Gold medal Olympian #1). Similar sentiments were echoed by others. "Absolutely Olympians have a wider role in New Zealand society", one multi-games Olympian and gold medallist remarked,

'My upbringing in education also helped with this as was interested and concerned about developing the whole person which is something the Olympic Movement does. The value of role models, fair play and effort, are important and is what the Olympic Movement tries to teach. There is an obligation to do more than just be the sportsperson as there is an education aspect. This aspect of developing the person and the Olympism being a way of life is often lost on the media who tend to have a narrow scope which is focussed on results and medals.'

The sense of collective commitment and duty is also bound up with feeling of social and moral responsibility extending beyond performative participation. Here, participants' memories were framed by a strong conviction that Olympic representation is synonymous with civil duty, and that sport participation places individuals in a unique social category that begets expectation and obligation. "Competing at an Olympic Games is the crème de la crème", one athlete remarked,

'I regard myself as being extremely lucky to have been able to compete at two Olympics. We were all very proud to wear the Olympic Uniform and very determined to do it justice by our performance on the track. I still regard the Olympic Uniform with almost religious reverence and will not wear it unless it is to a function where it will not be cheapened in any way.' (1968 & 1978 Gold medal Olympian)

Similar pride was also voiced by others. "When you are a Black stick (national hockey team member), you are a Black stick and when you retire you're just an ex-Black stick", one athlete recalled, "but once you are an Olympian you're always an Olympian and so as long as the title stays with you I think you have obligation to represent yourself as a role model New Zealander for others....Like a returning hero." (Olympian 2012 Olympic Games). Another well respected Olympian and administrator added, "I believe the biggest thing we are as Olympians is role

models for younger people and to show younger people anybody can do anything if they put the time and effort into it” (Olympian, 1992, 1996 & 2000 Olympic Games).

The nature of individuals’ Olympic involvement and the genuine respect for their role within the country’s sporting history expressed here may be of historic interest. Yet, the prestige and reverence afforded to Olympic participation has also been of value to NZOC as well. Echoed assumptions of public service have reinforced over time. Morality and social duty are imbedded as part of the team cultural and contractual imperatives (team members, for example, are obligation to participant in a range of public engagement, educational and commercial appearances before, during and after an Olympic Games). In addition, the organization’s most recent ‘Earn the fern’ campaign which has used similar evocative stories from contemporary athletes (shared across its digital spaces) to demonstrate the administrations’, teams’ and athletes’ community commitment to help engender public and commercial support.

Being politically ‘on-point’

Taken individually, participants’ accounts stand as valuable oral testimony to mark personal and politically poignant periods of sport history. Beyond this, the vignettes are an amalgamation of experiences contributing to a collective, yet selective, remembering of New Zealand’s Olympic participation. Although experiences vary, there are degrees of congruence in how voices coalesced around, and subsequently reinforced, certain narratives. Unity and echoing of voices is not inherently problematic (and might be expected of people sharing similar sporting experiences), yet there are consequences to constructing and sustaining these dominant narratives; especially in the context of our advocacy to open up sport organizations’ digital spaces to new voices and critical reflection.²⁷ Moreover, and although the concept looms large in sport and sport research,²⁸ the accounts reveal powerful nostalgia that may work against critical historical renderings.

Interrogating the prevailing sentiments of these oral histories, it is clear participants speak positively of Olympic Games involvement, and are united in being associated with the national team. Feelings of nationalism, pride, representation, duty, privilege and honour are substantive and resonate in individual’s historical thinking and the ways in which they position their place in the country’s contemporary sport culture. Coupled to this are strong associations to a sense of unquestioned, unique and distinctive national culture and unwavering belief as to the role sport plays therein. “Rugby is our national game. We are so dominant and quite consistent year on year”, one recent Olympian commented,

‘The rugged nature of the game probably has a connection to a national identity of being tough, boxing above weight, battlers, outdoorsmen, a bit rough, not so refined, strong and willing to get stuck in. I think it’s linked in that regard to the ANZAC war spirit which Kiwis are also proud to identify with, and also maybe the early NZ settlers. So it kind of matches our history identity...Kiwis succeeding tends to have that storey of ‘little NZ doing well on the world stage’ – definitely people want to see us medal and have huge pride.” (Olympian 2012 Olympic Games)

This penchant for historical positivity also manifests in reflections about the country's (relatively) small size and its direct participation in international politics. Recollections routinely regurgitate how the country's Olympic representation has been entrenched in global affairs and events (e.g., the 1972 Munich Massacre, or the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Boycotts). The positioning of the country's participation in relation to global events and the proximity of connections, from many of these participant's accounts, adds value and meaning to the significance of Olympic participation and gives further legitimacy to notions of a 'proud' Olympic history. These narratives are also fortified by further assumptions and clichés about domestic life, the country's characteristics, and contrasts of perceived national differences (for example, the prevalence of the entrepreneurial spirit, 'the underdog', 'little Kiwi battler', 'small isolated nation' up against the 'big boys', 'exceeding expectations', 'pulling above our weight', 'doing well on the world stage' etc.). Such ideas are, however, not new (they are, for example, replicated an array of the country's popular sport history publications)²⁹. Participants' reflections also illustrate a distinct evolution of collective spirit over time that has been bolstered by more recent organizational change (e.g., the 'One team, one spirit' campaign and strategic integration of indigenous cultural values and practices).

Although, most participants expressed similar sentiments about their Olympic histories, there were some evident generational distinctions. To recall, data collection spanned participants who had more than 50 years' experience with NZOC and the Olympic Games and had been part of the transition of sport from the amateur to professional era, to participants who were instrumental in instigating organizational cultural shifts in the 2000s, through to younger individuals. This latter group, some of who remained under varying contractual obligations and public/media restrictions with NZOC and commercial sponsors, have experienced a more strategic and carefully managed/manufactured team culture than their forbears. In the context of the oral history challenges,³⁰ the generational differences and organizational demarcation here matters because it highlights how prevailing discourses are perpetuated (in this case, the continuation of certain success stories, political events, and/or organization decisions/indecisions that have become part of the inherited historical fabric passed from generation of Olympic participant). To note, several participants who were specifically part of the country's past successes and key historical moments, and that have lengthy tenures and associations with the organization, remain in key positions within NZOC and have been instrumental in the prevailing memory making.

While not explicit in the vignettes, these oral histories are complicated further by the existing country's high performance funding structure. The current arrangements necessitate NZOC retains favourable relationships with State funding bodies and its commercial sponsors to facilitate continued Olympic participation. New Zealand has a history of representation in a range of sports, yet there are sports routinely afforded dominant status (e.g., rowing, cycling and yachting). In keeping with NZOC's need to enhance the visibility of its athletes, and these sports and athletes are, subsequently, also afforded prime space on the organizational website and feature heavily in its public engagement and marketing campaigns. Irrespective of whether it might be democratic and inclusive to champion all sports and embrace a plurality of sporting experiences, NZOC resources are limited and executive decision have had

to be made about its externally-facing activities. In this case, NZOC needs to consider who (or whose story) is going to be most beneficial meeting its priorities and stakeholder obligations.

Recollection, nostalgia and advocating organizational rethink

As evidenced in the work of other contributors to this special issue, oral histories can provide opportunities for new voices. In terms of this paper, new empirical nuance was limited. Notwithstanding the efforts of some participants voicing (at times) varied degrees of frustration with the organization, these were couched in the language of temporal and spatial sensitivity. For example, expressed as ‘the organization didn’t have the resources it has now’, ‘there were some differences in the way things were done back then’, ‘There was no (team) culture back then’, ‘Now, things are much different’). Regardless of disgruntlements, participants predominantly held fond memories of both the organization and their part within the country’s sport history. As such, rather than challenge the status quo (namely, of a ‘long and proud Olympic history’), the organizational account of its history (as also expressed on its website) coheres with participants’ nostalgic accounts and the political power of the prevailing narrative remains unchallenged.

From an organizational perspective, this narrative harmony is politically and economically favourable. To note, over the past decade selective historical recollection and evocative nostalgia have been absorbed in to NZOC’s organizational marketing. Activities here have included, for example: Centralisation of the administration to headquarters closer to key commercial sponsor in the country’s largest city (which, ironically, ended its physical museum); continued investment from the country’s leading philanthropists; prioritising historical ‘moments’ in digital and social media technology redevelopment; commemorative events; more obvious sponsor promotion on the website linked to legacy; improved synergies and partnership with stakeholders within the development of games campaigns (e.g. London, Rio, Sochi) that play on long-running associations with the Olympic movement; and, tie-up between the athlete promotion/support, commercial promotion and historical continuity. This activity has enabled NZOC to build trust and rapport between the organization, its members and the public and makes sense from a practical sport management perspective.

Nonetheless, while NZOC’s careful historical marketing is understandable, such practices are not without consequence or contradiction. Foremost of which is that here you have an organization who have demonstrated some commitment to critical and reflexive history (as evidenced by commemorative events, indulging former (successful) Olympians on the organization’s digital and social media spaces). However, this is at odds with NZOC’s current regulatory culture around athlete management that severely inhibits athletes’ freedom of expression in digital spaces and at Games times. To note, NZOC was one of the first Olympic committees to include athlete freedom-of-speech restrictions in its Olympic (and also Commonwealth) Games contracts; part of which entails athletes, and all members of the team, adhering to strict public relations and media behaviours in the lead up to and during competition. Accordingly, any efforts historians might desire of the organization to engage in a critical oral history, in this instance, are limited by the organizational and commercial contexts. Essentially, current oral history projects that ‘celebrate athlete voice’ still need to align with and reinforce the political and corporate agendas of the NZOC. Any counter

narratives (e.g. athlete or team frustrations, controversies or organizational incompetence) that may emerge at are likely to be either heavily moderated or inhibited.

Oral history resonance

Our research has encouraged us to consider the implications for three key groups; sport organizations, organizational stakeholders, and sport scholars. In positing potential lines of enquiry that might mobilise oral histories toward new means and ends,³¹ we encourage readers to consider what might critical oral histories ‘look’ like? Who might they be for in practical and ideological terms? What potentialities lay within oral history projects for changing institutional practices? How might empirical paucities be overcome with new methodological rigor and creativity? Such thinking, we believe, may open-up new empirical ground, but generate modes of doing oral history work that are potentially transformative, democratised, critically orientated and inclusive.

For sports organizations

With regards to sport organizations, NZOC is, invariably, at the progressive end of the spectrum of Olympic (and national sport) organizations that have shown capacity for historical conscience, political sensitivity and sensibility. NZOC’s efforts to profit from its past are not unlike other contemporary sport entities who have effectively monetised nostalgia and memory as routine corporate practice,³² yet their efforts are still rare among Olympic organizations who readily appear ill-equipped, dis-interested or have yet to prioritise critical historical investment. This said, NZOC are well positioned to demonstrate some leadership. Accordingly, following NZOC’s lead, sport organizations may first start by adopting more open, transparent, democratic, reflexive dialogues and engagements with their members (e.g. athletes, fans, public, sponsors, academics etc.). Essentially, we call for sport organizations to adopt a sensitivity and a sensibility when there are ‘problematic’ issues, controversies, or ‘difficult moments’ that may disrupt established power and narratives. Part of this exercise entails recognising the value and complexities of context. Moreover, with respect to digital representation and online public engagement, to then also operationalise this new thinking and contemplate alternative ways to constructing narratives of identity and collective belonging (for example, embracing multimodal platforms that facilitate non-linear historical exploration and create space for sharing a spectrum of sporting voices).

Our suggestions may not be appealing, or necessarily easy to implement, for sport organizations; especially for those entities who have clearly defined historical investment strategies, or for those not interested in going beyond digitizing narratives of athletic success. We are also not suggesting sport organizations should act, or have the capacity to act, as their own professional historians (hence our call for greater collaborative partnerships below). Empirical data collection, and digital representations, of the sort we suggest *does* have a cost that must be met either within organizational budgets, researcher’s expense accounts, or genuine goodwill. We appreciate that in many cases (for example, in large international or national federations or well-resourced domestic sport bodies), organizations are already suitably resourced financially, and/or may have ‘in-house’/on-call amateur historians and archivists able to craft narratives as and when deemed necessary. As such, to engage the

services of an academic historian for the sorts of substantive oral history work we are describing may, unfortunately, be economically unfeasible (particularly if scholars adhere to charging organizations in accordance with Universities' suggested 'consultation' fees or research cost policies). Moreover, in an age of increasingly commercial sensitivity and careful management of organization's digital/social spaces, it is understandable that sport bodies may want to maintain control over what gets posted on their public interfaces. Thus, it makes sense for organizations to be cautious over who to work with and how much intellectual license and freedom to afford (many historians, to note, have made careers out of organization critique that might work against effective collaboration). Nonetheless, we are adamant that if organizations are reluctant to relinquish editorship effective compromises and partnerships may still be reached.

For organizational stakeholders

We recognise that this may all constitute a radical step-change from what sport organizations may be comfortable with. Furthermore, there is the need to appreciate that sport organizations do not work in isolation. As such, the encouragement here for entities to 'speak out' in historical terms exists in tandem with, and must be balanced against, organizations' stakeholder relations (e.g. corporate sponsors, State funders, national federations and sports workers). In our case, the issue comes back to what NZOC wants to achieve and be known for (as a 'pioneering' National Olympic Committee), and how hard they want to push/invest in historical projects as part of their contemporary marketing. As with many other Olympic committees reliant on State and corporate funding, there is the need to stay current. Here, there is clear utility in using oral histories history to keep the organization's public image and presence alive and visible. There remains scope, however, to build upon these efforts and include a wider cohort of voices; particularly those of older athletes who are no longer bound by the same commercial and media constraints of in-competition athletes.³³

Lastly, in the absence of NZOC having a physical museum space, there needs to be investment and discussion regarding how to keep historical representation central to website development, and to investigate ways to move historical content, off the website and into other areas of public space.³⁴ Such discussion, we suggest, begins by appreciating the value of history (oral or otherwise) within NZOC's marketing strategies and to recognise the power of historical narratives for image and branding, and the understand the connections to the organization's other public engagement activities. As evidenced elsewhere, commercial relationships and imperatives have shifted how NZOC works with its members. Notwithstanding the complexities of these arrangements, in terms of advocating progressive oral histories, we argue sport organizations, commercial stakeholders and athletes need to converse and collaborate more openly about the current controls of athletes' lives and voices (while under the restrictive competition/team member phase). Although organizations and funders may be cautious about sound bites that jeopardise the brand or image of the sponsor, there needs to more realistic and ethical approach regarding freedom of speech, and collective expectations and responsibilities.³⁵

For sport scholars

Simply, we need more oral histories and projects of a critical nature that move beyond evocative sport performance reflections and nostalgic narratives. Moreover, reflecting other scholarly calls, we need to work on locating oral histories, and sport, within wider contexts. In doing so, consider the ways historical forces, events and ideologies come to bear on memory recovery, forgetting and narrative creation. Within this, we need to take a more rigorous approach to nostalgia and romanticisation, both from the source and the historian. Caveats to nostalgia are often acknowledged, yet nostalgic practice transcends just historians' methodological rigor and shapes the epistemological assumptions upon which our collective qualitative enquiry is based; for example, what constitutes concepts of, and assumptions about, ideas such identity, sport, corporeality and emotion.³⁶

Beyond nostalgia, we need be more adventurous with our subject and content matter. Although sport historians enjoy evaluating well-trod terrain, there is a need to continuing extending narratives beyond successful and known sport figures. Such diversification may also begin to examine voices of other types of sports workers (e.g., team officials, journalists, athlete entourage, politicians, sport governing/funding bodies and corporate sponsors). All of whom may yield fresh perspectives and questions for historical revisionism. To new subject matter we need to add new, and potentially difficult and discomfoting questions, that might challenge prevailing regimes of thought, and reveal fresh narratives about sport organizations and their members. In practical terms, such a task would be aided by greater efforts to get researchers working alongside organizations; to create partnerships and be part of historical, reflexive and critical discussions and collaborate on initiatives. More broadly, we encourage academics find ways to work, as much as their moral inclinations will allow, with Olympic committees and national federations in concert. Such redirections may take numerous forms. In the first instance, we take encouragement from peers who have offered ways of forging effective scholarly and sport organizational relations. Notable in this respect is Professor Kath Woodward's work (with others) in 2014-2015 with the International Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland. Entitled *Chasing Time*, the exhibit Woodward and colleagues curated was an evocative collaboration. The exhibit critiqued conceptions and fetishizations of time, deconstructed time as a cultural construct and how individual athletes have engaged with time, and, reimagined how notions of time that tie us to certain ways of understanding sport and athlete achievement could be configured. The exhibit cleverly called into question the entrenched associations between time and performativity, and in doing so disturbed the very rationality upon which the Olympic movement and organizational record keeping (and institutional power) is based.

These ideas about disrupting thought from within the organization we have taken up in our respective intellectual practices. The second author of this paper has, for example, begun working with the NZOC on developing social media and blog posts related to the country's Olympic past and present. At present, content oscillates across the spectrum of celebrating national success, addressing critical questions about the country's contemporary sport sector, and producing new analysis of New Zealand's historical sporting landscape that challenges assumptions, provokes thought and gives space for alternative voice. While the informal work

being undertaken ultimately aids the organization's public engagement imperatives, NZOC have also created a welcome space for academic authorship and critique to emerge and be valued. Similarly, as current Director of the National Basketball Heritage Centre (NBHC) in the United Kingdom, the lead author is endeavouring to ensure critical voices find a place within the public sport heritage domain. Irrespective of its status as a marginalised sport, basketball has a discernible public following in the United Kingdom and strong social and cultural roots in the country's underprivileged and underserved metropolitan boroughs. Moreover, scholarly historical analysis is scant and organizational investments into the sports' histories is limited. As such, the centre is currently undertaking a project that will examine the historical and contemporary significance of the sport to the nation, with a distinct emphasis on the sports' contribution to youth culture, education, and urban community development. Oral histories within will be utilised to discuss questions around hegemonic sporting participation and beliefs, challenge assumptions about ethnicity, social class, identity and inclusivity, and provide space for new cultural and gendered accounts to come to the fore.

The approaches we have taken in this paper, and the examples above, reflect our belief that doing oral history *anew* requires careful thought. Foremost, that not only historians understand the contextual forces that have produced prevailing narratives of their subject matter and existing ways of framing the past, but also that scholars see that these knowledge structures can be destabilised and reconstructed. Central to this task is maintaining our intellectual challenges to organizational power (in this case, the ability of sport organizations to author their own histories in particular ways), seeking out new narratives or critically re-questioning existing versions of record, and, ultimately, advocating for the silenced, disenfranchised and disempowered. For us as New Zealand Olympic historians, this task entails interrogating organizational actions that have adversely effected athletes' lives, challenging inequities of ethnicity, gender and class in public narrative making, examining the political and commercial motives for bi-cultural paradigms within contemporary team management, and enabling stories about sport/participation to be valued beyond discourses of success. Subsequent products of which may be oral histories that are not only rich in context, detail and meaning, but are significantly more representative of, and better resonate with, a much wider national demographic beyond the jingoistic and the sport-loving.

Conclusion

Oral history affords researchers myriad opportunities to interrogate, present and navigate issues – theoretical, practical and ethical. For us as Sport Historians interested in the nexus of organizational politics, digital spaces and public memory, the use of oral history was/is not as straightforward as initially perceived. Methodologically, in adopting an oral history tact we garnered valuable empirical data. Yet the exercise, when situated in the context of NZOC's 'progressive' and commercial imperatives, also demonstrated the dominance of prevailing hegemonic forces (e.g., hagiography, nationalism and nostalgia) and privileged voices, the sanitisation of political, social and cultural nuance. While appreciating NZOC efforts in the last decade to acknowledge its history *anew*, from both an organizational and historian's perspective, there remains work to be done by both sport organizations and scholars. For

NZOC, perhaps unlike many other sport organizations, there is an ‘old guard’ of former-athletes and key organizational figures (circa 1960-1980s) who now hold senior positions within NZOC, national federations, media, or commercial stakeholder circles, and remain actively in charge of gate-keeping the narrative of the past. Many of these individuals and groups comprise people who were either directly or indirectly involved in ‘key’ moments of NZOC’s Olympic participation. As such, for these e/affected figures, the past (collective or individual) is deeply personal, and the ways in which history is ‘voiced’ matters. Coupled to this are the liabilities (real or perceived) that the voices and recollections of contemporary athletes present to the organization and its public image. The paradox here is that recent shifts toward ‘good’ governance, organizational accountability and transparency, and improved athlete welfare, representation and participation, have forced organizations to provide increased opportunities for their members voices to be heard. For us, this is not just about NZOC telling ‘its own history’, it is a case of collective historical authorship and moral responsibility to create meaningful spaces for new narratives to emerge.

Endnotes

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