

MATTHEW ENGEL



[www.matthewengel.co.uk](http://www.matthewengel.co.uk)

THE SECOND OXFORD LECTURE

*"It's the cat's whisker".*

HOW SPORT AND THE MEDIA DEVELOPED TOGETHER, FROM MESOPOTAMIA TO JOHN LOGIE BAIRD.

*Delivered on Tuesday 1 February 2011, St Anne's College.*

The first known depiction of sport is a votive tablet from Mesopotamia dated circa 3000 BC<sup>1</sup>, 5000 years ago. And today I intend to romp through history, showing how sport and those who tell its story developed together up to the beginnings of the last but one big medium – i.e. television.

So that's 5000 years minus the last sixty, which I'm saving for the final two weeks. From BC to the BBC.

To begin at the very beginning, what's the point of sport? This has been a subject of intense and wide-ranging debate, involving – ooh – at least half a dozen academics over the years. Anyone who has ever seen a field of gambolling lambs or a litter of puppies can see that playfulness is in some way innate. But why?

One group believes that sport is essentially a survival technique: learning how to run from a predator or to throw a spear to kill. However, the cultural historian Johan Huizinga [HYZINGA] saw it differently. If that was nature's intention, he said, play would have become some kind of biological function. For him, it's there for its own sake. Fun.

But when you look at the origins of *organised* sport, another element comes in. There is considerable evidence of a religious connection. Across the world the rituals of sport are linked to the rituals of sacrifice: the Huron Indians played lacrosse; and the ancient Sudanese natives staged wrestling matches, in both cases to placate the deities and ensure a good crop.

Hill tribes in Assam had tug-of-war contests to expel demons, and Eskimos played a cup-and-ball game to catch the sun in spring.

And there is something attractive about this idea, because we can see it in ourselves. Anyone who has ever been to the gym or had a morning jog will be aware of the sense of piety and purification that induces. "Your body is a temple" – 1 Corinthians.

In my own case my body is more like the temple before the expulsion of the money-changers or after Samson had brought the whole thing down on his head.

The funny thing is that while on the one hand sport extends far beyond humanity, it can also be seen as culturally specific. Huizinga said he could find no other language that had a precise translation for the English word "fun". While the classicist David Sansone notes that the word "sport" is almost exactly the same in a host of unrelated languages, from Hungarian to Japanese – supotsu – suggesting that it was derived from English.

Sport was Britain's gift to the world – the gift that goes on giving, because we usually let them beat us. Don't we, Andy?

But it didn't start in Britain. The first story we have of a formal sporting contest comes from about 1000 BC: the account of the games played after the funeral of Patroclus from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Book of the Iliad. Significantly, after the sacrifices to the gods.

The chariot race Homer describes resounds down the ages as a representation of all the iniquities we perceive in modern sport.

A brief commentary on the chariot race: the two main protagonists, Eumelus and Diomedes – joint favourites with the Athenian bookmakers no doubt -, set off together. Eumelus was first to the turning point, a hollow tree. But then he crashed and was hurt. Diomedes didn't stop to see if he was all right.

Behind them, Antilochus was threatening to kill his horses if they didn't win. Diomedes was the winner: his prize – a young woman prisoner and a Trojan cauldron. The bad-tempered Antilochus came second, ahead of Menelaus and Meriones. Last of all was Eumelus, he of the crashed chariot. Returning on foot.

Achilles, as umpire, felt sorry for him, and offered him the second prize, a mare in foal. Not surprisingly, this infuriated Antilochus even more since he thought that prize was his, and Achilles backed down. Then Menelaus accused Antilochus of blocking him at the turning-point and said *he* should have come second. Furious arguments broke out in the stands. And this was the cream of Mycenaean society, not the riff-raff.

It took some while for order to be restored so the rest of the sports could go on: boxing, wrestling, running, spear fighting, discus throwing and so on.

In the running race – “fleet Ajax against cunning Ulysses”, as Homer billed them – Ulysses was getting close but couldn’t get past. He then prayed to Minerva whereupon Ajax slipped on some cow dung and Ulysses won. Ajax was furious and complained about the goddess playing favourites.

It’s got the lot: cheating, lust, hooliganism, match-fixing, bad sportsmanship, greed, cruelty, weak and inconsistent refereeing.

More than that, the sacrifices were obscenely ostentatious: In Sansone’s words –  
“libations of oil, honey and wine,  
*holocausts* of sheep and cattle,  
slaughter of horses and dogs,  
human sacrifice...  
the common denominator (he says) is expenditure, waste, squandering.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus we have the first hint of what was to come in the FA Premier League. Everything except Homer telling us that the wretched female Minerva knew nothing about sport.

And you can add to the list of horrors: dishonest journalism. Gods and cow dung indeed! You couldn’t make it up! Homer did. The first sports writer and the biggest liar of all. As the great sports’ writer’s cliché has it: Even Homer Nods.

But the story has come down to us because someone wrote it, and we have the first firm connection between sport and the media. After that, the trail goes very cold.

We do know that poets like Pindar honoured the heroes of the ancient pan-Hellenic games, though most of his work is lost. In Rome, there were fierce allegiances attached to rival chariot racing stables: Blues, Greens, Reds, Whites, Golds and Purples<sup>3</sup>. C’mon, you Blues!

Meanwhile, across the world, another civilisation was playing something remarkably akin to football. This poem, by Li Yu, survives from China, circa 100AD.

*A round ball and a square goal  
Suggest the shape of the Yin and the Yang  
The ball is like the full moon;  
And the two teams stand opposed;  
Captains are appointed and take their place.  
In the game make no allowance for relationship  
And let there be no partiality.  
Determination and coolness are essential  
And there must not be the slightest irritation for failure.  
Such is the game. Let its principles apply to life.<sup>4</sup>*

Ah, yes, that too is the football we know and love. But the world became a darker place. In England, the nobles hunted, of course. But there is little that can be recognised as *organised* sport until the time of Edward I when the medieval tournament ceased being just a militaristic melee and began to feature the chivalric joust.

The Tudor aristocracy had bowling greens and even tennis courts. Real tennis courts, the sport of kings, not lawn tennis. And in 1502 James IV of Scotland bought a set of golf clubs.

The lower orders, meanwhile, were staging their own form of melee: the mass football matches, with local rules or no rules at all, that can still be seen in some corners of the country, notably at Shrovetide. That was also a good time of year for blood sports, like cock fighting. "Cocking," we are told, "became popular even in schools<sup>5</sup>."

There was a brief counterblast from the Puritans although they continued to indulge public taste with that perennial favourite: a solid fixture list of public executions.

And the balance swung back under Charles II when formalised horse racing arrives and, then, in the 18th century, cricket and prize fighting. Plus the beginnings of a sporting press, specifically the Sunday papers which even then had begun to exhibit that mix of lubriciousness and censoriousness that has not disappeared from the News of the World even now.

It was summed up by the poet-vicar George Crabbe, in a verse about the very first Sunday paper, the *Monitor*.

*So moral essays on his front appear  
But all is carnal business in the rear.*

By the 1820s there was genuine sports journalism, led by the roistering Pierce Egan, chronicler and celebrant of bareknuckle fighting. But sport as we know it required communication in the broadest sense.

It needed proper transport so teams could travel. That came with the railways after 1830. Even to arrange fixtures, it needed an efficient postal service, which developed with the Penny Post after 1840.

To get an audience, it needed a means of transmitting results to the public, which emerged with the electric telegraph in the 1860s. It needed an affordable medium. That came with cheap newsprint and the abolition of stamp duty on newspapers in the 1850s, which made penny papers possible.

To build an audience, sport also needed a literate working-class, developed by the Education Act of 1870. That audience needed time off, which came with the spread of the Saturday half-day.

Society was becoming more squeamish, a tendency encouraged by the church, in alliance with bodies like the RSPCA. Cockfighting, dogfighting, bear, bull and badger baiting became illegal in 1835, although the blood sports associated with the upper classes did not. And the extent to which the illegal sports had gone away has always remained murky.

Some years back, I reported on a -- legal -- cockfight in the French West Indian island of Martinique. And I met the local grandee who was the chief patron of the event. I said I was a little surprised by his presence. "I think in your country," he said, "higher people than me fight cocks."

But there were still regular public hangings, with the crowds now brought in on special excursion trains. And there was football. The authorities had long been trying to suppress the local melees, which were associated with desecration of the Sabbath, public disorder and to some extent political dissent. But in the lovely phrase of one historian, Douglas A Reid: "football was like a subterranean stream, reappearing wherever the crust of repression was weakened."<sup>6</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it not merely reappeared but mingled with a different stream: the sport that was developing within the public schools, on the playing fields of not just

Eton but Rugby, Marlborough, Uppingham and so on. Two facts are incontrovertible: rugby football was NOT invented when a Rugby boy called Webb Ellis picked up the ball and ran in 1823; and his headmaster, Dr Arnold, was NOT the guiding force behind the muscular Christianity that underlay public school sport. He wasn't interested in sport.

The next generation of heads *were*, however. They saw sport as a means of socialising their feral charges and of inculcating the discipline and teamwork that would sustain the empire. Some of them explicitly rejected the academic virtues. In words attributed to Cotterill, a housemaster at Fettes: "Cleverness, what an aim! Good God, what an aim! Cleverness neither makes nor keeps man or nation!"

There was something else these masters didn't like. According to the historian Katherine Mullin: "The masturbation panic was so ubiquitous that there was a strong emphasis against solitude, against privacy, and against individualism.

"All sorts of team sports, football in particular, were brought in as an antidote<sup>8</sup>." Well, as I said earlier, cocking was popular in schools.

This may be an extreme interpretation. But there's no doubt that the manly virtues of muscular Christianity excluded and denied sex. And that Victorian obsession was an important link in the chain that created modern sport.

But sport still had other meanings. I came across an 1887 book called *Sport in Bengal*: "A plain unvarnished record of 40 years' life and experiences among savage beasts and more savage men". The chapter headings included

Wild hog hunting....  
Tiger-shooting...  
Spearing buffaloes on horseback...  
Beating out bears from dens...  
Shooting rhinoceros on foot  
A desperate set-to with a panther ...<sup>9</sup>"

At home, there was still an audience for the old rumbustious sports, enhanced by the combination of railways and newspapers. In 1860 Tom Sayers and the American Boy Heenan squared off for the first great Championship fight since Pierce Egan's heyday. And perhaps the first great international sporting contest: both men wore their national colours round their waist.

It was quasi-legal: promoted by the press, opposed by the authorities, and rescued by the South-Eastern Railway, which agreed to run special trains that stopped between stations in Kent to thwart the police. Lord Palmerston rumoured to be present; Queen Victoria said to be asking for news.

Train fare: 3gns, six times normal fare, two trains, 63 carriages, 42 rounds, a draw. "Barbarous," according to a visiting French journalist. Both men feted as heroes. Sayers in particular left a pathetic wreck. Both dead before they were 40.

That was a throwback. Later that decade, boxing would be sanitised by the Queensberry Rules. And soon manliness was seen to reside above all in team games.

But what game? Each public school played its own form of football so it was left to a university to codify some rules. Not this one, the other one. At first the argument was not about handling the ball, which was ubiquitous, but about hacking, slicing opponents off at the shins. But in 1862 Harrow and Eton Old Boys played an 11-a-side match at Cambridge that allowed neither hacking nor handling.

And a meeting soon followed to set up an association that would play football under those rules. One representative held out. F.W. Campbell of Blackheath thought hacking was part of the true public school spirit: "If you do away with it you will do away with all the courage and pluck of the game, and I will be bound to bring over a lot of Frenchmen who could beat you with a week's practice<sup>10</sup>". And so Blackheath became famous for rugby.

That would be the minority version in Britain as a whole, but the predominant one among public schools. They favoured it because, as Campbell said, it forged their strength. It also inculcated team spirit and tired them out and thus – though this was never said out loud – perhaps stopped them wanking.

In all the sports, journalism was in the thick of this process. A young journalist called Charles Alcock became secretary of the Football Association and in 1872 founded the FA Cup, the final of which was staged at The Oval, home of Surrey County Cricket Club, of which he also happened to be secretary. Oh, he was also the captain of the winning team, Wanderers. Quick bath, then he wrote the match reports.

Men like Alcock were ubiquitous in Victorian sport. Above all there was the extraordinary CB Fry, journalist, cricketer, footballer, world long jump record holder, scholar, politician, eccentric and alleged almost King of Albania. In old age, he told a friend in his London club that he was thinking of going into horse racing. "What as, Charles?" came the reply. "Owner, trainer, jockey or horse?"

As journalists, these men were not unbiased observers. They also tended to write in a style best described as Class A windbaggery. Even so, newspapers were at the forefront of the huge changes that were taking place within sport itself in the 1870s and 1880s. Sports were becoming formalised, acquiring their own ethos, cultures, guiding myths and heroes.

Captain Webb the Channel swimmer. WG Grace, who rivalled Mr Gladstone as the most famous man in the country. Cricket in particular was a media creation: newspapers, not the MCC, created the concepts of the County Championship, Test matches and the Ashes. It was the press, led by Alcock, that made the FA Cup seem important – and turned races like the Derby into big betting events.

Meanwhile, each sport was also making its own reckoning with the British class system. Horse racing developed into a peculiar coalition between the rural upper classes and the urban working-class, more or less excluding the hard-working bourgeoisie who shuddered at the immorality of gambling. That still holds today.

Cricket included all classes, but was split arbitrarily between the Gentlemen – who either could afford not to be paid or *pretended* not to be paid – and the Players, the professionals. They had different dressing rooms and often different gates to go onto the field.

A Gentleman was almost invariably the captain, however useless he might be. Gentlemen had their initials before their surnames, the Players afterwards. This led to the famous announcement at Lord's in the 1950s. "There is a change to the scorecard. Delete FJ Titmus. Insert Titmus FJ." The system lasted until 1962.

Rugby split in two in 1895 because the players in the northern industrial towns could not afford to take the time off work that top-level amateur rugby required. And even now rugby league's strength lies in those smaller towns of the north whose very names



still conjure up, to those of us of a certain age, the voice of the late Eddie Waring: Widnes, Warrington, *Castleford*.

Association football might also have split between toffs and plebs, but the balance of power was very different. For its first 11 years the FA Cup was won by impeccable amateur teams; Wanderers, Old Etonians, Oxford University. But they were becoming pressurised from teams based in what was becoming the sport's heartland: the Lancashire mill towns. Their clubs, with backing from local newspapers and local entrepreneurs, were starting to pay their players and even to import them, often from Scotland.

In Year 11 of the FA Cup, 1882, a northern club, Blackburn Rovers, reached the final for the first time, but lost to Old Etonians. A year later the OEs had to face Rovers' local rivals, Blackburn Olympic. In May 1883 the following appeared in the Eton College Chronicle:

"So great was Olympic's ambition to wrest the Cup from the holders that they introduced into football play a practice that has excited the greatest disapprobation in the south. For three weeks before the final they went into a strict course of *training*, spending, so report says, a considerable time at *Blackpool* and some days at *Bournemouth* and *Richmond*<sup>11</sup>."

Result: Old Etonians 1, Blackburn Olympic 2. No amateur club would ever win the FA Cup again. The Football League began six years later without a single team from south of Birmingham.

The spread of football is often put down to muscular Christians from the public schools spreading out into industrial England as teachers and vicars. I think this theory gives the working-class too little credit for working out their own destiny. It's not a complicated game, after all.

And its popularity was stimulated massively by big specialist papers like the *Sporting Life*; local Green 'Uns and Pink 'Uns, the Saturday sports editions of the evening papers; and publications like the *Boy's Own Paper* – another sports writing cliché – published by the Religious Tract Society and thus the very embodiment of muscular Christianity.

One element was missing: a national popular press. The curious notion took hold that a certain levity and lowliness was permissible in the evening papers, invariably local, and on Sundays. But the morning was a time for sober respectability. This notion lasted long after it ceased to be true. As late as 1936, George V's doctors engineered events to

ensure he would die at the right time for the morning papers rather than the evenings, who they feared might be insufficiently respectful.

They were 40 years behind the times. But not as far behind the times as Fleet Street was on May 4 1896 when the *Daily Chronicle*, which claimed the largest circulation in London, published 22 leading articles, the longest of them 1,500 words about a professorial magazine article on public taste.

A year earlier, on the day WG Grace became the first cricketer to score a hundred hundreds, the Chronicle had begun the first of its mere 12 leaders with the question: "Is it not time that there should be a distinct process of *Aufklärung* within the Liberal Party?" One of the leaders did concern WG Grace but it was some way behind the welcome given to de Goncourt's Diaries (Volume Eight).

On May 4 1896 newspapers changed forever, unknown to the verbose dolts at the *Daily Chronicle*. Alfred Harmsworth – later Lord Northcliffe - brought out the first edition of the Daily Mail. Cost: a ha'penny, not the customary penny. Within three years it was selling 600,000 copies every day and during the more dramatic phases of the Boer war, more than a million.

We all moan about the excesses of the popular press. Well, perhaps not during a lecture sponsored by News International. And the *Mail*, like its owner, was nasty, obsessive and vindictive. You might think it hasn't changed. But Harmsworth understood that a popular newspaper had to address the concerns of the people of Britain, not just those who might want to know about de Goncourt's Diaries (Volume Eight).

He understood there was another half of the population, the female half, that papers like the *Chronicle* had never bothered to address. He understood the importance of sport in the lives of his potential readership. And he understood that journalists needed to communicate in clear, plain English not mumble in convoluted polysyllables.

Within a few years, the Mail had been joined by new papers like the *Express* and *Mirror* and even old lags like the *Chronicle* had started to shape up. And the morning newspaper became a form of mass communication that would last into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if not for much longer. And for the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it would be the dominant form. Crowds at Football League matches tripled between 1895 and 1905. No coincidence.

The excesses of football were already starting to alarm *bien-pensant* opinion, as they would ever more. But the popular press was now starting to reflect the feelings of the people. The up-market press less so.

In 1901 more than 110,000 people descended on Crystal Palace for the FA Cup final between Sheffield United and Tottenham Hotspur, then still a non-league club. The result was a 2-2 draw although *The Times* had no doubt what should have happened: "There was a pretty general opinion among the *best* critics that victory should have gone to Tottenham<sup>12</sup>." This was probably not the opinion of the 75,000 who had come down on 75 special trains from Sheffield. Compared, incidentally, to the 700 who had travelled down with Blackburn Olympic 18 years earlier<sup>13</sup>. This game was becoming HUGE.

In fact, Tottenham did win the replay and were soon facing the northern clubs in the highest echelon of the League. But the amateur game *The Times* relished was in full retreat. So was the "elegant and blameless football" – in CB Fry's phrase<sup>14</sup> - associated particularly with Corinthian FC, who disdained such fripperies as fouling, penalty kicks and – heaven forefend – training.

"They (literally) arrived at a game sporting top hats and canes," said one football historian, "while their opponents wore cloth caps. In the 1880s the Corinthians were typical of the game's founding fathers; by 1914 they were utterly exceptional – toffs in a world taken over by the plebs.<sup>15</sup>"

If we go back to the question I posed last week about who controls sport. The initial answer – not just domestically but internationally - was the British upper-class. In sports like cricket and rugby union, that would remain true until very recent times, even into the 1990s. In football, that era vanished much faster.

The upper-class would lead the plebs into one last great game, which lasted four years. There were numerous incidents of footballs and rugby balls being kicked over the top into No Man's Land to begin attacks in the First World War.

Most famously, on July 1 1916, at the opening of the First Battle of the Somme, Captain Billy Nevill of the 8<sup>th</sup> East Surrey Regiment led his men towards the Montauban Ridge dribbling four footballs. He had promised a reward to the platoon that was first to score in the enemy trenches. He did not survive to present the trophy<sup>16</sup>.

In the aftermath of war, there was some movement away from football, which had tried to ignore the war, and carried on as normal through the winter of 1914-15, towards rugby, which was seen as more patriotic<sup>17</sup>.

But this seems to have been confined to the public schools. It didn't affect the estimated 200,000 who tried to get in to the first Wembley Cup final in 1923. It didn't affect the countless thousands of kids, especially in the north, who saw professional football as a way of escape from either drudgery or unemployment.

And every sport was about to receive an impetus from a once unimaginable technology.

The first radio sports commentary was broadcast in the US in 1920. And on the night of May 11 1922 my father, aged 10, sat up in bed in Cricklewood – I think – and listened on his primeval cat's whisker wireless to the big fight between Georges Carpentier of France and Ted "Kid" Lewis.

Next morning the *Daily Express*, on its way to replacing the *Mail* as the top-selling newspaper, claimed the credit for this in a banner front page headline "How we Broadcasted [sic] the News". The *Express* had even signed up the world heavyweight champ, Jack Dempsey, to describe proceedings. The fact that the fight was a fiasco – Lewis knocked out in the first round – was a minor detail. The *Express* was not just excited.

"A wonderful and romantic new era....Ships on the ocean from Liverpool to New York, lonely farmers from Sutherland to Czecho-Slovakia, men and women far beyond even the long arm of newspapers, heard the story of the fight, in Dempsey's own words, long before they could receive even a bulletin of the result through the medium of printed paper."

The *Express* was over-excited. The crude connection made by the cat's whisker wire was about to exclude the newspapers and their owners. Later that year, the British Broadcasting Company – a consortium of the big six manufacturers of wireless sets – was given a monopoly over British wireless transmissions under the control of the Post Office, and employed a young Scottish engineer, John Reith, as its general manager. It had a staff of four. It grew.

Since this was a private monopoly, the press was given some right of veto to guard against unfair competition. And the newspaper owners used that veto to ensure the BBC could not broadcast any news or live events before 7pm. In 1925 Reith applied to be allowed to broadcast "coded narratives" of the Boat Race and the Cup Final<sup>18</sup>. He

failed. The BBC was allowed to go to the Derby but only to broadcast the noise of the crowd and the sound of the hooves.

But the General Strike of 1926, which stopped the newspapers and established the BBC as a reliable source of news, gave Reith more leverage. And when the company mutated into the publicly-owned British Broadcasting Corporation in 1927, the press barons had to give way. On January 15 1927 the England-Wales rugby match was broadcast, with Commander Teddy Wakelam, formerly of Harlequins, describing the contest from a hut in the corner of the ground. "A daring experiment" said the *Express*. "Fifty-two thousand saw the match. A million others must have 'heard' it."<sup>19</sup>

Three days after the match the Cambridge Union debated the motion that "the listening-in habit is a menace to the sanity of England". Mr RE Stevenson, who proposed the motion with a five-valve receiving set staring him in the face, said: "Wireless is a strategem for monstrous national inactivity. Instead of going to good concerts or to the University, people turn on the wireless."

Mr Gerald Sparrow, opposing, said: "Broadcasting is a recreation for the wife, a retreat for the husband and a solace for the spinster." Voting: 39 for the motion. 213 against. Motion defeated<sup>20</sup>.

Defeated not just in the Cambridge Union. The rugby broadcast was a huge success: Wakelam became one of the stars of the inter-war BBC. That year a whole range of other sporting events – the Boat Race, the Grand National, Wimbledon - received similar treatment under the driving hands of the Head of Outside Broadcasts, Gerald Cock.

Three things may not be obvious from this distance. Firstly, there was never any certainty that the BBC would develop in the way it did. British radio might have become an American-style commercial free-for-all. And there was certainly political discussion in the 1920s about having two competing operations.

And the style it adopted came about only because men like Reith, Cock and Wakelam gave it that style. The BBC might easily have regarded sport as a trivial distraction from its mission to give the nation concerts and uplifting talks on de Goncourt's *Diaries* (volume 8). It didn't.

In the early days the very nature of commentary was still unsettled. For the early football matches, the BBC divided the field into numbered sectors with a plan in the *Radio Times*. That's what you heard on the opening clip. One commentator described

the play; another called out the numbers. Hence, allegedly, the phrase Back to Square One.

Nor was it even certain who should commentate. One listener suggested there was a simple answer: let the referee do it. A microphone could be strapped to his chest with an elastic lead attached to one of the goalposts<sup>21</sup>. Everyone laughed, but a version of that does happen in rugby.

The style of the commentators who did emerge gave the BBC its distinctive tone: they were overwhelmingly Oxbridge men – authoritative on their sports, conservative in their outlook, patrician in their speech patterns – dedicated to the amateur tradition of sport.

Second point that's easy to forget is the terrifyingly primitive nature of the technology. Robert Wood was the sound engineer for that first rugby match and at many of the great events of the era - you might have glimpsed him setting up George VI's broadcast in *The King's Speech*. Wood told graphically of the horrors of broadcasting, for example, the Boat Race: crouching low in a launch, buffeted by the waves and the weather, using an aerial that had to be lowered under every bridge, without a clue whether anyone was hearing a damn thing unless he could glimpse a man somewhere in the crowd waving a handkerchief<sup>22</sup>.

The third point concerns just how much this “wonderful and romantic new era” meant to the listener. In 1928 there was a letter to the *Radio Times*, one I find immensely affecting.

“Many of your readers must be office workers. They must know what sort of a life is that of a clerk in a provincial city - a tram-ride to the office, lunch in a tea-shop or saloon bar, a tram-ride home. You daren't spend much on amusements - the pictures and that - because you've got your holidays to think of. We have no Trade Unions and we don't grumble, but it's not an easy life.

“Please don't think I'm complaining. I'm only writing to say how much wireless means to me and thousands of the same sort. It is a real magic carpet. Before it was a fortnight at Rhyl, and that was all the travelling I did that wasn't on a tram. Now I hear the Boat Race and the Derby, and the opening of the Menai Bridge. There are football matches some Saturdays, and talks by famous men and women who have travelled and can tell us about places<sup>23</sup>.”

“Recreation for the wife, retreat for the husband and solace for the spinster.” It wasn’t just a smartarse Cambridge Union aphorism.

The newspapers’ ability to thwart the BBC diminished drastically in the 1930s. But there was a new enemy, and we began to see the battlelines being drawn for the contest that still dominates the relationship between broadcasting and sport. The rights.

At first the BBC took the line that it was doing the sports a favour and performing a public service. The press was allowed in free. Why not the BBC? On that basis, it won an early skirmish with the Football Association over the 1930 Cup Final.

In football, a pattern emerged that lasted until the age of satellite TV. The Football League, which then represented all the clubs from Arsenal to York City, were vehemently opposed to having their matches broadcast. The FA, which ran the Cup, was more accommodating.

There was a good reason for this. It soon became clear that radio stimulated interest in the major events, just as the newspapers did. And far from diminishing attendance, it increased it.

But if a big match was on the wireless, or even more so in the years to come, the television, it was far less likely that anyone would go along to see Tranmere play Stockport.

Arsenal was the first club to see clearly how the technology could be a boon. Their manager Herbert Chapman had a flair for publicity, hence his stunt of persuading London Transport to rename boring old Gillespie Road station on the Piccadilly Line after the football club it served.

Chapman also welcomed the newsreel cameras. For although wireless was the most exciting medium of the 1930s, the world of the monopolistic BBC was serene in comparison with the others.

This was an absolutely ferocious era of competition among the popular press: never have the papers been as raucous and brawling and dishonest as they were in the ‘30s. Radio certainly hadn’t hurt their business since circulations were up 80% on 1914.

And the advent of the talkies had produced a huge boom in the number of companies producing cinema newsreels: Pathé Gazette, British Movietone News and so on. Competition between them was intense. The sports administrators were very aware of the value of cinema rights. They could tell by the desperation of the companies.

In 1934, Movietone and Gaumont British were given joint rights to the Oval Test against Australia. One of their rivals, Paramount, tried to get shots from a tower outside the ground. A large gas-filled balloon was raised to block Paramount's view.

Meanwhile, Pathé had exclusive rights to the Grand National and their team at the race included several heavies hired to see off the opposition. In 1934 they discovered unauthorised movie cameras hidden inside bags of fruit, a chauffeur's luncheon basket, a bookie's satchel, a steam-powered excavator and a coal barge at the Canal Turn<sup>24</sup>.

The film, when they could get it, wouldn't be shown for several days. That technological barrier was about to be bust wide open by another new invention. But that is next week's thrilling instalment.

Copyright © 2011 Matthew Engel

---

<sup>1</sup> Sports and Games in the Ancient World Věra Olivová 1984 p 22

<sup>2</sup> Greek Athletics and the Genesis of Sport David Sansone 1988 p 63

<sup>3</sup> Sport: A Cultural History Richard D Mandell 1984 p 81

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in The People's Game: The History of Football Revisited James Walvin 1994 p 11

<sup>5</sup> A History of English Country Sports Michael Billett 1994 p 47

<sup>6</sup> The Cambridge Urban History of Britain ed DM Palliser, Peter Clark, MJ Daunton p 772

<sup>7</sup> Quoted Walvin op.cit. p 38

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Those Feet, David Winner 2005 p 16

<sup>9</sup> *Sport in Bengal*, EB Baker 1887

<sup>10</sup> Birley op. cit. p 259

<sup>11</sup> *Eton College Chronicle*, 3 May 1883

<sup>12</sup> *The Times*, 22 April 1901

<sup>13</sup> *Bright Particular Stars* David McKie 2011 p 176

<sup>14</sup> Foreword to *Corinthians and Cricketers* Edward Grayson 1955

<sup>15</sup> Walvin op.cit. p 92

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/museum/agq\\_0105.html](http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/museum/agq_0105.html)

<sup>17</sup> Walvin, op.cit. p 119

<sup>18</sup> The History of Broadcasting in The UK Asa Briggs Volume 1 p 240

<sup>19</sup> *Daily Express* 15 and 17 January 1927

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Express* 19 January 1927

<sup>21</sup> *Those Vintage Years of Radio* John Snagge and Michael Barsley 1972 p 79

<sup>22</sup> *A World in Your Ear : The Broadcasting of an Era 1923-64* Robert Wood 1979 p 70



---

<sup>23</sup> *A Social History of British Broadcasting: Volume One* Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff 1991 p 278

<sup>24</sup> *Sport and the English 1918-1939* Mike Huggins and Jack Williams 2005 p 33