

# What do People have to do with Sport? Folklore/Ethnology in the Kinesiology Classroom

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Article abstract

This article discusses the challenges and strengths faced by a Folklorist teaching in a Kinesiology Department. It specifically focuses on a fieldwork assignment in a History of Sport class, where students were required to collect oral histories of sport from within their communities. The author discusses how, as a professor, he legitimized this exercise to the students, the students' response to it, and the outcome of the research exercise. He intends to illustrate how folklore principles in the classroom achieve a greater understanding of the cultural value of sport, but also generate greater interest in the subject matter at hand.

# WHAT DO PEOPLE HAVE TO DO WITH SPORT?

Folklore/Ethnology in the Kinesiology Classroom<sup>1</sup>

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For today's presentation I will speak to the idea that as folklorists/ethnologists we have tremendous relevancy outside of our discipline. I say this now, despite teaching in fields where folklore/ethnology as a discipline was/is not only unknown, but of little or no consequence. In applying for jobs, I have made a concerted effort to downplay my identity as a folklorist/ethnologist for fear of not being taken seriously, and instead have emphasized what I do in terms of my research. This *should* strike people as odd, since our research is made possible because of our training as folklorists/ethnologists; and if our research is appealing, than so should be our discipline from which it derives.

Part of the problem here is that academic disciplines continue to function as parochial bodies only claiming to endorse interdisciplinarity when their own specific disciplinary agendas, in terms of funding or hiring, are secure. Therefore there remains a challenge for newly minted folklorists/ethnologists wishing to gain employment in Canadian university settings, because we are, aside from a few institutions, disciplinarily destitute. I have not come to suggest solutions to this dilemma, but instead wish to illustrate why this is a dilemma and how our training is of great value to academic departments, and more importantly, to the students who take our classes.

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1. I would like to pay special thanks to my Kinesiology 2640 class at the University of Lethbridge, who in the Spring semester of 2001 voluntarily completed a questionnaire I gave them which enabled me to complete this paper. I am especially grateful to Marnie Bevans, Eoin Colquhoun, Dave Nishizaki, Leanne Starkey, Kate Taylor and Rob Van Winkle who formally provided me with written consent to use their names and research papers for citation throughout this work.

To illustrate, I thought it would be useful to discuss an aspect of a course I taught in the winter semester of 2001 at the University of Lethbridge. It was a second year history course entitled *History of Physical Education, Sport and Recreation*, and I had not taught it before. As I was putting the course together and trying to think of assignments for the students to do, I kept returning to the idea of studying local history to familiarize them with sport/recreation development in their own regions. My reasoning was selfish at first, in that the course as it had been taught previously did not appeal to me. I thought the only way I could make it more compelling was to focus on local sport development, rather than spending an entire year discussing Greek athletics and how the modern Olympic movement has utterly perverted the Greek ideal.

Without abandoning the ancient sport component altogether, I decided to introduce an assignment that would have the students doing folklore/ethnology research throughout the semester, whereby they were responsible for collecting local knowledge about sport development in their communities. The students were required to locate and interview at least one person who has been alive long enough to offer personal perspectives about sport as it has been experienced within a specific historical period. I did not specify a particular time frame, but emphasized that individuals selected for the project must be able to comment on sport prior to 1960. In essence, I was asking the students to do oral histories.

I am not suggesting this type of research is unique to folklore/ethnology, but I think our interest, or dare I say, fascination with the local, the mundane, the vernacular, is quite discipline-specific. In fact, not once in my department's history had such an exercise been conducted, yet when I discussed with my colleagues the idea of getting students to learn of their own sport heritages, it seemed to be of obvious value; it had simply not been done. The only concern expressed was that kinesiology students (at least at the University of Lethbridge) are trained primarily in quantitative research methods, and fieldwork as I was suggesting would be completely unfamiliar to them. Moreover, kinesiology students do not expect to have a fieldwork component to their courses, unlike students in anthropology or perhaps even sociology courses. How then would my students respond to such unconventional demands?

In a first year position in a new department, teaching courses that were all new to me, there wasn't much time for second-guessing, and I forged ahead with this assignment nonetheless. I introduced the assignment on the second day of class and explained to students what was expected of them and why primary research — in this case oral history — is such an undervalued but important means of collecting historical data. I explained that two other classes throughout the semester would be set aside to deal with the assignment and briefly instruct students on interviewing techniques and fieldwork strategies. There were few questions, as is usually the case early in the semester, and I left the classroom without any real sense of how the assignment was received. It was not until the third week in the course that initial feedback began. The most amazing thing occurred as students began coming to my office with treasures they were discovering doing this assignment. One student, Kate Taylor, came to me with a scrapbook documenting her grandfather's journey as part of a Canadian Curling Championship team. Another student<sup>2</sup> learned that his uncle not only played NHL hockey during the "Original Six" era,<sup>3</sup> but was instrumental in developing hockey in Britain during World War II.

These were not isolated cases, as some students continued sharing their families' stories with me; and others shared the stories of strangers they had looked up and interviewed for the sake of this project. The examples that I want to comment on here are those that I found most rewarding when reading the students' submissions. But before doing so, it would be useful to briefly look at the results of a questionnaire I passed out to the class to complete a week prior to the final course deadline (see appendix A). My primary objective in handing out this questionnaire was to give students an opportunity to openly comment on the assignment. I wanted to find out what their initial response was and if their impression changed over the course of the semester. I have

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2. I have not provided this student's name because I was unable to contact him and request permission to use his name for this paper.
  3. The "Original Six" refers to the pre-expansion era of the Canadian National Hockey League, made up predominantly of six teams: Montreal Canadiens, Toronto Maple Leafs, Boston Bruins, Detroit Red Wings, New York Rangers and the Chicago Blackhawks. The League doubled in size in the 1967-68 season, therefore enabling more players to play NHL hockey, arguably reducing the overall talent level of the League. Pre-expansion hockey is thus romanticized as the golden age of hockey.

thus focused on the students' responses to questions 1, 3 and 4 (see Appendix B, C and D).

Aside from the students' comments, their work itself proved to be a clearer indicator of the success of this assignment and why it was of value to the students. I mentioned already Kate Taylor, who discovered that her grandfather was a Canadian curling champion in 1960. Taylor's grandfather died in 1978, before this student was born, and she relied on her father to tell of her grandfather's feats, learning not only of her grandfather, but also of her dad in the process. In one passage, she recounts her father's memory of her grandfather as a local celebrity in Rivers, Manitoba:

My grandfather won this bonspiel with his rink that consisted of Len Harvey, Don Woods, and Harry Parker. My father was 10 at the time and this particular bonspiel was a great occasion for the 900 people in Rivers. He remembers all the telegrams that were sent, all the newspaper articles and all the hype that surrounded the event. It was all people talked about. Most farmers gossip a lot and this was the main topic of discussion for about a month as my dad remembers (Taylor 2001).

She then quotes her dad who says: "They had this parade down Main Street, my dad with the three other guys in the back of a pickup truck heading for the Legion. I was really proud to see him waving at all 1,000 people that had come out to watch" (Taylor 2001).

Rob Van Winkle in his research paper documents his grandmother Gwenne's success as a track and field athlete in a period in Canadian history when track was not seriously pursued by women — the late 1920s-30s. In this highly discriminatory sporting field, where according to Gwenne "girls were not considered that important," she achieved success beyond anyone's expectations. Her success is described in one passage where she was honoured at her high school's Christmas banquet:

Gwenne wore a long dress for the first time and was escorted to the banquet by a boy in her class. Gwenne received a medal that night, but she was more impressed by a poem that her teacher had written and read. The poem boasted Gwenne's quickness at the Stavely track meet and playfully compared her to a popular female athlete in Canada. Gwenne wishes now that she had remembered the poem because it was more special to her than a medal (Van Winkle 2001).

Gwenne's accomplishments did help effect change in terms of female athletics, which Van Winkle acknowledges when he writes:

As the presence of women in sport increased, societal views continued to change. Outstanding female athletes like Gwenne made critics of their sport look foolish. Many women in the 1930s accomplished amazing things in sport and proved the skeptics wrong (Van Winkle 2001).

Aside from the connections students made with family members, there were those who went out into the community and conducted interviews with local sport celebrities. Two students interviewed Billy Gibson, a member of the 1951 World Champion hockey team, the Lethbridge Maple Leafs. Gibson not only played for the Maple Leafs, but also played for the 1952 Canadian Olympic hockey team, the last to win a gold medal for Canada in hockey. I found these two projects interesting for different reasons. One writer, Eoin Colquhoun, is a former hockey player, who now coaches boys' hockey in the Lethbridge area. He is not only knowledgeable about the game of hockey and its history in Canada, but is also a fan. The other student, Leanne Starkey, had limited knowledge of hockey and little interest in the sport altogether. She pursued this topic after learning of the Lethbridge Maple Leafs during a class field trip to the Sport History Exhibit at the local museum. It was not surprising that they produced entirely different documents.

In terms of Colquhoun's project, I was updated almost daily about what he was uncovering. Either before or after class he would often stop by and tell me who he had met, or of a particular story that was revealed to him as a result of the conversations he had with the players. The highlight of his experience was getting invited to the fiftieth anniversary commemoration banquet for the Leafs. He writes:

March 17, 2001 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lethbridge Maple Leafs World Championship victory and I was lucky enough to attend the banquet honoring the team's achievement. During my attendance I was able to meet and talk to a couple of the Maple Leafs that are still alive today. It was great to see that even after fifty years the community still acknowledges this amazing accomplishment (Colquhoun 2001).

The nature of this project enabled Colquhoun to become passionate about the subject, more so than what students generally express in my courses. I wish all my students opened their work claiming that they wished for more time to pursue their research:

Mr. Gibson is an outstanding person to interview; he could remember virtually every aspect of that trip and the one he made the following

year with the Edmonton Mercurys to the Olympic Games. Mr. Billy Gibson could have been a sports history topic himself. Without any type of time constraints I could have spent numerous hours listening to him recall the World Championships and Olympics; due to other school responsibilities my time was limited (Colquhoun 2001).

By the time I graded Colquhoun's paper I was not surprised to see such passion in his work, as his conversations with me had indicated this already. However, when I came to Starkey's paper dealing with the same subject matter, I was impressed by the kind of interaction she was able to establish with Billy Gibson. She writes: "One man who played for the Lethbridge Maple Leafs expressed his view of hockey as it was experienced back in the 1950s and his story left an indelible impression on me" (Starkey 2001). She later states:

While I was there he told me about winning at the Olympics, standing on the platform surrounded by thousands of people he didn't know while they played the national anthem and raised the Canadian Flag. It was wonderful sitting there listening to this man with such conviction and pride in his voice having won two prestigious events in his life from playing hockey. He even cried at one point in the interview recalling his days of hockey (Starkey, 2001).

Before I conclude, it is important to stress that I do not think that mere interest in a project is sufficient in terms of what we expect from our students. I do think, though, that this interest can generate better research, which was evident in the insightful commentaries produced. I will briefly discuss two examples. The first comes from a student of Japanese heritage who studied the development of Judo in post World War II Calgary. For this project, Dave Nishizaki interviewed the son of the founder of the first Judo Club in Calgary, which opened as a non-profit club in 1957, and the current owner. Through his research Nishizaki was able to hear firsthand accounts of internment camp experiences and the struggles of Japanese-Canadians to overcome racial prejudice during and after the Second World War. Interestingly, it was Judo, and the valuable service it provided to various sectors of the community, that helped erase prejudice and discrimination against Japanese Canadians. He explains in the following passage:

Members of the RCMP received Judo training. This was done because it was felt that Judo was more useful to officers than wrestling which was the standard training at the time... connections were made with officers of different ethnic backgrounds... This was a huge step for

the Japanese-Canadian community... Demonstrating that the Japanese community was hard working and trustworthy began to reduce the tension between the two sides (Nishizaki 2001).

Another example provides similar stimulating commentary about boxing in the small Southern Alberta community of Cardston. In her paper, Marnie Bevans acknowledges the violent and often brutal history of boxing, as both regulated and vernacular enterprises. She contrasts this, however, with “boxing in the small rural town of Cardston” which was “embraced and encouraged by the townsfolk and schools.” Her research suggests that “[boxing] was used as a method of teaching discipline, fair play, hard work, and encouraged as a form of physical exercise” (Bevans 2001). Instead of boxing to knock out or harm one’s opponent, the sport in Cardston was about technique and scoring points. One former boxer explained to her that you “go in there and box, not go in there and try to knock out, you have to learn to box, not knock out” (Bevans 2001).

Aside from recognizing these important boxing distinctions, however, Bevans takes this further by making a connection between boxing and religion. Cardston is predominantly a Mormon community where family centred activities are the norm, and are held in alcohol free environments. Contrasted with typical boxing contexts in Canadian history, usually bars attended by men, and accompanied by heavy wagering, Cardston boxing is a total anomaly. Bevans explains:

Contrary to the atmosphere in other centers, boxing in the town of Cardston took place at the local high school. Since the events took place in a public arena gambling was not permitted... The fact that bouts were held in the school permitted and promoted family attendance and participation (Bevans 2001).

By the conclusion of the paper, Bevans successfully illustrates the positive manner in which boxing was expressed within this community, but also and perhaps more importantly, why boxing existed as it did. It is this kind of learning that is possible when students are presented with opportunities to explore subject matter in its living context that is meaningful and of value to them.

I am aware that through this presentation I have risked boring some of you who teach in folklore/ethnology departments because you regularly assess research projects of this nature. However, I do not apologize because it only indicates to me further that these student



discoveries taken for granted in our discipline are not expected in disciplines outside of our field. The interest in the project I have described stemmed from students engaging in lived experience, which I would argue is the very foundation of our discipline. The highly personal nature of folklore/ethnology research is embraced by students, thus creating a more effective pedagogical environment and ultimately higher levels of learning. This makes us both relevant and necessary in university education. We are hired for what we do, but often our departments don't actually know what that is. In my case, deliberately choosing not to name it as folklore<sup>4</sup> creates flawed logic that haunts us in that we are wanted for what we do, not for what we are.

## **Appendix A**

### *Oral History Project Discussion Form*

Without identifying yourself in any way, please respond to the following questions. Your responses will have no bearing on my evaluation of your work. The point of this survey is to help me identify the pedagogical potential of the oral history project.

1. What was your initial impression of the oral history project when it was first assigned?
2. Did your feelings about the assignment change over the course of the semester? How?
3. What is your impression of the fieldwork component of this assignment?
4. Can you comment on your learning experience? Was it high? Was it low?
5. Did this assignment increase your interest in local history?
6. Did this assignment increase your interest in this method of research?
7. Do you feel there is a place for this kind of research in Kinesiology?
8. Additional Comments?

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4. I have deliberately left the word "ethnology" out here because when pressed for an answer I usually refer to myself as an ethnologist.

**Appendix B**

*Oral History Project Discussion Form*

1. What was your initial impression of the oral history project when it was first assigned?

Good Idea	Nervous/Scared
14/42 (33%)	28/42 (67%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ I was enthusiastic to have a project as open ended as this. Also excited to conduct an interview.</li> <li>■ I was excited about the assignment because I knew some people in my family that play sports. I thought it would be interesting to learn more about them when they were young. I liked the idea of an oral assignment. It was a nice change from regular history research assignments.</li> <li>■ I felt it was a really good idea. If the person were to choose a relative to interview then they would learn lots about their family that they may not know. I chose a relative, my dad and we discussed his father. I got to learn about two people I never knew much about.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. I thought it would be a lot of work and it almost made me drop the class.</li> <li>B. Panic, trying to think of someone I knew who I could interview for the project. Kind of disappointed.</li> <li>C. Disaster. Not something appropriate for a 2000 level class.</li> <li>D. I thought I was done like a kitchen cowboy.</li> <li>E. Initially I was not interested in the assignment at all and was unsure how to approach it or who to speak about historical events. I was lost to put it short.</li> </ul>

## Appendix C

3. What is your impression of the fieldwork component of this assignment?

Difficult/ Not Enjoyable	Ambivalent	Positive
8/42 (19%)	6 (14%)	28 (67%)
<p>B. It was kind of a pain in the butt and stressful.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ I hated it. It was hard to find people who had the time and desire to answer my questions.</li> <li>■ It was a little difficult because your subject may be very vague and tough to find people to talk to about. The interviews were a difficult task for myself.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ A good idea, but difficult to find someone to interview. Partners/ groups would be a better idea.</li> <li>■ The fieldwork was difficult. Finding a recorder and another phone line was a pain as I could not afford them. It was difficult to interview someone you've never met, but the challenge was a good experience.</li> </ul>	<p>A. I enjoyed the interviewing and found the field trip to the Galt [Museum] very helpful for researching</p> <p>C. This was the best part. It was neat to hear the personal perspectives of people within our community — an opportunity for us learn directly.</p> <p>D. It was easy for me because I interviewed someone I knew real well and could talk to anytime.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ It was the most interesting part of the assignment. Even though I was a bit anxious in interviewing somebody, it was more enjoyable than sifting through secondary sources.</li> <li>■ The interviewing gave this assignment a different, more personal angle. We actually get real people's stories and opinions rather than merely research and reading. Very interesting.</li> <li>■ This was by far my favourite part of the assignment. I interviewed someone that I had never met before and he was very interesting. The man I interviewed was very smart and had a lot of good stories to tell. I'm glad we had to do this.</li> </ul>

**Appendix D**

4. Can you comment on your learning experience? Was it high? Was it low?

High	Medium	Low
36/42 (86%)	3/42 (7%)	3/42 (7%)
<p>A. What was taught in the class corresponded perfectly with the assignment. This allowed for a connection to be made between classroom learning and field learning which just enhanced each other completely.</p> <p>C. I learned a lot about the people I was interviewing, and a sense of the atmosphere surrounding my sport. But I didn't learn much about the sport itself, and that was ok with me.</p> <p>D. I learned quite a bit on what people my age did for recreational activity back in the 60s.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Extremely high; it was really fun. My dad has already read the paper and he told me that it was like he wrote it.</li> <li>■ Very high. I thought I knew quite a bit about my topic but I learned a great deal more.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Medium. I knew the person and most what he did before I interviewed him for the project.</li> </ul>	<p>B. It was between high and low but more towards the low side.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ My learning experience was low. Most of the information that I gathered was from alternate sources.</li> </ul>

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