

Huggins, Mike ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2789-4756> (2023) Early sports journalism. British Newsreels, 1911-1930: Culture and Society on Film [online] . (Unpublished)

Downloaded from: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/7299/>

*Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.*

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

**provided that**

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
  - a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

**You may not**

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).

Topical Budget covered sport regularly, recognising its importance to British culture. Sport was a key social institution, followed by players and spectators, read about in newspapers and magazines, discussed in public houses and gentlemen's clubs, at work and in the street. The 'shorts', brief bi-weekly newsreels often lasting only a minute or so, with their multiple possible sporting meanings, were understood alongside these other forms of information, diversion, and entertainment. The Topical Budget newsreels were simple and uncontroversial, with easy-to-follow stories and representations, exploiting popular sensibilities, but also helped shape attitudes towards sport more generally.

Topical Budget's newsreel coverage, like that of other newsreel companies such as Pathé News, was shaped in part around regular annual 'topical' key sporting events seen by its editors as representing their view of Britain, from the Epsom Derby and the F.A. Cup Final to Henley Regatta. This allowed audiences to look forward to these yearly events and feel part of wider popular culture, even when they were shown some days afterwards. Editors also then exercised their intuition and commercial judgement, drawing on newspaper and magazine lists, to select further sporting topical events for filming. In total over forty separate sports were covered, from mountaineering in the Rockies or angling at Richmond to swimmers crossing the Channel. In a period before sound, the brief text of the opening frame was usually written by the editor, leading to occasional errors. The newsreel covering Grasmere Games, which showed regional sports such as pole leaping, wrestling, and hound trailing across the fells, for example, was described as 'in the famous Cumberland arena', when it was in fact in the historical county of Westmorland.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/grasmere-games/20485670>

Distribution was across Britain, though coverage was largely from a southern English standpoint, with little coverage of Welsh or Irish sport. There were Cardiff City's cup successes, and coverage of the Irish Guards football team during the First World War, but no coverage of Gaelic games, important to Irish nationalists. Scotland was better covered, although much of this was filmed for Scottish audiences as 'special distribution' material, including the boxer Johnny Hill training at Waverley Market, and the 'Old Firm' Celtic v Rangers football final at Hampden Park in 1928.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/scottish-cup-final/23452729>.

Coverage of overseas events was quite rare, although the growing more general Americanization of cultural life meant some limited interest in American sport. There was 'special distribution' material too, shown only in particular areas of Britain, giving locals what *they* wanted. English Football Association Cup matches might have been expected, but there was also interesting newsreel coverage of some less-widely popular sports such as, in 1929, the Cumberland and Westmoreland sports at Newcastle for Tynesiders, and the crowds and large numbers of entrants at the Liverpool marathon.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/at-the-third-time-of-asking/23451311>. Coverage aimed at being speedy, with an emphasis on entertainment and physical action wherever possible.

Topical's sport newsreels attempted a fine balance between topicality, nationalism, relevance, modernity, and tradition. Some films covered powerful and often exciting symbols of modernity, technology, and speed, involving women as well as male contenders. Cinemagoers saw speed boat records, and international motorboat races, with an outboard motor speedboat record in 1929 celebrated as 'British and Best'. The 1920s were a boom time for motorcycle ownership, and motorcycle races (such as the Isle of Man Junior TT)

were shown regularly, captured in areas from Birmingham to Scotland. Air sports took off too including the glamorous (and dangerous) Schneider Cup air race.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/schneider-cup-heroes-home./23003795>. The then modern new sport of greyhound racing became popular in the later 1920s, so Scottish audiences, for example, saw film of the new track opening at Carntyne in Glasgow in 1927.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/glasgow-greyhound-racing-opens-at-carntyne/23003949>.

Newsreels tried to foreground Britain's international status and sporting successes to a more limited extent, though it was clearly generally assumed. There was little interest in the overseas Olympics at that time, although Lord Burghley was shown demonstrating his hurdling skill after winning the 400m hurdle race at the Amsterdam Olympics in Amsterdam in 1928. In golf, by contrast, the Ryder Cup was a feature. The celebrated American player Walter Hagan attracted most attention, although more so when he was defeated at Moor Park in April 1928 by Archie Compston, the formidable match-play British golfer, in a famous challenge match over 72 holes for what the newsreel claimed was virtually the World's Professional Championship.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/british-golfers-triumph./23003894>

Cricket attracted less film than its widespread press coverage merited. Its slow pace meant capturing lively action on film was costly and time-consuming, and its subtleties were not easily conveyed. But it was often claimed as England's national summer sport and a symbol of national character. This made it important to signal the start of the season in newsreel titles such as 'Cricket Comes Round Again', 'Welcome Wielders of the Willow', 'Welcome King Willow' or 'First in the Field'. Other coverage might be focused

on foreign sides. Test matches against Australia in Britain or (very rarely) in Australia were particularly important, and the English side was shown on a steamer returning from the 1929 Australian series under the title 'Bringing Home the Ashes'. County matches were occasionally shown, but not the league cricket of the north and midlands. Up-to-date sporting celebrity was foregrounded, and famous players such as bowler Harold Larwood or batsmen Jack Hobbs or Patsy Hendren were those most often featured. Jack Hobb's hundred at Taunton, his then record 126th hundred, beating that of W. G. Grace, in August 1926 in front of circa 10,000 spectators at Taunton, was carefully captured on film, including the delight of the crowd.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/hobbs-does-it-at-last/23003869>.

Topical Budget newsreels drew on British traditions in several other ways. Through the year the Royal family, especially George V and the princes, gained publicity by being filmed at key sporting events. The king and Queen were shown arriving at Royal Ascot in June, attending Cowes Regatta in August, and the Braemar gathering in September. George V made tentative links with more democratic entertainment, attending FA Cup finals, creating a new invented tradition by being filmed meeting the team and/or presenting the cup,

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/the-cup-final-1927/23451959>

Older annual traditions were perpetuated too. There was annual coverage of the surviving Shrove Tuesday folk football games, with their large numbers, propelling a ball towards a distant goal. The most famous and filmed of these was at Ashbourne, in Derbyshire, with up to a thousand involved, the ball usually carried rather than kicked, and goals three miles apart. It was presented as 'another kind of football', an amusing 'rough and tumble', a disorganised historical curiosity.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/another-kind-of-football./23452988>

The newsreel's generally traditional, conservative political lens meant that public school and university activities were also featured, especially the Oxford v Cambridge boat race, but also other events such as Bradfield College's sports and steeplechase, Eton's sports, steeplechase, and wall game, the Eton-Harrow cricket match at Lords, indoor cricket coaching from a cricket professional at Upminster, or the Public Schools' Athletics Championship. The meets of the various hunt clubs, hunting for foxes and otters, or hare coursing, also occasionally featured, were always presented as social activities, with no concern for the animals hunted.

Football was the major national winter sport covered, though since filming required good natural light, urban pollution and short daylight limited its midwinter coverage. During World War 1, professional football briefly continued, and one patriotic film at the end of the 1914-15 season showed the players of Clapham Orient finishing their game, changing into uniform, and joining the Footballers' Battalion, perhaps to encourage recruitment more widely.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/claptons-khaki-team/23003911>. The following season, the game was temporarily remodelled on strictly amateur lines, but cinemagoers were still able to watch servicemen and civilians playing, while charity matches raised funds.

After 1918 professional soccer returned and again dominated. Because professional clubs articulated regional rivalries and civic identity, papering over tensions, their supporters were less interested in the doings of other clubs outside their area, and that meant league matches were less interesting to audiences. Most Football League clubs were reluctant to have their matches filmed anyway lest it harmed attendance. So even First Division matches were rarely shown. Arsenal was a rare exception, a rare club happier to allow

coverage. Indeed, coverage seemed to have boosted attendances. Apart from Cardiff, Welsh, Scottish and Irish clubs received minimal coverage. By contrast the Football Association were happier to allow coverage of the FA Cup. Topical Budget got the sole rights to film the 1921 and 1922 Cup Finals held at Chelsea. The final shifted to Wembley in 1923, and the 1927 film survives.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/the-cup-final-1927/23451959>

Because of the heaviness of their equipment, goals were often missed by cameramen, and it was hard to follow action. Their camera shots would later be arranged by the editorial department back at the studios to provide a final cut. Some supposedly first half incidents covered might come from the second half and vice versa. Cameramen were good at capturing faces: the faces of the crowd, jammed into the terraces, mainly men, but also boys and occasional women, and the faces of more famous players, rather than their backs. This helped cinema football fans feel part of the action. At a time when standing room terraces were often packed and overcrowded, soccer and rugby crowds sometimes flooded almost onto the pitch itself, but film showed them almost always well behaved, restraining themselves till the final whistle, as at the Wigan-Oldham Challenge Cup final at Rochdale in 1924.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/like-last-year-at-wembley/22863388>

Rugby union was also rather reluctant to allow filming. Surviving propaganda newsreel shows how rugby continued through World War I, allowing the cultural, social, and class-based divisions between 'amateur' rugby union with its rigid draconian banning policies against professional Northern Union (rugby League) players to be temporarily laid aside in the services context. There was an influx of Dominion servicemen, allowing Ansac teams to play alongside British service sides and the London hospital teams. One newsreel of 1917,

for example, showed the success of the Army service Corps team at Grove Park, playing rugby union but augmented by many top Northern Union players, including internationals. It lost only one of its twenty-six games that year.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/a.s.c.-win-again/23038760>

After the war, the Rugby Football Union resumed its anti-rugby league opposition. In 1923 it celebrated its supposed centenary, shown by Topical Budget through an event filmed at Rugby school, and featuring its tablet portraying the fictional exploits of William Webb Ellis handling the ball there in 1823, helping claim the game for the public schools and social distinction. Many of the rugby union games filmed illustrated the play of often successful overseas sides. A strong-running Māori side was shown performing the Ka Mate haka before defeating Somerset at Weston-super-Mare in 1926.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/ka-mate-kamate/23452878>. In 1927 the 'all-conquering' New South Wales touring side, the Waratah, was shown playing opponents at Twickenham and Murrayfield, while France defeated England in Paris. <https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/french-rugby-triumph/23452561>

Northern Union (rugby league) with its supplementary narratives of class identities and regional rivalries, had its heartlands and large crowds mainly in Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Cheshire, and was even less often featured, though Wigan, one of the leading sides, appeared more often. From the 1920s occasional newsreels revealed its growing social and cultural recognition in southern England. In January 1930 Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald greeted the professional touring Australian rugby league side at Downing Street before their final match, against Wales, later that week.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/pre>

[mier-meets-rugby-team/23451252](http://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/a-mier-meets-rugby-team/23451252). Although rugby league was keen to expand into the south of England, it had little success although the first rugby league final to be held at Wembley, between Dewsbury and Wigan, was shown by Topical Budget in May 1929.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/a-battle-of-the-roses/22863389>.

Between the wars horseracing also claimed to be Britain's leading sport, attracting the largest crowds to its key 'national' events, the Aintree Grand National, the Epsom Derby and Oaks, 'Royal' Ascot and the Doncaster St Leger, or courses close to London such as Sandown, Windsor, and Hurst Park, especially races with the largest prize money, such as Sandown's Eclipse stakes. National events were always of great interest to film goers, with cameramen usually giving as much attention to the huge crowds attending as the races themselves. Alongside the five cameramen who worked full time, freelancers were also involved to record these major events. Eleven cameramen were involved in filming the Derby in 1922, for example. The leading newsreel companies all had motor bike riders racing to be first back to the offices with their negatives, and the films were shown in leading London cinemas that evening.

Betting on such races increased the interest for many cinema attenders. Informed estimates suggest that about eleven million people in Britain bet regularly, working-class betters usually taking off-course starting prices with local illegal bookmakers. Betting and sports were major pub conversation topics. Such popularity meant that the leading Handicap races with strong betting interest were often filmed: the Lincolnshire Handicap, the City and Suburban at Epsom, the Stewards Cup at Goodwood, or the Cesarewitch and Cambridgeshire at Newmarket. In northern England, where cinema was most popular, York's Ebor Handicap was second only to the St Leger, attracting a huge crowd in 1930, many brought large distances by coach and omnibus as well as

rail. <https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/a-dead-heat/23452224> Topical Budget made the most of that interest, announcing to the audience, 'A Dead Heat: Gentlemen's Relish and Coaster finish together in a thrilling race for the Ebor Handicap', a result that attracted great post-race attention and press debate. Here as elsewhere the film was strong on the crowd scenes.

Boxing, well covered in the British press, was more difficult to film indoors, and the violence of actual fight coverage was often avoided in favour of linked events such as training activities, although the Amateur Championships at Alexandra Place in 1924 were shown. Outside matches were easier to film and examples of crowds watching open air matches in Scotland, where there was much interest in boxing, survive. Films of boxers in training covered activities such as sparring, skipping and the use of Indian clubs, as well as their leisure activities such as playing on the beach or putting. <https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/who-will-win/20484730>

Even well-known British and foreign professional boxers such as Georges Carpentier 'the Beau Brummell of the Ring', or Jack Dempsey, gained their coverage usually in training, looking directly to the camera to aid their public recognition. There was also coverage of 'human interest' features, such as the King watching Canadian military boxing training activity during World War I. For those less interested in male aggression an 1828 film of a boxing kangaroo apparently caused much amusement.

Where newsreels differed from print media most was in their coverage of women's sport. Even though sports newsreels overall were always male dominated, approximately 60 per cent of the cinema audience was female. Between 1920 and 1930, sporting items featuring women participants were a significant proportion of Topical Budget's coverage, most especially tennis, golf, hockey, athletics, speed records, and hunting. Badminton, racing, cricket,

lacrosse, swimming, ice skating, football, rowing, motor-cycle racing, and paper chase cross-country occasionally featured too. Print media generally paid little attention to the achievements of women in sport. So audiences watched women playing sports that they perhaps had never actually previously seen, competed in, or read about. These pre-selected images and framing of women helped to shape audiences' attitudes, acting as a potentially powerful social force shaping gender understandings.

In tennis, leading foreign players were often featured. Suzanne Lenglen, world number one from 1921 to 1926 was praised as remaining 'supreme' at Cannes in 1926, while Helen Wills, best woman player in the world from 1927 to 1933, 'the Queen of the Tennis World' or 'idol of America', also received regular newsreel attention.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/queen-of-the-tennis-world./23038857>. English star Betty Nuthall, who won the women's singles championship in the USA in 1930 was regularly featured, described as 'our Betty', a 'runaway win' praised in 1927 and consoled with 'Better luck next time' when the Wightman Cup was lost in August 1929.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/better-luck-next-time./23003935>.

Leading women golfers, such as Cecilia Leach or Joyce Wethered became well known as personalities through newsreels, which featured events such as the Ladies Golf Championship at Sandwich in 1922, the Girls' Golf Championship at Stoke Poges in 1925, The English Women's golf championship at Walton Heath in 1928 and a Women's Golf international at Formby Lancashire in 1930,

Women's images were filmed, selected, and edited by men, existing in a context of gendered power relationships. One title plate described the 'weaker sex' at an AAA meeting at Stamford Bridge in 1926 hurdling, sprinting, road walking and throwing the javelin. Some

newsreels showed women competitors at events while not directly involved, sitting together companionably, a sisterhood, watching others compete, in athletics in 1926, for example,

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/women-athletes/23451857> or at a golf championship at Sandwich in 1922.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/sandwich-personalities-at-ladies-golf-championship./23003938>.

Newsreel title pages, reflecting wider gender attitudes, placed regular emphasis on women's appearance, fashion and attractiveness: 'a pretty girl goalie' at a hockey tournament at Windsor on 7 January 1926

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/pretty-girl-goalie/23038586> or 'graceful girls' who broke records at an athletics meeting.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/wonderful-women-athletes./23038711>.

Women's sports perceived as too masculine were rarely featured, or tacitly criticised. In 1920 some Lyons restaurants started women's football teams for their staff, and a soccer 'Teacup Final' between girls at Regent Palace and the Strand Corner House ladies was presented as mere entertainment. A girls' team filmed playing 'a keen and stylish game' against men at Richmond in July 1925 were described as 'Amazons at the wicket'. One 1926 film entitled 'Should Women Box?' featured the 'novelty' of women boxing, but only in the USA, not Britain.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/should-women-box/23452999>

Some accomplished women were shown evading dominant assumptions and challenging male stereotypes. South African Peggy Duncan, aged nineteen, took only sixteen hours to swim the Channel in 1930.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/girl-of-19-swims-the-channel/23452822>.

Another example of women's success was the Newmarket Town Plate, a traditional horse race lying outside Jockey Club and National Hunt rules, since begun c.1665 and technically open to all townspeople. After 1918 women jockeys began to enter, competing against men for the cash prize. Betty Tanner, daughter of a racehorse breeder was third in 1923 after a 'gallant ride', and in 1928 Iris Rickaby (later the mother of champion jockey Lester Piggott) won, though the opening frame carefully reminded viewers that she only beat one 'mere man'.

<https://topicalbudget.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/women-jockeys-only-opportunity/23003775>

The Topical Budget newsreels covering sport were important because between 1911 and 1931 most people in Britain had limited opportunity to watch live sport. Many workers had only a week's paid holiday each year, and The Holidays with Pay Act dated only from 1938. The working week for most working men stretched through to Saturday lunchtime. Domestic and family life allowed women little free time. Sunday sport was constrained through surviving religious attitudes. BBC radio only provided some limited outside broadcasts of major events. Newspaper and magazine journalists certainly provided a key source of information and diversion about sport, but only for those with the literary skills and time to read them, and newspaper photographs only gave a static view.

This made the newsreel's sports images of great social and cultural significance. The cinema, and the cinema newsreels like Topical Budget, offered people a wider and much more visually accessible sporting menu. Coverage encompassed both familiar sports, and ones that for many offered novelty, and images of sports in motion. This began to transform public life, emphasising more visual experiences of leisure activities. After World War II television was

able to exploit these even more fully. For many cinema-goers attendance was settled and regular. People were able to see on the cinema screen a great variety of different sports, far more than they could ever personally experience. They saw what sporting celebrities looked like. They saw international teams and players. They could see women taking part in sport as well as men. They watched the sports that had helped to shape British sporting identity in the past, such as the Grand National or England-Australia test matches, and the new ones like greyhound racing, speedway or motor-boat racing that were recently introduced. They saw aspects of the sports played in England's so-called public schools, the sports of the upper classes, and 'traditional' sports played only in one locality, like the Grasmere Games in the Lake District. They could construct new meanings, discuss what they had seen in other cultural contexts like the workplace, the allotment, the public house, or the back street. Like other sources of information, newsreels often offered a largely metropolitan, white male, rather traditional and conservative view. Ethnicity rarely surfaced. But audiences brought their own experiences to bear too. This made the newsreel sporting films a major player, ensuring that collectively such experiences of sport on screen could play a significant part in influencing cinema audience's views and understandings of the British sporting world.