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‘Sport helps make us what we are’: The Shaping of Regional and Local Sporting Identities in Cumbria c.1800-1960

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This paper explores the ways in which Cumbria’s sports were used to express regional, county or urban identities. It begins with the sporting place myths constructed by national newspapers and newsreel companies, which focused largely on events such as Grasmere Sports. It then goes on to explore the extent to which such ‘traditional’ sporting activities were specifically Cumbrian, before examining the diffusion of modern sports. These arrived later than elsewhere, but though organised by county, generated little sense of county loyalties. Football, rugby and cricket all generated local loyalties, high levels of participation, spectatorship and interest, and became as popular in Cumbria as elsewhere, but gained little if any success on any wider stage, and so were rarely exploited as emblematic symbols. By contrast, Cumbria’s surviving traditional sports still perpetuate myths of Cumbrian exceptionalism and attract off-comer, visitor and media interest despite low levels of participation, often from families with a history of involvement.

THIS article covers the period from around 1800 to 1960, by which time women in Cumbria were playing more than 30 different forms of sport and men even more. It makes no pretence at any form of condensed overview of all sports found in the region, but focuses solely on those sports which shed light on the relationship between sport and the construction of what leisure historian Peter Borsay has seen as ‘place’ sporting identities.¹ Sport is, of course, ‘a mirror in which nations and communities, men and women now see themselves’.² The study here explores the role of sport in helping to structure those popular preconceptions (and multiple misconceptions) that frame complex Cumbrian identities. It assesses the extent to which sport has helped shape the ‘imagined communities’ that make up the modern administrative county, and fostered regional sentiment and cultural identity.

Sporting identities are multilayered, intersecting or pulling in different directions, and have a plastic and fluid quality. Even biological or pseudo-biological identities, such as *gender*, *age* and *ethnicity*, are partly influenced by socio-cultural factors. People have *occupational* or *class* identities, and belong to local *communities*. Many belong to particular *sports clubs* and various other forms of *association* such as churches and chapels, pubs, institutes or social clubs. But as David Russell has observed, identity is also ‘something constructed in and experienced through the locality’.³ Such imagined place identities often have little connection with empirical realities, as has been noted by scholars who described, disentangled or decoded the multiple discourses relating to sport’s supposed links with national identity in relation to Welsh, Scottish and Irish sport.⁴ Studies of English sport in major urban areas, especially the larger industrial towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire, have led to profitable exploration of representations of sporting identity in ‘the North’ – an ‘imagined community’, variously defined, focusing on what was imagined, by whom, and why. Such studies showed how far, for example, notions of distinctive ‘Northern’ styles of play have proved to be powerful

myths, whilst even supposed antagonisms towards and definitions of ‘the South’ have varied markedly over time.⁵

It is therefore unsurprising that many of the dominant images associated with Cumbrian sporting identity in the past also had little objective validity. They have been cultural constructs, representing *ideas* or *images* of Cumbrian sports found in popular imagination. So the following discussion begins with the most widely prevalent images of Cumbrian sporting identity, those projected and disseminated by outsiders, especially metropolitan opinion formers, for whom the region conventionally formed a ‘place on the margin’, part of the ‘far north’ of Britain, because of its harsher climate and perceived distance from London.⁶ Such dominant images, which often focus on Cumbria’s so-called ‘traditional’ sports, are next deconstructed, before moving to evaluate how far sport has, more objectively, tried to fulfil a role in constructing Cumbrian place identities.

The article also adds to the limited historiography on Cumbrian sport. In 1905 the *Victoria County History of Cumberland* provided a useful summary of its sport, with some expert contributions. More recently, there has been John Marshall’s exploratory work on the ‘culture of communities’,⁷ Bryn Trescatheric’s brief, descriptive study of Barrow’s sport and leisure,⁸ Ian Ward’s 1985 Liverpool Ph.D. thesis on nineteenth century Lakeland sports, and Lyn Murfin’s study of popular leisure in Cumbria, which covered sport, including useful material on women’s role, and incorporated oral testimonies.⁹ Women’s sport in Cumbria has attracted little substantive coverage, despite the obvious importance of the co-operation or perhaps exploitation of women at all-male or mixed sports clubs. The capacity of sport to assist women’s emancipation was noted in Chris Brader’s work on soccer-playing women munitions workers in Cumberland and Carlisle, while Carol Osborne has explored the world of women climbers.¹⁰ Though there have been famous women sports stars from Cumbria, such as Cecilia Leitch (1891-1977), who was born at Silloth-on-Solway, and learnt her golf there, their contributions are still unrecognised and under-researched. Leitch won the British Ladies Amateur Golf Championship three times in a row either side of the First World War (1914, 1920, 1921) and again in 1926.

Extra-Cumbrian views

Cumbrian emigrants have long relocated their sports, and formed Cumberland and Westmorland Societies in London, Liverpool, Glasgow, Edinburgh and elsewhere, keenly preserving their tradition and identity. London’s Cumberland & Westmorland Wrestling Society organised annual Good Friday wrestling events, and from 1824 had a code of rules and staff of officials. The organisation helped exiles to remember their origins and heritage, and pass them on. But once rail links were possible, leading northern wrestlers came down to capture the prizes, and in 1849 they were excluded since ‘from being in continuous practice and rude health from the nature of their rustic occupations [they] are more than a match for their fellow countrymen resident in the metropolis’.¹¹ The Society ran annual Easter events till late in the century, usually with some open events and some for London men, and occasional bans of ‘professionals’ from the north. Those metropolitans keen on inventing and imposing more ‘amateur’

approaches created an Amateur Wrestling Society which held annual summer sports in the late 1880s, with prizes presented by the Lord Mayor, though as modern sports became more popular, both forms died out.¹²

But it was visiting tourists to Cumbria who brought its sports to national journalistic notice. Their representations generally focused on what the *Wrestham Advertiser* called ‘that most glorious region of Cumberland and Westmorland known as our Lakeland’ rather than Cumbria overall.¹³ The Lake District drew national mythic significance from the English Romantic movement and from its supposed distance from the industrial revolution. So coverage often stressed hiking and walking in the central Lakes.

Outsiders’ views of Cumbrian traditional sports were surfacing regularly by the mid-nineteenth century. When Dickens visited the Ferry Ring on Windermere in 1858, for example, his report was most taken by the wrestling, though he mentioned the local regatta, the running matches, dog trails and the pole leaping, which he described as ‘the most graceful of all the treats’. He noted too how far supportership evinced what he saw as strong ‘local attachments’ and urban identities (‘a perfect torrent of bonnie Carels or boonie Kendals’), whilst he also noted an element of regional rivalry between the two counties.¹⁴ By the 1870s Grasmere Sports had become iconic of Cumbrian sporting identity, merging elite social attendance with the sporting pleasures of supposedly ‘genuine dalesmen’. The *Daily News*, in 1875, described ‘members of Parliament and clergy-men, country gentlemen and dons’, and even the Prince of Abyssinia, there to see ‘the sports for which the district is famed’, in a carnival atmosphere likened to the Derby, but containing more ‘genuine’ sport, with a wrestler competing for victory as ‘an additional honour to his county’.¹⁵ Such relatively rare inter-county rivalry was in part strengthened because Grasmere stood almost on the border of the two counties, just to the south of Dunmail Raise. *The Times* featured Grasmere regularly from the 1880s. Its narratives merged images of the Romantic and ‘rugged scenery’ of the ‘wild’ Lake District with notions of the noble but primitive savage. *The Pall Mall Gazette*, associating Grasmere with ancient Olympia, entitled one report, ‘the Olympian Games at Grasmere’.¹⁶

Twentieth century reports continued in similar vein. In a 1913 leader *The Times* saw the games as ‘picturesque’, and a ‘symbolical survival of the past’. They were ‘local and indigenous to the soil’, ‘the primitive sports and pastimes of a hardy northern race’.¹⁷ The regular reports from various *Times* ‘Special Correspondents’ generally treated local sports with respect, but sometimes described wrestling in gently mocking tones: ‘To an ignorant southerner wrestling is a peculiarly engaging spectacle ... it can be exhaustingly comical ... a clumsy imitation of modern dancing, the gentleman in embroidered tights and pink flush trunks’.¹⁸ A leader of 1929 was more typical, presenting Grasmere as having a ‘distinctive Lakeland quality’, with some events ‘peculiar to the district’ and ‘still untainted at the core’. ‘Men of the Lakes and mountains’ competed in the wrestling. The leader writer praised this ‘stubbornness and power of resistance in Lakeland’ commenting that ‘if local pride were to be undermined, and local watchfulness relaxed, even Cumberland and Westmorland might fall victim to some of the many foes that threaten their integrity and their peace’.¹⁹

Post-1919 newsreel content provides another insight into metropolitan views. Whilst filmed in Cumbria, newsreel film was cut, commented on and produced in London. Such films conveyed a gendered, socially hierarchical and mythically masculine image of the region, stressing tropes of physical hardness and toughness, 'traditional sports', rural life and landscape, and a relative lack of modernity. Between the wars Grasmere sports, Cumberland rugby league, Workington Shrove Tuesday football, the Cumberland Plate at Carlisle races and fell fox hunting mostly dominated national coverage. As with the press, Grasmere was the dominant thread, the one Cumbrian event regularly shown nationally by all main newsreel companies, a rich site for the construction of pan-class Cumbrian identities, representing all classes in commentary discourse. In the 1920s and 1930s, Lord Lonsdale's presence was heavily foregrounded.²⁰ Across Britain cinemagoers were assured that Grasmere sports were 'Lakeland's Olympiad', or 'the dalesmen's Derby', two familiar parallels, and likewise 'world-famed'.²¹ Superlatives flowed. They were supposedly 'the most difficult sports in the world'; the 'world's most difficult meeting', competed for by 'mighty men of the fells', 'intrepid giants', 'fearless giants', 'stalwart dalesmen', 'successful dalesmen', 'hefty men of the lakes and fells' or 'the north's toughest dalesmen', men who were variously 'part of the heart and tradition of Lakeland', 'more famed in the district than any screen stars', 'names of local renown'.²² According to most newsreel commentators the fell race, run for by 'local mountain guides' was the most famous event, the 'big contest of the day', 'the Derby of the Dales'.²³ A BBC radio report on Grasmere Sports, broadcast in 1938, adopted a similar overview.

Standard coverage featured those sports that if not peculiar to the region, appeared to be so to southern eyes. Essentially the Games were presented as traditional, amateur and local. The newsreels omitted to say how competitive they were, that innovations were regularly introduced, that most competed for cash, that competitors came not just from the Lakes but all of Cumbria and beyond, and that visiting professionals from outside the region included them in the circuit. Even during the nineteenth century less than 15 per cent of top wrestlers usually lived within the boundaries of the later Lake District National Park, and leading wrestlers such as George Steadman travelled across England and Scotland to urban centres to compete in other wrestling styles and in other sports. Many events had little in common with 'amateur' competition. The sports were as commercial as any other gate money sports event. Indeed, by 1925 the Grasmere Sports Company Ltd. was making an annual profit of £1,500 and owned a field with a rateable value of £160.²⁴

After 1945 Grasmere sports still dominated coverage but Cumberland rugby league successes occasionally featured, alongside rambling and Outward Bound. The Lakes themselves also attracted interest. Images of Windermere Regatta, with the wooded slopes and beautiful waters of the lake intermixed with the white yacht sails represented an imported upper-class sport, but Windermere featured regularly through various forms of avowedly modernist motor sport. The yearly reports on world water speed records, especially those by Malcolm Campbell, Norman Buckley and Donald Campbell, made Coniston, Ullswater and Windermere well known to cinema audiences.

Cumbrian identity and traditional sports

To a significant extent many Cumbrians, most especially those who had not taken part or watched the region's many sports, shared such views, not least since even regional television channels eventually perpetuated such images. In reality, however, it cannot be stressed too strongly that *modern* sporting forms from rugby, football and cricket to golf, tennis, cycling, swimming or angling have actually dominated active participation and spectator rates in Cumbria from at least the end of the First World War, much as they did elsewhere, though the lack of large urban areas and top facilities, and travelling distances and times made the region uncompetitive on the national stage. Certainly, however, the complex, shifting and more problematic entity, 'Cumbrian consciousness', has been partially promulgated and preserved through the media's multiple representations of the region's 'traditional sports': Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling, hound trailing, hunting with the Lake District packs of foxhounds, and annual coverage of unique events such as Grasmere Sports or Workington 'uppies and downies' football. These survived partly through some limited local supportive resistance to modern sports and in part through the financial support of educated elites who rarely took part but saw traditions as worth preserving.

Grasmere Sports, run by a socially superior committee, gave traditional sports a middle-class cachet, without totally altering their nature. Working-class participants saw the organisers as 'toffs', but seem to have accepted their authority. It gained far more national coverage than its Cumberland equivalent, the Pooley Bridge Sports, Ullswater. Both offered substantial prize money for professional events, though most who competed had almost full-time jobs from which they could absent themselves: farm workers, shepherds, builders, cloggers and skilled workmen, labourers and the like. By the late 1800s, in a sop to southern amateur sport, both meetings offered 'amateur' as well as 'professional' events, and some for 'locals'. Ullswater, like the earlier Ferry Sports at Bowness, often maintained the pleasure boat races that tourists enjoyed, and unsuccessfully offered Graeco-Roman wrestling in 1890, though it was soon concluded that 'ground wrestling will never find favour in this district'.²⁵ Ullswater's prize money could be greater. In 1950, for example, it had £415 in prizes to Grasmere's £350.

But 'traditional' events at such meetings were often far less exclusively Cumbrian than often supposed. English cross-country races already existed well before Grasmere Guides race, a run initially to the summit of Silver Howe Crag, instituted in 1868, with prize money of £3, taking its nomenclature from the local men who acted as tourist guides to the fells, though entry was not as restricted as tourists imagined. It was essentially an invented tradition for visitors' amusement, offering local men some prize money, and variously described as a 'fell' or 'mountain' race, with less than 20 entries most years, and anything over 40 a rare exception. Similar events were found in mountainous tourist areas elsewhere, notably the 1840s Highland Games, Wharfedale's Lortherdale Fell race (c.1850), and the Ben Nevis Race (1899). Fell races in the Southern Pennines largely adopted the amateur provisions of the Amateur Athletic Association, as did the modern fell races growing in popularity in Cumbria from the 1960s. The Guides race, however, largely attracted Cumbrians. In 1933, for example, the only non-Cumbrians of the 27 entries came from Lancaster and Scorton. Fell racing was too specialised and risky for professional runners.

Cycle races were another invented tradition, appearing long after they were popular elsewhere. They were handicaps, not amateur races. Arriving first at Ullswater at the end of the Victorian period to add excitement, they were introduced experimentally at Grasmere in 1931, becoming a feature from 1938, when entries came largely from Carlisle and Penrith, as well as Birmingham, Wisbech and Cambridge.

The presence of the Lowthers at Grasmere or Ullswater, often foregrounded in the media, had no particular sporting significance. Upper-class presence at, financial support for and exploitation as a politico-economic tool of popular but respectable sports could be found right across Britain.²⁶ The highest-status figures were always central, as with the presence of the Earl of Derby (1932), or Princess Mary, the ex-King of Greece and Lord Harewood (1930), at Grasmere.

Other events, such as the mile and 880 yards handicap footraces introduced first at Ullswater, and later at Grasmere (1933) to boost attendance, were likewise imitations of the pedestrian prize-money races found in Powderhall and elsewhere. They attracted betting interest, and professional runners from across the north and lowland Scotland. They were attractive to the public, and helped raise gate money and programme sales.

Cumberland and Westmorland back-hold wrestling was more peculiarly Cumbrian. It was one of several British regional wrestling forms during the nineteenth century found alongside more 'national' styles such as 'freestyle' and 'Graeco-Roman'. A majority of top Cumberland and Westmorland-style wrestlers always came from Cumberland, especially areas round Carlisle, Dearham and Wigton, with some east-west rivalry. In 1873, 17 per cent of what were described as 'principal wrestlers' came from the future National Park, a further 59 per cent from the rest of Cumberland, only 6 per cent from the rest of Westmorland and south Cumbria, and 18 per cent spread across Durham, Northumberland, Lancashire (as far south as Liverpool) and southern Scotland.²⁷ Wrestling was the most visible and ubiquitous of the summer's 'traditional' Cumbrian sports. Popular, not elitist, it retained its strongest hold in rural agricultural areas together with Carlisle and market towns and villages linked by good roads.

In its commercialised form, prize money was offered at annual sports, galas, fairs, carnivals, agricultural shows or sports days. Wrestlers paid entry fees, and then worked their way through elimination rounds to a final, though there were sometimes also individual matches for stake money. Unlike soccer or rugby, most wrestlers entered a very small number of local sports and galas where prize money was low but competition was limited. Relatively few semi-professionals found it worthwhile to risk wages by travelling further to win prize money.

Wrestling competition provided discourses of common purpose and shared experience. They combined entertainment with the expression of local loyalties, personal status and honour, demonstrated through the same 'masculine' skills and strength as many rural jobs. They became emblematic of Cumbria's masculine popular culture. Wrestlers 'stood' not just for themselves but also for their village, or even their county. This was the more so for the occasional big stake-money matches between leading wrestlers, which were popular in the decades around 1850 when matches at the Flan, Ulverston,

a farm site established in the 1840s, could attract ten thousand or more spectators, and £300 or more stake money. Women rarely watched early in the nineteenth century, but did so increasingly thereafter. When prizes for best-decorated outfits were first offered, initially at Carlisle, in the later 1860s, women seamstresses responded to the adoption of pedestrian kit, quickly creating a new tradition of embroidered costume to replace the previous drawers and shirtsleeves.²⁸

But wrestling was also firmly grounded in betting. Good wrestlers could earn substantial sums by manipulating betting, ‘buying and selling’ (fixing matches amongst themselves) or deliberately losing, so there was always scope for what was locally called ‘barneying’. It was endemic and tacitly accepted. In 1894, for example, one visitor pointed out that:

The promoters of the great Grasmere Carnival may feebly protest against it by exhibiting small bills with the words inscribed ‘No gambling allowed’, but gambling goes on vigorously all round the ring and last year a Westmorland statesman came to me and gave me the ‘square tip’ as to who were going down. I did not avail myself of the favour but my friend did, and scooped £7.²⁹

Most betting was informal. Professional bookmakers were few in number, though their presence was complained of by northern and London newspapers in 1897.³⁰ As respectable attitudes to betting changed they became common between the wars.

Wrestling constantly had to defend itself against changes in taste and popularity, the challenges of new sports such as football, rugby and boxing, and economic and cultural shifts. There were peaks and troughs in participation, and the numbers regularly participating were quite small. As early as 1800 it was dying out as a community sport but was revived when wealthy gentry began offering money prizes. It struggled once more in the face of soccer and rugby in the 1890s, and Carlisle, which had been wrestling’s main centre throughout the nineteenth century, never afterwards recovered its position. At Grasmere in 1900, only 45 entered the lightweight wrestling, and a further 27 entered the heavyweight competition alongside some lighter men.

Boxing became a serious rival after 1918, taking hold in West Cumberland in the 1920s. By the early 1930s, the *Carlisle Journal* was describing a ‘boom in boxing’ and in 1934 about 1,500 people were attending bouts in Carlisle’s Drill Hall.³¹ Some schoolboys still learnt wrestling, especially in those places such as Bootle where training academies provided a boost, but by 1936 members at the annual meeting of the Wrestling Board reportedly felt that ‘since the War ... wrestling has deteriorated’, ‘young men prefer pictures’, and ‘the rising generation was not taking up the sport as they did’.³² In the late 1940s eight or nine areas across Cumbria opened or reopened training academies to try and attract the young. But active numbers soon declined. By 1958 only 20 lightweights entered Grasmere Sports. In the 1960s only Kendal academy survived.

Cyclical periods of decline forced wrestling to be regularly re-invented and re-launched.³³ Wrestling organisations from the Carlisle and Cumberland Wrestling Association (founded 1809), the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association (c.1870), and the Northern Counties Wrestling and Athletic Association (c.1900) to

the Association Governing Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling (1907) all gave the appearance of reform, seeking to purge dishonesty and update rules to make the presentation of the sport more attractive.

During the nineteenth century, much English working-class sport was still characterised by intensely individual challenges, as popular national and regional sports such as pedestrianism in its various forms, sculling, pugilism, dog races, potshare bowling, quoits or handball illustrated. These one-to-one contests involved much betting as well as the winning of prize and stake money. There was little evidence of any middle-class amateur ethos: taking part without reward or winning merely symbolic prizes. For most working-class men, and certainly for many in Cumbria, on low wages, living in a poorly developed wage economy, any sporting success could earn significantly more than work on day rates.

Elsewhere things changed with the ‘sporting revolution’ of the later nineteenth century. Older sporting forms began to die out with the arrival of modern commercial or amateur forms of sport. In Cumbria, however, despite losing much support, some individualised sporting forms survived, in time becoming a form of imagined cultural heritage. The sports were in part perpetuated thanks to the financial contributions and encouragement of local elite figures and middle-class visitors who saw them as important to preserve and enjoyable to watch, plus a few Cumbrian families whose personal identities and cultural capital had been involved in wrestling or hound trailing, for example, for many generations. Such sporting forms were codified on the basis of regional, not national, rule systems, with cash, not honorific rewards, affronting more amateur national organisations. These sports, found especially but not solely in rural areas of the region, demonstrated pride in regional culture, even if only a minority of Cumbrians actually participated, according to lists of competitors. Whilst many traditional forms of sport disappeared across Britain, in Cumbria the physical and psychological distance from dominant cultural forms and metropolitan influences helped to protect those sports which adapted to change and developed formal pan-regional organisational structures capable of developing sufficient ideological support to sustain them, though at low levels of participation.

Up to the 1950s and beyond, the sports sections of the regional press often employed specialist journalists for particular sports, and their local loyalties helped promote and preserve a diverse ‘traditional’ sporting culture, nurture myths of Cumbrian exceptionalism, and resist outside pressures. Such newspaper representations helped to strengthen cultural stereotypes amongst those who knew relatively little about sport, whilst encouraging those who actually took part in more traditional forms of sport to continue their involvement. ‘Traditional’ Cumbrian sports helped construct a particular form of regional identity, implicitly defining itself as different from broader British urban culture. They asserted regional distinctiveness, even if much was mythical. Local events, especially in and around the central Lakes, deliberately and self-consciously played up this regional distinctiveness to entertain summer visitors and new residents.

Up to and beyond its ban in 2005, the ‘blood sport’ of fell fox hunting and the activities

and songs associated with it often contributed to personal, family and community narratives of Cumbrian place identity. The song ‘John Peel’, created by Peel’s friend John Woodcock Graves c. 1826, has, for example figured regularly in constructions and diffusions of regional identity: sung in dialect form at hunt suppers and ‘merry neets’, at events for Cumbrian exiles, at concerts and in middle-class homes.

The fells offered a geographically based identity. Fell packs served agriculturally significant and utilitarian community purposes, with foxes killed as a service to local sheep-farmers, and strong support for the hunts. Membership fees were low. Everyone could join in, whatever their income. Little attention was paid to dress.³⁴ In the first half of the nineteenth century, Cumbrian gentry and statesmen families hunted with and kennelled their own foxhounds, demonstrating their commitment and asserting local status and position. But from the mid-nineteenth century, fell hunting moved to ‘subscription’ packs, collecting running costs locally. By 1900 the Lake District fell packs, hunting largely on foot, included the Blencathra (the oldest, centred on Threlkeld), the Coniston (founded c.1825), the Eskdale and Ennerdale (1850s), the Melbreak and the Ullswater, each with their own history and traditions. The Lunesdale joined in 1936. These hunts attracted few fee-paying middle-class visitors from urban areas, and retained strong bedrock support. It was claimed in 1906 that, ‘squires and statesmen, hill farmers and dalesmen alike have combined’.³⁵ Hunting brought the community together – in the hunts organised at Troutbeck and earlier at Bowness and Cartmel Fell, the public house afterwards, the mock-Mayor making, the hunt balls, the whist drives and dances. Hunts became symbols of local pride.³⁶ They were collective and socially cohesive. Many families kept an association with hunting over generations. The companionship, exploits and communal fun were celebrated in the region’s hunting songs, often linked to public house sociability. These became, according to Lyn Murfin, ‘the most typical of Cumbrian “folk-songs”, in which the community themselves are celebrated’.³⁷

The summer sport of hound trailing has a strong claim to be a Cumbrian sport too, though some northern seaside resorts once featured such events, often associated with horse races, to attract tourists. Other than for those with hounds, trailing was purely a spectator sport, combining enjoyment of the outdoors, love of dogs, competition and betting. Dogs followed an aniseed, paraffin and oil trail, and the sport grew firm regional roots from the mid-nineteenth century. At Grasmere the event was a feature from the 1850s and was a ‘serious draw’ by 1866.³⁸ A Cumberland and Westmorland Hound Trailing Association (HTA) was formed c.1906, though with separate North Lakeland and South Lakeland Associations. Its attractions spread well beyond Lakeland, and by the interwar period it was also popular amongst the miners of West Cumberland, while a Borders HTA covered Northumberland, South West Scotland and Carlisle. Like wrestling, there were regular suggestions that dogs were ‘nobbled’ to affect race outcomes, but during the summer the *Westmorland Gazette* regularly reported 20 or more meetings weekly and the *Carlisle Journal* provided detailed and regular reports from a specialist reporter. At this time the sport challenged wrestling as leading traditional sport for Cumbrian affection and loyalty. After 1950, however, it declined in terms of participation, and by the 1960s mainly survived only amongst those relatively few families who had been involved in trailing for generations.

Workington's mass football contest has also figured as a dominant myth of Cumbrianism, supposedly a violent outlet from the discipline and supervision of local life, although it is only one of a number of such survivals, as at Alnwick (Northumberland) or Ashdowne (Derbyshire). The 'uppies' and 'downies' game had its origins in rival occupational identities – the miners and sailors. The strength of local backing ensured its survival despite opposition from the respectable and religious.³⁹ The Easter event was reported regionally in the press from as early as 1775. Once the railway was built, the contest rapidly became a tourist attraction. In the 1870s it attracted perhaps 5,000 spectators, some coming by special train. By 1920 a reported 20,000 were watching. To a significant extent the visitors, and the money they spent, encouraged locals to demonstrate their heritage and hardness, their strength and solidarity. The film company *Topical Budget* introduced Workington football visually to the wider British public in 1923, and the National Coal Board's *Mining Review* covered the event in one of its early features in 1947.⁴⁰

Not all traditional sports survived so well. Cockfighting survived strongly in Cumberland beyond the 1820s, celebrating both local and gentry county sporting identity.⁴¹ Its banning in 1835 and a further Cruelty to Animals ban in 1849 forced it underground. Police intervention sometimes brought it to light, though prosecutions often failed, perhaps indicating the difficulties of proving a case to what were sometimes sympathetic local magistrates. It often enjoyed cross-class support. A prosecution at Ulverston in 1881 claimed that a well-known sporting baronet was present, but only the cocks were confiscated. In 1913 in another Ulverston prosecution five police broke up a main at which between eighty and one hundred were reportedly present. A miner and a 'gentleman' were accused but the bench dismissed the case.⁴²

The sport of 'pole leaping', initially very much a feature of early Lake District sport, also failed to survive. It was found only rarely elsewhere, but by the 1840s results from pole-jumping competitions were being occasionally recorded in several centres in Cumbria, often associated with wrestling festivals, possibly because the arm strength of wrestlers' skills was especially suitable for pole-jumping. Charles Dickens watched it at Bowness in 1858 and it first appeared at Grasmere in 1868, soon becoming a regular feature, with separate amateur and professional events from 1881.⁴³ The regular competition there and at meets elsewhere may have helped pole-jumping nationally, but most winners adopted the regional style later made illegal by the Amateur Athletic Association, who adopted and 'reinvented' the event, which had become a 'pole vault' in modern form at Grasmere by 1972.

County identities

If the sports now seen as 'typically' Cumbrian are only partially so, how far has sporting loyalty focused on the county? Cumbria itself is too recent a creation to have attracted sporting loyalties, but in the early modern period Cumberland and Westmorland were a focus of regional loyalty as well as key administrative, political and judicial units. However, county loyalties surprisingly rarely emerged in descriptions of individual sports, where it was more often support for a village or town that was called upon. As modern sports developed, far later in Cumbria than the nearby counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire, any county sporting loyalty faded still more as local loyalties strengthened.

In the new team games loyalties to ‘Canny auld Cumberland/Cummerland’ were far stronger than county loyalties in Westmorland, even though most modern sports adopted county forms of administration. More urgent issues of local rivalry, transport connections and playing power usually overshadowed mere matters of administrative convenience. Though separate Rugby Football Unions (RFU) were formed in Cumberland (1884) and Westmorland (1886) Cumberland dominated, with a national representative on the English RFU committee from 1888, when the county championship was initiated.⁴⁴ Whilst both maintained county teams to play inter-county matches from the later 1880s, Cumberland had the stronger sides, and reached the final of the county championship in 1893, before being defeated at Carlisle by Yorkshire, in front of a large and enthusiastic Carlisle crowd.

Rugby clubs in both counties were at first resistant to rugby’s ‘great split’ of 1895, when demands for ‘broken time’ payments to players led to many northern rugby sides leaving the English RFU to create the Northern Union, the forerunner of rugby league. Barrow, founded in 1875, had strong links with the seceding Lancashire sides, and in April 1897 it voted unanimously to join the Northern Union, soon followed by Ulverston and Millom. By the 1898/9 season there were few rugby union sides left, and none at all in West Cumberland, a former union stronghold, but an area which soon gave more support to rugby league, especially in Whitehaven and Workington.⁴⁵ Though rugby union revived, in 1905 the struggling Cumberland and Westmorland RFUs amalgamated, playing inter-county matches as Cumberland RFU but recruiting Westmorland players occasionally. Cumberland re-built a reputation as ‘the Border county’, relying largely on heavy, strong forwards, usually only playing in the northern section but reaching the County Championship in 1924 when Cumberland beat Kent convincingly in front of a ‘wildly enthusiastic crowd’ of 10,000 people at Carlisle, a rare match against southern opposition.⁴⁶ It was 1938 before Cumberland agreed to have at least one Westmorland member on its selection committee.⁴⁷

In most sports Westmorland county sides were insufficiently competitive to attract support. Representative Westmorland colts’ rugby sides played few matches. Representative Westmorland County FA sides survived for several years before the First World War, but were not reinstated until 1938, when an amateur county match was played at Kendal against Cumberland before a crowd estimated at 1,500.⁴⁸ Westmorland’s only brief attempt to form a county cricket team in 1835 was not sustained.⁴⁹ Cricket was a sport with lower status in the region than elsewhere, at least in part a feature of poorer climatic conditions and lack of population. Cumberland’s first formal county cricket club was founded in 1884. Its early years were financially precarious and it soon foundered. A later relaunch failed but a third attempt created a combined Cumberland and Westmorland County Cricket Club in 1948, playing friendlies only. It had some limited middle-class support, and was based in Carlisle, but had a somewhat difficult and often struggling existence, with only a semi-commercial form of development.⁵⁰ When belatedly admitted into the Minor Counties in 1955 it took the name Cumberland County Cricket Club, but played on grounds which included Netherfield (Kendal) in the former county of Westmorland and Barrow, which was part of Lancashire, as well as Sedbergh School, then in the West Riding, and regularly recruited players from Westmorland’s Kendal and Netherfield sides.

At the local level competitive rivalry against other towns outweighed county loyalty. The new league structures often employed county nomenclature but in practice disregarded or defied county boundaries. Kendal provides a useful example. The town is the administrative centre of Westmorland, but Kendal's top sports clubs showed relatively little loyalty to the county. In cricket, for example, Kendal Cricket Club joined the North Lancashire (And District) League in 1892.⁵¹ In 1926 the North Lancashire League also recruited Netherfield Cricket Club, founded in 1893 for employees of a Kendal shoemaking factory (Whitehaven, from Cumberland, also competed between the wars). In the years after 1945 Netherfield, Kendal, and Cumberland sides like Millom, Whitehaven, Workington, Haverigg and even Carlisle were all members of the North Lancashire League. Leading Kendal soccer sides played in the West Lancashire League between the wars, and then in the Lancashire Combination.

Modern sports and place identity

At the start of the nineteenth century Cumbrian village leisure culture was still vibrant, and a wide range of physical activities was engaged in, though their actual frequency was limited. In the poems of Robert Anderson, for example, many physical activities and athletic sports are mentioned: cockfighting, fighting, flinging the 'geavelick' (a long pole like a javelin), various local forms of football, foot racing, handball, horse racing, hunting, leaping, quoits, shooting, throwing the stone and wrestling.⁵² Such images triangulate with other sources of the period.

Following the sporting revolution of the later nineteenth century the rise of football, cricket, tennis, golf, hockey and other codified sports, as well as more social pastimes such as cycling, rambling and swimming, brought modern sports to Cumbria. They arrived later than in neighbouring counties. The Lancashire Football Association already had 30 clubs affiliated in 1878: Cumberland Football Association only had four in January 1886.

But from the First World War onwards, modern sports attracted far higher levels of participation, spectatorship and interest than Cumbria's traditional sports. Even small villages had cricket and soccer sides if fields could be obtained. Cricket now gained more lines of coverage in the press than wrestling in the summer. Rugby and football dominated the winter. Modern sport became central to most Cumbrians' interests, and to a large extent traditional sports became increasingly peripheral except as quasi-mythical symbols of Cumbrian identity. Many wrestlers also played modern sports, especially rugby and soccer. Whilst crowd sizes at Kendal or Carlisle's rugby and soccer grounds, for example, were sometimes lower than at Ullswater or Grasmere sports, football or rugby were weekly events, while spectators at the latter only went once annually to watch not one but a variety of activities, and many spectators were family or friends of competitors.

There were sub-regional variations. Golf, for example, made a much larger impact on Cumberland, in part due to its many coastal link courses, than it did on Westmorland. In 1931, according to the census, there were 68 people employed full-time in golf-related activity in Cumberland (one in 752 of its industrial population), but only

seven in Westmorland (one in 4,096) while eleven worked in Barrow in Lancashire. The *Carlisle Journal* showed sufficient interest in golf by the 1930s to have a regular column by 'Linksman'.

Sporting participation in part reflected *personal identities* such as class, family, ethnicity or occupation, and so can be passed over briefly. The earliest cricket, rugby and association clubs in Cumbria, for example, largely espoused *class* identities. There were middle-class clubs, like Barrow's first rugby team, in 1875, formed from seven old boys of Lancaster Grammar School, a solicitor, an accountant, a clergyman, a customs officer and a future J.P.⁵³ As late as 1913 Kendal's rugby side was still being accused locally of being 'all collars and cuffs', with selection on class lines.⁵⁴

Rock climbing, often portrayed as a Cumbrian sport, was a class-based imported activity. Most climbers were middle-class visitors: young, wealthy, educated and with professional or commercial backgrounds. They visited the Alps, Scotland, Wales and elsewhere. It was only in the 1930s that a few more working-class Cumbrians such as Bill Peascod (Workington coalminer), Jim Birkett (Langdale quarryman) or Jack Carswell (boilermaker) began to appear. Even then most climbers continued to come from outside Cumbria. The Alpine Club (1857), Scottish Mountaineering Club (1889) Yorkshire Ramblers Club (1889) and the Climbers' Club (1897) all predated the Fell and Rock Climbing Club of the English Lake District (1907), a majority of whose membership and journal contributors have always come from elsewhere.

Some sports, such as whippet racing, popular in parts of Furness and West Cumberland mining communities, were very working-class sports, whilst tennis clubs, by contrast, excluded the less well off. As elsewhere too, *occupational identities* surfaced in sport, with teams being named after local factories. Early cricket teams in Kendal included Messrs. Braithwaites and Co., and the Carpet Works. Particular *families* became associated with a sport across the generations, as with the Robson, Bland, Mason or Harrington families in wrestling. *Ethnic and religious* differences were more often found in west coast mining areas affected by immigration. Moor Row, famous for its immigrant Cornish miners, formed a cricket team in the 1870s. Cleator Moor Celtic Football Club, founded in 1908/9 was founded by Irish immigrants employed in the local iron ore mines.

Place identities appeared more through 'local' civic identity and pride, especially in Cumbria's urban communities where team sports, most especially rugby and association football, created representative town sides, whose success against local or regional rivals fostered local loyalties. These came late, and rugby union initially towered over soccer as a popular sport. Industrial west coast sides began competing for a rugby challenge cup from 1882 and by the early 1890s, Aspatria, Barrow, Carlisle, Cockermouth, Kendal, Maryport, Millom, Whitehaven and Workington all had strong town teams. After rugby's 1895 split rugby league rapidly established itself in western urban, industrialised working-class areas. It reached a high standard in Barrow, Workington and Whitehaven, and became a potent source of working-class identity.

Association football initially struggled. As late as 1886, when the Tees region had

about 90 clubs, there were only seven clubs in all Cumberland.⁵⁵ Representative cricket was also slow to spread. Penrith Cricket Club was founded in 1878. Lord Lonsdale provided a ground at Castle Meadows in Whitehaven in 1879. Barrow and Cockermouth Cricket Clubs were only founded in the 1890s.

Because of their geographical marginality in terms of distance, cost and travel time, the larger towns in Cumbria struggled to achieve sporting successes that could be fully celebrated by communities or exploited by local politicians, reinforcing notions of civic pride, or gaining votes and status. Any historical anti-southern and especially anti-metropolitan bias amongst Cumbrians could not be extended to its sports, since Cumbria's sporting competitors rarely if ever competed against southern opposition until well after 1945. Sporting rivalry was largely confined to opponents no further away than neighbouring northern counties.

Rare cup final appearances on the regional or wider stage therefore had more meaning than elsewhere, and engendered strong feelings amongst Cumbria's more fanatical supporters even in the nineteenth century. One nationally reported 'Stoning at a football match' occurred in 1897 when Workington AFC met Carlisle City on the Carlisle Rugby Ground in the final of the Cumberland Association Challenge Cup. Following Workington's win, they were stoned by sections of the Carlisle crowd. One of the men struck later became paralysed down one side, and subsequently died. The coroner described the event as 'really a mob riot'.⁵⁶

Successes were few. In rugby league, Barrow's first major achievement was losing the Rugby League Challenge final to Salford in 1938. They reached the final again in 1951, losing to Wigan, and only finally won it in 1955, to the delight of fans, defeating their main local rivals Workington 21-12 at Maine Road, Manchester. They lost again in 1957. Workington Town, re-formed in December 1944 to compete in the fully professional Northern Rugby League, beat Warrington 26-11 in the Championship final of 5 May 1951, also at Maine Road, attracting 61,618 spectators. They defeated Featherstone Rovers in the League Cup final in May 1952, the first Wembley rugby league final to be televised, but lost to Wigan at Wembley in 1958.

Cumbria's soccer sides struggled too. Barrow A.F.C. initially competed in the Lancashire League and became a founder member of the Football League Third Division North in 1921, with little further success, though their F.A. Cup Third Round game against Wolverhampton Wanderers in the 1958-59 season briefly brought them to national attention. Carlisle United, formed by a merger in 1903, only entered the English Third Division North in the 1928/9 season, and equally had little success, though it reached a national audience when it forced a deserved draw with Arsenal in the FA Cup in 1951, a match recorded by *Pathe News* for national newsreel presentation.⁵⁷ Workington Football Club was reformed in 1921 but had poor crowds, and played in the North-Eastern League until it gained admittance to the Football League Division 3 North in 1951/2. In rugby union, both Kendal and Workington were amongst the leading northern rugby union sides in the 1920s and 1930s. By contrast Carlisle's rugby union side struggled through the interwar period, gaining its first grandstand only in 1923. County-wide media coverage of top local teams has thus been limited.

Conclusion

This brief study indicates the difficulties associated with defining Cumbrian sporting identity, which traditionally has had strongly gendered, masculine qualities, and largely excluded women. Loyalties to Westmorland or Cumberland were only rarely exhibited. Many clubs defied county allegiances. Traditional sports such as wrestling, hound trailing or fell-pack hunting were found across the region, while geographical remoteness meant modern sports took longer to diffuse. Older sports often dominated both regional and national media coverage even after Cumbrians largely participated in more modern sports: soccer, rugby, golf or cricket. These however generated weaker civic and regional identity, since Cumbrian clubs proved relatively unsuccessful and this made it hard for Cumbrians to identify with them. Many of the traditional regional sports at the main venues were survivals of earlier individualised, prize money, professional events found more often in the context of a low wage economy. But financial support from local elites and visitors helped to keep such events alive, and over time they created strong images of Cumbrian exceptionalism, which were widely shared across and beyond Cumbria. Such images were often unquestionably taken as fact, and repeated until they took on a life of their own, most especially since relatively few Cumbrians actually went to watch or participated. Even today, albeit with crowd numbers inflated by family and friends of competitors, events such as Grasmere generate more media coverage and a stronger sense of regional identity than any cricket game, the soccer games at Barrow or Workington or the various games under rugby codes.

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