

## BBC Radio and Sport 1922–39

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The BBC, the sole national broadcaster, was slow in entering the world of sport, but between the wars it helped reshape the way sport was experienced by the British, first presenting 'national' sports events such as the Derby or FA Cup final to a national audience, and later moving to much broader 'representative' coverage. The BBC experienced problematic beginnings to sports broadcasting in the mid-1920s, and the earlier attempts to establish approach and direction, which proved challenging, are first analysed. The article then explores the main patterns of sporting coverage between 1927 and 1939, demonstrating how simplistic notions of a BBC 'national' approach were constrained by issues of class, gender and region. These issues, impinging on questions of popularity, access and exclusivity, are explored through three major dimensions: the relationship between the BBC and the various sporting governing bodies and clubs, audience response, and the nature of commentary.

Keywords: Sport; BBC; Culture; Commentary; Football; Rugby

The 1920s saw a global expansion of radio sport coverage. American stations were the first to broadcast sports results, reports and live commentary. On 11 April 1921, a lightweight boxing match was broadcast on KDKA. Games from World Series baseball and Davis Cup tennis, also broadcast in 1921, were groundbreaking experiments.<sup>1</sup> The Dempsey versus Carpentier boxing match, transmitted from New Jersey on 2 July 1921, was widely listened to in halls and theatres within 250 miles, as the commentator, J. Andrew White, attempted to 'convey pictures' to the studio.<sup>2</sup> America's commercial radio stations quickly used sport as a programming and revenue staple, increasing demand for radios, and attracting large audiences to baseball, American football and boxing commentaries. The USA was a state-regulated service, with private ownership of broadcasting facilities, financed through advertising. By 1924 there were 1,400 stations, 3 million sets and almost daily sports broadcasts. Telephone lines spread coverage, and on 1 January 1927 the Rose Bowl football game was heard from coast to coast on NBC, as was the memorable Dempsey versus Tunney fight later that year. Sports broadcasts quickly attracted sponsors, leading to increased commercial pressures on American sport between 1926 and 1933.<sup>3</sup>

Other former British colonies were early entrants into sports broadcasting. In Australia, with its mixture of public and commercial radio, a Sydney station broadcast a testimonial match for Charles Bannerman in 1922, and in July 1923 a Melbourne steeplechase was covered. In 1924 Radio 2BL Sydney provided coverage of a rugby league cup final and MCC tour games.<sup>4</sup> Canadian Toronto station CFCA covered the final period of a hockey match between North Toronto and Midland in February 1923, and there were further commentaries that year. South Africa covered rugby in 1924, and by 1926 countries from New Zealand to Ireland were experimenting with sports broadcasts. A station in Christchurch, New Zealand, covered rugby that May and trotting and hockey were covered later in 1926. On 29 August 1926 Eire's 2RN station was probably the first in Europe to provide live commentary on a field game when broadcasting the All-Ireland hurling semi-final, an early indication of the support Irish broadcasting subsequently provided for GAA games.<sup>5</sup> 1927 saw further countries begin commentary.

While knowledge of global sports broadcasting between the wars, especially but not solely for the USA, is increasing, there has been little detailed exploration of early British sports broadcasting, with the exception of Hayes' study of football.<sup>6</sup> This is the more surprising given that radio's general

social and cultural history has been well served. Nicholas has explored the relationship between the BBC and its audience between 1939 and 1945, while the overall relationship between sport and the inter-war media has recently been analysed by Huggins and Williams.<sup>7</sup> Scannell and Cardiff deliberately excluded sport from discussion, while McKibbin's important treatments of radio broadcasting and sport remained unlinked.<sup>8</sup> Even so, they, and media historians such as Briggs and Pegg accept that inter-war sports coverage was one of the BBC's most direct contributions to entertainment.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Scannell and Cardiff argue that the BBC became the central organ of British national culture partly through its regular coverage of key sporting events.<sup>10</sup> Pegg claims that radio, alongside the press and newsreels, helped shape Britain's sporting culture and emphasise the 'national' character of particular sports.<sup>11</sup> It has also been suggested that radio widened general interest in sport while domesticating sport as a spectacle.<sup>12</sup>

However, while such widespread consensus may contain considerable truth, the substantive evidence either to support and clarify such assertions, or to critique an important but hitherto unexamined part of the story of sport and the media, has been largely lacking. This analysis exploits sources that include BBC promotional literature, especially its *Radio Times*, handbooks and year books, material that was often self-important, uncritical and ideologically biased, alongside press articles, biographical and autobiographical material. The article begins by examining the problematic beginnings of BBC sports broadcasting in 1927 as it established approach and direction. Second, it analyses the main patterns of coverage between 1927 and 1939, testing out earlier claims and exploring further key questions concerning the extent to which BBC coverage reflected sporting interests across different social classes and of women as well as men. How did the nuances and tensions of social exclusivity and inclusion, social unity and class rivalry work out in practice? What of different and distinctive national and regional sporting experiences and tastes? Changes in BBC domestic broadcasting coverage over time, the differing responses to BBC broadcasting made by sporting governing bodies and clubs, audience experiences and responses and the art of commentary all shed light on such questions.

This study in part clarifies the tentative findings of earlier studies, confirming that between the wars the BBC helped reshape the way sport was experienced. The BBC, with its broadcasting monopoly and public-service approach, created a limited number of 'national' British sporting events. It provided a national commonality of experience through a regular calendar of key outside sports broadcasts, fostering anticipation and future pleasure. By mediating such sporting events to a cross-class audience, the BBC promoted social unity rather than rivalry. It created new norms and expectations about commentaries alongside BBC cultural values and attitudes. Previously even if some people watched sporting events, most read about them or watched them on screen only afterwards. Radio now allowed listeners a new dimension, a vicarious presence as events unfolded. By 1939 a clear BBC sports broadcasting style had emerged, especially in its treatment of national sporting events, explaining the nation to the nation, and establishing a clearer sense of British sporting nationhood. More generally it widened knowledge of sport. In the 1930s radio introduced people to sports they had never seen before. Sport became 'respectable' as broadcasting raised the status of its key events. Radio made the University Boat Race a national event. It helped rugby grow in popularity. In part, BBC sports transmissions brought Britain closer together while also perpetuating persistent regional and national differences (amongst the Scots and Welsh) through its regional broadcasts.

But the BBC's impact can be over-stressed. Its coverage was selective and somewhat elitist in approach, biased towards more middle-class and metropolitan events. Football received few commentaries, greyhound racing none, even though they were the two most attended commercial sporting spectator events, highly popular with the working classes. The BBC's sport coverage attracted female listeners but its coverage of women's sports was poor, especially compared to that of the newsreels. Contemporary arguments that foregrounding nationally important events perhaps helped diminish spectator support for local games are not strongly backed by evidence. The extent to which sport was domesticated, supporting BBC discourses of neighbourliness and family life, with the whole family sitting together listening, is also debatable, although many letters in its favour were from the housebound or partially sighted, since communal outdoor listening survived in some places

through the 1920s and much of the 1930s. And finally, it is worth noting that, despite Reith's opposition to gambling and the BBC's avoidance of betting news, gambling experienced major growth in popularity between the wars.

### **The Beginnings of Outside Live Sports Broadcasts 1922–27**

Sales of radios in Britain were initially slow. Only 36,000 licences were purchased in 1922, and Britain initially lagged well behind the USA in broadcasting sport. The Marconi 2LO Company attempted a running commentary of the Kid Lewis versus Carpentier fight at Olympia for London listeners in May 1922. However, the Newspaper Proprietors' Association argued that radio was a rival form of news reporting and was able to block subsequent attempts at commentary by the British Broadcasting Company, then run by leading wireless manufacturers. In 1923 the parliamentary Sykes Committee on Broadcasting was concerned that any broadcasting of sports results would harm newspaper sales, but felt it might be acceptable to broadcast some 'special' outside events.<sup>13</sup> The BBC was placed under the jurisdiction of the Post Office, whose Postmaster General was very clear that the interests of the press and news agencies should not be alienated or financially embarrassed. So the BBC was subjected to severe restrictions on the coverage of outside events. Any concessions had to be prised from the press. In February 1925 the BBC undertook abortive negotiations to broadcast the 'running story' of the first half of the England versus Scotland rugby match, a 'coded narrative' of the Boat race and Cup final (with the key to the code published in the papers on the day) and an 'impressionist' broadcast of the Epsom Derby. The press, concerned about the broadcasting 'menace', rejected these.<sup>14</sup> In 1926 the BBC were given permission for an 'experiment' to provide conversation between experts, and the sounds of horses' hooves, bookmakers' shouts and other 'atmosphere', after negotiations with Epsom's organisers. It was a critical failure. Heavy rain dampened hooves and spirits. The final part of the commentary painted a very restricted picture: 'Here they come—now they're getting down to it—he's drawing ahead—it's sure to be Lex—no—Harpagon'. Then a distant voice said 'It looks like 9–5–1', before they were returned to the studio.<sup>15</sup> Listeners had to wait until the first news bulletin, at 7 p.m., to find out the result.

In 1926 the Crawford Committee on Broadcasting recommended a national, public-service broadcasting, crown-chartered utility, and on 1 January 1927 the BBC became the British Broadcasting Corporation, the sole British broadcaster. Its Director-General, John Reith, was ethically committed to universal dissemination of its 'public service' approach: inclusive, but raising public taste and promoting 'correct' social attitudes while informing, educating and entertaining. He wanted to create a genuine sense of audience involvement in national public life and culture. Sport, whose key events supposedly consecrated national sentiment, could help. Audiences would learn its finer points. Sport was entertaining, understood, an everyday fundamental part of life, especially on Saturdays. Reith and the head of Outside Broadcasting, Gerald Cock, decided that commentaries on Britain's major national sporting events would create excitement, provide unique listening experiences and help unify Britain.

So as early as 31 December 1926, with negotiations with the various news agencies and the press finally and positively concluded, the Radio Times announced a 'considerable expansion' of news broadcasting, including 'descriptive eyewitness accounts' of 'important events'. The obvious success of American broadcasting exercised BBC minds and Cock appeared interested in emulating American sports broadcasting approaches. In early January 1927 a Radio Times article described American football broadcasts, explaining that USA newspapers often had their own stations and reported sport regularly, so 'more interest was taken in the football and baseball pages than ever before'.<sup>16</sup> This public relations discourse thus hinted that broadcasts would aid British newspaper sales. Its view of American commentaries was positive, concealing intra-BBC debates about radio's role and fears that the 'national outlook and, with it, character' was 'gradually being Americanised'.<sup>17</sup> The BBC admired the speed, slickness, freshness and topicality of American sports coverage. When the first commentator, Capt. H. B. T. Wakelam, was recruited, by producer Lance Sieveking, he was told that 'it had been decided to follow a recent American innovation and to put out running commentaries'.<sup>18</sup>

But there was some unwillingness to get too involved in mass culture or attract mass audiences. Cock was opposed to the monopolistic power of American sports and entertainment organisations, saw real dangers in such over-commercialised moves, and wanted to maintain the highest possible standards of entertainment.<sup>19</sup> So only sporting occasions that the BBC could define as national events were initially covered.

The BBC found many of the more traditionally 'amateur' sporting bodies happy to welcome the 'national' broadcaster. Following discussions with the Rugby Football Union, and trial exercises at Blackheath and Richmond, a game on January 15<sup>th</sup> between England and Wales at Twickenham became Wakelam's first broadcast. A motor van transported the complicated transmission apparatus. The BBC trumpeted it as 'one of the most important events since the inception of broadcasting . . . the beginning of a new era in wireless', announcing that they would henceforth cover sports as 'an integral part of the broadcast service'. The BBC's postbag praised the 'crowded hour of glorious life', and the 'wild glorious cheering from 40,000 throats'. Some highbrow critics regarded it as a failure, but the London and provincial press was generally supportive.<sup>20</sup> The Times saw it as 'vivid' and impressive', and accepted that commentary had clearly 'come to stay'.<sup>21</sup> The Field praised Wakelam: '[nothing] could have filled the bill better than the delineations, running fire of comments and ejaculations'.<sup>22</sup> In the following weeks, listeners heard second-half commentary on a League match between Arsenal and Sheffield and a fourth-round Football Association (FA) Cup tie between Corinthians and Newcastle United.

February saw further rugby internationals and FA Cup matches broadcast. March saw just over an hour of racing commentary on the Grand National. Radio Times, still describing this as 'experimental', to forestall potential criticism, provided an entertaining plan of the Aintree course. Veteran Sporting Life journalist Meyrick Good, who usually 'read the race' for the King, provided commentary, with George V standing beside him. Good commented in the open, close to the enclosures, so cheering drowned his voice towards the finish. With a rapid return to the studio placings were also left unclear. After his broadcast he claimed that 10,000,000 had listened, commenting (for the press's benefit?) that audiences had been 'worked up to a high pitch of curiosity and want to see in cold print the evidence of their own ears corroborated and amplified . . . the broadcasting of these great racing events is more of an asset to the newspapers than otherwise'.<sup>23</sup> Five fixed microphones were used, for Good, for crowd and betting noise, for the Paddock, where a second commentator described the preliminaries, for the unsaddling enclosure, and for interviewing the winning jockey and trainer. One trainer wrote from distant Coblenz to say the commentary was 'a great success . . . the next best thing to seeing the race'.<sup>24</sup>

The Boat Race was a bigger technical challenge. The BBC broadcast commentary from a launch, whose aerial sent a signal to receiving stations at Barnes, which then forwarded it. The press, yet again, were generally impressed. The Times believed that listeners were in a distinct advantage over those who saw the event, and were well served by the 'expert analysis'.<sup>25</sup> The FA Cup Final, on April 23rd, included pre-kickoff sound of the vast crowd singing, claimed as 'the largest demonstration of Community Singing this country has ever beheld'.<sup>26</sup> Like crowd noise, this gave armchair listeners something of the communal atmosphere. Transmitting such national sporting rituals, often foregrounding royalty's presence, consolidated the BBC's cultural role, celebrated national pride, and reinforced a sense that such events belonged to the nation, not just supporters.

Cricket was covered not by running commentary but by much more limited 'eyewitness accounts'. At the end of April listeners were given brief reports and summaries of play of Surrey versus Hampshire at the Oval by former test player P. F. Warner. In May a 'descriptive narrative' on the Essex versus New Zealand game was provided. There was a ten-minute first report, summarising play, followed by brief hourly summaries, with a message inserted into the studio music programme for any especially exciting event. That summer there were occasional eyewitness accounts of both county matches and the Oxford v. Cambridge and Gentlemen v. Players games, perhaps a reflection of the gentleman-amateur backgrounds of BBC and commentating staff. Golf reports from the Amateur and Open championships received similar coverage.

Commentary coverage of the Derby in May, with Good dropped in favour of Geoffrey Gilbey, included interviews amongst the crowds, and band music. In late June and early July Wimbledon was broadcast. The St Leger was covered in September. The editor of that year's *Bloodstock Breeders' Review*, who listened in Guernsey, believed that the 1927 experiments in race broadcasting had been 'an unqualified success'. During the year sports talks were also scheduled. In April, for example, these included a survey of the women's hockey season and the prospects for England's tour of Australia.

But right from the start there were counter-currents against 'national' sporting coverage, helping consolidate regional and local identity and partisanship. It is important to stress that the BBC also reflected long-standing and persistent regional and national differences in sporting preferences. As early as 1923 Birmingham, Manchester, Cardiff, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Bournemouth had local stations. Further relay stations were set up in 1924. In 1926, because of wavelength restrictions, these were replaced by regional stations which the new BBC inherited. All regional stations were anxious to offer their own Saturday commentaries or eyewitness accounts alongside relaying national programming, and so reflect the sometimes different sporting interests of their listeners. In early March 1927, for example, London got an 'important association match', Manchester had Burnley versus Blackburn Rovers, Yorkshire had Sheffield United versus Spurs, while in south Wales, where rugby was the dominant game, the rugby union match between Swansea and Cardiff was broadcast. Later in the spring the Rugby League Challenge Cup final, between Swinton and Oldham, was also broadcast, but only from Manchester. In the summer the Roses cricket matches were also solely a northern feature. By contrast only London got the Eton versus Harrow game, reflecting perhaps more elitist metropolitan views.

### **Coverage of Sport 1928–39**

After 1927 the BBC continued to stress 'national' British events, although, as we shall see, these were underlaid by continued tensions of class, gender and region. Desensitised microphones soon cut out over-obtrusive crowd noise. Events such as the Grand National, Epsom Derby and Doncaster St Leger, the Boat Race, football and rugby internationals, the FA Cup final, the Amateur Golf Championship and Wimbledon, quickly became what the 1930 BBC Yearbook already described as 'old favourites' with listeners, fostering national pride in British sporting achievements. Some were covered by 'running commentary', others by reported summaries ('eyewitness accounts'). With the partial exception of the FA Cup final, the Boat Race and horseracing, most events covered attracted largely middle-class crowds. The Boat Race, with its Oxbridge associations, was seen by the BBC as the most outstanding of all outside broadcasts. Even so, as part of an annual compendium of broadcast national rituals and ceremonies, sports coverage presented the BBC in a more democratic light than much BBC output, which maintained a partial focus on high culture, as did the columns of the *Listener*—the BBC's magazine for listeners—which almost entirely ignored sport, an indication that it was perceived as too 'lowbrow' for its readers.

Sport took some time to be a major BBC priority, but in the early 1930s coverage of 'national' sporting events was expanded, cumulatively creating the elements of what Scannell and Cardiff described as a 'unified national life available to all'.<sup>27</sup> Initially expansion was fairly slow but it gathered pace rapidly from 1933 (Table 1).

The two sports most often covered nationally in the mid-1930s were motor sports and rugby, both largely, though not entirely, middle-class in terms of their participation and spectatorship, and thus socially exclusive rather than inclusive. Motor sports, like the BBC itself, were emblematic of modernity. Eyewitness accounts of the RAC Tourist Trophy Races at Ulster and the Isle of Man were broadcast in 1929 and proved very popular, as was the seaplane race for the Schneider Trophy on the Solent. Speedway coverage peaked in 1934. In 1935 the BBC covered motor-cycle speed championships at St Andrews, hill climbs at Red Marley and Shelsey Walsh, Grand Prix and other

motor car races at Ulster, Donnington Park and the Isle of Man, and the TT races at Ards and the Isle of Man.

The positive reception given to sport by listeners encouraged a move beyond national events to a wider expansion of Saturday sports coverage in the 1930s. In June 1932 the BBC broadcast three and a quarter hours of running commentary, 'the first occasion a programme so ambitious has been undertaken'.<sup>28</sup> By 1934 the BBC regularly offered national listeners whole afternoons of organised sport, with rapid shifts from one sport to another, and further regional variations. Saturday 15 August 1936, for example, saw 35 minutes of commentary and summary on the England v. India test, then music, 15 minutes of athletics, the test match again, semi-final and final single-handed bowls from the National Championship, then the test match once more. During the week, sports talks were also increasingly provided by a varied range of speakers, especially as the BBC began to feature 'personalities' in its coverage.

The early selective middle-class bias in terms of coverage began to soften in the later 1930s. By then a majority of British families had a radio, although significant numbers of poor families were probably still excluded from access to a radio in 1939, even if the unknown number of unlicensed receivers is taken into account, so the BBC was still not available to all. The BBC's own Listener Research Committee, which produced its first report in 1937, soon identified sport as having an impact on viewers (Table 2).

Pegg has argued that radio helped shape Britain's sporting culture by emphasising the 'national' character of particular sports.<sup>29</sup> But this became less true in the later 1930s, when the BBC responded to listener demand by expanding its 'national' coverage to include some 'representative' examples of less participatory sports such as basketball, clay pigeon shooting, cross-country championships, darts, fencing, gliding, pigeon racing, point-to-points, power-boat racing, racquets, real tennis, rifle shooting, speedway, table tennis and snooker. Village cricket was also occasionally covered. Commentary on a village match at Oxney in July 1937, for example, survives amongst other BBC material in the British Library sound archives.<sup>30</sup> Such changes introduced listeners to sports they might never previously considered watching or reading about and further widened the audience. Sports coverage was slowly becoming more crossclass.

But if the BBC partly aided a unified national life, it should also be stressed that regional sports commentary continued to cater for specific regional sporting interests. For example, Manchester, from its first year as the central northern England station in 1929–30, always provided coverage of cricket's Roses matches and rugby league games. Manchester listeners later also heard occasional England National Baseball League games. Regionalism was further fostered through more regional early-evening sports programmes, such as 'Midland Sport' (later 'Midland Sporting Diary') or the 'London Sports Bulletin'. BBC national coverage was, however, very Anglo-centric. The emphasis on 'national' events ensured a majority of outside broadcasts came from London and the South East. By contrast Scotland was poorly catered for on the national wavelength, apart from rugby internationals from Murrayfield, and one of the Highland Gatherings which featured annually as part of athletics coverage. The Scottish FA refused soccer coverage apart from internationals. So it was its own radio coverage which largely defined Scotland, as when its Glasgow station featured shinty in April 1939.

On the other hand, the BBC's national sports bulletins, which were slowly expanded, did foster a national view of what key events defined 'sport'. In 1926 the press concerns still forced news reportage, including sports, to be later than 7 p.m. to allow sales of evening sports papers, but by 1928 the first daily news report, which still had to be based on press agency material sent over by hand, was permitted after 6 p.m. This was initially the only one to include up to five minutes of sports results. In 1933 the Saturday 'newsreel' feature also got a similar bulletin at 9.30 p.m., which occasionally included recorded commentary, to round the programme off. In 1938 a survey was carried out by the BBC's listener Research Section. Fairly representative of the nation in terms of age, sex and location but over-representative of the middle classes, it showed that the BBC's Saturday sports results service, including soccer, then broadcast at 6.15 p.m., was listened to regularly by 58 per cent of

correspondents regularly and 16 per cent occasionally.<sup>31</sup> This facility increasingly required specialist staff. Angus Mackay, formerly been in charge of the sports department of the Scotsman, joined in 1936 as a sports sub-editor. Sporting news became a regular feature, with further 'sports experts' soon added to make the sports service more 'efficient' and 'comprehensive'.<sup>32</sup> By 1939 there were four full-timers, responsible for two daily sports bulletins and a sports talk for the Saturday evening bulletin. But though the Daily Sketch complained that the BBC had 'a director of everything except sport' in 1937, there was still no sports editor at the BBC even in 1939, which suggests that sport was still regarded as of only limited broadcasting importance.<sup>33</sup>

### **The BBC and the Sports Bodies**

The relationship between the BBC and the varied sports bodies sheds further light on the debate over how far the BBC could promote a national sporting culture and demonstrates yet again that this was so only to an extent. The BBC's coverage of sport and its potential tensions were underpinned by class and cultural biases both within the BBC and the different sports bodies and clubs, while the inter-relationships caused clear consequences in terms of the nature and extent of broadcasting coverage, and of listener interest.

The survival of amateurism and emphasis on sportsmanship in much of British sport, and the cultural background shared by BBC officials, commentators and many of the organisational bodies with whom they dealt, meant that the BBC was largely, although not entirely, able to claim entitlement to cover events without payment. Indeed, the BBC and wider public assumed that coverage should be offered freely by sports organisations as the nation's right. As early as 1930 the Times argued that the basic principle was that 'no national event, if it is capable of being broadcast, should be barred to listeners'.<sup>34</sup>

In general the BBC had a strong relationship with Britain's amateur-governed sports, who were largely prepared to privilege BBC coverage, providing facilities free of charge. Other more commercially inclined sporting bodies, however, felt that broadcasting would impact detrimentally on attendance, and sometimes demanded money. This clashed directly with the BBC's 'public-service' broadcasting philosophy.

Coverage of amateur rugby union, which had its power base in the south, dominated early BBC sports broadcasting, and the English Rugby Football Union, consistently anxious to publicly preserve its strongly amateur tradition, was the most receptive to the BBC. Most rugby clubs were little concerned about 'gates' and any anxieties were probably balanced by recognition that coverage helped carry 'the story of the game wider' and collect 'new adherents to click the turnstiles of the future'.<sup>35</sup> So it was no coincidence that the BBC began its outside broadcasting with rugby commentary. At Twickenham, the RFU secretary was keen to increase spectator numbers, and ground capacity was regularly expanded. Broadcasting seemed to encourage attendance there. Twickenham's facilities, and the fact that Oxford v. Cambridge, the Navy v. the Army, and England internationals were all played there, ensured that regular broadcasting was in everybody's interest.

Here, to an extent, broadcasting perhaps reshaped national sporting culture through increased interest in rugby, which proved popular with listeners across Britain, perhaps simply through regular coverage. Broadcasts from Murrayfield coincided with increased crowds. The Welsh RFU proved initially reluctant, and refused broadcasting permission in 1928, but were soon persuaded. Certainly many grammar schools changed from soccer to rugby between the wars. But the argument is true only to an extent. Rugby remained a resolutely middle-class sport in many regions, and there was little or no increase in crowds at club games. Equally, the single annual broadcasting of the Rugby League Challenge Cup Final, a northern phenomenon, initially put out only as a northern regional broadcast, although relayed from Wembley from 1929, was not enough to encourage the southern rugby union-supporting middle classes to visit Wembley in numbers once it was put out nationally from 1935. London rugby league final crowds remained well below those for FA Cup finals.

The extent to which coverage of horseracing promoted a unified national culture is less clear still. Emphasis on social unity came unstuck when it came to betting, a major opposition cutting across communities and families, dividing Britain not by class but by cultural attitudes. Recent research has shown that credit betting and sweeps were both popular with sections of the middle classes, although a vociferous and powerful minority, drawn in part from the more evangelical sections of nonconformity and the Church of England, bitterly opposed betting, stressed its physical, social, moral and economic ill-effects, and supported strong state action against it, thus making it impossible to soften existing legislation.<sup>36</sup> While others occupied a neutral position, nationally betting was only exceeded by cinema-going as the leading leisure spending activity. Gambling as a proportion of total consumer spending rose from 1.3 per cent in 1920 to 5 per cent in 1938. Much of this was gambling on the horses, though greyhound racing and the football pools also took their share.

Reith himself was strongly opposed to all forms of gambling, for which he had strong moral disdain. There was thus never any live commentary on greyhound racing's leading events, even in the late 1930s. Their working-class gambling associations were too strong. Likewise, from the very start of racing broadcasts the BBC avoided any broadcasting of betting news, and made no mention of betting odds, starting prices or bookmakers during commentary, though bookmakers could sometimes be heard in the background. So commentary essentially screened out much that spectators would have seen and heard. The difficulty for many listeners was that the leading broadcast races always attracted huge betting interest, with the Derby, for example, a focus for hugely popular sweepstakes. The winners of the Stock Exchange, Baltic and Calcutta sweepstakes in the 1920s and the Irish Hospital sweepstakes in the 1930s, with their huge prizes, were always publicised in the Times and other leading newspapers, and most pubs and social clubs ran sweeps, despite their technical illegality.<sup>37</sup> So broadcasts without reference to betting was not congenial to punters, even if commentary and scene-setting probably brought racing to new audiences, especially women. And race commentary not only lacked betting information, but also detail. Early broadcasters had to describe the full race from a distant vantage point in the stands, using large binoculars, which made it difficult to commentate. Races were not read in three or four commentary relays until the later 1950s. And print journalists sometimes complained that scenes and incidents were poorly conveyed.<sup>38</sup>

It is also worth noting the extent to which many British owners and racecourse companies were also unhappy at radio coverage. In the USA and Australia there had been a decrease in 'gates' and a drop in totalisator receipts once racing was broadcast, although Australian attempts to stop coverage had been stymied when the ABC commentated from rooms or platforms outside the racecourses.<sup>39</sup> Owner Sir Abe Bailey regularly objected to the broadcasting of running commentaries on races. 'We have', he contended, 'only to wait for the development of television, and there will be no necessity for any one to go to a race meeting'.<sup>40</sup> Within racing's higher circles, the Jockey Club, although an amateur, upper-class body, was unenthusiastic about Newmarket coverage given its fairly small crowds. Eventually the Cesarewitch (1937) and Two Thousand Guineas (1938) were broadcast, but not the Thousand Guineas. Gosforth's directors refused to allow broadcasting of the Northumberland Plate when first approached in 1927. Ascot was not broadcast until 1937.

The argument that the BBC helped to promote a unified national culture is even less supported by football, which despite being the leading winter working-class spectator sport attracted fairly few commentaries in the 1930s. In the 1920s good relationships with the FA allowed broadcasts of FA Cup matches, and some leading League clubs were positive.<sup>41</sup> Including regional broadcasts, over a hundred matches were covered in the period through to 1931, quite substantial coverage. But many football League clubs mirrored press concerns about loss of revenue, and the BBC was not prepared to provide financial compensation. Concerns began early. In March 1927 All Sports Weekly asked 'Shall the football matches be broadcast?', and reported that some clubs already had 'a bitter mind against the proposal'.<sup>42</sup> In May 1928 the members of the Third Division (North) put forward a resolution that the League Management Committee should ban broadcasts and put pressure on the FA to do likewise, claiming commentaries kept people away from other matches in the region, especially lower division games. Such views were paralleled in the USA, where sports promoters equally feared



that radio broadcasting kept paying customers away. The New York Giants, Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers all banned broadcasts between 1934 and 1939.<sup>43</sup>

Thereafter the BBC constantly grappled with club complaints. In March 1931 at an informal meeting at Manchester, Birmingham City and an unnamed London club suggested an anti-broadcasting resolution should be put to the League's AGM. Birmingham subsequently refused to allow their FA Cup match against Chelsea to be broadcast. Other clubs sounded out opinion through press leaks, again arguing that broadcasting supposedly had an adverse effect on the 'gates' of the broadcast match, on other important matches in the neighbourhood and on the 'gates' of smaller 'struggling' clubs. The BBC countered this, arguing that the attack was 'based on a fallacy', and citing carefully selected crowd figures to demonstrate that crowds on the Saturday of 14 February 1931 were higher despite rugby international and soccer Cup commentaries than on February 21st which lacked commentaries. It also cited letters from those who for reasons of health or blindness saw a game through the commentators' eyes.<sup>44</sup> The arguments had little effect and, despite widespread public support for the BBC, League coverage ceased. Arguing from crowd figures in reality proved inconclusive. Those clubs who opposed broadcasting, often less successful ones, could always find examples of diminished gates near a broadcast match. On the other hand, intervening variables such as the intrinsic importance of the game, the proximity of other important games, the local economic situation or weather conditions could all equally affect attendance.

The FA had a less commercial approach, happily allowing coverage of English home internationals. But the FA Cup Final created tensions, given the pressure from League clubs and the substantial fee annually paid by newsreels for 'exclusive' film rights. In April 1929 the FA demanded a fee from the BBC as well. The BBC refused, despite its clear attachment to the Cup Final as one of the most important days in British sport, and instead broadcast eyewitness accounts. Eight different commentators entered the ground with purchased tickets, and then in turn rushed back to a nearby flat to report. Summaries interspersed with music were provided. The BBC later claimed that it was 'entirely successful'.<sup>45</sup> In reality breathless commentators talking without script and with minimal preparation for up to ten minutes proved unsatisfactory. One reporter even wrongly announced that Chelsea, not Portsmouth, had scored. Listener and press response varied. Most welcomed the attempt. But it was also later unkindly described as 'the most humorous item on the BBC programme of 1929'.<sup>46</sup>

In early 1930, following increased representation of professional clubs on its Council, the FA withdrew rights to all cup tie broadcasts without a compensatory fee. The BBC refused to pay but offered a payment to charity. It published the correspondence of its negotiations to demonstrate FA 'intransigence'. Cock argued that the BBC was 'analogous to a newspaper' and press reporters paid no fee. He complained that FA opposition stemmed from the League clubs, 'professionals whose whole interest apparently is commercial'. He appealed to leading FA officials' more amateur, conservative and insular mindset, inferring that the BBC was protecting its audience from 'commercial' exploitation. He claimed that the 'blind, the invalid and the poor' could listen, while broadcasts 'actually increase and spread interest in the sports described'.<sup>47</sup> Much of the resulting BBC post-bag unsurprisingly supported his position. A Times editorial, headlined 'Commercial Football', pointed out that the final was oversubscribed and saw the commentary as for football enthusiasts everywhere, including the 'halt, the maimed and the blind'. It saw the charity offer as 'a fair sporting one' and castigated the FA for showing 'an ungenerous and mercenary spirit, opposed to the interests of sport in general and damaging the reputation of the Council'.<sup>48</sup> Letters to the Times argued that the FA's outlook was over-narrow and out of touch with the majority of football enthusiasts. The FA responded by denying 'allegations' of their commercial and 'professional' approach, demanding a retraction of this, and saying that the only real issue was whether they or the BBC should decide on where the offered money should go. Faced by further adverse publicity the FA sought a get-out. During a speech at the FA Council luncheon two days later the Bishop of Buckingham helpfully described the BBC's attack as 'absolutely unjustifiable', but appealed to the FA to 'nobly and generously give the public what they want—a running commentary'. The following day the secretary of the FA, Sir Frederick Wall, responded by inviting the BBC to broadcast.

However, opposition to commentary amongst professional clubs was still strong. In April 1931 a resolution to the FA Council restricted broadcasting to the final two stages of the FA Cup and to internationals, arguing that broadcasting was not in the best interests of clubs or the game as a whole. A further resolution in June suggested that only the Cup Final should be allowed. Thereafter soccer broadcasts were largely limited to the internationals, the FA Cup Final, Oxford v. Cambridge or the Charity Shield.

The BBC's tacit acceptance of the League's attitude, and reluctance to challenge the FA, reflected a reluctance to get involved in commercial competition. Its approach contrasted strongly with that of the leading British newsreel companies. When access was denied to them they used a variety of strategies, including smuggled cameras and light aeroplanes, to gain coverage.<sup>49</sup> In Australia, where many football and racing companies opposed coverage, commercial radio stations tried to find rooms overlooking grounds. Commentators occasionally even climbed trees. But the FA did allow one innovation to be broadcast which helped consolidate the Cup's appeal. This was the third round draw, live from the FA Council Chamber. The scene was set by a commentator and then 'the proceedings were left to speak for themselves'.<sup>50</sup>

Cricket too proves problematic for arguments about how far BBC sport broadcasts created a national view of sport. Here however, it was the BBC who was reluctant to provide coverage. Between the wars cricket was perceived as the embodiment of Englishness, moral worth and social harmony despite being riddled with privilege and social distinction. Those social groups with economic and political power esteemed it highly. Matches against dominion sides, especially Australia, always attracted widespread cross-class interest.<sup>51</sup> But the BBC appears to have believed that only fastmoving sports made interesting running commentary. Up to 1934 cricket coverage was largely limited to occasional eyewitness accounts. Cricket's slower pace supposedly did not have sufficient domestic appeal. This contrasted with Australia, where there had been ball-by-ball coverage as early as December 1925. Interest in test matches there was huge. Over two million sets were sold in 1930 so Australians could listen to broadcast reports on the first test match of the series in England, many staying up until 3 a.m. The MCC 'bodyline' test tour of Australia in 1932–33 created huge interest amongst Australian listeners to ball-by-ball commentaries. When the Australians toured England again in 1934, the recently formed ABC introduced 'synthetic' coverage from a Sydney studio, using a succession of cablegrams as the basis for imaginative commentary, with sound effects such as crowd noise to complete the illusion, a technique already used by some commercial stations earlier in the 1930s. Test cricket commentaries significantly enlarged Australian radio audiences.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast BBC coverage only slowly increased from 1934, with regular summaries at the start, lunch, the tea interval and close of play, plus brief ball-by-ball commentaries when play got exciting. It was only when the BBC's own Listener Research Committee surveys found that cricket commentaries were popular, that actual commentary expanded in the later 1930s. In 1938 a scorer, Arthur Wrigley, was employed for the first time to assist with background material.

Tennis was largely seen in terms of middle-class Wimbledon, although Davis and Wightman Cup commentaries were added in 1934. The BBC enjoyed a good relationship with Wimbledon's amateur authorities but here there were technical scheduling problems. Times of matches varied with play and weather. The final might be broadcast in full, but other Wimbledon matches sometimes only got final set commentary, breaking into normal programming. Even so, these descriptions were, according to the Daily Telegraph, 'deservedly popular' even in the 1920s.<sup>53</sup> They became increasingly popular thereafter. Here it is undoubtedly true that broadcasting helped extend awareness of the sport, most especially amongst women and the home-based.

But if the BBC was trying to be more inclusive, it should be pointed out that women's sport apart from tennis received far less radio coverage than it did on the various cinema newsreels or in the print media. Commentary on women's hockey, billiards and figure skating only began in 1937, and BBC sport was dominated by male commentators and sportsmen, even if Marjorie Pollard, hockey and

cricket international and journalist, provided commentary on the women's test between England and Australia in 1936. The BBC still reflected a gender divide in society.

## **Audience Response**

How far did radio, with its remote, indirect experience of sport, quite unlike that of direct experience, 'domesticate' sport as a spectacle? It did, but only to an extent. In the 1920s few had a radio, and its novelty and attraction ensured some early listening experiences were communal, since public houses, town halls, clubs and other organisations sometimes broadcast commentary over loudspeakers, to the huge annoyance of the evening press. At Oxford, mass listening in the street was initially 'a regular activity', especially of evening sports results and Saturday sporting events.

There were still 'reasonable' crowds in the street for the Boat Race as late as 1937.<sup>54</sup> When the first rugby commentary was broadcast, Wakelam received a letter from the staff of a south Wales bank, unable to make the journey, saying that they had enjoyed themselves and learnt about the run of play as they gathered round a loudspeaker to 'support the National team'.<sup>55</sup> When Cardiff City reached the FA Cup final in 1927 thousands crammed the city centre to listen on specially erected loudspeakers, and others stood outside wireless shops.<sup>56</sup> Police sometimes had to break up large crowds holding up traffic. In 1929 radio-engineers on board the Flying Scot were able to receive Derby commentary, letting travellers know the result as it happened. But such communal involvement in sport, whilst fairly common in the 1920s, declined with increased set ownership, and listening to sport became a more home and family centred pursuit in the 1930s.

It is clear that radio opened up sport to the house-bound, supporters who could not afford or were otherwise unable to travel to national events and casual listeners. As Scannell and Cardiff have pointed out, radio 'admitted listeners to public events, to their live presence, in a way no previous technology had been able to do'.<sup>57</sup> Letters from the blind and infirm regularly thanked the BBC. A London listener wrote that 'an invalid blind boy whom we visit told us that he was able by listening to the running commentary to get a better idea of the football matches than seeing brothers who went in person'. A Stockport man suffering long-term ill-health wrote that 'to one who has played the game and taken a great interest in sport, you can quite understand the great pleasure your minute description of the games has given to me. May I just mention the Arsenal club and directors to thank them for allowing the broadcasting and I can tell them they have thousands of supporters and well-wishers in the north'.<sup>58</sup> Such letters showed how radio extended the fan base, predating the better-recognised impact of television in eroding local loyalties.

Certainly, by bringing together the classes to listen to commentary, the BBC aided the promotion of social unity rather than rivalry. But such arguments cannot be stretched too far. The BBC coverage of sport by no means fully overcame the persistent class, gender, regional and national differences which characterised inter-war Britain in terms of the nature and extent of sporting preferences.<sup>59</sup> It needs to be remembered that in 1937 London (73% of families), the West (76%) and the Midlands (76%) all had substantially larger proportions of licence payers than northern England (66%), Wales (58%), Scotland (59%) and Northern Ireland (37%).<sup>60</sup> It is also worth emphasising that while surveys and viewers' letters, especially amongst the working classes, were positive about BBC sports coverage, variety and concert parties, light orchestral, military and dance music were all far more popular amongst the DailyMail listeners who voted in a 1927 survey.<sup>61</sup> By 1935–36 Seebohm Rowntree's survey of York found that variety shows and sports, especially racing, were the most popular of the programmes provided by the local Relay Company.<sup>62</sup> Listeners felt they were actually 'at' the event. Some women who had hitherto showed little interest in sport found commentaries interesting, and were 'thrilled' by them, whether or not they fully understood the rules. Listening to broadcasts, like watching sport on the newsreels, generally increased women's interest in sport. Boxing proved popular with women, but only to listen to, not to watch.<sup>63</sup> Middle-class women, who often listened to the radio, could have had their interest in some sports encouraged by radio discussions and commentary. The 1939 Bristol University survey also suggested keen working-class interest in radio

sport, and many 'always listened' to sports they had never actually seen.<sup>64</sup> The BBC's own Listener Research Committee, which produced its first report in 1937, identified sport as having an impact on viewers. A 1938 random sample, for example, included some limited exploration of audience tastes. Correspondents were asked which they 'liked' of 21 categories of programmes, including cricket commentaries (the only sport featured). Variety, theatre and cinema organ, military and dance music were all more popular than cricket, which came exactly midway, chosen by 49 per cent of the sample, liked by about two-thirds of the men but only a third of women. Regional differences were also important. Cricket commentary was much less liked in Scotland and Northern Ireland.<sup>65</sup> A BBC 1939 questionnaire survey showed that the Boat Race, previously of interest mainly to Londoners and ex-university students, was now liked by 70 per cent of the audience panel. 51 per cent liked boxing, and 50 per cent liked cricket and soccer. Lawn tennis and horseracing were only liked by 34 and 33 per cent respectively.<sup>66</sup> Even so the growing popularity of tennis is suggestive of a change of attitude, while all horseracing's leading events took place on weekdays, as did almost all of Wimbledon, so were less likely to have been heard by those in work. In general working-class sample members liked sport more than middle-class ones, especially soccer and boxing. There were regional differences too. The Welsh liked rugby union more than other areas, the North and Midlands liked soccer more than the average, while rugby league also had a hold on the North. The London region liked the boat race and speedway more than the average.

### **The Art of Commentary**

How far did the BBC succeed in being 'inclusive'? Here again, it was only partially, since commentators faced ambiguities and tensions in catering for different types of listener. H. B. Wakelam (an ex-Harlequins wing-forward who had umpired at Wimbledon), who broadcast *inter alia* on rugby, cricket and tennis from 1927 right through to 1939, and wrote widely on broadcasting, felt that while the more experienced wanted the 'finer and more intricate points', others merely wished 'to be entertained'.<sup>67</sup> BBC letters and interviews confirmed this. A woman told one interviewer that 'a fight is more exciting on the wireless than when you are actually there'; a blacksmith 'liked a good fight commentary'; but a Leeds advertising clerk believed that while more boxing match commentaries would please him, 'some of the commentators on the fights you do broadcast are not good enough—not detailed and not technical enough'.<sup>68</sup> Wakelam felt there were key 'techniques'. Firstly, commentary should use the plain, simple, everyday language of conversation. Some new listeners would need clarification and explanation of the game. Being too technical was a serious fault, as only about ten per cent would understand. Secondly, continuity should always be maintained. An early handbook described George Allison, a man whose dimensions extended 'chiefly sideways', at the 1927 Derby, leaning out from the roof and held by a burly BBC staffer. He continued commentating furiously about the reception of the winner while a colleague went to the unsaddling enclosure.<sup>69</sup>

If sports commentaries did unite Britain they did so largely on the BBC's terms, mediated through the subjective discourses of BBC commentators. The latter were largely male sports journalists, former top amateur players and administrators, a fairly homogeneous group, almost all 'gentlemen' in terms of education (generally public school and university), social background and attitudes. Any detailed sporting knowledge was derived from their fairly upper-middle-class backgrounds. So commentary generally put across norms of amateurism and sportsmanship through its subjects, presenters and comments. It reflected the sporting values more of the Daily Mail, Times or Daily Express than the Sporting Life. Harold Abrahams (the former Cambridge student and Olympic medal winner) was one of several successful commentators who survived through the 1930s. Others included Bernard Darwin (former leading amateur golfer), Geoffrey Gilbey (racing journalist), Col. R. H. Brand (a member of the BBC, but a tennis tournament player and umpire) and Lionel Seccombe (an ex-heavyweight boxer and Oxford blue). Thomas Woodroffe, an experienced microphone speaker, and former naval officer, who began commentating on racing, soccer, and very occasionally, cricket in the later 1930s, became famous for supposedly eating his hat after claiming, during the 1938 Cup Final, 'If there's a goal scored now I'll eat my hat'. Women rarely broadcast on sport, although Vera Lennox contributed

to the first ever 1926 Derby broadcast to add fashion colour, and there were similar contributions to some later races, especially once Ascot was covered. But in the 1930s a few female sports experts began to commentate. The former player Mrs Elizabeth Ryan, for example, commentated on a women's singles match at Wimbledon in 1935.

Commentary speech usually adopted 'received pronunciation', subtly reinforcing national norms and emphasising class structure, since such accents were not always popular with working-class listeners, reinforcing what the 1928 BBC Handbook called 'fluency and a good voice'. By 1938 the BBC consensus seemed to be that voices should be 'straightforward, class and accentless', as far as possible, although Wakelam felt that accurate facts, knowledge and coherent, comprehensive speech were far more important than purity of accent and cadence.<sup>70</sup>

A peculiarly British style of commentary also emerged. Unlike American broadcasts, there was rarely exaggeration, over-dramatisation or over-excitement. The predominant style was factual, realistic, unheroic, and less noisy and fast paced than today. Accuracy and sportsmanship was seen as more important than dramatic enhancement. Raymond Glendenning, who commentated on sport from the mid- 1930s, argued that reporters must talk about 300 words a minute, but 'convey only genuine excitement. For this the test is: does the pace and pitch of his delivery match the variation in the background of the roar of the crowd'.<sup>71</sup> A conversational style predominated, although the number of words a minute slowly increased. Right through the inter-war period hesitations were still quite common in commentaries even by 'leading' commentators, and individuals or horses were sometimes clearly confused and wrongly identified. Many mistakes were made, especially in fast-paced sports. Commentators generally praised play, and critical analysis was brief, found during summing up or half-time comments. Terse, literal descriptions as a game unfolded, delivered with an emphasis on fairness and good sportsmanship, were common features. Many commentators moved soberly between literal reporting and a momentary and hardly perceptible excitement, and cricket commentaries still had a somewhat cold-blooded neutrality in the late 1930s.

Nevertheless, commentators did sometimes sound excited. During one early commentary on the Grand National, the commentator reportedly had backed a strongly fancied runner, and as his horse entered the straight he shouted it home for all his worth. Listening millions heard only the commentator's frantic and repeated cries of 'Come on my beauty!' in the final seconds.<sup>72</sup> Harold Abrahams was so excited when his friend Jack Lovelock was winning the 1500 yards at the Berlin Olympics, that he forgot the microphone and shouted exhortations to 'Come on Jack', and 'My God, he's done it. . . .Hooray!' There were letters of abuse to the BBC, but many letters of appreciation too.<sup>73</sup> George Allison, the football commentator, succeeded in balancing reporting with unbridled enthusiasm, even if occasional cries from the heart alerted listeners to the side he was on.<sup>74</sup> Allison regularly reflected on his commentaries and felt he tried to keep 'a steely grip on his enthusiasm', while conveying excitement through his voice, in 'a way which conveys to the listener a mental photograph of what is taking place'.<sup>75</sup> But his commentaries were occasionally sprinkled with exhortations to players to shoot, pass or tackle, and cries of excitement, such as 'By Jove'. He occasionally drank port, to soothe his throat during commentary, and later even admitted that he sometimes invented action to keep the listener interested during boring games.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

There is little debate about the fact that radio helped a handful of major sporting events to join the list of approved patriotic moments singled out as worthy of national broadcasting, creating an annual calendar of leading events for listeners to anticipate.<sup>77</sup> Many were keen to hear these, and listening conveyed a sense of immediacy, excitement and vicarious participation in what were powerfully symbolic spectacles, at some of which the royal family attended. Such events already generated widespread public interest even before the advent of radio, and the major example of an event boosted nationally by radio was the Boat Race, formerly most popular in London and the university towns. It

became more widely popular as a spring listening occasion. Jennings and Gill quoted one informant as saying, 'We never used to hear anything about that, and now there's many wouldn't miss it'.<sup>78</sup>

Did broadcasting generate wider interest and attendance in sport, as some have claimed?<sup>79</sup> Certainly at least one sports historian has suggested that football and horseracing achieved 'enormous popularity between the wars, due in part to their promotion through the sporting press and increasingly through the medium of radio'.<sup>80</sup> There is little evidential support for such a position. Football received quite limited BBC coverage in the 1930s, and demands for FA Cup Final tickets were regularly substantially oversubscribed well before its first broadcast. In general, variations in football attendance merely mirrored teams' playing success and local economic conditions. Crowds at race-meetings in the 1930s were generally less, not more, than in the early 1920s. Any changes in attendance largely mirrored the national economy, not radio coverage.<sup>81</sup> Equally there was no firm evidence that broadcasting negatively affected attendance at sporting events elsewhere, while broadcasting the Rugby League Cup Final did not fill Wembley. In general, working-class support for horseracing in the summer and football in the winter was not adversely affected by BBC coverage of a wider range of Saturday sports, while betting on horseracing, the football pools and greyhounds significantly increased despite the BBC's aversion to betting information.

What does sports coverage say about the emergence of a common culture, or a middle-brow culture more generally, which D. L. LeMahieu has detected in several cultural institutions, including the BBC? While Ross McKibbin has argued that there was 'no common culture, but rather a series of overlapping cultures', McKibbin accepts LeMahieu's point in so far as if there was a democratic culture between the wars, it was the culture of the new middle class of London, its suburbs and their equivalents elsewhere.<sup>82</sup> The British as a whole, and particularly the middle classes, were regularly represented in contemporary discourse as an exceptionally sports-loving people. The breadth of BBC coverage in the 1930s reflects this. Outright condemnations of sport surfaced rarely, even amongst those writers, artists and intellectuals who loathed sport, although absence of Listener comment is almost certainly significant, and there was a more generalised, and somewhat ambiguous, intellectual contempt from F. R. Leavis and others for many of the new patterns of leisure consumption.<sup>83</sup> Sport was certainly not 'high-brow'. But given sport's popularity, it could be argued that BBC radio, a major cultural force, pursued British middle-brow culture and taste in difficult times by largely transmitting a middle-class vision of British sport, a vision which also shaped BBC commentaries. The most popular working-class spectator sports, league football and greyhound racing, were not covered in the 1930s, and betting was ignored. At the same time however, BBC broadcasts provided a hybrid discourse, catering for provincial as well as metropolitan listeners and so regularly covering some more working-class regional as well as 'national' sports events, although the nature of 'national' sports coverage, despite forays into home nation soccer and rugby internationals, largely remained resolutely Anglo- centred and indeed metropolitan-centred. Such potentially divisive strands might be seen as threatening middle-brow culture.

Finally, it is worth reminding ourselves of Alison Light's influential argument that national identity became more feminised and domesticated from the 1920s.<sup>84</sup> Did BBC sports coverage further this? If so it can only have been to a very limited extent. National sporting events remained hugely popular with spectators. Certainly people listened to Saturday sport more at home than communally by the 1930s, but the BBC broadcasts do not seem to have kept male spectators at home. Surveys suggest some increased interest from women listeners, but they largely listened to accounts of men playing. Sport remained firmly associated with masculinity between the wars.

## Notes

- [1] Oriard, *King Football*, 39–49. McCoy, 'Radio Sports Broadcasting in the United States, Britain and Australia', 20.
- [2] *The Wireless Age*, July 1921, 10; *The Wireless Age*, August 1921, 11–21 has a full account.
- [3] Hilliard and Keith, *The Broadcast Century*, 26; Sies, *Encyclopaedia of American Radio*, 531–2. See also Holmes, *Only Connect*; Sterling and Kitross, *Stay Tuned*; Smith, *Voices of the Game*; Smith, *Voices of Summer*. Halberstam, *Sports on New York Radio*.
- [4] McCoy, 'Radio sports broadcasting', 22.
- [5] Pine, *2RN and the Origins of Irish Radio*.
- [6] Hayes, 'There's many a slip', 143–156. For the links between Irish radio and sport see Boyle 'From our Gaelic fields' 623–636.
- [7] Nicholas, 'The People's Radio'; Huggins and Williams, *Sport and the English 1918–1939*, 24–41.
- [8] Scannell and Cardiff, *Serving the Nation*; McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*. Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture* relies largely on secondary sources for radio sport.
- [9] Briggs, *History of Broadcasting*, Vol. 2, 119; Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society 1918–1939*.
- [10] Scannell and Cardiff, *Serving the Nation*, 278.
- [11] Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society 1918–1939*, 214.
- [12] See Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 8.
- [13] Sir F Sykes (chair), *Report of the Broadcasting Committee*, Command Paper 1951 (London: HMSO, 1923). See Nicholas, 'All the News that Fit to Broadcast'.
- [14] Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, Vol. 1, .264.
- [15] Glendenning, 'Race broadcasting', 225.
- [16] Fyfe, 'The Way they Have in America II: Broadcasting Football', *Radio Times*, 7 January 1927.
- [17] Quoted in Scannell and Cardiff, 'Serving the nation', 180–81.
- [18] Wakelam, *Half Time*, 187.
- [19] Cardiff, 'Time, money and culture', 373–393.
- [20] *The Birmingham Weekly Post*, 29 January 1927 summarised the 'general opinion' as 'extremely favourable'. For listeners' letters see *Radio Times*, 28 January 1927.
- [21] *Times*, 17 January 1927.
- [22] Field, 20 January 1927.
- [23] *Radio Times*, 8 April 1927.
- [24] Good, *Good Days*, 176–183 describes his commentary.
- [25] *Times*, 4 April 1927.
- [26] *Radio Times*, 15 April 1927
- [27] Scannell and Cardiff, *Serving the Nation*, 277.
- [28] *Manchester Guardian*, 27 June 1932.
- [29] Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society 1918–1939*, 214.
- [30] 'Oxney match', T8529WR R C9, British Library sound Archive.
- [31] Quoted in Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society*, 138.
- [32] Briggs, *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, Vol. 2, 158. Mackay and Andrews, eds, *Sports Report Number 2*.
- [33] *Daily Sketch*, 25 January 1937.
- [34] *The Times*, 28 April 1930.
- [35] Wakelam's view in *Rugby Football*, 212.
- [36] Huggins, *Horseracing and the British 1919–1939*, 69–125 provides the most recent and detailed treatment of racehorse betting during this period. Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter* has useful chapters on the pools and greyhound racing.
- [37] Huggins, *Horseracing and the British*, 89–93.
- [38] E.G. Galtrey, *Memoirs of a Racing Journalist*, 296.
- [39] *The Times*, 24 April 1929.
- [40] *Bloodstock Breeders Review*, Vol. 24 (1937), 272.
- [41] See Fishwick, *English Football and Society 1910–1950*, Chapter 5 for detailed discussion.
- [42] *All Sports Weekly*, 26 March 1927.
- [43] McCoy, 'Radio sports broadcasting', 23.

- [44] Radio Times, 17 April 1931.
- [45] BBC Yearbook, 1930, 143.
- [46] Wakelam, *Half Time*, 236.
- [47] Radio Times, 28 March 1930.
- [48] The Times, 2 April 1930.
- [49] See Huggins, 'Projecting the visual'.
- [50] BBC Annual 1936, 57.
- [51] Williams, *Cricket and the English*.
- [52] Sissons and Stoddart, *Cricket and Empire*, 114. Cassman, *Ave A Go Yer Mug*, provides a useful analysis of the relationship between crowds and radio. During the 1932/33 bodyline tour two Parisian stations broadcast a synthetic commentary on the tests to British listeners, one using former player Alan Fairfax as commentator, but reception in Britain was often poor.
- [53] Daily Telegraph, 25 June 1928.
- [54] Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society*, 175.
- [55] Wakelam, ed., *The Game Goes On*, 174.
- [56] South Wales Echo, 25 April 1927, quoted in Martin Johnes, *Soccer and Society: South Wales, 1900–1936*, 163.
- [57] Scanell and Cardiff, *Serving the Nation*, 278.
- [58] Radio Times, 17 April 1931.
- [59] See Huggins and Williams, *Sport and the English*.
- [60] BBC Handbook, 1938, 49. But not everybody bought a licence, and in Northern Ireland some Catholics refused to pay.
- [61] Quoted in Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society*, 108.
- [62] Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress*, 409–10.
- [63] Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, 129–31.
- [64] Jennings and Gill, *Broadcasting in Everyday Life*, 33–38.
- [65] Quoted in Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society*, 139.
- [66] Interim report, 16 and 28 April 1939, quoted in Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society*, 128.
- [67] Radio Times, 10 April 1931.
- [68] Radio Times, 24 March 1939.
- [69] The BBC Handbook 1928, 144–5.
- [70] Smithers, *Broadcasting from Within*, 17. Wakelam, *Half Time*, 335.
- [71] Glendenning, 'Race broadcasting', 229.
- [72] Rickman, *Come Racing with Me*, 25.
- [73] Abrahams, 'Athletic roundup 1924–1954', 42.
- [74] Maine, *The BBC and its Audience*, 91.
- [75] Radio Times, 10 April 1931.
- [76] Allison, *Allison Calling*, 37–52.
- [77] See for example, Holt, *Sport and the British*, 311–4.
- [78] Jennings and Gill, *Broadcasting in Everyday Life*, 33.
- [79] Briggs, *Golden Age of Wireless*, 121; Jennings and Gill, *Broadcasting in Everyday Life*, 38; Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society*, 215.
- [80] Wigglesworth, *The Evolution of English Sport*, 40.
- [81] Huggins, *Horseracing and British Society 1919–1939*.
- [82] McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 327. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*. 230–31.
- [83] Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*. See Carey, *The Intellectual and the Masses*.
- [84] Light, *Forever England*.



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**Table 1** Numbers of BBC national commentaries on sport 1930–35

	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Rugby union	6	9	9	7	7	14
Car and motor-cycle races	3	4	5	4	5	12
Tennis	Wimbledon	Wimbledon	Wimbledon	Wimbledon Davis Cup	Wimbledon Davis Cup Wightman Cup	Wimbledon Davis Cup Wightman Cup
Soccer	1	4	3	4	4	6
Racing	4	5	5	5	6	6
Rowing, yachting etc	Boat race Cowes	1	1	1	4	5
Cricket	0 (eyewitness accounts only)	0	0	0	5	5
Boxing	2	1	0	1	3	2
Athletics	1	0	0	0	3	2
Ice hockey	0	0	0	0	0	2
Highland sports	0	0	0	0	1	1
Rifle shooting	1 (Bisley)	0	1	1	1	1
Snooker	0	0	0	0	0	1
Rugby league	0	0	0	0	0	1
Speedway	1	0	1	1	4	0
American football	1	0	0	0	0	0
Water polo	0	1	1	0	0	0

*Source: BBC Handbooks and Annuals.*

**Table 2** Accessibility of radios in Britain 1925–39

Year	Number of licenses	Number of licenses per 100 families
1925	2,178,259	20
1927	2,395,183	23
1929	2,956,736	26
1931	4,330,734	35
1933	5,973,758	48
1935	7,403,106	60
1937	8,479,600	68.5
1939	8,893,582	71

*Source: BBC Annual Report 1938, p. 73. M. Pegg, Broadcasting and Society 1918–1939 (1983), p. 7.*