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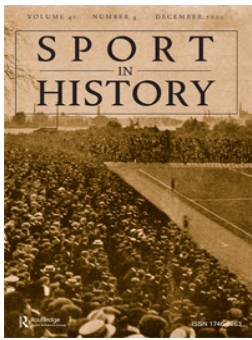
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Forms of competition in proto-modern eighteenth-century English sport: a tentative typology

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on sporting competition during the eighteenth century has been lacking, and its socio-cultural context is not yet widely understood. This paper moves consideration of sporting competition back to this important period of sporting 'proto-modernity'. It begins by setting it clearly in its cultural context, showing how while eighteenth-century English sporting culture gained increased elements of commonality, it was always differentiated by local, regional and sport-specific variations. It was increasingly commercialised, and linked to increased associativity and the popularity of wagering. The paper then attempts to build a tentative typology of the various forms of sporting competition then emerging, such as matches between two individuals, animals or groups; competitions where several individuals competed alongside each other to get a winner; elimination, knockout, or sudden death competitions; practice matches, unofficial competitions in which the aim was to prepare for future matches; the importance of challenges; the growing popularity of championships; and other aspects of competition. Finally, it provides a sense of the key changes and continuities in pre-and post-eighteenth-century competition to allow a sense of comparison.

This essay examines competition forms in England in the eighteenth century, offering a deliberate narrowing of perspective upon a period for which research has made it increasingly clear that many of the sporting transformations that took place were very important, if not indeed critical, for sport. So, whilst recognising the wider contexts of physical education, human movement, and games, and interpenetration of their boundaries, they are not considered here.

The period has been deliberately selected because the changes experienced over the longer eighteenth century created a phase of what has been called 'proto-modern sport', creating the competitive conditions which allowed

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what would later come to be viewed as ‘modern’ sport to develop.¹ Even accepting that the term ‘modern’ is itself a contested term, the eighteenth-century sporting world could still not yet be viewed as one of ‘modern sport’ in terms of the conceptual frameworks provided by Allen Guttmann, Henning Eichberg, Sebastian Darbon and others.² It was a period of major social and economic and social changes. Yet as Rebekka von Mallinckdrodt and Angela Schattner have pointed out,

although in the past decades a number of significant works have been published on the cultural history of sport, they have tended to concentrate on developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The early modern period, if included at all, has often received only marginal attention.³

This has been surprising. At that time sports were coming increasingly commercialised, part of a new eighteenth-century leisure world analysed and described by J.H. Plumb and others in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴ The population of England doubled between 1700 and 1800, and a new leisure class of titled, gentry and upper-middling groups emerged. The London and provincial newspapers grew in number, with increased coverage of elite and middling sport just one of their innovatory features. Toll roads now allowed more rapid transport, boosting towns and trade, and widening the spectator hinterland for sporting events.

Historians increasingly accept that modern sporting competition emerged from developments in the early modern era, rather than from industrialisation.⁵ There is still however, a significant debate over just why sport assumed a greater salience during the eighteenth century. Stefan Szymanski has argued that the fundamental unit of modern sport was the club, and that these associations developed autonomously in Britain during the eighteenth century, along with other institutions such coffee houses and the press, following the retreat of the state from the control of associative activities, creating a new and different public sphere. For Szymanski, informal associativity and sports club development together drove the rise of sport.⁶ More recently Mike Huggins has suggested that it was the widespread social popularity of wagering on sport from early in the century that generated media coverage, spectator interest and ever-increasing numbers of commercial sporting events. Wagers demanded tighter sporting regulations to avoid disputes. He pointed out that while informal association has always been a feature of sport, formal sports clubs and societies appeared only rarely before the 1760s though thereafter they began to grow in number.⁷

Members of embryonic sports organisations, such as hunt, racing or angling clubs, could meet together in non-competitive convivial shared enjoyment but wagering *needed* winners and losers, and an increased emphasis on competition was closely associated with the growing popularity of gambling on sport. In 2010 Alan Tomlinson defined ‘competition’ as most

usually 'a contest in which on the basis of shared understandings and procedures, a winner emerges', although it can also be simply an activity in which an individual seeks to establish a position of recognised superiority over others.⁸ Competition has always been one of sport's defining characteristics, giving eagerness for victory to participants and providing powerful meanings to spectators. Some competition has always been quite informal, giving the individual the satisfaction of demonstrating prowess/superiority in activities such as hunting, shooting or fishing. More recently Loy and Morford have seen sporting competitions as 'characterized by two or more sides, having agreed-upon-rules, criteria for determining the winner, with a zero-sum outcome wherein the winner(s) takes all'.⁹ Certainly, human fascination with 'competition' and 'contests' can be found from ancient times to the present. Such contests, as Johann Huizinga pointed out, are one of two principle resources for play, and this has ensured that competitive sport has always been culturally significant.¹⁰

The vast bulk of published scholarship has concentrated upon the different types of competition either in so-called 'modernity', most especially in the twentieth century, or on the medieval period. Recent revived interest in the medieval tournaments, for example, with their one-on-one jousts between individuals, their melees with two opposing teams, and practice activities like the quintain and running the ring, shows they too had their rules, and their organisational and competitive structures.¹¹

By contrast scholarship on sporting competition during the eighteenth century has been lacking, due to insufficient research or understanding of the socio-cultural context. This paper moves consideration of sporting competition back to this important period of sporting 'proto-modernity'. It begins with an exploration of competition's cultural context, and sport's nature and its extent. It then attempts to build a tentative typology of the various forms of sporting competition then emerging. Finally, it attempts to convey a sense of the key changes and continuities in pre-and post-eighteenth-century competition to allow a sense of comparison.

Sport in its cultural context

Until comparatively recently the limited research on eighteenth-century sport focussed largely on popular/plebeian/working-class sporting life. Richard Holt summed this up as 'old ways of playing'.¹² Another term used was 'traditional'. Both terms implied relatively little change over time. Adrian Harvey saw the beginnings of a commercial sporting culture taking place only from the end of the century.¹³ Yet while eighteenth-century English sporting culture gained increased elements of commonality, it was always differentiated by local, regional and sport-specific variations. Sporting activities could have bursts of popularity, thanks to changes in fashion, but

could equally be affected by the deaths or financial problems of patrons, enclosure, or local economic changes.¹⁴ There were regional differences. Different forms of wrestling could be found in Cumbria and Cornwall.¹⁵ Early cricket had relatively greater success in southern England, especially in the counties of Kent, Sussex and Surrey, around the Downs and the Weald.¹⁶ The degree of male and female participation, or status and social class as in sports like fox-hunting, all impacted on sport. The rise and fall of particular sports could also sometimes be related to changes in social attitudes, particularly so later in the century, as in discussions by reformers, Puritans and the more respectable about 'cruel' or 'brutal' sports, most especially where plebeians were involved, as in the case of cockfighting. Amongst the elite and middling groups mere fashion could play a part. Archery, for example, was popular in the 1660s, and then declined, with a few rural societies appearing only briefly, but then revived in the 1770s.¹⁷

It was also a period when hard and fast distinctions between rural, urban and peripheral urban spaces in terms of sports' use were often difficult. Clearly hunting, whether for hare, deer or fox, was a rural sport. But in many other sports there were overlaps. Horse races attracted rural spectators, the landowning aristocracy and gentry, farmers and countrymen, and race-grounds could be some miles outside a town. But it was townsfolk who formed part of race committees, and councillors, innkeepers and traders who contributed to race funds in order to gain financial benefit.¹⁸ Cricket grounds, such as White Conduit Fields in London could certainly be found in towns, but many were outside. The Hambledon cricket team, famous for their exploits in the 1770s, for example, played first on windswept Broadhalfpenny Down and then at Windmill Down nearer the village.¹⁹ Pugilism gained much of its support from urban spectators, but because fights could be stopped by local magistrates who saw fights as a threat to public order, many fights took place in the country to avoid interference and potential prosecution.²⁰ Pedestrian contests often took place on unenclosed open ground or on roads.

Historiographically, ideas about early-modern sport, leisure and culture are in process of revision. Many sports were in process of transition, no longer fairly disorganised early modern practices, but increasing well-regulated and organised. Sport in the eighteenth century still only had *some* features of the modern: largely secular, it had strong and widespread specialisation and professionalism, substantial commercial features, much publicly-available media information, widespread availability of rules, but limited bureaucracy and little quantification.²¹ Sports such as cockfighting, archery, bowling, horse-racing and sword-play were already attracting interest and gambling money amongst the elite in the early 1600s. Following the Puritan constraints of the Commonwealth and the accession of Charles II, while some of these older recreations revived, new sporting

play forms became popular, although many events still took place only rarely. As late as the 1790s almost all towns had only a single 'race week', cricket teams played few actual matches annually, and only the top boxers or wrestlers could afford to take much time off work for the chance of prize money.

The period saw sport becoming more increasingly a business, a spectacle and a performance, with growing numbers of spectators, increased numbers of sportsmen earning money, and profit-seeking promoters such as publicans who promoted facilities such as bowling greens or cricket grounds through the press.²² Thomas Higginson, for example, maintained tennis and fives courts in London from 1742 to the 1760s.²³ Over the course of the eighteenth century, more proto-modern sporting forms slowly began to emerge.²⁴ To take athletics as an example, track-based foot races grew in popularity from the late 1700s onwards, initially often run on public roads or racecourses and modelled on horse-racing, since town elites increasingly suppressed town street sporting activities in their quest for urban improvement, and urban spatial politics were often crucial. Though specialisation of land use for sport was rare at this time, and unenclosed areas of land were often exploited for a wide variety of sports, there were also early enclosed footrace venues, such Belsize House, already in use in the late 1600s, or Finsbury from the 1740s.

While some sports became more 'modern' some older activities such as cock-throwing or bullbaiting declined in importance. Some academics have emphasised growing elite active opposition to popular recreations and sports in the late eighteenth century.²⁵ However, though bull-baiting, for example, was in decline, this may not have been because of active opposition. Emma Griffin has suggested that actual attacks have been exaggerated and that in most places bull-baiting simply disappeared without fuss, while there was significantly more elite indulgence towards sports than has been recognised, with limited opposition largely on religious or political lines.²⁶ Pugilism was only semi-legal. While still supported by the elite 'Fancy', many magistrates attempted to stop contests. Writers could still be found defending cock-fighting, bull-baiting, or pugilism for 'their display of courage, vigour and address', especially where 'contestants were equally matched', contending for 'life and honour', and displaying 'intrepidity, firmness, gallantry, activity, strength and presence of mind.'²⁷ Boxers were praised for their rare combination of 'wind' (endurance), 'bottom' (courage), and 'science' (technique).²⁸

Newspapers reported sporting events regularly and by the 1770s 'Sporting' or 'Sporting Intelligence' sections appeared regularly in some metropolitan and provincial newspapers. The period was one when the vast bulk of newspaper-reported competition in a number of key sports, including horse-racing, cricket, cockfighting and pugilism, was financially oriented, dominated by money prizes, stakes and wagers or valuable non-money prizes.

In horse racing, prizes such as valuable cups and plates were common. In one cockfight at Whymondham, Norfolk, in 1803 the prize was a £40 bullock.²⁹ As cricket clubs began to form, their matches were normally played for stakes, and it is difficult to find examples of clubs forming, as one did in the 1750s, seeking members 'desirous of playing for diversion only'.³⁰ Between 1770 and 1789 the Hambledon cricket club played for stakes of over £40,000, and won £28,000.³¹ Though there must always have been a wish to take part for straightforward pleasure, the media focus of the period was always more upon serious sporting competition.

The term 'fair play' probably first emerged in the context of medieval tournament competition.³² But by the 1700s notions of 'fairness' and 'fair play' were linked to gambling and to 'gamesters', ensuring that the formal 'articles of agreement' were carefully agreed between participants, and that the specific rules of that contest were then followed, and bets could be paid. Later nineteenth-century middle-class notions of amateur 'fair play', where participants engaged largely or entirely without remuneration, complied with the rules, and valued fairness, chivalry and honour in competition above victory or gain, featured relatively rarely. Many reported contests took place for competitive wagers put up by participants or their backers. The more cunning, adroit and knowledgeable often tried to manipulate the betting market in any way they could within and beyond the rules, and exploit the naïve. Sometimes these wagers were 'play or pay' contests where if one contestant failed to participate, for whatever reason, the entire wager was still payable. This could open up various further market manipulations. At other times, as quite often in the 'match' horse-races at Newmarket and elsewhere, a 'forfeit', an agreed proportion of the wager, was paid instead.³³ In 1731 some thousands of people attended Ealing Common to see a bowling match at ninepins, for a wager of £40, between a Hampshire 'gamester' and Brentford victualler. But the Hampshire man then declined the match and paid a forfeit of £10.

Substantial betting around sports such as boxing, horse racing and cricket generated much interest. The Duke of Cumberland lost £10,000 backing Broughton in 1750. After a pugilistic fight between Johnson and Perrins, for the Championship of England at Banbury in 1789, one major backer reportedly won £20,000 in wagers on Johnson, who had 'high odds' against him initially, and gave £1,000 to Johnson.³⁴

Then as now, many competitions had restrictions. Numbers of sports clubs, generally fairly select in terms of membership, were still limited at this period. Sometimes there were competitions confined to club members, as in archery, especially after elite women took up the sport.³⁵ In Scotland the gentlemen of the Society of Golfers had begun playing annually for a silver golf club given by Edinburgh magistrates by 1745.³⁶ Cricket teams however were not always entirely composed of locals or club members,

but might be allowed 'given men' in order to match up the sides. In 1785, for example in a match between Farnham and Petworth, six Hambledon players were used as 'given men', and in a 1788 match between Kent and Surrey for a thousand guineas, the famous bowler Harris was 'given to Surrey'.³⁷

In horse racing, some races were restricted to 'gentlemen' riders, although such definitions could sometimes prove problematic. Sir Harry Featherstonhaugh entertained the Prince of Wales and his associates at his Up-park seat in Hampshire during August in the later 1780s, and arranged entertainments and races in which only they and their horses competed. Many race-meetings had races for hunting horses, where the owners had to provide evidence of them having hunted the previous season. Racing clubs like the Bibury and the Jockey Club, and hunt clubs such as Tarporley, had some races where only members' horses could compete. Some races were restricted in other ways, perhaps to horses owned by yeomen, to Scottish horses, to horses bred in a particular region, or to those residing in a particular area.³⁸ Hare-coursing organisations, such as the Swaffham Coursing Society, began having cup contests for dogs belonging to members late in the century: Swaffham and Ashdown Park both in 1792 and Malton in 1797.³⁹

Reporting of sport during the eighteenth century, judging by a search of the on-line files of the *Kentish Gazette*, *Manchester Mercury* and *Chester Chronicle*, rarely employed the word 'competition'.⁴⁰ Such activities were talked of more as 'recreation', 'diversion', 'disport', 'pleasure', 'amusement', 'entertainment', 'exercise', or 'refreshment', and their meanings depended on the context, individuals, and groups concerned. Yet competition lay at sports' heart, which leads to the question – what sorts of competitions could be found during this period?

Matches between two individuals, animals or groups

In modern times the term 'match' has been used most commonly for any single contest in which people or teams competed against each other in a particular sport. In 1667 Samuel Pepys already used the word at least partially in this way in reporting a 'match at tennis' organised by Prince Rupert.⁴¹ In the early eighteenth century the word encompassed more complex meanings, especially once wagering and commercial sport grew in popularity. The most popular dictionary of the eighteenth century, Nathan Bailey's *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, first published in London in 1721, variously defined the word as meaning 'a trial of skill', 'an agreement or contract', 'an equal', or 'to pair or couple', whilst amongst cockfighters it meant to see 'that they be of an equal height, weight and bigness in body'. By then the word was also in common use in horse racing, where writers talked about a horse being 'matched', 'running his match' and the 'match day'.⁴² A 'match'

thus involved only two animals, individuals or teams. When wagering or betting on such contests, there was most interest amongst spectators when the outcome was uncertain and where both contestants believed they had a chance of winning, so in such 'matches' there was a need to create some sense of equality, and the establishment of some kind of verbal or formal written contract, sometimes described as 'articles' of agreement, to set the conditions. By 1735, when Dyche and Parson's *New General English Dictionary* was published, a 'match' was defined as 'a bout of cockfighting' but also offered another definition: 'the making an agreement to fight or play at any exercise is called a match'.⁴³

In the first decades of the 1700s the language of matching was found most frequently focused on the sports of cockfighting and horse racing. A study of sporting press advertisements suggests that cockfights were the most commonly matched contests. A Newcastle advertisement in 1712 stipulated: 'the Cocks to be equally matched for the first battles, and the winning cocks to be matched over again as equally as can be for the second battles.' To avoid disputes, after the initial matching, the name of each cock's owner would be written on a piece of paper, and these were put in a hat, shaken and drawn by a person not concerned, and as they were drawn, to fight.⁴⁴ Phrases such as 'a match of cocks' or (more commonly) 'a cock match' to 'be fought' or 'after the cocks are matched' were commonplace throughout the period. Matching in terms of height, weight or size was relatively easy to agree. By the 1740s there were nineteen rules covering cock fighting, although nine of these regulated the betting.⁴⁵

Matching between two racehorses, however, was primarily a matter of the two owners agreeing a match and the stake, and such races were popular with high-staking owners, most especially at Newmarket. Press lists of the 'matches run' there were relatively frequent even in the 1710s and 1720s.⁴⁶ When Cheny's *A Historical List of all Horse Matches Run, and of all Plates and Prizes run for in England and Wales in 1728* was published in 1729, its title was a clear indication of match-racing's importance, and in 1728 over 70 per cent of races run at Newmarket were matches, for stakes of up to five hundred guineas.⁴⁷ Even in 1771 58 per cent of races there were matches, for an average stake of £306. At race-meetings elsewhere match-racing was comparatively rare throughout the century, often about 6 per cent of the total.⁴⁸

Competitive matched hare coursing between two greyhounds was another largely elite and middling-group activity. It had rules, 'The Laws of the Leash', drawn up by Thomas, Duke of Norfolk, sometime between 1558 and 1569.⁴⁹ As more organised greyhound hare coursing emerged with the establishment of coursing clubs with their elite and middling membership at the end of the eighteenth century, matches for stakes became more common, usually the best of three courses, often attracting significant

betting and crowds. There were other 'matches' involving the wealthy in other forms of sport. In 1751, for example there was a rowing match on the Thames from Westminster Bridge to Mortlake, between the 'gentlemen of the Lac'd Hat boat' and 'the Quakers' for a hundred guineas.⁵⁰

Even early in the eighteenth century reported 'matches' also took place between teams, most commonly in cricket or various forms of football. Such matches usually began by one party inviting the other to a match, and suggesting stakes and conditions, and these would subsequently be negotiated until there was joint agreement. Football games during this period, as Robert Malcolmson explained, had many different 'special customs and local arrangements' in different villages, but the term 'football match' was often used in newspaper reports and diaries.⁵¹ A reported crowd of 6000 watched a 'football match' at Newmarket in 1751.⁵² A football 'challenge match' took place at Bedford in 1726 between Rance and Great Harwood, which had 'challenged the whole kingdom to match them', with equal numbers on each side.⁵³ Cricket 'matches' involving the elite, the largely genteel games in the south-east of England, were already being regularly reported by the 1720s, often involving teams associated with the Duke of Richmond, or Mr Steed.⁵⁴ There were undoubtedly many village-based matches too. John Tolland, for example, in 1726, talked of his going to 'some cricket match or other prizes of contending villagers.'⁵⁵ Numbers of cricket matches rose across the century and there were occasionally other team contests such as the 1765 cudgelling match between nine Wandsworth men and nine 'London men'. Their occupations included a dyer, sugar-cooper, a carpenter, a maltster, a gardener, and a farmer's labourer. The same week saw a cricket match at Upham, Hants, between eleven married and eleven maiden women, for a large plum cake, a barrel of ale, and some refreshing tea.⁵⁶

Matches involving such fighting activities, including wrestling, cudgelling, backsword or singlestick were less often reported, since largely participated in by these without status and significant wealth. Cudgelling and singlestick contests retained popularity in the Wessex area across the century. These could be violent, since blood had to flow an inch to win, and risked severe injury. A 'match at cudgels' between a farmer's son and a 'poor labourer' for a piece of gold, ended in such a violent head blow that the labourer died on the spot. The jury passed a verdict of 'accidental death'.⁵⁷ The money at stake and a wider reputation was often the reason for coverage, so an advertisement placed by the landlord of a public house at Bury St Edmund's in 1746 puffed up a 'wrestling match' for twenty guineas between the supposedly 'famous Daniel Pryor of Hargrave, and the noted James Burgiss of Mildenhalls'.⁵⁸ Pugilism increasingly got greater coverage, and by the 1720s and 1730s there were 'boxing matches' in a number of London locations: the Bear Gardens, Figg's Amphitheatre, the Pest Fields,

Tottenham fair booths. As it became more systematized, with more agreed rules, and was encouraged by some members of the social elite, it gave leading fighters better financial opportunities. By the 1740s the leading contestants in the matches at London, first at George Taylor's Great Booth in Tottenham Court and then at Broughton's Amphitheatre in Oxford Road the latter built in part by subscription in 1742, at a cost of £400, normally gained a substantial proportion of the entrance money, mostly with two-thirds going to the winner although sometimes it was shared.⁵⁹

Competitions where several individuals competed alongside each other to get a winner

Horse races where several horses competed together had a long history, and in the eighteenth century already took a variety of forms: heat races or single races; over a range of distances; and under a number of possible rules, including those of the King's or Queen's plates, Newmarket race articles, 'give and take' plates, which handicapped horses according to their height, 'weight for age' races where older horses carried more weight, or those of 'selling races' or handicaps based on horses' earlier performances.⁶⁰ Such races were most popular where more entries were attracted (as in sweepstake races like the St Leger or Derby), where prizes were larger, and where better betting odds could be found before form was known.

There were similar races in other forms of sport, from pedestrianism to rowing. Rowing wagers were already emerging by the early 1700s. In 1715 Thomas Doggett, the joint manager of Drury Lane theatre, set up a legacy for a race in perpetuity to encourage and reward up to six young watermen, to be held annually on August 1 for a traditional red waterman's coat. Doggett was a Whig, and deliberately chose the date as a political signifier of George 1's accession to the throne, furnishing the coat with a silver badge 'representing Liberty'. By the 1780s it was a popular annual event for spectators on the Thames.⁶¹ Rowing contests were often sponsored by the wealthy, though rowers were usually watermen. The Prince of Wales, for example, sponsored a cup at Greenwich in 1749, for which twelve boats competed, some built specially for the purpose.⁶² Most races were for men, though occasional women's events were publicised. There were women's rowing races off the coast of Teignmouth, Devon in August 1773 and a rowing match between six women, from London Bridge to Chelsea in 1778 for similar prizes to Doggett's race, with runners-up prizes of £5 and £3.⁶³

Pedestrian matches were also common amongst both men and women. Von Mallinckrodt argues that the more commercial innkeeper-organised men's races were better reported by newspapers, allowing readers to place bets in advance, while results gave information on form they could win

but in terms of mere mentions at local level women and girls were even more likely to compete with each other than were local boys and men⁶⁴ and Peter Radford has likewise suggested that footraces between women at fairs and festivals were ‘a popular and widespread practice’.⁶⁵

Most common in London, media coverage was often sensational and erotic, especially when more female flesh was on display for voyeuristic spectators. They were sometimes described as ‘smock races’, since prizes for the winner of these half-mile to four-mile runs often included a garment and/or money. During August 1735 for example, one Thursday evening ‘six Women ran, not incommoded with clothes or modesty three times round the upper quarter of Moorfields, for a Holland shift and half a guinea, and gave abundance of sport to a numerous company of curious spectators.’ Two weeks later two ‘naked women’ raced in Stepney Fields ‘for a Guinea, a Holland Shift, an Apron and pair of Stockings, which afforded much diversion to the gentlemen and ladies present’.⁶⁶ There was a long-standing European tradition of carnivalesque racing (where often members of minority or sub-altern groups were obliged to run for the amusement of others), and there were similar races between women and girls in the Holy Roman Empire and elsewhere at festivals and carnivals, where women’s often light attire likewise encouraged male voyeurism.⁶⁷

The equivalent in cockfighting was ‘the battle royal’, in which a number of birds were ‘set’ (i.e. placed in the pit at the same time) and allowed to remain until all but one, the victor, were killed or disabled. Its nature was described in 1761 as the setting down of ‘a dozen or more cocks in the pit, where they maintain a promiscuous random fight, with the utmost fury, amongst each other, till they are all killed but one, who wins the prize’.⁶⁸ This was a comparatively rare form of competition, occasionally found in north-east England, but almost absent from Yorkshire. Even then it was more often only three, five or seven cocks that competed, though numbers briefly increased around mid-century. This was still a period that for much of society, according to Keith Thomas, ‘exploitation [of animals], not stewardship, was the dominant theme’.⁶⁹ But religious revivals, increased education and changes in moral attitudes saw increasing numbers of opponents who attacked such events as the ‘barbarous custom of setting cocks on to fight’ and a ‘cruel’ and ‘barbarous pastime’. ‘Battle royals’ declined rapidly later in the century, partly because it was an expensive and risky type of cockfighting where only the victor survived, and partly because of the changing attitudes to cockfighting itself.⁷⁰

Elimination, knockout, or sudden death competitions

In this form, rather than just a single match for a prize a number of matches took place, with numbers of entries restricted in some way, and then the

winner of each match played another winner in the next round, until the final, when the single winner took the prize. In modernity, events such as the Grand Slam in tennis, or the English Football Association Cup competition followed this model. In the early eighteenth century this type of competition was initially to be found most commonly in innkeeper-organised cock-fighting, in the form of the 'welch' or 'welsh' main, fought over a single day, the most popular form of contest in Northumberland and Durham.⁷¹ Generally, entries were restricted to a manageable number of cocks, most commonly sixteen, though occasionally just eight, or even thirty-two. There were separate contests for 'stags' under one year of age, 'cocks' and 'blinkard' one-eyed veterans, with weights also specified. There was a small entry fee charged for each cock, and consistent rules had already been established. The birds fought in pairs, eliminating the loser, until only one bird was left. At one Newcastle pit, for example, in 1726, the cocks fought 'according to the rule of fighting a welch main'.⁷² Here a plate, worth two guineas, was won by the last surviving cock. Up to the 1840s prizes in north-east England, took various forms, plates, a grey mare, a silver watch, or silver buckles, and were only rarely in money.⁷³

By the mid-eighteenth century this model had also been adopted in local contests for small prizes, usually organised by innkeepers, in wrestling and cudgel play competitions. One innkeeper near Matlock in Derbyshire in 1763 explicitly said that his matches at both sports would be 'in the form of a welch main', with eight men to enter, with prizes of one guinea for the cudgel-play and a silver-laced hat for the wrestling.⁷⁴ Large numbers sometimes entered these. In 1753 a 'grand cudgelling match' at Bristol attracted about seventy participants for a prize raised by gentlemen's subscriptions.⁷⁵ At Moulton near Northampton in 1794 no more than eight men were to wrestle at the Shoulder-of-Mutton inn, entering on the day, and wrestling down to a final, with one guinea for the winner and five shillings for the second man.⁷⁶

Practice matches, unofficial competitions in which the aim was to prepare for future matches

Informal sporting activities played as practice and/or preparation for later real contests were rarely reported, though it is likely that practices, whether for wrestling or other forms of sport, were common, part of daily life for many young men. But in cricket, as more formally constituted clubs emerged, newspaper advertisements announcing the first of a club's regular meetings through the season, beginning in May or June, slowly began to appear. Sevenoaks Vine Cricket Club, for example, began in late May by the 1780s.⁷⁷ At Stamford, the Stamford Cricket Club held practices on the race ground through the 1770s and 1780s, meeting in the grandstand

fortnightly on Tuesdays.⁷⁸ The twenty members of the Prince of Wales' cricket club met once a week in summer in 1784 to enjoy 'manly and wholesome exercise'.⁷⁹ Many clubs, especially those very middle and upper class in their membership, often coupled their practices with a meal afterwards. The Leeds Cricket Club, which played at the Bowling Green House in Chapel-town, began practices in May, pitching their wicket at eleven o'clock with 'dinner on the table' at three.⁸⁰ In pugilism, sparring could be used as a form of 'scientific' practice. Although much sparring demonstrations by leading boxers were in part a form of performance, an entertainment before paying viewers, in a public house, a theatre or perhaps a racecourse, pride appears to have ensured that they were spirited affairs. In horse-racing, owners often ran 'trials', testing their horses against others of known ability to assess their standard before making a match.

The challenge

In the twenty-first century relatively few remaining vestiges of the challenge appear, though the name survives in examples such as rugby union's European Challenge Cup, or the English Football Association's Challenge Cup, the oldest national football competition in the world. But challenge in sport has a long history. In the early 1700s the concept was still largely linked to earlier tournament fighting as in the phrase 'throwing down the gauntlet' and the practice of duelling, which was still perceived as 'an honour' still 'carried so high in this country [England]' in the 1740s.⁸¹

Sporting challenges began when challenger and challenged were both physically present. By the 1740s however, if not before, challenges in a range of sports were also commonly conducted and publicised far more publicly via the newspapers, a striking sign of more commercial approaches to sport being adopted, which helped attract popular interest and paying customers.⁸² Owners of fighting cocks in the north and midlands seeking opponents might issue a general challenge, giving details of possible stakes. One such example proffered cockers 'ten Guineas, or Half the Pit and two Guineas or a suitable Premium in Proportion' within a Month or six Weeks from the Date hereof, viz. 31 Cocks of Side, for Guineas a Battle, and the Odd, likewise 15 or more for Bye-Battles, a Guinea each'.⁸³ Most challenges were more specific. In cricket Slindon were then the leading Sussex side, and after playing the London Club team twice at the Artillery Ground in September 1742, issued a public challenge to play them a return match at Guildford.⁸⁴ In London, in Jack Broughton's amphitheatre, where his 1743 rules were initially introduced just to manage the pugilistic contests more effectively, challenges were attractive to spectators.⁸⁵

Challenges might be issued and accepted privately by letter, but often too via the press. Such processes had a ritual element to them and letters were deliberately boastful, trying to indicate the writer's manly fighting status and integrity. They were also sometimes used to put pressure on opponents attempting to back out. In 1771, for example, Isaac Doggett, a boxer from Melksham, Wilts, announced that he had initially received a letter from another boxer, Henry Selway challenging to fight for twenty guineas. He had 'with much pleasure' declared himself willing but had not heard from him since. So now has sent him a letter to challenge him to 'meet at any time for any sum' or be thought a 'coward, a black ... d and sc ... l'.⁸⁶

After being defeated by Richard Humphries in 1777, Daniel Mendoza, an astute self-promoter, initiated a letter-writing press campaign to get a rematch, saying Humphries was afraid, and 'shrinks from a public trial of skill'. There was a meeting to attempt to arrange a bout, after which Humphries wrote to *The World* claiming Mendoza refused to 'stand up like a man', and each then accused the other of cowardice, before the fight eventually took place.⁸⁷ Such accusations of cowardice were a common trope. When Mendoza failed to reply to a challenge from Watson in 1789, Watson inserted a press letter telling him 'you are a mere pretender to courage ... you do not possess the courage of a man ... you have my address and if you won't meet me, I shall post you as a coward'.⁸⁸

Challenges often contained conditions upon which the challenge might be taken up. When a Kentish cricket side was heavily defeated on Hambledon's famous Broadhalfpenny Down in 1774, they conceded the return match and stakes, but challenged the County of Hants to play two matches for 1000 guineas, on condition that 'Lumpy' Stevens (the outstanding bowler of the period) and two other men from any part of England except Hampshire, might play for Kent.⁸⁹

By the 1780s the formal challenge, publicly expressed, for a financial stake, was common in pugilism, with boxers and their financial backers 'coming to agreement' sometimes by letter and sometimes via the press, with agreed rules and officials (including umpire, second and bottle-holder) with stage size agreed (it varied at this time) and money publicly deposited, often at an inn. When arrangements were made for a fight between Jackson and George Ingleson, commonly called Great George the Brewer in 1789, the stakes were made good at the Yorkshire Grey in Bond's stables, on a Thursday evening, to fight on the 11th of March, on a twenty-four-foot stage. The money deposited was 50 guineas each. They were to fight 'agreeable to the principles on which Johnson and Ryan fought their last battle'. The odds were in favour of the brewer. Humphries to be the umpire.⁹⁰ The report claimed that 'this battle is expected be in earnest, the parties having been with difficulty prevented trying their skill while depositing the stakes', then, as now, presumably posturing to increase interest.

London was the key centre for fighters and contests, tied to inn-subculture, and aristocratic gambling patronage, though Bristol, Bath and Birmingham were also important.⁹¹ Crowds were often large. When Ingleson fought Miles the drover at Blackheath in April 1789, reports named members of the social elite together with a lower-class 'mob' of between eight and nine thousand as present.⁹² Sometimes promoters tried to use closed premises or a temporary palisaded enclosure, and charge entrance, but this was often problematic. At one Banbury enclosure, about 600 paid a half-guinea entrance, but then the palisade was broken down and a larger crowd entered.⁹³

Championships

Whilst competition definitions emphasise competition against others, 'championship' competition has always encompassed the further notion of becoming the leading team or individual. By the twentieth century there were sports 'championships' at a range of levels, right up to world championships, although the latter only first began to emerge with an 1863 so-called 'world sculling' event for men, when Richard Green from Australia entered the championship of the Thames. In terms of 'championships' within England, Oxford and Cambridge universities competed in rowing in 1829 and in cricket there was an informal championship between county teams, encouraged by the press in the 1860s, followed by a formal championship in 1873 with only nine counties.⁹⁴

In British medieval and early modern thought, the concept of a champion was already being used as a signifier for the English kingdom itself. The King's Champion in England was a feudal relic, a hereditary title held by the Dymoke family after 1377. The Champion's main duty became symbolic: riding on a white charger, dressed in armour, into Westminster Hall during the coronation banquet, supposedly to challenge any person who publicly denied the sovereign's right to the throne. In Scotland the Knight Champion of the Most Noble and Ancient Order of the Thistle had a similar function. The concept of a sporting champion representing the nation, or even a locality, was a simple case of transfer.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the term in the early decades of the eighteenth century was initially most commonly used in sport in those events most linked to medieval combat: the advertisements puffing up the London amphitheatre fights in rounds using some combination of small-sword, back-sword, fists, cudgel and quarterstaff by professional fighters like James Figg, James Stokes or Edward Sutton, who charged admission to their events.⁹⁵ From c.1719 Figg claimed to be the English champion.⁹⁶ In 1730 he could still be described as the 'English Champion', an 'invincible' man fighting with 'bravery and judgement'.⁹⁷ But even in 1725 in a

fight between a well-known Italian boxer, and a grazier, trained by James Figg, it was the grazier who was portrayed as the 'English champion'.⁹⁸

But with no formal structures to determine status there were other claimants. The *Ipswich Journal*, for example, reported a heavily puffed up sword fight at the White Horse Tavern between Edward Sutton 'the champion of England' and Michael Butler 'the champion of Ireland'. Butler claimed to be 'master of my Sword in all its Branches, Offensive or Defensive, having had the Honour to perform at Windsor before his present Majesty twice', and challenged Sutton who he described as the invincible Kentish Hero, called the Champion of Europe'.⁹⁹

Modern historians have often described leading eighteenth-century boxers as national 'champions.' Sharon Harrow, for example, argued that 'Daniel Mendoza held the title of National Champion of England from 1792 to 1795'.¹⁰⁰ Such arguments usually draw on Pierce Egan's early nineteenth-century histories of pugilism, in which he allocates this title to individuals. Egan's constructed history and rhetoric need to be treated with some scepticism regarding the extent to which individuals' claims were widely accepted, since a boasting style was often used by pugilists and their principals in their press claims. Egan argued that notions were slowly emerging of an English championship in boxing from the 1760s, but he accepted that such notions were in what he called 'a fluid state', although gaining increased importance and significance by the end of the century.¹⁰¹ As Adam Chill has pointed out, such titles were only nominal ones, with no formal organisational structures behind them. Titles were often self-allocated by fighters in advertising to drum up public interest, so long as they had some basic plausibility.¹⁰² In 1803, for example, after Belcher retired to take over a public house, Bourke 'considering himself the best man of the day, laid claim to the title'.¹⁰³

Earlier in the century titles were most often allocated to those boxers most publicly known by the London journalists as successful, such as Jack Broughton in the 1740s, and as such were often London-centric, though such terms were also in common use by then at lower levels. John Slack, for example, in 1743 was described as 'champion of Norfolk'.¹⁰⁴ At Ipswich in 1749, a fight followed a 'challenge' to William Parrey from nearby Bramford, by an Ipswich fighter, William Manby, to fight a 'severe trial of manhood' (along with 'severe trial of strength' a commonly used advertising phrase) for a stake of ten guineas. The two 'champions' were to meet on a stage set up at a local inn, charging a shilling to wealthy spectators, with an earlier opportunity to visit the boxers, who were both based at local inns.¹⁰⁵ In 1761 Bristol gamesters staked 1,000 guineas to back 'their champion' against 'any one man in the world'.¹⁰⁶

Further aspects of sporting competition

Whilst formal definitions of competition in terms of sport focus on competition between two teams or individuals, the term has often been associated with other key aspects. All competition took place in a complex of social relations, expectations and norms. As we have seen, competition could simply indicate an activity in which an individual seeks to establish a position of recognised superiority over others and eighteenth century 'championships' certainly embodied competition for position, status and honour. But even at the village level, argued Robert Malcolmson, competitive sporting recreations offered important status evaluation: 'realistic opportunities for the common people to acquire prestige and self-respect ... football, cricket, boxing, running, wrestling, cudgelling: all these sports provided channels for gaining personal recognition [and] the estimation of their peers'.¹⁰⁷ Whilst competitive, they were often a more informal part of sport, enmeshed with, and deriving their cultural meanings from, the social and economic patterns of rural, localised life. In the villages near Carlisle, in far northern England, in the 1790s, young men competed for status in sports as diverse as fighting, flinging the 'geavelick' (similar to a javelin), football, foot racing, handball, horse racing, hunting, leaping, quoits, shooting, throwing the stone, and wrestling. Their sports gave manly status, a way of contesting physical worth, defeating rivals, establishing ranking and their prospects as marriage partners. 'Fair' fighting, between men matched by weight, was considered a positive feature deserving of respect.¹⁰⁸

Competition could also be against oneself, fuelling an individual's desire and drive for sporting improvement. In pugilism, for example, it was easier for trainers to help competitive fighters develop 'wind' (endurance), 'bottom' (courage), and 'science' (technique).¹⁰⁹

And in the wagering culture of the eighteenth century, there was a further element of sporting competition. As Dennis Brailsford has pointed out, 'the most conspicuous athletic feats ... were usually performed against the clock or the calendar'. Around mid-century at Newmarket, there were substantial wagers concerning the production of a coach that could cover nineteen miles in an hour around a racecourse, and a letter that could cover fifty miles in an hour. In 1758 Captain Shafto backed himself for £10,000 to ride fifty miles in an hour over the heath, which he did using ten thoroughbreds.¹¹⁰

In the later eighteenth century, it was pedestrians that began to compete more commercially, for long-distance records, for money and the enjoyment of gamblers, in challenges of time and distance. Usually men, but occasionally also women, they attracted large working-class crowds, and substantial wagers. Foster Powell gained his reputation by achievements such as his walk from London to York and back (402 miles) in five days and eighteen hours in November 1773. In 1788 he walked 100 miles in 21 h 35 min. In

1778 John Batty, a poor pig-driver, walked 700 miles in fourteen days on Richmond racecourse for a wager.¹¹¹ Some men of higher social standing, belonging to 'the Fancy', such as the celebrated Scot Captain Barclay, also backed themselves at that time.¹¹²

Changes and continuities in pre-and post-eighteenth-century competition

It would have been useful to set this paper in the context of a clear analysis of continuities and changes in competition styles both before and after the eighteenth century. Unfortunately, given the still limited nature of academic research into the century before circa 1700 it is still difficult to provide much detail about the earlier competition types. In terms of sports' chronology Peter Borsary has taken the view that from the Reformation of the 1530s onwards in England, 'there was a long-term but uneven and highly contested process of attrition'; a 'sea-change', which deprived the common people of some of their 'traditional' sports, and caused a reassessment of religion, work and leisure.¹¹³ Only following the Restoration and the Enlightenment movement did a new phase begin. This, he feels, then slowly led to increased urbanisation and industrialisation which was in turn followed, sometime after the mid-nineteenth century, into a phase of recognisably modern leisure. Such models are, of course, by their nature, oversimplistic, given that historical change is a process. Over time there has always been a gradual evolution of thought and socio-cultural atmosphere, during which sports were related to multiple variables, adapted to changing historical contexts, rather than any sharp divide.

Currently much more research is still needed to come to any reasonably firm conclusions about the frequency of various competition forms in the periods before the eighteenth century, although it is clear that individual matches seem to have been most common. Much of the existing historiography covering seventeenth-century sport has focused on more rural, popular and folk games, often religion-linked and tacitly supported by the elite. We know as much about the rules and places of sport as the details of competitive features. The latter were rarely provided, Dunning and Ken Sheard, for example, focused only on older folk games;¹¹⁴ Dennis Brailsford largely focused on attitudes towards sport and exercise;¹¹⁵ and Richard Holt's coverage of 'old ways of playing' was brief.¹¹⁶ Malcolmson's chapter on sport concentrated on the post-1700 period. It is clear that seventeenth-century competitive forms in sports such as horse racing, hunting, hare coursing and cock-fighting, bore more than a passing resemblance to those of the eighteenth century. It was matching between two competitors that appears to have been the most common form of competition. Whilst we know sufficient about early cricket, horseracing, and hare coursing to know they

had similarities to their eighteenth-century equivalents much more research is still needed.¹¹⁷

By contrast the nineteenth century has a very extensive historiography, and historians of sport generally agree that the middle years of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a more recognisably modern, more achievement-oriented and commercial competitive sporting culture, though it can only briefly be sketched here. Competition grew more intense, more frequent, and for industrial workers, whether in factories, mines and other industrial complexes, sports were increasingly often more focused on the weekend. Attacks by reformers were largely successful on sports such as bull-baiting and cockfighting, but by the mid-nineteenth century sports were generally played and watched more extensively, with more events, at increased frequency, and more middle-class sports clubs. A so-called 'sporting revolution', driven partially by the middle classes, saw many older sports such as cricket, pugilism, horse racing, angling, hunting, wrestling rowing and coursing continue. In contrast, sports such as soccer, rugby, lawn tennis, mountaineering, and the formerly mainly Scottish golf were important and lasting innovations. Cycling races, involving several semi-professional competitors racing against each other, as in horse-racing's sweepstakes, were popular by the 1880s in enclosed courses in major towns such as London, Wolverhampton, Birmingham and Manchester. Some sports, such as rowing and track athletics, separated into middle-class amateur and professional forms.¹¹⁸ Others emerged in changed form or with new equipment (such as bowls, shooting, or greyhound and whippet racing). Sports were ever more popular and by 1901 *The Times* was reporting on twenty-one different sports.¹¹⁹

In the later nineteenth century, the straightforward 'match' was still the most common form of competition, found regularly in sports such as cricket, soccer, rugby, or boxing, but by then hardly ever found in horseracing. Where matches were 'friendly', with nothing at stake, as in rugby, these were less competitive and only drew crowds where local rivalries were involved. International matches were another new attraction. Challenge matches likewise continued, sometimes stemming from sporting public houses. In the 1840s challenge matches by rowers, pedestrians and pugilists were a regular feature of *Bell's Life* and professional sportsmen were still using the columns of *Sporting Life* to issue challenges in 1900.¹²⁰

Elimination matches were found across many sports in the nineteenth century, especially where cup or other prizes were introduced. The rural hare coursing clubs, growing in popularity in the early 1800s, for example, almost all had cups. The leading event, the Waterloo Cup, at Altcar in Lancashire, started in 1836 with eight dogs, had sixteen dogs in 1837 and thirty-two nominated entries in 1838. In 1857 sixty-four entries were allowed.¹²¹ Middle-class sports had elimination cups too. The first open golf

championship took place in 1860. The first croquet championship was held at Wimbledon in 1868 and in 1877 the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club had its first men's tennis competition.¹²² Tennis and golf competitions amongst local clubs on the same model soon spread widely. The same competition form gave a major boost to the urban popularity of soccer and rugby in the later nineteenth century, eventually threatening middle-class domination of these sports. The English Football Association Cup was introduced in 1871-2, and over the next decade many county associations introduced their own cups. Birmingham and District were the first in the 1876-7 season. In the 1884-5 season they even began a challenge shield for all the elementary schools in the city.¹²³ Rugby first emulated the model when sixteen Yorkshire clubs introduced a challenge cup in 1877. Such cup matches generated new players, new spectators and new playing methods. By 1890 almost every sizeable town or district in Yorkshire had its own cup competition.¹²⁴

With improvements in transport, competition for champion status could now widen from Britain to the world level. For example, Tom Sayers, the pugilist, perhaps debatably claimed to be Champion of the World after his fight with New Yorker John Heenan in 1860.¹²⁵ Over time sporting competitors travelled to Britain more regularly. Cricket teams, pugilists, pedestrians, or professional rowers like Canadian John Hanlan measured themselves against the best competitors in Britain, building up hope, expectation and public interest.¹²⁶

A major competitive innovation was the league form, with its more permanent, pre-arranged schedule of matches. County cricket had an embryonic league in the 1860s and 1870s, with newspapers publishing rankings, but there was no formal structure, and fixtures were not arranged in any organised way. The first proper league to be introduced was the Football League, in the 1888-1889 season, probably copied from American baseball, but just possibly a further development of the cricket county championship.¹²⁷ A Birmingham and District Cricket League quickly followed and soccer and cricket leagues at regional and local level spread rapidly, especially in the north and midlands. Leagues were immediately popular with spectators and much of the newspaper press, both regionally and nationally. A Second Division of the Football League was formed in 1892-3. There was more opposition to leagues from the English Rugby Football Union, but in 1892 a Yorkshire Senior Competition was allowed, and as Tony Collins has pointed out, 'by 1893 almost the whole of Yorkshire rugby was organised on a league basis'. By then Lancashire also had a three-division championship.

At the end of the nineteenth century, as a 1900 essay on sport philosophy recognised, the press and public all wished to define 'the best man, the best team, the best performance', giving rise to a 'profusion of championships, of

athletic leagues, and the evolution of an endless stream of records'.¹²⁸ In the next century new forms of competition were introduced. The soccer World Cup, European Champion League, or the Olympics, had more complex structures of competition. They were examples of mega-events, international events with individual competitors drawn from many different countries, or international competitions where the national teams of different countries participated.

In conclusion

Even in the early nineteenth century sports were not recognisably modern. The MCC's rules were often but not always accepted in cricket, and most often in the south. The Jockey Club's power was still largely over Newmarket racing and over more elite courses such as Epsom, Ascot or Goodwood, closely associated with Jockey Club members. Each pugilistic match still relied on its own negotiated 'articles of agreement', though Broughton's rules were often invoked, but in all sports, articles of agreement shared increasing commonalities. Cricket had spread from its south-east England origins across the country and numbers of horse-race meetings grew in number. By contrast, some sports, such as bull baiting and cock-fighting were becoming less popular thanks to cultural changes in social attitudes. English sporting culture still had much regional variation but was already becoming commercialised in the eighteenth century. As Adrian Harvey has shown, in the following decades, up to 1850, a rich, diverse and more commercial sports culture became available to much more of the population.
¹²⁹

In all, during the eighteenth century, sport's cultural context was in process of change: ever-increasingly commercial, and attracting large numbers of spectators; regulated; professional or semi-professional; and becoming a business for some. Some events had restrictions on entry, perhaps for class, skill level or geographical reasons. The most common form of competition was that of the 'match' between two individuals, animals or teams, with some attempt to ensure a measure of fairness, often in order to allow wagers and stakes, found in sports such as cricket, horse racing, pugilism or wrestling. In a second form of competition several individuals competed alongside each other to get a winner, most especially in horse races, rowing or pedestrianism, and, less commonly in the cock-fighting 'battle royal'. A third cluster, elimination, knock-out or sudden death competitions, which were to be a major feature of many modern forms of football competitions, were relatively rare at this stage, found occasionally in Welsh main cockfights, or wrestling and cudgelling competition. A fourth form of competition, practice matches or trials, must have been common but was rarely reported. Closely linked to the

first form of competition, the match, was the formally issued sporting ‘challenge’, either in person, or increasingly through the century a ritual process conducted via the press, found most commonly in pugilism. This period also saw a sixth form of competition, for the title of the ‘champion’, the leading figure in a sport. Around mid-century such titles were often nominal ones, fluid and slippery, and perhaps self-claimed, with no formal organisational structures behind them, but such competitions gained increased importance and significance by the end of the century. There were, naturally further aspects of sporting competition: perhaps for status, prestige or self-respect; competition against oneself to aid sporting improvement, and competitions where individuals competed against the clock or the calendar. Given the limited historiography covering eighteenth-century sporting competition, this essay should be regarded as a first foray into the field. I hope in due course to explore the world of sport, culture and society in more detail, as more sources become available.

Notes

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