

Sports in Philippine History: A Historiographic Survey and Invitation for Further Research

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Abstract

Although the history of sport has migrated from the margins of scholarly attention to the mainstream of historical research, many gaps in knowledge remain in the 21st century, especially in the global south. This paper argues for more research to be conducted on the history of sports in the Philippines, given the unique insights it can provide on the development of social, economic, political, and cultural forces. First, it traces the historiographic trends in sports history around the globe to provide a conceptual and methodological backdrop for future research. Asia in general—and the Philippines in particular—is identified as possessing extensive histories of both traditional and modern sports that can contribute to the local and international discourse in the field. While regional patterns are highlighted, the existing literature on Philippine sports is also surveyed to reveal the niches historians can fill. Second, it surveys the rich variety of sources available to historians wishing to study sports in the Philippines. Sports, by their nature, leave behind many material artifacts, oral accounts, and extensive media coverage that can help supplement typical documentary sources a scholar might use, especially those wishing to investigate the histories of marginalized communities. By laying out the possibilities for further research in the field, the paper hopes to entice other scholars to pursue similar projects, or perhaps consider sports policies, trends, and/or events in their future work on Philippine history.

Keywords: *Historiography, Philippine Sports, Sports History*

Introduction: Golf and the Urban Landscape in the Philippines

An argument for the relevance of a scholarly field is perhaps best introduced through a demonstration. In October of 2023, the newly formed University of the Philippines (UP) Golf Club sent out an open invitation to the whole Diliman campus for an afternoon at the Royal Ace Driving Range in Quezon City. It was met with mockery in its comments section, mostly from members of the UP community itself. Golf aficionados reacted to this with mixtures of disbelief, disappointment, and dismissiveness (UP Golf Club, 2023). Their reactions are perhaps products of ignorance of golf's historical baggage of elitism and exclusivism.

Perhaps it was a sport of the people once upon a time, but it has since grown into an exclusive activity globally. Modern golf boasts great popularity while maintaining an aura of elitist leisure. Two crucial issues sit at the heart of the hostile reaction to the UP Golf Club. First is the high bar for entry. Outside the high price of golf clubs, the associated sportswear and miscellaneous equipment are equally as expensive or lack cheaper alternatives. Second is land use. While golf does provide a form of low-intensity cardiovascular exercise, the idea that it allows golfers to enjoy nature is an illusion: golf courses are artificially designed to create tightly controlled surfaces for play and provide a picturesque aesthetic of the natural environment. They are highly manicured representations of nature that occupy plenty of space and require vast amounts of water to maintain. In a school like UP Diliman, where many people – students, faculty, and staff alike – cram themselves into any livable nook and cranny in an already overcrowded city, the very existence of the sport can be felt as an insult. Golf, by its very nature, resists, or even directly opposes, democratization. Attempts to paint it as an innocent and accessible game are thus derided online, especially in the Philippine context.

While a robust literature exists of golf's many accessibility issues across multiple disciplines, its history in the Philippines remains underexplored. Historians have traced its global development across centuries, from its evolution as a pleasant pastime in the highlands of Scotland to an exclusive sport of the Victorian-era elite (Phillips, 1990; Stirk, 1998; David, 1998), but no Filipino has done anything similar yet. It remains a missed opportunity, given the sport's location within an intersection of class, race, and urban history in the Philippines.

Take San Juan City's Wack Wack golf course for example. Established in 1930 by William Henry Shaw – a Philippine-based American philanthropist – the course used to serve as a more liberal space for golfers after the Manila Golf Club asked Filipino player Larry

Montes to leave the post-tournament celebrations of the 1929 Philippine Open. Montes won that Open, but he was still asked to leave because of his status as a caddie (Gleeck, 1998; Zafra, 2009). The decision was also implicitly fueled by racism, Montes being the first native Filipino to win the annual golfing tournament. Furthermore, while Wack Wack was constructed in what was once windswept hills at the outskirts of Manila, the city of San Juan today has long since been engulfed by the ever-expanding metropolitan area. Its clientele has also transformed, from marginalized colonial subjects to the nation's 21st century elite.

Such a short narrative on Philippine golf's history shows how studying a single sport can lead to insights into the lives of historical actors beyond their political, intellectual, or economic activities. Stories about people's physicality — their bodies, their movements, their health and fitness — matter as much as their other pursuits. The games people play help reveal underlying forces that shape society and, according to Richard Davies (2007), "rather than being irrelevant diversions of little consequence, such activities provide important insights into fundamental values and beliefs" of a people (p. 2). Sports link generations and unite communities through shared rituals, performed in the most informal of street games to the most complex of competitive spectacles.

This paper highlights the potential for sports history as a field of study in the Philippines. It calls for more research to be conducted on the country's sporting past due to the unique insights these could provide on the forces that have shaped the nation. This is not a simple call for undecided scholars to become "sports historians" or to add "sports history" under their list of research interests. Rather, it is a reminder for all students of history to consider our shared sporting past no matter their area and period of research, because sport is both cultural practice and social structure. Any historical narrative that includes sports is one that is deeply informed by the current moment within which historical actors lived in.

The Development of Sports History as an Academic Field

It was Johan Huizinga (1971) who first argued that play is an essential part of the generation of culture and is therefore central to human nature. After all, everyone was once a child and playing games is an inescapable aspect of childhood (Delos Reyes, 2010). The creativity and physicality of childhood play is retained by modern society in the sports played by adults — organized competitive activities that demand combinations of physical prowess, mental aptitude, and creative skill expression (Papineau, 2017). As sports became more rationalized and

bureaucratized throughout the 20th century, both their popularity and influence on the rest of humanity grew exponentially. It is no wonder that historians around the world choose to devote their careers to studying sports. As Wray Vamplew writes (2021):

[Sport] can promote socialization, moral education and, occasionally, political indoctrination, all preparing citizens for duties and responsibilities beyond the playing arenas...play could be a means of displaying masculinity (or femininity), or of affirming social status by demonstrating that one had time, money, and energy to devote to activities other than work. Sport could be undertaken to promote health and welfare, to create loyalty to a group or nation, or for a plethora of other reasons...Sport is an immensely important part of any serious attempt to reconstruct a nation's collective life. Although sport exists outside the daily urgency of livelihood and sustenance, it is simultaneously highly popular, compulsive, and a compelling stage for national, local, and community drama and glory: a narrative that is hard to resist (pp. 7-8).

That said, the profile of sports historians is often portrayed in dichotomies. First, there is the distinction between sports writers or journalists and the scholars who study sports. This usually aligns with the difference between popular and academic sports history (Cahn, 1994; Hill, 2011; Bass, 2014). Second, there is a dichotomy in the root academic disciplines – that is, between scholars from the social sciences and those studying human movement or exercise (e.g., physical educators, sports scientists, kinesiologists, etc.). Third, there is a geographic divergence between the more easily accepted development of sports history in North America and the delayed acceptance of a more fragmented field in European history departments. Notably, the emergence of sports history in the United Kingdom in the 1970s can be attributed to social historians heavily influenced by the *Annales* school (Hill, 2003; Holt, 2014).

The field of sports history has matured enough that several “state-of-the-field” historiographies exist. These have provided surveys of the existing literature, pointed out gaps in scholarship, and posited potential avenues for future exploration. For example, Richard Holt’s “Historians and the History of Sport” (2014) took on a global perspective, describing the parallel developments of the field on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. He also traced the spread of sports history across the Pacific to Australia and New Zealand and observed gaps in sports research across the “global south,” especially in Africa.

Of particular interest too is Amy Bass' "State of the Field: Sports History and the 'Cultural Turn'" (2014), which asserted the field's continued—and future—relevance to both the heavier use of cultural history by sports historians and the growing interests of cultural historians in studying sports history. While mostly surveying American sports history, Bass nevertheless offered a strong argument against what she identified as an "old school" Rankean aspiration to write history objectively (p. 154), revealing a field of historical inquiry that had, at least a decade ago, matured enough for its scholars to begin reevaluating their methods and frameworks of research. This prompted a response from Susan Cahn within the same issue of *The Journal of American History* (2014). She refrained from fully embracing Bass' call for a fully cultural turn in the field, especially since sports history itself "can be usefully integrated into any subfield of history" (p. 182). Cahn further questioned whether sports history is, in fact, a separate field of its own, wondering if such an insistence upon its singular utility may have kept it apart from more well-respected branches of the broader historical discipline. Ultimately, she welcomed all who would use sports as a window into the past regardless of background, arguing that "[w]hat matters is that historians of sport produce excellent work reflective of the best traditions and innovations in historical scholarship" (p. 183).

A year after Bass and Cahn published their works, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* published a special issue on the methodology of sport history (2015). The issue showed the fruits of easing disciplinary barriers to better facilitate the spread of sport's contributions towards diplomatic history, sports management, geography, legal scholarship, economic history, museums and art, philosophy and literary studies, and other disciplines. For example, Matthew Taylor (2015) commented on the interdisciplinarity of historians themselves, and criticized those who worried overmuch about sports being accepted by what Vamplew described as an "imaginary historical 'mainstream'" (p. 1772). Similarly, back in 2007, Martine Johnes wrote that:

...the essential methods, ideas, and concepts are no different from those applied to any other topic in historical inquiry. Thus, the whole idea of sport history being a field distinct from mainstream history is rather odd and is rooted in the volume of work produced in the field and the fact that many of its practitioners do not work in history but in sports science or kinesiology (pp. 106-107).

Sports historians have long carried their own misgivings about defending the importance of their field of specialization vis-à-vis the practicality of just letting their work speak for itself. From the outside,

it may seem like much “second-guessing their own relevance” (Guingona, 2024, p. 168) despite how the 21st century has seen a renewed global interest in analyzing sports.

Needless to say, “[s]ports history is no longer a marginal academic subject,” with the world now recognizing that “sport is a significant cultural activity that matters to millions of people and ought to be studied by academic researchers, including historians...” (Vamplew, 2016, pp. 297-312). A robust literature has already been established by pioneering researchers of sport, creating a rudimentary level of knowledge other scholars can now draw from (Mckibbin, 2011). Yet, even today, fundamental challenges exist in the discipline, especially since “there is little agreement as to what exactly is ‘sport’ and what precisely are the emotions, satisfactions and disappointments that are involved in it” (Mckibbin, p. 168).

Difficulties in conceptualizing sports make writing and teaching it a challenge. On one level, there is the delineation between “sport” as opposed to “play,” and while much can be said about the centrality of sports in the leisurely sense, most sports histories tend to focus on sports as the “higher” level of competitive “athletics” (McComb, 2004, pp. 1-2), wherein entire careers are built around the acts of playing, supporting, and organizing athletes. Even then, there are unique questions to be asked about the relationship between sports and work or about the nature of sports as work. Questions also abound about the relationship between players and spectators within this work-leisure dynamic, as well as the near-religious aspect of modern sports practice and spectacles. Furthermore, the difficulties with definitions operate within issues of gender or ethnicity since contexts of inclusion or exclusion in sports transform when moving from “serious” sports to less-serious “play” (pp. 168-173).

Finally, there remains a much-debated distinction between “traditional” sports and the modern organized forms popular today, since even the most “original” forms of old modes of play are, even in the past, always constantly being constructed and reconstructed by their practitioners. This challenge is being addressed by the transnational and multi-disciplinary nature of recent scholarships. For example, histories of globalization and imperialism show that:

[t]he endeavor to merely define “traditional” and “modern” sports masked the reality that the “tradition” in traditional sports was made into a problem by the onslaught of different sports backed by powerful interests, and so “tradition” is more usefully viewed, not as an unchanging quality, but as a product of globalization. An exploration of the classification

of “sport” amounts to an exploration of the nature of modernity (Besnier and Brownell, 2012, p. 448).

The disparate origins of methodological traditions, the multi-disciplinary aspect of late 20th and early 21st century scholarship, and the vagueness of concepts within the field are some of the issues that make it hard to establish any definitive “canon” of works for aspiring sports historians. Some are repeatedly cited, however, having been dominant in the spreading of different topics within the field. Therefore, while not extensive, the following list of works represents my choices for adequate entry points into the historical research of sports.

First, Jeffrey Hill’s *Sport in History: An Introduction* published in 2011 serves as a brief but insightful look into the field. The book surveys the theories and methods used to tackle prevailing concerns of sports historians across the years: modernization, identity, gender, media, globalization, etc. It is a short but densely-packed read. Hill confesses that, within sports history as a whole, “attention has been given to the period since 1800 and to ‘the West’ (i.e. Europe, North America, and Australasia),” and that the field would benefit from more studies into “medieval and early modern sport, and sport in Asia, Africa and South America” (p. 145).

Next is one of the most influential works in the field: Allen Guttmann’s *From Ritual to Record*, originally published in 1978. Here Guttmann formulated his seven characteristics of modern sports, which are secularism, equality, bureaucratization, specialization, rationalization, quantification and obsession with records. Guttmann’s use of modernization theory has been borrowed far and wide, from grand narrative works to research on singular sporting events. The long shadow cast by *From Ritual to Record* has also been the topic of debate since the 1990s, when his evolutionary schema of sports was questioned by anthropologically minded historians. Critics have pointed out that modern sports remain ritualistic, since record-setting itself has been transformed into a ritual. Additionally, even Guttman criticized the Eurocentrism of modernization theory (Koulouri, 2005, pp. 233-234). Scholarly reliance on modernization was criticized by Vamplew in 2015, who was concerned that sports historians were prone to making data conform to theories instead of creatively adapting such frameworks based on the facts their research had established (p. 305).

Other prominent historians would include the likes of Richard Holt and J.A. Mangan. Holt’s *Sport and the British*, initially published in 1989, signified the most popular trends of sport history as a subject both taught and written about upon its legitimization in British

universities. J.A. Mangan on the other hand has written a large corpus of work covering several different topics. Some of these would include *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (1981), *The Games Ethic and Imperialism* (1986), *Manliness and Morality* (1989), *Making Imperial Mentalities* (1990), *Sport in Australasian Society* (2000), *Gender, Sport, Science* (2011), and many more. Mangan has done much to elaborate ideas regarding the roots of sports in Victorian middle-class England and is one of the first Western scholars to explore the sports histories of regions outside of sports history's bulwarks (i.e. Australasia, South and East Asia, and Africa).¹

Earlier than even Mangan's work on cultural imperialism is one of the most well-cited books about sports, colonial realities, and national identities: C.L.R. James' *Beyond a Boundary* (1963). An Afro-Trinidadian historian and journalist, James recounted his personal experiences in a career of playing cricket under British imperial rule. His narrative has been treated as a "history from within" of the cultural reclamation of sports in colonized territories (Hughson, 2009, p. 76), with James himself, and other prominent cricketers of color, being highly aware of the socio-cultural impact of their ability to play as good as—if not better than—their white counterparts. *Beyond the Boundary* remains the definitive interdisciplinary text that combined "memoir, cultural theory, and social analysis, making it a benchmark in cultural history write large" (Bass, 2014, p. 152).

There are more works that have made considerable impact in their own spheres of influence, but mentioning them as well would only prolong this already lengthy paper. In any case, sports history is now spreading to cover the long unaddressed gaps in knowledge in its extant literature. Of course, Asian sports history is today receiving much attention and has developed its own unique trends.

Sports History in Asia

In the early 2000s, most Asian sports history written in English language was done or compiled by non-Asians. An early attempt to cover the "happenings, issues, and practices in Asia" in terms of sports was *Sport in Asian Society: Past and Present* (2002), an anthology published due in large part to the efforts of J.A. Mangan. It had an eclectic approach, with articles sharing no single theme apart from their geographic boundary. The hope was to encourage other Asian scholars to join the field.

A significant English language sports history book came out in 2004. *Marrow of the Nation* was by Andrew D. Morris and focused on the first four decades of the 20th century. Morris explored how Chinese actors—from physical education instructors to state agents to the

individual athletes – borrowed various forms of physical culture from the West and Japan to modernize the Chinese nation. He utilized a wide variety of primary sources, from rare documents in half-forgotten Chinese archives to personal interviews of surviving Chinese athletes who competed in the 1930s. Morris argued that modern sports, more than just a Western imperial imposition on Asia, was a cultural form that Chinese across all political, class, and gender lines believed to be a necessary component for a modern nation to be respected among an international community of sovereign states.

Another important work was an anthology edited by James H. Mills titled *Subaltern Sports: Politics and Sport in South Asia* (2005). Its works insisted that imperial dominance is never hegemonic, operating under the premise that “sports invite subalternity” due to three factors: the presupposition of a level playing field between competitors, regardless of their place in the relationship of dominance; the location of sports’ competitors outside normal social roles; and the sense of unity and community developed by the shared spectacle of sporting competitions. Sports therefore liberate as well as oppress, and Mills makes the argument that historians must examine sport “because it is such a volatile and unstable medium, in which all grand designs of an elite can be publicly mocked or shocked by a moment of individual brilliance or a show of determined teamwork” (pp. 1-4).ⁱⁱ

One of the factors that prompted more scholars to study Asian sports was the hosting of several mega-events by the global south in the 2000s. These would include Macau’s hosting of the East Asian (2005), Lusophone (2006), and Asian Indoor (2007) Games, the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the World Cups held in South Africa (2010) and Brazil (2014), and the Rio Olympics (2016). Sports history in Asia thus grew with a distinct political flavor, focusing mostly on the soft power politics involved when hosting mega-events, the development of sports diplomacy in the region, and the establishment of different models of national sports governance.

A product of this trend is the collection titled *The East Asian Olympiads, 1934-2008*, edited by William M. Tsutsui and Michael Baskett (2011). The essays within the anthology examined the Olympic Games – both successfully and unsuccessfully held – in Tokyo (1940 and 1964), Seoul (1988), and Beijing (2008), treating them as a group to encourage comparisons between the East Asian experiences and contrasts against Games hosted elsewhere. Being the only Olympic Games to be held outside of the Western world, the Asian Olympiads helped construct national and regional identities, identities connected by the shared experience of being “rising East Asian powers, latecomers to wealth and global prominence, and modern societies with

non-Western cultural roots” (p. 15). They were “symbolically, politically, and emotionally charged spaces” where hosts grappled with issues of ethnicity, modernity, marginalization, memory, nationalism, globalization, and a whole host of other challenges, all of which helped make the Olympic Games defining moments of nation-building in modern Asia. (pp. 18-19).

The mixing of sports and diplomatic histories is embodied in Stefan Huebner’s *Pan-Asian Sports*, published in 2016. It is the first historical work to create a grand narrative of Asian sports within the context of mega-events and the elite actors that organized them. *Pan-Asian Sports* follows the three Asian mega-events—the Far East Championship Games, the West Asian Games, and the Asian Games—from 1913 to 1974. Huebner treats these sports spectacles as sites of contestation between different Asian intellectual and political elites, focusing on their clashing conceptions of what “Asia” should truly be or mean (p. 10).

Yet Asian countries possessed a robust literature of sports history themselves, albeit written in their local languages. Huang, Fan, and Zhang (2020) show that, contrary to outside perceptions, East Asian countries possess a long tradition of publishing historical research on sports which have, unfortunately, been isolated within separate countries due to the lack of a shared language. They also identified underexplored fields of study, like indigenous sports, the transplantation of modern sports to the continent, and the historiography of Asian sports history itself. They further proposed trajectories for research in Asia to promote “the development of a genuinely Asian perspective on Asian sport and its interconnectedness with sports histories in the other civilizations of the world” (pp. 1094-1097).ⁱⁱⁱ

Less has been written about the historical development of sports within the Southeast Asian region. Recent scholarship includes Simon Creak’s *Embodied Nation* (2014), which approached Laotian sports from a social and cultural lens, and Friederike Trotier’s *Nation, State, Arena*, where she explored the connection between elite sports competitions and the development of urban centers as national symbols, focusing specifically on Indonesia (Trotier, 2021). More recently, Creak and Trotier co-published a paper on the diplomatic history of the Games of the New and Emerging Forces (GANEFO), hosted by Sukarno in Jakarta in 1963 (Trotier and Creak, 2024). Being written in English, their works are reliable resources for Southeast Asian historians hailing from other countries. However, they also remain within the criticism made by Huang, Fan, and Zhang regarding the external perspective of Western scholars, regardless of their expertise, due to linguistic and cultural barriers. The possibility always exists that an Indonesian or Laotian

scholar writing on the same topics as Creak or Trotier may have access to additional sources, perspectives, or insights unique to their own positionality within the nation under study.

This can be observed in Janice Beran's 1989 article "Americans in the Philippines." She explored the purposeful use of sport as an instrument of government policy, accurately identifying the close connections between the American-built public education system and the introduction of modern sports into the Philippines. Yet her claim that Americans simply assumed, with full confidence, that "what was good for them would also be good for Filipinos," paints the American utilization of modern sport in the Philippines in a much more benign light than what Filipino nationalist historians have argued (p. 82). Her overreliance on American sources may have led to such an outcome. Some of her arguments were simply repetitions of the US perspective, especially regarding the American attitude towards the Hispanized Filipino elite who were viewed as foppish dandies ignorant of modern physical fitness. Counter to this presupposition, elite 19th century schools in the Spanish Philippines included routine calisthenics exercises, swimming classes, and games. What was lacking in Manila society was organized physical activity outside of the school context (Perez, 2020). While Beran did mention Filipino historians, this initial foray into the American introduction of modern sports left much to be desired.

A more well-rounded history would be written later by Gerald Gems in *Athletic Crusade* (2006), which devoted a chapter to the role of sports within the broader framework of U.S. imperialism. Compared to Beran, Gems highlighted the racial aspect of sports policies in the Philippines. While Gems explained how Americans viewed Filipino bodies as weak and unhygienic—using such as a justification for "Benevolent Assimilation"—he also dissected the racial anxieties of Americans whenever Oriental athletes defeated Western men in fair competition. Such an approach allowed tied sports to the hypocritical tendency of empire to essentialize Asian bodies as weak, effeminate, and sickly, while at the same time espousing a "civilizing mission" to transform such bodies through modern sports. However, the book's perspective remained limited to the American colonial leaders, their policies, the institutions they established, and the overall effect these had on the Filipino population. It did not focus on stories from Filipino's themselves and how they engaged with the sports the Americans were teaching them.

The same can be said for Stefan Huebner's *Pan-Asian Sports*. While he takes a broader Asian perspective by arguing that the Asian Games was a site of contestation for elite actors to assert their own conceptions of what Asia should be, the book contains three full chapters that

heavily features the Philippines and its sports leaders, whether American colonial officials or their Filipino counterparts. However, he remains constrained to archival sources written in English—any narrative using sources in the local languages will have to be written by a Filipino scholar.

An example of such work can be found in Lou Antolihao's *Playing with the Big Boys* (2017). The later chapters analyzed vernacular songs made by the fans of the Barangay Ginebra San Miguel, a popular Philippine Basketball Association (PBA) team. By problematizing basketball's uncontested popularity in the Philippines, Antolihao weaved a narrative removed from the writings of decision-making elites, highlighting subaltern discourses in Filipinos' love for the ballgame. Though his discussion of sports in the Philippines from the 1970s onwards would focus solely on basketball, he also utilized many of the same sources as Huebner in his narration of basketball during the American colonial period. Yet, like Huebner, Antolihao's broader historical narrative and use of archival material is richest only until the 1950s, when the Third Philippine Republic was still finding its place on the world stage as a sovereign entity. His latter chapters are either more focused in scope (e.g., the PBA in the 1970s) or rely on sociological and anthropological methodologies (e.g., the PBA in the post-EDSA years).

Antolihao's work is still a welcome addition to the slowly growing body of work on the Filipino sporting past. Most extant literature of Philippine sports can be categorized under popular history, mostly dealing with biographical narratives of notable Filipino athletes. This list includes Recah Trinidad's book on Manny Pacquiao (2006) and Joaquin Gonzalez's work on Philippine boxing (2012). The books of Gloria Garchitorena-Goloy (1997) and Jorge Afable (1972) also come to mind. A more research-oriented text is Rafe Bartholomew's *Pacific Rims* (2010). In a similar vein, a recent book by Isidra Reyes, Gerard Lico, and Lorenzo Manguiat (2025) told the life stories of David Nepumuceno, the first Filipino to compete in the Olympics, and influential physical educator Dr. Regino Ylanan. Other works offer simple chronicles of various organizations and governing institutions of sports in the Philippines, and these are often written by officials who served in those same organizations (Ylanan, 1965; Juico, 2000; Dayrit, 2003).

As far as the academe is concerned, publications by Filipino scholars have mostly been confined to the 21st century and come from a mixture of different fields—media studies, human kinetics, legal research, political science, and many others. Articles by Dennis Blanco (2016; 2017; 2019; and 2023) are especially notable, given his inclusion

of brief histories of Philippine sports when discussing sports governance stakeholders, the development of college basketball and volleyball, as well as the Olympic Movement in the Philippines. However, his historical sections largely remain chronologies of events, institutions, and leading people, with the focus of his work being the political issues surrounding contemporary sports policies within the past half century.

A more rigorous historical analysis can be found in Philip Guingona's *China and the Philippines* (2024), which attempted to trace the transfer of ideas, syncretization of cultures, and formation of both national as well as regional identities between the Philippines and China outside the usual imperial binary of colonizer-colonized relationships. Guingona featured the travels and transactions of educators, musicians, and athletes from both countries, showing "extensive and durable connections across Asia, exemplifying a rich but nearly unknown history of Sino-Philippine entanglement" (p. 2). Here, he managed to highlight the transnational flow of sports through the movement of products, people, knowledge, and paradigms of competition. Additionally, Guingona presented ways for scholars outside sports history to use sports in the enrichment of their research. For example, sports history can contribute to the history of Philippine nationalism, given the connections between international sporting events and nation-building projects. It could also provide insights into economic histories (spending on sports infrastructure, events, and products), linguistics (the use and evolution of unique sports terms), foreign relations, medicine and public health, and so on.

Another topic where scholarly conversation has circulated around primary sources would be Filipino Martial Arts (FMA). Enjoying widespread practice in the Philippines, FMA organizations have long sought to legitimize their disciplines as both a serious system of fighting and a combat sport culturally unique to the Philippines. This has led to many attempts at rooting fighting traditions in earlier time periods—or even historical actors—and can best be observed in the literature on *arnis de mano*.

Typically referred to as *arnis*, the Filipino folk fencing style was declared the national martial art and the national sport of the Philippines in 2009 via Rep. Act No. 9850. *Arnis* is typically distinguishable by its nature as an art of stick fighting, with sticks commonly wielded as a pair. Due to its popularity among American martial artists, several books on *arnis* have been published in the United States (Inosanto, Johnson, and Foon, 1980; Diego and Ricketts, 1999; Galang, 2005). Much like these publications, works in the Philippines have tended to be descriptive and instructional, focusing on the artform's styles and levels of mastery (Yambao, 1957; Lema, 1989; Sulite, 1993; Presas, 1994 and

1996; Somera, 1998). A few authors have also attempted to trace its origins in Filipino cultural history (Wiley, 1997; Jocano, 1997; Nepangue and Celestino, 2007). More recent scholarship has sought to conceptualize the *arnisador* identity within a martial arts system involving stick, blade, and unarmed forms of fighting (Cruz, 2018) as well as examine instances when *arnis* represented Filipino national identity through film (Gonzales, 2020).

Notably, articles by Reidan Pawilen (2020; 2024) and Andrea Rollo (2023) seem to be the only direct “conversation” between scholars using primary sources. Outside of FMA, one would be hard-pressed to find discussions between Filipino historians of sports. Ultimately, there are only a few scholars who have fully investigated the political, cultural, or social contexts of sports during different periods in Philippine history.

Contextualization and Demystification

Nick Joaquin—prolific writer, prominent journalist, and an authority on Filipino culture—wrote an overview of Filipino athletic history in his essay “Portrait of the Filipino as Athlete,” published in the inaugural issue of *Filipino Athlete: The National Fitness and Sports Digest* in 1984. The magazine was part of the celebrations surrounding the inaugural *Palarong Pilipino*, which was a Marcos-era rebranding of the annual national games known as the *Palarong Pambansa*.

Much like how the *Palarong Pilipino* did not outlive the Marcos dictatorship, Joaquin’s essay was largely forgotten amidst the larger corpus of his work. It began with excerpts from the accounts of Spanish friars commenting on the physical attributes of island natives, highlighting the combat-adjacent nature of Filipino physical prowess. After barely a single page, the narrative abruptly entered the American era’s establishment of playgrounds, physical education in public schools, and participation in the Olympics. The rest of the essay—nearly three out of the four total pages—alternated between boxing icons and college basketball stars or tournaments from the 1920s to the 1960s, before ending with a quaint observation: “The Filipino as athlete has come a long way since the days of the lightest, swiftest runners who swam like fishes that the early Europeans observed kicking a hollow ball with their feet” (Joaquin, 1984, p. 14).

Joaquin’s narrative shows that much of the Filipino sporting past remained opaque as late as 1984. Even today, popular knowledge of Philippine sports in the 20th century remains entwined in myths, mostly due to the absence of proper historical contextualization. A useful contribution of historians to Philippine sports studies would be their ability “to expose the myths that bedevil the public’s conception of sports history” (Vamplew, 2021, p. 17), and such demystification can

be observed in the case of Rizal and his supposed practice of *arnis de mano*.

For decades, there has been a trend of sports enthusiasts claiming that Rizal practiced or taught *arnis de mano*. Many of these claims have been perpetuated online within FMA groups or forums. Thus Pawilen (2020) examined the idea of Rizal as a martial artist, investigating extant biographies and selected letters of the national hero for mentions of his physical activities before cross examining them against the most popular sources claiming Rizal was an *arnisador*. He concluded that Rizal most likely did not practice *arnis* and that the myth was a result of years-long nostalgia as well as efforts by practitioners to legitimize their martial art by associating it with symbols of national significance.

Rollo (2023) presented a contrasting view, insisting upon Rizal's knowledge of *arnis* and concluded that the national hero was, in fact, an *arnisador*. Rollo does so by trawling through Rizal's memoirs, novels, and epistolary correspondences with family members, friends, and fellow reformists, which was followed by philological analyses of translations and mistranslations of the primary sources. Crucial also were Rollo's readings of various biographers of Rizal who talked about his hobbies and physical exploits. Ultimately, Rollo reveals a clear series of documentary evidence to suggest a bias by researchers towards assuming a completely Western lineage to Rizal's martial practices – that is, a European style of fencing, boxing, wrestling, and pistol shooting. My own work is guilty of propagating such implicit biases (Perez, 2020).

This is not to say that Rollo endorsed the extant myths in FMA spheres. He noted that FMA books, magazines, and website “contain so much unfounded information on their history and origins” (Rollo, 2024, p. 108). He was also aware of how literature on *arnis*, published during the early years of contemporary Philippine history, “was a result of a nationalist sentiment among practitioners” (pp. 134-135). Yet he argued that the community's mythologizing created biases in the perception of academics towards the post-war period – rife as it is with nationalist projects in all sectors of Philippine society – resulting in FMA scholars automatically considering claims of Rizal's *arnis* practice to be “one of many promotional attempts to instill ‘Filipino pride’ among practitioners,” being quick to associate pieces of historical information with “the remaining falsehoods, myths, and legends spread during the same historical period about the origins and development of Filipino martial arts.” (p. 135)^{iv}

However, as rigorous and insightful as his work is, Rollo's claims are not airtight. For example, he overemphasized oral recollections of

sources far removed from Rizal as a child.^v More importantly, Rizal himself left no mention of martial arts in any of his writings even though he took many opportunities to showcase the culture and history of his homeland to an international audience.^{vi} Rizal was also prideful to an extent, in his own way, towards his physical capabilities, especially in shooting (Perez, 2020). Yet *arnis de mano* never comes up in his voluminous correspondence with family or fellow reformers. Since then, Pawilen has also written another article on *arnis* (2025), where he ended up challenging two of Rollo's claims: that "*moro-moro* was essentially an '*arnis game*' during Rizal's time" (p. 511) and that "*espada y daga* represents an authentic Filipino style, despite its foreign name" (p. 512). The rest of Pawilen's article focuses on the rich practice of *arnis* by Filipinos during the American colonial period using the Southeast Asian Newspapers open-access digital collection.

This small back and forth between Rollo and Pawilen is a promising sign that Philippine sports history is fertile ground for meaningful exchanges between students of history. It is also a reflection of many of the myths ascribed to *arnis* by the FMA community, and which are sure to exist within the popular histories of other sports as well. The rigorous interrogation of primary and secondary sources helps demystify the sporting past and reveal instances of implicit, yet pervasive, biases woven into historical narratives, whether consciously or not.

"Sporting myths develop as nostalgia clouds memory. Indeed, all sports appear to have a 'golden age,' usually beyond living memory. Many sports commentators allude to a previous era in particular sports, or in sport generally..." (Vamplew, 2021, pp. 17-18). Historians can challenge these myths, whether they are naturally emerging or deliberately constructed, by scrutinizing them under a microscope of source analysis and critical reasoning.^{vii} Such work is crucial, especially in activities that inspire the strongest emotions in its participants.

History can provide evidence to set events and incidents in their proper context...not everything in modern sport is new. Indeed, the sporting past has shaped the sporting present, since all sports have some inheritance from the past, be it rules, governing bodies, styles of play, competitions, or equipment (pp. 13-14).

Sports reflect fundamental characteristics of the societies that play them. They are symbolic of how people spend their money and view their leisure time. They provide insights into the rituals of a community of spectators. Their rules shape the way athletes play, and the way athletes play shape what is entertaining for fans to watch. Sports offer a unique lens to study human behavior and the worlds we create.

For example, many take for granted basketball's association with Filipino masculinity. From barefoot street ballers to the strong physiques and rugged personalities of celebrity athletes, basketball is identified with markers of manliness across the Philippines. However, it was originally more popular with women, even earning a reputation for being a "sissy game" among its detractors (Antolihao, 2017, p. 75). The indoor nature of basketball, and its emphasis on team play, was thought to be a milder activity perfect for the physical education of schoolgirls. Yet something happened between 1910, when it was officially included in the physical education curriculum of public schools, and today. Something similar happened with volleyball, although it was gendered in the opposite direction. The non-contact sport was invented in 1895 when all the bumping and jolting in basketball was proving too strenuous for middle-aged businessmen (International Volleyball Hall of Fame, 2024). Since then, volleyball in the Philippines has grown to become highly competitive and, curiously, highly gendered — it is now a feminine space assumed for women and male members of the LGBTQ+ community. Again, this transformation over the course of decades would require careful study.

Race is another aspect of sports history in the Philippines. ^{viii} During the Spanish period, children's games like *sungka* or spinning tops, together with gambling activities like cockfighting and the card game *panguingue*, tended to resist cross-class — and therefore cross-race — syncretization. Many of them remained *indio* pastimes (Agoncillo, 1990; Camagay, 1992; Scott, 1994; Medina, 2005). Race became a more prominent social category in the country with the sudden establishment and expansion of the U.S. empire in the 19th century (Kramer, 2006), so it should be unsurprising that racialized rhetoric was very present during the introduction of modern sports into the Philippines (Beran, 1989; Gems, 2006; Antolihao, 2017). Racial tensions between Asian countries also existed outside of the imperial relationship with America. During the 1927 Shanghai FECC, the Chinese and Filipino football teams came to blows in a brawl that soon involved the thousands of Chinese spectators. The local press coverage of the event painted the Filipinos as a "brutish and violent" team, while Chinese officials warned Chinese women a post-event banquet not to go home with any of the rowdy and backward Filipino men (Morris, 2004, pp. 97-98). In the 1934 FECC, a Chinese commentator wrote a column rife with racialized imagery, even comparing the Filipino athletes to monkeys when the Philippine team beat China in the second round of the basketball tournament (Guingona, 2024, p. 208).

Finally, the study of sports itself can also fill gaps in Philippine history. Physical Education has always been an integral part of public education, and sports have been an avenue for governments to create

healthy generations of new citizens since the American colonial period. The history of public health would involve fitness initiatives where sports are concerned. The history of science includes sports technology and knowledge about human kinetics. Studies of leisure culture are not complete without cultures of play. Insights into spectatorship and mass media consumption can be mined from patterns of behavior of sports fans. Gender, social stratification, economic cycles — the list goes on and on and the topics are as varied as the primary sources available for study.

Primary Sources for Sports History

To the wider public, collecting trading cards may look like a niche hobby only tangentially related to sports culture. However, Sanchez (2023) insists that collecting cards of various athletes provides insights into the complexity of Philippine history and its diaspora. They offer snapshots of powerful moments in history, like how the undersized Filipino Olympians fought for the ball against Mexico in 1936, which was the first time basketball was played in the Olympics. Cards also serve as interesting gateways to historical research, even forming the first steps to exploring challenging periods of colonialism and imperialism.

Historians know that material evidence is just as essential to historical narratives as archival texts, and sports history boasts a rich pool of artifacts to examine. Changes in sporting equipment show the evolution of sports over time, usually due to changes in rules, while such rules themselves can be the product of public outcry or political pressure. The development of American football's panoply of protective gear comes to mind. Sports venues also stand testament to the historical forces that built them: the Rizal Memorial Sports Complex is rife with the history of a nation attempting to modernize itself under the shadow of imperial America and, later, rebuilding itself after the destruction caused by the Pacific War. Such sources are ripe subjects for visual inquiry, which offers unique dimensions to social and cultural research on sports. Such methods would also include an analysis of symbols and their meaning within the physical design artifacts big and small.

This visual inquiry can be applied to the case of the Second Asian Games, which Manila hosted in 1954. While the games were a spectacle much welcomed by a post-war urban population, it was also a chance for Filipino leaders to broadcast messages about the country to the regional neighbors they were hosting. The Rizal Memorial Coliseum and adjoining facilities had been restored, and an estimated 300,000 people attended the Games. In front of this crowd, the Philippines had a coming out party that displayed cultural symbols of a unique Filipino identity separate from any of its former colonizers. For example, teachers

and students in mass demonstrations during the opening and closing ceremonies wore traditional outfits like the *barong Tagalog* and *baro't saya* (Huebner, 2016, pp. 134-136).

Among the material artifacts from the games were the trophies and medals awarded to the athletes. The commemorative medals are of particular interest since they featured both Western and Asian symbols. The front was a half-naked athlete holding a flag, aligned with the symbolism used by the broader Olympic movement. Meanwhile, the back showed Filipinas — the personified allegory of the country — in a seated pose traditionally held by Nike, the Greek Goddess of Victory. In her hands was held the Philippine coat of arms and a palm leaf, while sampaguita, the national flower, was featured heavily in the design. Behind Filipinas was a volcano and a river (identified by Huebner as Mt. Mayon and Pasig, respectively). The combined images signaled that the Philippines was a "free country" belonging to the "free world," showcasing a unique identity while simultaneously reinforcing its alliance with Asian democracies during the Cold War (pp. 137-139).

There is plenty of archival material to choose from as well. Newspapers always have sports pages painting a rich tapestry of sports narratives waiting to be retold within the context of their wider histories. The minutes of the annual meetings of the Philippine Amateur Athletic Federation (PAAF) provide key insight into the thoughts and motivations of national leadership in the establishment and reestablishment of sports programs from the 1930s to the 1950s but the Federation's official publication — a magazine called *The Filipino Athlete* — is a rich supplement to understand the leadership's communications with the public. Copies of these documents can be readily accessed at the Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center Library. Meanwhile, sports pages in the 1980s were not just rife with the victories of *Gintong Alay* athletes but also routinely highlighted the connections such achievements to the administration and the cronies who funded the program (Perez, 2024). The Philippines also has its fair share of laws that sought to impose order onto the activities of the sporting public, the professional leagues, and its elite athletes. Ateneo's Mickey Ingles has made a space for himself writing about Philippine laws on sports and athletes and legal historians may wish to add their own research into picture.^{ix}

The central role played by schools in sustaining organized sports activities means that many such written records can be found in their archives. School papers, athletic scholarships, grade requirements, expectations or stereotypes of student-athletes, funding matters, alumni connections, the conceptualization and negotiation of an identifiable "school spirit" on campus — all these could be the start of new and exciting research opportunities for historians old and new. Sporting

events would also likely have souvenir programs, posters, pamphlets, medals, trophies, and tickets that marked their existence. Television coverage of these events would further add to the avenues of visual inquiry. All of it could be further enriched by quantitative data on fan demographics, ticket sales across different time periods, or franchise ownership in professional leagues.

There is, to wit, a cornucopia of material sources to study. Hopefully, these sources will lead to the development of new methodologies for research or new insights into old topics.

Conclusion: A Call for Conversation

Playing and watching sports continues to change lives. So many professional athletes sign multimillion-dollar contracts every year. So many student-athletes are recruited into college sports programs with dreams of securing better lives for themselves and their families. Across the past century, states have sunk vast amounts of resources in time, money, and manpower to host Olympic Games. Sports have also been a driving force in technological innovations and scientific knowledge on the human body. Today, across the globe, millions of people buy tickets or pay for streaming subscriptions to watch sports live. They spend money on merchandise to proclaim their team allegiance. They pray, they organize schedules, they forge communities, and they even riot because of sports. Sports affect economies. They form class identities. They create entire subcultures. Sports matter to modern life in a way that few phenomena do today.

We saw some of this magic in the Philippines when Pacquiao was at his prime. Whenever Pacman fought, Filipinos stayed indoors to watch and left the streets of our urban centers bare of traffic. Such power cannot be denied. It must be studied.

Of course, calling for the relevance of the sub-field may undermine the very mission of showcasing the importance of studying sport history. Perhaps simply *doing* sports history would have sufficed. However, I myself was drawn to the sub-field because I encountered typical state-of-the-field literature surveys like the ones written by Bass, Hill, and Holt. For Filipino scholars who may be wondering where to start their research, an article about the extant knowledge in the field serves as a much-needed signpost to accelerate their contributions to the discipline.

The scholarly analysis of sports has been underutilized long enough in the Philippines that I suspect most academics hesitate to enter the field for one reason or another. Maybe they think one must be a sports fan to analyze it properly, or perhaps the idea of keeping

sports an ideologically pure realm of mass enjoyment has embedded itself unconsciously in many people's minds. No matter the reason, there remain many questions waiting to be asked about sports in the Philippines. Perhaps now, more than ever, historians are in prime position to answer them.

Bionote

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Endnotes

i Mangan's work was essential in forwarding the idea not just of the British origin of many sporting values and traditions but also of locating much of sports development outside of Europe within 19th century the routes of empire.

ii The anthology covered a wide range of subalternity, including indigenous sporting forms and traditions, the indigenization of cricket, the imperial tendency to Orientalize the athletic victories of the colonized, sports outside the "civilizing mission" of 19th century imperialism, how contested sporting spaces transform urban areas, how sports history challenges to dominant ideas on nation and gender, the transformation of Asian attitudes towards modern sports over time, and how sports could serve as forces of division and integration, as seen in the case of the Anglo-Indian community's history.

iii Such trajectories would include reconciling the difference in periodization of Asian sports history within the Western-dominated traditions of world sport history; focusing on the "sportization" process within the Asian region by utilizing comparative studies of modernization among different Asian nations; the promotion of a holistic view of Asian sports history unique to the region; and lastly, the enrichment of already extant research on Asian sports history by Western scholars who, regardless of their expertise, remain external to the field due to linguistic and cultural barriers.

iv Early authors of FMA books had a tendency of uncritically linking their martial art to Filipino national heroes. The most egregious of such myths would be that Lapulapu, vanquisher of Magellan in 1521, was a practitioner of arnis himself.

v Rollo privileges Sixto Orosa's book *Jose Rizal: Man and Hero* for details about Rizal's childhood practice of *arnis de mano*, using only translation notes as a justification for his choice. This, despite an important event being received from an oral source several times removed: witnessed by a neighbor in Calamba, who was the father of Dr. Conrado Ustariz, who was interviewed by Sixto Orosa, who then published his book in 1963 in English.

vi For example, Rizal's eagerness to showcase the complexity of a pre-colonial society and culture led him to several exaggerations of native capacity of canon-making and shipbuilding in his annotations of Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (Ocampo, 1998). He engaged with the known "Philippinist" scholars of his time and his novels provide glimpses of a unique lowland Filipino identity that was quite different from Spanish culture, no matter how Hispanized. That he would leave no direct mention of a native martial art that, according to Rollo, he was actually quite good seems, to me, quite implausible given what we know of the man.

vii My own work in sports history has similarly challenged a long-accepted myth in Philippine sports history. Drawn by stories about Philippine sports' "golden age" during the 1980s, I investigated the elite sports program called Project Gintong Alay. Archival research of sports pages, presidential decrees, and magazine interviews led me to conclude that, while Gintong Alay was a

well-conceptualized athletic program that efficiently used resources and put the athletes' needs first, it was ultimately funded by the ill-gotten wealth of the presidential family's closest allies – the infamous Marcos cronies. The sports renaissance of the 1980s cannot be separated from the dictatorial regime that made it possible, a regime seeking new avenues of legitimacy during a time when its authority was crumbling and opposition against it was mounting (Perez, 2024).

viii Sports have a dual nature of unifying and dividing people, and the contradictions of such essence can best be seen in international competitions between countries. Metaphors of conquest are rarely absent in such parlance, and – in the most extreme cases – racial identity can become a banner around which to rally the national community in its bid for respect and relevance in the modern world. Such forces continue to be relevant today, as the hiring of foreign coaches, trainers, naturalized players, and Fil-foreigners remain sore spots for many coaches and athletes across different national teams (Blanco, 2016; 2023).

ix Mr. Ingles describes himself as a “student-athlete-turned-lawyer-and-novelist.” His blog can be found at <https://www.mickeyingles.com>.