

# Introduction

JOHN BALE, METTE K. CHRISTENSEN  
AND GERTRUD PFISTER

This is a book of stories about sports-persons. These include sports stars, sports people who are not quite so famous, and relatively unknown physical education teachers and sports scientists. The stars have been the objects of much biographical writing. After all, stars are famous and well-known. Writing about an anonymous educationist, on the other hand, is often termed a life-history and anonymity is usually a requirement of research methodology.

In the chapters that follow, questions are raised about writing biographies in the academic world of sports studies. It does not set out to be a methodological treatise but through the writing of lives in sports does raise questions of method. Sports biographies are a feature of both academic and popular writing. John MacAloon's (1981) biography of Pierre, Baron de Coubertin, is a splendid example of the former. Such a book could never have been bought in a high street bookshop. Recent popular biographies of footballer David Beckham (e.g. Burchill 2002) on the other hand, are easily available over the counter of a high street or airport bookstore. Beckham, however, has also been the object of academic 'biographical' work (e.g. Whannel 2001, Cashmore 2002). And, of course, it is often difficult to disentangle the 'academic' from the 'popular'. Roger Bannister's (1954) *First Four Minutes*, an autobiography (if it is possible to call it that, at the age of 25) written by a scholar, was, in its time, popular but not populist. Ultimately, the distinction between 'academic' and 'popular' is somewhat spurious: Given the ultimate problem of representation all such representations are stories. Some sports 'biographies', an example being James McNeish's (1986) story of the 1936 Olympic 1,500 metres champion, Jack Lovelock, blur the distinction between biography and novel, between 'fact' and 'fiction', producing what some have termed 'faction'.

Are sports biographies different, in any way, from those dealing with people from the non-sporting realm? Several writers feel that the written lives of sports stars are de-politicised. Földessi (1995), in a secondary analysis of Hungarian Olympians' autobiographies notes that what was important in the written lives of the sports-people was the Olympic competitions,

not the traditional sequences of life. McNeish (1991) likewise noted that international athletes were ‘unpolitical and self-worshipping’, unaware of ‘events occurring under their noses’. However, while these may be characteristics of the sports biography, it is difficult to argue that such attention to personal performance would be any less lacking in the biographies of, say, film-stars.

Another characteristic of sports biographies is that they often fail to reflect a *life* but rather a *career*. Sports participants, be they stars, physical education teachers or sports scholars, have bodies and minds that, in time, result in them being no longer able to take part in the activity that made their biography worth-while. Again, however, the same thing could be said of the film star or rock singer. Such biographies are obviously partial but, perhaps no less partial than many other works that claim to be a life story – a broader biography that seeks to record or represent a life.

The media analyst, Garry Whannel (2002) has recently dealt with the biographical writing of sports celebrities in his *Media Sports Stars*. He suggests that the range of functions in the ‘narrativisation’ of careers in sports stars’ biographies moves in a rise-and-fall pattern that highlights the inevitable loss of sporting powers. Biographies, such as those by Bannister and the footballer, Eric Cantona, end at a time in life when each athlete was at the height of his prowess. In fact, as Whannel observes, sports biographies and autobiographies often appear following a period of success, sometimes quite early in a star’s career. Sport biographies tend to follow a familiar formula. Analysis, interpretation and insight are marginalised or sacrificed in favour of the economics of the book trade that often requires that the work be produced rapidly. The British biographer of Sir Alex Ferguson, Michael Crick (2002), noted that many sports biographies have more to do with public relations and merchandising than with stringent method. Anecdote, gossip and hyperbole are frequently found. Few sports biographies have resulted from lengthy research projects; instead they are often banal and cliché-ridden. None of this, however, necessarily distinguishes sports biographies from those of other popular entertainers.

Whannel (2002) suggests there are several types of sports biography. Many are ‘ghosted’ – in essence, authored by journalists. As noted earlier, there are relatively few sports biographies that are written by professional academics, though there are many exceptions. The works of MacAloon and Cashmore have already been noted but others come readily to mind – Bill Baker (1986) on Jesse Owens and Hans Bonde (2001) on Niels Bukh, for example. Another categorisation is applied more to the celebrity than the

sports person per se. Whannell (2002, 117) suggests these various types of sports celebrity biography: ‘exposé/hatchet job, the hagiography, the “real person” revealed, the chronological account, the “meaning” of the subject as capturing the *Zeitgeist* or reflecting his or her time, and the subject as creative genius’. Then again, biographies can be characterised on the basis of the ‘kind’ of person they are describing – ‘the good boy’ (e.g. Roger Bannister), ‘the bad boy’ (George Best) or the ‘pretty boy’ (David Beckham). In such cases material included about the object of the biography goes beyond the sporting, especially in cases of the ‘bad boys’. Indeed, part of the attraction of such books is the extra-sporting antics in which such sports-people are involved.

The life-history is different from the biography. For a start, the former is more associated with academic work in the social sciences whereas the academic biography resides more obviously in the humanities. While one might look for order among a number of respondents, the other seeks insight and understanding of the human condition. The life-history approach has however increasingly developed in different directions. In the social sciences one talks about the turn to biographical methods (Chamberlayne *et al.* 2000) as a trend towards the agent perspective in order to reveal the smaller history as a representation of the bigger history. Here the life-history of ordinary, usually unknown persons is not always regarded in order of time and events, but also in order of space and relations. In educational research the life-history approach is used both as a scientific method by doing qualitative research, interviews about narratives and biographical constructions in educational contexts (Kvale 1997) and as a didactical approach to include the live-history of the learner in the learning process (Alheit, Bron-Wojciechowska *et al.* 1995). The so-called biographical learning has a strong motivation in adult education.

Especially within the research field of physical education and PE teachers the biographical turn has emerged as a way of understanding the meaning of being a sports-person both physically, professionally, educationally and personally. The British writer Andrew Sparkes, and his work on PE teachers’ life-histories and narratives of the body in sport (Sparkes 1992, 1999, Sparkes and Silvennoinen 1999), has inspired several of the writers in this book. This may be because in the bodily-biographical focus of this kind of work, the forms of presentation are made up of a wide range of genres. We see short stories, poems, essays, autoethnographical ‘faction’ etc. as representations of life-histories. The life-history of a person is however always a *told* story, and in that sense dependent on the very presence of this person,

which makes the life-history approach itself a relational research method. The presence of the person rarely exits in biographical research yet in both biography and life history there is the common problem of ‘writing the body’ and the centrality of body-culture in peoples’ lives. Indeed, Crick (1996) makes a reasoned case for avoiding the object of the biography on the grounds that such contact can create a sense of obligation. The ‘unauthorised’ biography or the independent biography avoids the many problems of cooperation. For the ethnographer, cooperation might be thought of as essential.

A crucial problem characterising all written work is that of representation (or re-presentation). Much has been done in recent years to explore ways of inscribing the body and its movement cultures on the written page. The work of Sparkes and Silvennoinen (1999) and Sparkes (2002), for example, has been central to this quest. Rarely, however, have the skills of a writer coincided with that of a career in sports. Roger Bannister and John MacAloon came close to being sports persons who could write but few approaches match that of the extraordinary autobiography of Leslie Heywood (1998), a former distance runner and today a professor of English. Likewise, as noted earlier, academic-biographical approaches to those in the world of sports remain limited.

The purpose of this collection is to alert students and teachers working in the fields of sports history, sports sociology and educational studies to some of the problems and potentialities of (auto)biographical work.

## Plan of the Book

Each essay in this collection (explicitly or implicitly) deals with problems of writing sports-people’s lives. These essays could be said to fall along a spectrum from those dealing with anonymous individuals, whose anonymity results from the confidentiality requirements of a social scientific research methodology, to those leaning more towards the literary-historical traditions of ‘conventional’ biographical writing. However, these examples are polar extremes and none of the essays fails to recognise problems of sport-biography. Indeed, several focus explicitly on exemplifications of these problems.

The first essay by Birgitte Possing sets the scene for all historical biographical work. Possing reminds us of the problems posed by the biographical mode: The possibility of myth-making, the tension between the historical biography and the biographical novel, the danger of de-human-

izing biography and the problem of making biography a ‘respectable’ genre. Her essay is an introduction to biography as a genre and provides a sound starting point for the essays that follow.

The next two chapters focus on rather specific problems. In John Bale’s essay on the sports-scientist, Ernst Jokl, he first raises the question of how one obtains a ‘true portrait’ of the person being represented. Bale, in an overview of Jokl, identifies several layers of ‘truth’, each of which could theoretically emerge as research progresses. ‘The truth’, it seems, is as much a function of the author’s diligence as of the object’s life. The second problem is the danger of relying on close family relatives for information and the ethical questions that might arise from including some aspects of the private life of the object of the study. Bale also recognises the possibility of ‘playing with’ his material – ‘standing back to look at it in one way and another, then seizing swiftly the image ... lest it should vanish and be difficult of recovery’ (O’Connor 1993). In a sense, Bale’s approach is a ‘geographical biography’, stressing as it does the out-of-placeness of the work’s object, Ernst Jokl.

Hans Bonde addresses some of the characteristics of ‘the historical biography’ outlined in Possing’s chapter. By examining the life of Niels Bukh, the Danish advocate of gymnastics and one of the major body-cultural figures of inter-war Europe, a number of important questions about biographical method are explored. Having described and interpreted aspects of Bukh’s life, Bonde addresses some questions of sports biography and returns to some of the points raised in Possing’s introduction. He suggests that there has been something of a resurgence in sports biography and concludes with an interesting attempt at a ‘Ten “commandments” of the historical biography’.

A methodological theme is also addressed by Mette Krogh Christensen who introduces the idea of ‘the anonymous biography’ as a possible interpretation of doing qualitative interviews and analysing interviews as single cases, but subordinated to the philosophy of (positivistic) science: namely the idea of anonymity and objectivity as a golden rule for ‘real’ science. Christensen suggests that the qualitative interview and the biography can be seen as two different research approaches, representing and moving between two poles in the same methodological paradigm or continuum: namely the synthesis of agent and structure in the life-story. This essay builds upon a qualitative interview study among Physical Education teachers and their experience of the ageing body as professional teachers and as sport-persons. Fiona Dowling follows a similar theme but uses a more experimental

approach to representation, a strategy also taken by Martti Silvennoinen. With the intention of *telling* the reader how life as a PE teacher was, rather than only *showing* various aspects of the PE teachers' lives, Dowling uses different writing genres such as ethnographic fiction and poetic transcription. She presents a poem as a way to recreate the emotions of social experience and questions thereby the usefulness of a more traditional realist tale. Silvennoinen, as the third writer in this book dealing with PE teachers, takes an autobiographical approach, looking back on his early life as a boy, a sportsman and a teacher. Silvennoinen puts the question: what are we talking about when we discuss a recollected, recognized, relived and reconstructed body or a body considered as a locus of opportunity and a means of change and of making dialogue and communication possible? He answers the question by introducing the *interpretive sensitivity* of one's own body as a methodological perspective. In his essay Silvennoinen presents various styles of body-representations: a photograph, a story and a poem.

These essays on alternative interpretations of the traditional biography are followed by two essays on women's lives in sport. Else Trangbæk presents her thoughts on biographical narratives about acculturation, education and training. From a historian's viewpoint she explores three different socialisation arenas: the high school, the gymnastics institute, and the sports club, and how the arenas play an important role in the life-story of women in the period 1920-1950, told by the same women 50 years later. Leena Laine also focuses on women's life-stories. First, she adopts a collective biographical approach and secondly uses life-histories by focusing on two single cases: a gymnastics leader and a skier. Her point is that different types of sport (gymnastics and skiing) give shape to women's lives in different ways.

Gertrud Pfister's chapter not only exemplifies the situation of the biographer within the biography but also raises the question why an author is drawn to a particular biography for research. After a fine introduction to the classical problem of text and interpretation, Pfister concludes that the personality of the author, along with his or her emotions, must find its way into biographical texts, because biographies (almost) always are written by an admirer of the biographed person – be it a sports star, a hero or a heroine.

Richard Holt addresses the question of who might be sufficiently worthy of a sporting biography. He takes two British sportsmen, Jackie Milburn, a professional and international English football (soccer) player and the Olympic sprinter, A.G.K. Brown. A further important dimension of Holt's chapter, we think, is his attempt to edge towards the differentiation of sports biographies, suggesting that some sports are more inclined to at-

tract biographical writing than others. He also suggests that the biography contributes to the making of the sports hero, rather than *vice versa*. In other words, the biography is used to promote celebrity. Additionally, he notes that sporting renown, though biography, is not sufficient to engender lasting public esteem. Another British sports hero forms the object of Jeffrey Hill's paper. During the immediate post-war years, one of the most well-known sportsmen in Britain was the cricketer (and footballer), Denis Compton. One aspect is the myth-making associated with Compton's written life, including his own autobiography. A working class boy from north London, he becomes textually transformed into what Hill terms 'the very hallmark of scientific modernity'.

Myth-making also features prominently in Niels Kayser Nielsen's essay on the Swedish soccer player, Lennart 'Nacka' Skoglund. In the final chapter Nielsen suggests that through Skoglund's rise from inner-city child to national soccer star, he acted as a metaphor for Sweden's social welfare system – 'what Sweden was able to show the rest of the world'. Here, biography is shown to be useful in history.

We feel that, taken together, the chapters that follow provide not only lively discussions of individual sporting lives but also important methodological and conceptual questions for writers in a variety of sporting and educational disciplines.

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