

# An enjoyable, well written, and very Canadian tome on sport, politics and society

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This collection of fourteen essays is dedicated to Bruce Kidd – athlete, activist and scholar. The contributions are separated into four parts – (1) Global Promises: The Contested Terrain of International Sport, (2) Continental Divides: Revisiting the Shaping of Sport in North America, (3) Local Contours: Debating Access to Physical Activity in Canadian Communities, and (4) Shifting Ground: Reconsidering the Role of the Public Intellectual in Sport. In his editorial introduction, Russell Field observes, ‘this collection pursues multiple avenues of inquiry into the cultural significance of sport: interrogating the deep interconnections of sport, popular culture, economic interests, the media, and the state...’ (p. 12). It does this in an informative, accessible and thought-provoking manner. All of the contributors are to be congratulated for their efforts.

*Russell Field (ed.)*  
**Playing for Change: The Continuing Struggle for Sport and Recreation**  
467 pages, paperback.  
Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press 2016  
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The overall focus of the book is resolutely Canadian. The majority of the contributors are Canadian and/or based in Canadian universities. However, the book is also outward looking not least because of the range of themes that are addressed, including the Olympic movement, high performance sport, social inclusion, ecology, public intellectualism, and social activism. Douglas Booth’s concluding chapter is the only one that addresses at length the contribution made by Bruce Kidd to sport studies and sport activism. As Booth argues, ‘Kidd is one of a select few to explicitly advocate history as a vehicle to raise political awareness and consciousness in sport with a view to effecting social change’ (p. 426). For those who are unfamiliar with Kidd’s life and work, it is worth reminding ourselves of certain salient details.

Born in 1943, he won gold and bronze medals for distance running at the British Empire and Commonwealth Games 1962, a year after being awarded the Lou Marsh Trophy presented annually to Canada’s top athlete. He graduated from the universities of Toronto and Chicago and then received an MA and a PhD from York University. He has gone on to become a globally recognised figure in sports history and a senior academic at the University of Toronto. His is an estimable career and yet it is fitting that his name does not appear on the cover of this book and nor are the contributors expected to use their essays to sing his praises. We can all probably think of other leading scholars in sports history and the sociology of sport who would demand nothing less from a book that was dedicated to them. Kidd’s presence is felt throughout but it is there in a quiet, modest and, one might say, Canadian way.

In addition, criticism, albeit gentle in tone, is permitted. Kidd’s enthusiasm for the sport for development and peace movement is certainly not dismissed out of hand. However, in his contribution, ‘Sport, Development, and the Challenge of Slums’, Rick Gruneau supports those locally-based activist groups which are regularly offered help from outside and emphasise in response the need for autonomy, for recognition that ‘coalitions of international, national and local elites cannot be trusted on their own to do the right thing for slum dwellers’ (p. 58), and for the absolute necessity of structural change if there is to be development for poverty reduction. The unselfconscious idealism of the global north is surely not enough.

*Room could surely have been found for contributions by scholars such as Mary Louise Adams, Margaret MacNeill, Nancy Theberge, Pirkko Markula and countless others.*

The most poignant essay in the collection is Hart Cantelon and Jim Riordan's analysis of the Sochi Winter Olympics and, specifically, the role of the Russian oligarchy in relation to funding the Games. This was to be one of the last essays which Riordan worked on before his death in 2012. It is pertinent to recognise in this review, therefore, the contribution of yet another towering figure in the field of sport studies, best known for his passionate work on sport in the former Soviet Union and its satellite states and for supporting Portsmouth Football Club through thick and thin.

As with all collections of this sort, readers will be drawn to those chapters that are of particular relevance to their own work. This is not to argue that these contributions are superior to others in the volume. However, I particularly enjoyed Stephen Hardy's discussion of the selling of ice hockey to the United States in the period 1875-1935, Colin Howell's examination of America's contested baseball hegemony from 1945-1955 with specific reference to Mexico, Quebec and the Caribbean, Parissa Safai's study of the struggle against barriers to opportunities for physical activity and sport in ethnocultural communities in Toronto, and Peter Donnelly and Michael Atkinson's chapter, 'Where History Meets Biography: Towards a Public Sociology of Sport'. Like Booth, Donnelly and Atkinson reflect on Bruce Kidd's personal and political activism noting that Kidd 'has not only championed the ideology of an interventionist, praxis-oriented, public sociology of sport, but he has translated that ideology into concatenated practice' (p. 369).

The book is not without its failings. Although gender and sexuality have never been major themes in Kidd's writing, it seems to me to be remiss that they are not discussed directly in a work that is sub-titled 'The Continuing Struggle for Sport and Recreation'. There are female contributors – Parissa Safai, Victoria Paraschak, Nancy Boucher and Patricia Vertinsky – but none of them focuses on gender politics. Room could surely have been found for contributions by scholars such as Mary Louise Adams, Margaret MacNeill, Nancy Theberge, Pirkko Markula and countless others. Without these voices a picture emerges (or is this just my vivid imagination working overtime?) of a group of good old boys sitting in a senior common room talking about hockey and the merits of the novels of Robertson Davies.

This is an enjoyable, well written book. I find it difficult to imagine it being used as required reading for undergraduate university courses, except perhaps in Canada. However, it is a book that would be worth reading by anyone with a serious interest in sport, the roles that it plays in society and the roles that it could conceivably play.

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