

## Four Histories About Early Dutch Football 1910-1920: Constructing Discourses

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The title of Nicholas Piercey's book is honest with regard to some of its ambitions: namely, this is not *a* history *of* Dutch football previous to 1920. Its aim is very different to providing a linear history of the early years of the sport in the Netherlands: instead, it is to give historians of sport a primer on both the challenges of archival research in the history of sport, and the limitations of long-form history. Piercey's conversational tone is accordingly very different from that used in typical historical monographs, one which he would say attempts too hard to create some kind of objective reality to fit a narrative which might not have existed in the first place. If his aim was to write a book (based on a PhD thesis) which is provocative and forces readers to think about many of the issues raised by having to make sense out of archival research, then he has largely succeeded. And, as UCL Press's price for the paperback edition is fairly cheap (not counting an open-access PDF of the text, which can be accessed from some universities), there is no reason why those scholars wanting to examine these issues should not get themselves a copy of Piercey's volume. Whether or not it will be to everyone's tastes is another matter. There are some fairly sizeable qualifiers with Piercey's work, namely with regard to the other major aim of his book: seeking to engage both historians *and* a wider audience with the potential postmodern approaches to history have to offer. On the contrary, some of Piercey's approaches towards that end here might actually *discourage* that.

Along with a sizeable introduction and a shorter conclusion (more on those later), the title hints at the basic structure of the book: there are four primary 'histories' (chapters two, three, four, and five) which ostensibly have four different foci on early-20th century football in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. These two cities were not chosen at random: not only are they the Netherlands' two biggest cities (and arguably two biggest football towns), but they have radically different post-Second World War histories, in terms of the preservation and rebuilding of infrastructure. In his first chapter, Piercey posits these post-war developments as a means of understanding that, as in the UK, football's history (or 'histories' perhaps, in this case) can be used as a means of understanding social change within rapidly-altering urban environments. There were plenty of places to play football in ostensibly municipal grounds in pre-First World War Rotterdam, but more densely-populated Amsterdam was a different story altogether. In both cities, a combination of public money and private subscriptions from wealthy donors ensured that one first-class football stadium in each

city would be built. Piercey correctly identifies the football stadia's influential patrons as being interested in what they would see as a kind of social improvement, an interest which undoubtedly involved a means of steering the moral message and civic identification of sport. In any respect, the Sparta Stadium in Rotterdam (home to the club of the same name) was viewed as a greater success than the new *Sportpark* in Amsterdam, whose poor turf and surrounding infrastructure was seen to be indicative of a less well-managed city, in the run-up to the War. The first 'history' works roughly within the form and framework of more traditional histories, as does the chapter four (the third 'history'), which examines the discourses (very much in the Foucauldian sense of the word) prevalent in the Dutch sporting media of the period. The subaltern discourses, as Piercey identifies them, include the construction of civic identities, 'amateurism' (around what unsurprisingly is a class-based fulcrum), timing, and discipline. The major sports papers in the west of the Netherlands were crucial in creating dialogue, of course, but it also had the effect of legitimising the country's fledgling national football association, the *Nederlandsche Voetbalbond* (NVB), as the central power within in early Dutch football.

The two other 'histories' will cause a far bigger stir. Within the history of sport (if we can refer to it as a 'discipline' rather than an 'area' within history, sport studies, or both), the precedent for the form, tone, and purpose of these two histories exists within Synthia Sydnor's still-controversial 1998 *Journal of Sport History* article on the history of synchronised swimming.<sup>(1)</sup> In chapter three, Piercey recalls his own experiences in attempting to research the biographical information of many of Rotterdam's leading footballers in 1914, the period in the immediate run-up to the start of the First World War, in which the Netherlands would eventually declare its neutrality. Attempts to obtain this information were understandably difficult, so Piercey's means of introducing these biographical details – and arguably enrich them – is to freeze-frame the lives of several footballers at the beginning of August 1914, examining where they might have been on a given day, their daily routines, and their relationships with other people. Piercey admits that elements of this are fictionalised: they are a means of speculating when only some pieces of the puzzle exist. It may be beyond the remit of this review to determine whether or not this 'history' meets some kind of literary standard, but it is nevertheless an intriguing experiment. The fourth 'history' (chapter five), meanwhile, features an ultimately fruitless quest by Piercey to ascertain what, if any, references to football are made in the diaries of Cornelis Johannes Karel van Aalst, the director of Amsterdam's *Sportpark* project. van Aalst was heavily involved in sport in the city, but was probably more known within civic circles for his links with Dutch international trade. Despite Piercey's initial excitement at discovering these diaries, the only connection they had with anything related to football was van Aalst's lobbying on behalf of JC 'Kick' Schröder, a former footballer for early Amsterdam club RUN Amstels Progress (RAP), who had become editor of *De Telegraaf* and had run afoul of the country's fuzzily-defined wartime neutrality laws, which forbade the press from expressing support for either side of the conflict. Piercey's two non-traditional histories do very well to introduce the political context which football took place in during the time period. They certainly present several alternative means of writing histories.

So, in many respects, Piercey's book is a success, if not always in providing a coherent recreation of football in Amsterdam and Rotterdam during the period, then at least in completing quite a bit of what he actually sets out to do: get those reading his book to ask questions about how they research history and how they end up composing it with the spare parts one finds in archives. Yet, he has another aim at which he is arguably less successful: democratising the form. Piercey believes that thinking about these other questions can allow history to be used as a medium for more radical, progressive reinterpretations that involve non-specialists. That, of course, is absolutely true. Piercey, however, takes a militant approach towards policing the boundaries between history and 'History': the thing that historians do at university (more on this point in a minute). The introduction and conclusion contain a lot of linguistic red herrings such as this, and it is questionable whether the punter on the street is going to be interested in how academics label the internal architecture of their workplaces and structures. I do not think, in many respects, most history academics based at universities would even dispute these problematic relationships, so reiterating a seemingly obvious point has the effect of making academics seem obsessed with themselves. Outwith the introduction and conclusion, Piercey still needs to find a more direct language to communicate in. If recent events have

proven that postmodernism's critique of 'truth' and 'facts' seems fully on point, its scholars have still not found a language to communicate in that is any more convincing than the 'mainstream' academic 'histories' they decry. I, for one, cannot see Albion Rovers or Stenhousemuir supporters, enjoying pies and Bovril out on the terraces on a cold, wet Saturday in the Scottish winter, paying too much attention to a debate about whether or not 'history' needs to be capitalised in different contexts.

Speaking of which, Piercey states that he is 'sceptical' of 'History'. In his mind, academic historians are gatekeepers of knowledge, and the way in which they research and compose history perpetuates a highly exclusive hierarchy. The history of sport, he states, has been too empiricist, and especially conservative and resistant to change. That might be so, of course – we have all experienced the problems of research described in Piercey's body text – but he does not actually cite examples of journals or academics' work which he finds insufficiently radical. In Piercey's introduction, his one in-text discussion of the historiography of sport is to Douglas Booth's 2005 book *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History*, considered one of the seminal postmodern texts on the history of sport.<sup>(2)</sup> Thus, historians of sport can assume that Piercey is including *you and me* within the 'royal you' of historians who are too square to understand what postmodernists are trying to do. Booth's work has been critiqued by the likes of Tony Collins, Allan Guttman (a bit too harshly), and (most eloquently) Martin Johnes, who shares many of the same criticisms of postmodernism with this reviewer.<sup>(3)</sup> However, a blanket criticism levelled by Piercey on a whole group of people working within a certain area implies that there is no need to listen to any of these authors anyway. A passive-aggressive approach towards critiquing a discipline/area does not actively seek any kind of debate, or indeed any meaningful critique of other work which exists on a given topic. It does not allow for the possibility that there is, in fact, *any* kind of pre-existing debate on conclusions, language, historiography, and form which is already taking place within the journals and monographs in that area. Excluding what appears in the endnotes, the authors that Piercey speaks of in the introduction are almost exclusively postmodern historians and theorists. It leads one to conclude that, despite attempting to engage other academic historians or democratising the production of history, Piercey's primary audience is within postmodernism's own echo chamber. Is the purpose of this book to revolutionise the way that histories of sport are researched and written, or is this solely an intellectual exercise?

Piercey has managed to convince himself of the novelty of his own work – and elements of it are highly original – but it does not exist in a vacuum. Some of the most beneficial aspects of postmodernism's influence can be seen in current generation of academic historians via their social media and blog posts, many of whom speak a great deal – and, like Piercey, in the first person – about the challenges they face regarding historical research and writing. Nowhere is digital media mentioned by Piercey, a development which arguably *does* change and add reflexivity to the productions of histories and historians, while conversely increasing the frequency at which 'alternative histories' (*a la* Kellyanne Conway) can be made easily available via a re-tweet. And of course, despite Piercey's admitting nerves about writing his 'history' of the Rotterdam football players, his book (to give one example) was released 32 years after Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*, a book which has caused many an argument on the subject of historical 'storytelling' in undergraduate history writing/historiography modules.<sup>(4)</sup> If this is old news for history students, those coming to the history of sport from outwith history might have a different perspective. For instance, despite Piercey's increasing suspicion throughout the book of the inherent power of sport as a force for social good, trained sociologists of sport (many of whom publish articles within the history of sport umbrella) may wonder why it took Piercey so long to finally reach a definitive conclusion about what Jay Coakley refers to as 'The Great Sport Myth'.<sup>(5)</sup>

There is a lot to recommend *Four Histories About Early Dutch Football*, in that it does manage to accomplish a great deal of what it sets out to do. Academic historians of sport will relate to many of the problems Piercey has faced when putting together his histories, and the book is accordingly useful for thinking about what alternative futures of the study and writing of history might be. It also effectively uses sport to provide snapshots of urban Dutch society at a crucial juncture of 20th-century history. The challenge for Piercey, then, along with other postmodernists, is to find a more populist, less alienating way of framing

some of the debates which they believe need to take place within history-at-large and academic history. Finding some kind of common language is crucial here, especially on a topic which has considerable resonance outside of academia, and a steadily increasing interest within it. Postmodernist histories of sport should not just be critical of other academic histories. They should ask the same critical questions of their own form and practice as of those within the 'History' practice; namely: What is the relevance of our work? Who are our primary and secondary audiences? How does our work explain the world we live in, and where might we be heading? If Piercey's work takes us down that road, then we will know it has succeeded.

## Notes

1. S. Sydnor, 'A history of synchronized swimming', *Journal of Sport History*, 25 (1998), 252–67.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. Booth, *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History* (Abingdon, 2005).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. T. Collins, 'Work, rest and play: recent trends in the history of sport and leisure', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42 (2007), 397–410; A. Guttmann, 'Review essay: the ludic and the ludicrous', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25 (2008), 100–12; M. Johnes, 'Archives, truths and the historian at work: a reply to Douglas Booth's "Refiguring the Archive"', *Sport in History*, 27 (2007), 127–35.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. N. Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA, 1984).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. Coakley, 'Assessing the sociology of sport: On cultural sensibilities and the great sport myth', *International Review of the Sociology of Sport*, 50 (2015), 402–6.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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