

The Origins of Working-Class Spectator Sport: Lancashire, England, 1870-1914

John K. WALTON

Ikerbasque / Universidad del País Vasco (EHU)

john_walton@ehu.es

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Abstract

This article examines the development of working-class commercial spectator sport in the English county of Lancashire, especially the areas where the cotton industry dominated in the south and east, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It argues that the growing popularity of professional Association football, coupled with similar developments in other sports, made this pioneer industrial area the location of a new kind of sporting culture, as part of the wider development of a working-class consumer society, and that this has global implications.

Key words: Sport; spectators; consumers; industry; working class; Lancashire.

Los orígenes del espectador de clase obrera en el deporte: Lancashire, Inglaterra, 1870-1914

Resumen

Este artículo investiga el desarrollo de los deportes comerciales para la clase obrera en el condado inglés de Lancashire, sobre todo en los distritos dominados por las fábricas de algodón en el este y el sur, hacia fines del siglo XIX y a principios del siglo XX. Propone que la popularidad creciente del fútbol, combinado con las innovaciones parecidas en otros deportes, construyó un modelo nuevo de cultura deportiva en este distrito industrial pionero, formando parte del desarrollo más amplio de una sociedad de consumidores de la clase obrera, con consecuencias de ámbito global.

Palabras clave: Deporte; espectadores; consumidores; industria; clase obrera; Lancashire.

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1. Introduction

This article examines the development of a pioneer professional and commercial sporting culture in an English industrial region. It argues that the cotton spinning and manufacturing district of the north-western county of Lancashire provided the necessary conditions of resources, competition and collaboration, of shared cultures and local loyalties, to become the crucible in which a novel culture of commercial

spectator sport, for overwhelmingly working-class audiences, could be forged. The argument applies particularly, but certainly not exclusively, to the rise of professional, commercial Association football, a sport which allowed professionalism in 1885, and established the Football League in 1888. Each innovation was strongly driven from the Lancashire 'cotton towns'. This is not to suggest that similar processes were not occurring elsewhere in Britain, as in (for example) the distinctive industrial environment of Sheffield. (Harvey, 1999, 2001) Moreover, in trying to establish a degree of primacy we should not lightly set aside the parallel development of professional baseball in (especially) the north-eastern United States, focused originally on New York and New Jersey, where an enduring professional league structure emerged as early as 1871 and crowds for National League games in 1885 might already top 10,000. (Burk, 2001, p. 10-14, 26, 92) The key question here is, perhaps: were the paying spectators drawn more from the 'middling classes' or from the swelling ranks of 'blue-collar' workers? This seems not to have been resolved. Nor should we dismiss the importance of commercial sporting provision at an earlier stage, including the employment of professional players, in other sports and settings in Britain, most obviously cricket in London and the south-east of England, and horse-racing, which attracted large working-class crowds in industrial areas from at least the dawn of the railway age. (Underdown, 2000; Huggins, 2000) Indeed, Adrian Harvey has argued that a 'unified' commercial sporting culture was already being created across England in the first half of the nineteenth century, with strong manifestations around Manchester; but this was based above all on horse-racing, pugilism and betting, and despite the increasing regularity of contests, it represents an older, more irregular, less disciplined sporting culture than the one under discussion here. (Harvey, 2004)

The argument advanced here, building especially on the impressive research of Lewis and later Swain, is that it was the Lancashire 'cotton district', and particularly a small area at its core on an axis between the towns of Bolton and Blackburn, that blazed the trail for the systematic commercialisation of sport through the development of leagues and the attachment of local people to 'their' clubs and teams, and that this was founded in the distinctive nature of regional society and popular culture. (Lewis, 1994, 1997, 2002; Swain, 2008, 2009) This argument can be extended to cricket as well as Association football: cricket leagues, whose matches were played on Saturday afternoons and whose teams hired one or at most two professional players, spread very rapidly across the 'cotton towns' from 1888 (when the Bolton Association was founded) through the early 1890s. Their strongholds were in exactly the area where professional Association football first took hold, slightly ahead of similar developments in West Yorkshire and with wider ramifications and greater strength in depth than in the Birmingham area, where the Birmingham and District League was also founded in 1888. (Sandiford, 1994; Vamplew, 1988, p. 59, 69, 122, 124, 177; Light, 2008, p. 64-78; Kay, 1970) Rugby football as a popular spectator sport was more a phenomenon of neighbouring West Yorkshire and south-west Lancashire, but when in 1895 most of its northern clubs seceded from the national Rugby Union to form the Northern Union, later known as Rugby League, those

'cotton Lancashire' clubs which had not gone over to the Association game were quick to join the new organization. The Northern Union was not originally 'professional' in the fullest sense: it was set up in opposition to the London-based Rugby Union's refusal to allow compensation for lost working time (and therefore pay) when travelling to matches. Middle-class amateurs could receive lavish expenses, but 'broken time' payments to working-class players were not to be countenanced. (Collins, 1998; Collins, 2009; Greenhalgh, 1992a; Greenhalgh, 1992b) Regional sports with a lower profile, such as crown green bowling (played on a convex surface of closely-cut grass sloping up to the centre), might also be assimilated into the argument: its professional tournaments, the Talbot (from 1873) and the Waterloo (from 1907), attracted big crowds of spectators and 'betting men' to the Blackpool public houses with attached mini-stadia where they took place, in a setting that was firmly identified with the popular holidays of the Lancashire 'cotton towns'. (Poole, 1982; Russell, 2004a, p. 239-40) The first governing body of crown green bowls, which was an important sport across much of northern England, covered the counties of Lancashire and Cheshire and was established in 1888. (Collins, Martin and Vamplew, 2005, p. 48, which is however wrong about the foundation date of the Talbot Handicap tournament).

Before developing this argument, which will have to take account of various cross-currents and nuances, we must provide some background and context on the area under consideration. The English county of Lancashire, which historically (until the local government reorganisation of 1974) included both Manchester and Liverpool, was at the core of a remarkable array of key developments in the making of the modern world. It was here, and particularly in the eastern and south-eastern part of the county, the triangle bounded by Preston, Colne, and the Ashton-under-Lyne and Stockport district to the south of Manchester, that the rise of the cotton textile industry, together with an interlinked array of mining and manufacturing activities including engineering, papermaking, chemicals, construction, and the provision of transport, lighting and heating, generated an early form of globalisation and transformed economies and societies far beyond its parochial confines. This was one emergent English industrial district among several, and it was only one model of industrial development within the county: in south central and south-west Lancashire industrialisation was more narrowly grounded in coal, chemicals, shipbuilding, import processing and the maritime activities of the great international and imperial port of Liverpool. But it was always ahead of its industrial contemporaries, such as North-East England or the West Riding of Yorkshire, in the development of popular institutions and spending power. (Walton, 1987).

An important and distinctive (though often neglected) aspect of the region's precocious development was the rise of the first working-class consumer society towards the end of the nineteenth century. At this time relatively high, stable and predictable family incomes enabled working people to combine a commitment to thrift (through savings banks and Co-operatives) and mutual insurance against ill-health and unemployment (through Friendly Societies and trade unions) with the ability to direct discretionary spending towards commercial enjoyment, in ways which

increasingly extended beyond the old staple of the public house. The rise of commercial sport as entertainment formed part of a wider pattern of provision, already developing from the 1820s onwards, which included music-hall (which was probably invented in Bolton in the early 1830s, rather than the London of the 1850s); travelling shows and fairgrounds; commercial pleasure gardens such as Manchester's Pomona and Belle Vue, or the 'weaver's seaport' at the reservoir of Hollingworth Lake; and popular seaside holidays, which expanded spectacularly from the 1870s, based on holiday savings clubs which funded the unpaid sojourns of several days or a week at the coast. (Poole, 1982; Walton, 1981; Colligan, 1998; Nicholls, 1992) These and other popular pleasures were not universally accessible: families with small children were squeezed until the older offspring began to earn, while poorly-paid unskilled or casual workers were unable to divert resources to paying for their fun, as were the elderly whose earning power declined. (Griffiths, 2001, p. 236-45) And the pleasures of the week-end and the holiday away from home were made accessible by a regular, disciplined regime of hard, demanding work, which included contributions from children (from an early age) and women, most obviously in their teens and early twenties but often through most of their working lives, especially in the weaving district in the northern part of the region. (Fowler, 2003, ch. 3) This made spectator sport, especially football, distinctive and potentially contentious: unlike music-hall or the seaside, sporting crowds were overwhelmingly masculine, and women were left at home with the children on Saturday afternoons while their husbands went to the match (and the public house) after leaving work at lunch-time. This does not seem to have inhibited the development of commercial sport alongside the more inclusive aspects of commercialised leisure in this setting. (Russell, 2004b).

The rise of this pioneer working-class consumer society followed on from the early traumas of industrialisation in the Manchester region. In this hitherto remote and little-regarded part of England the first industrial society was forged between the late eighteenth century and the First World War; but the breakthrough came in the early nineteenth century. Lewis Mumford's 'carboniferous capitalism', a smoky combination of coal-powered factories, sophisticated transport systems and specialised industrial towns, which were almost indistinguishable to the external observer but which expressed and sustained strong local identities, rivalries and civic pride, coalesced here at an earlier stage and on a more spectacular scale than anywhere else in Europe or the United States. By the 1830s and 1840s Manchester, that 'great human exploit', and its satellite towns had become the object of social investigation and revolutionary speculation, not least on the part of Friedrich Engels himself, who lived in the city and whose family firm was part of the process he was analysing. Poverty, public health, pollution, illiteracy, and the exploitation of female and child labour were at the core of contemporary concerns, even as commentators marvelled at the spread of technological innovation and the growth of productive forces. (Walton, 1987, ch. 6, 9)

From the middle of the nineteenth century, and especially during the last quarter of that century, living standards improved, first gradually, with fluctuations due to inflation and the depression associated with the 'Cotton Famine' of the early 1860s,

then steadily, impressively and cumulatively, as prices fell while wages held steady and work was rarely interrupted by industrial conflict, even in periods of depressed trade. (Walton, 1987, ch. 13) The development of the Saturday half-day holiday, in Manchester from 1845 and more generally in the aftermath of the Factory Act of 1850 which closed the cotton factories at 2 p.m. on Saturdays, thereby setting a transferable precedent, provided a vitally important space in the weekly calendar. (Bailey, 1978, p. 27; Harvey, 2004, p. 25) Griffiths' careful study of families and living standards in two industrial towns suggests that family incomes continued to hold up well in the early twentieth century, despite inflationary pressures, and that multiple sources of income within a family, often in more than one industry, helped to boost collective incomes and enhance a sense of security (despite the ever-present risk of injury and long-term illness) which helped to stimulate and justify consumer spending. (Griffiths, 2000, ch. 7) Moreover, his case-study towns of Bolton and Wigan were dominated by cotton spinning, coal mining and engineering, with fewer opportunities for women to earn a good wage than in the weaving industry further north, around Blackburn, an area which became a great centre both of football spectatorship and of the popular seaside holiday. (Lewis, 1997; Walton, 1981) Fowler's study of Lancashire cotton workers in the early twentieth century underlines the contrast between the southern cotton spinning area and the northern weaving district. In the former area, high family incomes were led by the earnings of male cotton spinners and engineering workers, and women's work in the preparatory processes of spinning was supplementary; whereas weaving offered uniquely high wages for women, who worked alongside the men, although high family incomes depended on both partners (and children) working and, ideally, on the husband having a skilled job or working as a supervisor ('overlooker') in the factory. (Fowler, 2003, pp. 43-8) But both of these patterns proved conducive to the rise of working-class consumerism, of which the enjoyment of spectator sport was an important facet.

The masculine, working-class crowd, presenting a sea of peaked cloth caps and a haze of tobacco smoke to the contemporary observer, was a constant feature of professional football from the 1880s to the First World War, and indeed beyond. (Taylor, 2008, p. 137) It had its counterparts in other sports. This is not to say that women or middle-class men were absent from these enclosures and arenas (organisation and management were middle-class preserves at the highest levels of commercial competitive performance), but to emphasize the overriding importance of the threepences and sixpences of working men, far more so than at the music-hall or on the pier. (Russell, 2004b; Poole, 1982; Walton, 2004) Popular spectator sport was a distinctive aspect of the emergent working-class consumer society, and this article investigates and seeks to explain its origins as an organised, commercial, regular experience, and the timing and location of the transition.

2. State of the Question

The current state of research on these phenomena and their contexts understandably has a dominant focus on Association football, on which there is lively debate. There is a valuable contextual historiography on leisure and popular culture in Britain, (Bailey, 1978; Borsay, 2006) and on the broad panorama of the history of sport in England, (Vamplew, 1988; Brailsford, 1992; Huggins, 2004; Hill, 2011) which can only be mentioned in passing here. But the key questions involve the transformation of Association football, at its highest levels, into the first commercially-driven working-class spectator sport. It is important to remember that organized football was also expanding rapidly at levels which presented a lower profile, through amateur leagues, works football, schoolboy football, and informal encounters in back streets and on waste land. The emergent professional game was the tip of an extensive participatory iceberg, in Lancashire as elsewhere. (Taylor, 2008, p. 76-82) There is no shortage of valuable research-based academic overviews of the history of the sport, originating with Walvin's path-breaking contribution of 1975, and have continued to appear at regular intervals, with each book bringing its own distinctive evidence base and angle of vision. (Walvin, 1975; Mason, 1980; Russell, 1996; Taylor, 2008; Sanders, 2009) Of the two most recent books, Taylor's provides the better academic study: that of Sanders is written in a lively style, and shows awareness of most of the relevant literature, but it lacks the contextual grasp and analytical sharpness that Taylor provides. All the overview histories concur about the overriding significance of the transition to commercial spectator sport and professionalism which began in earnest in the 1870s and 1880s, and about the importance of the Lancashire 'cotton district' to this process; but there some debate continues about the nature of the roots from which this flowering arose, and about the orderliness and respectability of this new kind of crowd in its quest for pleasure, excitement and the affirmation of local identity, albeit vicariously through imported professional representatives.

In the first place, there is the question of whether Association football, in its eventual commercial form, should be seen as having been introduced to the 'cotton towns' from the elite, fee-paying so-called 'public schools', by the sons of landed gentry, professional men (especially clergy of the Church of England) and industrialists who sought to spread an ideal of respectable, strong but restrained masculinity through the new ideology of 'muscular Christianity', aided by the foundation of the Football Association in 1863 and the evolution of a standard set of rules. (Mangan, 1981) An alternative perspective is that it evolved from the grass-roots by the adaptation of popular local sporting traditions, in an environment associated with beer and betting, to adjust for limitations of space and time in the industrial setting. (Taylor, 2008, p. 20-30) These lines of descent need not be mutually exclusive, not least because sporting clubs founded under church or chapel auspices tended to go their own way very quickly, as in the case of Bolton's Christ Church football club, which migrated across the road to the Gladstone Arms public house and became Bolton Wanderers. (Bailey, 1978, p. 147) But 'cotton Lancashire'

examples of the dissemination of football from the public schools, almost by the 'laying on of hands', are not absent from the picture. At Turton, near Bolton, in the area that was at the heart of the transition to the professional and popular, a successful village team was established in 1871 by the son of the local landowner, who had returned from a 'public school' education at Harrow, in conjunction with the village schoolmaster. (Mason, 1980, p. 24)

Nevertheless, the weight of the evidence suggests that the popular genealogy, traced through matches for stakes organised through public houses, was more influential than the imported strain of 'muscular Christianity'. (Goulstone, 2000; Swain, 2008; Swain, 2009) The public house connection is particularly important here: landlords had long been entrepreneurs of popular competitive sport, for stakes and with abundant betting, including bowling, quoits and the 'eccentric and undisciplined' athletic spectacles associated with 'pedestrianism', whether running or walking. (Bailey, 1978, p. 140; Poole, 1982) Turton's football club built on a long village tradition of regular matches. (Swain, 2009) The availability of these earlier traditions and experiences helps to explain the ease and rapidity with which Association football took root and spread in these industrial settings. (Lewis, 1997)

A further dimension of debate has involved the alleged early roots of football 'hooliganism' in disorderly rivalries, inadequate policing and uncivilised working-class behaviour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Eric Dunning and his followers, working with an adapted version of Norbert Elias's theory of the 'civilising process', claimed to identify a high level of violence and disorder in the formative years; but when Lewis challenged their interpretation by re-examining and reinterpreting their data in contextual detail, their response was unconvincing. Taylor provides his own silent verdict on this controversy by leaving his treatment of early football 'hooliganism' to the early twentieth century and confining it to Scotland and Belfast, while later providing a cursory summary and a much more developed general critique, with a focus on the 1960s onwards. (Dunning, Murphy and Williams, 1988; Lewis, 1996; Murphy, Dunning and Maguire, 1998; Taylor, 2008, p. 100, 312-13) We should not be surprised to find assertive, abusive, even threatening behaviour emerging at points of dispute or disappointment in the formative, transitional years, when there was also trouble at the seaside, the fairground and the music-hall; but to equate it with the systematic violence and vandalism of the later twentieth century seems disproportionate. Perceptions of a rapid 'improvement' in the holiday behaviour of the Lancashire working class, at Blackpool and elsewhere, in the late nineteenth century will also hold good for the Association football field. (Walton, 1983, ch. 8)

These debates apart, the development of sport in 'cotton Lancashire' in the late nineteenth century has been more chronicled than debated. Lewis's argument for the primacy and wider significance of the Bolton – Blackburn axis, and of (especially) a wider area of the cotton weaving district, has been left to lie on the table, although earlier work, such as that of Mason, has drawn attention to the rapid growth of participation by village as well as town sides from this area in the English FA Cup (founded in the 1871-2 season) in the late 1870s and 1880s. (Lewis, 1997; Mason,

1980) It has been assimilated into a ‘social diffusionist’ model of the spread of the game between neighbouring settlements, rather than down an urban hierarchy (a perception which favours the grassroots model of growth and spread); but although the evidence is not in dispute, its meaning has not been fully addressed. (Taylor, 2008, p. 33) Nor has the evidence from other sports been incorporated into the wider picture. Here is the central purpose of this article.

3. The Paradigm Case of Association Football

The clearest support for the argument that the Lancashire ‘cotton district’ was not only the cradle of the world’s first Industrial Revolution, but also the origin of a revolution in the organization, commercialization and popularization of spectator sport, comes from the development of Association football in the region during the late nineteenth century. The work of Lewis, especially, has pinpointed the years between the late 1870s and mid 1880s, and the small triangle (which is really almost a straight line, and better imagined as an axis) between Bolton, Darwen and Blackburn, as the crucible of change. The total distance is just over 20 kilometres, although the importance of early football clubs in industrial villages around Bolton (such as Turton and Halliwell) would increase it a little. It is interesting that, while Bolton was a stronghold of high-quality cotton spinning, the other towns specialised in weaving, so that the key area as identified by Lewis straddled the notional boundary between the contrasting social systems of the cotton industry. It was in this area that the Lancashire Football Association was founded in 1878, in the village of Bromley Cross, near the home ground of Turton Football Club, on the railway line from Bolton to Darwen. and Blackburn, enabling the Lancashire Cup competition to be launched in the following year. (Lewis, 1997; Swain, 1999)

The development of an intensive network of football teams, increasingly employing professionals (often from Scotland) during the 1870s and 1880s, marked this area out as distinctive even within Lancashire. Darwen, a small town south of Blackburn which became firmly attached to the Association game in 1875, reached the quarter-finals of the FA Cup as early as 1879, playing two professionals and bearing the expenses of three trips to London before losing to Old Etonians in a second replay. In 1881 they reached the semi-finals. But it was the larger weaving centre of Blackburn that made the breakthrough for northern industrial sides against the London ‘public school’ amateurs. In 1882 Blackburn Rovers lost in the FA Cup final to Old Etonians; but in the following year Blackburn Olympic, fielding several unequivocally working-class players, beat the same opponents to win the Cup. Rovers had more financial clout, and this was Olympic’s one moment of glory; but Rovers then proceeded to win the Cup in the next three seasons, and again in 1890 and 1891. Meanwhile Bolton Wanderers were on the losing side in the 1894 final. (Mason, 1980; Lewis, 1997)

Impressive though its record was, the Bolton-Blackburn axis did not have a monopoly on either playing success or striking innovations. The Blackburn

successes straddled the transition to the Football Association's acceptance of professionalism in 1885, but that was precipitated by a complaint against Preston North End, who also had a reputation for importing 'Scotch professors'. The five 'cotton Lancashire' teams that made up the original twelve-club Football League in 1888 included Bolton Wanderers and Blackburn Rovers, who were later to be joined in the First Division, briefly, by Darwen; but Accrington and Burnley lay a few kilometres to the east of Blackburn, and Preston North End, the 'Invincibles' who won the first league championship undefeated, were based a similar distance to the west. Even so, this was a remarkable concentration of football power; and Halliwell, on the outskirts of Bolton, were strong enough in 1888 to be considered as serious alternatives to Bolton Wanderers for inaugural membership. Accrington, like Darwen, was less able to compete at the increasingly exacting highest level, despite extensive recourse to imported Scotsmen; and they left the League in 1893 after relegation from the top flight. Neither side could match the growth in average attendances of a large town club like Bolton, whose weekly 'gates' increased fivefold to 25,000 over the first quarter-century of the Football League. (Fowler, 2003, p. 65-6; Tabner, 2002) But the football strength in depth of the county as a whole was demonstrated by the formation of the Lancashire League in 1889 and the Lancashire Combination in 1891. (Lewis, 1997; Russell, 1996; Swain, 1999) Compelling reasons for these path-breaking developments can be found in a combination of high family incomes, strong sporting traditions, clusters of settlements with strong identities and well-developed civic pride in close proximity to each other, resident capitalists with an interest in supporting local endeavours, and the development of a close network of cheap and convenient public transport systems, to an extent that could not be found elsewhere. (Lewis, 1997)

4. Evidence from Other Spectator Sports

Association football provides the strongest evidence for the primacy of the Lancashire 'cotton towns' in the development of a commercial working-class sporting culture. Cricket, the 'national game' of the summer months, presents a more nuanced picture, not least because the evidence for the crucial transitional years in the late nineteenth century is even more fragmented, while the role of the wool textile towns of the West Riding of Yorkshire is comparatively more prominent. Cricket is a difficult sport to explain to outsiders. Unlike Association football, which has become a global sport, cricket has made little headway outside the nations of the former British Empire, where it became effectively the national sport of India and Pakistan, and developed a strong following in Sri Lanka, as well as putting down firm roots in Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and the West Indies, though not in Canada. (Stoddart and Sandiford, 1998) A helpful description in Spanish of how cricket is played can be found at <http://www.catalunyacc.com/queeselcricket.htm> (accessed 27 March 2012), although it is not a good idea (unless in search of amusement) to use the website facility to translate it back into English. Since the later

nineteenth century cricket has been played in long, intermediate and short forms, from the five-day international Test Matches, through the three- or four-day first-class matches (mostly played between teams representing counties in England), to one-day or half-day encounters between village and town teams. These have been the commonest of a variety of arrangements, and it was the half-day version of the game, played on Saturday afternoons to a League format (which spread rapidly in immediate response to the success of the Football League), which attracted large, partisan and knowledgeable crowds to the grounds of 'cotton Lancashire'.

As in the case of football, the rise of league cricket grew out of a transitional period of growing popular enthusiasm for the game, which was already in evidence in industrial northern England by the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Cricket's origins as a competitive sport lie in England's southern counties, under aristocratic patronage, and it was already being commercialised in London for well-off audiences by the early nineteenth century. (Underdown, 2000) The three-day matches for what became the English County Championship, which developed haphazardly through most of the nineteenth century but was not formally organized into a primitive league format until 1890, were already attracting working-class spectators in the industrial counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire by the 1860s, especially at Sheffield, where there was a tradition of irregular working patterns in the local industries which freed up time for sport spectatorship, especially on Mondays. But most working people were excluded by journey times and prices, and by more effective labour discipline. (Birley, 1999; Sandiford, 1992)

What generated an explosion of cricket's popularity as a working-class spectator sport, building on and reinforcing existing enthusiasms, was the introduction of the Saturday afternoon league format, which coincided with similar developments in Association football. This has been little discussed by historians, but there is enough evidence to demonstrate the importance of the changes, and to show that nothing on a similar scale was happening elsewhere. The Bolton Association, founded in 1888, occupied the same territory as the early initiatives in professional football. The Lancashire League, with its focus on the weaving towns in the north and east of the county, was founded in 1890; the Central Lancashire League, further to the south around Manchester, was firmly established two years later. (Fowler, 2003, p. 67-9; Kay, 1972) Vamplew has speculated that league cricket recruited its spectators from football fans; and it also offered opportunities for the 'working-class amateur' who could play for his local side, not least against the middle-class East Lancashire club of Blackburn, founded by officers in a Volunteer regiment and supported financially by a local factory master. (Vamplew, 1988, p. 91; Fowler, 2003, p. 68; Edmundson, 1992, p. 13-14) The Burnley and Nelson clubs regularly attracted crowds of 6.000 through their turnstiles in the early 1890s, as did nearby Enfield later in the decade, and although growth could not be sustained in the way that Association football developed, and admission prices were a little lower, the leagues continued to flourish, paying their best professionals more than double the going rate for a skilled factory worker during the 20-week season. (Sandiford, 1982, p. 13-14, 16; Sandiford, 1994, p. 86) The only comparable area for the widespread development

of working-class cricket was industrial West Yorkshire, which failed to build effectively on developments in the early 1880s, when the final of the Emsley knock-out cup might attract 10.000 spectators, the Heavy Woollen Cup was inaugurated in 1883, and local leagues proliferated in the 1890s. But this early impetus was not sustained into professionalism and the building of a large, regular spectator base. (Light, 2008)

Rugby football, the ‘handling game’ (as it became), has a less direct purchase on this argument. Here, the primacy of Yorkshire in the transformation of the sport is quite clear-cut, although the contrast between Yorkshire and Lancashire is strongly influenced by the early dominance of the Association game in the ‘cotton district’, from the point of its emergence. Rugby became a popular spectator sport in the 1870s in the industrial West Riding of Yorkshire and all around the ‘cotton towns’: but it never penetrated beyond the eastern and borders of the cotton spinning district, at Oldham and Rochdale (and around Burnley and Colne until superseded by the Association game in the early 1880s), or the western fringes at Wigan, as well as gaining a foothold on the edges of Manchester. The Manchester club itself remained firmly middle-class in ethos, as Rochdale Hornets had been at the beginning, and did not join the Northern Union in 1895. Yorkshire established a county knock-out Cup in 1876, Lancashire ten years later; and the centre of gravity of (increasingly) working-class rugby was certainly in the woollen manufacturing and coal mining districts of West Yorkshire. It was here that the first investigations into covert professionalism began, although the finger of suspicion soon pointed additionally at Oldham. Here it remained strong enough to make it very difficult for professional Association football to gain a foothold when it tried to make inroads in the early twentieth century. (Collins, 1998; Collins, 2009; Russell, 1988; Taylor, 2008, p. 33; Martens, 1996; Barlow, 1993; Arnold, 1988) But the contrasting profile of rugby, in an area where the development of a working-class consumer culture lagged behind that of ‘cotton Lancashire’, (Walton, 1981) and with smaller crowds and a later and less direct move towards professionalism, does not challenge the argument advanced here. If anything, it reinforces it.

5. Conclusions

The Lancashire ‘cotton district’ is a strong candidate for consideration as the location of the world’s first working-class commercial sporting culture. There are curiosities and limitations about the ways in which professional sport, with its restrictions on dividends to shareholders, payments to directors, players’ wages and the free movement of labour. This was something both more and less than the full-blown application of industrial capitalism to sport, not least because its values embraced the furtherance of local pride, competitive status and success on the field, which were more than just financial goals. Indeed, the relentless pursuit of profit by ruthless owners might well have hampered the game’s development. But these themes were common across the sports in question, and not peculiar to Lancashire.

(Mason, 1980; Vamplew, 1988)

An important dimension of the transformation of popular sport in ‘cotton Lancashire’, over and above the growth of the leagues and the impressive investment in grounds, players’ wages, administration and infrastructure, was the rise of a regional sporting press to challenge the established hegemony of London, with Manchester’s *Athletic News* at its head, Bolton’s *Football Field* not far behind, and rapidly expanding coverage in all the local newspapers. The *Athletic News*, founded in 1875, apparently doubled its circulation from 50,000 to 100,000 between 1891 and 1893, apparently stimulated by the rapid rise of the League system in Association football and, to a lesser extent, cricket. (Tate, 2005) The headquarters of the Football League took root in Preston, on the western edge of the ‘cotton district’, in a leafy inner suburb of this early centre of the professional game, whose team (Preston North End) had passed triumphantly undefeated through the first season of the Football League to win the inaugural championship. (Taylor, 2005, p. 51; Savage, 1987, p. 105)

All this gives added weight to the arguments advanced by various historians, and supported convincingly by the meticulous research of Lewis in local newspapers and archives, that the ‘cotton towns’ were the original heartland of professional football as a working-class spectator sport, and provided the necessary social, economic and cultural conditions to nurture and impel a transformation which was to have global repercussions. (Lewis, 1997) The previous history was long and complicated, but the tipping point is clear. Here, as in the case of the Rochdale-style Co-operative movement or the working-class seaside holiday, this part of the county of Lancashire was identified with innovations in popular culture and consumerism which were every bit as important globally as the inventions and innovations in industry and trade which enabled the rise of the factory system. (Walton, 1994; Walton, 1981) With few exceptions, these developments arose spontaneously from the grass-roots rather than being imposed from above or promoted from without: they are a tribute to the power of the region’s social networks, based in and beyond the manufacturing communities, factories, churches, chapels and neighbourhoods, and to the combination of local rivalries and networks of social solidarity, which characterised the ‘cotton towns’ to a remarkable and perhaps a unique extent. (Walton, 1987; Griffiths, 2001; Joyce, 1980; Joyce, 1991)

We can also identify a less clear-cut but plausible case for the region’s primacy in the development of other popular commercial spectator sports, the most important of which was cricket, the region’s summer game. The development of league cricket in Lancashire, charging at the gate, paying professionals and attracting large and enthusiastic crowds on Saturday afternoons, clearly ran ahead of developments in other parts of industrial England, in spite of Birmingham’s narrow primacy in setting up a league. To a large extent, meanwhile, rugby (of both Union and later Northern Union codes, despite changes in the rules at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century to make the game more attractive to the uninitiated) was crowded out by the success of the rival winter football game. (Greenhalgh, 1992b) The development of professional spectator sport, put on as a spectacle, becoming a vehicle for the

competitive expression of local identities, and developing into a fortnightly ritual for its devotees, grew out of a flourishing earlier commercial culture of sport as entertainment (including the regular popular horse-race meetinfs), but disciplined and industrialised it, as befitted its new surroundings. The first industrial society had created the first industrial sporting culture. (Huggins, 2000)

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El autor

John K. Walton, investigador catedrático en el Departamento de Historia Contemporánea de la Universidad del País Vasco UPV/ EHU, Leioa, Bilbao, se licenció en la Universidad inglesa de Oxford y se doctoró en la de Lancaster en el mismo país. Ha trabajado durante muchos años en las universidades de Lancaster y Central Lancashire, y en el Institute of Northern Studies de la Universidad Leeds Metropolitan, antes de trasladarse al País Vasco. Ha publicado libros y artículos sobre historias de turismo, deportes, cultura popular, el movimiento cooperativista y las identidades regionales, especialmente en Gran Bretaña y España, y ha sido editor de la revista *Journal of Tourism History* (Taylor & Francis).