

A review of Nigel Townson's *The British at Play*

An estimated three million Britons take part in some sort of sporting activity every week. Globally, around four billion people – over half the world's entire population – watch at least part of major events like the Olympic Games. Sport is big business. In fact, it is the UK's 11th largest industry, employing over 400,000 people.

5 But these figures don't get to the heart of the social power and significance of sport in the modern world. It is a powerful social force in Britain, as in many other cultures. Friends and colleagues regularly discuss sport, and it is one of relatively few topics that are acceptable when initiating social interaction with strangers. Expressions from sport have passed into general use: we talk about 'team players' in situations that have nothing to do with sport, and the word 'goal', meaning an objective, probably evolved from its
10 meaning in sport.

Why is sport so important in society? *The British at Play – a Social History of British Sport from 1600 to the Present*, by Nigel Townson, sets out to answer that question by examining the connections between sport and social class, gender, violence, commercialism, race and even our sense of national identity.

The British at Play explains these complex issues simply and straightforwardly. For example, it
15 highlights the way in which sport contributes to the creation of 'in groups', most notably the supporters of particular football teams. Such informal associations define themselves by their loyalty to their own group and opposition to others, the 'out groups', and in an extreme form, this opposition leads to the phenomenon of football hooliganism. The author handles the issue well, showing what is wrong with the well-known stereotypes of soccer hooligans. He argues that media coverage of fan behaviour helps to
20 create a climate in which hooliganism occurs. And when trouble does break out, the media sensationalises and exaggerates it, with the result that an atmosphere of panic builds up in the country.

Several of the topics relate to social changes in Britain in recent decades. Women are entering fields of activity which would have been closed to them just a generation ago – as football commentators, producers of sports programmes for radio and television, editors of sports magazines. This greater
25 visibility of women highlights the weakening of the traditional view that sport is mainly for men.

The worldwide health-and-fitness boom has to some extent been driven by our growing wish to have a 'perfect' body shape. And that desire has been encouraged, if not created, by the emphasis in sport on images of 'ideal' male and female bodies.

Sport fits in well with the global TV world of beautiful and perfectly muscled young people, exercising or
30 playing sports, dressed in the latest fashionable sports gear. Sport images in the media do not depend on the written word, just on strong images, reaching out directly to the emotions of the viewer – the perfect medium for advertisers.

So sport becomes big money, attracting more and more commercial interest and investment. Some international TV companies depend on the popularity of sport for their survival. Football clubs turn
35 themselves into businesses, raising money by selling merchandise and by selling their shares on the stock market.

The British at Play is an excellent work, of great value and interest to a wide range of audiences, but if I have one criticism of it, it is this: despite its title, the book is not about play. It does not ask the most basic question of all – why do people do sport? Why is it so popular? The book did not, for me, go far
40 enough in transmitting the power, the energy, the passion, the emotion and the joy of sport. The social power of sport ultimately rests on this psychological and physical appeal – the way it involves the whole person, the way in which it allows us to play.

Questions 1–8

Complete the summary below.

Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER** from the passage for each answer.

Sport is of major importance around the world, with around **1** participants in the UK. It has great social significance. Unlike many other subjects, it is sometimes used to start conversations between **2** , and it is the source of a number of everyday **3**

The writer examines the way in which groups are formed whose members show **4** to each other. Their **5** to 'out groups' can lead to violence. The writer rejects the common **6** that are used to describe football hooligans. Instead, he focuses on **7** in the media, and shows how this can create a public sense of **8**

Questions 9–13

Complete each sentence with the correct ending **A–G** from the box below.

- 9** The change in personnel in sports activities
- 10** Growing interest in health and fitness
- 11** Advertising related to sport
- 12** The greater role of business in sport
- 13** The only weakness of *The British at Play*

- A** is unlikely to continue in the same form.
- B** lies in how the appeal of sport is explained.
- C** shows that sport is no longer seen as a mainly masculine activity.
- D** makes considerable use of pictures of sportsmen and women.
- E** has resulted in large salaries for players.
- F** is partly caused by a focus on the physical characteristics of sportsmen and women.
- G** has led to changes in the activities of some football clubs.