

Prof. Dr. CLAUS TIEDEMANN, HAMBURG UNIVERSITY

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<tiedemann@uni-hamburg.de>

<www.claustiedemann.de/>

<www.sport-geschichte.de/>

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On dealing with Time and History in Sport

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1. Introduction

Boris Becker won the 1985 Wimbledon tennis tournament at the age of 17. He was and still is the youngest Wimbledon winner. This fact is called a "record" by many. Some also describe this fact as follows: Boris Becker "has written history". This metaphor is particularly annoying for me, because as a historian I know what writing history really means. Of course, Boris Becker did not "write history" in the true sense of the word.

What this metaphor is probably intended to express is a special relationship to the fleeting passage of time. The fact marked in this way is thus to be lifted out of the stream of time as unique and worthy of commemoration even in later times, as worthy of being handed down. The word "record" and the metaphor "writing history" have this in common.

Similarly metaphorically as "writing history", the adjective "historical" is used to exaggerate the significance of events. An example with both attributions I found during the work on this lecture in a short report about a sports event in "DIE WELT" from July 20, 2015: In my opinion, this is an annoying, pompous use of language.

Today I would like to share with you some thoughts on how to deal with time and history in sport. The reason for my choice of topic is

the implications of the record-breaking orientation in contemporary sport. **My main thesis** right from the start: **I think that records in sport are unnecessary and that record addiction is harmful.** I will argue in particular philosophically, historically and sociologically, but start with some linguistic remarks.



2. Linguistic comments

When sport journalists and also some sport historians speak of a "record" or describe a sporting achievement as "historical", this is probably based on the urge to take this event out of time, to attribute an "eternal value" to it.

The word "record" is derived from the Latin "*recordari*", i.e. to remember. As historians, we are people who study the past in order to recognise the memorable events that we transfer by language into the present. In this respect, we have a special professional affinity with this

word: in English, a historical archive is called a "record office", a collection and administration place for documents. And in everyday life we encounter the loan word "recorder", a device for picking up or storing data.

I cannot go into detail here about philosophical or sociological considerations of the concept of time, as Norbert Elias, for example, has done. I would just like to state in very general terms that we as (sport-) historians work in the continuous flow of time - as people in the ever-fugitive **present** who investigate the **past** in order to gain insights for the **future**.

The word "record" has long been used, both in English and later in German, for an event which, because of the importance attached to it, was considered worth remembering and recording - not only, but especially in sport. Maria Kloeren proved this in her dissertation published in 1935, which was received in particular by Christian Graf von Krockow and Wilhelm Hopf in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the 20th century at the latest, a shift in meaning has taken place towards the significance of "record", which Kurt Weis defined in 2003 in the (German) Lexicon of Sport Science:

"Record... is in those with technical equipment ... measurable sports ... a performance which is achieved in accordance with the rules... ... and which is unsurpassed in a particular regional or institutional field... *performance* (e.g. national, world or Olympic record), which, after submission of the protocol, has been approved by the national or international sports federation as a r."¹

This shift in meaning has had and continues to have a major impact on the practice of competitive sports, especially, of course, international high-performance sport, but also more generally on the sporting activities of many other people.

3. From record to record mania

To help you follow my thesis that records in sport are unnecessary and harmful, I have to present to you my concept of sport.

"Sport" is a cultural field of activity in which people voluntarily enter into a relationship with other people in order to compare their respective abilities and skills in the art of movement - according to self-imposed or adopted rules and on the basis of socially accepted ethical values.²

Unfortunately, only a few German sport scientists have clearly defined the subject of their, our science. But I do not want to elaborate this today.

For both the concept of sport and the concept of record there is the thesis that these con-

1 Weis, Kurt (2003): (keyword) „Rekord (record)“. In: *Sportwissenschaftliches Lexikon*. Eds.: P. Röthig and Prohl, 7. completely revised ed. Schorndorf: Hofmann. pp. 447 - 448. Quotation: p. 447. My translation (C.T.)! The German original: „Rekord (record) ... ist in den mit techn. Geräten ... messbaren Sportarten ... eine unter Einhaltung der Regeln ... erzielte und in einem bestimmten regionalen oder institutionellen Bereich bislang unübertroffene ... *Leistung* (z. B. Landes-, Welt-, Olympiarekord), die nach Vorlage des Protokolls vom nat. oder internat. Fachverband als R. anerkannt ist.“

2 Tiedemann, Claus: „Sport“ - a suggested Definition. <.../sportdefinitionEnglish.html>. There I give reasons and explain in detail how and why I understand „sport“ this way.

cepts could not be applied meaningfully to the movement culture in antiquity. I regard this position as wrong in both cases. For the concept of sport I have argued this several times, for the concept of records John Marshall Carter and Arnd Krüger³ and most recently Dietrich Ramba⁴ have justified this.

I just want to deal with a representative of this position here. He has at least - in good Anglo-Saxon tradition - clarified his terms. I'm talking about Allan Guttmann. In his book "Vom Ritual zum Rekord. The essence of modern sport" (1979 in German version) he defines "sport as a non-purposeful, physical competition".⁵ 25 years later he has stuck to this definition, in English: "sports can be defined as autotelic physical contest".⁶

However, **Guttmann distinguishes between two phases in the history of sport**: a pre-modern and the modern one, which "arose between the early 18th and the late 19th century". Only for the "modern" sport, seven "seven interrelated formal-structural characteristics" apply to him, the last of which he in 1979 called "search for records" („Suche nach Rekorden" in the German translation, for which probably he himself was responsible). That still sounded rather harmless. In 2004, the choice of words for the seventh characteristic of modern sport in English is much sharper: "Obsession with records".

In contrast to Guttmann, **I support a concept of sport that can be applied to all phases of cultural history** and which does **not** essentially involve the pursuit of records. I agree with Guttmann that the comparison of achievements in the field of skilful movement is essential for sport. However, this only means that at least two competitors want to determine which of them is the better one, "**here and now**", in an agreed competition, while observing general ethical and specific sports rules.

It is the **comparative** that is essential for sport - by my definition - **not** necessarily the **superlative**. *Comparare* is the Latin word for to compare. And the comparative as a concept of grammar I learned as the "*first* (form of) progression". The "*second* progression" is the superlative.

As an athlete in competition, I want to win, triumph, be the **better** one (**comparative**), for my sake the **best** among the **present** (present tense!) competitors (**superlative**, but only "for here and now"!)). Both forms of progression are included in the sense of sport for me. However, I consider their **binding to the present of the sporting comparison** to be crucial. Here and today the comparison takes place for which the participants have agreed. The sporting performance must only be noticeably better than that of the competitors (comparative); that is enough.

3 Carter, John Marshall; Arnd Krüger (Eds.) (1990): *Sport Records and Quantification in Pre-Modern Societies*. Westport/Conn.

4 Ramba, Dietrich (2014): *Bestimmung der prägenden Wesenszüge im Sport der griechisch-römischen Antike*. Diss. Göttingen. <<https://ediss.uni-goettingen.de/handle/11858/00-1735-0000-0022-5EFD-8>> (last access: 04.05.2020)

5 Guttmann, Allan (1978): *Vom Ritual zum Rekord. Das Wesen des modernen Sports*. Schorndorf: Hofmann. Quot: p. 26.

6 Guttmann, Allan (2004): *Sports. The First Five Millennia*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press. Quot: p. 2.

In direct comparisons, where speed is important, it is **in principle** even possible to dispense with measuring the performance, as long as there is sufficient visual evidence to determine the result - if necessary, with the help of referees, umpires. When it comes to the necessary use of technical aids, I advocate a **human scale**: determining the winner by measuring a thousandth of a second seems to me as exaggerated as the proverbial cannon shot at a sparrow.

The situation is different in comparisons where distance or weight is important, which are carried out indirectly, one after the other. Here, of course, every single performance has to be registered until the end of the competition (and only as long as it takes!), but here too please in a humanly comprehensible way, i.e. not in the range of millimetres and milligrams. After the end of the competition and determination of the result, it is not necessary to record and to archive the measured performances.

The essence of an athletic competition basically refers to the time dimension present. But for many people this does not seem to be enough; they want to capture and immortalise the fleeting present. Goethe, in Faust's wager with Mephisto, referred to this frivolously determined end point by Faust's words:

„Werd ich zum Augenblicke sagen: / Verweile doch! Du bist so schön! / Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen, / Dann will ich gern zugrunde gehn!“ (Vers 1699–1702)

"Will I say to the moment: / Stay! You are so beautiful! / Then you may strike me in chains, / Then I'll gladly perish!" (V 1699–1702, my translation, C.T.)

The perpetuation of the present, the "moment", is not possible anyway. But in the fantasy we can imagine this. A similar **mental construction** underlies the record. Up to now there has been no better performance - this is the dimension of the fleeting, former present that has already become the past. **The best performance is de-coupled from time and place and declared a "record"**.

Thanks to this "abstraction", which Guttmann called "ingenious", it is possible to enter into (virtual, not real!) competition in the imagination with people who - according to authenticated records - have performed certain performances at other times and in other places. However, **this "ingenious abstraction" record has developed a momentum of its own**, which ultimately seduces athletes to strive beyond human measure, thus endangering and damaging themselves.

The record principle has the constant, immortalised comparative as its basic pattern: Everything must be surpassed again and again, *citius, altius, fortius*. But this has **limits in our human nature**. In some sporting disciplines they have probably been reached long ago; many records can only be surpassed by **doping**.

There is probably no need for me to give specific examples of this increasingly evident suicidal madness in top international sport; they are obvious and well-known.

Records are not the essence of sport; the fixation on them even has harmful effects. This is the second part of my main thesis.

For some time now, however, the public (resp. published) opinion has been so fascinated by the idea that all sporting best performances are there to be improved even further that the **question** arises as to **whether the record principle can be dispensed with in international high-performance sport**. I think that this is possible. Examples from past and present prove this.

Just so much about the **past**: Despite the above-mentioned fact that there were records of top sporting achievements even in "pre-modern" times, it must be noted that the evidence for this was not essential for the competitive sport of the time. The ancient Olympic Games and other sporting competitions managed without records, without losing any of their fascination.

In the **present** time, the olympic Games - moreover, all championship competitions - offer the best arguments for the first part of my main thesis that **records in sport are unnecessary**. Championship titles and medals are **always** awarded according to the "here and now" principle. **In principle**, the noting down of records is **superfluous**.

Records are meant to be broken. They are quickly forgotten when a new record has been set. Victories in important competitions, on the other hand, remain largely unaffected, as is evident from Becker's Wimbledon victory mentioned at the beginning. This is true even in the record-hungry sports public. Even after a long time, a title such as "olympic champion" is still highly valued, even if the (measured) performance achieved at that time is (meanwhile) far from the current record.

The record mania also has effects that actually contradict the meaning of sport. According to the record principle, we relativise sporting achievements and thus, by the way, often devalue them: According to this principle, it is not enough that the winners here and now have obviously been better than all competitors. Winners are sometimes almost regarded like losers when their measured winning performance is far from the current record.

Sporting records have moreover a credibility problem since long time. The owner of the world records for women in the 100 and 200 m dash, Florence Griffith-Joyner, who established them in 1988 (which are still considered valid today), died in 1998. Rumours that this was a late consequence of doping appeared early and were not very credibly denied. There are good reasons not (no longer) to consider this "world records" - and some others - as "acknowledged". But then, however, the whole record principle in sport would be called into question; and it is not only the association's leaders who are afraid of this, but possibly also the sports fans.

In Germany, the criteria according to which the participants for the olympic games are selected by the sending sports associations are, strangely enough, not based on the here and now principle, but rather on the record principle. In our country, the professional associations de-

termine performance standards that must be met before the actual competition. These standards are based on international records and are supposed to guarantee "medal chances". Above all, the problem of the "day's form", which is crucial in the competition itself, is disregarded.

The track and field athletes in the USA, on the other hand, must pass a competition-related test to qualify: The top three of the one crucial event will be selected. With this procedure, it can happen that a world record holder or leader of the annual best list misses the ticket. This is exactly the same - just like in the real competition at the olympic games. Records do not count there - *hic Rhodos, hic salta!* **The winner is the one who is better than the others here and now - that's all.**

After all, there are many **sports in which the performances achieved are not meaningfully conveyed in numerical terms**, such as boxing and other duel sports, ball sports or nature sports such as sailing and rowing. This is especially true for sports where judges judge the movement according to the difficulty and quality of execution and then translate the performance into numerical values. In principle, the only thing that matters here is to outperform the competitor(s) here and now; the only result is to determine who has won and who has reached the other places. A somehow measurable value, with the help of which the result could be compared with performances achieved sooner or later, is **generally** not recorded in most of these sports.

The fact that even in such sports, which are not really designed for quantification, the so-called "statisticians" are involved, who collect and evaluate everything that can possibly be counted, in order to occasionally hold it up to a supposedly interested public, is not actually a result of the nature of sport, but rather of the culturally induced need for further opportunities for the spectators to experience it in an exciting and admirable way. **The sportsmen and -women themselves could do without these opportunities** if they were not - at least in top-class sport - involved in an exploitation context that is ultimately also financially determined.

This leads me finally to a brief look on the **relationship between sporting and general social affairs**. The assumption that **similar, if not identical, principles that are guiding activities** apply in both areas remains general and blurred, and is probably also over-complex; but this hypothesis calls for closer examination.

Some have already tried it from very different points of view, for example the peace researcher Johan Galtung⁷, who interpreted "the sports system as a metaphor for the world system", or the evolutionary biologist Josef H. Reichholf⁸, who identified "sporting ambition as the driving power in the evolution of humans", or the psychoanalyst Horst-Eberhard

7 Galtung, Johan (1995): Das Sportsystem als Metapher für das Weltsystem. Translated from the English by Hendrik Ahrend. In: *Weiterbildung, Sport, Gesundheit. Praxismodelle und theoretische Grundlagen*. Eds.: G. Holzapfel et al. Neuwied, Kriftel, Berlin: Luchterhand. pp. 60 - 74.

8 Reichholf, Josef H. (2009): *Warum wir siegen wollen. Der sportliche Ehrgeiz als Triebkraft in der Evolution des Menschen*. New edition. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer paperback.

Richter⁹, who examined the "crisis of western consciousness", also using the example of high-performance sport.

Richter sees the "irrational record mania" in sport and in society in general as being driven by the "secret egomania of our western world", by an "apparently insatiable urge to want to rise above oneself", which in sport necessarily leads to doping. "What holds the alliance together are vast sums of money, but in the end they are only flowing for the sake of records." As "accomplices" Richter names "physicians, researchers, dealers, officials, pharmaceutical companies" as well as "the often only apparently unsuspecting associations and the many others who do business with the spectacular records". I only add: **The mass of sport "consumers" is also part of this disastrous system, which is based on and maintains the record mania.**

Christiane Eisenberg recently ascribed to the "sporting competition" the function "that as a *mental model* it generates orientation knowledge for the capitalist market economy marked by uncertainty". And she concludes her article of 2015 with the (in her view) hopeful outlook that a „reflexive sport-science“ „justifies ... the persuasive power of the obvious socio-political argument that sport is just as »systemically relevant« to capitalism as the banks“.¹⁰

4. Conclusion

Starting from the thoughtless use of metaphors and words such as "writing history" and "historical", I wanted to draw attention to the (problematic) behaviour towards time and history that is implicit in the concept of sport and record. These connections certainly need further clarification. In addition, I have tried to explain why records in sports are harmful and dispensable. A return to human measure in sports seems to me to be necessary. We sport historians can certainly contribute to this.

9 Richter, Horst-Eberhard (2002): *Das Ende der Egomanie. Die Krise des westlichen Bewusstseins*. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch.

10 Eisenberg, Christiane (2015): Sportliches Handeln und die Ungewissheit kapitalistischer Märkte. Plädoyer für einen funktionalen Sportbegriff. In: *Reflexive Sportwissenschaft. Konzepte und Fallanalysen*. Eds.: Swen Körner; Volker Schürmann. Berlin: lehmanns media. pp. 73 - 83. Quotations: p. 78 and 81.