

The business of leisure: sport, labour and co-operation in post-war Britain

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Compared with the activities of its European counterparts, the sporting and recreational pursuits of the British labour movement are less well known. Yet the co-operative movement organised an impressive range of sports clubs, competitions and events. Whereas previous studies have examined the relationship between the labour movement and working-class leisure during the interwar years, this article considers the interactions of the co-operative movement with popular discourses on recreation in Britain from the 1950s to the 1970s. In so doing, it challenges assumptions about the Left's disconnection from sporting culture. The Co-op used sport to create a collective co-operative identity amongst its employees. Examining the social and political context of these activities in post-war Britain can inform debates on the construction of female identity through sport, the use of recreation for business advantage and the extent to which the co-operative movement shaped working-class leisure patterns. Although the article highlights that co-op sport formed a source of tension between the retail and wholesale sections of the movement and could be adversely affected by popular affluence, it argues that a reappraisal of the co-operative movement's recreational activities contributes to a broader understanding of post-war working-class culture.

Keywords: co-operative; labour; sport; post-war; business; working-class leisure

Introduction

Back in 1994, Celia Brackenridge and Diana Woodward deplored that both popular perception and most academic work had often treated sport and leisure as essentially minor issues despite their major social, political and economic significance.¹ Since then, however, the history of sport and leisure has attracted much academic attention. Martin Polley, for instance, has encouraged reflection on the complex relationship between sport and society, moving beyond the idea of sport as a mirror of society to one where it is an active agent.²

This article addresses such interaction by examining sport and the co-operative movement from the 1950s to the 1970s. It focuses on the objectives, functions and organisation of sport for co-operative employees and, in doing so, traverses the divide

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between the sub-disciplines of sports and labour history. Although the recreational activities organised by the co-operative movement have been the subject of academic studies, such research has focused on the period before the Second World War. Likewise, more general studies on organised labour and leisure have targeted the period prior to 1939.³ In contrast to this impressive body of work, the relationship between sport and the co-operative movement after the Second World War remains under-explored. This is all the more surprising as the movement actively promoted leisure activities as a means of cementing and emphasising its identity during this period.

The relationship between co-operative employees and sport needs to be understood in the context of post-war society's broader features. The recreational culture of the co-operative movement intersected with the new leisure culture available to the working classes of post-war Britain. Nonetheless, the phenomenon tends to be overlooked in otherwise excellent studies of working-class affluence of the period.⁴

Stephen Jones has suggested that 'the social side of Labour activity, often ignored by historians, was an important part of the day-to-day existence of the movement'.⁵ The case of the co-operative movement and sport appears to corroborate his argument. This article underlines this point by analysing four major facets of recreational sport within the co-operative movement: sport and co-operative culture; company recreation; women and sport; and the patterns of working-class leisure.

Sport and co-operative culture

John Hargreaves has argued that a distinctively socialist sports culture failed to develop in Britain. Noting the construction of an alternative workers' leisure culture in continental Europe, he states that by comparison in Britain (where his main focus is on the Labour Party), 'socialist initiatives were nugatory'.⁶ Other research on socialist recreation in Britain has interpreted such activities as a feature of nineteenth-century socialism that had subsequently been eroded.⁷ However, with regard to the interwar years, Stephen Jones has challenged the view that the British labour movement abandoned opportunities for leisure provision.⁸ More recently, Daryl Leeworthy and Matthew Worley have demonstrated that Labour was not disconnected from working-class sporting culture in interwar Britain.⁹ Meanwhile, Peter Gurney's work on co-operative culture between 1870 and 1930 suggests that the recreational and social provisions associated with the movement were 'remarkable and makes the better-known activities of the Clarion Clubs look like very small beer indeed'.¹⁰ Clearly, the Left in Britain did think about leisure provision in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But what of the post-Second World War period? To what extent did co-operative sports clubs for employees provide a distinctly co-operative leisure culture?

To achieve a suitable balance of scope and depth, the themes examined in this article are developed through a focus on three organisations – the London Co-operative Society (LCS),¹¹ the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RACS)¹² and the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS).¹³ The size of these bodies allows us to explore the co-op's recreational environment from several angles and to study how the movement utilised sport. The retail co-operative societies possessed a unique democratic structure. Although part of a national movement, each individual society was owned and controlled locally. The analysis of the LCS and RACS permits an enquiry of individual retail societies whereas the CWS, with its federal structure and nationwide operations, provides

opportunities to explore the range of sporting pursuits available to employees on a national scale. The study builds up a broad picture of the opportunities available to employees within the co-operative movement; it considers sport both in the centrally organised wholesale society and at the level of the individual retail society.

Co-operative employees had access to sports grounds and clubhouses owned by the movement. The LCS, RACS and CWS all owned their own sports grounds. The LCS opened its first sports ground at Chingford in 1927. By the 1950s, it had additional clubs at Osterley, Romford and Rochford.¹⁴ The RACS opened a sports ground for its employees at New Eltham in 1947.¹⁵ It remained a popular venue for employees until escalating costs forced its closure in 1999.¹⁶ The first CWS factory to provide a sports ground for employees was the Crumpsall biscuit factory, establishing these facilities during the early twentieth century.¹⁷ The CWS subsequently developed a vast network of sports grounds as it acquired over 120 acres of land for its staff during the 1920s.¹⁸ The employee sports clubs of the LCS, RACS and CWS organised games, competitions and events, incorporating a variety of popular sports.

Studies on sport and identity demonstrate that sport can promote the idea of community and help to celebrate the collective spirit of a particular group, communicating ideas of regional allegiances and common cultural heritage.¹⁹ Some activists within the co-operative movement certainly saw organised sport as a way of fostering a sense of community among fellow co-op employees. For example, CWS sports competitions (such as the Inter-Depot Football Cup and the Angling Cup) were designed as an opportunity for employees to travel across the country to meet fellow co-op workers. Some teams entered these competitions not necessarily with the ambition of winning but to have the 'opportunity of meeting colleagues from other CWS works'.²⁰

Assessing the movement's position in 1951, G.D.H. Cole stressed that for Co-operative idealists, the 'Co-operative Commonwealth' was a state to be aspired to, with all consumers' services to be organised under Co-operative control.²¹ In the post-war period, key aspects of the movement's wider ethos were displayed through sport. This ranged from 'Commonwealth' named clubs (for example the RACS' Commonwealth Table Tennis Club)²² to sport as a component within an all-encompassing co-operative culture. With its strong commitment to welfare and community, the co-operative movement was more than a retail organisation. Having its own recreational culture was one way of illustrating this. As the editor of the CWS employee magazine was told in 1950, employees in the movement have 'some grand opportunities ... you have sports clubs, dramatic societies, discussion groups ... In fact, there is practically everything for the go-ahead person who wants a progressive, useful and happy life'.²³

Of course, not everyone who participated in these leisure pursuits identified with the alternative vision of the Co-operative Commonwealth. However, sport did help to promote a co-operative identity that went beyond the store and factory. Alan Metcalf has explored the annual festivals of mining villages, concluding that sport played an important role in promoting a collective spirit within these communities.²⁴ Sport was also a prominent feature in a Co-op annual event – Co-operative Day. First established in the early 1920s as a 'Festival of Celebration and Propaganda', it was supposed to demonstrate 'to the whole world the solidarity of Co-operators'.²⁵ It has been argued that by the 1950s such celebrations were devoid of co-op activism. Consequently they have been dismissed as events where sports and entertainment were completely foregrounded at the expense of the historic-symbolic significance of Co-operative Day.²⁶

However, for co-op activists sport at these events played a significant role in celebrating the collective spirit of the movement. Sports competitions drew large crowds and were often followed by co-op demonstrations, led by well-known figures within the movement.²⁷ The day was used to recruit new members and celebrate the movement's success. Commenting on the contributions of RACS's sports clubs to Co-operative Day, the Society's sports organiser stated that 'I am sure we do much to promote the goodwill of our movement . . . Each group adds its own inspiration'.²⁸ The co-operative press went further, describing the LCS's event as 'revolutionising the whole world without bloodshed' (*Co-operative News*, July 11, 1953, 3).

Prior to 1930, co-operative culture drew its strength 'from organising and including in its ambit whole families, not just the male bread-winner at the point of production . . .'.²⁹ This continued to be the case in the post-war years, and it can be argued that sports days were an important element of this. They were promoted as family days and the activities offered reflected this. Events included traditional relay races, sprints and cycling races, but also more 'light-hearted' events such as egg-and-spoon races and tug-o-war.³⁰

Commercialised leisure occupied an ever-growing role in Britain from the late 1950s onwards. As Clarke and Critcher have put it, 'leisure was becoming one of the growth areas of private investment'.³¹ It is likely that most of the employees who participated in co-operative sports events would not have done so with a view to subverting the commercial leisure industry. Even activists who organised sports programmes entered teams of co-op employees into local business leagues where they played alongside non-co-operative organisations.³² Employee associations would occasionally permit non-co-operative organisations to use their facilities.³³ Nevertheless, to suggest that the Left in Britain did not think about leisure would be to ignore the recreational sports that were organised within the co-operative movement. A reappraisal of sport within the movement suggests that these activities featured prominently in the movement's social calendar in the post-war period, helping to express co-operative collective identity.

Work and play: company recreation

The day-to-day activities of each sports club were organised by a committee elected from among the employees. Employees paid a small membership fee to use the facilities. The directors and board of management, however, took a keen interest in promoting recreational activities to the co-op workforce. Large organisations such as the CWS, LCS and RACS could provide support in a variety of ways, including travel expenses permitting teams to play 'away' games at other co-operative premises,³⁴ donations towards prize funds at sports events³⁵ and the capital for the purchase of equipment and kit.³⁶ Managers and directors presented trophies at competitions, gave addresses and conveyed written greetings.³⁷ Such support was dutifully acknowledged by the individual sports associations. The LCS Sports Recreation Club commented that 'we do have considerable financial and practical help from the society – I dread to think where we would be without it'.³⁸ In thanking the branch managers and other officials of the society 'for the very willing co-operation they give at all times to the Sport Association', the RACS employees' sports association stated that the management committee 'must consider the Society's trading activities first of all, but [we are] gratified to record that they always manage to pull that little extra "out of the bag" whenever the Sports Association has requested it'.³⁹

Whilst it is true that trading activities were of central importance for directors and managers of co-op organisations, enhancement of employee recreation was not necessarily conceived of as entirely independent from business. The provision of sports facilities could attract employees, retain staff by building loyalty and increase productivity. Thus, support for recreation programmes could serve business interests well.

Several works on the use and functions of corporate sport highlight how this can attract, retain and motivate employees. Pichot, Pierre and Burlot, for instance, argue that the sense of belonging created through sport can be a useful ‘tool’ for companies.⁴⁰ Much of the relevant literature examines the period between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, and views sport as part of wider paternalistic policies that shaped working-class leisure. The focus has been on privately owned organisations famed for their welfare policies.⁴¹ Yet, to what extent did the co-operative movement, ‘the people’s business’, use sport and recreation for business advantage and how did this reflect wider business concerns of the period?

It is possible to identify three related reasons why the Co-op, as an employer of labour, developed sports provisions. The first is a general concern to demonstrate its commitment to its staff. In a post-war survey of the co-operative movement, Jack Bailey (National Secretary of the Co-operative Party) noted that co-operative officials frequently complained that better wage-earning prospects in industry meant distributive trades were at a disadvantage, especially in attracting juvenile employees at the start of their careers.⁴² Compared with the private sector, the lower salaries paid to school-leavers were also noted by the Co-operative Independent Commission Report.⁴³ Evidence suggests that in this period, the LCS used its ‘first-class recreation grounds’ to counteract this and promote itself as a progressive employer. The LCS wished to be seen as an employer that offered ‘an interesting and satisfying career – not a “dead-end” job’. Opportunities to enjoy pursuits such as tennis, football and cricket ‘in ideal circumstances at very little cost’ were promoted alongside training programmes, career progression and extra pay for those who showed ‘special merit’.⁴⁴ Sports programmes were evidently seen as a useful tool to attract labour.

The second reason can be interpreted as an attempt to integrate staff more fully into the business, which could have advantages for how efficiently work was conducted. This was especially important in a co-operative society whose business, and therefore its premises and workplaces, was widespread. As a member of the RACS noted,

large firms with thousands of employees in one factory had not the difficulties of one so widespread as ours; there people are known by daily contact – in ours, a person is often only a name or a voice on the other end of the telephone.⁴⁵

Opportunities to integrate employees into the business were especially important in the wake of the Co-operative Independent Commission (CIC). Following a resolution at the Co-operative Congress of 1955, the CIC was established to make recommendations ‘to secure the greatest possible advantage to the Movement from its manufacturing, wholesale and retail resources’.⁴⁶ The CIC’s report (published in 1958) was a response to the changing pattern in retail distribution following the Second World War, and it focused on modernising the movement in order to meet the demands of a new commercial environment. One of the CIC’s key recommendations was to reduce duplication of services via amalgamations, whereby 1000 retail societies would be replaced with just 200–300.⁴⁷ A programme of amalgamations began in 1960.⁴⁸ The activities of recreation

clubs were used as one way of integrating employees from the smaller societies as they amalgamated with larger ones and thus helped in the creation of a new common identity. For example, in the 1960s a number of formerly autonomous societies merged with the LCS.⁴⁹ The Sports Association pages in the LCS's employees' newspaper were used to welcome these 'newcomers', and employees from the smaller societies were invited to join the LCS Sports Association with visits arranged to LCS recreation club premises.⁵⁰

The third reason why the provision of sport for employees was identified as being useful was connected to staff loyalty. In this respect co-ops did as other employers did: they used sporting facilities as a way to hold their labour⁵¹ and to build affinity. For instance, in 1953, the *Co-operative News* addressed discussions regarding the funding available for sporting provisions. In this context, it cited a representative from a Midland retail society, who explained why he was in favour of more financial support for employee sport: 'create in your employees loyalty, enthusiasm, and co-operative awareness, and they will sell "Spel" and all the other things' (*Co-operative News*, October 31, 1953, 4).⁵² He made this point during a debate regarding the CWS's financial contribution to the National Co-operative Sports Association's (NCSA) football competition. A resolution was put to the CWS asking them to meet the hotel and travel expenses incurred by teams participating in the final stages of the competition. These costs were seen to be a financial burden for smaller retail societies, which potentially prevented the participation of teams from these societies. The CWS directors ultimately rejected the resolution as they deemed its implications too costly. Furthermore, they felt that if the retail societies were truly interested in further developing employee sport they 'would like to see some practical demonstration that they were giving the sports association tangible support' (*Co-operative News*, October 31, 1953, 4). This debate reveals a degree of tension between the wholesale and retail sections of the movement regarding responsibility for funding sports activities. Thus, there were limitations despite the recognition of business advantages. In a period when the CWS was experiencing less loyalty by some retail societies than in the pre-war period, falling dividends and the cost of post-war developments (*Co-operative News*, February 21, 1953, 7), support for the NCSA's football competition proved too much of a financial burden.

This is not to say that the CWS was unaware of the business opportunities that sport presented. The 1950s and 1960s saw a fundamental growth in consumer power throughout most levels of society. Sport and the leisure industry were part of this growing commercialised mass culture. Within the context of a rapid expansion in the consumption of goods and services for the mass market, sport was used to sell goods produced by CWS employees. The CWS used sport and leisure to advertise some of its products, ranging from Pelaw shoe polish to Amora blackcurrant juice.⁵³

The CWS also tapped into working-class support for football (an extremely popular sport during this period)⁵⁴ and manufactured football boots. However, rather than simply manufacturing and selling such items, some of its boots were designed by, and advertised using, one of the most popular footballers of the generation, Stanley Matthews. Matthews earned himself the reputation of being 'the most astonishing single sight in football ... a legend in his own lifetime ...'.⁵⁵ Matthews's name was first used to endorse CWS football boots in 1948. Following the victory of his Blackpool team in the 1953 FA cup final – subsequently known as the 'Matthews final' – CWS footwear became firmly associated with his football skills. The implication in CWS advertisements was that by wearing the Matthews-designed football boots, skills would be enhanced. Typical phrases

in advertisements included: ‘there’s Matthews’ magic in these boots’⁵⁶ and ‘Stanley’s know-how and the ideas are aimed at a style that will promote better ball control, extra speed, and confidence ...’.⁵⁷ The CWS’s business relationship with Matthews provides a striking example of the movement’s use of links with the world of professional sport in the quest to sell products made by CWS employees.

Women and sport

Whilst existing studies note that the emergence from post-war austerity saw the British working class enjoy significant increases in the resource required to enjoy greater leisure – commonly identified as more free time, higher real incomes and access to items associated with post-war consumer society⁵⁸ – the impact on women’s participation in sport is less clear. Research that has explored women and sport in post-war Britain has largely focused on elite female athletes.⁵⁹ But what of women who wished to engage in recreational sport? By scrutinising the co-operative movement’s activities for female employees, it is possible to trace shifts in British women’s relationship with sport.

The records of the LCS, RACS and CWS all make reference to opportunities for female employees to engage in sport as a recreational activity. Women’s teams existed for a wide variety of different activities, including darts, table tennis, hockey, shooting, golf, netball and fishing.⁶⁰ A study of how these activities for working-class women were portrayed can contribute to the historiography on engendered leisure and female roles.

There appeared to be some level of encouragement when female employees established sports teams. For example, the *Beehive* reported that they were ‘pleased to learn’ that the newly established Oakthorpe Laundry Netball Team had been successful in getting into the North London Senior Netball League. The sports review in the employees’ magazine was keen to report on their progress ‘so that we may give them some encouragement in these columns’.⁶¹ In 1959, it was again recorded that all interested women were invited to join the netball team and it was hoped ‘to form teams for competitive play’.⁶²

Within British society, certain activities were deemed more appropriate for women than others and, as such, sport played a role in constructing femininity. Sports traditionally associated with women included gymnastics, jogging, cycling and tennis, placing ‘great stress on the sporting value most compatible with “normal” femininity, that of aesthetic skill’, and emphasising grace, balance and poise, which it was seen ‘fulfil rather than contradict ideals of “womanhood”’.⁶³ However, activities undertaken by female co-operative employees were not necessarily the kinds of sports traditionally associated with ‘femininity’. Women did, for example, play darts which had been perceived as a men’s sport.⁶⁴ As the CWS’s employee magazine exclaimed,

how popular this game of darts is becoming with our women colleagues! More and more women’s sections are being formed ... And rivalry is quite as keen as among the males. At Norwich Boot Works they even have a trophy of their own, the Hodgkins Cup.⁶⁵

As Guttman has noted there remained, considerable resistance to women as ‘serious competitors’ during the immediate post-war period.⁶⁶ Sport has frequently been taken ‘to be a recreation which is biologically male orientated’, emphasising strength and competition.⁶⁷ In some respects, the attitude displayed in the CWS magazine indicates that within the co-op this view was not necessarily prevalent. Female employees could evidently be considered ‘serious competitors’.

It might therefore be suggested that Co-op sports teams offered their female employees an opportunity to challenge conventional perceptions of leisure pursuits ‘appropriate’ for women. This line of argument would, however, ignore evidence that suggests a far less supportive view regarding female employees participating in sport. While some reports promoted women’s sports, others were more patronising. On the formation of an LCS staff darts team for women, the *Beehive* reported: ‘Yes, that’s right, Mrs. There is nothing sacred to us men nowadays, and now the female of the species had started to cash in on Darts.’⁶⁸ Whilst reports of men’s teams and games included phrases such as ‘all-conquering’ and ‘hard fight’,⁶⁹ competitions for women were often deemed ‘successful, if only for its entertainment value’.⁷⁰ The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a series of political, cultural and legal events that promoted equal opportunities and consolidated the presence of women in the public sphere of the workplace. Yet reports by the co-op on women’s sports continued in a similar vein to those of previous decades. Events were labelled a ‘friendly “aside” arrangement’ to the men’s competition⁷¹ and, on other occasions, the sports editor of the employees’ magazine had to be ‘frequently reminded by the ladies that they are a separate Section, worthy of occasional mention in these notes’.⁷²

Not only could women’s teams be mentioned merely as an ‘aside’ in reports of staff activities, it is also clear that these activities were not always popular among potential female participants. When women’s teams or activities discontinued due to lack of support, various explanations were offered. These ranged from the ‘novelty’ wearing off, wintry weather and the implication that young female members of staff preferred to spend time with their boyfriends.⁷³ (Although presumably these were young men who did not work for the Co-op or take part in any sports team, as this factor was not commented on for male employees.) The apparent implication was that female employees were generally less interested in sporting activities. No mention was made of the fact that female staff often had less leisure time than their male counterparts to take advantage of organised team games. Research examining gender inequalities in post-war Britain indicates that women profited less than others from the leisure revolution. Brackenridge and Woodward conclude that nothing like equality existed ‘between women’s and men’s domestic contributions’ and women were still primarily responsible for shopping, cleaning and childcare.⁷⁴

Seen from this angle, an exploration of the relationship of female employees to co-op sport exemplifies more general aspects of women’s leisure in post-war Britain. Thus, although working women were given some opportunities to engage in a variety of activities, in terms of the way these were presented and the time available to these women to participate, it can be argued that there was not yet equality of opportunity or access.

Rethinking patterns of working-class leisure

Harold Macmillan asserted in 1957 that ‘most of our people have never had it so good’. Within the political culture of the Left, as Tiratsoo and Black have shown, there was a degree of scepticism towards popular affluence of the 1950s.⁷⁵ This rapidly expanding consumer culture had an instrumental effect on working-class leisure within a newly prosperous Britain. An exploration of how television affected the recreational activities of a working-class institution such as the Co-op sports clubs sheds further light on how this section of the Left reacted to growing affluence – especially as TV ownership was a key

marker of affluence.⁷⁶ This approach also reveals how working-class leisure patterns more broadly were shaped by this affluent society.

In 1950, 4% of the adult population had a television in the home. Within five years, this had increased to 40%, and by 1960, 80% of families owned one. Alongside this growth in ownership was an increase in the hours of TV transmission.⁷⁷ Clearly, the television became a major source of entertainment.

Existing histories of sport have highlighted the ‘marriage of convenience’ between the commercial sports and television industries. Increased television coverage produced a dramatic rise in spectatorship and ‘passive participation’ in sport.⁷⁸ The television has been attributed with radically altering working-class recreation. Co-op sports clubs saw an inverse relationship between television ownership and participation at club level that met with criticism among activists. The ability of ‘members to tear themselves away from those TV sets’ was identified as a necessary factor in order to run a successful programme of sporting activities.⁷⁹ For some, the increase in television ownership was seen as directly responsible for a waning in the popularity of the sports clubs. In a front-page article entitled ‘Help save our club!’, ‘T.V. watchers’ were labelled as leading ‘anti-social lives’. The article identified the television as the main factor responsible for a fall in recreation club membership: ‘Just what then stops the larger percentage of staff from joining? In today’s society the club competes against numerous other activities and number one to blame will obviously be television.’⁸⁰

The television presented not only a problem for specific sports clubs organised for co-operative employees, but was also an issue raised by other co-operative groups. The National Guild of Co-operators, a national adult co-operative auxiliary, referred to the ‘TV curse’ as deflecting ‘many new entrants to our meetings’.⁸¹ For other co-operative activists, television, and especially Independent Television, was viewed as ‘coarse, vulgar, crude, garish, puerile, and shamefully materialistic!’ (*Co-operative News*, January 15, 1966, 2).

That being said, there was recognition of the business opportunities opened up by the television for individual co-operative retail societies and the CWS. The 1950s are widely seen as a time when the co-operative movement began to falter. A so-called ‘old-market leader’ caught between ‘its own commitment to small community shops and the competition of the large-chain stores’, it is seen as falling behind the rapidly expanding multiples, such as Sainsbury’s and Tesco.⁸² Yet, there were those within the movement who identified initiatives and opportunities for development during this period. In the early 1950s, the *Co-operative News* noted that ‘television will, and is, developing at a rapid rate ... Television is the medium of indoor entertainment, and in five years will put radio in the back-ground’ (*Co-operative News*, October 10, 1953, 2). The periodical referred to the intensified competition for the movement but also to the business opportunities provided by the television: ‘in the new era of television we should be in the forefront with trained technicians to advise our members on problems associated with the installation and maintenance of television’ (*Co-operative News*, October 10, 1953, 2). The CWS arranged lectures and demonstrations on the subject of the television to which representatives from retail societies were invited; it produced its own television set (aptly named ‘Defiant’) in 1950; and some societies were able to provide facilities for TV rental and hire purchase.⁸³ The RACS went further. Building on the ‘big business’ of TV rental, the RACS established the first chain of Co-op TV rental bureaux in 1975. These bureaux, separate

from the stores, were designed to cover the whole of the society's trading region and to provide a forerunner for similar bureaux to develop throughout the country.⁸⁴

Walvin sees the social impact of the television as 'particularly important in redefining the nation's attitude to leisure',⁸⁵ with Moran highlighting how watching the television has increasingly taken up 'so much of our waking lives'.⁸⁶ Within the Co-op, the very recognition of the undeniable growing popularity of watching television as a principal leisure activity created tension between those within the movement who saw in it great business opportunities and those who viewed it as detrimental to other co-op leisure provisions.

Recreation in modern, affluent Britain was also marked by an expansion of state intervention in leisure. Thus, the labour movement and sport are often discussed solely in the context of the Labour Party's commitment to enact a progressive leisure policy. Assessing the ways in which the co-operative movement interacted with these popular discourses in policy and provided opportunities for its employees to engage with the latest sporting trends demonstrates how sport is influenced by broader currents. It also contributes to the growing body of historiography challenging assumptions that the co-operative movement was generally complacent during this period.

It has been argued that the Labour government of 1964–1970 facilitated the expansion of state intervention in recreation that is associated with the politics of leisure in this period.⁸⁷ Establishing the Sports Council in 1965, it began promoting the development of multi-facility sports and recreation centres. These were to become the focus of leisure provision during the next decade, providing venues for indoor sports (such as squash and badminton), offering tuition and widening access to sports that had been restricted because of the need for specialist facilities or expensive equipment.⁸⁸ The RACS and LCS also engaged with these trends and developed related initiatives for their employees. For example, squash became 'a craze' in the 1970s.⁸⁹ Reflecting and engaging with this, the LCS met the cost of hiring a squash court for some of its staff.⁹⁰ The RACS established a squash section in the 1970s, which reportedly did 'considerably well'.⁹¹ Furthermore, in 1975 the RACS employee sports association carried a motion urging that the Sports Council give consideration to the building of squash courts, as provisions in the district fell far short of demand, ultimately securing a grant from them.⁹²

In 1977, the Sports Council worked with the Health Education Council (established by the Labour government in 1968)⁹³ and the BBC to initiate a 'Feeling Great' programme. This campaign promoted the benefits of regular exercise.⁹⁴ Medical findings in the 1970s showed a positive correlation between exercise and health. The LCS and RACS engaged with contemporary views relating to exercise and health and were developing their own strategies to promote these currents in leisure policy to their employees. The RACS publication, *Together*, discussed the campaigns of the Health Education Council, passing on advice to its employees that: 'sitting round at home is more dangerous than most of us ever imagined. Apart from getting fat, you are also risking heart disease and depression'.⁹⁵ Reporting on the sporting pastimes of a number of employees, it encouraged others to take up exercise with the employees' sports association, concluding that

the Society has so many sporting men and women . . . they're fit, and they enjoy keeping fit. So if you're getting pains in your chest, or fits of depression, or your sex life isn't what it used to be, why not join them?.⁹⁶

In the 1970s, the LCS similarly focused on exercise and health, organising Keep Fit and 'Slimnastics' classes for employees.⁹⁷

The effort to promote the health benefits of sport and regular exercise among co-op employees was informed by wider changes in leisure policy of the 1970s. Co-operative sports associations thus can help us gain a broader understanding of the labour movement's attitude towards recreation in post-war Britain.

Conclusion

Work and leisure are often seen as separate entities. Yet, sports activities for employees of the co-operative movement lie at the intersection of both these areas. During the 1950s to the 1970s, sports clubs, events and competitions contributed to a collective co-operative culture. Although co-op activists complained that commodities associated with post-war affluence, such as the television, impacted negatively on the recreation clubs, co-op sports associations continued to attract support. The post-war expansion of commercial leisure did not undermine the promotion of recreational activities. This observation challenges assumptions about the labour movement's disconnection from sporting culture, adding to our understanding of the important links between the co-operative movement and sport. Johnes points out that sport is 'an active agent' in society.⁹⁸ Seen as a marker of co-operative culture, sport contributes to broader debates concerning the shaping of identity.

Hargreaves's study of the relationship between socialism and sport in Britain concludes that 'the Left has rarely allowed itself to think seriously, in the creative sense, about leisure and pleasure'.⁹⁹ Admittedly, recreational sport offered to co-op employees had its limitations. It faced financial constraints, was a source of tension between the retail and wholesale sections and did not necessarily challenge traditional views on women and sport. Viewed in this way, the co-op fits Hargreaves's categorisation that the British labour movement, unlike its European counterparts, failed to recognise the potentially important role sport could play in mobilising support and building loyalty. However, the array of clubs operating within the co-operative movement indicates that organisations on the Left did recognise the importance of sport. Within the co-operative movement, sport was part of its social culture. These activities can also contribute more broadly to a reappraisal of post-war working-class culture. Understandably, a key focus of research on this period has been on consumer culture and developments of commercial leisure. This was a period of unprecedented choice and diversity; however, the activities of the co-op, as a working-class institution, can contribute to a wider appreciation of working-class leisure.

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Notes

1. Brackenridge and Woodward, "Gender Inequalities," 192.
2. Polley, *Moving the Goalposts*, 5.
3. Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics*; Southern, *Co-operative Movement*; Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class*; Jones, *Workers at Play*; and Holt, *Sport and the Working Class*.
4. Bourke, *Working-Class Culture* and Benson, *Rise of Consumer Society*.
5. Jones, *Workers at Play*, 145.
6. Hargreaves, "Sport and Socialism," 133–153.
7. Yeo, "New Life."
8. Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class* and Jones, *Workers at Play*.
9. Leeworthy, "Dragons of the North" and Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, 161–3.
10. Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics*, 60. On socialists and the politics of popular culture before the First World War (including the Clarion clubs), see Waters, *British Socialists*.
11. The LCS was Britain's largest retail society. Established in 1920 by the amalgamation of the Stratford Society and the Edmonton Co-operative Society; it grew further by merging with the West London Co-operative Society in 1921. Trading north of the Thames, by the 1960s its trading boundaries reached from Yiewsley, in the West of London, to Southend-on-Sea and Shoeburyness in the East and as far north as Potters Bar and Radlett (LCS, *Always a Step Ahead*). By the late 1970s, LCS employees numbered 11,490 (*Co-operative Statistics*, 1977, 36–7).
12. The RACS traded in South East London. Established in 1868, it became one of the co-operative movement's largest retail businesses (Rhodes, *Arsenal for Labour*, 1–3). During the 1960s, nine societies merged with the RACS and its trading area expanded to over 420 square miles (Roffey, *Co-operative Way*, 91–6). By the late 1970s, its employees numbered 6828 (*Co-operative Statistics*, 1977, 36–7).
13. The CWS was established in 1863 and served England and Wales; the Scottish CWS merging with it in 1973. Through its wholesaling, manufacturing and service provisions, it became the main (although not the sole) supplier of goods that retail societies did not process for themselves. CWS factories, depots and salesrooms were spread throughout the country. The CWS's federal structure enabled local co-operative societies to govern it 'from the bottom up', with member societies electing its national leadership (Wilson, Webster, and Vorberg-Rugh, *Building Co-operation*, 14). The CWS was one of the largest employers in Britain. By the late 1970s, it employed around 30,000 workers (Richardson, *CWS in War and Peace*, 360).
14. LCS, *First Annual Sports Meeting* and LCS, *Beehive*, June 1953, 9.
15. RACS, *Together*, April 1958, 89.
16. Roffey, *Co-operative Way*, 142.
17. Burton, *British Co-operative Movement*, 14 and CWS, *Illustrated Description*, 42–3.
18. Redfern, *New History of the C.W.S.*, 507.
19. Mason, "Football, Sport of the North?"; Williams, "Churches, Sport and Identities"; and Hill, *Sport in History*.
20. CWS, *Ourselves*, September 1950, 14.
21. Cole, *British Co-operative Movement*, 55 and 159.
22. RACS, *Together*, May 1955, 98–9.
23. CWS, *Ourselves*, January 1950, 1.
24. Metcalfe, "Sport and Community."
25. Watkins, *International Co-operative Alliance*, 141.
26. Burton, *British Co-operative Movement*, 86.
27. For example, Co-operative Day for the RACS included John Corina (a notable figure in the RACS as well as a former vice chairman of the Co-operative Union) and Lord Williams (president of the CWS) as principal speakers (*Co-operative News*, June 20, 1953, front page).
28. RACS, *Together*, August 1975, 15.
29. Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics*, 83.
30. RACS, *Together*, April 1958, back cover.
31. Clarke and Critcher, *Devil Makes Work*, 88.

32. For example, Rolls Royce (CWS, *Ourselves*, February 1950, 9). Teams of co-op employees also entered sports leagues against businesses in the local area. For example, the London Business Houses competitions (LCS, *Beehive*, August 1953, 18–9 and January 1955, 16–7).
33. For example, employees of Fiat and the National Coal Board were permitted to use LCS employees' facilities for a charge (LCS, Employee Recreation Club Minutes 9 May 1972 and 13 June 1972).
34. CWS, *Ourselves*, July 1952, 11.
35. RACS, *Together*, April 1951, 77.
36. Market Research Department, *Brief Introduction*, 17; LCS, Employee Recreation Club Minutes, 3 March 1977; CWS, Board Minutes, 11 March 1963; and RACS, General Committee Meeting, 19 May 1958.
37. RACS, General Committee Meeting, 27 August 1958; RACS, *Together*, June 1972, 14 and May 1975, 12; LCS, *Now*, September 1966, 8; LCS, *Beehive*, June 1961, 12; and CWS, Board Minutes, 11 July 1950.
38. LCS, *Now*, January 1971, 5.
39. RACS, *Together*, April 1958, 78.
40. Pichot, Pierre, and Burlot, "Management Practices," 140.
41. Parratt, "Making of the Healthy"; Bromhead, "George Cadbury's Contribution"; Gilchrist, "Sport Under the Shadow "; and Jones, "Employers' Welfare Schemes."
42. Bailey, *British Co-operative Movement*, 138.
43. *Co-operative Independent Commission Report*, 66 and Birchall, *Co-op: The People's Business*, 149.
44. LCS, *Careers with the LCS*.
45. RACS, *Together*, April 1951, 78.
46. *Co-operative Congress Report*, 1955, 6.
47. *Co-operative Independent Commission Report*, 92–3; and Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, *Building Co-operation*, 234.
48. Reducing the number of retail societies was one of the CIC Report's most contentious recommendations because 'it hit at the heart of the Movement's most precious value, local autonomy' (Birchall, *Co-op: The People's Business*, 159).
49. These included Croxley Green (1963), Staines (1965), Grays (1967), and Chilterns (1968). LCS, *Now*, September 1970, 5.
50. LCS, *Now*, February 1968, 12 and LCS, *Now*, June/July 1968, 8.
51. As Elliot argues, the effects of 'fringe benefits' are difficult to measure. Periods of full employment may increase the importance of non-wage incentives, but it is impossible to know for certain the effect on labour mobility due to the process of attraction and counter-attraction by other firms. Elliot, "Company Welfare Benefits," 319–21.
52. Spel was the Co-op's own brand of washing powder.
53. Advertisements for CWS Pelaw polish linked this product with images of bikes and featured slogans stressing the need to protect shoes used for cycling (*Co-operative News*, June 9, 1956, 9). Advertisements for CWS Amora blackcurrant juice drink featured individuals playing various sports along with slogans such as "puts you quickly into healthy vigorous action again" or "the delicious way to vigorous good health" (*Co-operative News*, March 10, 1956, 4 and *Co-operative News*, March 24, 1956, 7).
54. Holt and Mason, *Sport in Britain*, 124.
55. Mason, "Stanley Matthews," 170–1.
56. *Co-operative Consumer*, July 1957, 2.
57. CWS, *Ourselves*, August 1964, 13. Between 1948 and 1962, over 800,000 pairs of these boots had been produced (CWS, *Ourselves*, December 1962, 19).
58. Brackenridge and Woodward, "Gender Inequalities," 193.
59. Kay, "Window of Opportunity," 198. A notable exception here is Polley, *Moving the Goalposts*.
60. CWS, *Ourselves*, January 1950, 10; LCS, *Beehive*, April 1955, 14; RACS, *Together*, October 1951, 197; *Together*, April 1968, 19; *Together*, February 1968, 18; *Together*, November/December 1978, 23; LCS, *Beehive*, October 1955, 22; and CWS, *Ourselves*, September 1950, 15.
61. LCS, *Beehive*, October 1955, 22.
62. LCS, *Beehive*, March 1959, 26.

63. Clarke and Critcher, *Devil Makes Work*, 161.
64. Pub and club-based sports such as darts, snooker and billiards were traditionally defined as men's sports. Polley, *Moving the Goalposts*, 95.
65. CWS, *Ourselves*, January 1950, 10.
66. Guttmann, *Women's Sports*, 190.
67. Borsay, *History of Leisure*, 121.
68. LCS, *Beehive*, April 1955, 14.
69. LCS, *Beehive*, August 1953, 18 and RACS, *Together*, January 1951, 18.
70. CWS, *Ourselves*, September 1950, 15.
71. RACS, *Together*, November/December 1978, 23.
72. RACS, *Together*, May 1975, 11.
73. CWS, *Ourselves*, April 1953, 20 and RACS, *Together*, August 1975, 15.
74. Brackenridge and Woodward, "Gender Inequalities," 194, 196.
75. Tiratsoo, "Popular Politics" and Black, *The Political Culture*.
76. Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture* and Bourke, *Working-Class Culture*.
77. Bourke, *Working-Class Culture*, 188. Broadcasts totalled 16 hours per day in 1963 compared to just six in 1954.
78. Holt, *Sport and the British* and Mason, *Sport in Britain*.
79. LCS, *Beehive*, August 1953, 17.
80. LCS, *Now*, January 1971, 5.
81. National Guild of Co-operators, *Annual Report*, 1956, 12.
82. Royle, *Modern Britain*, 279–80.
83. CWS Board Minutes, 18 June 1963; LCS, *Always a Step Ahead*, 13; RACS, *Together*, October 1958, 201; and RACS General Committee Meeting, 19 September 1958.
84. RACS, *Together*, September 1975, 2.
85. Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, 153.
86. Moran, *Armchair Nation*, 11.
87. Henry, *Politics of Leisure*, 18.
88. Clarke and Critcher, *Devil Makes Work*, 135 and Jefferys, *Sport and Politics*, 220–2.
89. Mason, "Introduction," 5.
90. LCS, Employee Recreation Club Minutes, 24 June 1975.
91. RACS, *Together*, May/June 1978, 12.
92. RACS, *Together*, December 1975, 23 and RACS General Committee Meeting, 20 December 1976.
93. Health Education Council, *Major Programmes for 1982–1983*, 4.
94. Mason, *Sport in Britain*, 83–4.
95. RACS, *Together*, May/June 1978, 12.
96. *Ibid.*, 12–3.
97. LCS, Employee Recreation Club Minutes, 14 November 1972 and 23 October 1973.
98. Johnes, "Play Up!" 26.
99. Hargreaves, "Sport and Socialism," 142.

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