

Professor Chris Gratton: an obituary

TAYLOR, Peter and SHIBLI, Simon <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4420-115X>>

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Professor Chris Gratton: An Obituary



Any student of the economics of sport in the last 35 years or so will inevitably have read books or papers by Chris Gratton, one of the founding fathers of the subject. Chris passed away on 2 October 2022, after battling with cancer. He leaves an outstanding legacy of economic analysis which helps academics and practitioners alike to understand the sport market from an applied economics perspective. For anyone who knew him, he also leaves a vivid memory of a very personable, sociable man with a great sense of humour.

Like many academics studying sport, Chris was passionately interested in sport from an early age, following his home town team of Port Vale FC and participating in football with enthusiasm and not a little skill. In those days, however, academic study of sport was largely confined to Physical Education courses, and Chris's academic career started with undergraduate and Master's degrees in Economics at Manchester University. He was appointed as a lecturer in economics and econometrics at Manchester Polytechnic in 1971 and by the time he left in 1991 he was a Principal Lecturer. During that period, however, his interest in sport never waned and in the late 1970s Chris took a sabbatical at Cambridge University to start work on a PhD in the Economics of Sport.

In the early 1980s a previous tutor on Chris's degree and later head of Economics at North Staffordshire Polytechnic, John Bridge, was helping to develop a degree in Sport and Recreation Studies there. He asked Chris if he would come back to Stoke to teach the economics of sport modules in partnership with Peter Taylor, a lecturer there. Thus began the very fruitful 'Gratton and Taylor' era, during which, having realised that there was precious little literature on the economics of sport, Chris and Peter produced several books and research articles, with their first book, *'Sport and Recreation, an economic analysis'* rapidly becoming a standard text on the subject.

"It took two weeks for us to agree that we should write our first book on the economics of sport. Those early days were transformative in my academic work, thanks entirely to Chris. Psychologists have a term for it – 'flow' - when you are so absorbed in something that you lose all sense of time and space. Well, working with Chris in the 1980s sent me into many a state of flow." Peter Taylor

From 1991 to 1994, Chris was a senior lecturer at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, quite an interesting venture for a person who loved hills and fell-funning! However, Chris was always international in his outlook and interests and this period was a very fruitful one in developing his international network. The lure of the Peak District, however, proved strong and Chris and his family returned to live in Grindleford. Chris was appointed as Professor of Sport Economics at Sheffield

Hallam University, at a time of considerable development for the academic study of sport at the University, which included the creation by Chris of the Leisure Industries Research Centre and the Sport Industry Research Centre (SIRC). The latter continues with success today, under the leadership since 2004 of Professor Simon Shibli.

“Almost from nowhere he created the opportunity to work on major sports events and elite sport development systems and these areas of research have kept me busy, happy and motivated for 25 years. When Chris presented you with a chance, you worked hard because there was no greater reward than his affirmation.” Simon Shibli, head of SIRC

At Tilburg and Sheffield Chris worked on many national and international projects, particularly on the economic importance of sport and the economic impact of sports events. He and the SIRC team at Sheffield Hallam University conducted evaluations of many major sports events, starting with the UEFA European Football Championship in England in 1996 (Euro 96), and including the economic benefits of hosting of major World and European championships in the UK in a wide range of sports, as well as other major sports events that include Wimbledon, the London Marathon, The Open Golf Championship, the Ryder Cup, and the UK stages of the Tour de France. SIRC has become the main centre for producing analyses of the economic importance of sport in the UK. Following a contract for the Sports Council in 1996 to review the methodology for analysing the importance of the sports economy, SIRC developed a computer model of the sports sector. This was used to produce estimates of the economic importance of sport for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as for the UK using data for 1995. These have all been updated at regular intervals to provide a time series from 1995 to the present.

Chris had a truly international reputation and was invited as a keynote speaker to sports conferences in China (4 times), Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and at many European conferences. He also represented the UK on the *EU Workshop on Sport and Economics* from 2006-2010 and on the *Expert Group on Sport Statistics* from 2011-2013.

Chris particularly enjoyed the EASM conference and was a regular from the first conference at Groningen in 1993 until his retirement in 2012. Chris did not maintain a full academic CV and was too modest to list his many achievements. However, a prudent estimate would be that he delivered five keynote speeches at EASM conferences. His last keynote for EASM was at the Ajax Arena in 2009, when he addressed an audience of 500+ delegates sitting in the stands whilst he stood on the half way line and had his slides projected onto the big screens at each end of the stadium. Chris encouraged others to attend EASM and could always manage to find funding for his staff and PhD students to reap the benefits of the conference and to develop their own international networks.

Chris was a founding member of key European projects that evolved from EASM conferences, including Comparative Monitoring of Participation in Sports (COMPASS) and Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS). The SPLISS consortium is still running today. We should at this point acknowledge Paul De Knop, who was also a founder of SPLISS and who passed away in August 2022.

“My first EASM conference was at San Marino in 2000 and I was pleased to travel with my new boss, Chris Gratton. We arrived late in the evening and made our way to a local pizzeria. Almost everybody in the restaurant knew Chris and the respect for him was palpable. Chris was undoubtedly the catalyst for my long relationship with EASM and the collaborations I have developed as a result.” Simon Shibli

As important as Chris's professional reputation is, his personal qualities also shine through people's memories of him.

"Although very intelligent and supremely confident of everything he said and did, he showed not one hint of ego or arrogance. He was kind, he was caring, he listened and he always maintained a positive outlook." Peter Taylor

"He was the classic 'charismatic leader' who made us believe that anything was possible. He trusted us and motivated us to take on as much responsibility as we could handle." Simon Shibli

"He was one of my 'go to' researchers. But more than this, I always enjoyed being in Chris's company and particularly remember the good times we shared (often over a few beers) in various European cities and the time we spent in Sydney." Nick Rowe, former Head of Research at Sport England

"As well as always being in awe of his knowledge and expertise, I was extremely fond of Chris and remember with great pleasure many conferences and overseas trips that we shared." Jerry Bingham, former Head of Research at UK Sport

"He always had a warm smile on him that made people feel welcome. A wonderful mentor and boss with a good sense of humour. Laughter was often heard when he was around." Shia Ping Kung, Senior Research Fellow, SIRC

"Chris was a kind, thoughtful and witty individual, who made the world a better place. I am pleased and proud to be able to have called him my friend." Ian Henry, Emeritus Professor, Loughborough University

"Chris was such a sincere and genuine person." Dr Liu Dongfeng, Professor & Dean of Graduate School, Shanghai University of Sport

"He was one of the brightest students I ever taught and without any intellectual arrogance. I remember him as a decent, modest, kind person with a sort of gentleness I find hard to describe." John Bridge, former lecturer Manchester University and Head of Dept Staffordshire University

Chris leaves a wife, Christine, two sons Joe and Will, and two grandchildren. His funeral service was held at Hutcliffe Wood Crematorium on 24th October 2022. Joe and Will delivered a touching eulogy to their Dad and further tributes were paid by John Vint and Peter Taylor. Among the many who came to mourn Chris' loss and to celebrate his life were EASM regulars: Ian Henry, Paul Downward, Leigh Robinson, and Rob Wilson. In true British tradition, the funeral was followed by a 'wake' at a local public house at which there was much happy reminiscing about Chris, who lived a full life and was taken away too soon. In the world of Sport Management, he leaves the enduring legacy of a true pioneer in our field.

Chris Gratton: Born 14/8/1948, died 2/10/2022

Peter Taylor and Simon Shibli