As a composite whole, my research uses oral histories and archival materials to explore individuals’ Cold War sporting experiences on both sides of the Iron Curtain in relation to domestic policies, international bodies, and migration politics. My current work examines how Hungarian athletes navigated the boundaries of their limited agency vis-à-vis socialist sport leaders, and how the latter simultaneously negotiated their own power and influence within the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In the next project, I study the opportunities and trials experienced by athlete-defectors who migrated from the Eastern Bloc to the West. Based in oral histories that I conducted in Hungary and the U.S., these studies locate the history of Cold War sport in the voices of the people upon which East-West politics depended: the athletes.

My dissertation, titled “Negotiation Through Sport: Navigating Everyday Life in Socialist Hungary, 1948-1989,” was based on over thirty oral histories that I conducted with Hungarian athletes and sport leaders, and archival documents from the socialist state, secret police, and the IOC. It explored how and why Hungarian athletes, socialist sport leaders, and the IOC softened their tactics in order to cooperate with each other after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. One chapter traced the challenges sport leaders faced in balancing the demands of their socialist superiors and the IOC during the Stalinist period from 1948-1956. Chapter Three examined the material privileges that athletes could receive, such as fake “sport jobs,” opportunities to smuggle prized goods, and access to professional careers. Chapter Four explored how the 1956 Revolution and mass defection of athletes to the West convinced athletes and sport leaders to work with, rather than in opposition to, each other. Importantly, athletes realized that only socialist Hungary—and not the capitalist West—could give them the privileges, status, and opportunities that they desired. Athletes benefitted significantly from sport leaders’ relaxed policies after 1956, and continued to do so partly as a result of leaders’ improving relationship with the IOC. The body’s increased reliance on the Eastern Bloc members to bolster its institutional power in the 1960s gave the latter more power. The Bloc members used their increased leverage to mold the IOC’s global governance in ways that benefitted and protected their athletes from scrutiny. The sixth chapter analyzed the role that athlete-sport leader connections played in allowing second-tier, non-Olympic athletes to profit from smuggling goods in the 1960s-1980s. These connections illustrated how many athletes wielded increasing power in late socialism, and underscored the extent of their mutually-beneficial relations with sport leaders. I argue that the members of each group gradually—and haltingly—chose to work with one another to achieve their respective aims of socio-economic benefits and institutional legitimacy. After 1956, Hungarian athletes in particular cooperated as a way to achieve the best possible life within the realm of Cold War sport. This research was funded by multiple awards, such as a Fulbright IIE grant, a North American Society for Sport History Dissertation grant, and the Olympic Studies Centre’s PhD grant.

I currently have two journal articles in process based on my current and future research. The first article will be published by the Journal of Sport History in spring 2019. It examines how two Hungarian athletes defected to the US in 1956 and struggled to use their cultural capital to establish themselves in the California track community. I am currently revising and resubmitting the second article to the Contemporary European History journal by November 2018. It illustrates the impact of the 1956 Revolution and mass defections on convincing sport leaders and Hungarian athletes to cooperate with one another. I am moreover beginning to revise my dissertation into a book manuscript, titled The Politics of Cooperation in Cold War Sport:
Hungarian Athletes, Sport Leaders, and the IOC, 1945-1992. My manuscript demonstrates an uncharted aspect of Cold War sport that—in an arena typically defined by fierce East-West battles—highlights the agency and cooperation of each group. The work focuses on athletes’ voices in particular to illustrate how and why socialist citizens engaged with the state by asserting their limited agency within the spheres of domestic politics and international culture. The manuscript moreover illustrates the concrete ways in which athletes influenced international sport, and how local cultures and evolving policies influenced the IOC and its governance of sport worldwide. Kyla Madden from McGill-Queens University Press and Megan Laddusaw from Palgrave Macmillan have already expressed interest and requested to see a proposal.

My next research project analyzes the transnational experiences of athletes and coaches who defected from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to resettle in the West during the Cold War. I began this research with the Journal of Sport History article, and am continuing to gather oral histories for it as part of my project with Toby Rider. Like all refugees, athlete-defectors faced the challenges of leaving their homelands and adjusting to new political and cultural environments. As cultural products of the Eastern Bloc, they struggled with two dynamics: the Western countries’ desire to benefit from their prized athletic prowess on the one hand, and the cultural stigma of their “Communist” heritage on the other. Other athlete-defectors, such as those who resettled in fascist Spain, successfully continued their sport careers but found their bodies manipulated for political ends once again. My future research will include athletes who resettled across North America, in Western Europe and Australia. By comparing the athletes’ experiences before, during, and after their departure from behind the Iron Curtain, this project studies the global cultural politics of East-West migration during the Cold War.

Due to linguistic challenges, the politicization of memory in the region, and a general lack of expertise in the methodology, few scholars of Cold War or sport history have conducted oral histories as part of their research. By introducing the voices of athletes in relation to the corresponding leaders and institutional bodies, the two projects provide significant methodological and analytical contributions to the burgeoning fields of the global Cold War and sport history. Their voices counteract the archival depiction of athletes as helpless victims at the mercy of Cold War politics by illustrating how they sought to use their cultural capital to influence and exert agency on their lives. Athletes’ experiences moreover reflect on the complex relationship between agency and cooperation in authoritarian states then and today, as well as the ambivalence of Western democracies towards politicized migration.