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ENGLISH SPORTING IDIOMS

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Abstract: Each language has its own collection of wise words or expressions. While some of them give wise advice about life, others describe the ideas and basics of a certain society or culture. Learning idioms is fun, mainly when we compare the English idioms to those in our native language. English idioms are quite utilized in everyday conversation and an adequate usage of them can make our English sound more like of a native speaker. Among English idioms, the sporting idioms domain is highly productive. Over the years, sport has given us a large number of idioms. Our article is focused on this particular domain of the English phraseology, since sport has always been a rich source of idioms.

Keywords: sport, connotation, idiom, origin, synonyms.

Idioms, as we know, facilitate the ingression into the culture and history of a nation. And, in this regard, the English language is a language wealthy nuances. If you are not a native speaker of English, learning idioms might help you understand certain connotations that some words or phrases might have. The wealthiness of a language lies, generally, in those words or phrases which are difficult to understand by a foreigner, those aspects of a language which come to the surface in the speech act and which are socially and culturally entailed, either we are speaking about the popular speech or the slang discourse.

From this point of view, the sports linguistic domain is very well represented. There are a big number of idioms which have entered the English language from the world of sport. Many of these idioms have originally come from sport, but they are used to talk about other situations. "Over time these phrases have come to mean something that can be used in everyday life. While most sports idioms can still be used when discussing sports, they are even more common in other areas of life, especially the business world."[1]

Our article has tried to give a list, as comprehensible as possible, of these sporting idioms. The expressions are arranged alphabetically, each one of them is explained and an example is provided. Unless a word is used in all parts of the English-speaking world, the country of origin or the country in which the word is most prevalent is given between brackets, together with the sport which the idiom comes from. We have had as a reference book *"Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English"*[2]. Here are some examples:

- *a dark horse* (British English) = a candidate with a few adherents (in politics); a person who does not reveal much about his/her life and who surprises other people by having unsuspected qualities; e.g. *You are a real dark horse! I didn't have a clue you could sing so well.*

[1] https://www. englishclub.com/vocabulary/idioms-sports.htm
[2] *Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English*, Oxford University Press, 2006

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This idiom comes from horse racing, where a *dark horse* was a horse that nobody knew much about; now it is used to designate someone who wins a race unexpectedly.

- *a dead ringer for somebody* (familiar speech) = a person who takes after someone else; e.g. *Michael is a dead ringer for his father.* This expression comes from horse racing, where a *ringer* was a horse that was replaced by another in order to cheat in a race.
- *a false start* = a thoughtless beginning; e.g. *After a few false starts, I finally managed to fix the air-conditioning*. In sport, *a false start* is a situation when a competitor in a race starts before the official signal has been given.
- *a good innings* (British English, familiar speech) = used when referring to a person's long life or career, when that particular person has died or is at the end of his/her life or career; e.g. *He has had a good innings but now we have to bid him farewell.* In cricket, an *innings* is the period of time that a team or a person spends batting (=hitting the ball). *A good innings* is one that lasts a long time and in which a lot of "runs" (=points) are scored.
- *a political football* = a problem that causes argument and that various political groups use to gain votes; e.g. *Once again health is being used as a political football, but no party seems to be really interested in this matter.*
- *at home* = play at one's own ground, field (when referring to a sports event); e.g. *Tonight we are at home to Manchester United and next week we are away to Liverpool.*
- *at the buzzer* (American English) = at the end of a game or period of play: e.g. *Our basketball team won at the buzzer 32-30.*
- *a wild goose chase* = a hopeless search; e.g. *She gave us false information on that matter, which led us off on a wild goose chase. A wild goose chase* was a sport in the past, in which horse riders had to follow the exact course taken by the first rider, like the way that geese fly by following a leader.
- *back the wrong horse* (British English) = support the loser in a contest; e.g. *I was feeling that I had backed the wrong horse when I had chosen him to be our leader.* In horse racing, if you *back the wrong horse* you bet money on a horse that does not win the race.
- *be a good/bad sport* (familiar speech) = be/not be generous or cheerful, particularly in a difficult situation; e.g. *Be a good sport and do me this favour!*
- *be a slam dunk* (American English) = be something that is going to be successful; e.g. *This movie is excellent; it will surely be a slam dunk.* In basketball, *a slam dunk* is the act of jumping up and putting the ball through the net with a lot of force.
- *behind the eight ball* (American English) = in a difficult situation; penniless, broke; e.g. *I found myself behind the eight ball, not knowing what to do or say.* In the game of pool, if you hit the eight ball (the black ball) into one of the holes at the wrong time, you lose the game. If your ball is behind the eight ball, the risks of doing this are greater.
- *be in the saddle* = be master of the situation; get the upper hand; e.g. *If Thomas is in charge of this campaign, everything will be all right as he is always in the saddle.* In horse riding, *the saddle* is the leather seat for the rider.
- *be (way out/over) in left field* (American English, familiar speech) = totally wrong; strange or unusual; e.g. *He is way out in the field if he thinks he is the only one who is able to manage the situation.* This expression refers to the left part of the field in baseball.
- *below the belt* = irregular, unfair (referring to a comment or attack); e.g. *His comments*

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about her performance were a little below the belt. In the sport of boxing, the rule is that boxers must not hit each other below the waist.

- *be on a sticky wicket* (British English, familiar speech) = be in a difficult situation; e.g. *I was on a sticky wicket when I had to choose between my best friend and my brother.* This idiom comes from the game of cricket, where *a sticky wicket* is a playing area that is drying out after rain and so it is more difficult for the person hitting the ball to play on.
- *be on/off your guard* = keep/ not keep a close watch, be/not be on the alert; e.g. *While I was off my guard, he punched me in my nose.* In a sport such as boxing or fencing, your *guard* is a position you take when you want to defend yourself.
- *be (about) par for the course* (deprecatory meaning) = be exactly what you would expect to happen; e.g. *She has put her foot in her mouth once more; that's about par for the course for her.* This idiom comes from golf, where *par* is the number of times a good player should hit the ball to complete a particular hole or course.
- *be quick/slow off the mark* = be quick/slow to do something or understand something; e.g. *He is known to be very smart; he is very quick off the mark.* In athletics, the *mark* is the starting point in a race.
- *be the butt of something* = be the person or thing that other people joke about or criticize; e.g. *She is always the butt of other people's practical jokes.* In the sport of archery, *butt* means *target*.
- *blow the whistle (on somebody/something)* = put an end to something you do not agree with; stop somebody from doing something illegal or wrong; e.g. *John blew the whistle on his business partners when he found out they were corrupt.* This idiom comes from football, where a referee blows a whistle to stop the match when a player breaks the rules.
- *catch-as-catch-can* (American English) = fighting in which most things are allowed; using whatever is available; e.g. *The party took a catch-as-catch-can approach to win the election. Catch-as-catch-can* originates in the sport of wrestling, in which competitors hold each other and try to throw the other to the ground.
- *close but no cigar* (American English, familiar speech) = used to say that the answer, result, etc. is not good enough; e.g. *You were close but no cigar of winning the contest.* This idiom originates in the old American custom of giving a cigar as a prize in fairground games of skill, such as shooting games.
- *cry fool* (British English, familiar speech) = complain that someone else has made a mistake or has done something unfair; e.g. *I cried foul when the manager accused me of theft.* In sport, a *foul* is an action that is against the rules of the game.
- *fair game* = easy mark, someone who is played jokes on, criticized, etc.; e.g. *Unless you let your schoolmates know what's what, you will certainly be fair game.* This idiom comes from hunting, where *game* refers to birds and animals that people hunt for sport or food.
- *flex your muscles* = show that you are ready to use your power, abilities, etc.; e.g. *They are flexing their muscles, showing that they are ready to take the power and change the world.* In athletic sports, athletes *flex* (=stretch) their muscles before a race.
- *force the pace* (British English) = make somebody do something more quickly; e.g. *Our history teacher is forcing the pace on his teaching line, which makes us feeling rather stressed.* In a race, if you *force the pace*, you force the other runners to run as fast as you because you want them to get tired.
- *get a guernsey* (Australian English, familiar speech) = be chosen for something, be

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recognized as being good; e.g. *Our local basketball team's last success failed to get a guernsey in the press.* In Australian football, a *guernsey* is a kind of shirt worn by a player. If you are given a *guernsey*, you are selected to play for the team.

- *get to first base (with somebody/something)* (American English, familiar speech) = successfully complete the first stage of something; e.g. *Our project has finally got to first base.* In baseball, *first base* is the first of four positions that a player must reach in order to score points.
- *have a ringside seat/view* (familiar speech) = view/see something from a vantage ground; e.g. *I had a seat to the fore, so I was able o have a ringside view of the concert.* At a boxing match, *a ringside seat* is one which is closest to the ring.
- *heavy going* = slow progress; difficult, boring; e.g. *The conversation was heavy going, as we were at a loss.* In horse racing, the *going* is the condition of the ground.
- *hedge your bets* (familiar speech) = choose two or more courses of action at the same time, in case of being wrong about something; e.g. *Tom has invested his money in two different businesses, so he is hedging his bets.* In horse racing, putting money on more than one horse increases your chances of winning money.
- *horses for courses* (British English) = persons or things should be used only for the purposes they are most suitable for; e.g. *I think of Tom as the right sort of person for this job. It's a question of horses for courses.* This idiom refers to horse racing, where horses race better on a track that suits them.
- *hell for leather* (British English, familiar speech, old-fashioned) = with the greatest speed, energy, etc.; *They started going hell for leather when they saw the dog coming towards them.* In horse riding, a rider can hit a horse with a strip of leather to make it run faster.
- *hit/knock somebody/something for six* (British English) = totally destroy a plan, a suggestion, etc.; e.g. *When he refused to go with us on that trip, he knocked all our plans for six.* In cricket, if you hit the ball a long distance you score six runs.
- *in full cry* = follow hard behind somebody; attack somebody/something with enthusiasm; e.g. *The mass media were in full cry over the pay freeze.* In the sport of hunting, hounds make a certain noise when they are chasing a fox.
- *jump the gun* (familiar speech) = perform a certain action before the right time; e.g. *I jumped the gun by starting solving the problem before the teacher told us the entire requisite.* This idiom refers to an athlete in a race who starts running before the starter has fired the gun.
- *kick something into the long grass/ kick something into touch* (British English) = stop dealing with a problem; e.g. *Whenever he has an argument with somebody, he has a tendency of kicking it into the long grass.* In rugby and football, if a ball is kicked *into the long grass* (the area outside the lines that mark the sides of the playing field), the game stops.
- *level pegging* (British English) = making progress at the same rate as another person; e.g. *In the last minute of the match, the teams were level pegging.* In some games, a player puts a *peg* (a short piece of wood, plastic, etc.) in one of a series of numbered holes to mark their score. If both players' pegs are *level*, their scores are equal.
- *loaded for bear* (American English) = ready to act in a determined manner; e.g. *The girls were ready to bear in the music contest.* This idiom comes from hunting and refers to carrying the correct equipment, bullets, etc. to shoot a bear.

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- *make a move on somebody* (familiar speech) = try to pass somebody who is in front of you in a race; e.g. *He made a move on his opponent, so he finished the race in the third position.*
- *Monday morning quarterback* (American English, familiar speech, deprecatory meaning) = someone who criticizes or makes comments on a particular event after it has happened; e.g. *Jim is always playing Monday morning quarterback with us, as he is always critical about our behaviour.* This expression comes from American football, where most games are played on Sunday, so Monday morning is the day after the game finished.
- *off-base* (American English, baseball) = 1. totally wrong about something: *You are completely off-base if you think Jim is a trustworthy person.* 2. on the wrong foot, off balance: *My question caught her off-base.* In baseball, a *base* is one of the four positions that a player must reach in order to score points.
- *on aggregate* (British English) = inclusive (used when the scores of a number of games are added together); e.g. *Our football team won 3-2 on aggregate.*
- *on the home straight/stretch* = approaching the end of a task; e.g. *We have two more days and we have finished our project. We are on the home straight now.* This idiom originates in horse racing and it refers to the last part of a horse race when the horses are approaching the finishing line.
- *on the ropes* (familiar speech) = very close to failure or defeat; e.g. *If you don't take into account your counsellor's advice, you will be on the ropes.* This idiom comes from boxing and refers to a boxer who is against the ropes of a boxing ring.
- *on the sidelines* = watching something but not taking an active part in it; e.g. *She is waiting on the sidelines for a chance to become an actress. The sidelines* are the lines along the sides of a sports field that mark the outer edges.
- *out for the count* (British English) / *down for the count* (American English) = unconscious or in a very deep sleep, either because you have been hit very hard or are very tired; e.g. *After a whole week of painting the house, I was out for the count.* In boxing, if a boxer is still down when the referee has finished counting to ten, he loses the game.
- *out of bounds* = outside the area of play which is allowed (referring to a ball, in some sports); e.g. *His ball went out of bounds.*
- *play it straight/ play a straight bat* = be honest and sincere with someone; e.g. *I always try to play it straight when someone is asking for my opinion.* These idioms refer to one way of holding the bat in the game of cricket.
- *roll with the punches* = put up with a difficult situation; e.g. *You will have to roll with the punches and accept the fact that there isn't anything you can do to change things.* This idiom comes from boxing and refers to a technique which the boxer uses to move away from the punch to avoid a direct hit.
- *run interference* (American English, familiar speech) = help people by solving their problems instead of them; e.g. *I have been running interference for my little sister my entire life.* In American football, if you *run interference*, you clear the way for the player with the ball by blocking players from the opposite team.
- *run somebody/something to earth/ground* (familiar speech) = to track down somebody/something; e.g. *After several weeks of searching my dog, I ran it to ground in neighbouring district.* This idiom comes from hunting and it means to chase an animal to its hiding place.

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- *saved by the bell* = saved from an unpleasant or difficult situation at the last moment; e.g. *I was trying to avoid his question when you showed up miraculously. Thus, I was saved by the bell.* In boxing, *the bell* marks the end of a round.
- *set the pace* = make the running; give a lead; e.g. *This new device has really set the pace in the technology domain.* In athletics, there is one person who *sets the pace* for the other competitors by running faster than them.
- *straight from the horse's mouth* (familiar speech) = at first hand; on good authority; e.g. *I have found out about their wedding straight from the horse's mouth.* This idiom comes from horse racing and it has a humorous meaning, according to which one has heard from the horse itself whether it would win the race.
- *take somebody/something to the mat* (American English, familiar speech) = engage in an argument with someone or over something; e.g. *I took my son to the mat on the matter of his spending money.* This idiom comes from wrestling, in which two people fight by holding each other and trying to force the other person to the ground (=*mat*).
- *the best of three, five, etc.* = up to three, five, etc. games played to decide who wins, the winner being the person or team that wins most of them;e.g. *They decided to go in for a race so that they might see who played the best of five.*
- *the gloves are off* (familiar speech) = behave bluntly, without mincing the matter; e.g. *I have tried to be gentle with him, but his rude behaviour has made me change my attitude, so now the gloves are off.* This idiom refers to boxers taking off their gloves.
- *the last lap* = the final part of something; e.g. *We are on the last lap of our dance competition.* In athletic sports, a *lap* is a single circuit of a running track.
- *the man of the match* (British English) = the man who plays the best in a game; e.g. *At the end of the football match, he was proclaimed the man of the match.*
- *the real McCoy* (familiar speech) = original, authentic (when referring to something); e.g. *This ring has a genuine diamond; it's the real McCoy.* This idiom refers to the American boxing champion Kid McCoy. Many people pretended to be him, so that he started calling himself Kid "The Real" McCoy.
- *throw in the towel/sponge* (familiar speech) = give up the fight; admit defeat; e.g. *You shouldn't throw in the towel whenever the plot thickens.* In boxing, *throwing in the towel* is a sign that a fighter accepts defeat.
- *throw somebody a curveball* (American English) = surprise someone with something (a situation, question, etc.) that they do not expect; e.g. *When my wife left me, I didn't think anything would throw me a curveball anymore, but after a few months she came back asking for forgiveness*. This expression comes from baseball, where a *curveball* is a ball that is hard to hit as it does not move in a straight line.
- *up to scratch* = up to the standard; satisfyingly; e.g. *Whenever I needed his help, he was up to scratch.* In boxing, the line in the ring which the boxers have to come to when they start to fight is called the *scratch*.
- *win, lose, etc. by a short head* = win, lose, etc. by only a little; e.g. *The contest was very tough but my sister succeeded in winning by a short head.* This idiom comes from horse racing and refers to a close finish.

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- *with no holds barred* = with no rules of restriction; e.g. *They decided that their fight should be with no holds barred.* In wrestling, *no holds barred* refers to the fact that there are no rules about which ways of holding your opponent are allowed and which are not.

Sporting events have always been a wealth of idiomatic expressions, since people everywhere talk about different sports, agreeing or disagreeing on various aspects of the sporting world. The English language is full of idiomatic phrases connected with different sports, in which the concepts of success and failure are very well represented.

Our article has brought up different idiomatic expressions related to the world of sport, either we are speaking about sports which are very popular in the United Kingdom or about sports which are more common in the United States. We have noticed that the English are much more familiar with certain sports, such as cricket, horse racing, golf or football, while American sporting idioms include idioms which are connected with basketball, baseball, boxing or wrestling.

In conclusion, this article has tried to highlight the most representative sporting expressions, since sport is an important part of our lives, many sport phrases being often used in everyday communication among friends as well as in different other areas of interest, such as the business world.

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