

SPORTS HISTORY: ITS USE IN THE  
WESTERN CIVILIZATION SURVEY

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My first sports history course in 1980 at Saint Louis University centered on the theme "Sports as a mirror of the aspirations and frustrations of society." The sports that people enjoy, both as participants and spectators, often reveal more about man, since they are adopted voluntarily, than his work, which is usually imposed. Hence, sports are one reflection of a society's image. Instructors, therefore, can use sports history in their classes to present a graphic illustration of social problems and conflicts. Since games involve action and appear regularly on television today, the subject attracts young people, and I have found it a useful tool, especially in the western civilization survey with its huge classes of non-history majors fulfilling an academic requirement.

Sports history illuminates numerous periods of that course. For instance, primitive man learned to rely on running and jumping just to survive, and his first games probably derived from these actions and from hunting skills. Since he felt overwhelmed by the immensity of nature, his first religious ceremonies originated in the activities of play, "a significant function" with definite meaning, also affecting primitive art and military activities, as explained by Johan Huizinga, whose Homo Ludens is a classic work in the culture of play.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, the Greeks present an outstanding example of the use of sport as a splendid mirror of their social mores. Useful as a preparation for war and often part of a religious ceremonial to entertain their anthropomorphic gods, sports were enjoyed for the exhilaration of competition, usually for the laurel wreath. The student in the western civilization survey can easily grasp sport as one aspect of the Greek ideal of individualism and human fulfillment in the free spirit of the polis.

Footraces, wrestling, and boxing, together with horse and chariot racing, entertained the Greeks long before the Olympic Games of 776 B.C., the first known organized sports event, fostered by the city-state environment. Honoring Zeus, the Olympics introduced most notably the pentathlon, consisting of five sports: the footrace, broadjump, javelin throw, discus throw, and wrestling, to test the all-around athlete. What a contrast to the oppressive atmosphere of earlier near eastern civilizations.<sup>2</sup>

The Greek words athlon ("contest," hence our word athlete), gymnos ("naked," from which gymnasium derives), agon ("contest," origin of the word agony), and stade (a distance of about two hundred yards for a footrace, basis of our word stadium) testify to the place of sport in Greek life. The statue of Poseidon, god of the sea, in the National Archeological Museum at Athens, or that of Hermes, messenger of the gods, at Olympia, artistically represent their goal of a well-developed body and cultivated mind.

Since rules limited competition to freeborn Greeks, the Olympics present a dramatic portrayal of their social structure, which called for citizen participation by mature Greek males but excluded women and slaves, a sizable portion of the community. Moreover, the Olympics, and later the Pythian, Isthmian (both dating from 582 B.C.), and Nemeian (573 B.C.) Games acted as a homecoming for Greeks living in the various colonial city-states of the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas, making them feel as one people, in contrast to outside "barbarians."<sup>3</sup>

Athens used sport for the joy of competition; Sparta employed it to develop robust soldiers and women who could bear healthy male children. Here women competed openly in a regimented society given to the military tradition. Sports

helped provide the training for the discipline of Spartan life. Although we do not know the exact rules of many Greek games, mural and vase paintings give some clues.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas individual participation and achievement attracted the Greeks to sport, the Romans utilized it primarily to entertain spectators. Roman games reflect the degree of alienation of the masses from participation in the state and thus provide a significant reflection of the Empire's social malaise. Rome imbibed the Greek heritage with its love of games by way of southern Italy ("Magna Graecia") and through the conquest of the Hellenistic world itself by 133 B.C. Moreover, the Etruscans, Rome's northern neighbors, also passed their knowledge of Greek games to that city, especially chariot racing (for which they built the first Circus Maximus when they ruled Rome) and the gladiatorial combats. These last derived from the cruel Etruscan practice of making prisoners of war entertain their conquerors after battle. Slaves provided most of the personnel for these two brutal sports in Rome, and Spartacus, one of these gladiators, led a revolt of his fellow slaves in 73-71 B.C. Gladiatorial combats often shared programs with wild animal fights, mock naval battles, and struggles to the death between men and beasts. The Colosseum (completed by 80 A.D.) housed these spectacles.

Rome's foreign conquests, commencing with the Punic Wars (264-146 B.C.), had flooded the city with that tide of slaves and booty which enriched her military, landed, and commercial classes. This influx expanded that economic gap with the common people which eventually left Rome "a society of beggars and millionaires," in the words of historian Theodor Mommsen. After the era of the "Five Good Emperors" (following 180 A.D.), unemployment created a critical problem as aristocrats forced farmers off their lands and into the cities, where slaves dominated the labor market. Meanwhile, a closed caste of professional officers virtually barred the common man from the army. The city reached its nadir when fully fifty percent of the Roman people futilely sought work, most of them on the dole and dependent on monthly handouts from the grain stores. Holidays monopolized two-thirds of the calendar, with an average work-day of only six or seven hours. Games kept the people occupied, necessitated by their non-participation in and estrangement from a political and social order that despised them. Organized carnage provided an addictive narcotic that helped prevent street rioting, always a serious disruption of public order, although the restless populace was seldom a substantial danger to the regime itself.<sup>5</sup>

In Juvenal's words, it was "bread and circuses" (*panem et circenses*), principally in the Circus Maximus and Colosseum, invariably full to their capacities of ca. 200,000 and 50,000 respectively. Apparently there was an abundance of free seats for the poor, who would gather early to claim their places and their shares of distributed food. Reserved sections for the wealthy--the Colosseum provided a huge canopy to shield them from the sun--and boxes for officials ensured large crowds. The Olympic Games continued under Rome but now with professional performers. Where the Greeks had delighted in competition, Roman citizens wallowed in brutality, gore, and bloodshed. The Emperor Trajan's games (over 123 consecutive days) featured 10,000 gladiators and 11,000 slaughtered animals. Most emperors regularly attended. Nero himself drove the chariot and once manned a ten-horse team in the Olympics. Most participants were slaves who used their profession to purchase their freedom. The frustration of public indolence thus relieved itself in a mindless sensuality, provided for those with little stake in the existence of the state.<sup>6</sup> Their morbid fascination with games, then, shows the exclusion of the vast majority of the Roman people, who could not have cared less if the Empire lived or died. A discussion of Roman games (or *ludi*) enables the student to grasp a significant dimension of the Empire in decline.

Christianity offered an appealing solace to these dispossessed of Rome. An important victory for that faith over the Empire occurred when Theodosius I banned the Olympic Games as vestiges of paganism in 393. A later Christian emperor ordered destruction of all facilities at Olympia, the original site. Spectacles ceased, and the wanton dismantling of the Colosseum by Christians proved symbolic of their demise as orgies of a despised past. Such Christian historians as Tertullian and Cassiodorus long had castigated them as corrosive to public morals, yet their writings disclose much valuable detail about them. Although the Church's disdain for Greek and Roman games as pagan rituals was absolute, the popes never went so far as to condemn sports as such.<sup>7</sup>

Sports history enables the teacher of western civilization to offer a more effective presentation of many social aspirations and frustrations of the Medieval period as well. The Middle Ages are often difficult for the beginning student because of their interspersing earthy and spiritual values, and the institution of feudalism especially defies simplistic explanation for the teacher because of its complexity. I have found that games and sports help here because of their reservation to certain social classes.

The Medieval tournament presents a colorful example of chivalry or code of knightly honor. Since he was the ordained defender of society and obliged to furnish military and other services to his lord, sealed by oath in the feudal ceremony of investiture, the Medieval knight played at war in the joust, the individual combat, or in the *melée*, the pitched battle. Admiring ladies offered their handkerchiefs or scarves to adorn lance points as the knights became their "champions." Descriptions of the Medieval tournament are many, but the treatment by William Stearns Davis in his Life on a Mediaeval Barony is especially helpful.<sup>8</sup> The common folk, artisans from the nearby towns and peasants from the lords' estates, peered through the fences surrounding the lists, watching the pastimes of their lords and ladies. The unprivileged were given bread by the host lord during intermissions. Since the Church banned much feudal warfare by regulation, the Medieval tournament was regarded by the participants as needed practice for war, although also disparaged by the Church.<sup>9</sup>

Manorialism becomes somewhat more understandable to the student when the instructor can explain that peasants delighted in their own game called "footballe," given that term because it was not played on horseback. According to tradition, some peasant unearthed the skull of a Danish invader of Britain in the ninth century and kicked it in derision; thus the ancestor of modern soccer, rugby, and the American gridiron sport was born. Participants, using an inflated cow's bladder, played footballe in an open field or in the streets of a nearby town. Lords pronounced against this diversion on numerous occasions as distracting from necessary archery practice. What rules prevailed are unknown. Holy days of the Church (derivation of our word holiday) provided free time for this and other games such as running, jumping, and tug-of-war.<sup>10</sup>

After the year 1,000, new sports developed, reflecting the rise of an ambitious merchant class, which profited from a stimulated trade, with its overseas commerce, banking, and money economy, centering in the new towns. In such thriving communities as Nimes, Limoges, Rothenburg, and Augsburg, townspeople now enjoyed animal baiting and cockfighting. University towns, such as Heidelberg and Oxford, however, discouraged sports, forbidding student participation in sword play, footballe, or even as spectators at cockfights or tournaments. In fact, the Medieval universities provided no organized sports program of their own whatsoever, as play distracted from study; thus, the academic attitude towards sports was almost entirely negative, presenting another facet of student life in the Medieval university.<sup>11</sup>

The Reformation also deprecated sport, despite the speculation that Martin Luther influenced the modern game of bowling. John Calvin disdained sport as a

frivolous activity. Later, his Puritan followers inveighed long against sport on Sunday as defiling the Lord's day and provided the source of many of our contemporary "blue laws."<sup>12</sup>

England's King James I struck a blow at this Puritan Sabbatarianism with his Book of Sports (1618), permitting popular entertainments and games on Sunday, as seventeenth and eighteenth-century sports continued the Medieval motif of confinement to specific classes. Continental aristocrats emphasized horse racing and also archery, whose effectiveness in warfare by then had been totally eclipsed by firearms. Townspeople enjoyed foot races, bear baiting, boxing, and wrestling, while "stool-ball," a bat and ball game and possible ancestor to modern baseball, entertained the English peasants.<sup>13</sup>

British sport in the nineteenth century mirrored the Industrial Revolution's impact on the social system of the United Kingdom. For the first time sports were organized with definite rules but continued to follow social lines. Sports interest intensified as the factory system expanded cities; the proletariat formed a new laboring class in need of diversion; the railroad and trolley enabled spectators and participants to travel greater distances; the work week was shortened, permitting more leisure; and the educational system, at last, recognized the value of sports.<sup>14</sup>

The old British landed aristocracy had long engaged in sports rather than games--hunting, hawking, coursing, shooting, fishing, and riding, pastimes suitable to the rural estate. As industry enriched the middle classes, however, these groups purchased country estates and at first imitated their social betters in the pursuit of these sports. But with the decline of British agriculture by 1878, these business classes developed games of their own. Lawn tennis became a favorite sport for the new suburban middle classes due to the efforts of Major Walter C. Wingfield, who popularized the game for both men and women. Croquet saw some resurgence for the same groups. Golf, long known in Scotland and played enthusiastically by Mary Queen of Scots, organized around athletic clubs formed by wealthy businessmen, especially the Westward Ho (1864) and Hoylake Clubs (1869). The sport grew in popularity after 1885 when women were permitted to play men's rules. Cricket made a strong appeal to the middle classes when W.L. Grace, something of a Babe Ruth of cricket, established set rules between 1871-1885, making the game popular with athletic clubs. Thus, the British traditional landed aristocracy and new suburban middle classes enjoyed their own distinctive diversions.<sup>15</sup>

Much sports impetus also sprang from a religious movement known as "Muscular Christianity," which inspired the founding of the Young Men's Christian Association in London in 1841. The new British public school system, established by the Forster Act of 1870, offered sports programs, especially the game of soccer, a name derived from the "Association" which formulated the first rules in 1863. Middle class graduates, on entering the business world, in turn sponsored soccer teams for their industrial workers. Various Factory Acts, gradually reducing the working day, freed Saturday afternoons for sports. Paying spectators made these games a profitable enterprise for the businessman, and many teams went professional. Cities alone could provide the necessary facilities for soccer and its large crowds, and the sport at first centered in northern Britain's industrial areas. Soccer thus became thoroughly identified with the working classes, who found it a welcome relief from daily drudgery.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, rugby became associated more with the upper classes and aristocrats in the universities. William Webb Ellis, playing football at Rugby School in 1823, tired of the kicking game. He then picked up and ran with the ball in clear violation of the rules. Cambridge University students later adopted Rugby football, and a new game--named for the school--was born for the upper classes. The English Rugby Union, formed in 1871, established definite

rules, which successfully resisted professionalism. Truly, "Soccer is a gentleman's sport played by ruffians; rugby is a ruffian's sport played by gentlemen." Hence the Industrial Revolution, in creating the modern city, helped to organize sports, necessary for play in an urban environment. British sports and games, consequently, became associated with certain classes and represent a mirror of the Victorian social structure.<sup>17</sup>

Another example of the use of sports history in teaching western civilization can be found in the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896 by the French nobleman Pierre de Coubertin. His efforts took place in the Age of Realpolitik with its philosophy of Social Darwinism, racked by class conflict, competing alliance systems, imperial rivalries, and arms races before World War I. De Coubertin deplored his country's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and ascribed it to the poor physical condition of French youth. He admired the place of sport in the new British public school system and unsuccessfully sought to influence French educators. A student of the classics as well, de Coubertin traveled frequently to Olympia, the original site of the Olympic Games, to find German archeologists supervising excavations. All these frustrations resolved him to champion the revival of the historic games to foster international understanding. The Greeks hosted the spectacle at Athens in 1896 under the new Olympic flag which bore five interlocking rings, representing the world's continents and de Coubertin's goal: to create a true spirit of internationalism and brotherhood in an age of social strife, exploitation of subject peoples, and competitive national states.<sup>18</sup> The visitor to Olympia today can see the quiet forest grove overlooking a simple stele whose inscription reads: "Ici repose le coeur de Baron Pierre de Coubertin."

In the twentieth century, burgeoning cities on the European continent attached sports to factory systems and athletic clubs rather than to schools as in Britain and the U.S. The airplane and automobile, along with newspapers, movies, radio, and television, helped popularize events, which somewhat compensated the urban resident for the impersonality of his sprawling metropolis by allowing him to identify with sports heroes and their adoring throngs.<sup>19</sup>

Other examples could be cited, but the foregoing illustrations will show how the instructor can introduce elements of sports history into his western civilization classes to enrich and dramatize his presentation. Sports and games do mirror the social aspirations and frustrations of the peoples who play and witness them. At the same time the teacher must emphasize that he is not teaching sports history per se but rather using that discipline as a new but nevertheless significant aspect of the human story. Without doubt, sports history in itself offers something readily communicable and attractive to the younger generation, nurtured on the World Series, Super Bowl, Stanley Cup competition, and NBA playoffs via television.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), I, 89, 158.

<sup>2</sup>George A. Christopoulos (ed.), History of the Hellenic World: The Archaic Period (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), 488-91.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 491-98.

<sup>4</sup>H.A. Harris, Greek Athletes and Athletics (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1964), 29-30.

- <sup>5</sup>Michael Grant, History of Rome (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 437-61.
- <sup>6</sup>H.A. Harris, Sport in Greece and Rome (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972), 198-202, 213-22.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., 226-37.
- <sup>8</sup>William Stearns Davis, Life on a Mediaeval Barony: A Picture of a Typical Feudal Community in the Thirteenth Century (New York: Harper, 1923), 208-23.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup>R. Brasch, How Did Sports Begin? (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1972), 85-89.
- <sup>11</sup>Earle F. Zeigler (ed.), History of Physical Education and Sport (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), 63-70.
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid., 87-91.
- <sup>13</sup>L.A. Govert, The King's Book of Sports (London: Elliott Stock, 1890), 38-39.
- <sup>14</sup>William J. Baker, "The Making of a Working-Class Football Culture in Victorian England," Journal of Social History (Winter, 1979), 241.
- <sup>15</sup>R.C.K. Ensor, England, 1870-1914 (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1936), 164-67.
- <sup>16</sup>Baker, "The Making of a Working Class Football Culture in Victorian England," 241-49.
- <sup>17</sup>Brasch, How Did Sports Begin?, 90-95.
- <sup>18</sup>M.I. Finley and H.W. Pleket, The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976), 1-5.
- <sup>19</sup>William J. Miller, "The American Sports Empire," in William J. Baker and John M. Carroll, eds., Sports in Modern America (St. Louis: River City Publishers, 1981), 153.

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