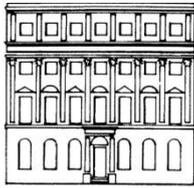


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*Sport in Early Modern Culture*

Conference Report

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*Sport in Early Modern Culture.* Joint conference of the DFG Network 'Body Techniques in the Early Modern Period' and the German Historical Institute London, held at the GHIL, 17-19 Nov. 2011. Conveners: Rebekka von Mallinckrodt (Free University Berlin) and Angela Schattner (GHIL).

This conference, the last in a series of four organized by the DFG Network 'Body Techniques in the Early Modern Period', focused on the role of sport and physical exercise in early modern society, something that has so far largely been ignored in the historiography. The conference had two main concerns: first, it asked how sport was embedded in social, economic, and political contexts; and secondly, it asked about new methodologies and potential new approaches to sources that have so far been neglected. The papers presented at the conference discussed issues relating to space, medicine and health, social and political change, and commercialization and professionalization.

The first two papers looked at the spatial localization of sport and the development of an infrastructure of sport in connection with a leisure culture, commercialization, and social differentiation. Christian Jaser (Dresden) took an urban micro-history approach to the history of sport, providing a detailed analysis of the sporting habits of different social milieux, and contextualizing them in terms of contemporary social, economic, political, and urban developments. Taking the example of tennis courts in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Paris, he demonstrated that their spatial distribution in the city showed whether they were used by aristocrats, artisans, or students. The boom in building tennis courts in Paris between 1500 and 1600 can be explained, he said, by increasing demand within the framework of a growing urban leisure culture and the choice of tennis courts as an investment by wealthy people. The courts were separate commercial units, and the owners lent or sold users the necessary equipment.

Angela Schattner (London) investigated the social use of sports facilities, differentiating between the function of communal and exclusive spaces in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Britain. Communal spaces such as churchyards and commons offered places where

The full conference programme can be found on the GHIL's website <[www.ghil.ac.uk](http://www.ghil.ac.uk)> under Events and Conferences.

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whole urban and rural communities could meet and engage in social activities and sport. By providing space for sport within the community, they strengthened the community. From the fifteenth century, by contrast, aristocrats, and, following their example, the guilds, created sports facilities with limited access, or ones that had to be rented, thus creating their own social spaces underlining their exclusivity. These exclusive spaces which charged for entry or rent also gave wealthy social climbers a chance to imitate the way in which the elites spent their leisure time.

The second session looked at the social, cultural, and religious factors that influenced sport in the early modern period. Taking the example of the Cotswold Olimpick Games, Charlotte Zweynert (Berlin) explained how in seventeenth-century Britain sports events were tied in to the political and religious debate on sporting activities and the Sabbath initiated by the Puritans. In order to prevent a ban on his Olimpick Games, held annually near Gloucestershire at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Robert Dover made sure that the idea behind his Games accorded with Puritan views on sport and gambling. He forbade betting during the Games and held them on week days so that there was no risk of a prohibition by local Puritan authorities. He and his friends and patrons reserved public criticism of Puritan attitudes for the literary treatment of the Games in a volume of poetry, *Annalia Dubrensis*, published in 1636, in which the authors celebrated Dover as the saviour of 'Merry England'.

In his paper, Wolfgang Behringer (Saarbrücken) argued that the early modern period in Europe should be considered a separate sporting era when competitive sports were 'sportified', ball games became more popular, aristocratic physical education was combined with an aristocratic code of behaviour and cult of the body, and sport was institutionalized and rules codified. The example he used was that of European ball games. Played in all European ruling houses, they gradually replaced the tournaments which, until then, aristocrats had participated in widely. From the sixteenth century at the latest, he said, ball games formed a standard part of a young aristocrat's schooling and a humanistic education. The institutionalization of sport, he explained, could be traced in the increasing differentiation of ball games such as tennis, pallone, and calcio across Europe, in their representation in paintings, drawings, tracts, and rule books, and in the ever expanding infrastructure of sports facilities.

The third section focused on the relationship between health and physical exercise as discussed in advice manuals and letters, and its social and gender differentiation. Alessandro Arcangeli (Verona) investigated the gender-specific prescription of physical exercise specifically for aristocratic women in medical guides of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He emphasized that the exercises recommended in this literature must be seen as part of the canon of healthy leisure activities recommended to compensate for the aristocracy's lack of work. In this genre of literature addressed to a male audience, women were seen in their role as mothers giving birth and nursing their babies, and the function of physical exercise was seen as to enhance health and beauty. For the 'weaker sex', light exercise, such as graceful and modest dancing, the female exercise par excellence, or even passive movement (*agitatio*), such as being carried in a litter, was recommended to maintain health.

Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey (London) drew a comparison between theoretical advice literature and the practice of exercise in seventeenth-century Italy, using the private letters of the Roman aristocratic Spada family. Concepts and practices for promoting health documented in both types of sources reveal a changed attitude towards the benefits and execution of sport since Antiquity. Changing ideas of social origins and physique, notions of gentility, and new aesthetic demands of the aristocratic body played an important part in differentiating the aristocracy socially from the lower classes. Thus excessively strenuous sports, it was believed, could only be carried out by working people, who had an appropriate physique. For aristocrats and scholars, by contrast, light activities such as walking or easy ball games were considered suitable to protect their 'tender complexions'. Categories such as age and sex were important factors in choosing physical exercise, and changed attitudes towards the body favoured a new model of aristocratic masculinity. A comparison of the sources shows a dynamic exchange between advice literature and the ideas of lay people on the one hand, and medical paradigms and aristocratic fashions on the other.

The fourth session dealt with the professionalization and commercialization of boxing, and the introduction of more scientific methods of training in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century. Benjamin Litherland (Sussex) outlined interconnections between the commercialization of sport, the beginnings of advertising in newspa-

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pers, and the transformation of pugilism into a national spectacle with professional boxing stars. Referring to contemporary stars of boxing such as James Figg, George Taylor, Jack Broughton, and Daniel Mendoza, he explained how successful boxers knew how to market themselves through targeted advertising. Using their names in connection with self-conferred titles such as 'British Champion' and the promise of a bloody spectacle, they increased their name recognition and that of the places where they held their matches, which they mostly ran themselves. This attracted larger audiences, increasing the profits generated. Their star status and this degree of commercialization, Litherland said, was only made possible by a combination of higher wages in the eighteenth century, the rise of a consumer culture with an increased demand for entertainment, and the beginnings of the advertising industry.

Dave Day (Manchester), also speaking about boxing, showed how the commercialization and professionalization which took place in the eighteenth century went along with an increasingly scientific approach to the sport. Influenced by the Enlightenment idea that sporting abilities could be improved with knowledge of bodily processes, trainers attempted to enhance the achievements of their young boxers by means of good nourishment and targeted technical training. Victory now depended not only on strength, but also on treating one's own body professionally. The better trained the athletes, the bigger the audiences they attracted, and the more profit could be made from betting on them.

Contributions to the fifth session dealt with status and sport in a non-European context. Michael Wert (Milwaukee) outlined how sword fighting in early modern Japan as part of Samurai culture had developed into a competitive sport of the rich peasant classes by the end of the eighteenth century, and pointed to the change in status involved. During the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), an official prohibition on non-Samurais carrying weapons meant that fencing became an elite status symbol. At the same time, it was transformed from a practical fighting technique into a form of culture transmitted by fencing schools. The professionalization of fencing instruction began in the eighteenth century, when the social decline of the rural Samurai started and they had to earn money by teaching the sons of rich peasants. As a result, social boundaries began to blur. New techniques directed more towards winning competitions were developed

in these circles and competed with the more traditional techniques and teachings of aristocratic fencing. With the disappearance of the social system based on status groups, gains in cultural and social status also lost significance, and the number of fencers decreased.

Rebekka von Mallinckrodt (Berlin) looked at social demarcation through sport, taking the example of swimming. She investigated the link between the topos of the Noble Savage and the development of swimming as a sport in Europe. While the 'natural abilities' of indigenous peoples were considered impressive, she said, the differences between the 'culturally superior' Europeans and those they conquered also had to be clearly marked in swimming. In the eighteenth century, large numbers of learn-to-swim manuals which drew on theoretical and empirical research were published. This 'new invention' of swimming was an expression of the European worldview based on rationality, and ultimately contributed to social differentiation, not only in a transcultural perspective. Within each society, the correct technique was a matter of social status, so that in Europe, too, the swimming practices of the lower classes and seafarers could not provide a model.

The final session looked at sporting accidents, avoidance of risk, and the promotion of fairness in combat sports under the heading of 'Danger'. Steven Gunn (Oxford) presented sporting accidents as reflected in sixteenth-century autopsy reports, evaluated in the context of a large research project on the history of everyday life funded by the ESRC. Gunn presented these reports as a new type of source for the investigation of sport and physical exercise in the everyday life of early modern Britain. Although there are some analytical problems associated with this type of source—for example, it permits the investigation only of 'dangerous' sports—he suggested that in the descriptions of the circumstances in which accidents happened, these records could provide important information on how sport was practised. Quantitative evaluation, for example, allowed statements to be made about the participation of different social groups in sports such as archery, hammer-throwing, and football, and made it possible to draw conclusions concerning gender differentiation, preferred sports facilities, and favoured times.

The risk of accidents and attempts to avoid them in combat sports were also addressed in the closing paper, given by Ann Tlusty (Bucknell University), speaking on shooting clubs and sword fight-

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ing schools in German towns of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although the authorities supported shooting and sword fighting because of their military usefulness, she said, the clubs and schools were more concerned with sporting aspects and male sociability. Fairness and safety, she suggested, were more important than military training, and were guaranteed by the codification of rules, competition judges, and strict punishments for those who infringed the rules. For the towns, shooting events served as a demonstration of their citizens' military capabilities. As popular festivals, they also helped to shape the identity of urban communities, and could influence relations with other towns both positively and negatively.

Delivering the concluding commentary, Wolfgang Behringer emphasized the surprisingly high degree of commercialization found in early modern sport, something that had been mentioned several times during the conference, and spoke of the large number of non-institutionalized sports which need more investigation. He also pointed to the breadth of sources touched upon here which have hardly so far been used for the history of sport, such as wood cuts, drawings, letters, and serial sources such as autopsy reports, and encouraged scholars to combine different sources in their investigations. Methodologically, too, he suggested, it should be considered whether the variety of European regions favours a micro-historical or more comparative European approach.

In the concluding discussion, the question of whether defining central terms such as 'sport', 'physical education', and 'leisure time' would hinder or help the contextualization and expansion of the source basis attempted at the conference generated a lively debate. On the one hand, a relatively narrow definition of sport has long prevented scholars from looking at many forms of early modern physical games, competitions, and exercises. On the other hand, conceptual explication would make it easier to connect the concerns of historians of sport with investigations of early modern notions of gender, religious, social, political, medical, and scientific developments. This touched upon one of the main concerns of the conference, namely, to lead research on the history of sport out of its thematic isolation.

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