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**Romanticising the Classical: The Nineteenth-Century Amateur Athlete**

The nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation of a triadic model of class with those in the middle assuming much greater power in the social and political arena. With that power came the ability to be able to shape the world in their own image and in the latter stages of the century the working class sport of pedestrianism was superseded by the version of athletics preferred by the middle classes. Professional pedestrian events included hurdling, leaping over a height or for distance, either from a standing position or from a run, hop, step and jump, and vaulting using a 'leaping-pole'. The main disciplines were running and race walking in which the heel touched the ground before the toes. Despite its popularity the educated classes became increasingly critical, mainly because pedestrian matches were often accompanied by crowd disorders, gambling and drinking, and the formation in 1880 of the Amateur Athletic Association, which centralised the organisation of athletics and excluded professional athletes, led to the demise of pedestrianism. The professional middle class men responsible for organisations like the AAA prided themselves on their social and educational backgrounds, integral to which was their familiarity with the Classical world, and this was reflected in their athletic discourse. It was this class that developed the principles of amateurism and refined them into a sporting philosophy that had its roots in their particular interpretation of the practices of the Greeks. This paper briefly explores some aspects of that process and considers how the aesthetics of the sporting body were influenced by a selective interpretation of what it meant to be an 'amateur'.

**Amateur Sportsmen and Classical Allusions.**

The first modern Olympiad in Athens in 1896 came as the climax of a centuries-long fascination with ancient Greece. In 1869 John Harrisson observed that no nation:

> …except the Greeks, has ever regarded the education of the mind and the body as of equal importance; they were at one time the wisest most beautiful and the most athletic of ancient nations; it may be doubted if any other country has, even yet, produced heroes, philosophers, human forms, or sculptors equal to those of ancient Greece.[1]

Familiarity with the Greek world was embedded within the public school curriculum. The mid-nineteenth century Clarendon Commission described these schools as the chief nurseries of statesmen and the institutions responsible for moulding the character of English gentlemen. The critical experiences in this process were Christianity, the Classics, the prefect system and team games which fostered individual skills, co-operation and loyalty.[2] Given that it was ex-public schoolboys who created the late-Victorian sporting organisations it is not surprising that the sporting landscape was shaped by this devotion to the Classics. In 1864 one writer in *Baily's Monthly Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* highlighted this relationship between public schools, the Classics and sport:

> In former days, when money was not so plentiful nor so disseminated, it behoved gentlemen (I use the word in its strictest sense) to send their sons to these schools. They learnt what was good for them: eloquence from Cicero and Demosthenes, force from Thucydides; satire from Juvenal and Horace; politics from Plato; and manners and feeling from Homer…out of these very places come the boys of whom, as men, we are proudest…in these glorious places alone is a boy's body disciplined as well as his mind.[3]

Prime movers in the Olympic movement were products of this tradition. The first chairman of the British Olympic Association, Lord Desborough, staged Greek dramas at his home while the sculpture in memory of his two sons killed in the First World War was named 'Apollo in chariot'.[4] At the 1897 Congress of the International Olympic Committee Robert Laffan represented the Headmasters' Conference. The then Principal of Cheltenham College had obtained a First in Classical Moderations followed by First Class Honours in Latin and Greek before becoming Senior Classical Master at Derby School. After helping found the British Olympic Association in 1905, he acted as its Honorary Secretary until 1927.[5]

**Reading Greek Sport**

Familiarity with Greek texts did not necessarily mean that amateur sportsmen interpreted the content accurately. They admired Greek athletes on the grounds that because they were content to struggle for a worthless crown at the Olympics they were paragons of the purest amateurism in sport but this was a highly subjective reading of the evidence. Over the centuries, the Games had become professional events as

aristocratic participants were superseded by public and privately financed labouring-class athletes who competed for the honour of their city-states and were well rewarded for winning one of the great festivals. By the end of the fifth century B.C., the term 'athlete' was the label for a special class of individuals who rigorously pursued athletic careers.[6] These developments resulted in the Victorian belief that from Homeric times to the sixth century BC athletes were 'amateur gentlemen', loving competition for its own sake, and that a decline occurred when professionalism emerged. These views inspired nineteenth-century ideas about amateurism as an essential and highly desirable characteristic of sport but they were clearly a superficial reading of the texts. The myth that because Olympic victors received no cash prizes they were purely amateur ignored the fact that an Olympic victory raised an athlete's commercial value on the athletic circuit.[7]

Amateur interpretations of Classical sport were further informed by the writings of the intellectual classes who criticised athletes for their over-specialisation, to the detriment of a balanced development of the body, and for their neglect of the mind.[8] Plutarch, for example, ascribed to trainers and coaches a belief that intelligent conversation at meals spoilt the food and gave the diners a headache.[9] Critics denounced professional athletes not because they made money from sport but because of the time and energy they invested. Aristotle warned against the kind of specialisation required of Olympic competitors while Plato maintained that overtrained and overspecialised athletes would be ineffective citizens in his ideal state.[10]

Medical men were equally critical. Galen noted that athletes lacked any natural beauty and that their strength served no useful purpose beyond athletics. They were:

> …so deficient in reasoning powers that they do not even know if they have a brain. Always gorging themselves on flesh and blood they keep their brains soaked in so much filth that they are unable to think accurately and are as mindless as dumb animals...athletes overexert every day at their exercises.

Citing Hippokrates he said that 'Healthy training is moderation in diet, stamina in work' and a daily regime consisted of 'Work, food, drink, sleep, love, and all in moderation.'[11]

Given the longevity of Galen's influence on medicine it is not surprising that his views on professional athletics were equally long lasting. In 1569, Mercurialis described athletics as physical exercise corrupted by an excessive desire to obtain victory, to win glory and to delight the crowds.[12] Stubbe observed in 1671 that bodies which were 'dieted and brought up to an Athletick habit, do soonest of all decline into sickness and premature old age' and that the intellects of such men tended to be 'very dull'.[13] Eighteenth-century texts drew on Classical examples to point out the dangers of uneven development as a result of specialised training since, in 'every exertion beyond that what is gained in one part is inevitably lost in another'.[14]

**Moderation and the All-Rounder**

Nineteenth-century amateurs subsequently formulated a sporting ethos which pointedly rejected the professionalism, coaching and training which epitomised later periods of Greek sport. Amateur proponents of athleticism, or 'Muscular Christianity', perceived sport as an activity subservient to purity of soul and religious piety and they drew on Greek philosophers in warning exponents not to 'overvalue physical excellence and athletic performance' because there were 'more important things than athletics'.[15]

When athleticism gained momentum in the universities in the latter stages of the century it was driven by an amateur mantra of 'moderation', one of the cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy.[16] In 1864, the *Cornhill Magazine* argued that, 'In exercise, as in diet, the grand rule is Moderation. Avoid fatigue; as you would cease eating when appetite abates, cease muscular activity when the impulse to continue it abates'.[17] 'Moderation' was at the core of hygienic philosophy and Dr Henry Hoole suggested that training principles should differ only slightly from those of 'judicious living'.[18] The *Lancet* attacked the highly competitive environment within sport. Training to achieve 'vigour and moderate skill' was perfectly safe but training to achieve records was dangerous to health.[19]

Along with moderation went a preference for the all-round athlete and a rejection of specialisation. In the Greek world the pentathletes best represented Greek ideals of physical balance and athletic versatility by throwing the discus and javelin, long-jumping, sprinting and wrestling. Pentathletes represented the model of male beauty extolled by Aristotle: 'a body trained to withstand fatigue in running and in the exercise of strength and at the same time to be agreeably presentable.' Although much admired by artists and

intellectuals, spectators were less enthusiastic[20] if inscriptions enumerating in denarii the prizes in one minor games early in the Christian era are anything to go by: Pankration 3000; Boxing 2000; Wrestling 2000; 200 yards 1250; 400 yards 1000; Long-distance race 750; Pentathlon 500; Race in armour 500.[21]

When nineteenth-century amateurs formulated their sporting philosophy they followed the preferences of the Greek philosophers in their rejection of specialisation. Admiration for the gifted amateur permeated all aspects of social and working life. Manners, signifying virtue, and Classical education, signifying a honed mind, were better qualifications than expert practical training.[22] The ideal amateur was one, like C.B. Fry, who could play several games well with elegance and style and without giving the impression of strain.[23]

**Muscular Bodies - Classical Sculptures**

Their selective reading of the Classics extended to the type of body that nineteenth-century amateurs admired. Classicism had become linked with the rise of physiology as a scientific discipline in the late eighteenth century and the 1807 display of the Elgin Marbles with their elegant, symmetrical bodies, 'excited in their admirers a spirit of agitated romanticism'.[24] Sculptural representations were often specific according to the age of the competitor and athletes were represented in ways which were distinctive to their event. Specificity was also conveyed through the display of different athletic physiques which diversified as athletes became more specialised.[25]

In the ancient world there were, at least, two criteria of beauty. One concerned the young athlete 'with a slender graceful physique and a free moving neck', another focused on the athlete 'as very heavily built with a short massive neck and small head'.[26] Nineteenth-century commentary similarly distinguished between different athletic bodies. When professional sculler Robert Chambers stripped off for a match in 1860 his condition was 'admirable' showing every muscle in his 'Herculean back and shoulders'.[27] Nuttall, a middle distance runner, was described in 1872 as physically the beau ideal of an athlete; of full middle-height, broad across the shoulders, of great girth around the chest, fine, but not too fine in the loins, and very clean-flanked.[28] For amateurs, this less specialised body became the athletic ideal. Its resemblance to the youthful body was no coincidence since sports were suitable activities for boys, university athletes and young men generally but not for more mature individuals. Athletics was never to be ranked among the 'serious pursuits' that adults might engage in.[29]

Balance in the body was important. Physical educationalist Archibald MacLaren expressed particular concern about the uneven development found among athletes dedicated to one sport, reflecting a growing belief that body symmetry implied both physiological and spiritual fitness.[30] For medical man Hoole, well-formed and efficient organs should be encased in a symmetrically developed body which conformed to accepted standards of height and weight, and which could tolerate climate extremes, exposure to fatigue and disease, and 'the friction of professional, commercial and domestic life'. His university ideal of a perfect athlete was '70 inches high and 168 lbs. in weight',[31] an athletic body that avoided any outward show of specialisation or excessive muscularity. This 'university athlete' became a universally recognised reference point. When a reporter met the Scottish rugby team at their hotel before their game with Wales in 1900 he observed that their 'physique and condition' confirmed them as 'an excellent stamp of the university athlete'.[32]

**Summary**

It seems, then, that knowledge of the Classical world influenced both the philosophy and aesthetics of nineteenth century sportsmen. However, it also appears that the amateur educated classes 'cherry picked' their interpretation of Greek athletic bodies in the same way that they were selective about the aspects of the Classical world that would inform their sporting practices. Other sporting bodies were on display in the Victorian period, bodies that reflected the specialised training seen in the later Greek professionals, especially those noted in the 'heavy events' such as wrestling and weightlifting. The amateur swimming fraternity defined a different type of middle class body that reflected the view that the amount of flesh often carried by a swimmer was considered 'no hindrance to his swimming at a great speed'.[33]

Muscular bodies were publically visible but people like Sandow were seen as freak shows rather than sporting bodies. The amateur ideology, built around concepts of moderation and the all-rounder, emphasised effortless achievement and the hard physical training required to produce bodies like this was considered more appropriate to a manual worker or to a professional athlete than to a middle class sportsman. As a result, the athletic events preferred were middle distance, rather than long distance events

which required intensive training, while throwing events were avoided, partly because of the body type required, which was more akin to that of a muscular working-class labourer, and partly because technical events needed extensive coaching. We should not assume that these influences have ever truly disappeared from British sport. The rejection of coaching, specialised training and the extreme bodies required for throwing events, for example, continues to be a feature of British athletics.

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