

The 'mysterious "training tables": British antipathy to an American coaching tradition.

The United States (US), with a population far larger than Britain, was in an ideal position to develop athletic talent, especially in the colleges where elite competitors were trained by professional coaches in well-equipped training facilities. At Athens in 1896 the US won nine of the twelve athletics events and following the 1900 Paris Olympics A.A.U. President James E. Sullivan boasted that Americans had won all the major prizes.¹ Despite the fact that Britain surpassed the American team in total medals in 1908, the American media claimed overall victory based solely on the track and field competition. Anglo-American rivalry was evident throughout the Games² and these Olympics highlighted the diametrically opposite positions held by American and British sportsmen, at least outwardly, on the subject of coaching.³ This polarity in views of sport was reflected in British resentment over the rise of rationalized and systematic training processes in America. British concerns had been exacerbated by the growing realization that international success required a professional approach, an emphasis on winning, a commitment to coaching and training, and the provision of funds to subsidize athletes,⁴ epitomized in the British imagination by the American practice of the 'training table' in clubs and colleges, a system which provided selected athletes with quality food away from other students or club members.

Training Diets

Rigorous training programmes were not a new phenomenon and strict dietary regimes were always an important component in competition preparation. In his 1713 wrestling manual Thomas Parkyns rejected 'sheep-biters' in favour of beef-eaters, who he believed had more robust, healthy and sound bodies,⁵ while prizefighter James Figg took responsibility for one fighter's 'Instruction and proper Diet' before a contest in 1725.⁶ In 1788, one writer observed that a boxer should adhere to a disciplined dietary programme⁷ and Mendoza advised fighters and trainers to avoid excess in food or wine.⁸ Nutrition remained at the core of nineteenth-century training theory and the practices employed by trainers were in many respects contiguous with those of their predecessors although amateur sportsmen began to alter traditional practices on the premise that 'the habits of life and mode of living' of gentlemen meant that their training requirements were dissimilar to those of professionals.⁹ By the 1860s, amateur critics were arguing that training diets should resemble the normal diets of young men since the 'horrible monotony of chops and steaks, steaks and chops, nauseates rather than nourishes'. If a man wanted his steak very rare, 'let him eat it blue, but do not enforce it'.¹⁰ In 1864, a writer in the *Cornhill Magazine* argued that, 'in diet, the grand rule is Moderation...cease eating when appetite abates'¹¹ while Dr Henry Hoole later suggested that training principles differed only slightly from those of 'judicious living'.¹²

The American Training Table

This emphasis on moderation reflected an evolving amateur attitude which increasingly rejected systematic training regimes and the 1869 Harvard-Oxford race had initiated British criticism of the intensity of the losing American crew's training methods and their single-minded emphasis on victory.¹³ The Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) shared these reservations about the American approach, especially when American athletes began to dominate from the latter stages of the nineteenth century. In 1895, after athletes representing LAC were whitewashed by those of the NYAC, athletics administrator Montague Shearman cited the 'superior system of training and coaching which is in vogue at...leading University and athletic centres,' as one reason for the embarrassing defeat. Americans used paid professional coaches and supported their 'amateur' athletes at the public expense.¹⁴ He observed that a man who at Oxford or Cambridge would be described as getting his 'blue'

¹ James E. Sullivan, "Athletics and the Stadium," *Cosmopolitan* 31 (1901), 501-8.

² Pope, 'Negotiating the "Folk Highway" of the Nation', 327-341; Dobbs, *Edwardians at Play*, 157-160.

³ Ronald A. Smith, 'History of Amateurism in Men's Intercollegiate Athletics: The Continuance of a 19th-century Anachronism in America', *Quest* 45 (1993), 442-443.

⁴ Eric Halladay, *Rowing in England: A Social History - The Amateur Debate* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

⁵ Thomas Parkyns, *Progymnasmata. The inn-play: or, Cornish-Hugg Wrestler* (London, 1713), 9-18, 37, 59.

⁶ *London Journal* (1720), January 16, 1725.

⁷ An Amateur of Eminence, *The Complete Art of Boxing*, 17-21.

⁸ Mendoza, *The Modern Art of Boxing*, 24-27; An Amateur, *The Art of Manual Defence*, 88-94.

⁹ Salacia, *The Boat; And How to Manage it: A Treatise on the Management of Rowing and Sailing Boats* (London: Baily Brothers Cornhill, 1861), 14-20.

¹⁰ *St James's Magazine* (February 1863), 323-325; *Cornhill Magazine* (XV January 1867), 98-101.

¹¹ *Cornhill Magazine* (IX/50 1864), 220-229;

¹² Hoole, *The Science and Art of Training*, 1. 82-84, 89-91, 112

¹³ William G. Durick, 'The Gentlemen's Race: An Examination of the 1869 Harvard-Oxford Boat Race', *Journal of Sport History* 15/1 (Spring, 1988), 54.

¹⁴ *Outing* (XXVII November 1895), 159; Montague Shearman, 'International Athletics', *Badminton Magazine* 1 (1895), 573-92.

was described by the Americans as having secured 'his seat at the training table' and the 'payment of his "battels"'.¹⁵

Four years earlier, reports had outlined how this system operated at Harvard. The Varsity crew could be seen every morning on their way to Cranston's who was managing the training table for them. Breakfast consisted of rice or oatmeal, chops, steaks, or fish, plenty of milk and fruit. Luncheon, eaten between 12 and 1, was very similar while dinner, served when the crew came off the river at 7 or 7.30, included soup, meat, vegetables, salads, macaroni, with fruit and milk. Pork, veal, ham, and pastry were all excluded from the menu.¹⁶ In 1894, the rowing training table began in March and for the next four months the crew were ordered never to smoke or eat or drink anything at any time except at the training table. The training diet was no longer raw beef and dry bread and 'wholesale quantities' were provided of fruit, vegetables, oatmeal, toast, mutton, beef, chicken, eggs, oatmeal, water and milk.¹⁷ In 1892, John Corbin, described the training of Harvard athletes whose daily work consisted of pulleys, hurdling a single bar, dumbbells, 'starting' and practice runs with exercises being arranged so as to engage the body and leg muscles alternately. With the exception of soups, pastries and rich desserts their food was the same as that served on any table and everything was abundant, of the best quality and well cooked.¹⁸ In 1896 Camp and Deland argued that varsity football players no longer consumed large chunks of raw beef and that, rather than limited fare of 'the fifties and sixties,' the collegiate 'training table' now included garden vegetables, fruits, rice, bread puddings, cereals, potatoes, roast beef, lamb chops, broiled chicken, and plenty of pure drinking water. Such a menu made the college athlete 'an object of envy' to his classmates.¹⁹

Criticisms of the training table

There were signs that some American commentators were uncomfortable with how the training table practice sat with amateurism. One English report of an Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) of America meeting in December 1895 recorded the passing of a resolution that training tables (which the author suggested meant free meals for those in training) should be abolished.²⁰ Clearly the resolution made little impact because, in 1907, Sullivan, president of the AAU, again condemned the 'training table which can very easily be abused and is sometimes maintained at the expense of amateurism'.²¹

The 1895 defeat of the LAC in New York stimulated adverse comments on the training table system and led one English commentator to refer to the 'rotten amateur system of America'.²² For Shearman, the American athletic authorities had 'attained to the Greek system of supporting the athletic prizeman in the prytaneion at the public expense'. With respect to the 'training table' and its attendant customs, he could only hope they would never be introduced into England. The American system was producing a few wonderful performers, but it did not stimulate widespread participation in athletic exercise. He advised the Americans to 'take a step backwards and start by abolishing the "training table"'. The class of men who secured the benefits of the club training table were in many instances men of good social position. His objection was not to the men, but to the system which he described as 'radically vicious' and more likely to 'kill than to foster the genuine spirit of sport'.²³ Similar comments appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* a year later. In England, administrators insisted 'upon purity as far as we can secure it' while, in America, there were 'mysterious "training tables", which enabled athletes to train and live in luxury at the expense of the clubs'.²⁴ Responding to English criticisms following the 1895 athletic contest a Harvard man refuted the 'ungrounded statement that the training table was free. It is true that the food that is there obtained costs more than which many students habitually get; but the universal rule is that each man shall pay at the training table exactly what he paid before he came there'.²⁵

Following the 1900 AAA Championships, in which American competitors won eight out of the thirteen championships, the *Manchester Guardian* again critiqued the systematic methods employed in America.²⁶ Another reporter challenged the notion that these victories were due to physical or psychological superiority. They were the

¹⁵ Shearman, M. (1895). International Athletics, *The Badminton Magazine* December pp. 586-590.

¹⁶ *The Daily News*, Saturday May 30, 1891, 5; *The Nottingham Evening Post*, Saturday May 30, 1891.

¹⁷ Ralph D. Paine, 'Six Months with a University Crew', *Outing* (XXIV/1 April 1894), 69.

¹⁸ John Corbin, 'The Training of the Harvard Intercollegiate Team of 1891', *Outing* (XX/2 May 1892), 144-147.

¹⁹ Walter Camp and Lorin Deland, *Football* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1896), 77-83.

²⁰ *The Morning Post*, Monday December 2, 1895, 2.

²¹ 'Amateur Athletics in America', *The Times*, January 3, 1907, 5.

²² *Pall Mall Gazette*, Saturday November 30, 1895, 9.

²³ Shearman, M. (1895). International Athletics, *The Badminton Magazine* December pp. 586-590.

²⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, May 4, 1896, 7.

²⁵ 'Sporting Comments', *The Morning Post*, Monday November 4, 1895, 2; *Pall Mall Gazette*, Saturday November 2, 1895, 9?

²⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, July 9, 1900, 7.

result of a scientific system of supervised practice, the fact that athletic sports were more popular in America and the institution of the 'training table', the most important factor because it essentially implied the 'abolition' of the English distinction between amateurs and professionals. Seeing that it existed in all the larger American universities, it was an application of the scholarship system for the improvement of athletics. The promising young athlete who has won his seat at the 'training-table' need not pay a dollar for his board and lodging and, except at Harvard and Princeton, and one or two other 'salt-water' universities, the desire for intellectual distinction was not allowed to interfere with the more serious business of physical training. The intellectually gifted cricket blue and university oarsman were types of athlete peculiar to England and, while the English athlete who attained a distinguished position in public life was not uncommon the distinguished American athlete was seldom or never heard of in later years. The ambition of the men who joined these fraternities of the 'training-table' was generally limited to a wish to become the manager of a gymnasium or an athletic club, or to be, in their turn, salaried trainers and coaches, who were handsomely paid and had a social position quite equal to that of a college professor. The institution of the 'training table' implied so much more than the fraternal consumption of frugal meals as fall to the lot of the Oxford or Cambridge athlete. If scientific training is impossible without the institution of the 'training table' it is better to do without it and be content to lose like a gentleman.²⁷

A reporter for the *Northants Evening Telegraph* in 1901 observed that the inducements of the training-table encouraged greater numbers to try to 'make' some team, especially in the cases of men who are working their way through college or who could not afford hearty meals. But the abuse of the training-table started as soon as men are taken at prices lower than they should be, the period of time during which the training-table is continued is made inordinately long or the number of men increased beyond reasonable numbers. In such cases, the charge of hiring athletes could be levelled against team management for furnishing support to a man, in return for which he gives his athletic services to the organization. Long-continued training-tables and low payments led to a tendency to violate the ethics of college sport.²⁸

British Approaches

British commentators remained critical of professionalized sport directed by expert trainers in order to win international victories²⁹ but they ignored in many respects the fact that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, British sport at elite levels had already become far more specialized than contemporaries were prepared to admit.³⁰ British university oarsmen clearly took their work seriously. Describing rowing at Oxford in 1891 Chase Mellen noted that the coaches, recruited from alumni or dons, put the crew into hard training about a month before the race and observed that 'No army is drilled with more precision than Oxford oarsmen'. Daily routines and diet were strictly controlled with the crew always eating breakfast and dinner together.³¹ The 1895 Oxford crew rose about seven and took a short walk or run although this was not compulsory. Breakfast at half-past eight included tea, as little as possible – in training only as much fluid should be drunk as will quench thirst – under-done beef or mutton, dry toast, or bread, of which the crust only was recommended. No exercise was taken in the morning. Dinner at two p.m.: meat much the same as for breakfast, bread (crust), no vegetables (but this rule is often wisely departed from), a pint of beer. About five o'clock row twice over the course, the speed increasing with the strength of the crew. Supper at half-past eight or nine: Cold meat, bread, and perhaps a little jelly or water cresses. Bed about ten.³² Not surprisingly, when Eton headmaster Edmund Warre urged a ban on all foreign crews at Henley in 1901, Frank Lowe, captain of London Rowing Club (LRC), disagreed pointing out that there was nothing in the ARA's definition of an amateur to prevent a crew submitting itself to a rigid course of training. If foreign crews were barred because their training was more severe than that enforced by the Universities then the Universities should also be excluded because their crews gave more time to training than metropolitan clubs and 'so are more nearly allied to the professional.'³³

Nevertheless, amateur concerns about specialization and the loss of the all-rounder, manifested themselves in newspaper comments before and after the 1908 Games. In 1907, *The Times* observed that the number of double or even triple 'blues' was proof that the benefits 'accruing from diversity' were well appreciated at the ancient universities. In America, on the other hand, those awarded a seat at the 'training table (equivalent to holding a scholarship for athletics) were almost invariably specialists.³⁴ Another *Times* article, in 1910, argued that there

²⁷ American Athletes *The Morning Post*, Saturday July 14 1900 p.4

²⁸ Athletes and their food; Abuse of the training table *Northants Evening Telegraph*, Saturday June 8, 1901.

²⁹ *Daily Mirror* (1 August, 1908).

³⁰ Matthew Llewellyn, 'The Battle of Shepherd's Bush', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 28/5 (2011), 694.

³¹ Chase Mellen, 'Undergraduate Life at Oxford', *Outing* (XVII/5 February 1891), 351-352.

³² Florence Stacpoole, Food and its Uses, *Bow Bells*, 29:372 (1895:Feb.), 173

³³ *The Times*, 18 July 1901, 7.

³⁴ *The Times*, July 18, 1907.

should be no more talk of the athletic decadence of the British and their approaches to sport which did not compel athletes to specialize, 'seating them at a "training table" and putting them under a paid professor of the dynamics of the human body'. If to avoid semi-professionalism was decadence, 'let us be decadents with a good heart'.³⁵

Conclusion

Although there has been a tendency in recent years to downplay the extent to which amateurism as an ethos was dominated by a rejection of financial rewards for playing sport it is true that this was a central feature of the concerns expressed at the time, not only about the training table but also about all aspects of American elite sport. Part of the superiority of American sportsmen was credited to the willingness of the American public to pay to watch the performances of notable athletes and this caused disquiet among British observers. While amateurism never implied that winning was unimportant, it needed to be kept in perspective³⁶ and those in the forefront of defending the amateur ethos preferred to emphasize the benefits of widespread participation rather than elite performance.³⁷ Worryingly, however, there were signs that British sport was becoming more commercialized. Because football, cricket and athletic clubs could no longer carry on without gate money it was becoming necessary to supply the best possible performers to attract spectators and this had led to a tendency towards professionalism. For many years, expenses had paid to those who could not afford to give their valuable services free of charge but the danger was that the rate of expenses paid might, in time, become as 'objectionable as the free training table of America'.³⁸ The inevitable outcome of this process would be that winning would become more important than taking part.³⁹ This was always part of the problem with the Americans who were accused of taking their sport too seriously and whose system of specialization was condemned as 'a *reducto ad absurdum*' of the meaning of sport.⁴⁰ American professional trainers were able to devote all their time and energies to a study of the 'human racing-machine and its imperfections', so their success in the identification and development of talent was naturally greater than that of an English amateur coach. The writer concluded that while 'the English athlete is born not made, the athlete from the United States is born and made'.⁴¹

However, the rhetoric of amateurism was never matched by its practical application and British athletic officials were increasingly prepared to stretch their principles when it came to preparing for international competition. A number of amateurs argued for a system of professional trainers in athletics and even Shearman suggested that Universities and leading clubs should be supplied with professionals who could supervise athletic practice and give training and dietary advice.⁴² The formal appointment of trainers to accompany the British team to Stockholm in 1912⁴³ illustrates the growing acceptance of the need for professional assistance, although amateur unease with this approach was mollified by enforcing a master-servant relationship onto trainers in contrast to the coach-centred system adopted in America.

Given this lasting adherence to the tenets of amateurism it should come as no surprise that critics had focused on the provision of the training table as the epitome of all that was wrong with the professionalized approach taken to sport by the Americans. The debate also continued to rumble on in America in the years leading up to Stockholm. In 1912, a plea for the retention of the table was made by Dr Boller of Dartmouth who emphasized that, since contemporary football was a commercial proposition, it was necessary to ensure men were properly fed and in a fit physical condition to take part in the game. Ethically, the training table had its faults but the same thing would be true if universities tried to get along without it and, at Dartmouth, they had found that it was far better for the men to have a training table and be in proper physical condition for the game. One observer concluded that 'it would hardly be possible to frame a stronger indictment of the game than he has indicated',⁴⁴ a comment which struck a chord with many British amateurs whose criticism of the operation of the training table continued to play a central role in their objections to the American approach to performance sport.⁴⁵

³⁵ The All-Round Athlete *The Times*, July 26, 1910, 21

³⁶ Lincoln Allison, *Amateurism in Sport: An Analysis and a Defence* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 22.

³⁷ Shearman, 'International Athletics', 589-590.

³⁸ *Morning Post*, December 9, 1895, 2.

³⁹ Richard Holt, *Sport and the British. A Modern History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 97-103.

⁴⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, July 23, 1912, 16.

⁴¹ *Morning Post*, July 14, 1900, 4.

⁴² Shearman, 'International Athletics', 585-590.

⁴³ Dave Day, 'Massaging the Amateur Ethos: Professional Coaches at Stockholm in 1912', *Sport in History*, 32 no. 2 (2012): 157-182

⁴⁴ 'The Training Table', *Outing*, LIX no. 6 (March 1912): 763.

⁴⁵ 'The All-Round Athlete' *The Times*, July 26, 1910, 21.