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The 'Human Training Stables' of Victorian America: Cultural Differences in Sports Coaching

During the latter stages of the nineteenth century, the trajectory of organized sports followed significantly different paths in America and Britain resulting in a diametrically opposed approach to professional coaching in which the American penchant for professional coaches contrasted sharply with the British preference for amateur coaches. **1** In America, a commitment to athletic success in the clubs and colleges led to coaching becoming a specialized profession that employed the principles of scientific management to maintain control of elite athletes. While the American model influenced the worldwide development of coaching there was resistance to the adoption of this system into Britain. This paper contrasts the characteristics of coaching practice and philosophy that typified American and British approaches during the Victorian period and outlines some of the British objections to American coaching methods.

2 In common with their British counterparts, the American Inter-collegiate Association defined an amateur as one who had never 'taught, pursued, or assisted at athletic exercises for money, or for any valuable consideration', but this impression of a shared vision of the pernicious effect of professional coaching is illusionary.¹ British athletics administrator Montague Shearman observed that American amateurs were prepared in training quarters by a skilled trainer, and remained completely under his orders, while the British amateur followed 'his own sweet will' in training himself.² His rejection of the American system was reflected in British criticisms of professional American rowing coaches who exercised total discipline over their crews. This was a serious issue for those suspicious of a system that allowed a professional coach, 'to whom the impulse is to take advantage of everything', to impose tactics which stretched the rules of sport.³ In America, such coaches were valued and the adjective 'professional' was equated to those who were not only paid for coaching, but also did it effectively.⁴ In contrast, British commentators rejected the notion of professionalized sport directed by specialized trainers in order to win international victories and their criticism became more strident as sport increasingly became a vehicle for the expression of national virtue.⁵

Reflecting on a Belgian rowing success at Henley in 1906, the *Daily Mail* observed that this was further evidence that Britain's 'vaunted supremacy' in sport was being superseded. The nation was now no better than the Australians at cricket or New Zealanders at rugby, while the Olympic Games in Athens had demonstrated American and Canadian superiority in track and field athletics. International defeats led British commentators to become defensive about a perceived decline in national superiority and this was reflected in Anglo-American confrontations throughout the 1908 Olympics, following which the *Academy* hoped never to see American athletes in Britain again.⁶

Cultural differences

This anti-American rhetoric was not a new phenomenon and merely reinforced the diametrically opposite positions already held by transatlantic rivals, at least outwardly, on the values of sport and on the subject of competitive preparation. This dichotomy had been

reflected in British reactions to the rise of rationalized and systematic training processes in America,⁷ particularly over the controlling role of coaches. The 1869 Harvard-Oxford race had generated British criticism of the intensity of American training methods, and when Cornell University competed at Henley in 1895 their professional coach, **3** Charles Courtney, was criticized for isolating his crew and holding secretive training sessions.⁸ For Courtney, this was standard practice but for British amateurs these objectionable practices destroyed ‘all the benefit that may be gained by athletics.’⁹ **4** The Amateur Athletic Association was equally suspicious of the Americans and this was reinforced in 1895, when athletes representing London Athletic Club were whitewashed 11-0 by those of the New York Athletic Club, who had been supervised by professional trainer Mike Murphy.¹⁰ **5** Shearman conceded that, given their individual qualities and their ‘magnificent state of training’, the American club would have easily beaten any team that Britain could have produced but he expressed a number of concerns that encapsulated amateur objections to what was viewed as professionalized sport. Shearman concluded that the Americans achieved their ‘superlative results’ through the application of a well-organized athletic system in which clubs maintained selected representatives at the club’s expense and provided well-paid and competent coaches, who took a scientific approach to competitive preparation.¹¹ A club of hundreds of members thereby subsidized a small band of carefully selected performers, resulting in these men developing ‘abnormal speed and endurance.’ Because the British amateur lived at home and had only an hour or two of exercise in the evening, the advantage to the American of this professional, subsidized coaching was incalculable.¹² In addition, the American universities used ‘gate money’ from football matches to create athletic endowments, a system that was ‘radically vicious, and more likely to kill than to foster the genuine spirit of sport.’ The widespread use of the ‘training table’ became a focus for disagreement with British commentators arguing that this gave the American athlete a significant advantage, not least because they believed that this was being provided free of charge. Shearman urged the Americans to abolish the practice, a view that drew widespread British support.¹³ **6** These objections were not the result of any significant differences over the content of athletic diets but to the way in which these were structurally arranged with American clubs and colleges using the training table concept, not only to control athletes’ diets but also to engender team spirit and the dissemination of athletic wisdom.¹⁴ At Yale, for example, dinner was served at the football training-table at half-past six, with the captain at the head of the table and the doctor or trainer at the foot.¹⁵ **7**

British criticism

The *Manchester Guardian* noted that British administrators insisted ‘upon purity as far as we can secure it’ while, in America, these ‘mysterious ‘training tables’, enabled athletes to train and live in luxury at the expense of the clubs’,¹⁶ and the *Morning Post* believed that the system had probably become too entrenched to be reformed. One university had spent £5,000 in one year on developing athletic talent,¹⁷ a level of subsidy that was an anathema

to those British amateurs who believed that money fundamentally changed the nature of sport and developed specialists rather than encouraging all-round athletes.¹⁸ Following the 1900 AAA Championships, when American competitors won eight of the thirteen titles, the *Manchester Guardian* pointed out that, in contrast to his American counterpart, a young Englishman wanting to be an athlete at university, 'has a track and the services of a general trainer but it is almost entirely a matter for himself.'¹⁹ The *Morning Post* denied that the Americans were somehow physically or psychologically superior and argued they were successful because of their scientific system of supervised practice and the provision of free board, which represented an 'abolition' of the British distinction between amateurs and professionals and the application of a scholarship system for the improvement of athletics.²⁰

8 The newspaper argued that many American athletes merely wanted to become salaried trainers and coaches, who were accorded a social position and income equivalent to that of a college professor. Because these professionals could devote all their time and energies to a study of the 'human racing-machine and its imperfections', they were always going to be more successful than British coaches. They caught their men at a young age and worked hard at formulating new ideas for increasing athletic efficiency to the extent that **9** while 'the English athlete is born not made, the athlete from the United States is born and made.' If scientific training was impossible without adopting the American approach, then it was better to be content to lose like a gentleman.²¹ A *Daily Mail* correspondent observed of the American system that, in their 'human training stables', the American trainer assumed more importance than the athletes and took total control, treating them just as a horse trainer looked after a horse. Athletes were put up in a sort of hydropathic establishment, a modern training stable, and drilled by a 'scientific process and professional bullying into the greatest excellence' of which they were capable. If Britons imitated these methods then performances would improve but this would also turn sport from a pleasure into a pain.²² The *Observer* summarized these criticisms by noting that British amateurs trained 'by the help chiefly of the light of nature' while American amateurs were trained even more strictly than British professionals and they would continue to dominate their British counterparts.²³ These trainers were 'more autocratic than the German Emperor' and the admiration accorded some of these men was 'ludicrous.'²⁴

A very British approach

Superficially at least, these criticisms were reflected in the differing approaches taken to sport in each country. Amateur concerns about specialization manifested themselves in *The Times*, which observed that the British elite sportsman liked to play several games well rather than to devote himself to becoming the 'virtuoso of a single pastime.' In contrast, because their professional trainers encouraged them to focus on one sport, American athletes were almost invariably specialists.²⁵ Not for the first time, this criticism conveniently ignored the fact that British amateurs, especially at elite levels, were already becoming far more specialized. The rhetoric of amateurism was never matched by its practical application

and not everyone applied amateur values with equal rigor. Ralph Paine noted in 1902 that British rowers did not like to be beaten, despite their protestations of 'sport for sport's sake', and he pointed out that British amateur scullers generally hired professional coaches.²⁶ **10** Describing rowing at Oxford in 1891, Chase Mellen noted that their amateur coaches put the crew into hard training about a month before the race and that 'No army is drilled with more precision than Oxford oarsmen.'²⁷ This level of training certainly gave the English university sportsman an advantage when competing at home. **11** After Edmund Warre urged a ban on foreign crews at Henley in 1901, Frank Lowe, captain of London Rowing Club, argued that if foreign crews were barred because their training was more severe than that found at the Universities then the Universities should also be excluded because their crews trained much more than metropolitan clubs and they were 'more nearly allied to the professional.'²⁸

While training and coaching might be taken seriously by some sporting constituencies in Britain, gentlemen amateurs structured their relationships with coaches somewhat differently to their transatlantic rivals, primarily by drawing on their social and working experiences to impose a master-servant relationship on the sporting pedagogue.²⁹ For many British amateurs part of the problem in employing a professional coach was that this would involve a reversal of the master-servant relationship and an undermining of class status so, while a number of trainers achieved artisan status, mainly because professional coaching remained highly specialized, their relationships with their amateur athletes were generally subservient. **12** Professional boxing trainers such as Bat Mullins and Bill Natty, who trained both amateur and professional boxers, adapted their approach depending on the population they were working with.³⁰ On retirement, many cricketers obtained employment as coaches in the public schools where even England player William Attewell, addressed by the boys as 'Attewell', was required not only to coach but to mark out pitches and perform similar chores.³¹ Golf professionals operated as servants, even after the formation of the Professional Golfers Association in 1901, while playing professionals in upper-class racquet sports repaired equipment as well as coaching club members.³² **13** Football trainers, many with boxing or pedestrian experience, such as Manchester United's Fred Bacon, were strictly controlled by the amateurs who sat on the clubs' boards.³³ **14** In athletics, Jack White, who had coached several amateur champions from the 1870s, became trainer to Cambridge University in 1893, while James 'Choppy' Warburton was official trainer at Manchester Athletic Club, where athletes 'attributed their success to his careful though severe mode of preparation.'³⁴ Spencer Wisdom, trainer to professional sprinter Henry Hutchens and to the 1908 Olympic champion, Reggie Walker, also had a long career as a professional trainer.³⁵ Looking down from their lofty and secure class positions some amateurs recognized that these professional trainers included men 'steady, observant and capable of forming clear and sound conclusions' but this was not a universal view and the professional coach remained relegated to the margins.³⁶

Conclusion

During the late nineteenth century, then, there was a significant shift in the social context within which professional coaches operated as the introduction and enforcement of the amateur ethos relegated the professional coach to the status of a servant, leaving a legacy that permeated all aspects of twentieth-century British sport. The existing British class structure contributed to the consolidation of this particular coach-athlete relationship, thereby avoiding the perceived excesses of the American coaching system and enabling professional coaching to survive within the amateur framework of sport.

While amateurism never implied that winning was unimportant, it needed to be kept in perspective and, in contrast to the specialized training witnessed in America, which had led to ‘small bands of gladiators being maintained by large companies of admiring spectators’, the British system supposedly encouraged much more participation.³⁷ For the committed amateur, the inevitable outcome of a system focused on performance would be that winning would become more important than taking part³⁸ and this was the problem with the Americans, whose system of specialization was condemned as ‘a *reducto ad absurdum*’ of the meaning of sport.³⁹ This criticism was connected both to the amateur ideology and to a broader nationalism. The rapidity and overwhelming nature of American sporting prowess entrenched amateur resistance in Britain still further towards adopting professional coaches and it should come as no surprise that British critics continued to attack what they considered to be the professionalized approach taken to sport by the Americans well into the twentieth century. **15** In 1910, *The Times* contrasted the early specialization of the American athlete with a British approach that aimed to develop all-rounders. The writer declared that it would ‘not be boasting’ to state that the winners of the forthcoming public school’s championships would, ‘rather more than hold their own’ with the pick of American athletes of the same age, except possibly in the field events. There should be no more talk of the athletic decadence of the British or criticism of an approach 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.’⁴⁰ **16**

Notes

¹ Theodore Andrea Cooke, *The Fourth Olympiad: The Official Report of the Olympic Games 1908* (The British Olympic Association), Appendix E., 762-778.

² Montague Shearman, “International Athletics,” *The Badminton Magazine* December (1895): 574-592, 588-590.

³ *The Badminton Magazine*, October 1895, 419-420.

⁴ Charles P. Korr, “Two Cheers for the Professional: Some Anglo-American Comparisons,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 2.3 (1985): 294–295.

⁵ Matthew McIntire, “National Status, the 1908 Olympic Games and the English Press,” *Media History* 15.3 (2009): 271-286; *Daily Mirror*, 1 August 1908.

⁶ Cited in Caspar Whitney, “The View-Point: Olympic Games American Committee Report,” *Outing* 53, (November 1908): 248.

- ⁷ *The Times*, 14 August 1882, 8.
- ⁸ 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; Roberta J. Park, "Athletes and their Training in Britain and America, 1800-1914," in *Sport and Exercise Science: Essays in the History of Sports Medicine*, eds. Jack W. Berryman and Roberta J. Park (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 71-72, 83.
- ⁹ *London Daily News*, 28 February 1895, 6.
- ¹⁰ Michael Murphy, *Athletic Training* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1914), Preface xiii.
- ¹¹ Montague Shearman, "International Athletics," *The Badminton Magazine*, December 1895, 584-585.
- ¹² Shearman, "International Athletics," 574-592, 586-587.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 587-590.
- ¹⁴ "How Uncle Sam plays football," *Nottingham Evening Post*, 12 November 1903, 3.
- ¹⁵ Walter Camp and Lorin Deland, *Football* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1896), 77-83, 273, 308, 316.
- ¹⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 4 May 1896, 7.
- ¹⁷ *Morning Post*, 9 December 1895, 2.
- ¹⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 30 June 1870, 6; *Athletic News*, 23 September 1901.
- ¹⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 9 July 1900, 7.
- ²⁰ "American athletes," *Morning Post*, 14 July 1900, 4.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Daily Mail*, 28 March 1903, 4.
- ²³ *Observer*, 4 August 1901, 6.
- ²⁴ *Observer*, 4 August 1901, 6.
- ²⁵ "The Loss of the Championships," *The Times*, 18 July 1907.
- ²⁶ Ralph D. Paine, "American University Rowing," *Outing*, XXX no. 3 (June 1902): 341.
- ²⁷ Chase Mellen, "Undergraduate Life at Oxford," *Outing* XVII no.5 (February 1891): 351-352; Florence Stacpoole, "Food and Its Uses," *Bow Bells*, 29 no. 372 (February 1895): 173.
- ²⁸ *The Times*, 18 July 1901, 7; *Baily's Monthly Magazine*, LXXV (April 1901): 226-227, 470-471.
- ²⁹ Wray Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 198-199.
- ³⁰ Stan Shipley, "Tom Causer of Bermondsey: A Boxer Hero of the 1890s," *History Workshop Journal* 15 (1983): 32, 50-52.
- ³¹ Derek Birley, *Playing the Game: Sport and British Society, 1910-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 21.
- ³² Dennis Brailsford, *British Sport: A Social History* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1992), 104; Derek Birley, *Playing the Game: Sport and British Society, 1910-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 35.
- ³³ Pierre Lanfranchi, "Mister Garbutt: The First European Manager," *The Sports Historian* 22 (2002): 44-59.
- ³⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 10 April 1893, 6.
- ³⁵ Spencer Wisdom. Census Returns 1871(RG10/10/32/55); 1881(RG11/6/34/36); 1901(RG13/1218/113/11); 1911(RG14PN59RG78PN2).
- ³⁶ Hoole, *The Science and Art of Training*, 7.
- ³⁷ Shearman, "International Athletics," 589-590; Lincoln Allison, *Amateurism in Sport: An Analysis and a Defence* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 22.
- ³⁸ Richard Holt, *Sport and the British. A Modern History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 97-103.
- ³⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 23 July 1912, 16.
- ⁴⁰ "The All-Round Athlete," *The Times*, 26 July 1910, 21.