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A 'Symmetrical Body': Amateurism, the 'University Athlete' and Attitudes to Professional Coaching in Late-Victorian Britain.

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Abstract

Coaching and training was an integral part of sports preparation for the British professional athlete from the beginning of the eighteenth century.¹ This traditional approach generated a specialised sporting body crafted into a shape and form suitable for working-class rowers, pugilists and athletes but it was a system rejected by the middle-class men who organised sport through their clubs and associations in the late-Victorian period.² Their adoption of the amateur principles of moderation and non-specialisation resulted in a preference for 'all-rounders' and in the development of the notion of the 'University Athlete', a sportsman who displayed a symmetrical body and who played sport with elegance and style.³ Using a selective reading of the Classical literature the university-educated athlete elected for a body shape that provided an outward demonstration of their moral superiority and their social status and power.⁴ This gentleman athlete, at least outwardly, avoided the constraints on his performance that might be imposed by coaches, especially those of working-class origins, and eschewed the notion of serious training, since this might shape his body into an unacceptable and non-aesthetic form.⁵ As a result, professional coaches and trainers were consigned to the margins of amateur sport, leaving a legacy that lasted for over a century, although the rhetoric of amateurism was not always matched by the realities of elite sport in Britain, even in the Universities, and some professional coaches continued to make a living.⁶ This paper explores all these various processes and brings them together through the presentation of archival research from the late-nineteenth century sources including biographies, newspapers and organisational records. Particular reference is made to the published comments of medical men who used statistics and anthropometry to justify their claims that upper-class bodies were different from working-class bodies and that working-class trainers could not fully understand the training needs of their social superiors. The author concludes that body shape was an important adjunct to the application of the amateur ethos by powerful social elites in late nineteenth century British sport and that the ideal body-type demonstrated by the 'University athlete' was used as a critical distinctive marker between the amateur and the professional athlete.

Introduction

The nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation of a triadic model of class in Britain with those in the middle assuming 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, involving running, walking, jumping and throwing, was superseded by a version of athletics preferred by the middle classes. The men responsible for the formation of organisations like the Amateur Athletic Association in 1880 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. Using material from nineteenth-century sources such as biographies, newspapers and organisational records, this paper briefly explores how the aesthetics of the sporting body were influenced by middle-class interpretations of what it meant to be an 'amateur' and the impact that athletic body preferences had on the practice of sports coaching. The argument presented is that the proponents of amateurism drew on their class attitudes and on Classical texts to argue for a symmetrical body developed through moderated, all-round training rather than a specialised physique created by professional coaches.

Coaching and training

Specialised coaching has been integral to athletic preparation in Britain for over three hundred years.⁷ During the Renaissance, a learned mind in a strong and agile body became an ideal⁸ and seventeenth-century writers, influenced partly by Descartes and by Puritanism, advocated physical training, proper hygiene and adequate exercise,⁹ although, even at that point, there were concerns over excessive specialisation. Stubbe observed in 1671 that bodies 'dieted and brought up to an Athletick habit, do soonest of all decline into sickness and premature old age'¹⁰ and subsequent texts emphasised the dangers of uneven development resulting from specialised training since, in 'every exertion beyond that what is gained in one part is inevitably lost in another'.¹¹

Trainers, meanwhile, remained preoccupied with appropriate body types. In his 1713 wrestling text, Parkyns noted that he selected men of a middle size, athletic, full-breasted, broad shouldered, brawny-legged and armed, yet clear-limbed, for wind and strength.¹² John Jackson later observed that pedestrians ranged from five feet to six feet tall, with long thighs and short legs, while John Hall looked for muscular men 'round in their chests, short in their waists, long in their thighs, from five feet seven, to five feet ten'.¹³ Their observations are reinforced by an analysis of pedestrians taken from nineteenth-century sporting newspapers. This implicit understanding of what an athletic body should look like and its fitness for purpose was shared by spectators who evaluated a trainer's success through the 'ceremony of peeling' that preceded sporting contests. When boxer Tom Spring defeated Langan in 1824 his appearance combined elasticity, firmness and an elegance not witnessed in his opponent,¹⁴ reflecting the key criteria of firm muscle tone which demonstrated that a man had been properly trained.¹⁵

As more professional sportsmen emerged during the early nineteenth century, intensive training programmes involved athletes going 'into training' in rural areas for up to eight weeks and undertaking a strict regime of diet and exercise overseen by a professional trainer who crafted specialised sporting bodies for their working-class athletes.¹⁶ This system was subsequently rejected by the middle-class men who organised late-Victorian sporting clubs and associations. Using a selective reading of the Classics these amateur gentlemen elected for an athletic body shape that provided an outward demonstration of their moral superiority, social status and power.¹⁷ Their adoption of the amateur principles of moderation and non-specialisation resulted in a preference for 'all-rounders' and in the development of the notion of the 'University Athlete', a sportsman who displayed a symmetrical body and played sport with elegance and style.¹⁸

Amateur sportsmen and Classical allusions.

The 1896 Athens Olympiad came as the climax of a centuries-long fascination with ancient Greece.¹⁹ Familiarity with the Greek world was embedded within the public school curriculum, as were team games, which were considered to foster individual skills, co-operation and loyalty.²⁰ 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 a devotion to the Classics.²¹ The prime movers in the Olympic movement were products of this tradition. The first chairman of the British Olympic Association (BOA), Lord Desborough, staged Greek dramas at his home²² while Robert Laffan, who was the BOA's Honorary Secretary until 1927, obtained First Class Honours in Latin and Greek before becoming a schoolmaster.²³

Familiarity with Greek texts did not necessarily mean that amateur sportsmen interpreted the content accurately and their admiration for Greek athletes on the basis that they were paragons of the purest amateurism in sport was a highly subjective reading of the evidence. As Lammer points out, in the Classical age, 'the absolute priority of performance and victory...made specialization necessary',²⁴ and by the end of the fifth century B.C. the term 'athlete' was the label for a class of individuals who rigorously pursued athletic careers.²⁵ Amateur interpretations of Classical sport were further informed by Greek philosophers who criticised athletes for their over-specialisation, to the detriment of a balanced development of the body.²⁶ Medical men were equally scathing. Galen noted that athletes lacked any natural beauty and that their strength served no useful purpose beyond athletics. Citing Hippocrates he argued that 'Healthy training is moderation in diet, stamina in work'.²⁷

Using these sources as evidence, nineteenth-century amateurs formulated a sporting ethos that rejected professional coaching and training. Exponents were warned not to 'overvalue physical excellence and athletic performance'²⁸ and when 'Muscular Christianity' gained momentum it was driven by an amateur mantra of 'moderation'.²⁹ 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'.³⁰ Along with moderation went a preference for the all-round athlete and a rejection of specialisation as amateurs embraced Aristotle's view that the pentathlete, who best represented Greek ideals of physical balance and athletic versatility by throwing the discus and javelin, long-jumping, sprinting and wrestling, represented the ideal model of male beauty.³¹ Admiration for the gifted amateur permeated all aspects of

Victorian social and working life³² and the principles of amateurism were developed and refined into a philosophy of sport that celebrated the ideal amateur as one who could play several games well without giving the impression of strain.³³ Specialisation needed to be avoided. Distance running rarely appealed to University men partly because it required extensive training and in the 1892 Cambridge versus London Athletic Club match not one collegian finished the three-mile race.³⁴

The sporting body

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'.³⁵ Sculptural representations of athletes were often specific to the age and event of the competitor and the display of different athletic physiques diversified as athletes became more specialised.³⁶ 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'.³⁷ Nineteenth-century commentary similarly distinguished between different athletic bodies. When professional sculler Robert Chambers stripped off in 1860 his condition was 'admirable' showing every muscle in his 'Herculean back and shoulders'.³⁸ 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.³⁹ For amateurs, this less specialised body became the athletic ideal. Its resemblance to the youthful body was no coincidence since sports were considered suitable activities for boys, university athletes and young men but not for more mature individuals.⁴⁰

Balance in the body was important. 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',⁴¹ 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'.⁴²

Amateur commentators employed scientific arguments to justify their particular version of the sporting body. Evolutionary theory provided some theoretical underpinning for anthropometric analyses and the professionalisation of science enhanced the authority given to scientists who measured, compared and interpreted variability in the human body, often relating this to class and heredity.⁴³ Surveys led to the conclusion that a difference in class meant a corresponding difference in height⁴⁴ and it was widely believed that lower class physiology, especially the nervous system, qualitatively differed from that of gentlemen.⁴⁵ A comparison of Galton's measurements from the general population with those of the average Cambridge student revealed that the latter had better lung capacity, height and other measurements thereby verifying the higher 'physical condition of the upper educated classes'.⁴⁶ Inevitably, these techniques were employed to determine the 'fitness for purpose' of the athletic body.⁴⁷ Physical educationalist Archibald MacLaren published data on height, weight and chest girth, gave advice on minimum chest sizes for rowers and expressed 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.⁴⁸ Holt has suggested that the aesthetics of amateurism required a balance between 'height, weight, muscle development and mobility'⁴⁹ and this ideal of a symmetrically appropriate body became a feature of the middle-class sporting ethos.

With the rise of the bourgeoisie, the lean body became desirable and the idea arose that individuals were primarily self-responsible for fabricating their own lean and healthy body.⁵⁰ The *County Gentleman* in 1898 argued that English bodies were no longer corpulent but had gained in height, muscle and stamina. An increase in home

exercise programmes helped explain the development of the sinewy, wiry type of Englishman.⁵¹ The writer was presumably referring to the gentlemanly middle-class body since his contemporaries remained concerned about the characteristics of the working-class body,⁵² which clearly lay outside the 'University athlete' norms. In addition, other sporting bodies were on display in this period, bodies that reflected the specialised training seen in the later Greek professionals, especially in wrestling, throwing and weightlifting. In sports such as swimming there was difficulty in attracting university men precisely because the body shape required for performance did not conform to the 'University' athlete ideal. Jabez Wolffe argued that swimmers needed to retain 'valuable bonecovering'⁵³ and the amateur swimming fraternity evolved a different ideal of the middle-class body arguing that 'ordinary' team games developed only certain parts of the body while swimming utilized nearly every muscle, particularly the respiratory muscles'.⁵⁴

Implications for coaching

Irrespective of the sport, the gentleman athlete avoided the constraints on his performance that might be imposed by coaches, especially those of working-class origins, and eschewed the notion of serious training, since this might shape his body into an unacceptable and non-aesthetic form.⁵⁵ As part of a wider attempt to consolidate their position within the professional class, doctors became increasingly involved in defending this amateur vision of sport by demeaning the skills of professional trainers. Dr Henry Hoole criticised them for their lack of scientific accuracy and their ignorance of 'the elementary facts of physiology and anatomy'⁵⁶ while Dr H. Cortis suggested that their methods caused physical breakdowns among their athletes.⁵⁷ Issues of class permeated much of the criticism. Henry Fazakerley Wilkinson, writing for amateurs in 1868, advised sportsmen to avoid professional trainers whose 'stereotyped code of rules' ignored individual differences. Constitutions varied according to class and the system employed by professionals was more appropriate to handling debauched working men. A gentleman had superior blood in his system, because of his better diet, and thus had a better foundation for training.⁵⁸ Westhall suggested that, while professional athletes were unlikely to reject training restrictions, upper class athletes were likely to resent strict discipline. The social distance between themselves and amateurs presented problems for coaches because gentleman amateurs rejected professional advice in the belief that working class trainers could not fully understand the training needs of their social betters and so could never properly shape superior upper class bodies.⁵⁹ In 1888, Woodgate argued that while traditional methods may have been suitable 'for men of mature years, who had probably been leading a life of self-indulgence,' they were inappropriate for young gentlemen.⁶⁰ As a rule, the professional classes relied on coaching from their peers, when coaching was considered unavoidable, especially in rowing where professional coaches would not be able to understand the complexities or the aesthetics of the unison and style vital to rowing in an eight. As a result, professional coaches and trainers were consigned to the margins of amateur sport, although the rhetoric of amateurism was not fully adhered to in practice, even in the Universities, and some professional coaches continued to make a living.⁶¹

Conclusion

Knowledge of the Classical world influenced both the philosophy and aesthetics of nineteenth century sportsmen, although it 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. Body shape was an important adjunct to the application of the amateur ethos by powerful social elites in late nineteenth century British sport and the ideal body-type demonstrated by the 'University athlete' was used as a critical distinctive marker between the gentleman amateur and the professional athlete. Vertinsky cites Foucault in suggesting that power relations in specific historical circumstances are manifested most concretely at the level of the body⁶² and the power and morality of the amateur elite was reflected in their symmetrical, non-muscular, supposedly superior bodies.

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. Olympic performances during the first part of the twentieth century emphasise the impact this had and 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.⁶³

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