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Sport and the New Culture: Amsterdam's Sporting Entrepreneurs in its 'Second Golden Age'

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Introduction

Good morning, my name is Nick Piercey from Manchester Metropolitan University and today I will speak about the emergence of sporting entrepreneurs in Amsterdam in the 1880s, in the city's Second Golden Age and their links to wider cultural change.

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As Amsterdam experienced a cultural and economic resurgence in the late nineteenth century; the aristocratic elite slowly faded from public life, to be replaced by a new merchant and financial elite, sport became an important new cultural product. Sport was a location that connected old and new elites, bodies, urban space and mass consumerism. In shops, sport goods became a profitable item to sell to a new group of consumers. And new sporting business found that the new fascination with sport, coupled with access to cheap urban space, could turn previously barren fields into sites of mass entertainment, visual culture and profit. This paper will suggest that sporting entrepreneurs in Amsterdam were a fundamental part of a wider cultural revolution, which at its core was about the visible, consumable, and mass body.

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The 1880s: Amsterdam and its Second ‘Golden Age’.

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Amsterdam experienced ‘a breath-taking process of change’. From the mid-1860s, new developments in infrastructure and culture changed the physical shape of the city. Cultural and economic palaces, such as the Paleis voor Volksvlijt, Concertgebouw, Rijksmuseum and Vondelpark financed by private individuals suggested a newfound economic and cultural confidence. The development of the North Sea Canal and new Central Station, not only brought Amsterdam closer to the centre of world economic trade but also represented a changing of the guard in Amsterdam political life – one where the old, conservative, patrician elite gave way to a new, confident, business elite. These new landmarks were intended to have a multiple purposes, to provide Amsterdam access to new markets, to cement its place as a world city and increasingly to provide space for an increasingly cramped city to find entertainment.

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It was not only in spatial terms that the city was changing. The period around 1880 has been called Amsterdam's 'Second Golden Age', one of economic expansion and cultural opportunity. The International Colonial and Export Exhibition, held in 1883, crowned a period of expansion and demonstrated the importance of an expanding colonial empire and how far Amsterdam had developed since the mid-1800s. Technological initiatives permitted shops to become centres for consumer culture. Plate-glass frontages transformed them into smaller replicas of the great nineteenth-century exhibitions, where seemingly everything could be bought. As Van de Woud notes, the street became a location where a love of products, an identification with brands and a level of narcissism became important characteristics. A new culture was emerging where what one paid for said a lot about who one was. The new culture was dynamic, pluriform, visible and on a mass scale.

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4 MINUTES

With developments in the natural sciences and new technologies of mass consumption and production, a new understanding of the body emerged. Bodily appearance and functionality became central to a new mass culture and Gymnastics and sport were and important representation of this. From the mid-19th century onwards, sporting clubs were established in the city. Initially a wealthy few established rowing club De Hoop and the Amsterdam IJsClub. But by the 1870s gymnastic and swimming clubs were supported with private and municipal funds, as ways to promote public health. By the 1880s, sporting clubs had become more numerous in the city. Demonstrating the importance of sport and exercise to the new culture, the *Algemeene Olympia-Vereeniging* (AOV) was established in the city, in 1883, as a private organisation aimed at promoting physical education amongst Dutch boys and girls.

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Given the central nature of consumerism and the body to the new culture, it is perhaps no surprise that sport and physical activities became an important area for entrepreneurial development. Enterprising stores marketed sports and leisure products, which capitalized on the demand for imported goods. In Amsterdam, Perry & Co. brought table tennis, dominos and mah-jong to a Dutch audience. Both they and De Gruyter's stores sold cricket balls to Dutch teams; and customers started to refer to the tennis ball as a 'Perry-ball', suggesting the effective nature of early sport marketing.

De Gruyter produced catalogues for his store and the expanding nature of the sport and games sections in the catalogue between 1883 and 1892 suggest an increase in the market for sporting products in both scale and diversity. International influences abounded in the new metropolis. De Gruyter developed a partnership with the Coventry Machinist Company in the United Kingdom becoming the sole agent for their bicycles in the Netherlands. This partnership saw the British firm manufacture specialist bicycles for the Dutch market, which would cope with the rigours of cobbled streets.

In October 1886, De Gruyter's store expanded to take in adjacent properties The new store had an area dedicated to 'children's play goods and sporting articles' showing the increasing market for such items. Not just content with servicing the market for participation in sport, De Gruyter was also involved in expanding it. He played an important role in facilitating the organisation of the 1888 Wijk aan Zee National Tennis tournament and used this opportunity to sell his goods to those in attendance. In the 1890s he would invested in attempts by an Amsterdam cycle club to build a new cycle track. New shopping techniques and international networks allowed entrepreneurs to bring new sporting goods to the market, but they did more than just sell, they expanded participation in the sporting product through investment in sporting events and businesses.

Adverts from De Gruyter and Perry appeared in the newly expanding sporting press. From the 1880s onwards a number of new publications appeared, and often disappeared quickly too. News and information about events, results, journeys and decisions all became a product to be consumed like many others.

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8 MINUTES

The development of the consumerist expansion of sporting events saw the emergence of a new types of enterprise. One of these was the Amsterdam Sport Club. In early 1886, 25 of Amsterdam's most 'well known sportsmen' established this new limited company. The men had put up 15,000 guilders with the explicit aim of developing 'grounds in the near vicinity of Amsterdam for trotting, horse-races and other competitions and activities in the area of sport.'

Based on the land which housed the Colonial Exhibition of 1883, those who founded the ASC sought to use this undeveloped piece of land to create a site near the city centre, which could capitalize from the increasing interest in sport that had become a part of Amsterdam's 'Second Golden Age'.

I will leave aside a detailed discussion of those who invested in the ASC. This can be found in the forthcoming paper in the IJHS. However, the investors in the ASC provide a snapshot of the changing nature of Amsterdam's elite; they represent a mix of the sons of old aristocratic families and members of a new entrepreneurial elite linked to trading, commercial and political networks. This sporting business was part of a wider cultural network, which encapsulated all aspects of Amsterdam's daily life, from manufacturers and merchants to politicians and sports administrators. In this respect, sporting clubs were not a radical departure from other associations in urban cultural life. What was different was that they developed locations that brought together an emerging mass, competitive bodily culture, and the new mass consumer culture. It was this fusion of space, consumerism and the observed body, which would make sport the hallmark of a new, modern, culture.

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The land behind the Rijksmuseum was intended to become a new residential neighbourhood in the late 1870s, but political arguments had left it still undeveloped by the mid-1880s. While residential plans were debated, the large, open space could be temporarily used for other activities. In partnership with the Amsterdam division of the AOV, the ASC was given access by the Municipality to the space to develop sporting spaces, although, initially, how long this would last was unclear. As an organisation that charged low entry fees and had an ideological goal, the AOV did not pay for the use of the land, while the ASC was required to pay 500 guilders for each day of racing, as well as maintaining the boundaries and fences. The AOV transformed the area into a ‘paradise for lovers of open-air gymnastics and games’, with cricket pitches, croquet lawns, tennis courts and facilities for football, while the ASC focused on sports that required greater space, maintenance or money; in particular, equestrian events, ice skating, athletics and cycling, bringing new products, ideas and opportunities to Amsterdam’s leisure market.

A core component of the ASC’s summer schedule were horse meetings, but so too was benefiting from the new consumer spirit of 1880s Amsterdam. Changes were made to the ground to ensure a more comfortable spectator experience. A gravel path was laid for the convenience of those coming by coach; different entry prices offered the opportunity to sit in the grandstand or cheaper entry to the course. In addition to competition on the track, economic competition occurred away from it.

The first meeting of 1886 saw a competition for the ‘most beautiful exhibition of saddles, harness etc.’, won by a local firm over one from London. The first betting totalizer in the Netherlands, introduced in 1887, saw other bookmakers complain about a loss of trade. The grassy space behind the Rijksmuseum represented the growing interest in sport and the increasing relationship between sport, space, consumerism and capital.

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13 MINUTES

While equestrianism was an established sport in the Netherlands the ASC also promoted new ventures. In April 1886, the *Nieuws van de Dag* paper announced that the ASC was to hold a running race for skaters. The aim, it was said, was to provide Dutch skaters with a way of measuring their summer training, spurred on by a prize of 100 guilders. Despite linking the new activity to the established ice skating, the attendance on a wet summer's day was less than hoped. Other athletics meetings were more popular and in 1891 a meeting drew participants from outside the Netherlands and sponsorship from the Sunlight Soap Company for an athletic trophy. In 1890, the Amsterdam Wieler-Vereeniging, organised an event on the land. Such events reinforced the links between consumerism and sport, as well as placing the measurable athletic body centre stage.

In winter, the land used to hold equestrian and athletic events was transformed into a public ice rink, which also held competitions. New developments in sporting facilities elsewhere provoked interest, especially the use of 'artificial ice rinks' in Hamburg. Following the Hamburg example, the ASC created their own rink, transporting water from nearby canals to create an artificial pool in front of the grandstand with cold weather finishing the job. This artificial facility proved popular and committed to providing public entertainment and spectacle the ASC offered a music tent and refreshments. Artificial lighting was set up so that the rink could operate during the evenings and fireworks and illuminations all catered for those wanting more than a gentle evening on the ice. By 1889, the ASC had created a toboggan area and had brought in sleds from Canada for patrons to use. The development of unique attractions was part of the wider development of consumer culture in Amsterdam and a way of differentiating the ASC's sporting space from others in the leisure market.

Recognising the popularity of skating and skaters amongst the Amsterdam public, the ASC invited famous skaters to give exhibitions and compete. In 1889, they invited skaters to compete in a four-day event publicised as a ‘world championship’. In the same year, the ASC organised an event challenging Frisian professionals to compete against amateur skaters in a prize race-against-the clock. The competitions were not only a form of mass entertainment but were an important way of measuring the body and reproducing the corporeal turn. The body of the athlete was something to be studied, judged, perfected and consumed.

Control of space was crucial in developing the sporting product and the consumable body. Although the ASC had been given control of the space behind the Rijksmuseum for a low rent, they were able to hire out the facilities and space to turn a profit. In 1886, they partnered with the AVC to build Amsterdam’s first cycle track. In the 1890 season, the ASC also hired its grounds to the *Amsterdam Skating-Club* for 600 guilders and to the AIJC for 3500 guilders. In fast changing and expanding cities, space became a contested and valuable asset. This allowed the ASC, perhaps mindful of the fact that they were only able to use the land it until residential plans were approved by the Municipality, to charge high rates to those who had developed a fascination with the sporting craze.

By the end of 1892, the land reverted to municipal control and the ASC no longer held events in Amsterdam. By 1901, they had stopped organising their own events and in early 1903, the remaining shareholders decided to liquidate the company.

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18 MINUTES

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That sport was a location for entrepreneurship was because of a fundamental change in the centrality of the body to everyday culture and the creation of a new mass, visual and consumer culture within Amsterdam. The Amsterdam of the 1880s saw a period of entrepreneurial activity in clubs, societies, businesses, and wider culture. It was a period where new technologies changed the way people shopped; the physical space of the city changed and the street became part of a wider visual consumer culture. Sport was part of this corporeal turn and entrepreneurs - such as De Gruyter, Perry & Co., various newspapers and magazines and the ASC - found that there was an emerging market for sports and sport-related goods and services.

Amsterdam sport in the 1880s was part of a wider shift between older and new cultures. The ASC was one organisation where a complex network of individuals from old aristocratic families and those of the newer commercial elites could profit from and reproduce the corporeal turn in everyday life. They were individuals who were concerned with art, science, music, education and spatial development, as well as sport, but could link new forms of bodily culture to the new culture of mass, visible consumption. By providing new competitions, products, sports and locations, Amsterdam's sporting entrepreneurs were helping to reproduce the new corporeal consumer culture within the streets of the city and within the body of the individual on a previously unseen scale.