

Good sports: how Europe learned to play fair

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The rise of modern European sport in the later 19th and early 20th centuries took place in societies deeply divided along the lines of politics, religion and class. Sport can be used as a litmus-test by means of which the deepest divisions within each country can be located.

In England the biggest sporting divides were along the lines of class. Some sports, such as golf and tennis, were largely limited to the upper and middle classes, while many of the regional sports, such as potshare bowling, popular in the north-east, were limited to the working class. In cricket, 'gentlemen' and 'players' played together but dressed and ate separately; in rowing, there were separate organisations for elite and plebeian practitioners.

But the most dramatic split came in rugby. Rugby developed as a mainly middle-class game in the south of England, but in Yorkshire and Lancashire the leading players were typically miners and workers in textile factories, who could ill afford to lose earnings through time spent in travel to matches. Some clubs responded by setting up these star players as landlords of pubs or through under-the-counter payments – proverbially, legs of mutton. There were also demands for 'broken time' payments – that is, payments in lieu of lost wages. There was an undercurrent of resentment between players and officials of different social background. Working-class players were regularly accused of ungentlemanly play, and they equally readily complained of snobbery. In 1895 the Northern Union seceded, the immediate issue being broken-time. In the years following, a series of rule changes were made in order to speed the game up, and in 1922 the name of Rugby League was adopted for what was by now a separate game.

In France Catholics, Republicans and Socialists played the same sports (in spite of the initial tendency for football to be more Catholic and rugby more Republican). But after the Separation of Church and State in 1905 relations were so bad that teams from 'les deux France' would not play one another and there were two separate national football teams. Meanwhile, Socialists were also encouraged by their political leaders to keep apart and in the 1920s there were Socialist and Communist Olympiads – the two joining together in the Antwerp Workers' Olympics in 1937, which included athletes from the Soviet Union.

In Ireland political and religious separation went one step further, as some Nationalists refused even to play the same sports as Unionists. In 1884 the Gaelic Athletic Association was founded. It championed authentically Irish sports such as Gaelic football and hurling. The Association not only promoted Irish games: it expelled those who played 'foreign games', such as association football, rugby, hockey or cricket. After Irish independence the 'ban' became a symbol of the GAA's credentials as a stronghold of militant nationalism and it was rescinded only in 1971. Gaelic sports became the 'national game' with unparalleled resonance as definers of national identity. This was unique in the history of British colonialism: elsewhere the colonised learnt British sports in order to beat the British; in Ireland the enthusiasm for soccer in the Protestant North was a reflection of their Britishness; only as the Nationalist and Republican tradition began to decline did soccer begin to rival Gaelic sports in the Catholic South.

The continuing power of the religion-politics-sport triangle became apparent again in Italy after the fall of Mussolini. In the 1940s and 50s Italian cycling was dominated by the rivalry between the two supreme stars, the Catholic Gino Bartali and Fausto Coppi, who was seen as a Communist sympathiser. Once again the Catholic and Communist press seized upon the victories of their respective heroes as proof of the superiority of their own ideology.

The 1960s, however, were in this, as in so much else, the end of an era. Growing affluence blurred the line between classes. Increasing individualism eroded political and religious loyalties. Vatican II, with its spirit of dialogue, weakened sectarian antagonisms. The ever-increasing commercialisation of sport brought in different values, in relation to which older political or religious values seemed of little relevance. Individual sports stars not infrequently drew on their own religious beliefs to provide motivation and discipline – and help them cope with defeat. But sport was now seldom a field of conflict between rival political or religious communities or a symbol of religious or political values.

There were exceptions – for instance the continuing role of Protestant-Catholic antagonisms in football in Glasgow or Belfast, the political ties of Italian football teams, or the politically coloured rivalry between Barcelona and Real Madrid. But these were now survivals from an earlier time, when these were normal, rather than being exotic exceptions.