



Chapter Title: Sport, the State, and International Politics

Book Title: Globalizing Sport

Book Author(s): Barbara J. Keys

Published by: Harvard University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt6wpm2m.7>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Harvard University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Globalizing Sport*

JSTOR

Sport, the State, and International Politics

One of the forces driving the internationalization of sport was the establishment of sport as an essential practice of a modern state. “Today the people of the world pay more and more attention to the question of physical education,” the British Board of Education noted approvingly in 1936. “They are beginning to grasp that healthy physical training is of decisive importance for the health and welfare of the nation.”¹ By the late twentieth century participation in international sports competitions like the Olympic Games had become a necessary marker of nationhood, a standard means of representing national identity to both domestic and foreign audiences.² Almost everywhere in the twentieth century sports became an important way to instill a sense of belonging to a nation, to solidify loyalty, to create a bond of attachment to an abstract entity. At the same time participation in international sport competitions became a statement of membership in a community of nations.

For the great powers it became a matter of urgency to win more medals or more championships than rival powers. For the smaller nations it became critical not so much to win but to show up, to perform respectably, and to be seen as a member of the club. Sport, with its readily quantifiable results, proved especially hospitable for the new currents of competition in the emerging international system based on national representation. Like participation in world’s fairs, the possession of a flag and anthem, and the sending of diplomatic representatives abroad, sport became one of the practices that shaped the form and image of nations as they entered the international order.

The origins of the close relationship between sport and nationhood lie

in a confluence of factors in late-nineteenth-century Europe. Rising standards of living, increased amounts of leisure time, technological innovations like telegraphy and steam-powered printing, and the commodification and commercialization of entertainment created the preconditions for the rise of mass sports and physical education. These factors intersected with fears of degeneration, Social Darwinism, and state intervention in matters of public health to produce new physical recreation movements that represented the state's strength in terms of its population's health. Across Europe the conviction grew that physical recreation could produce morally upright, economically productive, and militarily useful (male) citizens. As a result, fitness became a matter of state importance. National wealth was not just a matter of gold reserves, industrial output, or natural resources, but also of human resources. A healthy nation, vigorous enough to produce economic growth and maintain its stature in the world, depended on a healthy population.

These new views of health and leisure helped propel a tremendous upsurge in programs of physical exercise in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Europe, the United States, and in many parts of Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, politicians and reformers turned to physical exercise programs as a panacea for social ills and as a tool to increase national power. Private clubs mushroomed, factories introduced recreation programs, schools introduced physical-education classes, and governments began to spend public funds on playgrounds, stadiums, and gymnasiums.

Although the vogue for what was then called "physical culture" manifested itself in various forms, from bodybuilding to bicycling fads, the most important development of the nineteenth century was the creation of modern sport. Spurred by urbanization, the rise of mass media, and improvements in transportation, modern competitive sports (most significantly, track and field and team sports like soccer) were codified and standardized in Britain, then spread to other countries, and by the second half of the twentieth century had established global supremacy in the realm of physical culture.

In the interwar years, however, competitive sport represented only one strain of the physical-culture movement. In Europe, gymnastics was sport's main rival. In philosophy and practice, gymnastics represented a starkly different model of physical recreation. Unlike sport, gymnastics was primarily noncompetitive; instead of quantifiable achievement, it

emphasized process and posture. "Gymnastics and sport," a Belgian gymnast noted in 1894, "are *diametrically opposed* activities and [we have] always fought against the latter as *incompatible* with [the] principles [of gymnastics]." ³ From the late nineteenth century until World War II, gymnastics and sport were antagonists in a battle for supremacy in the field of popular recreation. On much of the European continent and elsewhere gymnastics was the dominant form of physical culture until at least World War I, with sport merely "an ambitious younger brother." ⁴

A thriving workers' sport movement posed a similar challenge to modern sport in interwar Europe. As with gymnastics, workers' sport emphasized cooperation and group solidarity over individual competition. Unlike gymnastics, workers' sport was predicated on internationalism, a transnational proletarian identity. Workers' sport was dealt a serious blow by Nazi repression, but the experience of the Soviet Union, where a Soviet version of worker's sport was introduced but then replaced by competitive Western sport, suggests that the competitive advantages of the mainstream international sport system would have relegated the European workers' sport movement to the margins even had it not been actively repressed.

Across the rest of the world traditional pastimes and recreations predominated. Sometimes these were resuscitated and modernized as part of broader reform agendas, but more often they were gradually pushed aside by Western imports. By definition, traditional recreations were uniquely local or regional. Gymnastics was essentially national, unique within each country and lacking a strong internationalist component. Workers' sport was class-based. Sport, however, was a universalist international system, and it was this characteristic that ultimately made it more appealing as a medium for nationalist impulses, helping to propel its meteoric rise to global supremacy.

The Rise of "Physical Culture"

Eugen Sandow was one of the best-known men in the world in 1900. The German émigré strongman and performer toured Britain, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Dutch Java, Burma, China, and Japan. He published a widely read magazine, sold thousands of photographs and postcards of himself in neoclassical poses that showcased his thickly muscled physique, and devised and marketed a system of physi-

cal training, centering on the use of dumbbells for muscular development. His body was widely heralded as an ideal; physicians proclaimed him the most perfect male alive.⁵

Sandow's rise to international fame was the product of a craze for physical culture that swept much of Europe, the United States, and beyond in the second half of the nineteenth century, reflecting fundamental shifts in views of health, fitness, and bodily ideals. Like Sandow's fame, the vogue for physical culture was furthered by transnational currents. Wrestling and bodybuilding, the craze for cycling, and tennis are notable examples of phenomena whose turn-of-the-century popularity crossed national borders. As the convening of the first International Congress on Physical Education in 1889 indicates, there was also a lively international exchange of ideas and practices in physical education.

Physical culture movements of the nineteenth century were driven by a common set of concerns arising from modernization and industrialization. The conditions of modern life, many nineteenth-century thinkers worried, led to degeneration, emasculation, and decline. They looked around their societies and saw men sitting in offices pushing paper or standing in factories engaged in narrowly specialized, repetitive labor, becoming morally and physically weak. Social Darwinists who saw life as a struggle among races and nations argued that physical strength was key to the "survival of the fittest" for human societies. And in an era of mass conscription, the health and fitness of individual men was directly tied to military power.

The public hygiene movement of the nineteenth century regarded physical fitness as an important component of healthy living, and hygiene advocates pressed for public efforts to promote physical exercise. By the turn of the century new ideas about public health combined with widespread fears of physical degeneration and weakness among "civilized" societies to produce a biological model of society, which gave new urgency to the longstanding idea that the health of the "body politic" depended on the health of individual bodies that constituted it.⁶

Recreation was also heralded as a remedy for social ills. The growth in leisure time spurred by industrialization meant that governments and reformers were eager to foster socially beneficial forms of recreation, ones that would not only promote good health, but also instill moral virtues and divert the working class from such vices as gambling. In a sharp reversal, physical recreations once condemned as dissolute now came to

be seen as character-building. In Britain, for example, the authorities had long battled against popular recreations, which they considered harmful, inhumane, and unproductive, but by mid-century many social and religious leaders came to see some of these pastimes not as hindrances but as aids to moral development. Politicians and social reformers now believed that proper physical activities could instill discipline, morality, courage, and other valued character traits.⁷ One nineteenth-century American reformer even argued that “naturally stupid” people could be made “comparatively intelligent, by prevailing on them to take gymnastic exercise.”⁸ Proponents of “muscular Christianity,” a doctrine that originated in Britain in the early nineteenth century, believed that perfection of the body through physical exercise was an essential part of Christian morality and personal salvation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea that “character” could be shaped by physical exercise had gained broad currency. Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, went so far as to declare in 1894 that “character is not formed by the mind, but primarily by the body.”⁹

Gymnastics versus Sports

In Britain the mania for physical exercise was expressed mainly through sports, especially team sports, which developed into their modern forms in the second half of the nineteenth century. The rise of competitive sports in Britain was driven by broader processes lumped under the general heading of “modernization.” Bureaucratization, standardization, specialization of roles, and quantification marked new features that separated modern sports from traditional predecessors. Urbanization provided one essential precondition for the development of modern sport: large numbers of people living in proximity and hence able to participate in common pastimes. Railroads provided cheap and efficient transportation that brought distant teams in competition against each other; rising literacy, the mass press, and telegraphy helped to communicate results across regions. Games that were local became sports that were national.

The main incubator for modern team sports was the English public school, where educators promoted and codified games for their male pupils as a way to instill the virtues of “manliness”: courage, self-discipline, respect for rules, and fair play. By the 1850s elite education was dominated by the culture of athleticism, as Thomas Hughes memorably described

in his 1857 novel of life at Rugby School, *Tom Brown's School Days*.¹⁰ Students at Eton, whose battlefield victories were later famously attributed to their experiences on the school's playing fields, were obliged to play soccer once a day or be "fined half a crown and kicked."¹¹

Originally the preserve of the upper class, sport became a middle-class craze in Britain in the last decades of the nineteenth century. It spread as well to the working class, spurred by technological advancements, more leisure time for workers, and a growing appreciation among social and religious leaders for sport's moral benefits. Upper-class reformers in Britain deliberately promoted certain sports as a means to divert potentially dangerous working-class energies into "civilized" channels. One British parliamentary committee opined that "if you provided [working people] with footballs and made them kick footballs, they would not be so inclined to kick policemen in the street."¹² Some sports remained the preserve of the wealthy (golf, yachting) as others (soccer) became associated with the working class. Social distinctions were maintained through the moral code of amateurism, which initially prescribed not only playing without material reward but also a "gentlemanly" style, effortless and scrupulously fair.¹³ With few exceptions, sports were a male domain, celebrated as a quintessential expression of masculinity.

Originally introduced by English émigrés, sport also found a fertile home in the United States, where it was nurtured by the same conditions of industrialization, urbanization, and middle-class formation that had spurred its growth in Britain. Transforming English games into baseball and football, the United States claimed the title of world's foremost "sporting nation" by the end of the nineteenth century. What Mark Dyreson has called a "sporting republic" emerged in the period from 1880 to 1920, centered around the idea "that modern nations should employ the regulation and training of body and mind through organized athletics for the production of civic virtue and national vitality." Advocates of the "strenuous life," including Theodore Roosevelt, vigorously proclaimed that sports produced the type of citizen required for individual and national success.¹⁴

The European continent, however, proved far less hospitable to modern sport. Here indigenous gymnastics movements like *Turnen* in Germany and the Ling system in Sweden were deeply entrenched as the primary form of physical education and recreation. Though these systems were similar to sport in aiming to instill moral and patriotic values,

they differed in key respects: they were noncompetitive, stressed group cohesion rather than individual effort, and valued process and posture over quantifiable achievement.

Often triggered by military defeat, gymnastics movements designed to rebuild national power and honor swept the Continent in the nineteenth century. It was first in the German states, after the Napoleonic occupation, that physical culture and fitness became political matters, when Friedrich Jahn devised *Turnen* as a way to strengthen physical and moral resources in the patriotic drive for national revival.¹⁵ Jahn's exercise program centered on equipment he invented, such as the parallel bars, and was designed to promote both health and moral qualities. Also in the first decades of the nineteenth century (and also prompted by military defeats), Per Henrik Ling in Sweden pioneered what became known as Swedish gymnastics. Judging Jahn's approach too complicated, Ling devised instead a system based on slow, limited, and systematic movements.¹⁶ As one historian describes it, the Ling system "relied largely on deliberate calisthenics and on the tonic effects of group or dual counterbalancing routines where individuals could aid one another by providing light resistance to muscular effort."¹⁷ The German and Swedish brands of gymnastics were influential in physical education programs abroad, from the United States to Japan. Unlike sport, however, gymnastics lacked an internationalist ideology, an institutionalized framework, and an ethos of quantitatively based competition, which meant that the spread of gymnastics programs did not create the kind of cohesive community that the spread of sport facilitated.

In France exercise and fitness regimes were important elements of a military and nationalist revival. Defeat in the 1870–1871 Franco-Prussian War and fear of biological degeneration produced an obsession with physical culture. French thinkers at the end of the nineteenth century began to measure national decline in biological and medical terms. Hygienic concerns in turn gave rise to physical culture movements that aimed to resuscitate what many observers saw as a tired and effete civilization. By the 1880s prominent right-wing nationalist groups were agitating for mass participation in physical exercise programs. Rather than embracing sport, however, many French hygienists favored Swedish gymnastics. Proponents of this form ridiculed what they described as the "violent gestures so dear to English brutality and American barbarism" as well as the "harsh and automatic movements cherished by German

militarists.” Sport and German gymnastics both had their advocates, but the Swedish method predominated in military training and in public schools before World War I.¹⁸ The military in particular was hostile to competitive sport, believing that it fostered individualism and could endanger the cohesion of the group.¹⁹

Most English observers were naturally convinced that their system of competitive sports produced far superior results, both physical and moral, than the gymnastics systems that dominated the Continent. One educator wrote in 1870 that the graduate of the French lycée, who was offered nothing but the regulated exercises of gymnastics, is “pale and worn, his limbs badly formed, his body without proper development, either elongated and thin, or stunted and obese, weak in either case. Mentally he is without decision, feels himself lost in the wide world, and detests law and order.” In contrast, the English youth, given time for voluntary athletic sport, “usually possesses a clear complexion and well-proportioned figure; is able to shift for himself should circumstances compel him to do so; and is proverbially a law and order loving member of society.” Some foreign observers agreed: one French journalist opined in 1862 that cricket had made the Englishman “a magnificent specimen of human kind.”²⁰

Despite the dominance of gymnastics in many parts of Europe, the English version of sport gained a foothold abroad in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This diffusion occurred less through proselytism than by a spontaneous process of imitation and adaptation. The British government made few active efforts to spread sports to other countries, and it was instead British merchants, students, sailors, and engineers, based wherever British power, commerce, or industry had penetrated, who formed sport clubs for recreation that then drew in locals to fill out teams or to provide competition.²¹ The slow diffusion, hardly noticeable at first, would over time make sports of British origin nearly ubiquitous across the globe.

Sport and the State in the Interwar Years

The catalyst that transformed sport into a mass phenomenon of great social significance was World War I. During the war, military officials in many countries included sport in training programs to increase fitness and in recreational activities to keep recruits from less savory diversions.

At war's end the YMCA organized, for the American Expeditionary Force, an extensive series of athletic competitions that led to the Inter-Allied Games in France in 1919, a huge festival that drew about half a million spectators over two weeks. As a result of their military experience, millions of men were introduced to sport, significantly increasing its popularity and legitimacy.²²

As sport became more widely popular around the world, the rise of a mass consumer culture in the years after the war provided a fertile home for its growth. The consumption of sport as spectacle—that is, spectator sport—grew even more rapidly than did participation in sport. Stadiums accommodating crowds in the tens of thousands were built; new forms—leagues, cups, championships—were devised to govern competition. Athletes, like the icons of other new forms of popular culture, became national stars with cult followings. Newspapers expanded their sport sections, and new dailies devoted exclusively to sport sprang up.

With sport's meteoric rise in popularity, government interest in sport expanded. As state regulation of populations increased sharply in areas such as managing the reproductive capacities and procreative practices of citizens, so, too, did state involvement in the promotion of recreation expand.²³ Many governments, dismayed by the poor fitness levels of their wartime recruits, turned to physical education and sport as key tools in raising military strength. In the twin tasks of preparing men for labor and war, the military aspect now assumed more importance. Most spectacularly in the dictatorships but by no means limited to them, sport in the interwar years took on a distinctly militarist flavor.

For the first time in many countries, governments were willing to devote substantial public resources to sports facilities and programs. Around the world educators and government officials adopted the view that physical education deserved a place in school alongside math, science, and literature. Many governments now formed ministries for sport or other specialized state agencies to oversee the promotion of physical recreation. In most cases the selection and preparation of teams for international competitions was left to private bodies, but these groups now often had government support. The French government, for example, in 1919 formed a Tourism and Sport Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote France's image abroad, and in 1920 granted a small allowance to sports bodies preparing for the Olympic Games.²⁴

Although it was a foreign import outside of Britain, modern sport

proved to have an extraordinarily potent appeal to group sentiments, including those at the national level. Eric Hobsbawm has called sport “one of the most significant of the new social practices” directed toward nation-building in an age of mass politics.²⁵ As sports were adopted and became indigenized, they were appropriated for the construction and consolidation of national identities.²⁶ Cricket in India, rugby in France, soccer in Italy—all are examples of imported sports that became bound up with the creation of national traditions and the expression of perceived national characteristics.

The quest to build healthy, fit populations through physical education—which included both sport and gymnastics, but increasingly tilted toward sport—was a global phenomenon in the interwar years. The comments of one Iranian reformer reflected a view in common circulation: “In the thought of those who have investigated deeply the philosophy of the progress of nations and its secrets, [physical sport] is counted among the most prominent reasons for national power, for the nation’s progress, independence, civilization, and survival.”²⁷ Commenting in 1930 on the importance of participating in the Olympic Games, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Zhengting expressed similar sentiments: “If a people wants to pursue freedom and equality in today’s world, where the weak serve as meat on which the strong can dine, they must first train strong and fit bodies.”²⁸

Typically both social groups—often middle-class modernizers—and the state were involved in introducing and promoting physical education and sport programs with explicitly nationalist agendas. In Iran in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, an emerging, reform-minded middle class embraced sport as a beneficial use of free time at the same time that the monarchy adopted sport as part of its efforts to create a healthy and productive nation. Influenced by many of the same currents that had driven the physical culture movement in Europe—belief in the moral benefits of modern, disciplined sports practices, a desire to foster social cohesion and a national culture, and worries about the debilitating physical effects of modern lifestyles—Iranian social reformers and government officials spurred an upsurge in school sports programs and in private sports clubs. Although Iran would not send a team to the Olympic Games until 1948, by 1936 it had hundreds of clubs in sports like volleyball and soccer, and by 1939 the first national championships in athletics, football, and swimming were held.²⁹

Perhaps the most avid emulator of Western practices, in sport as in so

much else, was Japan. After the Meiji Restoration of 1867, physical education became part of modernizing efforts. Japan's Ministry of Education introduced calisthenics programs in schools as a way to build stronger bodies and instill obedience to the state. By the 1890s college educators and students turned to team sports and athletic clubs to foster stamina and self-discipline. Buoyed by what Donald Roden has called "the quest for national dignity," baseball surged in popularity. Like the ideologues of Victorian manliness in the West, Japanese student athletes paid homage to the "strenuous life" as a defense against the softening influences of industrial civilization. When a Japanese college team beat a team of U.S. residents in Yokohama in the first official U.S.-Japanese baseball game in 1896, Japanese proclaimed it as a "victory for the Japanese people" that would help accelerate Japan's rise to equal status among the world powers.³⁰ While some traditional activities like sumo, swordsmanship, and judo survived in modernized forms, Westernized sport was emphasized, as one U.S. writer put it, as a way "to gain the respect and admiration of the world."³¹

Many Japanese likewise saw participation in the Olympic Games as a way to secure international prestige. As early as 1911 the Japanese Amateur Athletic Association was organized to participate in international meets, and the country began sending teams to the Olympic Games in 1912. The state offered subsidies beginning in 1924, and by 1928 Japan had won its first medals. Remarking on the benefits Japan had accrued from that medal victory, one Japanese observer commented that it offered the first occasion for many foreigners to hear the Japanese anthem and see the Japanese flag. By 1936 Japan placed an impressive eighth in the unofficial national rankings at the Olympic Games and secured the right to be the first country outside Europe and the United States to host the event. As the 1930s wore on, sports and physical education were more overtly militarized, and Japan's expansionist projects eventually led to the abandonment of its plans to host the 1940 Games.³²

In China, too, the promotion of modern physical culture was seen as an essential part of creating a modern state and citizens. In the first decades of the twentieth century both the Anglo-American model of sport, promoted by the YMCA, and European-style calisthenics and gymnastics made significant inroads in China. For Chinese modernizers, Andrew Morris has argued, these modern physical disciplines were not only a means to building a fit population; they would also "teach the values—competition, sports-

manship, confidence, awareness, discipline—that would create a new China.” In the 1920s Republican China constructed what Morris calls a “liberal democratic physical culture” dominated by competitive sport and the values of sportsmanship and teamwork. This movement declined after 1928 as the Guomindang state introduced new fascist models of mass-based physical culture, though elite competitive sport persisted. The country’s first participation in the Olympics came in 1932 and was seen, Morris concludes, “as a great step in establishing a foothold in the community of modern nations.”³³

Integration into the world of sport lagged in Africa. In sub-Saharan Africa, most of which was under colonial rule by European powers until the 1960s, missionaries and colonial administrators brought their sporting traditions with them, but before World War II organized sport for indigenous Africans was limited in many places to training programs for the army and the police and to a very small number of African schools.³⁴

The Rise of International Sports Competitions

The same outward momentum that propelled sports competitions from city to region to nation also propelled competitions at the international level. International contests grew slowly before World War I, limited by sport’s still narrow geographic base and by the high cost and slow pace of long-distance transportation. In the interwar years, the rapid expansion of sport and improvements in transportation led to an explosion in international meets of all kinds, from major multinational championships at the most elite level to informal competitions among weekend athletes.

The earliest international competitions were arranged informally between clubs, not between national organizations. For example, in 1885 the Paris Football Club and the English Civil Service Club arranged to play a rugby match in England; in 1887 a Southampton soccer club played at Le Havre; and in 1891 a delegation from the New York Athletic Club rowed against Racing Club in Paris, an event presided over by the U.S. ambassador to France.³⁵ In more elite circles such international meets began even earlier: the New York Cricket Club played a Toronto club in 1840; the America’s Cup yachting race was founded in 1851; and Harvard met Oxford in a rowing match on the Thames in 1869.³⁶ By the 1890s national sports associations were becoming involved in arranging,

sanctioning, and setting the terms of such competitions. In 1893, for example, the French sport union (the Union des sociétés françaises de sports athlétiques), with the help of the French Foreign Ministry, negotiated a convention on rowing with England's Committee of the Henley Royal Regattas to allow French rowers to participate in the English regattas.³⁷

Although national rivalries made an appearance at such contests, these meetings were generally viewed as encounters between two groups of athletes. It was not until the first decade of the twentieth century that national sports associations began to field representative national teams for international matches, in which the team became synecdoche for the nation.³⁸ This development was in part a response to new ways of envisioning the nation. As Michael Budd has noted, "the tendency to envision nations as bodies helped to support notions that societies not only were dangerously susceptible to the forces of degeneration from within but also were organic entities that battled one another for survival on the outside."³⁹

The founder of the modern Olympic Games justly noted that the creation of international championships was "the logical consequence of the great cosmopolitan tendencies of our times." Writing in 1896, Baron Pierre de Coubertin described the proliferation of international connections that were then arising:

The great inventions of the age, railroads and telegraphs, have brought into communications people of all nationalities. Easier intercourse between men of all languages has naturally opened a wider sphere for common interests. Men have begun to lead less isolated existences, different races have learnt to know and understand each other better; they have compared their powers and achievements in the fields of art, industry and science, and a noble rivalry has sprung up amongst them, urging them on to greater accomplishments. Universal Exhibitions have collected together at one point of the globe the products of its remotest corners. In the domain of science and literature, assemblies and conferences have united the most distinguished intellectual laborers of all nations. Could it be otherwise, but that sportsmen also of divers nationalities should begin to meet each other on common ground?⁴⁰

Coubertin, a French aristocrat who chose physical education as his life's work, is perhaps the single most influential individual in the history of modern international sport. A nationalist who was bitterly shaken by France's defeat in 1870–1871, the baron saw it as his primary mission to

rebronzer (strengthen) France by implanting what he saw as the secret to English power and success: the moral and physical training produced by public-school sports. Sport, he believed, cultivated not only strong and healthy bodies but also moral qualities like patriotism and devotion to the common good. He scorned the German-style gymnastics that then predominated in French physical education as “nothing [but] ensemble movements, rigid discipline, and perpetual regimentation”; it was the competitive spirit bred by English athletics that he wanted to instill in French youth of all classes.⁴¹ In the 1870s and 1880s his view of sport was not widely shared by other French reformers, for whom sport was both incompatible with the order and equilibrium they sought in physical exercise and, as a foreign import, an affront to nationalism.⁴² For Coubertin, however, sport was a quintessentially modern practice, uniquely suited to the social and psychological demands of modern industrial society.⁴³

With sport as yet little practiced in France, Coubertin hoped to popularize it through international competition, where French athletes could learn to emulate the exploits of champions. As he later reconstructed his reasoning: “Before ‘popularizing’ it would be necessary to ‘internationalize.’ . . . It would be necessary to organize contacts between our young French athleticism and the nations that had preceded us on the path of muscular culture. It would be necessary to give these contacts a periodicity and an indisputable prestige.”⁴⁴

In the 1890s Coubertin threw his personal, social, and financial resources into his campaign to further the spread of sport in France. He cultivated international contacts with like-minded men and traveled widely to examine conditions in other countries. In 1889 and 1893 he traveled to the United States to study the organization of sport and physical education in schools and universities. He was disappointed to find that German and Swedish gymnastics predominated in physical education programs, but found much to admire in the spectator sports that were becoming widely popular. According to biographer John MacAloon, Coubertin “saw sport as a dominant emblem and instrument of the vitality, democracy, and happy blending of tradition and modern innovation which he found distinctive of the United States.”⁴⁵ During his 1889 visit he struck up friendships with Princeton historian William Morgan Sloane, who would play an important role in the founding of the International Olympic Committee, and with Theodore Roosevelt, an outspoken advocate of the “manly virtues” of sport and outdoor activities. When

the Olympic Diploma was created in 1901, Coubertin made Roosevelt (by then president of the United States) its first recipient.⁴⁶

In his quest to develop international sport competitions, Coubertin was influenced by a general European fascination with classical Greece and with ancient Olympia in particular. He was aware of the German excavations at Olympia in the 1870s and of local athletic festivals organized under the heading of Olympic Games.⁴⁷ Linking his athletic project to ancient Greece gave Coubertin's plan an aura of tradition and an ostensible link to a heroic past for what was otherwise a purely modern invention. The most salient difference, in his view, was that the ancient Games had been for Greeks only. The modern Games would be "international and universal."⁴⁸

A central inspiration for Coubertin came from his visits to the world's fairs of 1889 in Paris and 1893 in Chicago. Beginning with the London Crystal Palace exhibition in 1851, world's fairs represented the largest international gatherings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, drawing tens of millions of visitors. Many of these exhibitions featured sports as part of the events, and the grounds of nearly every major exhibition in France, England, and the United States in the half-century before World War II were given over to sports after the fair ended. Beyond this close association, international sport competitions and exhibitions were structurally homologous: both brought representatives (or representations) of nations together. Sports events were less didactic, more explicitly competitive, and more temporally limited, and they offered much greater constraints in the means of representation. Like world's fairs, however, they offered arenas for the presentation of national achievements to international audiences and were major vehicles of worldwide cultural interaction.⁴⁹

"Let us export rowers, runners and fencers," Coubertin declared when he first proposed a modern Olympic Games in 1892. "This is the free trade of the future, and on the day when it is introduced within the walls of old Europe, the cause of peace will have received a new and powerful support."⁵⁰ When this first insufficiently concrete proposal fell flat, he tried again. In 1894 he organized an International Athletic Congress at the Sorbonne, inviting dozens of individuals and officials of sport clubs to discuss harmonizing the rules of amateurism, which were subject then (and later) to widely varying standards. As he later admitted, the discussion of amateurism was a "screen" to ensure widespread participa-

tion. The meeting's real purpose was to "revive" the Olympic Games "on bases and in conditions suited to the needs of modern life."⁵¹ Although Coubertin was the driving force behind the congress, he wanted to emphasize the broad international appeal of his ideas and, in particular, to ensure the involvement of the two countries most associated with modern sport. In the invitation and program, therefore, he listed England's C. Herbert and William Sloane of the United States as co-organizers.⁵²

The Olympics' founding congress attracted seventy-eight official delegates, the majority from France, but twenty delegates from eight foreign countries (Belgium, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Russia, Spain, Sweden, and the United States) were also present.⁵³ This time Coubertin's proposal was adopted almost without debate. The congress agreed to hold the Games in a different city every four years, with the honor of holding the first bestowed on Athens as a tribute to the Olympic Games of ancient Greece. "To emphasize the world character of the institution," as Coubertin put it, subsequent Games would be held in France (Paris, 1900) and the United States (St. Louis, Missouri, 1904).⁵⁴

In Coubertin's formulation the Games were to include "all the forms of exercise in use in the modern world," but in fact his vision encompassed only modern Western recreations.⁵⁵ From the beginning, then, the Olympics embraced a narrow definition of the forms of physical contest suitable for the world stage. The initial program of events included not only "athletic" sports (track and field) but also gymnastics and recreations with aristocratic lineages—what Coubertin termed combat, equestrian, and nautical sports (for example, fencing, riding, and sailing). He tended to speak of all physical contests as "sports," despite the distinct genealogies of British athletic sports, elite pastimes, and European gymnastics, and although he included gymnastics in the programs of the Games, the Olympics from the outset emphasized the competition and individualism associated with the British model of competitive sport.⁵⁶ Coubertin himself wanted to include only individual sports, in keeping with the legacy of ancient Greece, but team sports gradually made their way onto the program.⁵⁷

Although Coubertin himself was equivocal about the principle of amateurism, he accepted it as a deeply entrenched part of English sport.⁵⁸ In limiting participation in the Olympics to amateurs, the 1894 Congress adopted a relatively broad and flexible definition, excluding those athletes who had received money or prizes for competing or for work as

sport teachers or coaches, but leaving open the question of reimbursement for expenses.⁵⁹ It was the first of many attempts to define a concept that would preoccupy the IOC for much of the next century. Enforcement of the definition was left to national bodies, but before 1912 there were few national Olympic committees that could enforce amateur rules consistently, resulting in frequent accusations that some countries were violating Olympic standards.⁶⁰

The baron envisioned his great educational and athletic festival as a purely masculine endeavor. As the ancient Greeks had, he preferred to exclude women from the events altogether. The first Games were an all-male affair, but as early as 1900 women's events began to appear on the program in a handful of sports, such as tennis and archery, that many contemporaries regarded as suitably "feminine." Women's participation expanded slowly but steadily thereafter to track and field, swimming, and other events. Until late in the twentieth century, however, women represented only a small percentage of participants, and Olympic congresses were perpetual battlegrounds for debates about which events were appropriate for women.⁶¹

In Coubertin's vision the Olympic Games were deeply intertwined with pedagogical and moral aims. They were intended to be not just "ordinary world championships," but also "festival[s] of universal youth," combining the intellectual, moral, and religious bases of the ancient Games with the "democratic internationalism" of the modern world.⁶² He explained:

Our intention in reviving an institution that has lain forgotten for so many centuries, is as follows: Athletics are assuming growing importance every year. The part they play appears to be as important and as lasting in the modern world as it was in antiquity; they reappear moreover with new characteristics; they are international and democratic, suited therefore to the ideas and needs of the present day.⁶³

He expected the Games to develop "nobility of sentiments, high regard for the virtues of unselfishness and honour, a spirit of chivalry, virile energy and peace."⁶⁴ To further his educational mission he added art competitions to the Olympic roster in 1912, awarding prizes for Olympic- or sport-themed entries in architecture, sculpture, music, painting, and literature.

The symbolic and ceremonial aspects of the Olympic Games that Coubertin was careful to cultivate have done much to shape the appeal and

influence of the event. He was powerfully influenced at the 1889 Paris world's fair by rites that he would later appropriate for the opening ceremony of the Games: entry procession, flag raising, national anthems, the declaration of opening by the host nation's head of state.⁶⁵ The symbols and rites of the Olympics were expanded in the interwar years to include the Olympic flag, the Olympic flame, the Olympic Village, and the torch relay.

In Coubertin's view, bringing the youth of the world together every four years for "a happy and brotherly encounter" would serve to "gradually efface the peoples' ignorance of things which concern them all, an ignorance that feeds hatreds, accumulates misunderstandings and hurtles events along a barbarous path towards a merciless conflict."⁶⁶ For Coubertin, the rhetoric of peaceful internationalism was not a façade but an expression of deeply held convictions. Coubertin had close ties to the fin de siècle European peace movement and was likely influenced by models of private international organizations like the one set up to administer the Nobel Prizes.⁶⁷ (Coubertin himself was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in the 1930s.) Promoting a French nationalist revival was one goal of the Olympics, but it was not incompatible, in Coubertin's view, with the promotion of international peace. "Wars break out," he wrote, "because nations misunderstand each other. We shall not have peace until the prejudices which now separate the different races shall have been outlived."⁶⁸ He was not so naive as to assert that merely bringing people together would overcome prejudices; he was all too aware that encounters with foreign peoples could simply confirm or exacerbate prejudices. As his biographer writes, a true internationalist, in Coubertin's view, celebrated national differences "as different ways of being human," and it was the recognition of such differences that would lead to peace and mutual respect. In ways he never clearly spelled out, Coubertin was convinced that Olympic athletes, officials, and spectators were true internationalists, drawn into deep and rich interaction with foreign cultures that produced genuine experiences of common humanity.⁶⁹

This vision became deeply embedded in the self-understanding of promoters of international sports. It was most overt at the Olympic Games, but the sentiment was broadly used as a justification for international sport contests in general. Organizers of such contests frequently acclaimed sport as "the best League of Nations," arguing that international competition on the basis of sportsmanship and fair play produced mutual

understanding, respect, and goodwill not only among the participating athletes but also among the broader public.⁷⁰ The idea that sport created a genuine fraternity that transcended national, religious, and racial barriers more effectively than traditional diplomacy or other forms of international communication pervaded the rhetoric of sports in the interwar years. It was an idea repeated in various guises across the world. Compare, for example, the remarks of a U.S. coach in 1935, who wrote that international athletic tours “create an atmosphere of friendship that cements the Nations into one large family. Diplomatic relations, tourist travel, and commerce are a great help, but the greatest good is derived from having our athletes compete on foreign soil,” with the comment in a Malayan sports magazine in 1932 that “cricket knows no creed, religion, or politics. A well chosen cricket team is the best possible ambassador—as good as and certainly cheaper than any League of Nations.”⁷¹

For his part, Coubertin intended the Games to inspire both patriotism and peaceful internationalism. He saw no conflict between love of one’s country and respect, based on recognition of difference, for other countries. In the 1894 appeal that founded the Olympic movement, he called for “representatives of the nations” to meet face-to-face in “peaceful and chivalrous contests [that] constitute the best of internationalisms.”⁷² Athletes, in his view, would participate for the glory of their countries and at the same time develop a mutual understanding that could be “a potent, if indirect factor in securing universal peace.”⁷³ From the beginning, however, there were those who saw in international sport the exact opposite tendencies.

Nationalism and the Politics of International Sports

When Coubertin first floated his idea of instituting a modern version of the Olympic Games in 1894, Charles Maurras was among the plan’s most vigorous opponents. An extreme right-wing nationalist, a monarchist, and founder of the political movement *l’Action française*, Maurras regarded the growth of international sporting competitions with disdain. He was repulsed by the “mixing” of different nationalities at such events. In his view such events produced “the worst disorders of cosmopolitanism.” Still, when the first Games were held in Athens in 1896, he packed his bags and went to see for himself. To his surprise and delight, he saw none of the international understanding and goodwill promised

by the organizers. "Far from suppressing patriotic passion, all this false cosmopolitanism in the stadium serves only to inflame it," he wrote in *La Gazette de France*. "In the past, nations dealt with each other through ambassadors . . . Now peoples will confront each other directly, insulting each other face-to-face." Coubertin and his supporters claimed that bringing people together would promote peace, but Maurras was convinced the opposite was true. The contact engendered at events like the Olympic Games, he gleefully concluded, would propel rather than propitiate the forces of international enmity and mistrust.⁷⁴

Centering the Olympic revival on the principle of competition among "representatives of the nations," rather than among individuals, inevitably led to the use of the Games for nationalist and chauvinist purposes. In the years before World War I, each successive Olympiad saw an increase in expressions of nationalism. Genuine national teams, selected by national organizations as the best representatives in particular sports, made an appearance at the 1908 Games in London. At the same time, several European governments began to provide small subsidies to cover the expenses of their teams.⁷⁵ In 1912, at the Stockholm Olympics, public opinion began to see in the Games "a measure of national prowess as well as a test of individual ability."⁷⁶ As preparations for the 1916 Berlin Games got under way, president of the American Olympic Committee Robert Thompson noted approvingly that "the nations [are] entering into the spirit of competition with a whole-heartedness that has been missing in past Olympic games. Instead of the individual athlete being the first consideration, the nation now directs the actions of the athletes, and this . . . will result in better competition, world-wide interest, and add to the importance of the games."⁷⁷

These rather tentative signs of sporting nationalism paled beside the excesses that would come to characterize the interwar period. As sport's domestic popularity increased, so did its international significance. Governments began to actively promote international competitions as a way to publicize national achievements. The outcome of these contests was interpreted by governments and by the general public not just as an indication of the athletic abilities of individuals or teams, but also as a reflection of the quality of a country's sociopolitical system. Victories became a barometer of a nation's overall power and prestige, in part because sport seemed to offer a universal and easily quantifiable standard of achievement. In the Olympic Games, for example, a point total (computed in

various ways) quickly became a standard way to measure the overall performance of a national team. Like steel output or export of manufactures, then, performance in international competitions produced a number that, in the view of many observers, correlated with national strength.

The embrace by governments of international sport as a medium for promoting national prestige can be attributed in part to one of sport's most unique characteristics. Unlike other forms of culture, which can be judged by different standards, sport offers a single, universally accepted standard of achievement. By its nature, any sporting event is bounded by rules accepted by all parties, and the result of the event is therefore determined (at least in theory) only by merit: the best man wins. As with any other form of communication, different cultures may attribute different meanings to the same event, but there is a core set of rules and assumptions that frame the acceptable bounds of interpretation.

It was the relative latecomers to sport in Europe that were most likely to link sports achievements with national power and to devote government subsidies to secure them. The British government steadfastly adhered to the view that sport was a private, nonpolitical matter. When the Foreign Office briefly departed from this position in 1929, quietly suggesting to the Football Association that perhaps it ought to send only its strongest teams for competitions in Europe, the press immediately ridiculed the idea that international sport competition should be linked with "abstract considerations" of "British prowess." "The view of the Whitehall mandarins," one article scathingly remarked, "seems to be that unless our footballers were fairly certain of winning, British prestige would receive an irreparable blow, the peace of Europe would be endangered, and Sir Austen Chamberlain would have to do whatever Herr Stresemann told him."⁷⁸

The U.S. government took a similarly hands-off approach toward international sport, as it did toward cultural relations in general, providing no subsidies for and evincing little interest until the Cold War made everything from ballet to space exploration a matter of urgent state importance in the struggle against communism.⁷⁹ Politicians, military leaders, and sports officials nonetheless commonly cited the defense of national honor as a central justification for international competition. In the words of one top sports official, every U.S. Olympic athlete should recognize that "he will compete not for himself alone, but for all of his fellow countrymen . . . If American life produces better men and women,

we should be able to prove it by comparative performances in the Olympic Games.”⁸⁰

As athletes came to be viewed as “ambassadors” for their respective countries, sport was increasingly subject to the vicissitudes of international relations. Although international sport organizations in principle adamantly insisted on the separation of sport and politics, in practice sport was inherently politicized and politics often forcefully intruded on sport relations. One striking example of this phenomenon was the ostracism of Germany by the victors’ sport associations after World War I. The French, the British, and the Belgians refrained from sport competitions against German teams until political relations between the Allies and Germany were normalized in the mid-1920s. Representatives of the Entente powers also sought to remove German members from international sport federations, in many cases successfully. When the international soccer federation refused to institute an official ban on meetings with soccer clubs in Germany, the British withdrew from the organization. With the tacit agreement of the IOC, the organizers of the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp excluded the defeated Central Powers from the list of invitees. Austria and Hungary were allowed to participate in the 1924 Games in Paris, but Germany was barred until 1928.⁸¹

Who was right, Coubertin or Maurras? The debate has continued to rage to the present day. One side argues that global sport contests inflame nationalist passions and incite international hostility. As George Orwell put it, sport is just “war without the shooting.” The other side argues with equal conviction that international contests, by bringing people of different races and nationalities face-to-face in friendly competition, leads both competitors and fans to a deeper understanding of other groups, an understanding that naturally serves to promote peace.

The experience of the twentieth century has in many respects borne out Maurras’s predictions. The sport system can be, and often has been, a vessel of nationalist hostility, and on at least one occasion an international sport event has been a contributing factor in triggering war.⁸² Yet sports competitions also subsume nationalism in an internationalist structure and can foment not only hostility but also cooperation—sometimes both at the same time. Coubertin was partly correct, too.⁸³

The story of the Olympic Games and other international contests is not simply one of nationalist urges masquerading in humanitarian guise.

What Maurras failed to see is that Olympic claims to promote mutual understanding and respect among different national groups have a legitimate foundation: a genuinely internationalist element underpins the practice of international sport. Simply to play the same game on the same field according to the same rules is to acknowledge an essential equality, a common humanity, among competitors. The competitive spirit of modern sport thrusts it in a universalist direction. (Significantly, this universalism has been coded as “male,” and the world of sport in the twentieth century was a masculine domain into which women were permitted only partially and often reluctantly.) Sport’s competitive, hierarchical dynamic means that the best competitor in one region is naturally driven to test his skills against ever-widening circles of competitors. Physical contests were once unique expressions of a local community, ipso facto restricted to members of that community, with outcomes of purely local significance. Now, physical contests are global and their results become part of the permanent record of human achievement. Athletes compete not just against their immediate competitors, but also against all of humanity—past, present, and future. Measurement, quantification, and the pursuit of records inexorably further the view that an athlete, though he or she may act in one sense as a representative of his or her nation, is also fundamentally part of a universal human endeavor.

Unlike sport, gymnastics staked its appeal on a purely national level. German gymnastics, for example, zealously protected and celebrated its uniquely German character, disdaining any internationalism beyond pan-Germanism. Global *Turnen* was an oxymoron. Especially in Europe, gymnastics remained a central, often preeminent element of physical culture through the interwar years. By the end of the 1920s, modern sport had established itself as a major form of popular culture alongside gymnastics in many parts of Europe, and was a mass phenomenon in Japan and in many parts of Latin America. Yet gymnastics systems and traditional games and contests continued to thrive, and the outcome—that sport would become the dominant form of physical recreation throughout the world—was not predetermined. The onset of a worldwide Depression and the turn toward isolationism and autarky in many countries might suggest that modern sport’s internationalizing momentum would have been halted in the 1930s. Instead, it accelerated.