The Genesis of Sport

The Ukrainian word for sport is *spórt*. If you wish to read an account of yesterday's soccer match in an Athenian newspaper, you will look for the pages headed *Spór*. The magnificent building in Rome, designed by Pier Luigi Nervi and Marcello Piacentini, in which Cassius Clay won the gold medal for boxing in the light-heavyweight division at the Olympic Games in 1960 is called the Palazzo dello Sport. There is a Gaelic word *spòrs*, a Turkish word *spor*, a Rumanian word *spórt* and a Japanese word *supōtsu*. The speakers of all these languages, along with those of a host of others, have borrowed the English word *sport* because their native vocabularies did not provide them with a term that conveyed precisely what the English word conveys. This is somewhat surprising. For all these peoples—indeed, apparently, all peoples—traditionally engage in activities of a sort that can conveniently be designated by the word *sport*. Did the ancient Greeks, then, not have a general term to describe such activities as wrestling and throwing the discus? Is there no native Gaelic word that can be used to refer to field hockey and similar games? Was it really necessary for the devotees of sumo to import a Western word? The very ubiquity of the word in the languages of the world gives the answer to these questions: the English word *sport* refers to something for which many languages simply do not have a word. In fact, when we look at the history of the word in English, we

find that even English managed to exist for a good long time without a word to refer to what the Dutch call *sport.*[1]

The English word *sport* is not attested before the fifteenth century. It comes from the archaic English word *disport,* which comes, in turn, from the Old French *desport.* The French word, which means "diversion, recreation, pastime, amusement," is formed from the Latin prefix *de(s)-,* meaning "down" or "away from," and the Latin verbal root *port-,* meaning "to carry." Thus the basic reference of the English and French words is to that which draws the attention down from the ordinary, the mundane, the "serious." So, for example, in Chaucer's *The Parlement of Foules,* we read:

> And in a privee corner, in disporte,
> Fond I Venus and her porter Richesse,

and, in The Wife of Bath's Prologue:

> He hadde a book that gladly nyght and day
> For his disport he wolde rede alway.

Three hundred years later Milton uses the word similarly when he writes, in *Paradise Lost,* of Adam and Eve's fatal dalliance:

> There they thir fill of Love and Love's disport
> Took largely.

And the word *sport* is used with no apparent difference in meaning, for example, in the King James translation of Proverbs 10.23, "It is as sport to a fool to do mischief," and of Judges 16.25, "And it came to pass, when their hearts were merry, that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison house; and he made them sport; and they set him between the pillars." Thus the word *sport* is, from the time of its earliest appearance, a word of very general application; it can be used to refer to hunting and fishing (Izaak Walton speaks of "this day's sport"), athletic activities, wanton merry-making, and even erotic foreplay, by-play and interplay.

But it is only in relatively recent times, say in the past two hundred years, that *sport* has been limited to the use to which we now put it.

1. See further N. Grell, *Zur Geschichte des Begriffs "Sport" in England und Deutschland,* diss. (Vienna, 1943); J. Sofer, "Kurze Bemerkungen zur Vorgeschichte des Wortes 'Sport,'" *Leibesübungen—Leibeserziehung* 14 (1960) 13–14; E. Mehl, "'Sport' kommt nicht von dis-portare, sondern von de-portare," *Die Leibeserziehung* 15 (1966) 232–33. I am grateful to the University of California Press's anonymous referee for supplying me with copies of the articles by Sofer and Mehl.

Even today we are still likely, it is true, to refer gleefully to the baiting of a particularly gullible colleague as "great sport." And the word occasionally retains some of its earlier associations when we hear of someone doing something "in sport" or when we speak of ourselves as a "sport of circumstances." But these are fossils. It is no longer common, as it once was, to speak of an amorous encounter as "sport." We no longer use *sport,* as Shakespeare did, to refer to theatrical performances. Nowadays we speak of a "play on words" not, as formerly, a "sport of words." We reserve *sport* to distinguish hunting, skiing and football from such diversions as backgammon, gin rummy and crossword puzzles, all of which would at one time have fallen under the rubric "sport." It is this "modern" use of the word—which I have steadfastly resisted defining—that has so seduced the speakers of countless languages throughout the world that they have made the English word, along with its field of reference, their own. One might readily infer from this state of affairs that whatever it is that we now refer to by the name "sport" did not exist anywhere before about the beginning of the eighteenth century and, further, when it did first put in its appearance, it did so among English-speaking people. This would account for the absence of any equivalent to the modern term *sport* in any language, including English, before the eighteenth century. (I can assert on the basis of intimate acquaintance that there is no equivalent in ancient Greek, despite the acknowledged importance of the Greeks in the history of sport, or in Latin.) This would also account for the wide dissemination of the English word and its acceptance into the vocabulary of other languages.

And in fact it is commonly held today that what we think of as sport is precisely an English development of the time of the so-called Industrial Revolution. This view is argued by, among others, Allen Guttmann and Richard Mandell, the authors of two of the most stimulating recent books in English on the history of sport. In *From Ritual to Record,* the former states:

> Modern sport, a ubiquitous and unique form of nonutilitarian physical contests, took shape over a period of approximately 150 years, from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. Speaking historically, we can be reasonably precise about place as well as time. Modern sports were born in England and spread from their birthplace to the United States, to Western Europe, and to the world beyond.[2]

2. Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record* 57.

Mandell, in his recent book *Sport: A Cultural History,* writes to similar effect:

> During this period [the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] Englishmen made decisive and influential innovations in social and economic organization and in politics as well. Not uncoincidentally, many Englishmen also began to examine, reject, and refine forms of play or recreation which had been common in comparable social classes all over Europe. In England there evolved some new and broadly based attitudes toward games and competitions and athletes and their performances. These new notions favoring equal (sporting) opportunity, fair play, codified rules, training, transregional leagues, and referees had striking analogues in English social and economic life, which were being transformed. Few historians have noticed that modern sport has characteristics that are distinctive and that modern sport has its origins in precisely those social circumstances that fostered rationalized industrial production. For a while, industrial production and modern sport were uniquely regnant in England and both, subsequently, have spread over much of the world.[3]

It would appear, then, that two different approaches, the historical approach of Guttmann and Mandell and the linguistic approach, combine to produce the same conclusion, and that these different perspectives serve to confirm the validity of that conclusion, namely that modern sport is a wholly novel phenomenon and that it was a product of England at the time of the Industrial Revolution.

Now these scholars, along with a number of other serious historians of sport, have done a great service by focusing attention on the special characteristics of modern sport. But a number of questions still remain. It is not my intention to subject the work of Guttmann, Mandell and others to an extended and rigorous critique. If the thesis to be propounded below, namely that there is no essential difference between modern sport and the sport of other and earlier societies, can be shown to be correct, then such a critique would seem to be unnecessary. After all, once I have constructed a new and wholly satisfactory stable, there will be no need for me to clean out that of Augeas as well. If, on the other hand, my own argument proves to be nothing other than a crock of self-evident nonsense, I would prefer that this essay be consigned to the waves of oblivion rather than be recalled as an eccentric curiosity that happened to contain a meticulous examination of the work of oth-

3. Mandell, *Sport* xv.

ers. Nevertheless, a word must be said about the propriety in general of making statements of the sort, "We (in this time, in this country, in this movement) are unique." The value of studying the ideas, the activities and the beliefs of people who do not belong to our time, our society or our institutions is that it serves to combat provinciality. There is a natural tendency on the part of people to believe that what they do is, in the first place, different from and, in the second place, better than what is done by others. For example, when we look at a society (which we tend to stigmatize as "primitive") that adheres to the practice of painting, tattooing or otherwise decorating the bodies of its members, we tend to react with a feeling of superiority on the grounds that we have transcended such savage customs. When it is pointed out that members of our own society are similarly given to the habit of applying cosmetics to eyes, lips and cheeks (not to mention such uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous innovations as plastic surgery, electrolysis and "tanning salons"), the reaction is typically, "Oh, but that is different." We wish to believe that what we do is done for aesthetic reasons, and we recoil in horror at the suggestion that a woman having her ears pierced in Scarsdale is engaged in precisely the same activity as her counterpart in Tanzania. What lies behind our reaction is the unspoken assumption that the benighted denizens of other times and other places have nothing better to do with their time than to make themselves uglier, while we have progressed to such a level of civility that we have devised methods of improving on nature itself. Even when we criticize our own society, we rarely go beyond such sentiments as, "We are behaving no better than barbarians," or, "This piece of legislation looks as though it belonged in the Middle Ages," thus confirming by implication what we appeared to deny, namely, that "we" are, on the whole, superior to "them." But if it is the case that the human inhabitants of six continents independently developed the custom of applying colorful substances to the face, there ought to be a strong presumption that we are dealing in each instance with the same phenomenon, and it is a matter of some interest to inquire into the causes of the phenomenon. The last thing we want to do is to ask the woman from Scarsdale why she wears lipstick or has her ears pierced. She can only give us an answer in terms of the prejudices and presuppositions of her own society, and it is precisely those prejudices and presuppositions that stand in the way of our understanding what appears to be a widespread phenomenon.

And so when we examine the phenomenon of sport, if it is the case that the human inhabitants of six continents independently developed the practice of engaging in wrestling contests, there ought to be a

strong presumption that we are dealing in each instance with the same phenomenon, and it will be my concern to inquire into the causes of the phenomenon. The last thing I shall do is to ask the next person I see engaging in wrestling why he is doing what he is doing. For he will not be able to tell me what I want to know. He may tell me, for instance, that he wrestles because he enjoys it. But this is (presumably) the same answer he would have given had I asked him why he engages in sexual activity, and we are well aware that there are specific biological and physiological considerations that render "enjoyment" only a very partial explanation. Or he may tell me that he wrestles because the university that he attends will not charge him for his education if he does so. But this is to answer my question solely in terms of the values of the society of which our wrestler is a member. For I shall then be curious to find out why this particular society values education so highly that it charges dearly for it and yet exempts some students from the obligation to pay on the basis of criteria that appear to have nothing to do with the goals of education. And in any case, no matter how much I am able to discover about the peculiarities of this strange society, my knowledge will make me no better able to understand why this young man engages in the same activity engaged in by young men in societies that know nothing of universities and athletic scholarships. Finally, he may tell me that he wrestles because he wishes to keep physically fit, or because he cherishes the social atmosphere of the gymnasium, or because he is convinced that his girlfriend will be terribly impressed with him. But all of these can only be partial explanations. Human behavior is inordinately complex, and it is foolish to imagine that any instance of behavior above the level of the reflex can be accounted for simply as the result of a single cause. I cannot give a fully reasoned account of why I chose to wear a blue rather than a grey tie today, much less why I chose to marry Karen rather than Brigitte. Of course it is reasonable to expect that one person will be guided by a variety of causes, that he will join a tennis club for reasons of health *and* because he enjoys the sport *and* in hopes of advancing his career within the corporation for which he works. But, again, even if it were possible to account exhaustively for the motivation of an individual, we would learn only about that individual and, perhaps, about others of his nationality, age or social class. What we are concerned with is rather sport in general, and to this inquiry the question of individual motivation is of doubtful relevance. We may admire the sentiments (although not, perhaps, their manner of expression) of Howard Slusher, whose approach is existential and phenomenological:

> A basic dilemma is one of *causality*. Does man run because of *cause* or does he just run? Does he say first, I need to run? I need fitness? I need exercise? I need release of tension? I need to involve myself with nature? I need a social relationship? It is here I must agree with Sartre. Man runs! Cause might or might not be present. The importance has been traditionally rested on *motivation*. Perhaps it is now time to become *aware* of the human element in sport. Motivation is important. But it is time we asked what *is* happening when man runs.[4]

What the author of these breathless sentences fails to consider is that while *individual* motivation may be a matter of little concern, we cannot very well dispense entirely with considerations of cause if we want to inquire into the nature of sport in general. It may well be that an individual participates in a sport for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the essence of sport. (At this point I ought to give an example of what I mean, but any example would have the effect of pre-judging what is in fact the essence of sport.) But sport is so nearly a universal component of human existence that it is reasonable to seek after its cause or causes.

Why does man engage in sport? The answer to this question, that is to say, a theory of sport, must satisfy three requirements to be successful and convincing. In the first place, it must seek to explain the origin of sport. It is not sufficient to inquire into the origin of basketball. What is necessary if we are to understand sport is to discover why humans have always engaged in activities involving running, throwing, rules and teams. Nor is it legitimate, as we have seen, to assert that somehow basketball is essentially different from other activities that others have engaged in that involve running, throwing, rules and teams. For to do this is to exhibit provincialism and to make value judgments of a sort that is inappropriate in a scholarly inquiry. For example, one of the seven characteristics that Guttmann singles out as distinguishing modern sport from sport as practiced in earlier societies is "secularism." Nor is Guttmann alone, for it is widely believed that the secularization of sport is an indication that modern sport is fundamentally different from other manifestations of sport. But to assert this is to make some rather bold and unwarranted assumptions. In the first place, it is to assume that the connection between sport and religion in other and earlier so-

4. H. Slusher, *Man, Sport and Existence: A Critical Analysis* (Philadelphia, 1967) 54. All emphasis is, characteristically, Mr. Slusher's.

cieties is fundamental. Indeed, Guttmann makes this assumption, as is made clear when he says:

> For the Jicarilla Apache running between the circles of the sun and the moon or the Athenian youth racing in the stadium built above the sacred way at Delphi, the contest was in itself a religious act. For most contemporary athletes, even for those who ask for divine assistance in the game, the contest is a secular event.[5]

This is precisely analogous to the assertion that, while the members of such-and-such a tribe mutilate their faces because such behavior is an essential part of their rites of initiation, women in our society pierce their ears to make themselves more attractive. In the second place, to assert that secularization marks a fundamental change in modern sport is to assume that earlier there was *always* a connection between religion and sport. But we have no way of knowing the relative ages of sport and religion in human history. It is possible, for example, that sport was in existence long before man developed religious practices, in which case it may be that the connection between sport and religion during some stage of human development is only a secondary (and apparently temporary) phenomenon. Perhaps it is the Apache and the ancient Greek who are unique, not we.

The second requirement that a successful theory of sport must satisfy is that it must be able to account for the persistence of a particular sport within a particular society through various stages of the society's development. For it is clear that sport is remarkably conservative, and many of the sports that we engage in now were also practiced by our very distant ancestors. Nor is it sufficient merely to acknowledge the conservatism of sport. If we are to understand the essence of sport, we must also be able to account for its conservatism. It is perfectly reasonable to account for the origin of the javelin throw in terms of practicing and developing skills necessary for success in hunting and warfare in societies in which hunting and warfare are carried out by means of the manual projection of pointed shafts. But we need also to be able to account for the existence of international competitions in javelin throwing in societies that have relegated hunting itself to the status of a sport and that rely for the killing of their human foe upon the percussive qualities of various chemical and sub-atomic substances. Why should a man who earns his livelihood by spending his days depressing plastic

5. Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record* 25.

keys at a computer terminal train his body to be able to throw a javelin farther than it was thrown by those whose very lives depended upon their skill with this weapon?

The first two requirements of a theory of sport, that it explain the origin of sport and that it account for the persistence of specific sports, are of a historical nature and involve a diachronic perspective. The third requirement is of a synchronic nature and demands the skills, not of a historian, but of a philosopher and a lexicographer. It is that a theory of sport must account for the apparent diversity of the activities subsumed under the category "sport." In other words, what is the common element that allows us to apply the one word to such activities as golf, football, weightlifting and mountain climbing? This is a particularly difficult kind of question to answer, because it is so susceptible to the introduction of the vocabulary of valuation. Any attempt at a definition involves some degree of circularity: one cannot define a class until one knows which items belong in the class and which do not, but at the same time one cannot tell whether an item belongs in the class until one knows the characteristics of the class. The difficulties involved in devising a definition are frequently mitigated by the liberal application of personal prejudice. If one is attempting a definition of sport and is oneself a sportsman—as so many who have written about sport proclaim themselves to be—one tends to eliminate from consideration activites (which "others," perhaps, may regard as sport) that are somehow distasteful, inelegant or otherwise unworthy of inclusion in the company of such noble activities as those one practices oneself. For example, H. A. Harris declines to treat gladiatorial combats, the second most popular sport of ancient Rome, in his book *Sport in Greece and Rome.* That this represents a value judgment on the part of the author rather than an oversight is clear from an offhand comment that he makes when he says that the Romans adopted from the Etruscans "gladiatorial and wild beast shows—if these can be called sport."[6] A similar prejudice is exhibited by the other great English historian of ancient sport, E. Norman Gardiner, who describes the evil results of professionalism in ancient Greek sport in terms of what Gardiner perceived to be a parallel phenomenon in his own day:

> The evil effects of professionalism are worst in those fighting events, boxing, wrestling and the pankration, where the feeling of aidōs or honour is most essential. Here again the history of

6. Harris, *Sport* 50.

> modern sport tells the same tale. Wrestling which was once a national sport in England has been killed by professionalism. Amateur boxing is of modern date and owes its existence to the encouragement it receives from the Army and Navy, the Universities, and the Public Schools, but it is overshadowed by professional boxing, and the amateur is continually tempted to turn professional by the enormous sums that he can earn as a public entertainer. . . . When a boxer will not fight unless he is guaranteed a huge purse whether he wins or loses he forfeits all claim to be called a sportsman.[7]

Notice how blatantly Gardiner speaks of Greek sport in terms of the values of his own day, notwithstanding the specious and inappropriate introduction of a genuine ancient Greek word (*aidōs*). And notice the ringing conclusion to the paragraph, which ends on the emotional value-word *sportsman*.

The attitude of Gardiner and Harris is characteristic of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century British view of sport. We ought therefore to be very wary of defining sport in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British terms, and in particular of viewing "sport" as a characteristically modern British development. For when we do this we run the risk of assuming that the features that distinguish sport as we know it from other claimants to the name are somehow the essential features. When we are confronted with a society that engages in sports that have characteristics very different from those of the sports with which we are most familiar, we react by remarking the difference and, sometimes, by questioning whether the other society's sports really deserve the name. This second reaction is exemplified by, among others, Harris' reluctance to vouchsafe the appellation *sport* to so brutal a spectacle as gladiatorial combats; the first is implicit in the description of the Dodo's answer to Alice's question, "What *is* a Caucus-race?"

> First it marked out a race-course, in a sort of circle, ("the exact shape doesn't matter," it said) and then all the party were placed along the course, here and there. There was no "One, two, three, and away!" but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so, and were quite dry again, the Dodo suddenly called out, "The race is over!" and they all crowded round it, panting, and asking, "But who has won?"

7. Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* 105.