

Victorian and Edwardian Sporting Values

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Mens sana in corpore sano

Much has been written about the motto of *mens sana in corpore sano* - a sound mind in a healthy body - by which the majority of Victorian public schools expected their pupils to live, and for this reason the social and political conditions which led to its adoption will not be analysed in any great detail here. It is clear that the move towards health and moral purity came about for a combination of reasons. First of all, the nineteenth century saw developments in the field of medicine and there was a subsequent increased awareness of the need for fresh air and exercise. Secondly, there was a return to the high moral standards of the Puritan era which coincided with the accession of Victoria to the throne: the 'sound mind' of the motto referred to this, rather than to academic achievement. Thirdly, and less widely acknowledged, there was a very real awareness of the dangers of war from a multitude of sources: the French had always been unstable, the Germans were a growing threat, the Russians were intimidating numerically, and the Americans were growing in strength all the time. All of this meant that Britain, if she was to keep her place at the head of the world's greatest empire, needed to produce leaders, and, so the perceived wisdom of the time would have it, what better training ground for this than the football field?

There were hiccoughs in the development of sound morals of course. It was paradoxical that the Christian ethic could not have survived without the support of the public schools, yet it was the seclusion of life at those very schools which could lead a boy to stray from the path. It was understood that a boy's mind might be overtaken, if care were not taken, by one or both of the twin temptations that the cloistered life of the public school could give rise to - masturbation and homosexuality, the two great unmentionables of the Victorian age. Contemporary comments are revealing. Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and a devotee of the fair-play and purity ethic, wrote that the boys' souls could be 'hopelessly besmirched and befouled by this deadly habit,' whereas Montagu Butler, headmaster of Harrow, at one time insisted that the boys' pockets be sewn up! [In Holt, 1989: 90].

The answer, it seems, lay on the games field. The thinking was that, if a boy committed his energies and spirit to helping his school against its sporting rivals, the temptation for physical 'self-abuse' would be diminished. This was rather entertainingly put into words by the headmaster of Clifton school who addressed the parents of one of his schoolboys with the line, 'You may think games occupy a disproportionate amount of the boy's mind. You may be thankful that this is so - what do you think French boys talk about', [in Holt, *ibid*: 92]. One can only wonder if this sobering warning was enough to convince the parent that the school was right to insist on developing their son's sporting prowess. Notions of muscular Christianity were, in fact, balanced by a confused form of Darwinism. The idea was that the beast in man had to be tamed through cultivating the animal. It was health which was the great preoccupation, but the Christian belief was that the body developed along with the spirit. Exercise was character-forming, promoting manliness, not sexuality, but the path to manhood was not an easy one. The following extracts from Holt [*ibid*].

89/90] put the difficulties into perspective.

Hence the public school had to cope with the 'problem' of puberty and of what was later called 'adolescence' on behalf of the parents. In this connection the most commonly-used adjective in the public schoolmaster's vocabulary was 'manly'. Sport played a central role in the achievement of the kind of proper manliness that parents and teachers desired. Manliness was emphatically not to be confused with sexuality; manliness was to be an antidote to the precocious development of adult male sexuality by providing a new moral and physical definition of what masculinity was....

He goes on to discuss the new definitions of the roles of men and women together, examining the division of responsibility which characterised the Victorian nuclear family, and then turns to the adult version of masculinity

... a greater degree of self-control was expected from Victorian men than from their forebears; although their spartan upbringing did not exclude the notion of 'manly tears' and men might still take the arm of a friend in the street, in general the control of temper, desire, and affection was recommended. At precisely the moment when the new norms of maleness were coming into force, the incarnation of the opposite of 'manliness' was defined in the form of homosexuality, which for the first time was generally designated a crime in 1885.

Manliness and sport went hand in hand, whereas aesthetics and homosexuality were the antithesis of masculinity. It is perhaps significant that the man who gave his name to the newly-regulated code of rules for the sport of boxing, the Marquis of Queensberry, was also the man who brought about the prosecution of the aesthete Oscar Wilde for homosexuality.

Play up and Play the game

These ideas of masculine behaviour were disseminated through the public schools which had sprung up along with middle-class wealth. Within these schools, the children of new money played alongside the children of the aristocracy in a tentative and partial breaking down of social barriers: they all had to follow the rules of the school and its internal hierarchy, irrespective of title and rank outside the school. The idea was to 'play up and play the game' - play your best but play by the rules. This notion of sticking to the rules became deeply ingrained in middle-class culture, so much so that it could have tragic consequences. This is illustrated as early as 1825 by the death of Lord Shaftesbury's son in a fistfight at Eton when he was only 13. Significantly, the Earl refused to take any legal action against either the school or his son's opponent because the fight had been conducted according to the rules of the day governing fistfights. The day being the era of the pugilists, the fight went on until one combatant could take no more, and the liberal use of brandy to revive the protagonists between rounds is thought to have contributed to the unfortunate lad's death.

The young man had shown obvious courage in fighting an older and bigger boy over a matter of honour; courage - or 'pluck' - was one of the manly virtues of the age. Pluck and fair-play in combination were the characteristics of the gentleman both on the sports ground and, indeed, in life itself. Winning was not the goal; competing with honour and upholding team spirit most definitely was. Team sports encouraged adherence to established rules, preparing boys for life as responsible members of society. Modern commentators, however, are sometimes scathing in their attacks on the role of the schools in shaping society. Hargreaves [43 ff] is of the opinion that the fact that these boys were to become society's leaders led to a 'leadership cult', characterised by arrogance and narrow-mindedness. Certainly, there was an overwhelming tendency to see life, and even war, as a game. This delusion lasted until the end of the Edwardian era, as this extract

from the journal *Horse and Hound* in March 1914 illustrates [in Lowerson, 1995:292].

The individual superiority of the Briton over the Hun is due to our natural love for sports, and of all sports, surely hunting is the finest for teaching self-confidence, quick action and cool-headedness.

The Gentleman Amateur

However misguided some of their notions may have been, the middle-class sportsmen of late Victorian and early Edwardian England seem admirably romantic in their idealism, viewed from today's world of commercialised, win-at-all-costs sport, where kick-off times and the rules of a game are dictated by the television companies, and where footballers are congratulated by teammates for their skill in winning a penalty, even if this involves the employment of theatrical dives and rolls. The Corinthians, the greatest amateur football team of all time, was a team made up of former public schoolboys who had learned to love the game at school and who wished to carry on playing whilst pursuing their careers in London. They found, to their chagrin, that they were increasingly obliged to play against professional opposition because so many of their amateur colleagues had defected to rugby in order to avoid contamination from competing against those who played for money. As money became a factor in the game, winning became more important, and the rules were changed to increase the excitement of the game. The introduction of the penalty-kick was greeted with horror by the Corinthians, for they held that no gentleman would ever deliberately commit a foul. This led them to refuse to attempt to score from or save a penalty. Sadly, their opponents had no such qualms, and the decline of the amateur teams had begun.

The Corinthians also refused to enter any competition for which a cup was awarded, for this contravened the spirit of participation for its own sake. Winning was not the goal, merely a satisfying outcome of having given of one's best. Whilst this might seem quaint and somewhat idealistic, it was not an isolated case. There was another unwritten rule that one did not argue with the referee [indeed, there were many purists who considered that even having a referee should have been unnecessary] and a hockey player who did so was advised in print that the only honourable course open to him was resignation from his club [in the magazine *Truth*, February, 1907, recorded in Lowerson, 1995: 86].

The 'Weaker' Sex

One of the drawbacks of the education system that produced these stiff-upper-lipped sporting heroes was that it only really catered adequately for boys. There were a few public schools for girls, such as the famous Roedean, but the education of the female offspring was generally conducted in the home. This was mirrored in adult life, where men had the masculine atmosphere of the gentlemen's club to escape to whilst women had only the drawing room. Victorian attitudes to women competing in sports were constrained by notions of propriety, and dress restrictions made participation at a strenuous level all but impossible. In their teens, girls could dress in a manner which permitted exercise, and Lottie Dod famously won the Wimbledon tennis title as a schoolgirl competing against corseted adults in full-length skirts. There was also something of a fear that women taking up 'masculine' sports would end up masculine themselves, even though this clashed with the eugenic Darwinism that was popular at the time.

Yet these girls were still far better off than their working-class counterparts, who had no exercise at all. Girls and young women from middle-class family backgrounds took up some activities with enthusiasm, notably cycling. There was considerable resentment among the working classes, however, at the image of these privileged, sporty women, and Holt [1989: 118] records an instance of female cyclists being pelted with stones as they were passing through an impoverished part of London. Significantly, taking part in sports, or merely spectating, in exclusively middle-class surroundings such as the tennis club, Henley regatta, or, as mentioned earlier, the Eton versus

Harrow cricket match, allowed a single woman to find a suitable mate: opportunities to mix with groups of young men were few and far between and were taken up whole-heartedly.

Glorious Failure and Bold-Spirited Death

One of the principles of the middle-class sportsman was that there was no shame in defeat as long as one had done one's best and played the game honourably. This was just as well, for, as the Edwardian era drew to a close, the British ability to take defeat gracefully was severely put to the test. Defeat at the hands of colonial teams at rugby, above all the New Zealanders and South Africans, was bad enough, but at least the men who made up these teams were products of the same schooling and social backgrounds as the British. However, it was increasingly difficult to accept that Britain's finest were now coming second best in other tests of manliness and to representatives of 'weaker' nations.

This is perhaps best illustrated by Scott's failure to win the race to the South Pole, an adventure which captivated the Western press in the first few years of the century. The deaths of Scott and his team have been well documented, and among the well-publicised quotes from his diary is the moving, 'Englishmen can still die with a bold spirit, fighting it out to the end'. He and his team actually died through a foolhardy refusal to use skis, and Amundsen's victory was achieved in a style which was both athletic and honourable, despite mutterings in the British press that the use of dogs had provided him with an unfair advantage. Newspapers in Britain glorified Scott's death [and defeat] and paid attention to his heroism, his spirit and his 'pluck'. He had shown the world that the British would give their best and die in the attempt if necessary, but they would die with dignity and honour! The British public could not have known that death with very little dignity was to come within the next decade to three quarters of a million of their sons and husbands. It may be considered very British [but not exclusively so] to have a 'loser' as a national hero, and Scott of the Antarctic is one of those story-book figures who has enchanted young children for the best part of a century. His name is not well known outside of Britain, at least not in comparison to Amundsen's, but, to the British, he has always been a hero.

Even today, the nation rallies round those who have been 'cheated' out of success, celebrating as heroes those who would have won but for what some like to perceive as 'the underhand tactics of beastly foreigners'. Such was the case in 1995, when Michael Schumacher beat Damon Hill in the race for the Formula 1 driver's world championship. To the rest of the world, Schumacher, although not necessarily an engaging personality, was clearly the best driver, and won deservedly. Many in Britain were whipped into an anti-Hun frenzy by the excesses of the tabloid press [and the television commentary] after tactics of questionable ethics but devastating effectiveness by the German had ensured that Hill was forced out of the last race. Hill was voted *BBC Sports Personality of the Year* by the television viewing public. For a certain, more cynical section of that public, Britain's current role as a second-rate sporting nation was exemplified in that award. Since then, Hill has justified the public's faith in him by duly ensuring that the fastest car won the world championship for 1996; it remains to be seen whether he will be considered by future generations as a sporting hero.

'Playing the game' or winning?

Although the ideal of 'let's play and to hell with the result' was considered fundamental to sport in Britain, the fact is that the nation had got used to winning and did not always take defeat well. This was noticeable in their attitude to the professional tactics adopted in American sport in the first three decades of this century. Eventually, British pride began to centre on having been the first, not on being the best. This still happens today - the slogan for *Euro '96* [the European Football Championship] was 'football comes home'. To be fair, the England team acquitted themselves quite well in the tournament, albeit on home soil, and the Scots qualified for the final stages, but the game 'invented' in a London pub in 1863 has long since left British teams behind. Until *Euro*

96, England had for several years been unable to claim a place in FIFA's list of top twenty footballing nations.

The Americans [and others, such as the Germans] took their sport seriously, openly acknowledging the importance of winning. Many British administrators and participants, notably in athletics and rowing, considered that excessive training and the use of coaches was tantamount to cheating. Harold Abrahams, who won the 100 metres gold for Britain at the 1924 Olympics in Paris, famously had to leave his coach, Sam Mussabini, outside the stadium while he raced. Twelve years earlier, *Granta* magazine, a Cambridge University publication, had launched a vitriolic attack on the American Olympic squad for their blatantly unfair employment of coaches. Furthermore [and he appears to be serious] the writer goes on to criticise their insistence on training before any race of great importance! [In Crump, 52.] By the time the 1912 Olympics came round, we were hopelessly far behind the Americans in the medals table, but there was no longer any real belief in glorious defeat, and the press came out strongly against the team and administration.

The amateur administrator could not hope to compete with high-quality, full-time professionals from overseas, although it was to take another three-quarters of a century for the Amateur Athletics Board to realise this. They still have not done so at the MCC, and English cricket is in a state of utter turmoil, with the press united in their criticism but divided in terms of remedies. One of the weaknesses of British sporting bodies is that it has always taken them so long to realise and accept that they have been overtaken by other countries, that their sport is ailing and that they need to do find a cure for the disease.

The Great Game of War

By the time of the 1912 Olympics, criticism of our complacency in sporting matters and in the erosion of manly virtues had been going on for some time. Lowerson [1995: 278-80] records an atmosphere of gloom about the weak and effeminate state of the nation around the turn of the century, a feeling exacerbated by the catastrophes of incompetence and poor decision-making of the Anglo-Boer war. It was evident that the common soldier, the working-class enlisted man, was physically unfit for the rigours of war, and was out-fought and out-thought by his Boer counterpart, who had been hardened by his rugged existence in Southern Africa. Whereas the officer elite could all ride and shoot well, many of them turned out to have no tactical awareness, and the leadership skills learned on the rugby field were woefully inappropriate for the battlefield.

Thus there was something of a sense of panic during the first decade of the twentieth century, when the German menace was gaining strength. The feeling, quite rightly, was that the nation was unprepared for war against such a powerful enemy. Novels such as Erskine Childers' *Riddle of The Sands* brought home the notion of peril across the water to the public at large, and more and more of the nation's policy makers began to sense that 'the playing fields of Eton', which had won them the battle of Waterloo, were no longer an adequate training ground for modern war-mongering. Yet there were still some for whom sporting and military honour went hand in hand, and much of our officer elite comprised cavalry officers preparing to face tanks. Holt [1989: 276] records that schoolboys at Marlborough saw the war as 'a glorified football match'. It took four years and 723,000 British dead to show them that this was no game.