

The Idea of Sport in Western Culture from Antiquity to the Contemporary Era

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“...to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them.”

W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Dedicated to Professor Antonio Cardini

Table of contents

	<i>Introduction</i>	<i>vii</i>
	<i>Part I: Sport in Antiquity</i>	<i>1</i>
Chapter 1	Ancient Greece	3
Chapter 2	Ancient Rome	23
Chapter 3	The Middle Ages	31
	<i>Part II: Sport in the Modern Era</i>	<i>43</i>
Chapter 4	The Cultural Context	45
Chapter 5	The United Kingdom	53
Chapter 6	France	77
Chapter 7	Germany	93
Chapter 8	The United States	107
Chapter 9	Russia/The USSR	115
Chapter 10	Italy	123
	<i>Conclusions</i>	<i>149</i>
	<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>155</i>
	<i>Index</i>	<i>165</i>

Introduction

In recent decades, sport has begun to break into the academic sphere as an object of study, overcoming a number of deeply-rooted misgivings and obstacles.¹ In Italy, in the wake of a phenomenon already initiated elsewhere, there have been important and original research efforts springing from the realm of sport in the past few years that have attempted to offer a contribution to the study of Italian history.² But what is still lacking in Italy is a

¹ S. Battente, *L'idea di sport nel mondo antico e contemporaneo*, Roma, Aracne, 2019; G. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, Torino, Einaudi, 1946; R. Caillois, *Le jeu et les hommes*, Milano, Bompiani, 1981; A. Guttmann, *From ritual to record*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1978; R. Mandell, *Sport. A cultural history*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984; D. Sansone, *Greek athletics and genesis of sport*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988; M. Golden, *Sport and society in the ancient Greece*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998; H. A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and in Rome*, London, TH, 1972; K. Wilhelm Weeber, *Olimpia e i suoi sponsor*, Milano, Garzanti, 1993; E. Dunning - N. Elias, *Quest for excitement. Sport and leisure in the civilizing process*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986; H. Eichberg, *Der weg des sports in die industrielle zivilisation*, Baden Baden, University Press, 1974; R. Holt, *Sport and the British. A modern history*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990; J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981; E. Weber, *Gymnastic and sport in fin de siecle France*, in "American historical review", vol. 76, 1971; Id., *Peasants into Frenchmen. The modernization of rural France*, Stanford, SUP, 1976; G. Vigarelo, *Il Tour de France*, in A. Roversi - G. Triani (a cura di), *Sociologia dello sport*, Napoli, Esi, 1995; G. Vigarelo, *Un histoire culturelle du sport*, Paris, Eps, 1988; P. Vertinsky, *The eternally wounded woman*, Manchester, MUP, 1990; J. Hardgraevens, *Sporting females*, London, Routledge, 1994; A. Guttmann, *Women's sport. A history*, New York, Columbia, 1991; A. DAVISSE - C. Louveau, *Sport école société: la part des femmes*, Joinville le pont, Action, 1991.

² P. A. Bernardini, *Lo sport in Grecia*, Roma-Bari Laterza, 1988; A. Papa, *Le domeniche di clilo. Origini e storie del football in Italia*, in "Belfagor" XLIII, marzo 1988; S. Pivato, *I terzini della borghesia. Il gioco del pallone nell'Italia dell'Ottocento*, Milano, Leonardo, 1991; F. Fabrizio, *Storia dello sport in Italia. Dalle società ginnastiche all'associazionismo di massa*, Firenze, Guaraldi, 1977; S. Giuntini, *Sport scuola e caserma. Dal Risorgimento al primo conflitto mondiale*, Padova, Muzzio, 1988; R. Bassetti, *Storia e storie dello sport in Italia*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1999; G. Panico - A. Papa, *Storia sociale del calcio in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1995; S. Pivato, *La bicicletta e il sol dell'avenire*, Firenze, Ponte alle grazie, 1992; M. Marchesini, *L'Italia del Giro d'Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1996; Id., *Coppi e Bartali*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1998; P. Ferrara, *L'Italia in palestra*, Roma, Meridiana, 1992; G. Bonetta, *Corpo e nazione*, Milano, Angeli, 1992; A. Ghirelli, *Storia del calcio in Italia*,

preliminary methodological and conceptual debate aimed at framing and defining the new sphere of research in a meaningful way.³ (Not that there have been no important and original reflections on this point.)⁴ The purpose of this book is not to record a history of sport as an important social, cultural political and economic phenomenon with relevance to contemporary society. In fact, having acknowledged the original importance of sport as a subject for study capable of contributing to our understanding of complex contexts, thanks to an historiographic sensibility developed first in England, France and Germany as well as the United States and later in Italy, a methodological and conceptual reflection on the theme is decidedly interesting. While not intended to be exhaustive, it will nonetheless serve as a premise for an organisation of the discipline and the further development of studies on the subject. As noted, there have been analyses aimed at delving into this sphere of research, marking its boundaries and providing essential conceptual and methodological categories.⁵ However, a further preliminary reflection on the meaning of the idea of sport in a comparative approach and from a long-term diachronic perspective is important to provide clarity. In fact, on the national level, in particular, there seems to be a lack of such reflection, in contrast to important and original research on specific cases that often offer no attempt to make connections with others. Here I shall try to contribute to outlining a basic premise for individuating the particular characteristics of a thread and/or sphere of research focusing on sport as an object of analysis in general, and specifically within the main interpretive categories of contemporary studies. Such a premise will be useful and necessary to a more wide-ranging expansion of the study of the history of sport. There is no intention here, as I have said, to offer exhaustive and definitive responses, but

Torino, Einaudi, 1954; G. Brera, *Storia critica del calcio italiano*, Milano, Bompiani, 1978; S. Pivato, *Sia lodato Bartali*, Roma, Edizioni del Lavoro, 1986; G. P. Omezzano, *Storia del ciclismo*, Milano, Longanesi, 1985.

³ G. Panico, *Sport cultura e società*, Torino, Paravia, 1999.

⁴ A. Papa, *Domeniche di clio*, cit.; G. Panico - A. Papa, *Storia sociale del calcio in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002; Martin. S, *Calcio e fascismo. Lo sport nazionale sotto Mussolini*, Milano, Mondadori, 2006; S. Pivato, *I terzini della borghesia*, cit.; Id., *Le pigrizie dello storico. Lo sport tra ideologia storia e rimozione*, in "Italia contemporanea", n. 174, 1989; F. Fabrizio, *Storia dello sport in Italia*, cit.; S. Giuntini, *Sport scuola e caserma*, cit.; L. Di Nucci, *L'eroe atletico nell'Europa delle masse. Note sulla cultura del tempo libero nella città moderna*, in "Società e storia", n. 34, dicembre, 1986.

⁵ G. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, cit.; R. Caillois, *Le jeu et les hommes*, cit.; A. Guttmann, *From ritual to record*, cit.; L. Di Nucci, *L'eroe atletico*, cit.; R. Mandell, *Sport. A cultural history*, cit.; S. Jacomuzzi, *Gli sport*, Torino, Utet, 1963-64; S. Pivato, *L'era degli sport*, Firenze, Giunti, 1994.

rather a desire to foster debate on an important and basic theme and thus contribute to the writing of further histories of sport. The aim is to reflect on the idea of sport in the contemporary era through synchronic and diachronic comparisons among various locations and time periods, attempting to identify *longues durées* as well as original and innovative aspects. As a whole, this reflection can thus contribute in some small way by offering a sort of introduction to original interpretations of the various categories and themes linked to sport as an innovative kaleidoscope of contemporaneity.

Conceptualisation is of great importance in historical analysis and research.⁶ It is often a question of detailing and comprehensively defining every single nuance of complex categories, so as to avoid being caught up in interpretative *aporias*, especially when faced with the need to carry out comparative analyses. Sometimes, however, an excess of zeal, noble and in good faith though it may be, tends to involuntarily and unconsciously slip into eruditism, losing sight of basic elements that are fundamental in their unambiguous simplicity. With regard to the idea of sport, it is important to reflect on the possibility and means of comparison between the concept as it was structured in antiquity and as it re-emerged in the modern and contemporary eras. Taking a cue from Constant's idea of ancient and modern liberty, in reflecting on sport in ancient and contemporary times it is important to state at the outset that the word 'sport' did not exist in antiquity, but that in any case, beyond the nonetheless important lexical specifics, the underlying contents, in all their diversity, merit attention. Such a reflection is both "emic" and "etic"; this is not an attempt to write a universal history of sport, but a measured reflection on it that will in turn foster and pave the way for further studies. It is a matter of setting out from the epistemic specificities of the respective historical contexts linked to the theme of sport to prompt a comparative reflection which, while respecting existing differences and peculiarities, looks to identify *longues durées* that persisted through the caesuras of the centuries. In fact, differences are not necessarily synonymous with incommunicability or incomparability, but can sometimes indicate how similar or different cases can be interpreted according to heterogeneous and heterodox principles. To use Sartre's metaphor of the child who, sticking his hand in the honey jar, becomes aware that between solid and liquid there exists a third tactile sensation, i.e. viscosity, the key here is to verify whether, with regard to the history of sport, in light of the common adjectival uses of

⁶ F. Chabod, *Lezioni di metodo storico*, Bari, Laterza, 1969; F. Braudel, *Problemi di metodo storico*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1973; L. Febvre, *Problemi di metodo storico*, Torino, Einaudi, 1976.

the terms ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’, there can be a third category that is more *viscous* and complex to define. Borrowing from linguistic theory and cultural anthropology the concepts of *emic* and *etic* analysis, I shall apply to sport the points of view of various cultures and civilisations in comparison with our own contemporary one to highlight breaks and continuities, acknowledging diversity but seeking examples of a few meaningful universal *longues durées* that transcend time, to propose a variegated idea of sport and its functions in relation to human beings, the building blocks of any society.⁷

Beyond the lexical question, to which I will return, sport was and is an outcome and a reflection of the identity and values of individual societies. There is thus an initial method that can highlight substantial differences over the course of time, or even in the synchronic sense between different cultures, through the focusing lens of sport. But in conjunction with this is another, no less important approach capable of bringing to light the few but meaningful *longues durées* that underlie the various cultural/sport contexts, in both the diachronic and synchronic senses. A comparison between the ancient and the contemporary with regard to sport that acknowledges the peculiarities and differences developed over the centuries can be extremely useful in identifying a few *longues durées* of western culture, and perhaps human social interaction systems in general.

The too-long-evoked need to legitimise sport as an object of scientific study has influenced the methodological approach to it; it oscillates between forced justification and prolonged silence without coming to the natural conclusion of the importance of the sport/culture binomial, within the limits delineated by M. Bloch, who compared the historian to a fairy-tale ogre in that “wherever he scents human flesh, he knows that there lies his prey”, and asserted that the past is no longer something to be studied as an end in itself, but a summary of civilisation to reconstruct with precision, method and intellectual honesty.⁸

So although it must be acknowledged that the roots of western civilisation extend, both geographically and chronologically, beyond the *strictu sensu* concept of the west, the world of antiquity will be the terminus *a quo* for this reflection on the concept of sport as the object of historical analysis.

In ancient Greece the term for a game was *paideion*, from the root *pais*, youth, thus relegating the activity to a particular phase of life and, indirectly,

⁷ K.L. Pike, *Language in relation to a unification theory of the structure of human behaviour*, Mouton, Den Haag-Paris, 1967; C. Geertz, *Antropologia interpretativa*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1988.

⁸ M. Bloch, *Apologia della storia ovvero il mestiere di storico*, Torino, Einaudi, 1950.

laying the groundwork for its educational connotation.⁹ Similarly, the ancient Greek word *agòn*, contest, was also associated with sport activities, introducing virile activity into society as a whole in all its manifestations. Physical exercise in the Greek world was linked to the concept of *aristos*, associating athletes with heroes. In this sense, physical exercise had an edifying and character-building value, for the good citizen as well as the good soldier. But there was also a playful, recreational aspect typical of rural societies, where competitions were linked to festivals in periods of relative idleness during the agricultural cycle. The ancient Romans, on the other hand, used the term *ludus*, which Augustus associated with *iuvenales*, to connote youthful games. In the Roman world, the role of physical activity was more pragmatic, connected to concrete political-social objectives like the preparation of the future *miles*, or the concept of *panem et circenses*. In neo-Latin languages, what prevailed in designating the practices that would later be called sport was not so much the term *ludus* as *iocus*, or joke, although this does not necessarily encapsulate its meaning. So, in French, *jeu* and *jouer*; in Italian, *gioco* and *giocare*; in Spanish *juego* and *jugar*; and in Portuguese *jogo* and *jogar*. The difference in English between *play* and *game* is significant not only of a transformation of physical practices, but of their use in various historical periods. While the former indicated a playful, imaginative activity without fixed schemas, the latter indicated an enjoyable activity, but one regulated by specific and binding rules.¹⁰ Here, then, was a distinction between game and sport, in which the element of competition was preponderant but not exclusive, as exemplified by *kemari* in Japan, in which participants had to keep a ball in the air using only their feet, and there were no winners or losers.¹¹

These few considerations alone serve to illustrate the complexity of the concept of sport and its relative relevance as an object of cultural analysis in the sphere of historical studies; hence a thorough definition of methods is important.

Historiography has in fact pondered the transformation of the concept of sport over the centuries, sometimes suggesting its substantial continuity and in other cases pointing out a series of *longues durées* interspersed with

⁹ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, cit.; R. Malaspina, *Sociologia del gioco e dello sport. Analisi storico antropologica dell'attività logico-motoria*, Genova, Eci, 1988; A. Guttmann, *From ritual to record*, cit.

¹⁰ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, cit.

¹¹ R. Malaspina, *Sociologia del gioco e dello sport*, cit.; A. Guttmann, *From ritual to record*, cit.

periods of divergence. The term sport itself generates an initial series of considerations, as the word did not exist in ancient languages to designate athletic practices. However, the substance of the phenomenon, even in the absence of a term of reference, allows us to gather a few elements for analysis. The word sport would seem to derive from the Latin *desportare* – literally, to go out of doors or outside the city gates - , in the sense of leisure activity or enjoyment; later came the Medieval French *desport*, again meaning enjoyment, referring to the aristocracy at that time, which was reprinted and adapted by other languages, including Italian. According to the French dictionary, sport could be defined as “all outdoor exercise, such as horse racing, rowing, hunting on horseback, fishing, archery, gymnastics and fencing”.¹² In the English language, the use of the term *sport* with such a meaning is attested as early as 1532.¹³

In antiquity, the athlete was one who competed for a prize, based on the terms *athlos* and *athlon*, meaning combat and prize, respectively, in Ancient Greek. The concept of gymnastics developed similarly from the Greek *gymnazein* and *gymnasion*, both of which share the etymological root *gymnòs*, or nude. Sport and gymnastics were thus not synonyms, although they came to be associated, interweaving pedagogical and therapeutic meanings with competitive and playful ones.¹⁴

So, from antiquity, the connotation of physical activity was varied, linked to the cultural sphere of reference, not easy to simplify or boil down in its complexity, and this heterogeneousness has persisted into the contemporary era, albeit with new distinctions.

The image and the relative myth of the purity and simplicity of amateur sport in antiquity was, in fact, an idealized construction that emerged during the 19th century to support, enhance and thus legitimize a specific notion of the concept of the practice of sport. In actual fact, the Greek athlete competed for a prize; for example, in the Panathenaic games, victory in the *stadion* brought one-hundred amphorae of Attic olive oil, a much-coveted and valuable prize.¹⁵ This does not mean that the athlete, in this case, was a professional. The concepts of amateur and professional were in fact extraneous to ancient culture, and the fact that a prize was offered was simply in keeping with the anthropological sensibility of said culture. This simple

¹²E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de langue française*, Parigi, Hachette, 1863-1872.

¹³J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, cit.

¹⁴J. Ulmann, *Ginnastica, educazione fisica e sport dall'antichità ad oggi*, Roma, Armando Ed., 1968.

¹⁵S. Battaglia, *L'etica motore dei giochi*, in “Gazzetta dello sport”, March the 23rd 2016.

example leads us to reflect on how, in this regard, a comparison between the ancient and contemporary worlds regarding the idea of sport would be inapt and anachronistic. However, deeper reflection, while acknowledging perceptible structural differences, reveals that there are emotional and substantial elements of continuity between the practice of sport in the ancient and contemporary eras. For example, anyone who competed for a city other than his own was banned and repudiated. Here again, parallelisms must be employed with caution, but a few conceptual wellsprings seem to have elements of continuity, even in diversity. In antiquity, physical activity was geared as much towards honour and glory as material rewards – they were two faces of the same coin. Physical practices also had an educational and edifying value, as well as an element of spectacle, which were both linked to the competitive aspect and were thus interconnected. The athlete was a young man of good lineage who elevated himself and his city through sport, or sometimes a youth of humble origin whose virtue led him to aspire to a better life, not only in material terms, but in the elective and spiritual sense. The goddess of victory, *Nike*, chose a single athlete in all of Greece, leaving all the others to taste the bitterness of defeat; but Rome, as Aeneas testifies in the *Aeneid*, had acknowledged the second and third best as well, augmenting the numbers of prize-winners. Roman prizes were likewise not merely material, but alluded to a far more significant emotional, social and cultural status, the true moral prize to pursue. As Simonetta Teucci points out, antiquity had rules that were coherent with the anthropological culture they expressed.¹⁶ And yet, in their diversity, universal elements can be observed, for example in the constant attention – albeit with notable differences in terms of approach and meaning – that literature and art dedicated to sport: an implicit recognition of its basic and fundamental cultural value in terms of civility and civilisation.¹⁷

Young notes that it was in the Victorian age that an ideal and idealised link between the contemporary and antiquity was established.¹⁸ In some ways, it was an erroneous and anachronistic distortion that tended to evoke a world that may never really have existed as such. And yet, certain elements remained inviolable and unchallenged in the background, connecting past and present, even stigmatising their visible differences. According to McLuhan, sport can be thought of as an artistic manifestation of a people through which it perceives and interprets its own cultural, social and political

¹⁶ S. Teucci, *Un antico legame. Letteratura sport e società*, Roma, Aracne, 2018.

¹⁷ M. A. Manacorda, *Diana e le Muse. Tremila anni di sport nella letteratura*, vol. I, *In Grecia e a Roma*, voll. 4, Roma, Lancillotto e Nausica editore, 2016.

¹⁸ D. C. Young, *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics*, Chicago, Ares, 1984.

identity – a sort of kaleidoscope.¹⁹ And this is an initial element of contact between past and present, between sea change events and *longues durées*, between discontinuity and continuity.

In Imperial Rome, the principle of *panem et circenses*, associated with chariot races in the Circus Maximus and gladiatorial contests (borrowed from the Etruscans or the Sannites, among whom physical activities had a consolidated value), had an intrinsic social and political significance, as suggested by Huizinga – so much so that those who competed were not only athletes, but also the *principes* organising such events.²⁰ Once again, despite the evident distance and differences, a few characteristics of the ancient era are still present in the contemporary age, adapted to the anthropological culture of reference. In antiquity, competitive sport activities also had strong ties to the concept of war, as well as funeral rites. Huizinga highlighted the importance of reflecting on the link between war and sport in the ancient and contemporary worlds, without making inappropriate comparisons or defining armed conflict as an extreme intensification of sport, or of sport as a necessary precursor of combat.²¹ This dualism was maintained, albeit with profound cultural and anthropological differences, during the Middle Ages as well, and was impacted by influences brought in by barbarian *nationes*. War had, at least in the ancient world, borrowed rules of engagement from sport, without which there could be no conception of victory; hence the difference between clashes between *poleis* and those against a foreign enemy, as in the case of the Persians. The attempt to apply rules of engagement was reprised in the successive era as well.²² Again, there is both diversity and continuity, and above all, close ties between sport and culture as a possible *longue durée*. In fact, it is interesting to note that bloodshed was considered a potential outcome of some *agones* in antiquity and the Middle Ages, but at the same time, attempts were made to regulate them, down to the modern concept of war games.

Once again, the importance and pertinence of a reflection on themes of sport becomes clear.

Competition and physical practices, being linked to the idea of war, inevitably came to be implicated in the sphere of death as well. Funerary rites in the ancient world were an ideal occasion for athletic competitions, as Homer himself illustrates. As already mentioned, following along the lines of Henry Montherlant's thinking, reprised by Giampiera Arrigoni, "sports" are effectively

¹⁹ M. McLuhan, *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1974.

²⁰ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, cit.; M. A. Manacorda, *Diana e le Muse*, cit.

²¹ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, cit.

²² *Ibid.*

“the product of customs” and, through them, of “public powers”.²³ Hunting, for example, for various reasons, could contribute to both the definition and the specificity of the idea of sport, reconfirming its variegated nature.²⁴

The aim here is to determine whether, interpreting Benjamin Constant’s distinction between ancient and modern liberties, there are not only substantial differences between the idea and practice of sport in the ancient and contemporary worlds, but also a few universal elements of continuity, their specificity notwithstanding.²⁵ It is also important to reassert the link between sport and culture, using the former as an original sort of analytical kaleidoscope through which to study ancient and contemporary civilisations in their particularities.

According to some lines of historiographic thinking, there is a clear break between ancient and modern sport associated with the naissance of post-industrial-revolution society, and in fact, athletic or game-oriented phenomena of antiquity cannot truly be defined as sport. On this point, A. Guttmann outlined seven distinctive points that differentiate traditional games from modern sport: secularisation, equality, specialisation, rationalisation, quantification, bureaucratisation and the idea of records.²⁶ Appropriating the idea of cultural typing, N. Elias saw modern sport as a civilising element specific to modern society, and the practice of sport a remedy for the social violence of the past, thus proposing a clear break or caesura between antiquity and the contemporary world.²⁷ Another line of historiographic thought, however, while acknowledging differences, recognises the legitimacy of a history of sport with antiquity as its terminus *a quo*.²⁸ According to W. Decker, for example, it is perfectly appropriate to speak of a history of sport with reference to the ancient world.²⁹ And L. Turcot wrote of a sort of evolution linking sport in antiquity with that of the contemporary world, specific characteristics notwithstanding.³⁰

But within this continuity, some aspects of physical exercise and practices have changed radically over the course of the centuries, to the point of taking

²³ G. Arrigoni (a cura di), *La donna in Grecia*, Bari, Laterza, 1985, p.55.

²⁴ M. Aiello, *Viaggio nello sport attraverso i secoli*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2004.

²⁵ R. Mandell, *Storia culturale dello sport*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1988; M. Aiello, *Viaggio nello sport*, cit.

²⁶ A. Guttmann, *From ritual to record*, cit.

²⁷ E. Dunning – N. Elias, *Quest for excitement*, cit.

²⁸ W. Decker - J. P. Thuillier, *Le sport dans l'antiquité. Egypte, Grèce, Rome*, Paris, Picard, 2004.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ L. Turcot, *Sports et leisure. Une histoire des origines à nos jours*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016.

on completely new meanings and connotations, as has the context of reference, here intended both actively as an influencing element and passively as a moulded object. Conversely, although there is certainly substantial discontinuity, a few aspects of physical activity seem to have remained unaltered, suggesting a potential universal connotation.

To give just a few examples, physical effort, competition, the overcoming of obstacles, the presence of values and rules, the public milieu, active and passive forms of practice and prizes have all been subject to profound mutation over the centuries, while still maintaining a few basic common traits.

The educational and recreational bases attributed to physical practices and agonistic contests were particular features of antique culture. In this sense, sport had a deep-seated cultural and identitary value in these civilisations. Obviously, concrete ways of conceiving sport have changed radically, but at the same time, some general characteristics of reference have endured. For example, the idea of sport as elitist and aristocratic, detached from the principle of material gain, and the conception of physical strength as conducive to the attainment of tangible advantages already existed in ancient Greece, but were objectively profoundly different from the modern dualism underlying the distinction between amateurism and professionalism. At the same time, even in light of differences, these concepts evoke some principles that can be viewed as *longues durées* capable of linking past and present.

From ancient China in 2700 BC, to ancient Japan or Egypt, to cite just a few examples, physical practices began to take on therapeutic or leisure roles, rather than educational or military ones. The role of women – at least some categories of them – came to be linked with physical practices in terms of play and preparation for maternity in antiquity. Again, these are elements which, albeit with evident divergences, have endured up to contemporary times.

However, with regard to sport, in particular, the *terminus a quo* for the contemporary world has, not coincidentally, been identified within a more general identity and cultural context in terms of civilisation in ancient Greece and Rome; the history of sport then moves through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the modern age and the great 18th- and 19th-century revolutions, with its *terminus ad quem* lying between the *long century* and the *short century*. The basis of this timeline was a conscious intention to link the world of ancient Greece with that of Victorian England, thus bringing sport into the contemporary age. This notion has conditioned the historiographic study of sport, which alternately exalts elements of continuity and stigmatises elements of disruption, with no real big-picture view.

At the end of the 18th century and into the 19th, the western world went through a period of cultural upheaval which, having already begun in prior

centuries, transfigured many of its identity characteristics in jarring ways.³¹ In this general cultural context, physical exercise and practices were reprised on interesting new bases, while at the same time reconnecting with classical tradition.³²

Historiography summed up that ferment linked to the birth of the modern-era nation state in a sort of cultural dualism between the Victorian Anglo-Saxon model of sport and the concept of gymnastics as a paradigm of physical education for a nation in the nationalistic key represented by the German case.³³ But the English model was also imbued with a profoundly nationalistic spirit, and the Teutonic model of gymnastics interiorised a confrontational, competitive milieu. What emerges from these considerations is the utilization of sport as a cultural expression and, consequently, as a distinctive identity trait of a civilisation. English sport expressed and also served a liberal industrial-revolution society, while German sport was, on the contrary, the legacy of a Prussian idea of a nation centred around – and instrumental to – the organicistic state. Both models, for different reasons, alluded to the past and antiquity, in an ideal pursuit of legitimacy. Once again, what we see is a delicate web of relationships, of continuities and disruptions, that generated distinctive elements alongside universal traits, beginning with the link between sport and culture. Moreover, sport reasserted a need to find different, often contrasting and antithetical responses to issues encapsulated in the challenges of modernisation. The dichotomies surrounding modern sport fall within the same matrix of western civilisation that generated the conflicting and contradictory ideologies, cultures and identities of the *long* and *short* centuries in the so-called European civil war, all of which sought legitimisation in antiquity, towards both innovative and conservative ends.

In the Hellenistic world, as mentioned above, the terms *athlos*, combat, *athlion*, effort to win a prize, and *agon*, effort to be the first or the best, introduced the concept of physical activity, defined in cultural and educational/behavioural terms. In book XXIII of the *Iliad*, the funerary games decreed by Achilles in honour of Patroclus are emblematic, and the same can be said of books VI and VIII of the *Odyssey*, describing Odysseus' sojourn at

³¹ For a general framework see R. Cesarini - L. De Federicis, *Il materiale e l'immaginario*, Torino, Loescher, 1986, voll. 5, voll. III-IV.

³² J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens.*, cit.

³³ P. Dietschy - S. Pivato, *Storia dello sport in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019.

the court of Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians.³⁴ The reverence for classical culture manifested in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in the western world thus found the sphere of sport to be an interesting and original kaleidoscope through which to perceive points of substantial continuity and important breaks with the past, based on the new and still-changing needs of contemporary society. But reference to antiquity did not mean its complete and categorical continuation, nor much less a conscious understanding of the phenomenon of sport in that context. At the same time, even amid diversities, the desire to recuperate and revive past traditions revealed at least the inkling, if not the consciousness, of a few *longues durées* to preserve or reinterpret.

The Homeric hero competed for ascendancy, exalting the concept of individuality and originality. Athletic contests were in many ways linked to the idea of war. Honour, glory, triumph and reward became associated with one another,³⁵ principles which, although related in the particular sensibilities of the individual historical contexts of reference, suggest elements of universality. At the same time, the selection or revisitation of some of these characteristic traits of the past in the contemporary era seemed to go along with a certain interpretative teleology aimed at exalting and justifying the present, which must be legitimised and ennobled through the past, without regard for existing profound cultural differences. Continuous allusions in ancient accounts to the function of the gods in supporting or thwarting the protagonists of competitions as they did in battle offered a glimpse of a significantly different view of sport than the one that emerged in the contemporary era. Odysseus is a clear example, attaining dominance not only through his own acumen, but also thanks to Athena's favour, in the race against the far more athletically gifted Ajax.³⁶ The goddess' invisible hand indicated the legitimacy of using any means to win and gain the prize through which one asserted one's primacy and honour, a concept that became unacceptable in the contemporary era, when subterfuge, while not eradicated, became the object of negative moral stigma.

³⁴ Omero, *Iliade*, IX-VIII sec. a. c., XXIII, translated by V. Monti, vol. 2, Milano, Società tipografica dei classici, 1825; Id., *Odissea*, IX-VIII sec. a. c., VI, VIII, translated by I. Pindemonti, Milano, Società tipografica dei classici, 1805.

³⁵ M. Di Donato - A. Teja, *Agonistica e ginnastica nella Grecia antica*, Roma, ED. Studium, 1989; R. Patrucco, *Lo sport nella Grecia antica*, Firenze, Olschki, 1972; J. Ulmann, *Ginnastica, educazione fisica e sport*, cit.; K. W. Weber, *Olimpia e i suoi sponsor. Sport, denaro e politica nell'antichità*, Milano, Garzanti, 1992.

³⁶ Omero, *Iliade*, cit., XXIII, 720-790.

Equally interesting is an analysis of the prevalence of concepts of competition and antagonism applied to sport from antiquity to the contemporary era. Sport emerges in both the ancient and modern epochs as an element closely connected with and even underpinning the culture of reference of a given civilisation. The acknowledgement of specific subjectivities notwithstanding, this is potentially an element of continuity, almost a universal trait.

The idea of physical education as a part of one's moral and cultural upbringing, as fostered by Hellenic philosophy, which saw gymnasiums as forges of future citizens even more than of soldiers, was in harmony with this position.³⁷ The Roman, however, who, in keeping with the *mos maiorum* ably expressed by Tacitus, were against nudity in sport, considering it an instrument of moral decadence, replaced the gymnasium with the *palestra*, attributing physical exercise a more pragmatic role as conducive to military endeavours, or as entertainment for the masses, but always and in any case tied to a cultural value.³⁸ The adage originated by Juvenal in the Satira X, *mens sana in corpore sano*, seems to have alluded to the need for moral and physical growth, understood to be a gift from the gods.³⁹ The justification of any means to achieve an end without undermining the concept of honour, on the other hand, was a purely human notion that ideally linked Odysseus with Machiavelli's Prince (with reference to politics rather than sport) as an exaltation of shrewdness or cunning combined with physical prowess, of which sport was the vehicle, capable of fusing divergent values and exigencies.

Since antiquity, sporting events have also had a second, more popular customary function in terms of amusement and recreation, linked to political consensus with a specific connotation of passive consumption.

Both the educational component and the leisure/amusement aspect were strongly present in the renaissance of the idea of sport in the modern sense, adapted to the cultural need of the context of reference. In fact, with the Church's influence, sport had lost its pedagogical, formative role, in keeping with inclinations already seen in late-Imperial Rome; the advent of Renaissance humanism re-established the function.

³⁷ J. Burckhardt, *Griechische kulturgeschichte*, Berlin, Stuttgart, vol. 4, 1898-1902; A. J. Toynbee, *Il mondo ellenico*, Torino, Einaudi, 1967-70.

³⁸ Tacito, *Annales*, 114 – 120 d. C., XIV, 20, A. Arici (a cura di), Torino, Utet, 1983; A. Teja, *L'esercizio fisico nell'antica Roma*, Roma, Ed. Studium, 1988. Virgil dedicates Book V in *Aeneid* to the games in honour of Anchises.

³⁹ Giovenale, *Satire*, 100-127 d. c., X, 356, translated by B. Santarelli, Milano, Mondadori, 2011; R. Amerio, *Iota unum*, Milano-Napoli, Ricciardi, 1985.

The age of revolutions saw in a renewed conception of sport the possibility of adapting a few universal principles linked to physical practices in the context of changing cultural demands. Past traditions were thus dismantled and revisited, while maintaining a few of the general traits that had inspired their recuperation. Without applying inappropriate schematics, Victorian sports practices, for example, alluded to the elitist and oligarchic mould of antique societies reflected in the idea of the practice sport as the prerogative of a select few, as opposed to its passive viewing by the masses (albeit with some exceptions), differing from the one that prevailed during the ancien régime. What emerges from this is a link to changes stemming from the idea of nationhood formed from 1789 on.⁴⁰ The eras of the bourgeoisie and of imperialisms found an original and interesting point of analysis, in which continuity and innovation coexisted, in a new idea of sport.⁴¹ While apparently re-establishing a connection with past tradition, in particular the classical world, the contemporary age ended up radically innovating the idea and the practice of sport, adapting it to its own needs and its own nature. However, within this generic evocation of the past, we can glimpse a few basic, potentially universal traits that can lend significance to this ideal bond between epochs.

To paraphrase the already-mentioned Benjamin Costant's famous dissertation on ancient and modern liberties, we can reflect on the differences vis-à-vis the concept of sport in the ancient and modern worlds, finding numerous elements of disruption and a few – but no less significant – elements of continuity, reconfirming the strong tie between sport and culture and its ramifications in the political, social and economic spheres at the core of every society and civilisation.⁴²

In fact, like freedoms, sport in antiquity was collective in nature. It was a phenomenon primarily associated with certain clearly-identifiable social classes, differing from context to context but sharing a collegial framework into which the individual is integrated, albeit without negation of his ego. Hence sport in ancient Greece could be called a public social phenomenon that constituted one of the cornerstones of the education and relative duties of the perfect citizen, as well as the soldier. The entertainment and recreation model became fused with a collective, public nature that overshadowed the

⁴⁰ G. Matteucci - N. Bobbio - G. Pasquino, *Dizionario di politica*, Torino Utet, 1990.

⁴¹ E. Hobsbawm, *Lavoro, cultura, e mentalità nella società industriale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1986; H. Eichberg, *Der weg des sports in die industrielle zivilisation*, Baden-Baden, 1974.

⁴² B. Constant, *Discorso sulla libertà degli antichi paragonata a quella dei moderni (1819)*, Roma, Atlantica, 1945; N. Bobbio, *Eguaglianza e libertà*, Torino, Einaudi, 1995; Id., *Politica e cultura*, Torino, Einaudi, 1974.

subjective, private connotation. The very principle of *panem et circenses* which flourished in Rome alongside values imported with Hellenistic culture contributed to an idea of physical activity connected within a collective perimeter. Those who practiced physical activities were, in fact, lower social classes, for whom subjectivity and the private sphere had no importance, in a context in which the spectator classes sought to maintain the collegial value of the phenomenon.

In the ancient world, sport had a variety of meanings, depending on the particular culture and historical period, all of which fit within a collegial or social framework, whether as education or as exhibition. The Middle Ages muddled things by overlapping the public and the private. Only in the late modern age, and especially after the French Revolution, did the concept of sport again become a matter of renewed interest and reflections which, like the idea of liberty, of which it was an indirect expression and testimony, ended up appreciably revitalizing the theoretical frame of reference. Attention became more focused on the subjective element inserted within a private context, but of course, without disregarding the collective framework of reference.

There are numerous other elements that differentiate the antique and contemporary conceptions of sport. First of all, the practice of sport in antiquity was often directly or indirectly related to religious cult practices, while in the modern world, sport underwent a secularisation in the wake of the Enlightenment, paradoxically coming to create its own sacralising liturgy as it transformed itself into a secular-cult phenomenon. Furthermore, in the ancient world, as has been noted, sport did not necessarily entail the idea of fairness as the basis of healthy competition, as opposed to the principle of antagonism derived from a warrior/military mentality in which all was more or less fair in the pursuit of victory. On the other hand, physical exercise and practices were part of the moral and spiritual training process of the good citizen and soldier, while in the modern age they not only had educational aims, but were also linked with the private sphere and took on a recreational and entertainment value useful for the subjective sphere. Another relevant element of differentiation lay in the extemporaneousness and empiricism of sport, which the modern world, in harmony with the idea of the State, has associated with a great degree of bureaucratisation, with rules, norms and organizations to manage the world of sport. Other elements in their wake seem to have constituted further factors of differentiation, like, for example, the concept of records and the measurability of events, through which the *agone* of sport was expanded from the adversary to oneself and to nature. In addition, the element of rationality came to be considered essential for the mitigation of social conflicts inherent to the modern world, and indirectly to

sport. Finally, there is the element of spectacularisation, present in both historical eras, but with different aims and contexts.⁴³

During the 19th century, modern sport, having initially appeared in the 18th century, was subject to a first intense acceleration that then repeated itself over the course of the “short century.”

The 18th century, with classicism in Germany fostering fascination with the culture of ancient Greece, emphasising the serenity of the soul as reflected in the beauty of the body as a universal value, saw a revival of the importance and the role of physical activity, the key to said identity. Winckelmann, Schiller and Goethe laid the cultural groundwork for a sort of reawakening with regard to sport that spread from Germany across the entire continent. Physical activity was once again perceived as an educational ideal and an important aspect of individual development, with a focus on gymnastics and athletics, individual activities. Classicism was thus a catalyst for open elaboration of the concept of modernity, and of changes, and sport was surely one of its instruments. It was a matter of identifying universal values, and the idea of sport seemed a universal concept capable of sustaining them. In that sense, the search for a universal pattern or matrix came to elide the profound differences between past and present. The continuity of certain values did not entail cultural continuity in terms of the way they were defined. Just as it was excessive to note only the differences, it could be equally misleading to exalt only the presumed homologizing traits defined as universal.

Neoclassicism, on the other hand, which successively developed in various forms, had a different value, more defensive and aloof, and tended to mystify the concept of physical exercise in the face of the challenges of modernisation. The idea of the nation, introduced in the dualism between enlightenment and romanticism, modified and characterised the concept of sport as well, in the transition between antiquity and modernity.⁴⁴ In Germany, for example, there was a passage from the erudite but vital 18th-century universalism of classicism to the flowering of the romanticism of *sturm und drang* and the ideas of Fichte. The gravitational centre of German culture shifted from the imperial, universal idea, a vestige of the Holy Roman Empire, to the national rise of Prussian culture, accelerated by the need to defend the primacy of tradition before the attempt at formally universal identity acculturation proposed by Napoleon's armies.

⁴³ A. Guttman, *From ritual to record*, cit.

⁴⁴ G. Matteucci - N. Bobbio - G. Pasquino, *Dizionario di politica*, cit.

The idea of sport thus conformed to the cultural diversification taking place, assuming modernising or conservative values depending on the context of reference, while always maintaining a strong link with antiquity. This was a confirmation of the existence of potential universal elements inherent to the element of sport as a cultural vector, despite the fact that said elements were subject to radically different diachronic and synchronic interpretations.

A further stimulus to recuperate sport as a social value came from Anglo-Saxon liberalism which, once again, saw in the values of antiquity a universal quality through which to project its national primacy, both domestically and abroad.

It is interesting that German tradition, although holding fast to its own cultural roots in defence of its identity, did not exalt the values of sport derived from that context, but continued to preserve its ties to classicism, presenting them as a natural continuation. Anglo-Saxon and French cultures soon followed suit. With the rise of the idea of the nation, universalism and particularism became interwoven in ambiguous and sometimes conflicting ways, and the idea of sport was naturally impacted. In that context, the antique and modern concepts of sport were considerably re-elaborated, contributing to the generation of revisions and mystifications.

Hence the importance of a methodical and conceptual reflection which, springing from that period, can contribute to defining the role of sport as a cultural element, with all its peculiarities, differentiated between eras in the diachronic sense and among cases in the synchronic sense. At the same time, it is fundamental to individuate a few value-oriented macro-concepts as *longues durées*, albeit in different combinations.

So, without slipping into ambiguous rhetoric or facile anachronistic mélanges, one can hypothesise that over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, for various reasons and with dissimilar approaches, contemporary culture drew on antiquity, attempting to adapt models from the past to respond to issues of the present, and giving rise to innovative views of sport – views which, nonetheless, could also be recognized as the legacy of universal values dating back to antiquity.

On the one hand, perceptible differences regarding the idea of sport were anachronistically minimised in light of the desire to exalt a presumed legitimising continuity with a noble past; on the other, there was the risk of an equally anachronistic underestimation (due to the presence of objective differences) of the few but meaningful elements of continuity, which could be established as *longues durées* between past and present despite evident differences.

Sport in antiquity, as in the contemporary era, was not a monolith that remained unchanged over time. There were traits which, although later redefined in original and distinctive ways, were common to the very idea of sport, the principle matrix of which was the definition of sport in cultural terms, of which the educational, entertainment-oriented and competitive aspects were enduring examples in spite of their radically differing definitions within various cultural contexts.

The 18th, 19th and 20th centuries turned to the past to meet the challenges of their own times, re-establishing ties to tradition and classical culture, but introducing radically innovative and original elements, paradoxically encouraging conservation while also promoting change. In this sense, sport was reborn in a modern key, as a product of its time, even while looking to the past in an explicit attempt to reconnect with tradition, from which it drew to dominate modernity. The few macro-elements of continuity linked to sport, however, were altered or interpreted in original ways, without being completely lost.

The idea of sport rematerialized in an original way after the great revolutions in Europe and the west, but with a conscious will to reconnect with pieces of the past, the legacy of antiquity, sometimes distorting their meaning, sometimes innovating, and sometimes maintaining (or feigning to maintain) elements. In response to modernisation, sport served both as a bulwark in defence of tradition and as a vehicle for the imposition of different ideological and identity readings of it. Paradoxically, even considering profound differences, sport contributed, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes involuntarily, to the genesis of a universal language: it was a node of differences within the context of the enduring prevalence of a specific perception of reference that was in some ways completely dissimilar to its antique origins, but on the whole, preserved a few *longues durées*.

Thus the idea of sport sprang and springs from a few universal elements at the basis of human social-anthropological relations. It is therefore erroneous, in my opinion, to assert that no comparisons can be made between the ancient and modern worlds. The importance of the aspect of play and enjoyment, the role of sport in society, its value in terms of health and hygiene, its educational value and its political implications linked to specific stimuli and values are all traits that have persisted over the centuries. At the same time, the combination and interpretation of these principles has undergone radical transformations in the course of history, generating completely different scenarios based on idiosyncratic and thus to some degree, incomparable logics. Over the centuries, these general principles have had very different meanings and expressions, producing dissimilar experiences. These very differences are of particular interest because, like other elements of

analysis, sport (and I acknowledge that the term sport is used conventionally in this case, with all of the above-mentioned caveats), through its mutations and changes, can contribute to an understanding of the peculiarities of individual societies. Hence dissimilarities and apparent incompatibility are not a limitation, but a stimulus to study differences in light of the presence of general and generic *longue durée* elements.

Sport was and is a fundamental part of various cultures and societies, felt, experienced, utilized and interpreted in keeping with the various anthropological and cultural identity peculiarities of which it has been the expression. These differences, and our awareness of their presence, backgrounds and relevance, are interesting means of comparing different historical periods and circumstances, in both the synchronic and diachronic senses, at the core of which the centrality of a general nucleus of values remains.

The focus and value of sport has as often been educational and character-building as playful and entertainment-oriented, but in any case, has always been tied to the cultural matrix of which it is an expression. An analysis of the practice of sport from antiquity to the contemporary era seems to suggest that the educational component is predominant in the development and power-building phases of each civilisation, while the spectacle/entertainment element has accompanied periods of crisis and decline, generating a paradigm valid for all of western civilisation over the course of the centuries, albeit with distinctions and original aspects.

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Index

A

amateurism, xvi, 6, 7, 61, 67, 68,
70, 71, 73, 86, 110, 122, 139, 144,
146
Athens, 3, 7, 12, 58, 71, 72, 98, 116,
150
athletics, xxii, 8, 29, 56, 72, 100,
115, 136

B

baseball, 48, 107, 108, 109, 110
basketball, 62, 63, 74, 112, 120,
140, 141
boxing, 11, 24, 48, 55, 58, 63, 64,
103, 104, 144

C

cricket, 49, 53, 55, 66, 69, 70, 74,
108, 109, 136
cycling, 8, 74, 89, 90, 115, 142, 143,
144

E

education, xvii, xix, xx, xxi, 9, 10,
11, 12, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 34, 37,
39, 42, 46, 47, 49, 50, 51, 53, 58,
60, 62, 70, 72, 79, 81, 82, 83, 88,
91, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100,
101, 102, 103, 105, 111, 117, 118,
119, 122, 125, 128, 129, 130, 131,
133, 134, 135, 142, 143, 150
equitation, 60, 74, 85, 126, 131

Europe, xxiv, 40, 48, 50, 51, 57, 74,
75, 80, 95, 102, 109, 113, 115,
117, 127, 130

F

female, 12, 19, 20, 36, 110
fencing, xii, 41, 45, 46, 48, 60, 81,
82, 84, 85, 95, 115, 116, 125, 126,
127, 131, 139, 141
football, 53, 59, 61, 63, 65, 67, 68,
69, 71, 73, 75, 86, 100, 101, 102,
103, 110, 111, 115, 120, 121, 127,
132, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141,
144, 150
France, viii, 35, 38, 39, 40, 47, 48,
53, 56, 59, 72, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81,
82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90,
91, 92, 93, 96, 97, 108, 111, 115,
126, 130, 139

G

gender, 20, 47, 60
Germany, viii, xxii, 38, 93, 94, 95,
97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103,
104, 105, 108, 111, 120, 121, 139,
151
Greece, x, xiii, xvi, xx, xxii, 1, 3, 6, 7,
8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 17, 18, 25, 28, 67,
68, 98, 113, 131, 145, 153
gymnasium, xix, 9, 10, 12, 25, 26,
29, 67, 150
gymnastics, xii, xvii, xxii, 10, 13,
19, 20, 23, 25, 29, 41, 47, 50, 53,
59, 68, 72, 79, 80, 81, 83, 84, 85,
86, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100,
101, 103, 104, 105, 110, 115, 123,

128, 130, 131, 133, 134, 135, 137,
139, 140, 142, 143, 145, 151

H

health, xxiv, 1, 9, 12, 20, 21, 25, 26,
28, 29, 41, 46, 47, 50, 53, 58, 65,
66, 79, 80, 81, 83, 91, 94, 95, 96,
102, 112, 116, 126, 128, 129, 130,
133, 135, 139, 143

I

Italy, vii, viii, 36, 38, 40, 48, 49, 53,
58, 62, 63, 88, 106, 120, 123, 124,
126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132,
133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139,
140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146,
147, 153

M

male, 1, 12, 16, 60, 74, 110

O

Olympiad, 17
Olympic games, 12, 14, 15, 17, 36,
72, 104
Olympics, 6, 14, 16, 71, 72, 73, 74,
88, 99, 103, 113, 116, 119, 120,
129, 144, 146

P

professionalism, xvi, 6, 7, 8, 12, 24,
29, 51, 61, 62, 67, 68, 70, 71, 73,
74, 75, 90, 105, 110, 113, 122,
132, 139, 144, 146
public school, 56, 63, 65, 67, 99,
108, 110

R

riding, 20, 41, 47, 60, 68, 84, 115,
116, 126, 142
Rome, xiii, xiv, xvi, xix, xxi, 19, 20,
21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 32,
49, 58, 66, 67, 120, 145, 146, 153
rugby, 50, 59, 64, 67, 71, 74, 84, 86,
110

S

soccer, 67, 68, 74, 110, 111
Sparta, 3, 9, 20, 73, 98
spectacularisation, xxii, 61, 64, 78,
146, 147

T

tennis, 40, 47, 70, 71, 74, 80, 81, 84,
115, 141

U

United Kingdom, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55,
58, 59, 60, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69,
70, 74, 75, 87, 88, 89, 100, 144,
151
United States, viii, 100, 104, 111
USSR, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122

V

volleyball, 74, 120

W

war, xiv, xvii, xviii, 3, 8, 10, 11, 15,
16, 17, 19, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 32,
34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 45, 54, 62,
68, 73, 74, 77, 79, 84, 98, 101,
102, 105, 106, 109, 117, 119, 120,
122, 125, 141, 145, 146

