

# Body and Mind

## Sport in Europe from the Roman Empire to the Renaissance

John McClelland

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## Sport in the Global Society

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General Editors: J.A. Mangan and Boria Majumdar

### BODY AND MIND

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# Body and Mind

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Between the physical culture of ancient Greece and the development of our modern European and North American sports lie the ‘forgotten centuries’ of sport. *Body and Mind: Sport in Europe from the Roman Empire to the Renaissance* traces the evolution of sport in Western Europe from the arenas and chariot races of the Roman Empire, via the chivalric pursuits of the Middle Ages and the court games of the early modern period, to the triumph of personal decorum and scientific rationalism in the seventeenth century.

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Offering a new and original perspective on the relationship between sport and society, this unique study will be of great interest to all historians of sport and culture.

**John McClelland** is Professor Emeritus of French Literature and former Associated Professor of Sports History at the University of Toronto.



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# Body and Mind

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Sport in Europe from the Roman  
Empire to the Renaissance

John McClelland



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To my beloved wife Laura and our daughters Claire  
and Jacqueline

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## Series editors' foreword

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*Sport in the Global Society* was launched in the late 1990s. It now has over 100 volumes. Until recently an odd myopia characterised academia with regard to sport. The global *groves of academe* remained essentially Cartesian in inclination. They favoured a mind/body dichotomy: thus the study of ideas was acceptable; the study of sport was not. All that has now changed. Sport is now incorporated, intelligently, within debate about *inter alia* ideologies, power, stratification, mobility and inequality. The reason is simple. In the modern world sport is everywhere: it is as ubiquitous as war. E.J. Hobsbawm, the Marxist historian, once called it one of the most significant of the new manifestations of late nineteenth-century Europe. Today it is one of the most significant manifestations of the twenty-first century world. Such is its power, politically, culturally, economically, spiritually and aesthetically, that sport beckons the academic more persuasively than ever – to borrow, and refocus, an expression of the radical historian Peter Gay – ‘to explore its familiar terrain and to wrest new interpretations from its inexhaustible materials’. As a subject for inquiry, it is replete, as he remarked of history, with profound ‘questions unanswered and for that matter questions unasked’.

Sport seduces the teeming ‘global village’; it is the new opiate of the masses; it is one of the great modern experiences; its attraction astonishes only the recluse; its appeal spans the globe. Without exaggeration, sport is a mirror in which nations, communities, men and women now see themselves. That reflection is sometimes bright, sometimes dark, sometimes distorted, sometimes magnified. This metaphorical mirror is a source of mass exhilaration and depression, security and insecurity, pride and humiliation, bonding and alienation. Sport for many has replaced religion as a source of emotional catharsis and spiritual passion, and for many, since it is among the earliest of memorable childhood experiences, it infiltrates memory, shapes enthusiasms, serves fantasies. To co-opt Gay again: it blends memory and desire. Sport, in addition, can be a lens through which to scrutinise major themes in the political and social sciences: democracy and despotism and the great associated movements of socialism, fascism, communism and capitalism, as well as political cohesion and confrontation, social reform and social stability.

The story of modern sport is the story of the modern world in microcosm; a modern global tapestry permanently being woven. Furthermore, nationalist and imperialist, philosopher and politician, radical and conservative have all sought in sport a manifestation of national identity, status and superiority.

Finally, for countless millions sport is the personal pursuit of ambition, assertion, well-being and enjoyment.

For all the above reasons, sport demands the attention of the academic. *Sport in the Global Society* is a response.

J.A. Mangan  
Boria Majumdar  
Series editors  
*Sport in the Global Society*

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# Preface

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This book is addressed primarily to sports historians. It deals with athletics between the two historical periods and places that have tended to occupy their research, ancient Greece and modern Europe and North America. It is also addressed to the cultural historians of the early modern period, who have tended to overlook the role of sports and physical activities in the lives and social structures of individuals and political entities. It began life as a commissioned 40-page introduction, in French, to a facsimile reprint of Arcangelo Tuccaro's *Trois dialogues de l'exercice de sauter et voltiger en l'air* of 1599. For commercial reasons the reprint never saw the light of day, but the research I did on that project led to conference papers, contacts with colleagues working in related areas, and to the discovery of many more sixteenth-century books that taught the principles and practice of one or another of the varieties of athletics.

I had then thought to write a monograph on sport in the Renaissance, but was encouraged by J.A. Mangan to extend my scope back to include the Middle Ages, starting with the fall of the western Roman Empire in 476. Preliminary research convinced me that that date was as artificial for sports history as it was for social and political history, and that ancient sport underwent its real qualitative change in the years following Augustus's accession to the principate in 31–27 BC. On the other hand, to write a book that would treat Roman and Early Modern sport as if there was some continuity between the two flies in the face of what has seemed an irrefutable fact to all historians: the 'awful revolution', to use F. W. Walbank's term, that put an end to ancient civilisation. Sport was no more continuous through the Dark Ages than was any other form of Roman culture, but, I shall argue, recurrent cycles can be observed.

The starting point of my research, once I expanded it beyond the Renaissance, was naturally the general histories that had already been published, beginning with the work of Dennis Brailsford, Roland Auguet, H.A. Harris, and Gerhard Lukas, and later with that of J.-P. Thuillier and Bernard Merdrignac. Although I have, as much as possible, gone back to the primary sources that they indicated to me, this book owes them a debt that is not always acknowledged. Similarly, other books and writers influenced my thinking about ancient and early modern sport in ways that are both concrete and intangible, hence more difficult to specify than



any of the customary scholarly formats allow: Jacques Ulmann, Allen Guttmann, David Sansone, Nigel Crowther and Donald Kyle among those who have written directly on sport; James Ackerman, Alfred Crosby, Michel Foucault, Robert Klein, Bernard Weinberg, John White, and Sheldon Zitner among those whose subject lay elsewhere.

Along the way the project encountered a number of hurdles, the most significant of which has been the burgeoning of interest in the sports of ancient Rome and the concomitant appearance of a number of important books that revealed primary and secondary sources I had heretofore been unaware of. Gladiators, in particular, have been the object of recent studies almost too numerous to mention. In the early modern period, Fleckenstein's (1985) and Barber and Barker's (1989) work on the tournament, Heiner Gillmeister's history of tennis (1997), and Sydney Anglo's study of Renaissance martial arts (2000) have also obviated the necessity of covering those two subjects in the detail I had planned (and rendered superfluous some of the things I had already written). Ultimately, it became clear that it no longer made any sense simply to chronicle the evolution of sport during the 16 centuries in which, as several people have commented, sport seemed to drop off the historiographical radar. What is offered here then is a set of thematically based essays that each trace a particular dimension of sport and athletics in general over the *longue durée*. For this reason, the book is repetitious in places and at times it tells readers in some detail things they already know. The chapters may be read independently of each other and in almost any order, although the last three chapters should, I think, be read as a group.

In a book of this scope there are inevitably some imbalances. For the Early Modern period French and Italian sources are especially prominent because these have over the years been the major fields of my research. There are also, undoubtedly, materials that have been overlooked or given less prominence than some may think they deserve. In particular, I have not felt comfortable writing on horsemanship, and so there is nothing here on that subject. Fortunately the forthcoming work of Serge Vaucelle will palliate that neglect. Physical education generated a copious body of literature in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it belongs properly to another kind of study, except to the extent it impinges on sport. Beyond these, no other omission has been intentional and to the best of my knowledge I have not purposefully left out any primary or secondary text that might invalidate an argument I wish to make.

Some components of these chapters have been published elsewhere, as will be indicated in the notes, but only one is reprinted verbatim from a previous publication. Other elements have been drawn from papers and lectures given at the conferences and meetings of the North American Society for Sport History, the Society for the Study of Play, the Collège Européen de Sport Histoire, the France Seminar (Toronto), the Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium, the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the North Plains Conference on Early British Literature, the Convegno di Studi Umanistici at Montepulciano, the Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne, the Université de Paris

V, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris), the Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de la Renaissance (Tours), the Université de Montpellier, the Institut für Sportwissenschaften at the Georg-August Universität (Göttingen), and conferences and meetings organized by the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies in Victoria University at the University of Toronto. On these occasions I received many helpful comments for which I wish to express my thanks.

Over time, many colleagues and friends have made contributions big and small, intellectual and material, to the realization of the project. Michael Flannery, David Hamilton, Jill Levenson, Greg Malszecki, Fik Meijer, Joachim Rühl, and Zahra Newby gave me access to their research before it was publicly available or not to be found in Toronto libraries. Joan Bigwood, Bill Edwards, Jim Estes, Michael Dewar, and Alison Keith were always willing to help me over the hurdles posed by languages with which I was less familiar. Nigel Crowther, Don Kyle, Stephen Miller, and J.-P. Thuillier provided helpful, off-the-record insight into aspects of ancient sport. Paul Denis, Teresa González Aja, Corey Keeble, Paul-Hervé Parsy, Manuel Terrón Bermúdez, and Nicola Woods assisted me in putting together the book's illustrations. Other, more intangible debts, are owed for their help, friendship and encouragement to Jean-Michel Benoit, Ned Duval, Marie Madeleine Fontaine, Nevenka and the late Norman Gritz, Brian Merrilees, François Roudaut, David Smith, Serge Vaucelle, Georges Vigarello and many others. To all I here express my thanks, which I must also extend to Routledge editors Samantha Grant and Kate Manson, for their patience and assistance.

Finally, I must recognize a debt of gratitude to three colleagues and friends who are the book's prime movers: Paul Bouissac, who first introduced me to the work of Arcangelo Tuccaro and whose intellectual vitality continues to set an example; Bruce Kidd, whose decanal generosity made it possible for me to teach sports history in the University of Toronto's Faculty of Physical Education; and Arnd Krüger, whose offer of a visiting professorship at Göttingen opened up my research into Roman sport, and who, beyond that, has been a hospitable and energetic model of sports scholarship.

Above all, of course, my gratitude goes to my wife and colleague Laura Willett. She has supported this project in word and deed, taken time from her own research to help me with mine, and kept me focused in the face of other distractions. It has been – and will continue to be – an unalloyed pleasure to work and think and talk with her in the sun-filled room that is our study.

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# Timelines, historiography, definitions

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Between the years 28 and 2 BC Augustus, the first emperor, and the Roman senate in his honour, created three ostensibly permanent, quadrennial Greek-style athletic festivals, the *ludi pro valetudine Caesaris* (games to foster the emperor's long life and good health), the *Actia*, and the *Sebasta*, and elevated them to the same status as the Olympic and other 'crown' games that had been in existence for centuries (Caldelli 1993). These moves marked a new departure in the history of Roman sport. The Romans had previously considered Greek games to be oddities associated with the triumphs of victorious generals returning from the east. These new games, however, were part of a series of initiatives that would radically alter both quantitatively and qualitatively the sports that the Romans watched and practiced. Despite the fact that only the first festival of the three was held in Rome<sup>1</sup> – the other two took place in Nicopolis, Greece, and in Greek-speaking Naples respectively – they were perceived in retrospect as establishing a model for future emperors to follow and as achieving an assimilation of Greek and Roman culture.<sup>2</sup>

In June 1559, the French king Henri II similarly modified the course of sports history, though he did so inadvertently. Forty years old, politically defeated, and physically vulnerable, he hoped to recoup his prestige by jousting against a younger man he believed he could unhorse. As the two riders' weapons struck their mark, Henri's visor flew open and a large splinter of his opponent's lance pierced his eye and entered his brain. The best doctors were brought in and six criminals were beheaded to see if the wound could be replicated and a treatment devised, but to no avail. Henri's death 10 days later – perhaps the first time in history that a king had died from a sports-related injury – effectively brought to an end a sport the European nobility had practiced for six centuries and turned all its future manifestations into mere pomp and pageantry. The elimination of tourneying and jousting from the range of physical activities the upper classes might legitimately practice started an evolution that culminated in golf and lawn tennis.

Thus articulated, the dates chosen as terminals for this partial history of Western sport appear to derive from an outmoded historiography based on the notion of the 'great man'. They are more, however, than mere narrative conveniences. History is the sum of what humans did or failed to do, and some individuals have,

historically, committed or omitted more – and more significant – acts than others. Historians, I think, all agree that Augustus's accession to imperial power in Rome introduced political and cultural innovations that radically altered the ancient world. Greek civilisation spread west and Roman civilisation spread east. Small towns throughout the Empire burgeoned into cities, and Roman architecture and literature dominated the Mediterranean world. Henri's death some 16 centuries later certainly had a destructive affect within France – religiously based civil war would shortly break out and last 35 years – but it also led to a realignment of Western European power structures that would ultimately produce the first new empires since the decline and fall of Rome. More importantly for our purposes, it coincided chronologically with a number of decisive developments in both science and art that in retrospect have been seen to have created the set of paradigms that we call modernity.

The modifications that were introduced in the last decades of the pre-common era and again in the middle of the sixteenth century are just as visible in sport as in other phenomena. By 30 BC Roman spectator sports had a history going back as much as several hundred years, but under Augustus and his successors sports spectacles increased in number and variety, became the monopoly of the state, and were housed in the monumental venues that we associate with them today. At the same time, personal athletic activities lost some of the proto-military character that had originally justified their pursuit. Under the guise of the *collegia*, associations of young nobles created by Augustus, they took on more of the character of the Greek gymnasium, acquiring a medical, hygienic dimension and moving from the parade ground to exercise rooms (*palaestrae*) built as annexes to the public baths or into the country villas of private individuals. In republican times, physical exercise was a sign of performing one's civic and national duty; under the Empire it became a sign of one's wealth, nobility, and social prestige. Most interesting, however, is the fact that Latin writers, beginning with those that lived into Augustus's reign and that were at least on the fringes of his court, started to deal with matters athletic in some detail. This reflects not only the increasing importance of sport as a social phenomenon under the Empire, but also a willingness on the part of Roman authors to put sport into language, to intellectualize what had seemed to be purely physical activities and to recreate them in sentences that conveyed the reality of physical contests to their readers. This subjection of gestures to words bespeaks the increasing dominance of the mind over the body in imperial Latin culture, the submission of the organic – and therefore innately chaotic – to the artificial rational order of grammar.

The changes in athletics attendant on the demise of Henri II correspond to criteria that are partially of a different order. Physical exercise, focused almost entirely on the training of future knights in the handling of weapons and horses, had certainly existed in the early Middle Ages but the transmission of its techniques was almost entirely oral. Tournaments were not quite ad hoc affairs, but they had little internal structure beyond the attempts by knights to capture the horses and persons of their adversaries and hold them for ransom. In the fourteenth century,

however, spectacle, entertainment, and the display of chivalric prowess came to take precedence over the acquisition of booty as the determining factors in the tournament.

In the following decades, Renaissance humanists, usually employed as pedagogues, gave physical exercise a new articulation as part of general education and expanded its repertoire beyond the handling of weapons. They drew the authority for their pronouncements in this domain not from existing practice – though as Körbs (1938) pointed out, that is exactly what their programs perpetuated – but from what they knew of the sports of Greco-Roman antiquity. Almost simultaneously, various kinds of ball games – previously confined to ecclesiastics and rustics – began to interest the upper classes and, alongside dancing, joined with tourneying and fencing to create a new paradigm of knightly sports. There was also a change in ethic. Although competitiveness was still present, Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, published in 1528, stipulated that the most important thing for a noble was to ride, joust, swim, and play ball games with *sprezzatura*, a nonchalance that demonstrated to spectators his superior physical and athletic skills (Castiglione 1972). Three years later, Thomas Elyot's *Book of the Governor* also valorised sport and exercise as 'apt to the furniture of a gentleman's personage' and as both physically healthy and psychologically 'a laudable solace' (Elyot 1962/1531: 60). But in athletics as in other pursuits the Renaissance carried within it the seeds of its own undoing.

The social promotion of sport among the upper classes from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries certainly dribbled down into the bourgeoisie, probably through the schools, where recess became a time for competitive games, cf. Erasmus's 1522 colloquy on sport, 'De lusu' (Erasmus 1965: 22–30). It also attracted the attention of doctors, who debated with each other on the value of exercise, and came under the scrutiny of the bureaucratic mind. In the early fifteenth century tournament leagues were formed in Germany, with their attendant insistence on rules and regulations. There and elsewhere lances had to be stamped with official seals of approval, saddles and shields had to be uniform, and complex number-based scoring systems were adopted and applied. All these moves gradually robbed the chivalric sports of their spontaneity. Renaissance sport, as Semenza has said (2003: 13) 'bridges the chasm between the unrestrained disorderliness of Carnival and the orderliness of all rule-bound phenomena'. This shift towards rationalizing sport – in much the same way as Alberti rationalized artistic perspective in the early fifteenth century – was not to everyone's liking. Shakespeare certainly decried it (see Chapter 8) and Henri II had actually insisted that his fatal tournament be conducted 'à l'imitation des anciens tournois' (Tavannes 1838/1573: 225) rather than in the new style of scoring points cumulatively according to where your lance struck your opponent's body or shield.

This shift was concomitant with a new sense of decorum that in the course of the Renaissance permeated the nobility and the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie and cast opprobrium on physical movements that might require them to sweat or

perform gestures that, if not graceful, would make the doer look ridiculous.<sup>3</sup> Up to about 1600 French and other European rulers and their courts were fairly avid tennis players, both indoor and outdoor, but by the 1660s the courtiers of Louis XIV (1643–1715) and Charles II (1660–85) were less concerned with playing strenuous games and more with fencing, hunting, dancing well, and appearing fashionable, although Charles himself liked to play tennis vigorously enough to provoke copious perspiration.<sup>4</sup>

Parallel to sport's transformation into a regulated, rationalized activity and to the distancing between the self and the body that is implicit in the notion of decorum, sports also became over the course of the Renaissance something you could write about and talk about among persons of culture. As in ancient Latin there began to exist in the modern languages a vocabulary and a syntax capable of clearly describing a succession of physical gestures. After 1530 numerous books started to appear giving instruction in swordplay, swimming, archery, tennis, etc., and many of these – swordplay is an exception – were written not by professional athletes but by learned outsiders who relied much more heavily on text than on illustration.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, as I shall argue in Chapter 8, the progressive intellectualization of sport both fostered an interest in the nature of athletic activity and led fairly quickly to its abandonment as an actual practice among upper and middle-class Europeans.

Sport and bodily activities in general can be experienced by both participants and spectators as purely physical events, a set of rapidly executed gestures that lie somewhere outside the domain of language and reason. By creating a literature that taught its readers how to play tennis, ride a horse, shoot an arrow, or wield a rapier – both bio-mechanically and strategically – the late Renaissance objectified these forms of play and robbed them of their mystery. It thereby gradually removed sport from the domain of the intuitive and spontaneous and made it into a rational object analogous to those studied by physics and anatomy. The rise of scientific method that began with Copernicus and Vesalius before 1550 and flourished with Galileo, Harvey, and Descartes in the early seventeenth century placed a premium on intellectual activities and downgraded leisurely physical pursuits to the level of children's games or mere popular amusements. Despite isolated British examples – the upper-class pursuits of golf, cricket, and horseracing were all institutionalized between 1750 and 1787 – and despite an interest shown by educators in physical education for children in the eighteenth century (Ulmann 1977), the decline of serious athletics among adults, of the kind envisioned by Bardi (1580) and James I (1596/1599), would last for another two centuries. It was really only after 1850 that sports – almost all (re)invented – began again to occupy the prestigious cultural position that had been theirs in ancient Rome and early modern Europe.

Between these two high points of sport – Rome in the first two centuries of the Empire and Western Europe in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance – there was a long fallow period that has been attributed to a number of factors. The various Roman games – 177 days of them per year in the third and fourth

centuries – continued to be held at their stipulated dates, but attention seems to have been diverted from them to more urgent issues. Under the pressure of barbarian incursions, the Empire that Augustus had united was split into two halves by Diocletian in 285, along a line roughly coincidental with the present boundary separating Croatia from Serbia. And by 395 these two halves had become four quarters. Similarly, Rome itself, though it retained its historical symbolic prestige, had long been abandoned as an imperial residence in favour of cities closer to the places where the threat to the Empire's northern boundaries seemed most real: Milan or Trier or Ravenna or Sirmium.<sup>6</sup> The Colosseum, the Circus Maximus, and Domitian's stadium, all built or enlarged between 80 and 114, still stood and athletic contests were still held there, but the people's real attention was focused elsewhere and on other things.

It was also becoming increasingly expensive and complicated to stage spectator sports. Augustus had concentrated the monopoly of the games in the hands of the emperor, but in later centuries they were left again to private initiative. When the Roman official Symmachus was obliged to organize games to celebrate his son's elevation to high administrative offices in the late fourth century, his correspondence reveals that he had to write desperately to various friends all over the Empire to get enough gladiators, horses for the chariot races, and wild animals for the *venationes* or wild beast hunts (*Letters*, Budé, books 2, 5, and 9). For these same reasons, provincial officials who bore the responsibility of staging games in the outlying administrative centres had gradually abdicated this responsibility, preferring to devote such funds as they had to more useful purposes (Hen 1995). In other words, sports were not worth the money and effort that was spent on them.

Another contributing factor in the decline of the Roman games was certainly the negative attitude towards them expressed first by pagan moralists – Seneca – and then by the Christian moralists who took up the theme – Tertullian, St Cyprian, Salvian. Throughout the Middle Ages, Christianity in fact remained opposed to games in general, as it did to any indulgence that brought pleasure to the body, and this opposition increased in direct proportion to the material and human violence that the games might occasion, whether they were popular or aristocratic. Equally significant is the fact that the essentially nomadic peoples who flooded into the Empire from the east and who by the year 500 ruled Western Europe in the place of the Romans had no athletic culture. Although the first generation of barbarian rulers tried to mount public games in the way the emperors had, they really did not know how to go about it (Cassiodorus 1973; Gregory of Tours 1927). As Sidonius (*Letters*, Loeb 1.2) reports in the fifth century and Eginhard (1967/828) again in the ninth, Frankish and Gothic kings lacked the aristocratic Roman's sense of personal dignity and liked to show off their athletic talents, but as they equated personal strength with authority, they did not want to enter into any sporting contests with their power-hungry vassals. Europe between 600 and 1000 was, in any case, 'profondément sauvage', as Georges Duby described it (1973b: 11), and not fertile ground for Huizinga's play element to take root.



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