

SPORT

A Short Review by Dr. Fr. Franzmeyer

England is the motherland of sport, this being evident in de fact that the word "sport" originated in the English language. It is an abbreviation of the Middle English "disport/desport", a similar abbreviation being the derivation of "spend" from "dispend". "Disport/desport" is derived from the Old French "desport/depport/deport", meaning "joy, amusement, recreation". The verb appeared in the twelfth century, being used originally in the reflexive, "se déporter". Whether it is derived from the Latin "de-portare", meaning "to transport or carry", or whether a new form "se dis-portare", which does not exist in classical Latin, may be attributed to analogy with such words as "se deducere — se déduire, se dis-trahere — se distraire, se disvertere — se divertir" is difficult to decide. "Se déporter" is in any case equivalent in meaning to the word "se déduire", which also appeared frequently in early French and has a meaning equivalent to "se distraire/se divertir" in modern usage.

The Normans brought the word "despot" to England in the eleventh century, where in its new surroundings it assumed decisive significance in the national development. In the meantime de word became lost in its land of origin, traces being retained only in "déportements", meaning "misconduct". In England, on the other band, the word became associated with health and assumed a significance which determined the development in health and character of an entire nation. The Normans, as conquerors of the new country, continued for the time being to speak French. Their amusements were referred to in the word "disport". The vanquished "hordes", the Anglo-Saxons, who were held in a position of suppression and subservience., did not participate in this "disport". The amusement and entertainment of the noble and ruling Norman class were sought chiefly in bunting, although their competitive exercises with swords, spears, bows, etc. were also regarded and characterized as "disport". In this manner the word "sport" acquired two fundamental aspects in its meaning: an amusement which is sought in the fresh air of the open countryside, and one which becomes amusement only through the participation of a group. That the competitive element has also become fundamentally associated with sport is indicated even by the present-day attitude of the Englishman, who often referred to a successful undertaking in the Great War as "very tine sport".

In spite of the fact that sport was originally a purely chivalrous pastime of the Normans and the common people were even forbidden by law to participate in the sporting diversions of the knights, this distinction between nobility and people, Normans and Anglo-Saxons, had already disappeared by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, due principally to the Hundred Years War with France. A common language developed as did distinctly national forms of sport and games, which became the common property of all, regardless of class.

Chivalric and plebeian expressions, Anglo-Saxon and French words today make up the vocabulary of sport and games. The general designating terms are "play", "game" and "sport", and with all three is associated the idea of relaxation, joy and group recreation. In everyday usage "game" is the noun while the verb is "play", but "sport" comprises both "game" and "play" in a general concept. "Sport" is the testing standard for all play; it is inseparably associated with "fair play", and a "sportsman" is a title of honour for a "fair player" in sport as well as in life.

Thus the chivalric, which was responsible for the origin of the word "sport" in England, has been retained in the fullest measure in the modern meaning and application of the term. Its origin from the French and Latin and its relation to "se desporter" reveal a distinct personal desire for recreation chosen freely according to inclination, and the development of its meaning in English indicates that for such relaxation, recreation and joy, the mutual participation of the group or community is required, a participation in the fresh air and in competitive form.

Sport has thus made an "open-air people" of the English nation, and has determined its physical, moral and mental development. Out of the requirement for fresh air has developed in the course of the centuries not only the sporting but also the public life of the nation. As the English form of state government based on the highest possible degree of individual freedom replaced absolutism in Europe, English sport also entered the playing fields and vocabularies of the world.

In a new form with a new meaning the word thus returned to France from whence it had originally migrated with the Normans.