

Sport and National Prestige

(from "PHYSICAL RECREATION", London)

A recent editorial in the British Football Association's Bulletin, having called attention to the fact that in some countries success or failure in an international match is closely associated with national prestige, goes on to imply that this is an attitude we must accept and embrace however little we like it. Similar reflections are common in the sporting columns of the press and even, to judge from questions on the Order Paper, in Parliament.

How far is this to go? It is one thing to take our games more seriously, to improve our sports facilities, to study and learn from the techniques and practices of other countries. It is quite another even to begin to admit that our national prestige is in fact at stake according to our performance in this or that sport.

What would such a view lead to? It would lead first to the abandonment of some of our traditional and most cherished ideals in sport. We should have to preach that what mattered was the result and not the match. We should be urged to withdraw from any international competition in which prospects of victory were not good. There might even be widespread agitation for the national adoption of a single code of football so that our whole resources could be concentrated for success. True amateurism would finally disappear. And, sure enough, before long the Government of the day would be unable to resist the pressure to take some action or other to ensure victory for British teams at international contests. The Minister of Education and the Secretary of the Football Association might go in danger of their lives if an English goalkeeper failed to save a penalty!

Our Traditional Attitude

Surely our traditional attitude is a better one. Success at games means nothing more than success at games. If West Bromwich beats Preston in the Cup Final, it means

(probably) that they had the better football team, not that West Bromwich was a better place to live in, was the better-governed town, or had the happier, titter and harder-working citizens. If Derbyshire had won the county cricket championship no one would have expected large numbers of the retired population of Surrey to flock to live there on account of Derbyshire's enhanced prestige. If other nations are silly enough to talk or think of sport in terms of national prestige and sack Cabinet Ministers because of a wrong team selection, must we imitate their silliness?

A recent correspondent complained of the lack of humour in PHYSICAL RECREATION. He is quite right. But where is the fun in most international sport just now? Much of it is more like war. If Great Britain can maintain its sense of fun, which is pretty much the same as its sense of proposition, we may help the pendulum of international sport to swing back again towards joy and sanity. But without Britain's influence the outlook might indeed be a gloomy one.

This does not mean, and must not be taken to mean, that we do not care whether or not we win international matches. We do care. *But not above all else.*

The correspondence evoked by our last editorial under this title, some of which is printed elsewhere, shows that it expressed the alarm felt by many people at the present tendency to distort the true purpose and meaning of sport. All who wrote to us have endorsed the view that we have a duty to resist the claim so frequently made that a nation's prestige is in fact at stake in every single international sporting encounter and that, whenever we play a game or run a race, defeat does harm to our country. If this is not dangerous and pernicious nonsense, it is hard to see what is. Sportsmanship, not success, should be the criterion, otherwise, why compete? Someone *must* lose, yet no one wants to do a disservice to his own country.