

France

by Eugen Weber

Here is the last part of the study by the American historian, Eugen WEBER, on the birth of sport in France. The first two parts appeared in nos. 52 and 53-54 of the "Olympic Review".

The Birth of Nationalism.

Rugby remained true to the ideals that the first sporting clubs embodied: elitism, amateurism, the educational value of sporting activities were what its followers stood for and what we can find in the writings of men like Pierre de COUBERTIN. COUBERTIN, whose efforts played a major role in the spread and acceptance of sporting activities in the late 1880s and 1890s, had seen athletics and games as key educational activities, apt to produce all-round men and to free French youth from moral and physical inertia. What COUBERTIN had not bargained for was that the athletic revival

that he did so much to bring about made a great contribution to the nationalist revival of the pre-1914 years.

Before the turn of the century the "Almanach des Sports" already celebrated the martial virtues of team games. "Le football" for instance, *"is a veritable little war, with its necessary discipline, and its way of getting participants used to danger and to blows."* Then, in 1913, AGATHON's well-known inquiry into the mood of middle-class youth noted the effect of sports on *"the patriotic optimism of youth"* and praised *"the moral benefit of collective sports, like football, so widespread in our lycées," which "develop and maintain a warlike atmosphere among young people"* (41).

COUBERTIN himself had little use for such conclusions. But he quoted with approval an article in which the journalist Pierre MILLE described what his young contemporaries had learned from sport: *"They quite often consider a possible war as a match that must be played as well as possible, after having trained for it scientifically. One holds on, keeping one's composure and one's breath to the end. And if you win, you win; if you lose, you lose. It is no dishonor. A game is a game, and that is all"* (42).

Freedom on a Chain

Going beyond the advantages of preparedness, sport, as Hippolyte TAINÉ had perceived in his "Notes sur l'Angleterre" (1872), may also be considered as an excellent "outlet . . . for the strong and over-ample vigor of youth . . ." From society's point of view, competitive games offered a means of channeling and regulating violence, especially the savage violence of adolescence. To individuals too ready to follow some subversive drummer, games offered opportunities for self-assertion and sometimes also for indulging in competitive violence in any number of ways that society condemns outside the battlefield. Theodore ROOSEVELT, a great supporter of COUBERTIN, always preached the value of sport as a source of energy, but also as a way of channeling excess energy into socially approved directions (43). If, for children, play is often a work substitute, for adolescents its regulated form may provide a unique occasion for self-expression and immediate success. The kind of adjustment this facilitates may be looked on either with approval or with disfavor. Echoing the denunciations of sport's contribution to the "puerilism of contemporary life" found in HUIZINGA's *Homo ludens*, a French psychologist has found that sport provides "extraordinarily effective appease-



Theodore ROOSEVELT

ment for the insatiable unconscious," and hence "a very powerful means of infantilization". The best statement of this point of view appears in the work of Georges MAGNANE, for whom the discipline of sports offers "une liberté sous bonne garde". The opportunities opened for social control appear more powerful than those making for self-liberation or self-expression: "Sport is the chief pole of attraction toward approved activities: licit, consciously social and, in the broadest sense of the term, docile" (44).

We know that when problems vital to wild animals are solved by human intervention, surplus energy that may well be employed in play becomes available. Thus, adult domestic animals show tendencies to play that are normally found only in the young. For captive animals, too, play fulfills a hygienic role, providing an opportunity for activity without which animals nourished without effort and protected against natural enemies tend to lapse into aberrant behaviour. Captives, all zoologists tell us, need special opportunities for distraction and for the expenditure of surplus energy. Writing about play in animals, Jacques LECOMTE treats their games as substitutes designed to protect them against neuroses that may develop when their impulses cannot express themselves either in normal or in substitute activities. Referring to the tendency of animals liberated from tasks related to survival to express their freedom in play, he discerns ludic behaviour *"among young animals whose childhood is particularly prolonged and whose primary needs are satisfied by their parents"* (45).

Even without remembering that ROUSSEAU always insisted that *"to educate is to retard"*, we cannot help recognizing the counterpart of these young animals in the young members of the middle and upper classes then being educated in the schools of France. That the

concrete possibilities of this function of sport were soon noticed, and generally approved, can be seen from an essay printed as an appendix to AGATHON'S inquiry, in which a sporting journalist praised *l'éducation sportive* for preparing its subjects to be *"the right and contented man in the right place"* (46). Another contributor described how the practice of football and cross-country running had taught him and his friends the competitive nature of life, persuaded them that men were unequal, and turned them away from socialism with its false ideas of equality, fraternity and pacifism. *"Sport enlightened me on myself and on my real feelings"* (47). This brings to mind remarks of a later date like Lucien ROMIER'S assurance that a football team for every thousand inhabitants would solve the social problem. And it is true that, the hierarchy of players and athletes coinciding only very approximately with the general social hierarchy, games can provide temporary substitutes, artificial detours around irritating real-life barriers. They also provide a temporary opportunity for individuals to communicate - and to establish personal and social bonds that are otherwise lacking. A few years before the First World War, a rather obscure pamphlet actually pleaded this particular value of sport - the true equality established on the playing field - as a social educator. But we have seen already that this was not very

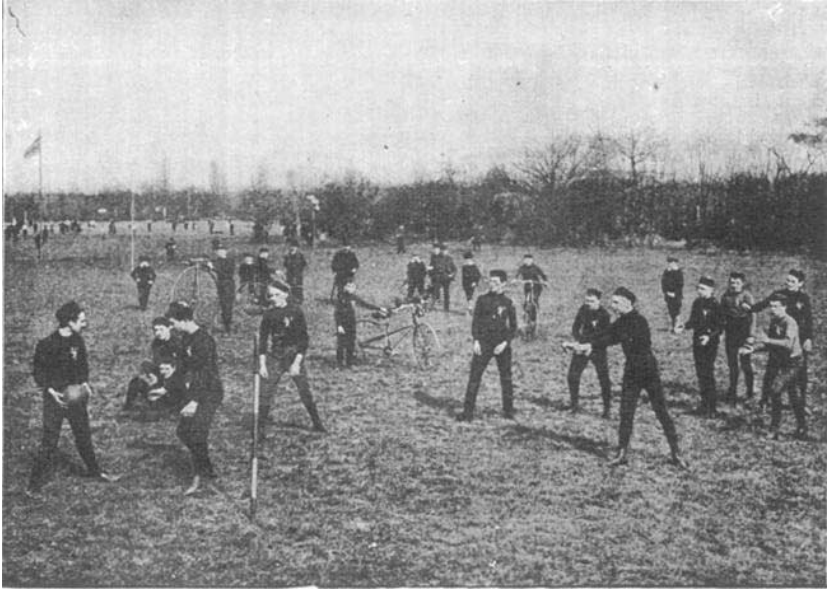
likely to occur in the circumstances of the 1880s and 1890s, when class distinctions were affirmed rather than threatened by the new athletic clubs.

Sports Rivalries, Political Rivalries.

ROMIER's words were uttered between the wars, when men of good-will sometimes sought "*a substitute for national union in a football team*" (48). In the 1890s the very idea of sporting activities for the common people evoked laughter when raised

in a municipal council. Conversely, when the Fédération Sportive Athlétique Socialiste was founded in 1908, it catered only to members of the Socialist party (SFIO). Though this exclusivism was abandoned in 1911, sporting activities for class-conscious workers remained at the mercy of political fluctuations and counted for little until the 1930s. The Swiss Socialists did much better in this respect with their SATUS (Workers' Federation of Gymnastics and Sport), founded in 1874.

There were, of course, the *patronages*, well-intentioned enterprises designed to improve the character and body of the deserving poor. The name reflects a paternalistic and, finally, patronizing inspiration. Not that, seen in contemporary perspective, there was much wrong in this, but for the fact that the *patronages* themselves served ulterior ends, while their activities, far from bringing sporting enthusiasts closer together, emphasized their divisions. Since the 1870s many English clubs founded in churches, chapels, or Sunday schools had grown to national prominence. But whereas in England such enterprises were "*an innocent source of pleasure and satisfaction for the masses*", in France they were too often mere rods to beat a foe. Thus, and especially in those western regions where political divisions were most fierce, many small towns enjoyed two sports clubs where one would have



Pupils from the Alsatian School playing rugby in the Bois de Boulogne.

been ample - one Catholic, the other Republican, one for the Right, another for the Left, centres of their party's activities and focus for the hostility of the other side (49). In the first decade of the century and especially after the separation law of December 1905, the Catholics made very serious efforts to expand and organize the scattered activities of their parish groups and thus regain some of the influence forfeited with the loss of so many teaching establishments. An increasing number of parish

patronages, deliberately oriented toward physical activities appealing to the young (Les Jeunes de St. Bruno, de St. Genès, de St. Roch) were grouped in regional gymnastic and sporting unions, and these in turn affiliated to the Fédération Gymnastique et Sportive des Patronages de France, founded in 1898.

The Union Régionale Gymnastique et Sportive des Patronages du Sud-Ouest was officially registered in 1907. Its directors naturally insisted that it had no poli-

tical aims, but their political opinions were well known and these contradicted their professions of neutrality. The authorities were skeptical. *"There can be no doubt,"* noted a police report, *"that their true purpose is to gather together the greatest possible number of young Catholics, in order to maintain their confessional hold upon them"* (50). Such Catholic zeal spurred the foundation or re-animation of secular competitors: *patronages laïques*, some founded by private enterprise, others (*patronages scolaires*) extra-curricular enterprises rather half-heartedly undertaken by primary schoolteachers at the urging of the Inspectorat de l'Education primaire. In 1909 the southwest counted ninety-nine such *patronages scolaires*, mostly devoted to gymnastics, shooting, or premilitary training. But the Inspecteur d'Académie still bewailed the incapacity of such *"Republican and secular"* *patronages* to meet the challenge of Catholics and *"enemies of the secular spirit"*. *"Religious or reactionary patronages,"* he reported, *"open and operate on all sides, seizing our pupils when they step out of school and seeking to destroy that which we have sought to raise in their minds"* (51).

Lay and religious *patronages* sometimes clashed over the use of play-grounds, the latter better served, as a rule, by the generosity of private sympathizers, the former clamoring for the support of the

Republican authorities. Neither side lost sight of its ultimate purpose, which the Inspecteur d'Académie quoted above recalled in his report: these children were the electors of tomorrow.

This rivalry probably deserves further study. Meanwhile, whatever their inspiration, it is clear that *patronages* must have provided some of the first - and few - play-grounds and sporting activities available to the young of the poorer classes, left out of account by regular sporting clubs.

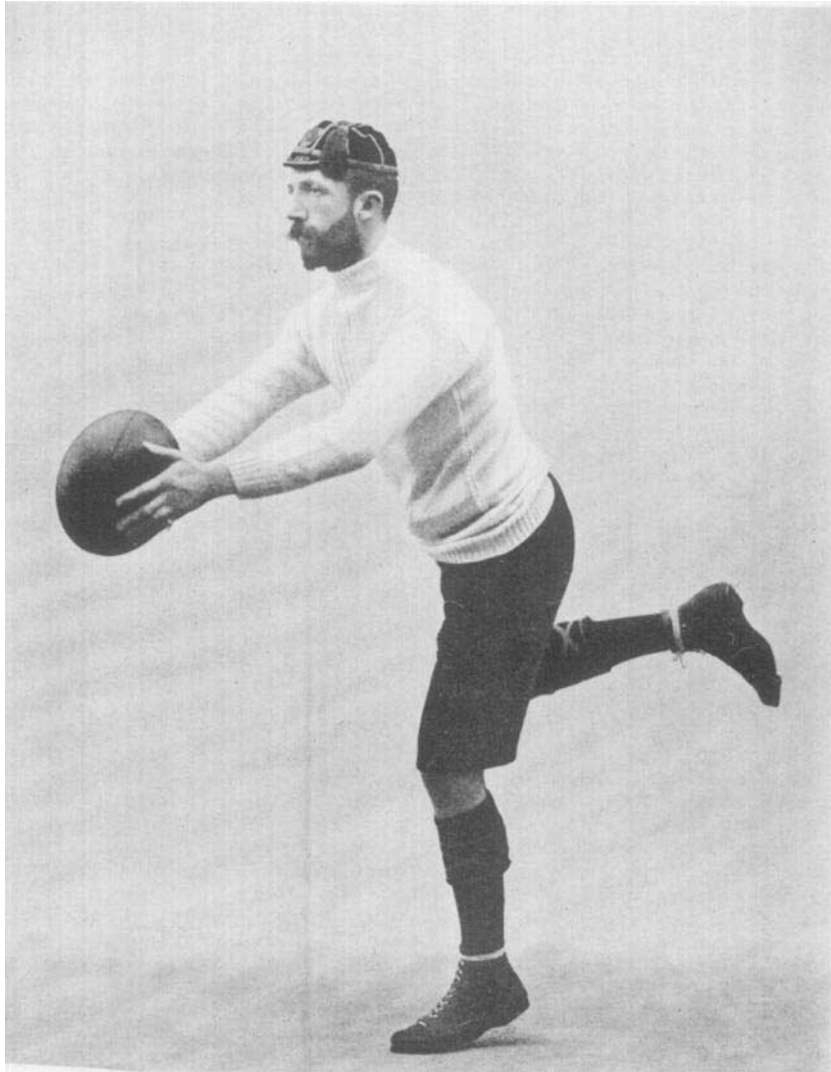
Class Privilege

Not that the leaders of the USFSA wished it so. COUBERTIN, for one, was always keen to bring sports to the workers. But his hostility to professionalism, his indifference to the cost of athletic

pastimes - small to the rich, but prohibitive to the poor - were as good as barriers. When in due course the stadiums were opened to the masses it would be less down in the arena than up on the tiers. Indeed, those sporting associations that catered first to the petty bourgeoisie and later, in the 1920s and 1930s, to the working classes, showed less interest in participation and disinterested competition than they did in prizes, professionalism, and spectator sports. Explicit or implicit, elitism ensured that "athletic sports" would remain the privilege of a minority. Social exclusivism could manifest itself in the clubhouse and on the playing field. The elitist aspirations of athletic enthusiasts could be enlisted to meaner ends. "*C'est une élite seule qui peut être admise à cette culture intensive du muscle,*" declared an Aquitainian enthusiast (52). And student clubs in particular tended to exclusivism. Thus, when the Bordeaux Université Club, founded in 1897, encountered the financial difficulties usual to its kind, it decided to merge with the powerful Stade Bordelais. In the debates that preceded the merger, a speaker warned that the Université Club was a society "*of young men with a similar education, stemming from the same milieu, sharing common tastes,*" and hence more likely to get on together than with the mixed crew they would encounter in the larger club. It is true that the membership of the Stade Bordelais, though

generally described in police reports as "*de condition aisée*" and benefitting from a "*bonne éducation primaire*", did include a fair number of clerks, shopkeepers, shop assistants, commercial travellers - even a waiter and a shoemaker. Such were no fit company for well-born youths. No wonder the merger soon dissolved, the students taking their leave in 1903 to found the Bordeaux Etudiants Club, explaining that "*students who wish to engage in sports are tired of turning to clubs where they must mix with young persons of diverse professions and ages . . .*" (53).

Such attitudes elicited the tacit or overt support of the first sportsmen themselves, whose views may be found in the authoritative "Les Sports athlétiques". Concluding a series of articles on the popularization of physical exercises, the organ of the USFSA opposed the ideas of clubs where workers and members "*of the ruling classes*" would mix: "*Nous repoussons avec énergie les associations mixtes.*" Such contact between rich and poor would be bound to create frictions that were best avoided. Besides, it explained, many young people would never consent to mix with workers, sharing the games of a class they did not know and from whom they were separated by prejudices of birth, wealth, and upbringing. The article quoted "*one of our finest runners*" waxing indignant at the thought of measuring himself against opponents "*sortis des rangs du*



Mr. LAPORTE, captain of the Stade Bordelais' football-rugby team, who were French Champions in this sport.

people". That, it affirmed, was how three-quarters of the membership of all athletic societies felt. Evidently, *"the hour of popular sports was not yet"* (54).

It is hard to say how much of this passed through the minds of the USFSA leaders. Like other pursuits (including war), sport can suggest that its rules are applicable to the rest of existence, that the sense of fair play developed on the playing field may appropriately be indulged elsewhere. This would favor ideas of social justice. Sport can equally well offer evasion from lives too far removed from the clear-cut situations of the playing field, an excuse for not trying to resolve the complexities of the outside world, and a refuge in the simpler, more limited world of club and game. Besides, we have seen that the conclusions men drew from sporting experience differed. Only one thing is sure: the decades before the First World War offered little occasion to use or regard sport as opium for the masses. Its possibilities as an opiate, if any, would apply to higher reaches of society. Despite the fact that Georges BOURDON, historian and veteran of the Racing, writing in 1906, rejoiced that *"athletic education having transformed the youth of the lycées, begins to affect the sons of the people"* (55), the negative evidence of his remark is more convincing than the wishful thinking.

The People and Sport

The distance between *"the people"* and the apologists of sport also appears in Paul ADAM's Nietzschean "Morale des Sports" (1907), when the author argues that *"the constant use of the brake is for the driver an incomparable moral exercise"*. But the term *"driver"* (*chauffeur*) refers to the hired hand who drives and cares for the automobile, as in another remark, this time by COUBERTIN himself, that the automobile makes for social equality by bringing nearer its rich owner and his *chauffeur* (56).

A simple list of dates should be enough to tell how far sporting activities could affect the people or their sons. The ten-hour working day was introduced in 1900; a law of July 13, 1906, established one day of rest per week; another of April 23, 1919, cut the working day from ten to eight hours; finally, the official forty-hour week for both sexes was introduced in 1936. Obviously, there was not much free time for games before 1919. Cycling apart, the early history of organized sport in France had narrow scope: schoolboys, foreigners, young men of good family. Most of its protagonists were *lycéens* and collegians. And there were, in the 1880s and 1890s, only about 52,000 *lycéens* and 160,000 young people in all secondary establishments, both clerical and

lay. These students represented something like five per cent of their age group (57). Few of them took an interest in organized games. But, then, there were not really that many who enlisted in nationalism, or syndicalism, or in the more passionate pursuit of the arts, and it is always the active minorities that attract our attention, because they affect - or in some way reflect - the rest.

The Birth of Sport, Reflections on a period.

If it is not too rash to draw conclusions from such a cursory survey, I should like to suggest that the appearance of athletics and sports in France at this particular time was no coincidence. The growing interest in sports was connected with patriotism only in an incidental way. The reasons for the relative success of organized sport - and for the particular social location of this success - were

more general than sporadic *revanchisme* alone would account for and more specific than the derivative - or counterirritant-potential of physical exercise.

Sports appeared in France as a leisure activity characteristic of a particular moment when the economic slump, or stagnation, of the 1880s and 1890s liberated the time and energies of the upper and middle classes, or at least of their young. Lower prices; higher relative incomes, especially for the *rentier* class, members of the liberal professions, and persons on fixed salaries; and a combination of medical advances and economic retrenchment that kept old men alive longer, slowing or blocking possibilities of advancement - all this meant fewer opportunities or temptations in the traditional directions to which young men who did not need to work to eat could turn for a career. A higher proportion of the leisured young could wait, or choose to wait, a relatively long time before turning to money-earning activities. Many sought a career in less traditional directions: literature, the arts, politics, and overseas ventures.

The rash of little reviews that marks the *fin de siècle*, the rising interest in colonial adventure, the spread of sports where they had not been heard before, were all reactions against a society often condemned as sclerotic, but also against its products, symptoms



Duchess d'UZES, patron of sportsmen

of a hardening and aging of social tissues. The growing favor and significance of activities not of a strictly utilitarian nature in social circles that had scorned them not long before was the evidence of a pathological condition, but perhaps also a token of its cure.

Advocates and observers had always remembered the connection between sports and national enterprise. From Thomas HUGHES' "Tom Brown's School Days", which asserted that rugby captains make capital officers, to Rudyard KIPLING's "Stalky & Co.", there seems little doubt that - even more than the battle of Waterloo - the British Empire was won on the playing fields of Eton. Mid-Victorian reformers urged public schoolboys to athletic sports to make them not only manly but also "*handy rifle skirmishers*". Sporting enthusiasts like Eton's headmaster Edmund WARRE sponsored Volunteer battalions as warmly as they did games. Such men apparently succeeded in turning their schools into "*splendid institution(s) for the Nation and for the Empire*," dedicated to "*turn out a hardy and dashing breed of young officers*" (58). And KIPLING's view that "*India's full of Stalkies - Cheltenham and Haileybury and Marlborough chaps*" was shared by many French, among them Father DIDON principal of the Dominican College at Arcueil, one of the first among French schools to introduce games for its students. When Father DIDON

visited Eton in the late 1890s, he remarked that the boys who learned to command in games were learning to command in the Indies (59).

Why should a society in search of revival not adopt the recipes that had worked elsewhere? There was some irony about the France of the 1890s turning to observations made in the 1860s about innovations of the 1830s. But there was reason, too. Here were challenges that could be proposed to young men in search of a *petite secousse*, not yet confronted by a *grande secousse*. One is struck by the similar language used by advocates of sports and those of colonial life. "*Ce ne sont pas tes beaux esprits qui partiront pour coloniser Madagascar*", wrote a well-known chronicler, "*il nous faut du muscle*". It is in the colonies, wrote E.M. de VOGÜE to Colonel Louis LYAUTEY, that men can find a real field of action, "*reforge their head, their heart, their muscles*". It is in the sporting clubs, declared Georges de SAINT-CLAIR, that men of action will be trained, "*who know how to will, to dare, to venture, to organize, govern and be governed*". And when we read of "*a school for energy and will*", it might as well be a rugby enthusiast as a colonist who used the phrase (60). So, after 1903, Louis HEMON, the sports enthusiast, left France first for the wilds of Stepney - whence he brought back the quintessential boxing novel

"Battling Malone" - then for Canada, where he wrote "Maria Chapdelaine" and was crushed by a train while following the rails through Ontario. And Paul BLANCHET, the boy who started the first games at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in 1889-90, became an explorer and died on an African expedition.

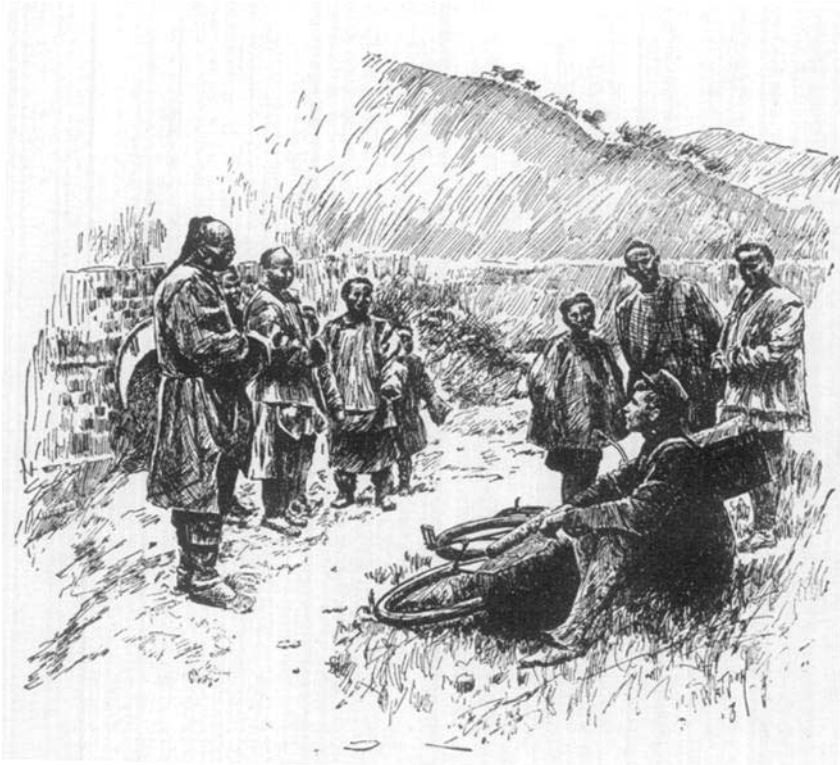
Yet, by the turn of the century, games trained young men less for enterprise than for conformism. It was on this score that KIPLING railed at his countrymen who "*contented (their) souls / With the flanneled fools at the wicket or the muddied oafs at the goals*". And it may be precisely for their power of contenting some souls that anachronistic English recipes appeared exciting. Action, liberation, adventure, and the heroic life were what the colonies seemed to promise. So did sports. Both proposed a way of escape from the drudgery, stultification, and repression of everyday life. Both held out the opportunity to assert oneself, to expend energies little needed or rewarded in the stagnant situation at home. Both reflected a reaction, evident in the little reviews, or in the new artistic ventures of the *fin de siècle*, against an aging, listless way of life, but largely in terms of a fat boy's revolt rather than of a rebellion of the downtrodden (61). For what the hint is worth, the suicide rate for young people nineteen and under rose faster in the years before 1914 than did that of any

other age group and higher than it would do in the next three decades.

A facet of contemporary conditions, then, a footnote for the social history of its time? Yes, but with a difference: "*The Greeks trained to adapt themselves to their civilisation,*" wrote Jean PREVOST in 1925, praising "Les Plaisirs des Sports". "*We train to withstand ours.*"

(41) See Ernest SELIERE, "*Un Artisan d'énergie française*", (Paris 1917); Louis d'HURCOURT "*La Guerre et les Sports*", "*Almanach des Sports*, 1899", 35; H. MASSIS and J. de TARDE (Agathon), "*Les jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui*", (Paris 1913), 35; see also Paul SOUCHON and Jacques MAY, "*La Littérature Sportive contemporaine*", (Paris 1924), 10, *passim*, for other aspects of this mood. The young men whom MASSIS and de TARDE praised were probably the same we meet in chapter 12 of R.M. du GARD's "*Jean Barois*" (Paris 1913). They would be exact contemporaries of the Ecole Normale's 1913 "équipe des intellectuels", a XV among whose players were to be found Jean GIRAUDOUX, Alain FOURNIER, Claude CASIMIR-PERIER, Charles TARDIEU and Alexandre GUINLE.

(42) COUBERTIN "*Essais de psychologie sportive*", (Paris, 1913), 262. Compare in Agathon the young men who declare that sport had given them "the taste of blood" and made them realize that "war was not stupid, cruel and hateful.



Taste for adventure: an explorer in China during the 1900s.

It was quite simply sport for real." *"Les jeunes gens"*, 140-44.

(43) Similarly, Thorstein VEBLEN, for whom sport helped to preserve "the two most barbarous traits of primitive man: ferocity and cunning", also regarded it as a means of spending excess energy and letting off steam, comparable to war. *"Theory of the Leisure*

Class", (Boston, 1917), 275, *passim*.

(44) Etienne de GREEFF, *"Les Instincts de défense et de sympathie"*, (Paris, 1947), 166; MAGNANE, *"Sociologie du Sport"*, (Paris, 1964), 43.

(45) Jacques LECOMTE, *"Jeux des animaux"* in Roger Caillois, ed. *"Jeux et sports"*, (Paris, 1967),

(46) "Dès maintenant, il me semble que l'éducation sportive a préparé notre Emile moderne à être bientôt (en allongeant légèrement la formule anglaise) 'l'homme convenable et satisfait dans la place qui lui convient.' Ce serait un joli résultat." Georges ROZET, "La jeunesse et le Sport" in Agathon, "Les jeunes gens", 139.

(47) *Ibid*, 140-44.

(48) Charles de SAINT-CYR, "Le Sport, Educateur Social" (Paris, 1908), 15-16; J. DUMAZEDIER, "Regards neufs sur le sport", (Paris, 1950), 29, 161; M. BERGER, "Pourquoi je suis sportif", (Paris, 1939).

(49) For England, see P.C. McINTOSH, "Sport in Society", (London, 1968), 72; for illustrations of the French situation, see J. OZOUF, "Nous les maîtres", 29, 136.

(50) Report of the Commissaire de Police, Bordeaux, in AD (Gironde), Sociétés sportives (Union régionale gymnastique et sportive).

(51) "Bulletin de l'Instruction Primaire", (Gironde), Oct. 1910, p. 88. The Union française des Oeuvres laïques d'éducation physique was not formed until 1928.

(52) Maurice MARTIN, "Un grand sport", "Revue philomatique de Bordeaux et du Sud-Ouest", 8, (1905): 6.

(53) F. SAUVAIRE-JOURDAN, "Les Sports et les Universités françaises", "Revue Internationale de l'Enseignement", Dec. 15, 1913, pp. 3-15; AD (Gironde), Sociétés sportives, unclassified. The seceders never regretted their action. Compare "Le BEC", Dec. 23, 1911 "You will not deny that the BEC, being made up of the intellectual elite, is certainly one of the French sports clubs where one finds the fewest cretins".

(54) "Les Sports athlétiques", Jan. 10, 1891; COUBERTIN, "Une Campagne", 87.

(55) BOURDON, "Renaissance athlétique", 26.

(56) COUBERTIN, "Essais de psychologie sportive", 229. Yet COUBERTIN was an untiring champion of higher education for workingmen. In 1890 he was proposing the examples of English university extension courses. In the early 1920s he preached universités ouvrières. See, for example, his "Entre deux batailles", (Paris, 1922).

(57) Compare F. LAGRANGE: "If our schoolboys get exercise, our students no longer do, any more than our young office employees or shop assistants". "L'Exercice chez les adultes", (Paris, 1897), 3. Class recruitment appears even more clearly in the beginnings of women's athletics and sports. See M.-Th. EYQUEM, "La Femme et le Sport", (Paris, 1944). The first sportives were titled

amazons like General BOULANGER's early sponsor, the Duchesse d'UZES, or Madame Camille du GAST. Their activities were of a costly and exclusive sort: car and boat races, tennis, fencing (in a special ladies' gymnasium, chez Madame GABRIELLE), mountain climbing like Andrée BERTHELOT, or flying like Marie MARVINGT.

(58) NEWSOME, "Godliness and Good Learning", 198, 201.

(59) "Royal Commission on Physical Training for Scotland", (London 1903), Minute 9628.

(60) Aurelien SCHOLL, in "Almanach des Sports", 1899, ii; Louis LYAUTEY, "Lettres de Tonkin et de Madagascar", (Paris, 1921), 621 (Oct. 2, 1898); see also the revealing quotations in W.B. COHEN, "The Lure of Empire: Why Frenchmen Entered the Colonial Service", "Journal of Contemporary History", 4, pt. 1 (1969): 103-16; BOURDON, "Renaissance athlétique", 119; and Martin, "Grand Sport", 7.

(61) For the same story as reflected in the literary activities of the time, see E. WEBER, "The Secret World of Jean Barois", in John WEISS, ed., "The Origins of Modern Consciousness", (Detroit, 1965).

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