

The sportsman's personality

(by Gaston Malané)



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When considering all the scientific research which has been carried out on sport, we immediately notice that the great majority of that research was intended to assess the physical effects of sport, that is to say the effects on muscular development and physiological processes. As a consequence, the beneficial physical results are today taken for granted. On the other hand, much less effort has been made to find out how those same sporting activities affect personality. If we examine the pre-scientific theories which partly hold true even today, we see that there are two major contradictory schools of thought. Ever since antiquity there have been people who maintain that sports automatically develop character, as suggested in the maxim *Mens sana in corpore sano*. Even today, to judge from the speeches of some sports club notabilities, sport cannot but

be of benefit from every point of view. On the other hand, there have always been some intellectuals who have nothing but contempt for sport and who point out very cleverly certain trifling or serious excesses related to sporting activities.

This state of affairs leads us to conclude that if we are to learn what influence sport has on the personality of its practitioners, we must resort to scientific enquiry. Most of the research in this field purports to draw a comparison between a sample of athletes and a sample of people who do not indulge in sports, by means of various personality tests.

Before summarizing some definite results, let us consider the complexity of the problem and the limits which methodology sets. For example, while we have the means of gauging personality, that is to

say personality tests, these do not have the accuracy of instruments used in other fields. In addition, there are a great many tests for estimating various aspects of personality which are not specifically designed to evaluate the sporting personality. Even if two tests determine a common feature, the concepts held by people sharing that feature do not always coincide. Then again, groups of athletes chosen may produce a multitude of variations. A distinction can be drawn between athletes of different age groups, different levels in training, different kinds of sport, and so forth. This all goes to show that it is difficult to make a comparison of different studies and that we cannot expect from those studies a sporting personality portrait of perfect composition.

The first important observation we can make when analyzing studies which compare athletes in general (without making any distinction in the different kinds of sport) with people who do not go in for sports is the following: almost all research methods do find differences—some find few, some find many—between the personalities of the two groups. Today, psychology recognizes that personality development is considerably influenced by environment. As training and competing are part and parcel of the sporting environment, they may to some extent explain the different results obtained by the testing of the two groups. If it is true that sports constitute an advantage permitting the satisfaction of a range of needs which in modern society are difficult to satisfy otherwise, the proposition that the practice of sport has an effect on personality becomes the more credible.

As we expected, the differences revealed by different research methods between those who practise sports and those who do not are not entirely coincidental.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that certain definite characteristics common to practitioners of sport are shown by a relatively large number of research methods. The characteristics concerned are self-assertiveness, aggressivity, extroversion, emotional stability, social adaptability, and hypochondria. Aggressivity is one of the features most frequently noted and in this respect the difference between those who practise sports and those who do not seems to be rather significant. Some research even indicates a relationship between the physical condition achieved and the degree of aggressivity. Warren R. Johnson, one of the experts in this field whom I shall quote, states that he has observed an extreme degree of aggressivity in the champions of sport whom he has studied.

Sports to reduce or increase aggressivity?

This marked aggressivity, like other characteristics found in practitioners of sport, is at the origin of a series of new questions and problems of which the solutions are of capital interest. For instance, some authors have asked whether the practice of sports and the competing in sporting events tend rather to reduce aggressivity (catharsis theory) or to increase it (theory of the frustration-aggressivity cycle). It is a very complex question and the answer has not yet been found. However, it is to be expected that the answer will to a great extent depend on

various factors, particularly the intensity of competitors' ambition and the degree of their success. Another crucial question which may be raised concerning the marked aggressivity and other characteristics of those who practice sports is this: are their aggressive and extrovert tendencies due to their sporting activities or are people with such characteristics inevitably more strongly drawn to the practice of sports? Research into the question is still scant. Some writers are inclined to favour the latter proposition, which would imply a limitation to the influence of sports on personality. The same writers, however, recognize that the question has not yet been definitively answered.

As it has been shown that the practitioner of sports is more socially adaptable, some writers wonder whether this is not due to a greater sociability of those who practice team games. Contrary to what could have been thought, tests comparing people who practise sports individually and those who are members of a team generally show little difference between the two. The reason seems to be that although the individual athlete is judged on his own performance, his achievements are nearly always taken into account for a team's placing in a league; in other words, he is indirectly also a member of a team.

Most studies reveal no difference in the general intelligence of those who practise sports and those who do not; provided those tests are aptitude-oriented.

However, those who practise sports show a clear superiority in achievement-orient-

ed tests, in which they score slightly higher points. This is due to the fact that practitioners of sports are generally more ambitious. It should be pointed out that the results referred to here are valid for a theoretical average adept of sports.

In fact, each individual diverges from the average to a greater or lesser degree. Some writers report considerable differences in the intelligence levels of practitioners of dissimilar sports, the best results being obtained by swimmers and the worst by wrestlers.

An actual example, however, shows to what extent these results can be misleading. Schendel has shown that, on the average, American university football players are less intelligent than the rest of the students. By analyzing this observation in greater detail, Berger and Littlefield have found that this phenomenon was due to a selective factor affecting football players but not the other students, namely that good football players can easily obtain scholarships at American universities, as a consequence of which the less intellectually bright stars in the football team have an opportunity to prolong their studies, which is not the case with other students who are also not gifted with intelligence.

It should be observed that many studies have been designed to compare the practitioners of dissimilar sports. The results are interesting in that they may provide an individual with guidance in his choice of discipline.

This suggests a practical purpose to research of this kind, namely the orientation of a certain type of individual towards

a sporting career in which, according to his personality, he has the greatest chances of success. In general, it may be said that some idea of personality in general and of that of the practitioner of sports in particular is of paramount interest for all sports teachers and coaches. Like any other branch of education, physical training and the teaching of sports is primarily for people.

Apart from this general usefulness, the results of the kind of studies we have referred to can help in solving a number of other problems, particularly in initiating methodology which takes into account the particular demands which can be deduced from those results. We might quote here the example of the non-swimmers who, despite lessons, never manage to learn to swim. According to research conclusions, such people tend to be neurotic, introvert, inclined to worry and of marked emotional instability. A method taking such handicaps into account will obviously have a greater chance of success.

Finally, we might mention that although research in recent years has achieved some definite results, the number of new questions and problems they have raised has been constantly increasing.

G.M.



The body in the service of the mind

The Roman Catholic Church which was for a long time violently opposed to sport has, over the last fifty years, considerably modified its attitude. During an audience granted to members of the International Catholic Federation for Physical Education and Sport, His Holiness Pope Paul VI declared: "Sport can and must become accessible for everyone and contribute to the harmonious development of young people as well as to the physical and moral well-being of adults... It can teach one to enjoy effort, self-control and respect for others. In contributing to make the body serve the mind, it has a place among the cultural needs of any civilisation".