

Sport in Siberia, 1917: A Rare Document

*Gerald H. Davis**

The translated article below was written in July 1917 by an Austro-Hungarian prisoner of war in Rasdolnoe officers prisoner of war camp near Vladivostok, Siberia. It was "published" in a one copy, handwritten edition of a camp magazine called "S'Vogel" (The Birdie) and passed around among some 100 subscribers. The author was the newly elected president of the camp sports club. Since "S'Vogel" tended to make fun of sports, he felt called upon to justify sports in philosophical terms which were meaningful to the officer class of the Habsburg monarchy. To him, sport was noble competition.

Many of the officers to whom the article was addressed had been prisoners of war for almost three years. Although they had endured the extreme unpleasantness one associates with captivity in Siberia, they had not been required or even allowed to work. This left them with a burdensome excess of leisure time. Recreation, including sports, became a desperate necessity. Rather than a release from the pressures of daily work and responsibility, these captives used sports to insert meaning into an otherwise vacuous existence. Although he used examples from life outside the camp such as hunting and horse racing, the author's message was highly relevant to the circumstances of his readers, and worthy of thought in our own time. He urged vigorous physical and mental activity and self-imposed discipline. Those concerned about professionalism and unruliness in sports nowadays may find his observations especially interesting.

I found the magazine in the German military archives in Freiburg in Breisgau, German Federal Republic and translated this article from the original German.

On Sport

By Cavalry Captain Gab. Br. Fosika

The trust my dear comrades showed by placing me at the head of the sports club inspires me to take pen in hand. I want to express here the thoughts

* Mr. Davis is a Professor in the Department of History at Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

which will guide me as I carry out the duties of this extraordinarily honorific position.

Like so many other concepts, sport has various definitions. One proceeds from the definition to the interpretation to the explanation, to the execution. From the definition one draws an entire program. I give the only definition which fits the narrow range of movement imposed on our wretched captive lives.

The sport club is the greatest association of our little prisoner of war society, so it has the greatest influence on our life here. Therefore I will apply all my strength, all my modest abilities to make it quite familiar to all.

Every effort, with exception of that which is generally understood to be demeaning, so long as it is done voluntarily with the intention to exert our mental and muscular powers, is sport.

In general such activity is amusing but that is not necessary for it to be considered a sport.

When we plant a garden, when we fetch water in a barrel, carry sod or sand on a cart; when we pull a turf roller, we are pursuing sport because such work is not demeaning, like dogcatching with a noose on a stick, and because we do it voluntarily, partly to strengthen our muscles, partly to produce something which pleases us. In a word, our exertion is always noble.

Noble exertion involves a noble way of thinking, which helps to explain sports thought. There are almost as many types of sporting activity as there are human activities. One can breed animals as a sport, grow plants as a sport, etc. In fact we can thank sporting competition in animal and plant breeding for the outstanding new improvements in the animal and plant worlds. Who does not know of the English thoroughbred horse, the shorthorn cow, the Yorkshire swine? There are all the results of sporting stockbreeding. Every sport has its laws and the more widespread the sport is, the stricter its laws. These lighten the sportsman's train of thought, since they limit the boundaries within which the events take place. He has to know how to make judgments within these laws. For example, to breed a thoroughbred horse one does not take a Rumanian stud from a neighboring village, but follows the rules of thoroughbred breeding. Likewise, one does not apply the rules of croquet to play soccer, because this would take away the character of the game.

Hunting is also a sport and one of the noblest. But if I do not hold to the laws of hunting I am not following a sport. I am perpetrating an outrage against hunting. The same is true of other people. Everyone who takes part in a sport

should think in these terms. To go against the laws of this sport is an outrage which demands punishment.

We see this on the soccer field every day, so to speak. The referee immediately punishes any unruliness with penalty kicks. Indeed, even good natured unruliness must be punished in this game, since it has a tendency toward roughness. One can be the most skillful player, able to shoot the ball exactly where he wants it, but if he constantly goes against the rules, he may be a skillful player but he is not a sportsman.

He who holds to his noble way of thinking and observes the rules of whatever branch of sports he pursues, is always a sportsman. It is not membership in a sports club but the upholding of the principles mentioned above that marks one as a sportsman. Otherwise that person is not even a dilettant.

On this subject there is a common misconception. How often do we read in our daily papers such typical banalities as, "The splendid weather favored the sport. The green grass and the elegantly dressed ladies greatly enhanced it and we saw all of our sportsmen there." That is how the spring races are usually reported. Horse racing really is a sport, but the question is, who are the sportsmen? The mere appearance at a race does not make one a sportsman and there are usually very few sportsmen at these events.

In a gentleman's horse race only two individuals out of all those involved are actually carrying out sports activity: the gentleman rider himself and the breeder or owner of the horse, providing that he has the horse run in the interests of horse breeding. All other persons are merely curious onlookers with no further interest in the sport. This applies to those who are there to sell "tips" or to chase skirts; likewise, the owners of the racing stables are not sportsmen if they keep their stables for reasons of profit rather than in the interests of horse breeding. This is especially pertinent since they are often involved in underhanded dealings which in dark ways take advantage of the gullibility of others and thereby oppose the noble spirit of the sport.

A livelihood for one person may well be sport for another. In such cases only the latter person may be designated a sportsman.

Riding is a beautiful and noble sport. Nevertheless, the cavalry officer is not involved in sport when he rides at the head of his column nor when he is on patrol, even though he may have to overcome more difficult situations here than elsewhere. But as soon as he swings into the racing saddle or rides to hounds he is engaging in sports activity and is a sportsman.

Hunting is the most appropriate model for judging sportsmanship, since hunt-

ing has the most laws and regulations which must be observed. In the first place the laws of the state must be observed. As I have indicated [elsewhere] it is unsportsmanlike to kill game out of season or on someone else's preserve. One does not go stalking with a shotgun. One does not shoot female mountain goats, even during the season when it is permitted to shoot rams. One does not shoot hares when sucklings are among those driven out. One does not shoot game which one's neighbor has already downed. One shoots only at a distance within which the immediate death of the game is assured.

Nothing is uglier than the practice among overly competitive hunters who make wagers as to who will kill the most hares. This leads many hunters to shoot at distances so great that they will most likely only make the poor game sick from buckshot wounds.

The proper sportsman must know the basic outline of the history of his sport and its utensils as well as the appropriate terminology. In sports which involve horses it makes a difference whether I take the snaffle reins or the leading rein in my hand. The first I can do only from the saddle, but when I hear the second I think of the coachman's box. It is also unsportsmanlike to play soccer with a sling ball.

As far as circumstances permit, one should dress appropriately for each sport, especially when the dress has practical value. How comical the tight Hungarian pants with spurred boots would look on the soccer field, or rolled up trousers or a stiff shirt and formal evening coat on horseback, or mountain climber's shoes on the tennis court. One would do better to avoid his sport altogether if he cannot dress properly for it. The same goes when one does have the proper clothing when it differs from that of the rest of society. For example, one rides to foxhounds in a red coat. One cannot do it with even the best cut brown jacket. Indeed, the custom of the red coat is a vestige of ancient hunting equipment. As one baited the game and brought it to bag, one used brilliant colors, especially in the huntsman's dress, to frighten the game.

The obligations of the true sportsman are numerous enough. But even if one meets all requirements, he is still only a pseudo-sportsman if he cannot control himself. We should keep in mind that in sports activity we should employ not only muscular but also mental powers. These include above all presence of mind and self mastery.

Whatever the sport, presence of mind determines the execution and self control produces its beauty.

The first should be the goal of every sportsman, the second is his duty.