

“To Win or Die”: A Taxonomy of Sporting Attitudes

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Modern sociologists of sport, both Western and Marxist, share the basic assumption that what we play reflects what we are. Those whose favorite game is denigrating American society argue that we especially suffer from a decadent “Vince Lombardi syndrome,” referring to the immortal coach of the Green Bay Packers whose credo was: “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the *only* thing.”

The purpose of this essay is to put the philosophy “to win or die” into perspective. One sociologist has called this attitude peculiarly American.) but the notion is more widespread. After the Rome Olympics, for example, President de Gaulle referred to the French performances as “a national disgrace.” “Victory or death!” were the words of a telegram actually sent by a head of state to his team during the 1974 World Cup.²

The antithesis to this ethic is that sanctimonious (not to mention plagiarized) utterance of Baron de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympic movement: “It is not the winning, but the taking part.” The evidence of games past and present proves that this is utter nonsense.

Every four years, journalists delve into their history books to discover anew that it was the Greeks who invented the Vince Lombardi syndrome, thus giving it the patina of historical precedent. Moreover, they tell us that the Greeks were less hypocritical about it. Homer, Herodotus-not to mention Pindar-came right out and said it: winning is glorious, losing ignominious. And the competitive spirit, far from being “that last infirmity of noble mind,” is the engine which drives all societies to cultural greatness. As Goethe should have put it: “das Ewig-*Sportliche* zieht uns hinan (Eternal Sport leads us on high).”

Was the 19th century scholar Jacob Burckhardt correct in arguing that what made ancient Hellas great in every domain was its unique competitive spirit-*der agonale Trieb*? And was it a drive which *kein anderes Volk kennt* (no other people knows)?³ His views long dominated the study of Greek culture, and in some quarters are still alive and well.

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1. See A. Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record* (New York 1978).

2. Reported by Christian Graf von Krockow in *Sport Gesellschaft Politik* (Munich 1980) p. 111.

3. *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (Stuttgart 1941) (Orig. publ. 1893-1902) 3.68

More recently scholars have attempted to provide a counter-balance to the Burckhardtian theory, by arguing that the will to win is not uniquely Greek. It is universal. Everybody, everywhere, strives to be number one. The brief survey which will demonstrate that there is, in fact, a variety of attitudes towards winning in various cultures both past and present. Even-though this seems heretical-among the ancient Greeks.

The cornerstone for the argument that the Greeks were uniquely competitive is the famous verse uttered (twice) in the *Iliad*:

aien aristuein kai hypeirochon emmenai allon

First Glaukos reports to Diomedes (6.208) that his father's final words to him when he departed for Troy were: "always be the very best, and superior to everyone else." This is the same exhortation uttered by Peleus to his son Achilles as he left for the great war (11.784). Not, as the proverb goes, "with your shield or upon it," but rather as the very best.

Still, as Homer reports, there was some honor for runners-up in the Heroic Age. The competitors in the games of *Iliad* 23 receive the equivalent of silver and bronze medals. Achilles, for example, announces that the first prize for the wrestling match will be a tripod worth twelve oxen-and, for the man who is defeated, the award will be a woman (worth four oxen!).⁴

But by the age of Pindar, attitudes towards victory and defeat seem stronger, and in Crown Game contest, defeat-even if second place-was a painful disgrace. In Olympian 8 the poet celebrates a victor in the boys' wrestling, who "with fortune from God and his own courage threw his four opponents and laid upon their limbs a hateful homecoming (*noston echthiston*), disgrace, and secrecy (*atimoteran glossan kai epikruphon oimon*), while in his father's father he inspired new strength (*antipalon menos*, lit. "strength to counter-wrestle") against old age.⁵ In *Pythian* 8, praising another wrestling champion, Pindar addresses the victor, "And then you sprang with grim intent (*kaka phroneon*), pinning the limbs of your four opponents. Not for them, as for you, a sweet return from Delphi, no light laughter rising from their mothers' lips in welcome. No, they slink along back alley-ways, shunning enemy eyes and nursing pain, the bite of defeat."⁶

Burckhardt's theory of *das Agonale* was anticipated by Ernst Curtius, the excavator of Olympia. Writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, he spoke of the unique competition-orientated character of the Greeks, "im Gegensatz zu dem Genussleben des Orients (as opposed to the sybaritic life of the Orient)."⁷ Curtius singles out the Chinese as particularly lacking appreciation for the heroic ideal. From this *Wettkampf* (contest) *Ideologie* we see the evolution of the racism from which, a century later, would emerge the concept of "Das nordische Hellas." Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi minister of pro-

4. *Iliad* 23.700ff. Notice that some smaller Greek festivals, though not the Crown Games, offered prizes for 2nd and 3rd place. cf. *IG* II.965.

5. Pindar, *O.* 8.67-72 [tr. F. Nisetich].

6. *P.* 8.81-87.

7. Letter to his brother, 1856.

paganda who fostered this concept,⁸ also prepared a document that went Greek agonal ideology one step further: before the 1936 Olympics. he wished it disseminated that “the best men always win.” (Fortunately this was never published, as Jesse Owens was not exactly his definition of a good man). Nietzsche also contrasted the Greek genius born of “der Kampf und Lust des Sieges (the struggle and consummation of victory)” with the less alacritous Orient.⁹ Nietzsche and Curtius may have had slightly different perspectives, but their essential orientation was the same.

The Germans may have excavated the “exclusivity theory.” but other nations recognized it as a genuine find. The Oxford scholar E.N. Gardiner [*Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals* (1910)] and Frenchman Henri-Irene Marrou [*Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité* (1948)] are two early examples. But the “exclusivity theory” also had opponents, none of whom denied the existence of the agonal element in Hellenic culture, but who sought to discover traces of this phenomenon beyond the borders of Greece.

Scholars like Julius Jüthner would go as far as claiming that *das Agonale* was a cultural universal. He noted that the enthusiasm for competition, although most emphatically a characteristic of the Greeks, may well be a characteristic of all mankind: “wenn dieser Wetteifer, der nichts eigentümlich Hellenisches darstellt, sondern allgemein menschlich ist.”¹⁰ We may also cite a more specific example in G. Gesemann’s *Der montenegrinische Mensch* (1934) which, in a kind of cultural *Anschluss* (“colonization”), extended *dans Agonale* to the Balkans.¹¹

Curtius’ disparaging views notwithstanding, Marcel Granet’s *La Civilisation chinoise* documents the enormous respect accorded the Chinese warrior class.¹² And, a bit later, Huizinga equated the Greek and Chinese mentalities, emphasizing that the word *cheng* acutally denotes a Chinese concept in every way identical to the Greek *agon*.¹³

So-called “universalists” of the agonal persuasion often adduce C. M. Bowra’s *Heroic Poetry* in support, since this work celebrates the medieval *chevalier*, the Spanish *caballero*, the Russian *Bogaiyr*, the Nordic *Jarl*, etc. But they conveniently ignore Bowra’s insightful distinction between heroic and non-heroic societies, whose world views are expressed in their poetry. In the Finnish *Kaleavla* for example, “man is not the center of creation, but caught between many unseen powers and influences.”

Curiously, the insistence that “all the world’s an *agon* and all the men and women *agonistai*” has not waned even in our day. An essay written as recently as 1960 discusses the spirit of competition among youths of the Dakota

8. Principally in *Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1941).

9. *Homers Wettkampf* (1972).

10. J. Jüthner, “Herkunft und Grundlagen der griechischen Nationalspiele.” *Die Antike* 15 (1939) 246. See I. Weiler’s critical analysis, “AIEN ARITEUEIN,” *Stadion* 1.2 (1975) 209 ff.

11. Cf. Gesemann, *Heroische Lebensform* (Berlin 1943).

12. See Chinese Civilization, tr. K. E. Innes and M. Brailsford (New York 1930).

13. *Homo Ludens* rev. ed. (Boston 1955) 32 (orig. publ. 1944).

tribe: "All honor goes to the first man in the foot-race; but the last must suffer the ultimate disgrace: henceforth he must go play with the girls."¹⁴

One can offer a strong counter-argument that the agonal drive, "to win or die," is not universal. And it would be most suitable to begin the refutation of an argument that began with Greece-in ancient Olympia. History offers 776 B.C. as the date of the first Olympic Games-when Koroiobos of Elis won the only event, the one-stadion dash. But, clearly, men held games in that sacred spot on the banks of Alpheus for many centuries previous. Plutarch claims that the original contests held in Olympia were duels . . . to the death.¹⁶ And his report is not implausible, since such a phenomenon would not be culturally unique. The significant factor here is that these events seem to have been *non-agonal*. They were not intended to determine the best of men, but rather to expiate the wrath of the gods. It mattered less who won, than that someone would die.¹⁷

Similar in ethos (if not in era) are the famous ball-games of the Maya in Central America, after which, the team captain (and perhaps the entire team) was decapitated.¹⁸ It is still a matter of scholarly dispute whether it was the winning or losing side that had to give up their lives. The important fact is that someone-and someone young and strong and fit-died to appease the gods and insure the harvest. Admittedly, some anthropologists and cultural historians argue that this is merely a pre-agonal phase, characteristic of primitive peoples-which the Greeks soon ceased to be.¹⁹ Unfortunately, Mayan culture cannot be called primitive by anyone's definition.

Despite the claims by divines like John Donne in his Holy Sonnets, some might regard death as a kind of defeat. Let us therefore proceed to examine sports that are even more clearly non-agonal. In the lives of Nuba tribes of the South-west Sudan, wrestling and stick-fighting are supremely significant activities. Isolated from society in special compounds called *zaribas*, the athletes pursue their training with ascetic zeal. Yet, on the actual days of the matches, very little fuss is made over the champions. These games have been studied in detail by S. F. Nadel, who concludes, "There are essentially no victors and defeated."²⁰ What sporting spirit. And the Nuba never had the privilege of hearing the words of Baron de Coubertin.

And as far as China was concerned, sport was not always regarded merely as a para-military exercise. During the Chou dynasty (11th-3rd century B.C.), new criteria emerged. According to Confucius, intellectual education and physical training must form a harmonious unity. In archery contests, these

14. C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London 1952) 4-5.

15. H. Damm, "Von Wesen sog. Leibesübungen bet Naturvölkern. Ein Beitrag zur Genese des Sports," *Studium Generale* 13 (1960).

16. *Moralia* 675C.

17. "Blut mus, fließen," as K. Maull puts it in "Der Ursprung der Olympischen Spiele," *Die Antike* 17 (1941) 189-208. See also Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The anthropology of ancient Greek sacrificial ritual and myth* (Berkeley 1983).

18. Cf. Celso Enriquez, *Sports in Pre-Hispanic American* (Mexico 1968) pp 20ff, which analyzes the wall paintings of Chichen-Itza.

19. E.g. Guttman (note 1 above) 29.

20. *The Nuba*, (Oxford 1947) 232-233

precepts were put into practice. During the first round, the archers were judged solely for their balletic movements, and only later by the number and precision of their hits.²¹

Most scholars regard England as the birthplace of “modem” sport-some-time in the eighteenth century-although, there are distinct earlier signs of the so-called “modem” outlook.²² This attitude is based on what the Germans would later call *Leistungsprinzip*, sports of achievement. England remains a bastion of *Leistung* to this day, with her mountain-climbers and her sailors like Sir Francis Chichester. In reaching the highest peak, circumnavigating the globe, or sitting on flagpoles, there is no sense of head-to-head competition. Instead we have the challenge of man against nature, or man against himself. There is certainly no shame in failure.

We can discern earlier traces of this attitude in England, in Elizabethan times. Will Kempe, the famous clown of Shakespeare’s company, inaugurated the seventeenth century by dancing from London to Norwich in less than ten days. Naturally, he won a bet. By 1731, it is significant that Englishmen were already using stop-watches to measure races against time in their then-literal sense.²³ The quintessence of *Leistung* is measurement-a notion totally absent in ancient Greek athletics. Granted, it might have been impossible for the Greeks to time their running events, but they certainly could have measured the distances of javelin and discus throws. They did not.²⁴

In England, *Leistung* was inextricably associated with the betting spirit, whether it was in the sport of kings or of their footmen. Not only did the nobility wager on the relative speed and endurance of their servants, they wagered on individual pedestrians (which was then a technical term), and their capacity to accomplish astounding exploits.

Suffice it to mention Foster Powell, England’s first great pedestrian, who would elicit wagers from aristocrats, always keen to see whether Powell could accomplish the seemingly impossible challenges he set for himself. Perhaps Powell’s finest moment was in September of 1773, when he walked the three hundred and ninety-six miles from London to York and back in less than six days. It was reported that when he arrived back in the outskirts of London with several hours to spare, “not less than three thousand persons on foot, on horseback, and in their carriages . . . came with him from Highgate” to the center of the city. He had rested all of an hour and a half in York, consumed only tea and toast, drunk small beer and water-and won his wager: a hundred guineas.

There are those who might yet discern some “agonalism” lurking behind the *Leistungsprinzip*, i.e. arguing that a race against time by athlete B can be

21. Cf. H. Ueberhorst, *Geschichte des Leibesübungen* (Berlin 1972), 116.

22. Cf. H. Schoffler, *England das Land des Sportes* (Leipzig 1935)

23. See von Krockow (note 2 above) p. 16.

24. The famous epigram on the record long jump by Phayllos of Crotona (*Anrh. Pal App.* 297) is c. 2nd century A. D. roughly seven hundred years after the event.

construed as a race against the record set by athlete A—hence, an indirect duel between A and B.²⁵

Thus, in order to show that sport can exist without the slightest scintilla of the agonal, we must go still further. Consider now the native sports of West Sumatra, which are all based on an ethos of non-achievement, an attitude inculcated both at home and in school. Their games include *sepak raga*, in which the participants are not divided into sides. As a group, they simply try to keep the ball bouncing in the air as long as possible without it touching the ground. There is no “competition.”

The Sumatran indifference to individual “winners” is so marked that the man who arrives first in a festive run may find himself barred from participating again. All their sports have a choreographic and musical element. *Pencak silat*, their form of sparring, is actually a kind of dance. In short, here is a value-system diametrically opposed to the Homeric-Western philosophy of beating all others to show you are the best.²⁶

Similarly, the *taketak* game of the New Guinea Tangu people is, according to K. O. L. Burridge, a cooperative play which mirrors the dominant idea of their society, “a notion of moral equivalence.” In *taketak*, which refers to the spines of coconut palm fronds, players choose up sides; they throw tops, attempting to hit the *taketak*. But no score is kept. And when one side registers a hit, the other team equalizes things by taking away or adding enough *takerak* to its lot to assure equivalence. The game is over when the players tire of it.²⁷

Japanese *kemari* is a game often called “football” by Westerners, because the ball is kicked. But the real object of the game, as in Sumatran *sepak raga*, is to keep the ball in the air. The players move the ball within an area whose four comers are marked by a willow, a cherry, a pine, and a maple tree.²⁸ There are no winners or losers.

Many other examples of non-agonal sport could be adduced, but those already cited should suffice to make the point.

This taxonomy has discussed pre-agonal, agonal and non-agonal societies. Turning our attention once more to present-day America, it would seem that we are in a period of transition from the Vince Lombardi-agonal—“win or die” ethos to a new outlook, a new “sporting spirit”: the post-agonal.

We can see this most clearly in the current attitudes toward the marathon. This race has suddenly developed from a highly competitive event to one that idiosyncratically involves a certain *Leistungsprinzip*: either the participants aim to finish in a certain time, or simply to finish. The average marathon race has, of course, but one winner. But nowadays, it has at least ten thousand very happy runners-up.

25. The whole notion of a “record” is an extremely modern concept. Track and field records, for example, came into existence only after the Oxford-Cambridge meet of 1863. See Richard Mandell, “The Invention of the Sports Record,” *Stadion* II. 2 (1976) 250ff.

26. For *sepak raga*, see H. Eichberg. “Spielverhalten und Relationsgesellschaft in West Sumatra,” *Stadion* 1.1 (1975) 1-48.

27. For details see Burridge, “A Tangu Game,” in J. Bruner et al., ed. *Play: Its Role in Development and Evolution* (New York 1976) 364-366.

28. Guttman (note 1 above) 5 notes that the trees are symbols of universal harmony.

This phenomenon, we should recall, is extremely un-Hellenic. The Greeks were wont to make bitter jokes about the man who came in last in the race. Take, for example, the epigram from the Greek Anthology which concerns a runner so slow that he came in seventh in a field of six! Another satirical verse describes a runner whose pace convinced the custodians to close the stadium, because they thought he was a statue!²⁹ Yet today the greatest applause, after that which greets the winner in the Boston marathon, welcomes the person who comes in dead last,

This may be indicative of Christian revival (cf. Matthew 19:30, “The last shall be first”). But whatever the reason, this new ethos clearly rejects the Homeric agonal notion of “win or die.” It is, in a very humanistic sense, a celebration of life.

29. *Anrh. Pal.* XI.82; XI.85.