

Student Sports in the First Five Centuries of Universities (1150-1650)

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A general conception is that “Medieval and Renaissance universities had no official interest in sports or games and assumed no responsibility for amusing undergraduates; paternalism of this kind is an American eccentricity.” However, there is evidence from primary sources in the historical record that indicate that the first five centuries of the universities were not a total void as far as student participation in athletic sports. The major primary sources are the statutes of the various universities, student correspondence with parents, student handbooks or manuals, and diaries and autobiographies of students and university personnel.

Many of the university statutes prohibit participation in specific sports, which is in itself an indication that they were practiced sufficiently to warrant a written prohibition. But it is difficult at times to ascertain the specific sports that were allowed. In the Aularian statutes of 1483-90 at Oxford we read, “All members of a hall on being directed by their Principal to go off to the fields or other places whatsoever on account of proper recreation and the honour of the community of the Hall shall repair there together and return in like manner, and none of them shall stay at home, except for some reasonable cause, and with the leave of the Principal, under penalty of a fine of two-pence.” There are also civil regulations pertaining to scholars. Between 1585 and 1600 the magistrates of the City of Edinburgh showed “every disposition to promote the health and gratify the inclinations of the students, by contributing to their amusements: for they determined to repair the bounds of Mure Lands for the students playing place.”

Correspondence between students and parents provide some insight into both attitudes and activities. In a letter from a physician to his sons at Toulouse in 1315 he prescribes physical exercises for them and suggests that when the weather is inclement that they run up and down the stairs. He concludes by saying, “all these were invented not for sport but for exercise.”

Another primary source is student manuals and handbooks which were often written in dialogue form. The need for exercise and the dangers of swimming are familiar themes in these manuals. In the *Paedologia* of Petrus Mosellanus (1481) is a dialogue between two students in which one does not want to play ball because of his lack of skill. He is urged to play anyway by the second student so that he can practice and besides it is not important whether you win or lose.

Diaries and autobiographies constitute a vast source of data for student athletic activities in the early universities. The diary of Anthony Wood at Oxford from 1632-1695 has many references to sports such as tennis, football, and wrestling.

By 1600, the number of young aristocrats matriculating at Oxford and Cambridge had increased. Extensions of the arts course called extra-statutory studies were developed to meet the needs and demands of these students. These included courses in dancing, vaulting, and fencing. The Scottish and French universities had permitted and provided instruction in sports before the English universities did.

The secondary literature presents problems of conflict, information out of context, and conclusions on incomplete data. There is a need for revisionism.

The historical record does have sufficient data to conclude that the students in the universities from 1150 to 1650 were no different from students of all other times in history — they did participate in athletic sports in many forms during their days and years as scholars in the universities.