

Sports of Princes: The Role of Exercise and Games in a Sixteenth-Century Court

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The rise of territorial princes in late medieval and early Renaissance Europe fostered the development of specific educational programs for the training of the complete prince. Erasmus of Rotterdam in particular focused upon the “education of princes” as an important aspect of his educational reform proposals. Sports, physical exercise, and games were not only encouraged by this unique blending of theoretical and practical educational theory, but they played an integral role in the formation of the Renaissance prince.

This integration of sports into the educational curriculum was especially pronounced in the ordinances and statutes drawn up by Duke Christoph of Wuerttemberg, a medium-sized state in southwest Germany in the mid-sixteenth century. Christoph was a talented ruler who single-handedly established the institutional framework that governed his lands until the time of Napoleon Bonaparte. The ordinances which he wrote or dictated for the preceptors of his children set aside specific times of the day for them to be instructed in physical exercises, athletic skills, and more complex games of social interaction and endurance. The extensive archival holdings of the Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart for his period of European history enable us to identify some of these sports of princes and to draw some surprising conclusions about their role in the life of the court.

The ordinances for Prince Eberhard, born in 1545, and his brother, Ludwig, born in 1554, indicate that running, safe childrens’ games (but no contact sports, like bucking like goats or kissing the girls!), fencing, shooting with bow and arrows, chess, and even dancing were part of the arsenal of acceptable princely sports. More dangerous, hence more attractive to the young princes in their teenage years, were hunting and participation in knightly tournaments on horseback and on foot.

Unfortunately, the exercise program for Prince Eberhard floundered badly, primarily due to the animosity between the humanist preceptor entrusted with the academic subjects and the *Hofmeister*, or master of the court, assigned to teach the prince sports and games. Eberhard himself contributed to his eventual total undoing by devoting himself to overzealous hunting and drinking of alcoholic beverages.

A particularly rich source of information on the role of games in the larger court is provided by the correspondence and ordinances governing Prince Eberhard’s attendance at a princely wedding in Munich in 1568. Week-long tournaments were watched avidly from the sidelines by the women, who then presented the victors with their prizes in the evening dancing. A wedding celebration for Christoph’s own daughter, Hedwig, in 1563, left a detailed description of the knightly games on horseback and on foot, especially in the ordinances intended to protect participants against foul play from unsportsmanlike opponents.

Thus sports for princes were an integral part of the educational structure. The complete sixteenth-century prince was to become as adept with sword and horse as he was to be knowledgeable in Latin and legal studies. Unfortunately, then as now, the theory often outran the practice!