

Sport, The Blessed Medicine of the Renaissance

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Four Renaissance physicians, Thomas Elyot of England, Christobel Mendez of Spain, Girolamo Cardano and Girolamo Mercuriale of Italy, authored books concerned wholly or partially with the ramifications of sport participation on physical and mental well-being. Through their efforts, they brought forth a revolt in medical literature by focusing on sport as a viable concern of physicians.

Sport, formerly not deemed significant nor appropriate for medical attention, underwent a transformation by acquiring status among medical concerns through the publication of Elyot's *Castel of Helth* (1531), Mendez's *Libro del exercicio corporal* (1553), Cardano's *De sanitate tuenda* (1560), and Mercuriale's *De arte gymnastica* (1569).

Through an analysis of these works, it was determined that the physicians perceived sport (voluntary movement unrelated to work, e.g., exercise, games, athletics and leisure pursuits) as the most facile, profitable and pleasurable way to obtain and preserve health, and as such, deserved a "lofty place as a blessed medicine that must be kept in high esteem." (Mendez, 1553) The rationale provided for their concept of sport was that sport participation brought about physical and mental advantages without resorting to the usual medical practices of drugs, bleeding and purging.

The positive physical gains resulting from sport involvement included improved appetite and digestion, better sleep patterns, stronger heart and lungs from increased exertion and altered breathing, improved visual acuity and increased resistance to illness and disease. Bodily strength, vigor, endurance, and flexibility were also improved.

Among the mental efforts of sport involvement were personal satisfaction, pleasure and joy. Physical activity was believed capable of allaying depression and melancholia. Personal traits such as courage, tolerance and self-discipline were also fostered through sport.

The activities which would bring forth these positive physical and mental effects were prescribed by the physicians for special populations: children - games tossing rings, running and jumping; female adolescents and adults - ball games, hunting and dancing; male adolescents and adults - hunting, fencing, darts, archery, quoits, swimming, lifting weights, dancing, boxing, ball games and wrestling; older adults - moderate ball games, walking and horseback riding; senescent adults - short walks and rocking.

Doctors Elyot, Mendez, Cardano and Mercuriale believed that sport was essential to physical and mental health. Observation of the positive results accrued through participation proved that sport was the best way to obtain and preserve good health. To them, sport was truly the "blessed" medicine of the Renaissance.