

# The Concept of the Professional “Player-Athlete” in Elizabethan and Jacobean England

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During the latter half of the sixteenth century to call someone a “professional player” conjured up widely divergent possibilities. He may have been John Simon, an accomplished acrobat paid 13 to perform before Elizabeth in 1583, or perhaps, he was Richard Tarleton, a popular stage clown with the Queen’s Men, a skilled fencer, a maker of plays and ballads, a drummer, a tumbler, a juggler of swords. He even could have been a member of the boys’ company at St. Pauls’ where style and elocution set the standards for acting styles in the decades to come. During most of Elizabeth’s reign, players were accomplished in sports and games, physical skills hardly inseparable from the dramatic arts. In addition to shared stages and shared performers, the Elizabethans’ delight in the spectacular even

prompted playwrights to include physical feats e.g. wrestling, scripted battle scenes, fencing, etc., in many of the history plays. Feats of activity were also prominent in the repertoire of the travelling players. Sport skills came in handy when small troupes took to the countryside during the winter months or during outbreaks of the plague when fear of contagion forced the banning of all public gatherings in London. Townsfolk, offered a mix of physical activity along with regular plays, watched the usual fare of clowning, singing, and dancing, but spectators particularly marveled at daring feats of the acrobats, tumblers, and fencers. Scattered throughout the records of towns are numerous examples of the provincial audiences insatiable appetite for such lively action. Among the examples we find a celebrated acrobat travelling with the Earl Essex Men and professional rope dancers accompanying the Queen's Players for periods during the 1590's. John Dutton and John Laneham also formed a company specializing in physical feats and seemed to have regularly toured the provinces.

England underwent significant political and social changes during Elizabeth's waning years, including a growing economic prosperity. The changing economic climate also had a significant impact on the public sporting events. During the latter part of the sixteenth century, the gentry, a new prosperous class of landowners became a major force in English society. This new aspiring class of gentlemen came with a new attitude toward public recreations, namely their desire for separation from the common social order, an attitude which was partly responsible for the erosion of the Elizabethan spectrum of popular entertainments. Entertainments which were largely accessible to all during Elizabeth's reign, were performed more often to privileged audiences by the beginning of the seventeenth century. The changing taste of the gentry signalled a separation of the professional sporting enterprise from that of the dramatic stage. By 1601 fencing schools discontinued public trials of defense; wrestling, vaulting, and tumbling exercises were only occasionally inserted in the Lord Mayor Shows; and after 1603, professional athletics were absent from the elaborate courtly entertainments of King James I. The shift from an action-orientation to a more professional theatre catered to a more sophisticated elite and paved a new direction in public entertainment, a new audience, and a redefinition of performing standards. These changes however, resulted in the diminution of the once popular professional "player-athlete" long before the curtailment of all public entertainments during the years of the English Civil War.



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