

# Aborted Attempts at Organized Sport in Jacobean England: The Case of the English Popular Theatre

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The Declaration of Sport, issued in 1618, is popularly viewed as the benchmark of King James' attitude toward popular sports. Recent inquiry, however, calls into question the intentions behind the issuance of the document and forces us to reconsider how popular sports were actually viewed during the early Stuart period. A fertile, but much neglected area for the study of such pastimes of the common people is the organized sporting events performed as part of the English popular theatre. Of particular significance to the history of popular sport in the English theatre were events surrounding the crown's endorsement of building a large London amphitheatre to be used for a great variety of sporting exhibitions. In 1620, three London entrepreneurs succeeded in obtaining a license to erect a 12,00 seat structure, three times larger than any existing building, intended to showcase "the exercise of many Heroicke and Majestic Recreations" including "exercise of the Tilte, Tumey, course of field, Barriers, running at the ring . . . armes for foot, the pike, Partizan, Halbred, swords, musket, pistoll or any other usual or necessary armes." The plan also called for the cessation of all other London shows for one day per month. On the surface the King's endorsement of such an enterprise appears to provide a golden opportunity for the growth of popular recreations. But instead, the King abruptly withdrew his support and although attempts to change his mind were made on several occasions, the structure was never built. This paper examines the events surrounding the three unsuccessful attempts to build this spectacular sporting arena, and in so doing, considers the social, political, and economic conditions in Jacobean England that contributed to the demise of "professional" sport in the London theatre prior to the Civil War.

Specifically, during the early seventeenth century, political, social, and economic changes had a significant impact on the public sporting events. 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 during the seventeenth century. The changing taste of the gentry signalled a separation of the professional sport enterprise from that of the dramatic stage. 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 redefinition of performing standards which excluded professional sporting events.

We also argue that the power given to the professional acting companies under the **Privy Council Ruling of 1599** gave the acting companies sufficient power to oppose an amphitheatre that was clearly not in their best interests. Moreover, an analysis of James' motives reveals he was not interested in promoting popular sport among his constituents, but rather, in providing elaborate displays for his own entertainments and that of his court.