

The Great Escape-Sport and Recreation at Stalag Luft III: A Case Study

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Much has been theorized relative to the possibility that sport serves as a safety valve for people resident in compromising human conditions. Such situations include stifling urban living atmospheres, physically and mentally draining work places, and youth environments infested by problems of drug, alcohol, crime and moral abuse. As much as has been written on sport as safety valve, particularly when making the application to those all too obvious conditions noted above, there remains at least one area of degrading human condition touched by sport that has escaped the attention of sport historians. That condition relates to a human confinement environment or, more simply put, *incarceration*. One aspect of incarceration that has received attention in modern literature, cinema, theater, even music, relates to the prisoner of war camps in World War II. In many such camps, particularly in the Pacific and Eastern European areas, human conditions were such that the fine line between life and death sublimated sport almost entirely. In other camps, however, particularly those located in Western Europe harboring the officer class of the Allied Armies, sport was present. Not only was sport present in impromptu fashion, but in some camps it was organized to a high degree of competition. One such example was Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Germany.

This study investigates the form and function of sport at Stalag Luft III during the years 1943-1945. A review of primary sources, including letters, diaries, personal reminiscences gathered in oral consequence, photographs, and records of Prisoner of War Aid Societies, give rise to the following conclusions:

- (1) Sport, both impromptu and organized, existed in some prisoner of war camps during World War II;
- (2) Sport, when present, served specific functions, of which (a) pastime diversion and relief of boredom, (b) considerations of physical health and fitness, (c) nationalistic displays, and (d) diversionary activity to help mask escape planning, preparation and execution, were important;
- (3) At one time or another, to greater or lesser extent, sports facilities were constructed, equipment contrived and gathered, and energies devoted to carrying out recreation and competition in the following activities: ice hockey, calisthenics, gymnastics, track and field athletics, softball, volleyball, fencing, cricket, rugby, soccer, stoolball, instrumental and choral music, and theatrics.

The incarceration atmospheres of World War II prisoner of war camps render added testimony to the axiom that sport can germinate, grow, even flower, amid conditions of human degradation and deprivation.