

The Institutionalization of Sport in Pre-Industrial England

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This paper applies the sociological concept of “institutionalization” to the sports of pre-industrial England. “Institutionalization” refers to the process by which some cultural form or pattern becomes established and accepted within a society. This paper then seeks the “social and cultural support systems” encouraging and stabilizing sport during this time.

To illustrate the principles involved, the author initially considers three contexts of industrial (i.e., post-1750) sport. An eighteenth-century invention, the sporting club, is considered briefly as is a nineteenth-century pattern, official school sports. The third context treated is the professional sports organization of the twentieth century. It is argued that each setting developed sport in distinctive ways.

Within the pre-industrial era, five contexts supporting sport are considered: 1) hosted sport, 2) religiously-sanctioned sport, 3) government-regulated sport, 4) sports of communities and guilds, and 5) commercial establishments providing sport. Each represented a different, if often overlapping tradition.

Hosted sport reflected the essentially personal nature of wealth and status in feudal social structure. When the host provided festivities for familiars who recognized their social inferiority, a bemused, paternalistic attitude prevailed. Hosted sport for strangers or potential rivals, however, tended to feature more pageantry, seriousness, and status display.

Religiously-sanctioned sport could overlap with the former case. However, it was characterized on its own by license or escape. Catholicism legitimized play in that it asserted the primacy of an order transcending materialistic, power-ridden existence. Holiday games were part of sacred time. When everyone (but especially youth and the poor) could take over public spaces. Themes of exuberance and recklessness are predominant.

Government sport is often bureaucratic—managed from the top down to achieve socially-defined ends. The playful, experiential quality of sport is kept within bounds; seriousness prevails. Some of the administrative schemes to regulate the tournament are cited as examples as is archery practice.

Community and guild sports suggest the possibilities of sport as a vehicle to articulate horizontal social distance, i.e., distinctions between more or less functionally similar social units. Sports became occasions for individuals to act out their corporate memberships.

Finally, there were a number of commercial establishments profiting from sport. These included instructional schools, tennis and bowling alleys, pits and rings for animal fighting, theatres, taverns, and sporting grounds. This commercial basis for sport introduced new possibilities for social mingling and inter-class gambling. For that reason, various procedures guaranteeing social distance among the ranks were introduced. Nevertheless, these settings were “culturally democratic” in that they set forth defined games and expert participants that rich and poor alike could applaud. Furthermore, they constituted centers where people could participate or watch sport on a more or less daily basis.

This paper then questions the utility of speaking about “sport in society” as a unitary phenomenon. There were many contexts for sport in both the pre-industrial and industrial world. These not only stabilized sport but colored it in distinctive ways.