

Danish Gymnastics What's So Danish About the Danish's?

Else Trangbak
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

The end of the 19th century can be described as the period of struggle for gymnastics in Denmark. This was the time when a conflict was waged between Swedish and German gymnastics, and the outcome was that Swedish gymnastics was introduced into the voluntary clubs into the population of the farmers and into the gymnastics in schools.

The two gymnastics systems, the Swedish and the German played a crucial role in the middle of the 1880s in the political struggle between the left and right in Danish politics about the introduction of parliamentarism. In this struggle, Swedish gymnastics came to stand for a “democratic” form of exercise and a popular counterculture to the gymnastics of the state and those in power, which was inspired in particular by German gymnastics.

The result of this clash was a characteristic Danish gymnastic culture with firm roots in Danish agrarian culture. Danish gymnastics is still based on the traditions of the agrarian gymnastics despite the growth of the sports movement and the industrialization of the Danish society. This characteristic Danish gymnastics culture is one of the reasons that we in Denmark have been able to sustain an ideological sports debate in a country where “enjoyment of pleasant cosiness” is part of the collective consciousness.

This paper will be based on an analysis of what constitutes the peculiarly Danish aspect, including an evaluation of what the Danish Folk High School and delayed industrialization in Denmark have meant for the development of gymnastics and sport in Denmark.

The analysis is based on work done for my Ph.D. Thesis on The Development of Danish gymnastics in the 19th century, and analysis of the development of the sports movement in Denmark in the 20th century.