

Sports and Physical Exercise in Diderot's *Encyclopedie*

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Of the approximately fifty encyclopaedias published in Europe during the 1600s and 1700s, the most influential, controversial and widely read was the *Encyclopedie, ou Dictionnaire raisonnee des sciences, des arts et des metiers*, published in seventeen volumes of text and ten volumes of prints between 1751 and 1772. Edited by two of the Enlightenment's leading intellectuals, Denys Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, it contained approximately 40,000 entries, designed both to communicate information and at the same time to advance the Enlightenment's program of rationalism, secularism, social criticism and intellectual freedom.

Sports and physical exercise received extensive and generally positive treatment in the *Encyclopedie*. It included approximately seventy entries on sport history, with all but one (on the medieval tournament) dealing with Greek and Roman antiquity. The authors of most of these entries (a cleric, Edme Mallet, and a writer/physician, Louis, Chevalier de Jaucourt) presented a favorable picture of Greek athletics and attitudes towards physical exercise. Although pugilism is criticized for its brutality, in general Greek athletes are praised for their dedication and their alleged willingness to compete for honor rather than money. The sports and physical exercises practised at the gymnasia gave the Greeks strength and agility, made them better soldiers, and contributed to their health. In contrast, the authors are scornful of what passed for sports among the Romans. They condemn the gladiatorial combats and animal hunts and show little enthusiasm for chariot races, even though the topic was covered extensively. Only the various Roman ball games are praised because of their health benefits.

The *Encyclopedie's* coverage of eighteenth-century sports (*jeux d'adresse et de force* - "games of skill and force") is limited to French urban-centered sports that had followings among aristocratic and bourgeois males. These were *jeu de boule* (bowling), *jeu de quilles* (skittles), *jeu de mail* (croquet), *jeu de billards* (billiards) and *jeu de paume* (tennis). Although all the entries except the one on tennis are quite brief, they uniformly emphasize the benefits of sports participation. Croquet, for example, "has miraculous effectiveness for the transpiration of humors," and "there are no rheumatisms or other similar disease it is not able to prevent." Sports of the European countryside, however, and the important developments that were taking place in British sports receive no coverage in the *Encyclopedie*.

In addition to promoting the benefits of sports participation, the *Encyclopedie* also presents a case for the health-giving benefits of regular exercise. The articles on

this topic were all written by de Jaucourt, a physician committed to the principle that more effort should be made by physicians and individuals to prevent rather than cure disease. He presented this argument most forcefully in the article entitled Hygiene, which he defined as the “branch of medicine that deals with the conduct necessary to pursue for the preservation of existing healthfulness.” Exercise contributed to good health primarily by stimulating the wholesome movement of bodily humors - good circulation and digestion and the removal of bodily wastes through perspiration and bowel regularity.

The extensive treatment of sports and physical exercise in the *Encyclopedie* suggests that older historians of French sports such as Jusserand might have exaggerated the declining interest in sports in eighteenth-century France. It also suggests that historians of physical exercise might look to the views of physicians such as de Jaucourt as another source for the growing support for the physical exercise and physical education in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Europe.