

Football and National Identity in a Skiing Nation: The Case of Norway, c. 1930-1998

Since the introduction of football (soccer) to Norway in the 1880s, the game has held a special position in the nation's sporting scene. As a completely new and imported sport, it took some twenty to thirty years for football to become rooted in Norwegian sport culture, and in its early years the game was played mostly by middle-class students and merchants' sons. During and shortly after World War I, however, football experienced a social breakthrough and from the 1930s it has been the most popular sport in the Norwegian Sport Federation, in terms of participating members.

This paper deals with three issues concerning football's further development in Norway. First, in spite of the game's leading role in terms of organized participants, football has never, up till now, threatened skiing's cultural position as Norway's national sport. Second, until the 1990s football was a sport which brought home few, if any, international laurels. With the national team's recent international success, interest in it and the game has risen beyond previously experienced heights. Finally, this recent success has been interpreted as a result of a clever choice of playing style by the national coach. This style, although inspired by British impulses, has been most fully developed by the Norwegians and is concerned not with traditional notions of elegance and beauty, but with scoring goals. While not popular in international football circles, this new paradigm of playing style has been taken in Norway as a sign of intelligence and acuity, so confirming a national self-image already in existence. The lack of popularity of Norway's style among international football's traditional powerhouses is mostly taken as a confirmation of "our" innovative force.

This paper discusses the interrelationship between these issues and addresses the following specific questions: Have Norwegian football's recent international successes contributed to a more modern national identity? Is the new Norwegian playing style related to traditional notions of a special national identity? What can be said about the role of smaller nations such as Norway in the international development of football? Is it possible to compare two sports like skiing and football with regard to the issue of the construction of "Norwegianness?"