

# SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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## ***Food for Athletes: Reflections on Sports Medicine in the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

The following statement appeared in the September 1998 issue of *The Physician and Sportsmedicine*: “The search for strategies to improve performance has prompted a recent surge of interest in nutritional practices...however, most of these interventions have little or no scientific basis” (p. 59). Fifty years earlier, Herbert Herxheimer, an early contributor to an emerging scientific basis for sports medicine, had criticized the “deplorable ignorance” regarding what diets were best for men engaged in intense athletic performance and cited as part of the reason the disinterest of the medical profession. The catalyst for the German physician’s remarks was an article in the *Lancet*, entitled “Food for Olympic Athletes” in which Dr. Nevil Leyton commented upon the deficient diets of British athletes (further impoverished by restrictions of the recent war), and the effects upon their performance in international competitions. Both Leyton’s and Herxheimer’s remarks—and an editorial entitled “The Games” that the *Lancet* published just before the opening of the 1948 London Olympics—are notable more for their larger contexts than for any scientific information they contained.

The emergence of “sports medicine” as a specialty in Germany in the early 1900s has been eloquently discussed in John Hoberman’s *Mortal Engines*. To date, little attention has been directed to events in English-speaking countries, where formal organizations were not created until the 1950s. In his short commentary Herxheimer faulted the British organizing committee for failing to arrange a conference of physicians and physiologists in conjunction with the 1948 Games as had been done at Amsterdam in 1928 and at Berlin in 1936. Members of the International Federation of Sports Medicine (founded at the time of the 1928 St. Moritz Olympics) had been disappointed that the organizers of the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics did not arrange such scientific meetings. The second FIMS congress was held at Turin, Italy in 1933 and all subsequent congresses would be held on the Continent until Santiago, Chile in 1962.

The present paper draws upon a variety of sources concerned with sport, such as Olympic reports and articles in sports and general circulation journals, as well as bio-medical sources. It explores the assertion that political cultural considerations as well as the creation and maintenance of professional authority have had as much, if not more, to do with developments in sports medicine than have purportedly “disinterested science.” In so doing, the paper contributes to the history of sport, Olympism, and also the configurations of professional organizations such as medical societies.