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In the Borderlands of Ling and Jahn: The ‘Finnish Gymnastic System’ in the Late Nineteenth Century

Finland’s first contact with the Swedish gymnastic system was made in the 1820s and 1830s when the gymnastic and fencing teachers Gustaf Mauritz Pauli and Gioacchino Otta introduced the concept of “health gymnastics” into the University of Helsinki. This remained the primary gymnastic pedagogy in the university for several decades. In the 1860s the Finnish gymnastic pedagogue and teacher Viktor Heikel undertook study tours to the Central Gymnastic Institute in Stockholm and to several German towns, becoming acquainted with both Ling’s gymnastics and the German system of Turnen created by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn. Heikel compared these systems and tried to combine the most positive elements from both. On his return to Helsinki, he started to teach gymnastics in some schools according to his new ‘Finnish system’, a combination of the rival Swedish and German gymnastics.

One of Heikel’s most outstanding disciples was Mauritz Vænerberg. Having finished his gymnastic teacher’s exam he also undertook a study tour to Germany in 1875. He was impressed not only by the German gymnastic system itself, but also by the network of voluntary gymnastic clubs, where gymnastics could be practised without state supervision. When Vænerberg returned to Helsinki in the autumn of 1875, he started an unofficial gymnastic club, which he consequently named Helsingfors Turnförening (the Helsinki Turnen Society). In the early 1880s the gymnastic society was reorganized and changed its name to Helsingfors Gymnastikklubb (the Helsinki Gymnastic Club).

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the Gymnastic Club became perhaps the most distinguished exponent of the Finnish gymnastic system. During gymnastic festivals in the Nordic countries the Club made the Nordic gymnasts familiar with Finnish gymnastics, although not without ideological and pedagogical feuds. This was the case especially during the festival in Stockholm in 1891, as the Swedish orthodox advocates of the Ling system tried to prevent foreign gymnastics from being displayed. The Gymnastic Club also arranged two national gymnastic festivals, held in Helsinki 1886 and 1894, where the Finnish audience was acquainted with male display gymnastics.

In the late 1880s Finnish gymnastic pedagogues tried to raise the status of gymnastics within the school curriculum. The issue was discussed during the Diets (Finnish Parliament) of 1885 and 1888, accompanied by debates in the press about which gymnastic system was best suited for the Finnish schools. Hereby gymnastics also became a gender issue, as the dividing line between the supporters of the Swedish and German systems ran between male and female gymnastic leaders, the women strongly supporting the Ling-gymnastics as they had done from the very beginning.

In general one could say that the Finnish system of gymnastics included more apparatus-oriented exercises, combined with so called free exercises with iron sticks, a type of gymnastics that was not very common in other Nordic countries in the late 19th century. The Finnish gymnasts carried on with this type of display gymnastics well into the 1900s.

This paper sheds light on the first decades of the Finnish gymnastic system and its encounters with its fellow systems in, for instance, Norway and Denmark, where elements of Swedish and German gymnastics were also mixed to produce 'national' varieties of gymnastics. Hereby the paper offers yet another comparative study of Nordic gymnastics, from a viewpoint that has been seldom presented – the Finnish view.