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Published by: Oxford University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3787342
Accessed: 08-03-2017 01:20 UTC

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THE MAKING OF A WORKING-CLASS FOOTBALL CULTURE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

As every student of European history knows, in the wake of the Industrial and French revolutions the English working class emerged as a self-conscious, aggressive force in English society. Excluded from the franchise and exploited in the marketplace, working men as diverse as factory operatives and skilled artisans came to recognize shared interests, to identify common foes, and to articulate mutual goals. Class “acquired a peculiar resonance in English life” as the “making of the English working class” culminated in the Chartist challenge to the established order. In the words of E.P. Thompson, “everything, from their schools to their shops, their chapels to their amusements, was turned into a battle-ground of class.”

One of Thompson’s students, R.M.T. Malcolmson, has ably demonstrated the manner in which popular amusements—traditional rural games and pastimes—fell prey to class prejudices and the rise of a market economy in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. In response to Malcolmson’s call for a study of “the reshaping of popular leisure” after 1850, however, one must turn from the rural countryside and villages to the towns and cities, from informal games and customary pastimes to organized institutions and games.

The territory is largely unexplored. Yet some hints for the traveler can be found in parallel studies of the relation of the masses to sport and the larger society in other nineteenth-century nations. The rise of organized sport in the United States, for example, came in the second half of the nineteenth century on the heels of the rapid growth of urban centers of population, the shortening of the work week which provided leisure time for industrial laborers, the development of rapid and relatively inexpensive means of transportation, and an educational system which fostered physical as well as mental activity. All these factors were present in the English situation. Moreover, the early emergence of professionalism in American sports has its transatlantic counterpart. Although the customary frontier thesis is a model hardly applicable to Victorian England, the origins and early patterns of organized sport in the United States offer suggestive parallels.

Sport in fin-de-siècle France, on the other hand, provides a study in contrast. Following the military debacle at the hands of the Germans in 1870-71, Frenchmen turned their attention to sports and gymnastics out of an overwhelming concern for national unity and patriotic revanche. To some degree they mimed English sports, but the mime proved to be vastly different from the model. French sports were, in the words of Professor Weber, “integrated and integrating activities, part of the contemporary scene, reflecting social and ideological preoccupations, and very likely affecting them
in turn." While organized sports in late-Victorian England both reflected and affected social relationships and ideological assumptions, sports in Britain were scarcely "integrated and integrating activities." On the contrary, they resulted from a class-divided society and tended to accentuate rather than to heal those divisions. Without a unifying anti-German nationalism, Englishmen played out their aggressions on each other. Football, especially, set class against class.

* * *

The peasant origins of football, its periodic repression by authorities, and its near-demise in the eighteenth century have been thoroughly documented.7 Taken over by the "public" (private) schools, the old kicking, carrying, tackling, tripping, gouging, punching game became stylized according to each school's facilities and traditions. By 1850, the many different versions of the game fell into two distinct types: the handling and tackling game (with some kicking) played at the newer public schools such as Rugby, Marlborough, and Cheltenham, and the kicking game (with handling and tackling forbidden) promoted by older establishments such as Eton, Shrewsbury, Westminster, and Charterhouse. In the '50s and early '60s several attempts were made to arrive at a uniform code, all to no avail. The two games were simply irreconcilable, and the breach was formally recognized by the formation of the Football Association (soccer) in 1863 and the Rugby Football Union in 1871.

While the game was being transformed in the country's elite educational institutions, several factors were taking shape which were ultimately destined to facilitate a popular football culture. The growth of cities was basic. Whereas in 1800 there was not a single city other than London with a population of 100,000 or more, by 1891 no less than 72 per cent of all English citizens lived in cities, and the number of urban centers (especially in the industrial Midlands) surpassing the figure of 100,000 had leaped to 23. Like no other country in the world late-Victorian Englishmen were tightly congregated and in need not only of new housing, sanitation facilities and the like, but also of new diversions, amusements vastly different from the traditional village fare. Parks and open fields were at a premium in the working-class sections of most industrial towns, creating a demand for adequate, cheap means of transportation. As Britain's fast-growing railway systems made inter-city football competition possible, a boom in intra-city transport vehicles such as passenger cabs, omnibuses, coaches, and trams linked the most remote working-class areas to fields of play.

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, industrial laborers had neither time nor energy to pursue recreational activities. Not until several mid-century Factory Acts limited the hours of women and children in textile factories did the traditional six-day work week for adult males begin to be shortened. By 1870 a half-day Saturday was realized in most factories, mines, and workshops, providing leisure time for the bulk of the laboring population. In the same year Parliament passed an Education Act, ordaining that a school should be placed within the reach of every English child. As English schoolboys learned their three R's, they also learned to play organized games. In providing reading and writing skills for the children of industrial laborers, the Education
Act of 1870 created a mass reading audience for the sports press which burgeoned in the last two decades of the century, and inadvertently placed a football in the hands or at the feet of every English schoolboy. While the laboring classes won their half-day Saturdays, informally played one or both versions of football, and turned out in increasingly large numbers to watch local clubs, gentlemen of leisure dominated both the Football Association and the Rugby Football Union. The two leading officers of the F.A. governing committee were C.W. Alcock (1842-1907), an Harrovian, and A.F. Kinnaird (1867-1923), an Etonian and Cambridge graduate who became a Scottish baron in 1887. The composition of the early teams reflected this upper-class leadership. In 1872 the first F.A. Cup was won by the Wanderers, a combined team of former public school and university students. Between 1872 and 1882 the Wanderers claimed five cups and the Old Etonians two. Similarly, Rugby and Marlborough men filled the rosters of the early international Rugby teams as well as the prestigious University matches between Oxford and Cambridge, begun in 1872.

On the northern horizon, however, new clubs sprung up daily. Churches, the YMCA, numerous philanthropic and temperance societies designed to undertake a "civilizing mission" to the poor, and public school and university graduates fired with the ideals of "muscular Christianity" zealously introduced Rugby and soccer to the masses outside the pale of southern refinement. Soccer, especially, appealed to working-class men and boys in the north. Unlike Rugby, it could be played by anyone regardless of size or strength. Unlike cricket, the traditionally popular village game, a football contest could be played to completion within a brief span of time. Soccer football was a "democratic game": "within easy reach of absolutely everyone." According to one journalist, already by 1867 soccer was exerting an appeal of "gigantic dimensions" in working-class communities.

Many of the major clubs still competing in the Football Association trace their roots to the 1870s and '80s. Some originated out of Sunday schools or Nonconformist chapels. The Aston Villa team began in 1874, with members of the Villa Cross Wesleyan Chapel; in the same year the Bolton Wanderers started out of a local Sunday school. Between 1875 and 1880 Birmingham City, Everton, Burnley, and Wolverhampton soccer teams formed out of similar religious organizations. All the while older grammar schools and new state schools were producing their football teams — such as the Blackburn Rovers, Leicester City, and Sunderland. Nor were trade unions asleep to the new craze: Stoke City, Manchester United, Arsenal, and West Ham United all originated with workmen and labor organizers eager to play.

The death-knell of aristocratic and upper-middle class dominance of Association football sounded in 1883, when the Cup Final pitted the Blackburn Olympics against the Old Etonians. The social background of the Old Etonians was impeccably privileged. Among the Blackburn squad, on the other hand, were three weavers, a spinner, a dental assistant, a textile factory hand, and an iron-foundry worker; their captain was a master-plumber. They beat the Old Etonians in overtime, and returned home by train to the adulation of a huge crowd led by what Old Etonians no doubt viewed as the epitome of that...
northern, Nonconformist, low-cultured working class life: a brass band. The populace had successfully stormed the ramparts of the barbarians and philistines. From 1883 to 1914, northern working-class teams won every F.A. Cup except one. Even the one exception, the Tottenham Hotspurs who won the Cup in 1901, was a team comprised of three northerners, five Scotsmen, two Welshmen, and an Irishman.11

In the ascendancy of those northern clubs lay the origins of professional football. Working-class footballers were simply unable to take time off for practice, travel, and the game itself unless their expenses were paid. Enterprising Scots quickly seized the opportunity to come south and sell their athletic as well as their industrial skills. Gentlemen founders of the game put their collective finger in the dike and sternly forbade play for pay, but the payments merely went under the table. Entrepreneurs, rich with their industrial profits, had no qualms about paying players as they paid their factory operatives. Seeing professional football as an excellent investment, they pumped the game’s expanding profits into new stadiums, equipment, uniforms, and salaries. Nor were such investments merely good business sense. A winning football team became a badge of honor in Lancashire and Yorkshire towns; civic pride and entrepreneurial savvy went hand in hand.12

In the Football Annual of 1880 C.W. Alcock lamented that there was “no use to disguise the speedy approach of time when the subject of professional players will require the earnest attention of those on whom devolves the management of Association football.”13 Four years later the crisis came to a head when the sponsor of a Cup finalist, Preston, admitted forthrightly that he paid not only his players’ expenses but also small salaries. Under fire from the officials of the Football Association, he convened a meeting of Lancashire clubs and threatened to form a breakaway organization. Reluctantly the F.A. officials, led by Alcock, backed down. To the aristocratic alarmists who insisted that it was “degrading for respectable men to play with professionals,” Alcock pierced to the heart of the class issue. He rejected the assumption that industrial workers were “the utter outcasts some people represent them to be.” and added that it was hardly “immoral to work for a living.”11 After a long and acrimonious debate, in 1885 the soccer element in English football reached an agreement whereby separate amateur and professional leagues would operate within the same organization.

Rugby football was another matter altogether. Like soccer, Rugby had been introduced in Lancashire and Yorkshire by upper-class graduates of the public schools and universities. Although not as popular as soccer, Rugby too by the ’80s had established itself as a working-class sport. After the capitulation of the Football Association, Rugby was also under the threat of professionalism. In 1887 the London-based Rugby Football Union passed a resolution against allowing any player to receive money for play. As one contemporary put it, “The Rugby Union Committee finding themselves face to face with the hydra, have determined to throttle it before it is big enough to throttle them.”15

Finally in 1893 a Yorkshire contingency submitted a formal request to the Rugby Football Union that “players be allowed compensation for bona fide loss of time.” The petition was rejected by an overwhelming majority on the
grounds that such a provision was “contrary to the true interest of the game and its spirit.” In the following year Rugby Union officials dug in their heels with an explicit pronouncement that “only clubs composed entirely of amateurs shall be eligible for membership” in the R.F.U., and that the headquarters would be forever “in London where all general meetings shall be held.” The impasse was fixed between amateurs and professionals, working classes and public school men, north and south. In August, 1895, twenty representatives of northern Rugby football clubs met at Huddersfield, an industrial town situated between the booming centers of Manchester and Leeds, and there formed the Northern Rugby Football Union (later re-named the Rugby Football League).

* * *

As one might expect, class prejudices and alarmist predictions poured from the pens of upper-class defenders of amateurism in the 1890s. The purpose of Rugby football, according to the public school ethos, was to provide “an education in that spirit of chivalry, fairness, and good temper for which, if report speaks truly, the masses of our countrymen are scarcely as distinguished as their fathers were.” Rugby professionals supposedly would throw such principles to the wind, and play not for the game’s sake but for the sake of winning in order to please “the gallery and the gate.” Thus Rugby, like soccer, would become “a byword for money-grubbing, tricks, sensational displays, and utter rottenness.”

Behind the colorful language lay some truth. Like the Tories of 1832 who warned that if the franchise were opened to the middling classes, the masses too would soon barge in, these Rugby reactionaries were to some degree correct in their diagnosis. After 1895 professional Rugby footballers in the north of England altered the rules of their game to make it faster and more attractive to paying customers. For the upper classes these changes reflected the “utter rottenness,” “degradation and decay,” “unregenerate passions,” “warped instincts,” and “contagion” of a “sordid nature” associated with working-class life.

Less rhetorically prejudiced, some observers saw football (especially soccer) as a socially valuable means whereby the working classes could work off their aggressive, criminal instincts in an acceptable manner. “Since football became popular with all classes,” Montague Shearman wrote in 1889, “there have been less wrenching off of knockers and ‘boxing of the watch,’ and fewer ‘free fights’ in the streets.” Criminal statistics, incomplete and unreliable as they are in late-Victorian England, support the proposition that the level of criminal activity in London and the larger provincial towns declined in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Education, economic opportunity, and more efficient law enforcement contributed mightily to this trend, but increased leisure activities for urban dwellers certainly played a part. Shearman could well conclude that “Football has its national uses quite apart from the cheap enjoyment it has given to thousands.”

Even this most reflective assessment of the social function of football betrayed a bias against the working class. Was football, in fact, simply “cheap enjoyment” for the masses? Of course not. As Huizinga suggests, homo ludens
always engages in something "more than physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex." Play "goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a significant function — that is to say, there is some sense to it." Uppermost in Huizinga's mind was the "play element" in cultural rituals such as religion, art, drama, and military activity as well as spontaneous fun-filled games. Professional sports, for him as for upper-class Victorians, meant utilitarian work, not play, passive spectators rather than active participants in the ludic impulse. "In play there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something."23

Professional or not, soccer football meant something of supreme importance to working-class players in late-Victorian England. In truth, the "professional" nature of the game was more akin to our meaning of "semi-professional" in which capable, enthusiastic players received small salaries, some local employment perhaps, but not outrageously high salaries. By 1900 most footballers could not support themselves on football playing alone. The average wage was nearly 2 pounds a week for a first-class player, about the same as a skilled artisan, but the inflated wages of a few exceptional individuals obscured the fact that younger, lesser-known players received a pittance for their efforts.24 For its working-class participants, soccer meant much more than a job.

Unlike politics, higher education, and commerce, which were still reserved for the well-born or moneyed, football provided an opportunity to compete on even terms, to heighten the sense of self, to strive for heroic triumph and thus to achieve what one social theorist calls "organismic durability."25 Even in informally organized games, athletic prowess brought local acclaim; a successful professional career insured a kind of primitive mythic immortality in the estimation of the "tribe." One miner born in 1892 in the village of Birtley, County Durham, remembered long afterwards that the local lads worked ten hours a day in the pits and then gathered on the village green to play "a hard game of football without flinching." Especially memorable were those young men who "found their way into professional sporting avenues" such as "first-class football."26

Metaphorically for many, literally for a few, football was a way out of the pits despite the fact that the steel grip of the F.A. soon replaced the iron law of wages. By 1900 professional footballers were as much at the mercy of their owners and managers as factory operatives had been under the thumb of the captains of industry in the early years of unregulated industrial enterprise. Once a player signed with a club, he was registered on its books by the Football Association and was forbidden from selling his services to any other club until his owner granted an official release. Transfers were common, but they too were the sole prerogatives of owners.27

In an effort to protect themselves, professional players followed the pattern of industrial laborers and founded the Union of Professional Footballers in 1898; ten years later the organization was recognized by the authorities of the Football Association. All the while footballers asserted themselves in "a direct appeal to the crowd" who paid to see them play, praised their talent, and
applauded their vigor. Yet even at the professional level the game meant much more than mere external acclaim. For the working-class player, it was an intrinsically vital expression of the search for self-esteem. Far more than other paid entertainers such as minstrels, actors, and musicians, a footballer could "expand his self-feeling" not only by "physical incorporation" on a team but also by competitive "triumph or demonstration of his own excellence." The game of soccer was one of the few avenues wherein a young man of working-class origins could have his claim for self-importance internally satisfied and publicly recognized.

Emulation was one sure sign of recognition. Memoirs and social commentaries at the turn of the century (not to mention recent histories of the period) are filled with references to boys playing soccer football, games spontaneously informal yet often in conscious imitation of the local professional team. In 1906 George Sims observed "urchins kicking paper balls in the back alleys" of the East End of London, in the shadow of West Ham United. In Lancashire and Yorkshire, especially, football was apparently "played in every street" on weekday afternoons and Saturday mornings. For boys in Manchester the term "outdoor games" had "only one meaning, and that is football, as played under the Association Code." Whereas cricket games were largely ignored and seldom seriously studied even when outstanding cricketers appeared, Manchester lads were "keenly observant of the tricks employed by a first-class football player." In Birmingham, where "the supporters of Association would outnumber those of the rival code [Rugby] by about five hundred to one," boys congregated regularly to play in relation to the professional game. Beginning early on Saturday afternoon, they engaged in their own game of soccer for two hours, then went to the stadium to cheer their local Birmingham City club. For amateur and professional alike, football transcended the necessities of life.

This symbiotic relationship between professional and popular football runs counter to the shallow assumption, often implied if not openly expressed, that professionalism merely created a passive spectator audience on the order of the Roman spectacles. Victorian apologists for gentlemanly amateur sports understandably held such a view. Unfortunately they find a receptive audience in the corridors of modern historians who are negatively impressed with the passive character of the televised spectacle called organized sport. But professional football in late-nineteenth century England was of another order. Like American baseball during the era of Cobb, Ruth, and Gehrig, English soccer spawned a massive following of youth intent on emulating as well as cheering their heroes. By the second or third decades of the game, many of the spectators were themselves playing, or had played the game in their youth.

If football was a "significant function" for participants, it was all the more important for those thousands of spectators who turned out to watch the game. At the most obvious level it meant a pleasant, if momentary, escape from the routine of factory work and the confines of cramped working-class living
quarters. Even more than the ancient Shrovetide Tuesday games, professional football provided a touch of color and excitement for an otherwise drab, monotonous existence. One unsympathetic commentator granted this point:

The astonishing increase in the numbers that play and watch others play the great English games is largely due to the dull monotony of life in our large towns: it is the absolute necessity of some change, some interest outside the daily work which has long ceased to be interesting, that causes the huge crowds at the weekly football matches.35

Those huge crowds serve as statistical evidence to supplement literary testimony on the importance of football for the working class. Whereas only 2,000 spectators turned out for the first F.A. Cup Final at Kensington Oval in 1872, twenty years later about 25,000 fans filled the stadium to its limits. In 1895 the new Crystal Palace grounds attracted 42,500, and in 1901 bulged with 111,000 enthusiastic fans. At the turnstiles English workers registered their delight with the game that offered “as a tonic some bracing excitement” to transport them from a week spent “in exhausting and monotonous labour.”36

Yet there was more to it than relief from drudgery. As laborers flocked to the stadium “in their workaday dirt, and with their workaday adjectives very loose on their tongues,”37 they found what Durkheim called “a new kind of psychic life,” a collective experience “qualitatively different” from the isolated life of the home or factory.38 Urban workers in the late-nineteenth century were still, to a large extent, only a generation or so removed from their former lives as village-dwellers and farm laborers. Cut off from the traditional securities of an extended family, familiar faces, seasonal chores, and parish church life, they suffered alienation and anomie in the impersonality of town life and industrial competition. Along with pubs and music halls, Saturday afternoon football games made possible a new sense of belonging, a ritualistic involvement in a larger group symbolized by colorful scarves, team songs, and folk heroes. “The crowds who flock to see two football teams play in the North or Midlands like a good match,” according to one commentator in 1895, “but their predominating desire is to see their own champions win, and this desire is made the more intense by the fact that the players are fellow-towners with whom they are in touch, or whom perhaps they know personally.” Even Scotsmen, “invaders from across the Border” who supplied the bulk of talent for many of the teams, were “soon identified with their new home, and became to all intents and purposes natives.”39 More than for those few Scotsmen, for masses of working-class Englishmen ceremonial struggles on the field of play gave focus to a vital though largely unarticulated feeling of identity with town and fellow workers.10

While providing both a respite from the factories and a cohesive force for working-class communities, football diluted the political energies of English laborers. Occurring simultaneously with the growth of football “for the masses” was the emergence of the Labour Party, but the coincidence is misleading. Politics, like Rugby football, was still a game controlled by “the classes.” Like the pubs and music halls which thrived in the late-nineteenth century, soccer football was a personally satisfying diversion, a warm blanket covering the cold fact of political impotence.11 Before one laments football’s contribution to that popular “culture of consolation,” however, one should first
recognize its social value. For the working class in fin de siècle England, the game was meaningful as well as fun.

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FOOTNOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Symposium on Popular Culture at Sweet Briar College in March, 1978.


14. Quoted in Walvin, People’s Game, 80.


32. C.E.B. Russell, Manchester Boys (Manchester, 1905), 61, 65.


