The Sensual and Intellectual Pleasures of Rowing: Pierre de Coubertin's Ideal for Modern Sport

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In my opinion, no other sport demands such a continual and meticulous self-assessment. If one were to create an ultra modern convent, I would recommend that the prioress establish obligatory rowing as a means of examining one's conscience. (Pierre de Coubertin, 1928)

Rowing has certainly been recognized as a vital force in the emergence and development of modern sporting institutions such as amateurism, intercollegiate sport, and the Olympic Games. In the latter decades of the 1800s and the early decades of the 1900s, men from divergent social backgrounds rowed recreationally and competitively on the waterways of Europe, North and South America, and Australasia. Though rowers of different classes rarely mixed socially at boathouses or in competitive regattas, the sport remained popular for participants and spectators and was regarded by commentators of the day as an exemplary athletic endeavour for modern times. But what lured men to the rivers and boat houses? What did rowers take away from their experiences? In the past several years, historical scholarship on rowing has been plentiful. As a modern sporting phenomenon in the 19th century, rowing has provided a potent backdrop for critical social class and gender histories. Compelling as these analyses are, the athletes who rowed during this era seem to be represented as passive objects of class, gender, and ethnic discourses. Their sporting instinct and erotic pleasure is supplanted with abstract references to power relations and the unequal distribution of economic capital. The athletic lives lived are stripped of cultural agency. As historians, how can we access the "feel for the game" or the "practical sense" of sport that enabled athletes to function as agents "to act and react in specific situations in a manner that

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was not always calculated and that was not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules. In short, we are left asking a fundamental question: How did rowing function culturally?

As an avid rower, Baron Pierre de Coubertin (the founder of the modern Olympic Movement) knew the feel for the sport of rowing; he had a practical sense of its culture. For this exceptional figure in the history of sport, rowing was a perfect physical activity and sport, “le plus beau des sports.” Fortunately, Coubertin was also a prolific theorist of sport and physical education and his literary oeuvre has been effectively preserved in the archives of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and through his own publishing efforts. Though Coubertin theorized and promoted many different and sometimes seemingly divergent initiatives related to sport, rowing emerges time and time again as an ideal against which most of these initiatives, including the Olympic Games, were measured. His willingness to express his own personal zeal for the sport is very evident in his prolific and esoteric writing. His meditations on the sport of rowing, and faith that it represented a kind of “ideal” for modern sport, are rich and vital evidence of sporting culture at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. If we are to explore the cultural nature of sport the way sport and physical activity brought meaning to the lives on men at the turn of this century, Pierre de Coubertin provides us with a vital point of departure.

Coubertin’s personal sporting experiences led him to a self-defined career as a promoter of sporting culture. Through his practical sense for the sport of rowing, he grew committed to the notion that this particular sport could provide vital truths for men of the modern world. Sociologist and cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu refers to this practical sense or “taste” for specific cultural practices as habitus. His notion of habitus does not, however, stand alone in explaining the sociological complexities of culture. For Bourdieu, the more precarious dimension of cultivating particular tastes emerges from within the “field” of the cultural production. Here, the manipulation and management of symbolic and cultural capital defines who can legitimately consume specific cultural practices and who is excluded from such production and consumption. Bourdieu reveals how a practical sense or habitus, which predisposes us to prefer particular patterns of cultural consumption, is fundamentally linked to traditional social structures, systems of power related to specialized bodies of knowledge, and access to economic, symbolic, and cultural capital. Through the consumption and production of sports, arts, and aesthetic ideals, fields of cultural production are defined and lines of social authority are confirmed. At the most profound level, Bourdieu’s sociology of culture reveals that systems of cultural production, of which sport can be included, require the inculcation of tastes that are deceptive in the way they legitimize certain cultural forms at the expense of others. To fully understand the social implications of culture, one must analyze the history and organization of the