Sport, Status, and Style

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Class accrues . . . from participation and even interest in sports. But not all sports, only certain carefully selected ones. A prole aspiring to rise can ascertain what the right ones are by simply entering a good . . . upper-middle-class [men’s shop] and scrutinizing the neckties . . . From these he’ll learn as much about the OK-ness of certain sports as from the sports themselves. He’ll notice ties depicting . . . a little fish with a fly in its mouth, a tennis racquet, a sailboat, a golf ball or club, a horse or polo bat . . . But there are class pitfalls even here. One must learn that fishing in fresh water is classier than in salt, and that if a salmon and trout are the things to catch, a catfish is something by all means to avoid.1

Sport historians agree that social classes played a major role in the emergence and development of modern organized sport, but over the last decade they have largely ignored the links between class and sport. As Steven Riess asserts in a recent review of the literature, “grand theories based solely on class [have been] largely discarded.”2 While some historians have turned their attention to the antecedents of what they perceive to be postclass, egalitarian consumer cultures,3 most have adopted a pluralist perspective that does not privilege a priori one social determinant over others, albeit age, class, gender, race, or political power.4 Our view is that class remains essential to the analysis of both modern and postmodern sport: All the evidence suggests that, irrespective of culture or historical period, people use sport to distinguish themselves and to reflect their status and prestige. Our objective in this article is to illustrate the potential of embodied social status, lifestyle, and consumption for rich empirical and comparative historical research.

Sports historians have largely ignored social classes as collectives of relatively similar status groups (including occupational categories and subcultures) that have similar lifestyles and consumption patterns.5 Certainly, few historians have paid much attention to the embodiment of status,
lifestyle, and consumption. For us the body is the key to understanding prestige and social distinction. Bodies are highly visible and explicit markers. In the case of sport, "although the degree of physical input varies" between codes, it is "the body and its attributes . . . that constitute the most striking symbol [and] . . . the material core of sporting activity."6

In the first section of this article we draw on Max Weber to clarify the concepts of class and status. We then turn to the contemporary French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who according to Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow "has developed one of the most analytically powerful and heuristically promising approaches to human reality on the current scene."7 Bourdieu provides us with a conceptual framework for examining the relations between sport and social status. Building on the premise that sport requires "management of the body" and management is "central to the acquisition of status and distinction,"8 Bourdieu asserts that embodied lifestyles are powerful indicators of social inequalities in sport. In the second section we apply Bourdieu's embodied perspective to show how the upper, middle, and lower classes use the corporeal capital of their sporting bodies to display and distinguish themselves and thus maintain social distance.9 Finally, we conclude the article by appraising the relevance of embodied social stratification in contemporary consumer culture: If sport historians felt that they had good grounds to omit it from their analyses, contemporary consumer culture is a convincing reason to reintroduce class.

Class and Status: From Weber to Bourdieu

Weber: Class, Status, and Styles of Life

In his theory of social stratification, the seminal sociologist Max Weber sharply distinguished the concepts of class and status. For Weber, class denoted economically determined forms of social stratification, while status designated types and degrees of honor and prestige granted to or received by individuals. He believed that economic classes are achievement-oriented and universalistic, while status groups are ascriptive and particularistic. Moreover, "class relations are defined by interaction among unequals in a market situation, whereas status is determined primarily by relations with equals."10 Finally, he wrote that class groups comprise individuals who have life chances in common, while status groups consist of people who have similar lifestyles. Barry Barnes provides a highly pertinent summary of Weber's notion of lifestyle:

Particular attention is paid to the non-instrumental aspects. . . . Economic considerations may contribute to the way a group lives: Those monopolizing an occupation, for example, may find much in how they act being common and distinctive simply by virtue of what they need to do. But codes of status groups themselves give more attention