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The Aristocratic Taste for Sport among Swedish Sport Researchers

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Abstract

The cultural-scientific capital of sports researchers turns them into important arbiters of what is to count as a legitimate understanding of modern sport, and what is to be considered good and bad in sport. Drawing on the extensive work of Swedish sports researchers in social sciences and humanities between 1970 and 2010, the aim of this paper is to present a succinct view of how modern sport is portrayed in this intellectual milieu. The aim is to find out what its ascribed characteristics and essential values are, and then to contextualize this understanding socially and historically. The theoretical point of departure is the French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s writings on social classes and their different tastes for sport. Bourdieu’s views on upper-class cultural fractions, which in his view includes university teachers and researchers, and their aristocratic attitude towards physical activity is of particular interest. This attitude includes a general distaste for win-at-all-cost – ‘serious’ – competitions, and a specific distaste for sports with a pronounced element of bodily contact such as boxing and football (soccer). According to the analysis presented here, this has also become the mainstream attitude among contemporary sport researchers in Sweden. The competition-critical discourse that is pronounced among Swedish researchers has one root in the general left-wing critique of the competitive market society prevalent in the 1970s, and another in specifically pedagogical ideas which claim that playful learning processes are always the most efficacious.

Key words: competitive sport, modern sport, play, physical activity, Swedish sport researchers, taste for sport, aristocratic taste
Introduction

‘To compete is to live,’ proclaimed Victor Balck, one of the prominent figures in Swedish sport at the end of the 19th century, a period when modern sport became popular and spread throughout the country. However, not everyone shared his enthusiasm for competition and for the growth of independent, volunteer-driven sport clubs, which were not always controlled by individuals from the upper classes and which were being established at an accelerating pace. On the contrary, there was rather widespread criticism of the hysteria associated with sports results and of being sports-crazy in the British sense. Many from the rural populace, and leaders of the trade union and working-class movement, thought that the focus of modern sports on intense training, competitions and spectacle was unwholesome – a deplorable feature of urbane luxury. Obsession with sports was also seen as an expression of hedonistic values, without any positive effects on national health and morals. Not surprisingly, the national Swedish Church was more interested in the soul than the body, while cultural conservatives such as doctors and teachers preferred Ling Gymnastics with its roots in the beginning of the 19th century and all-round outdoor activities. The opinions of doctors, acknowledged at the time as the legitimate experts in the field of physical activity, were especially important as the nation sought to understand the rapidly rising popularity of sports.¹

Sixty to seventy years later, at the end of the 1960s, a new category of acknowledged experts on modern sport emerged: sport researchers working in Swedish universities. Their legitimacy was based in modern science, and they were part of a rapidly expanding university system. A growing interest among politicians in public health and how to implement what was labelled the ‘sport-for-all’ policy increased the value of and the need for academic experts in the field of physical activity (both within sport clubs and within the education system).²

The rich cultural-scientific capital of sport researchers and their consequent reach and influence turned them into important arbiters of what was – and is – seen to count as a legitimate understanding of modern sport, and what is considered good and bad in sport. In this article I focus on Swedish sport researchers in social sciences and humanities

² Ibid.
(in Swedish “humanvetenskaperna”) and their work between 1970 and 2010, concentrating especially on those dealing with sports for children and teenagers, one of the most important areas of sport research during this period. The aim of the article is to present a succinct description of how modern sport is portrayed by these researchers, to find out what its ascribed characteristics and essential values are, and then to contextualize this academic understanding socially and historically. This has involved a careful reading of sport science texts written by prominent researchers. I have used a discourse analysis method to attempt to identify key concepts and establish how these are linked to overarching value systems.

Discursive understanding among academics typically has an unreflective, self-evident approach: one simply knows what the subject is about, basic concepts, statements and thesis-promoting reasoning are familiar, and these do not need to be explained or justified. This general complacency is perhaps one reason why there seems to be so little inclination to scrutinize ourselves, in our roles as scientific experts, or to consider how academic and social positions are interlinked and reflected in our works (Alan Bairner’s study of sports sociologists as ‘public intellectuals’ in Northern Ireland is one of the few exceptions).\(^3\) My focus on sport researchers themselves is, then, somewhat unusual, in both the Scandinavian and international literature.\(^4\)

The theoretical point of departure here is the work of the French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, specifically his writings on social classes and their different tastes for sport. Of especial interest are his views on upper-class cultural fractions of the population and their distinctly ‘aristocratic’ attitude towards physical activity. Historically, this attitude included a general distaste for meritocratic, win-at-all-cost competitions, and a specific distaste for sports that involve a pronounced degree of bodily contact, such as boxing and football.


\(^4\) This statement is based on my reading of Swedish and international sport research written in Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and English.
Taste for sport

According to Pierre Bourdieu, modern sport should be viewed as a specific field. He addresses sport in two articles written around 1980, and sport also plays a role in his synthetic work *Distinction* (1979), which contains a comprehensive mapping and analysis of French consumption patterns and lifestyles. *Distinction*’s primary purpose is to demonstrate how cultural practices, such as book-reading and dining habits, the playing of sports and outdoor activities in general, have distinction values, and to show that these have a social differentiation function. The idea that a taste for something simultaneously involves distaste for something else is central: taste, in short, has a relational foundation.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu’s analyses revolve around the positions of the social space (he offers, in other words, a class analysis based on profession, income, wealth, etc.) and how these co-vary with ‘the space of lifestyles’ as consumption fields. The dominant positions within the social space belong to those with major economic and cultural capital, and so among the pre-eminent here are France’s business leaders and university and upper-secondary school teachers. The former, who belong to the dominant class fraction by virtue of their significant economic – rather than cultural – capital, prefer tennis, golf and water skiing, while university and upper-secondary school teachers – possessors of considerable cultural capital – prefer activities such as hiking, swimming and cycling. In the lower half of the social space, among the ‘dominated’, are various categories of workers; these groups prefer to play football and rugby, but also watch sport on television. The analytical basis is that a supply fulfils a social demand; that is, agents with habitus. Both the supply and demand are products of history: the supply as a result of structuring structures, and habitus as acquired dispositions, which, at the same time, through the agents’ practices, either reinforce or restructure existing structures. The two systems, the space of lifestyle and the social space, meet in and through individuals’ habitus.

Bourdieu’s description of modern sport’s emergence and establishment as a distinct field, details how this involved the approval of various

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6 These occupational categories should be understood as social positions in a system of relationships and not as ideal-typical, caricature-like descriptions of empirical phenomena.
social elites and the promotion of pre-modern popular physical games, tests of strength and military exercises to the status of socially edifying sport. One important step towards an autonomous field of sport (relatively speaking) was taken with the emergence of sports organizations and their subsequent rise to increasingly powerful positions.

In parallel with the establishment of sport as a field, doctors, teachers and others from the dominant class fraction with significant cultural capital discussed the value of modern sport and its correct execution. The debate was cleanly split: on opposite sides of the argument stood an aristocratic (ascetic) sports ideal that emphasized values such as fair play, amateurism, aesthetics and moderation, and a meritocratic sports ideal that emphasized achievement, goals, optimal performance and entertainment. The first ideal was supported by the upper-class fraction with significant cultural capital, while the second was supported by the upper-class fraction with significant economic capital and the corresponding fraction within the middle class. Popular conceptions and ideals about sport certainly existed alongside these differentiated upper-class tastes in sport, but they had no significant influence.

Bourdieu treats sports as ‘popular’ or ‘bourgeois’ throughout, both historically and in his contemporary analyses. This approach relates to sport as a collective activity based on class habitus, where similar social origins give rise to similar tastes in sport. The popular groups prefer individual sports such as wrestling and boxing and team sports such as football and rugby. These and similar sports are viewed with distaste by the dominant class. One reason for this is the simple commonness of these particular sports, which renders them uninteresting as tools of social distinction. Another reason for the dominant class’s social repudiation is the close bodily practices and the integrated elements of struggle and comparison involved.

Popular sports of this sort are sharply contrasted with bourgeois sports such as golf and gymnastics. Gymnastics in particular is described by Bourdieu as ‘the ascetic sport par excellence since it amounts to a sort of training (askesis) for training’s sake. Gymnastics or strictly health-oriented sports like walking or jogging, which, unlike ball games, do not

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7 It should be mentioned that this quite crude analysis of class and sport primarily relates to the analysis of sport and consumption patterns in Distinction and the two sport-specific articles that I have referenced. Some later publications, particularly among those written by some of Bourdieu’s colleagues who studied sport empirically, include more sophisticated analyses of sport, body and class. See, for example, Loïc J. D. Wacquant Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer (New York, 2004).

offer any competitive satisfaction, are highly rational and rationalized activities. Bourgeois sports are often individual and do not require interaction with anyone else; they can also be socially exclusive in various respects, a result of the heavy time expenditure and financial costs involved. Interest in the body, which can manifest itself as a ‘hygienic health cult’, is especially common among the middle class. This can take the form of ascetic, disciplined work with one’s own body, an individual project spanning multiple years. However, the diametric opposite to this also exists; this may seem confusing, but it is an expression of upper-class heterogeneity – a more relaxed attitude that emphasizes physical well-being as a goal in its own right. For the same reasons, participation in sports competitions with a win-at-all-cost social frame is often rejected because, as Bourdieu writes in *Distinction*, these ‘are incompatible with a lofty idea of the person’.

Affiliation with the upper class and its tastes in sport leads to an exaggerated lack of interest when it comes to personal participation in ‘serious’ sports competitions. At the same time, modern sport and its competitions could be viewed with inquisitive interest, just like any other popular spectacle. For some individuals and groups from among the upper class, explicit support for modern sport and its events were also likely to be part of a power-political strategy with populist overtones.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu also discusses how the aristocratic sport’s ideological position manifested itself in the 1960s and 1970s, by which time competition had become firmly entrenched. However, according to Bourdieu, competition, if it is to occur at all, should have a playful, improvised setting. ‘Moderation’ is the key word; victory is welcome, but absolutely not at any cost and not at the cost of too serious an approach, either. Bourdieu exemplifies this through what he terms ‘Groovy football’:

Competitiveness isn’t entirely ruled out, but we’re a long way from the fanaticism of ‘pro’ teams. In fact, the people who come along to kick the ball aren’t out there to win at all costs, given that there are no prizes, it’s rarely the same teams, the length of the match is very elastic, and the scoring is very approximate (to within a goal or two). And when one

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9 Ibid. 839.
team is obviously stronger, you balance it out by ‘transferring’ players between the two teams…. It’s far cry from the gamesmanship they teach you most of the time at school.\textsuperscript{11}

Bourdieu’s work proved to be influential: since the 1980s sport researchers around the world have used his theoretical tools in order to study sporting practices. Many studies have essentially confirmed the results he set out in \textit{Distinction},\textsuperscript{12} although there are also critics, or those who see the need for modifying Bourdieu’s analyses of the relations between social class and the choice of sport.\textsuperscript{13} Of particular interest to this article are those studies that have illuminated the two upper-class fractions’ diverse sporting practices and views on what is to be considered legitimate sport and legitimate use of the body. One example is Olivier Hobian’s study of mountaineering in France, which he sees as ‘essentially an aristocratic sport.’\textsuperscript{14} Another researcher of relevance here is Carl Stempel, who undertook an analysis of adult sport participation in the US. Stempel’s main finding is that many sports at that time – data for the study was from 1998 – were class exclusive in accordance with Bourdieu’s theory.

The dominant classes use strenuous aerobic sports, moderate levels of weight-training, and competitive sports that restrict direct physical domination and/or are aerobically strenuous, in order to draw boundaries between themselves and the middle and lower classes. Competi-

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. 219.


tiveness and demonstrating the ‘will to win’ within ‘civilized’ constrains on physical domination appear to be an important secondary principle of distinction. The evidence also support a gendered ‘ascetic vs luxury’ divide between the culturally and economically weighted fractions of the dominant classes.\textsuperscript{15}

Swedish sports research in social sciences and humanities

Swedish sports research in social sciences and humanities developed and became established in the 1970s and 1980s, and took a quantitative leap in the 1990s when there was a significant increase in the number of doctoral theses and research projects. The most important research settings developed at universities and colleges in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Umeå, where the first professorships of sport were also established in the 1980s. These institutions had physical education academic programmes, and many sports researchers were involved in these and in the work of designing the programmes. It is worth pointing out here for contextual purposes that Sweden has a long tradition of physical education with an emphasis on pedagogy, starting with the establishment of Gymnastiska Centralinstitutet (GCI) in Stockholm 1813.\textsuperscript{16}

Seventy-seven doctoral theses with subjects related to sport were completed in Sweden between 1970 and 2007. Sixty-one of these were completed after 1990, a remarkable figure which graphically illustrates the growth of sports research in the last few decades. A little less than half (37) of these 77 were doctoral theses in pedagogy, while history came in second place with 14 followed psychology with ten theses. It is noteworthy that only five theses related to sport were presented in the subject of sociology, an otherwise popular subject in Swedish universities and colleges. The pattern is similar for published articles related to sport – a strong dominance of the subject by pedagogy, followed by history, psychology and sociology.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} GCI was founded by Pehr Henrik Ling, later rebranded as Gymnastik- och idrottshögskolan (The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences). See Lundvall, 2015.
\textsuperscript{17} Joakim Åkesson, \textit{Idrottens akademisering. Kunskapsproduktion och kunskapsförmedling inom idrottsforskning och högre idrottsutbildning} (Örebro, Örebro universitet, 2010).
Sports pedagogy research has examined, in particular, how sports – including sports within the educational system – have influenced children’s and young people’s values and understanding of the body, performance and gender. In the last 10 years, ethnicity has been added to this list. Since the 1970s, there has consistently been a more or less self-evident ambition of helping to realise the overarching, official sport-for-all policy in Sweden through research and education efforts in sports pedagogy.  

Before the mid-1980s, sports research in social sciences and humanities in Sweden had a strong empirical orientation: pedagogues analysed the sports habits and attitudes of subjects practising sport, psychologists studied achievement and motivation factors and historians examined how sport has developed since the late 19th century. In the 1980s, a more theoretical and problematizing ambition emerged among researchers. Sport development started to be related to different stage theories – for example sport during feudalism and capitalism – at the same time as it became the subject of profound class and gender analyses. Theoreticians such as Allen Guttmann, Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler became important points of inspiration and reference for many researchers working in the field. Yet even with the central role played by these international influences in theory formation, Swedish sports researchers remained working largely within the national context and were not very active on the international sports research arena.

### Sport for all

The Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC, *Riksidrottsförbundet*) was established in 1903. Since then, it has been the umbrella organization for the majority of tax-funded organized sports in Sweden. The SSC is composed of 71 different sports associations (April 2016). In turn, the various national associations have regional organizations based on geographical divisions within Sweden. This means that all of Sweden’s approximately 20,000 sports clubs belong to the SSC (if accepted as members,  

18 Ibid.  
19 Ibid.  
of course). The SSC have a little less than three million members, and most sports activities are managed by volunteer leaders – about 650,000 people out of a total population of about ten million. The SSC represent a popular, voluntary movement with a representative democratic structure, from the bottom – the sport clubs – to the top. The primary function of the individual 71 national associations is the formation of policy and the implementation of decisions upon rules and regulations and systems of organized competition. The actual sporting events take place in local clubs, apparently independent of control from the centre, but remaining firmly within the framework of the centrally determined system of rules.22

The background to the situation outlined above is worth discussing in brief. By around the mid-20th century, record chasing and ranking based on performance had become uncontested and accepted controlling principles in the structure of sports clubs. By that time, the experts connected to the upper-class fractions possessed of cultural capital (doctors, teachers, Ling Gymnastic representatives) mentioned earlier had long since lost the ‘battle’ begun in the late 19th century about what should be considered as ‘correct’ and health-supporting physical activities. Modern sport in Sweden and its institutions (the SSC and its clubs) had experienced increased support from politicians and the upper classes’ fractions with economic capital during the period 1880–1950, and the values of some modern sports and practices, such as football, cross-country skiing and competitions, also found their way into the education system. Sport was all about training to perform better, and having one’s success acknowledged at competitions and by spectators. One winner and the rest losers – those were the simple terms of sports competitions. The underlying meritocratic principle closely matched attitudes among many leading social democratic and liberal politicians and industrial leaders,23 and the basis of modern sport in Sweden seemed secure and unquestioned.

However, from the 1940s onward, there was also a growing trend among businesses, insurance companies and politicians to support health-orientated sports that combined recreation and exercise. This was a reflection of a widespread concern that people would become unfit as a result of the improved standard of living. This interest and concern among politicians more or less forced the SSC to address the issue. Dur-

ing the 1950s and 60s, there were various efforts undertaken by the SSC together with other stakeholders to combine recreation and exercise, and promote the benefit of both.

In 1969, the Swedish government official report *Sport for All* was published.\(^{24}\) This represented the start of an increase in government commitment towards and financial support for ‘non-elite sport’. Politicians began making decisions on future sports policy on the basis of this report. *Sport for All* was clearly based on the perspective of public health: sport was seen as a means to improve the health and well-being of the entire population, and this justified and led to the allocation of a huge increase in financial support for the sports movement. This policy offensive and the investments in non-elite sport, together with intensifying demands for equality, resulted in increasing numbers of women, teenagers and small children (7–12 years) becoming involved in sports clubs from 1970 onwards.

‘Competitive sports’
– an inhuman cultural manifestation?

Following their emergence as recognised experts in the 1960s, Swedish sports researchers quickly began expressing forceful views on how sport should be designed in schools and sports associations. Competition in sport came into focus. At a conference in 1970 on the subject of physical education in schools, the pedagogue Lars-Magnus Engström emphasized that ‘We must make all pupils succeed. We have so far failed to do that’. Another researcher, the psychologist Torbjörn Stockfelt, wanted more ‘exercises free of competition’, since he felt that people stopped practising sport when they ‘are no longer competitive’.\(^{25}\) Engström’s doctoral thesis (1975) stated that from a public health perspective competitive sports were a relatively uninteresting phenomenon, and he advocated efforts, both in the educational system and in association-based sports, that were aimed at physical activities where the ‘recreative elements’ were prominent and adapted to individuals. ‘It would thus be possible for young people to join an association or a comparable organisation in order to

\(^{24}\) As part of the long-standing tradition of detailed report-writing by government in Sweden. Reports such as *Sport for All* are used as sources of knowledge in political processes and decision-making in the parliament.

\(^{25}\) These quotations are taken from the Swedish journal (for teachers in physical education), *Tidskrift i Gymnastik*, no. 2 1970 (Engström) and no. 1 1972 (Stockfelt).
learn a skill and not primarily to compete with others by means of this skill.\textsuperscript{26}

Some years later similar criticisms of competitive sports were formulated by other pedagogues. One doctoral thesis stated that there was solidarity in sport but that this was in opposition to ‘serious’ competitive activities. Losing risked adversely impacting a person’s self-esteem and experience of their own identity. Competition was claimed to encourage and support aggressiveness, violence and an individualistic mentality. ‘Sharply worded I would like to claim that it is a picture of a human being as an asocial being that emerges here.’\textsuperscript{27} The researcher recommended that the sports movement and Sweden’s politicians should upgrade pleasurable, ‘expressive’ sporting activities. Another doctoral thesis in pedagogy criticized the mechanical view of human beings that existed in association-based sports and challenged that this was allowed to characterize school sports: ‘There are not many activities in schools or in leisure time that on different levels can have such excluding effects and hence negative experiences as sport.’\textsuperscript{28}

What are competitive sports?

Swedish sports researchers’ critical analyses of ‘competitive sports’ and their practical effects on children and young people continued in the 1980s, at the same time as the more theorising tendency alluded to above manifested itself. A recurring problem was the question of how sport should be defined, and how this overarching concept was related to the often-used term competitive sports.

In the 1970s, competitive sports and related concepts such as ‘modern sports’ and ‘modern competitive sports’ were used quite freely as synonyms without ever being closely defined or having a theoretical basis. The overall concept was a general one, taken from the everyday language used to illustrate and describe a development from the late 19th century onwards with more and more new sports where organised competitions were frequent. However, this atheoretical attitude was abandoned in the

\textsuperscript{26} Lars-Magnus Engström, \textit{Fysisk aktivitet under ungdomsåren} (Stockholm, Stockholms universitet, 1975), 45. (My translation to English, which is the case for all quotes from non-English articles and books.)

\textsuperscript{27} Hans Brunnberg, \textit{Begreppet idrott hos människor inom idrotten} (Pedagogiska institutionen, Stockholms universitet, 1976), 52–53.

\textsuperscript{28} Bert Aggestedt, Ulla Tebelius, \textit{Barns upplevelser av idrott} (Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, Gothenburg, 1977), 206.
1980s, when many Swedish sports researchers, not least sport historians, were being influenced by theories of formation that had developed internationally; viewed from this perspective, sport was problematized on the basis of various societal development and stage theories. These theories paid attention to such ideas as the connections between the demands of the capitalist factory system for measurability, achievements and disciplining, and the similar phenomena existing in modern sports.  

One theory in particular was widely adopted, namely the one launched by the historian Allen Guttmann. Guttmann’s description of ‘modern sports’, or, as they came to be called in Swedish, ‘competitive sports’ [tävlingsidrott], became a frequent point of departure for many studies. The translation caused a significant shift of meaning; the concept of modern sports was more comprehensive than competitive sports, which focused on competition in a way that modern sports did not. The inexact translation of Guttmann’s term meant that the somewhat narrower Swedish concept of competitive sports was integrated into the influential formation theories of the day, hence receiving greater scientific legitimacy and status.

Sports logicians and habitus

In parallel with the interest shown by historians in the emergence of competitive sports, sports pedagogues were attempting to distinguish between different forms of physical activity. This was partly about manifest characteristics, for instance whether the physical activities were governed by rules and connected to the activities of sports organisations, and partly about more subjective and meaning-carrying characteristics related to the question of why people – consciously and unconsciously – chose certain types of physical activities. These researchers attempted to identify the different core values that existed in competitive sports, and sought to determine if people were attracted or repelled by these values. Those who were attracted were of research interest in terms of how the sporting values they had adopted influenced their broader outlook and system of values.

29 Hjelm, 2015, 87–98.
Lars-Magnus Engström was one of the most influential early researchers producing sports definitions and classification models; his work was commonly used by later research generations and students. He became a professor of education at Stockholm University in 1983 with sports research as his speciality (this was considered the first sport professorship in Sweden), and he was the central figure in an expansive sports research environment over the following 20 years. As early as 1975, Engström had launched a theoretical model with six different forms of distinct physical activity. A few years later, in 1979, an expanded model with eight forms was presented; this was reduced in 1983 to five physical activity forms, and further reduced in 1989 to just three: competitive, keep-fit and recreational sports. According to Engström, keep-fit and recreational sports were characterized by the practitioners’ aim of gaining better health and physical capacity and greater well-being. There were most often no official rules or other binding agreements, and nor were there any ‘explicit competitive elements’. The decisive difference between keep-fit and recreational sports was that keep-fit sports emphasized ‘wholesome’ values, while recreational sports emphasized what was ‘enjoyable’.\(^{31}\)

According to Engström, competitive sports had certain distinctive characteristics, such as an institutional affiliation and the requirement to follow rules and norms. This implied that ‘the individual must be adapted to sport and not the other way round, i.e. that the starting-point is not the individual’s needs and wishes’.\(^ {32}\) The competitive athlete learned to regard the body as a means to attain success in competition with others. Engström stated that the competition and ranking of the participants on the basis of performance would ‘surely be experienced as brutal if they took place in other areas of our social life’. A competitive athlete without success stood out as uninteresting or, even worse, as ‘pathetic’.\(^ {33}\) Competitive sports also contributed to strengthening social class differences. But perhaps the most serious flaw was that competitive sports, according to Engström, did not fully respect the principle of the equal value of people. Before a competition all the participants were equals, but afterwards the situation was different: ‘Since the winner of the competition is valued more highly than all the others, the competitors are valued differently

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\(^ {32}\) Ibid. 43.

\(^ {33}\) Ibid. 42.
after the competition. In that sense, sports do not aim at people’s equal value.³⁴

Engström’s classification model from 1989 was followed by two more classification models. One, from 1999, consisted of seven practices in ‘the body exercise culture’: physical training, competition and ranking, play and recreation, challenge and adventure, training for skills, aesthetic activities and movement and concentration training.³⁵ In 2010 Engström presented his final model, which now consisted of (at least) ten sports logics – the concept of ‘logic’ having replaced practice. Just as in the model of 1989, the starting-point was the historical expansion and different phases of sport, and Bourdieu’s ‘reasoning about “the practices’ logic”’.³⁶ According to the 1999 classification model, there were seven sports practices that carried meaning, regulating logics that characterized the individual’s habitus. Engström saw the creation of habitus in childhood and adolescence as of decisive importance for how individuals looked upon physical activity later in life. Those who had been in a specific sports practice and immersed in the appurtenant meaning-carrying logic in this formative phase of their lives, came, later in life, to feel most at home in the same practice. In their lifetime, individuals could of course devote themselves to different practices where different principles for action and carrying of meaning dominated, but as Engström writes, ‘there is quite often one practice that is superordinate in a person’s life’.³⁷

One of Engström’s practices, which was ascribed particular importance since it dominated the association-based sports for children and young people, was competition and ranking. Regarding the relationship between the practices of competition and ranking and ‘play and recreation’, it was stated quite briefly that ‘ranking and competition are more important ingredients in modern sports than the element of play’.³⁸ This theoretical point of departure implies that the practice of competition and ranking, the dominant practice in childhood and adolescence, also plays an important role in the practice of sports in adulthood, since people (partly unconsciously) will seek forms of activity that harmonize with their habitus. This includes for instance adults who want to work as voluntary sports leaders. As sports leaders, they will work for and support

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³⁴ Ibid. 109.
³⁵ Lars-Magnus Engström, Idrott som social markör (HLS förlag, Stockholm, 1999).
³⁶ Lars-Magnus Engström, Smak för motion. Fysisk aktivitet som livsstil och social markör (Stockholm, Stockholms universitets förlag, 2010).
³⁷ Engström, 1999, 36.
³⁸ Ibid. 26.
the dominant practice of competition and ranking found in association sports. It also includes people in older life who want to stay physically active in order to feel well, and who are looking for and taking advantage of age-adapted options, such as Nordic walking and stress-free skiing tours. Instead of taking advantage of these options, some people may fall into physical inactivity, since Nordic walking and skiing tours represent practices with logics that deviate from the one they grew up with (i.e. most often competition and ranking). Engström asserts that the physical inactivity of many elderly people may be linked to having taken part in a particular practice (logic) in their childhood and adolescence that in this sense can be described as counterproductive in the long term.\textsuperscript{39}

Positive alternatives to competitive sports

In their capacities as sports experts and teachers at the nation’s sports education departments, sports researchers who are critical of competition have worked to change the direction of Swedish sports. Their view is that the dominant position held by the practice of competition and ranking should be complemented or replaced with other practices whenever possible. There have been some fairly sharp criticisms of competitive sports formulated in terms of principle: for instance, in 2002 the pedagogue Olle Åhs wrote ‘competitive sports, i.e. the sports movement’s activities for children and young people may […] be regarded as an exponent of a prevailing individualistic value and belief system. In this belief system the winners raise their status, i.e. their human value, by defeating their competitors’.\textsuperscript{40}

A recurring critical view, expressed not least by Tomas Peterson, professor of sports sociology, and the author of Sweden’s latest official government report about sport (presented in 2008), is that competition itself decreases the number of practitioners of sports. In the 2008 report, Peterson writes that Sweden’s sports associations have two partly incompatible missions: on the one hand fostering the associations’ culture, which is about ‘many becoming more’, and on the other ‘fostering competi-


\textsuperscript{40} Olle Åhs, “Idrott, människosyn och värdegrund”, in \textit{Pedagogiska perspektiv på idrott}, eds Lars-Magnus Engström, Karin Redelius, 243 (Stockholm, HLS förlag, 2002).
tion, [which] constitutes the logic of competition of “many becoming fewer”. The statement about ‘many becoming fewer’ is not explained more precisely, but this is probably a manifestation of the old idea that those who participate in sports competitions and often lose stop taking part in sports.

Swedish sports researchers critical of competitive sports value play and ‘spontaneous sport’ very highly (Engström’s practice/logics of ‘play and recreation’). Indeed, as early as the 1970s and 1980s, sports research romanticized play, and demands that association-based sports for children and young people should contain more play were based on assumptions that this would reduce dropout and alienation from sport. The idealization of play and the positive attitude to spontaneous sports were further strengthened in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century, most likely due to the stronger position that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child had gained in the previous 10 to 15 years. ‘More play’ in children’s sport – ‘playful sport’ – is wanted by sports researchers, and is described as a way of humanizing children’s sport and reducing the rate of dropout from sport generally. The dichotomy between play (non-competition) and seriousness (sports competition) is frequently used; playful sport is described as less demanding and is considered facilitating learning and creativity; adult sport, however, is a problem, since it has made sport ‘too serious’. Spontaneous sports are described in the same positive way and are contrasted to competitive sports. A common assertion is that children’s spontaneous sports do not contain any ranking based on performance, and that everybody is allowed to participate based on their own ability and level of ambition.

‘Competing with oneself’, instead of with others, is also emphasized as a good solution to alienation in sports and feelings of shortcomings in ability, not only for children and young people, but also for adults. This is based on the idea that the risk of disappointing performance, feelings of inferiority and low self-confidence will decrease if the ego is

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41 SOU 2008:59, Föreningsostra och tävlingsfostran. En utvärdering av statens stöd till idrotten (Stockholm: Kulturedepartementet, 2008), 194.
42 For an early critical comment about the romantization, see Göran Patriksson, Idrotts barn. Idrottsvanor, stress, ”utslagning” (Stockholm, 1987), 269. For a similar, critical view (at that time) on the ‘idealization’ of play among sport researchers and others, see Douglas Booth ”The Consecration of Sport: Idealism in Social Science Theory”, The International Journal of the History of Sport 10(1) (April 1993): 1–19.
43 Hjelm, 2015, 121–135.
44 SOU 2008:59, 239–240.
the point of comparison.\textsuperscript{45} A closely related view is seen in descriptions and analyses by sports researchers of new sports, sometimes referred to as lifestyle sports or extreme sports, which are often individual sports where the practitioners disassociate themselves from modern sports and their thoroughly organized competition activities. When the practitioners themselves describe why they windsurf or skateboard, their explanations resemble the values ascribed to ‘play and recreation’ and ‘outdoor life’. They emphasize sensual experiences such as speed and rhythm; ‘feelings of flow’ are difficult to articulate, and winds, waves and concrete foundations are what should be mastered, not human opponents. It is an individual struggle against the elements of nature and goals set by oneself that make the activities meaningful. Empirical studies of these new sports do not fully confirm this view, however. These studies show that informal competition – without written rules and valuation criteria – is both common and important, and demonstrate that these subcultural communities of resistance do in fact have their own performance-based hierarchies.\textsuperscript{46}

The \textit{individual} perspective

An important consequence of the criticism aimed at competitive sports is that in research terms competitions have been reduced to little more than formal events with systematically implemented performance comparisons of the type that have dominated modern club sport in Sweden for the last 100–150 years. There has been a marked lack of interest in studying and problematizing other kinds of physical performance comparisons, for example informal trials of strength in modern spontaneous sports or those that existed in Sweden before the mid-18th century (wrestling, running, swimming, horse racing, etc.). Based on various stage theories and classification models of sports, such activities have been defined as something other than sports competitions/competitive sports. From an historical perspective, this is an anachronistic attitude;

Allen Guttmann’s theory of modern sports has also been criticized on the same grounds.\(^{47}\)

Another typical feature of the prevailing research methodologies is that modern sports – competition, training or everyday exercise – are usually described and analysed as *individual* practices, not as collective practices. For example, the fact that some sports (for instance wrestling, football, table tennis) are ‘inherently competitive’ – to borrow the sports sociologist Graham Scambler’s expression\(^{48}\) – is not problematized or discussed; in addition, how this affects feelings of meaningfulness and inclusion within different sports is not considered.\(^{49}\) The same is true of sports within the educational system:\(^{50}\) it is the individual’s motives, activities and experiences, as well as the effects of vertical social relations, which have been placed at the centre of analysis. (Vertical relations concern the active subject’s experience of leaders, teachers and parents, and how these types of actors experience and interpret public sports policy and normative decrees issued from above, such as curricula and policy documents.) In contrast, there are few studies of social horizontal demand and interaction patterns of sport practice and feelings of *meaningfulness* and collective solidarity that are experienced by co-acting, cooperating subjects taking part in sports. That a team ball sport, such as football, is about cooperation just as much as competition often goes unacknowledged,\(^{51}\) thereby avoiding the question of how meaningfulness and feelings generating fellowship in and during the practice of sports are affected by such things as an individual’s skills in the sport and the team’s collective ability to act together intuitively and quickly. Generally then, no distinction is made in the literature among different kinds of sports, although


\(^{50}\) This is one (of several) explanation for the absence of academic articles/books in Sweden of the type you find internationally; see e.g. Stephen Harvey, David Kirk, Tone O’Donovan, “Sport Education as a Pedagogical Application for Ethical Development in Physical Education and Youth Sport”, *Sport, Education and Society* 19(1) (2014): 41–62.

\(^{51}\) See e.g. Lundvall, 2004.
from a social perspective of course sports are very different in terms of demands for cooperation and adaptation to one another.\textsuperscript{52}

The competition-critical discourse

The comments by Swedish sports researchers on competition, play and seriousness form part of a persistent, largely critical discourse on competitive sports in which certain concepts and formulations have been used and reused without further reflection.\textsuperscript{53} This discourse has formed part of a general pedagogical trend in which play and pleasurable learning have been highly valued;\textsuperscript{54} sports, it is argued, should not be a means of anything else. At the same time, the individual and present-day (often hedonistic) practice of sports is assumed to lead to a lifelong interest in exercise and being physically active – an ultimate realization of the state’s health policy objective. That objective is to be attained by internalizing it in the individual, making it a non-conscious objective. There is a political dimension to this, and in fact the implicit point of departure for many sports researchers is the neoliberal ideal of sport as an individual activity and a personal area of responsibility. Indeed, the Swedish adaptation to and harmonization with neoliberalism in terms of sport over the last 30–40 years, which researchers Malin Österlind and Jan Wright have examined, can be said to have been supported by influential sections of the sports research community.\textsuperscript{55} Criticism of competitive sports by Swedish sports researchers also bears definite traces of the politically coloured criticism of sports made in the 1970s; loose connections to researchers such as Bero Rigauer, Henning Eichberg, Johan Huizinga and Jean-Marie Brohm can also be detected. This criticism could be both left wing and conservative in nature, and these apparently opposing viewpoints were sometimes even united, as in their romanticized view of chil-

\textsuperscript{52} See e.g. the latest evaluation of Swedish state support for the sports movement, Statens stöd till idrott. Uppföljning 2012, Centrum för idrottsforskning (Stockholm 2012).

\textsuperscript{53} Exceptions do of course exist; see for example Patriksson 1987; Håkan Larsson, Isensitivity i idrott. En nutidshistoria om idrottsmannen och idrottskvinnan, (Stockholm 2001).


The criticism of competition may actually have much older historical roots: the arguments put forward by contemporary sports researchers are remarkably similar to those made by the conservative-minded advocates of Ling Gymnastics from one hundred years ago when they criticised the growth of modern (i.e. competitive) sports. This brings to mind such areas as the criticism of the homage of modern sports to performance, competition, bodily instrumentalism and its spectacular pandering to the public. On a more overarching level, the 19th century’s growth in sports may be seen as a modernist project, and the criticism as an expression of a pre-modern and postmodern reaction, respectively, with class-related overtones. What is less certain is whether the competition-critical tradition can be linked to the emergence of the Swedish welfare state and the social equality ideal that gained ground during the 20th century.

This discourse-influenced understanding of competitive sports is primarily covered by researchers who have studied children’s and youth sports from an inclusive public health perspective. Criticism of competition characterizes the most outspoken critics within the competition-critical discourse and distinguishes them from many other sports critics. Their reform proposals also illustrate this point, as the researchers recommend ‘competition-free exercises’, the formation of sports associations free from ‘elements of competition’ or, as Engström and many of his colleagues have done from the late 1990s onward, argue for a broadening of the range of logics and an appreciation of logics other than ‘the competition and ranking logic’.

As mentioned previously, one prominent element of the competition-critical discourse is the fostering of the individual: the object of study is the individual and their relationship to physical activity; there is a dearth of analyses of ‘the competition’ (or ‘competitive element’), play, sponta-
neous sport and adventure sports as social phenomena. The dominance of the individual perspective has been made possible through a highly selective reading of Bourdieu. Little remains of the cultural sociologist Bourdieu, now that a number of his central concepts have been rejected and/or discounted in contemporary analyses of sports practices – class, capital, ‘distaste’ and field have all been largely abandoned. Habitus and logics (i.e. practices) remain, albeit with the latter suspended in a social vacuum where the absence of the concept of field is especially crucial.

According to sociologist Thomas S. Henricks, the individual perspective is not uncommon among those inspired by Johans Huizinga’s theory of play, which also applies greatly to the competition-critical discourse. Henricks also calls for the application of a sociological perspective: ‘To see play as an activity or interaction (rather than as a behaviour) is to shift from a psychological perspective to a sociological perspective.’61 From a viewpoint such as this, individual behaviour becomes just one of many components of physical play and related physical activities.

Conclusion: Swedish sports researchers’ ‘taste’ for sport

As has been outlined here, Pierre Bourdieu described in general terms the rise of modern sport in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a field in which various experts played a crucial role, defining what were considered legitimate physical activities. According to Bourdieu, an intellectual struggle took place in which two sports ideals stood in opposition to each other: the aristocratic, ascetic ideal and the meritocratic sports ideal. The former was supported by a fraction of the French upper-classes with significant cultural capital, while the latter was supported by a fraction with significant economic capital. In addition, the meritocratic ideal was supported by a corresponding fraction within the middle class. Class-based tastes were also identified by Bourdieu and his colleagues in the consumption and lifestyle studies of French society which they conducted during the 1960’s and 1970’s. As mentioned earlier, similar results have later been produced by sport researchers working within the same theoretical tradition and using similar conceptual tools.

The ‘aristocratic’ taste or ‘attitude’, towards sport has also been discussed by Brian Sutton-Smith, one of the leading contemporary play theorists. In one of his latest books Sutton-Smith writes:

In games played for their own sake, courtly or gentlemanly virtues could prevail […], whereas in games played for money, the desire to win prevailed over all other considerations. It was an aristocratic attitude designed to preserve the wealthy from association with the sweaty poorer classes. The current emphasis on play as fun can be seen to have similar connections to more affluent, or at least more elitist, perceptions of the good life.62

Where Bourdieu and other researchers with similar aim focus on how people and social groups actually chose different physical activities based on taste – as a bodily and mental practice – the main interest in this article has been in how Swedish sport researchers during the period 1970-2010 put forward their upper-class cultural fractions taste for the very same activities by writing about physical activities; how they produce the legitimate understanding of sport.63

Although the fit is not exact, the ideological position of Swedish sport researchers, expressed in and through what has been called the competitive sports-critical discourse, coincides closely with the aristocratic sports ideology that Bourdieu identified among a section of the French upper classes.64 This aristocratic sports ideology, a powerful force in France and probably also present in Sweden, upheld certain clear values: there was the importance of its voluntary nature, simplicity, moderation, all-roundness and the ‘sacredness’ of the natural space; sports practices were a goal in themselves, or, alternatively, they could be used as conscious

64 For insight into the risks and opportunities related to applying Bourdieu’s research to countries other than France and Algeria, see Donald Broady, Sociologi och epistemologi. Om Pierre Bourdieus författarskap och den historiska epistemologin (Stockholm, 1990), 302–304.
means to achieve particular goals external to sport. Arguably, the last of these values related to the French military’s need for well-trained young men at around the turn of the 20th century, while in Sweden today there is the external goal of good public health. Indeed, the exceptionally high appraisal by Swedish sports researchers of public health, and of sport and health education’s role in laying the foundation for a healthy lifestyle, is in keeping with a general education policy that existed during the second half of the 20th century; this has given the ‘goal rationality model’ a monopoly. 65 The ideology of the meritocratic sports ideal, on the other hand, appears to be much less appealing to Swedish researchers, and the competitive sports which are integral to this ideal have been fiercely and principally criticized. The vast public super-spectacles that characterize competitive sports are seen as sullied by rampant commercialism, and they are consistently presented as lowbrow cultural events that glorify struggle and conflict. In this unforgiving sporting environment, victory is pursued with all of ‘the means at hand’, not something that is easily harmonized with a mental state of ‘moderation’. 66 In short, we may conclude that the taste in sports that Swedish researchers have exhibited seems to coincide with the taste exhibited by Bourdieu’s French upper-class fraction with their abundant cultural capital.

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