Sports training, science and class among British amateur athletes in the mid to late nineteenth century

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Abstract:
Organised amateur sports emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. This paper, an exercise in historical sociology, analyses how a new system of sports training was devised by the amateurs to meet their particular needs. The data comes from contemporary British training manuals and the analysis is informed by the theories of Bourdieu and Foucault. That amateurs came from the higher social classes was highly significant: it meant that they could not adopt existing training practices because these were associated with plebeian professional athletes. For amateurs to have followed the preparation of the professionals would have placed their bodies under the control of a social inferior and promoted a somatic shape more in keeping with the lower than with the higher social orders. Mirroring the social distance between them, amateurs came to stridently reject professional training practices. Instead, they devised new training techniques which were justified through recourse to contemporary bio-medical knowledge. It is argued that amateur training originated for social reasons, with the proponents’ class positions and social capital facilitating the evocation of scientific knowledge as a legitimating ideology.

Sports training now uses science differently than in the 19th century. Today, training techniques are based on research directed at understanding physiological processes for the clear purpose of enhancing sporting performance. Previously science was evoked to provide understandings that legitimated training practices which had their origins in social processes of class and body culture as these had emerged in modernity. In this paper, an exercise in historical sociology, I explore how science came to be used, from about the 1860s, to support the training techniques associated with the new phenomenon
of British amateur sports. The training practices in place until the emergence of amateurism were closely associated with plebeian professional sport.

Amateurs used science to undermine the legitimacy of the professionals’ training as well as to validate their own preparatory programs. Here, I investigate 19th century commentaries on sports training to discern how science was used to inform practice. The theory used implicitly in this paper comes from Foucault’s (1979) treatment of power, knowledge and practice and from Bourdieu (1984) on embodiment. The data comes from British training manuals of the period: while many manuals were published, a selection which contribute to a understanding of training logic are used here. They are examined to establish the dominant discourse associated with amateur training and how this was informed by scientific paradigms. The questions addressed are: How does knowledge formulated in one social field (science) influence that of another (sport) to inform the construction of social practice? And, how do the ‘non-sport’ social practices of those involved in sporting fields influence the interpretation and utilisation of scientific knowledge for sporting purposes? In brief, my argument is that amateur training techniques, originating among the upper classes, were constituted through a classed interpretation and implementation of knowledge from other social fields into sporting practices, which was facilitated through the social capital embedded in the higher social orders.

While training for modern sport commenced in the 18th century with the preparation of pugilists and pedestrians, only cursory contemporary accounts of these body regimes were written (e.g., “Amateur” 1788; “Modern” nd[1800]). Trainers generally were working class men who had a formula, learned from apprenticeship and observation, that they applied, often in great secrecy, to suitable prospects. Sinclair (1807) and Thom (1813) attempted physiological explanations for this training, which they believed produced perfect bodies and outstanding health. In their time there were only the training techniques of professional sportspeople, but the sporting scene changed significantly in the second half of the 19th century, when the upper classes no longer restricted their involvement in sports to spectating and gambling, but engaged in active physical participation: “Half a century ago the gentry looked on and made bets, while the professionals exhibited” (Pollard 1882: 38). Athletics became socially ‘respectable’ in the
1860s when “men of social standing”, including aristocrats, initiated competitions between themselves ensuring that “gentlemen might engage in athletics without losing caste” (Griffin 1891: 8-13). Amateur athletics thus emerged as a separate sporting activity from its professional forebears. As the ‘toffs’ entered sports, it was demeaning for them to rub shoulders in competition with the hoi polloi; upper-class bodies were conceptualised differently and had to be accorded a separate treatment from lower-class ones. To begin with, aspiring upper-class athletes often organised their training with a professional trainer, only to reject their services and training regimes to shift to a new form of preparation.

Amateurs instigated a wholly new system of sports training. The separation of amateurs from professionals, of higher from lower class sportspeople, involved the construction of differences between ‘classed bodies’ that required the practising of parallel body cultures. Social processes are embodied (Mauss 1973). A person’s habitus is there for all to see in their body shape, gait and deportment (Bourdieu 1984). It was unconscionable in Victorian Britain that an upper-class person should acquire plebeian somatic characteristics through adopting the same practices of body culture as professional athletes (Mewett 1995). So the new training regime of the higher classes produced bodies that accorded with their class origins and social rank. While this was entirely ‘social’ in origin, it was legitimated by recourse to contemporary scientific knowledge, which was also used to undermine and at times viciously deride and delegitimate the professional training practices. Medical and scientific knowledge was evoked in the rejection of professional ways, but, in so doing, amateurs interpreted this learning from a classed perspective. Their argument was tautologous: they construed medico-scientific knowledge from a perspective informed by their social locations and then applied it in ways which validated their higher-class positions. The amateurs’ derision of professional training and their justification of their new training techniques provide important insights into how bio-medical knowledge was interpreted to underpin a classed body culture. To use Foucault’s (1979) terms, these interpretations comprised the knowledge informing amateurs’ training practice, and were made possible through the power of their high social positions.
The translation of science into practice in the early decades of amateurism is found in the training manuals which proliferated in Britain from the 1860s. Amateurism provided a growing market for training manuals because athletes were encouraged to eschew trainers and train themselves. Many of those writing about training practices were drawn from among the university educated social elite, including lawyers, medical practitioners and members of the clergy. Pollard (1882) noted the considerable representation of the professions among amateur athletes. Their interpretations of training and their understanding of it through contemporary medico-scientific knowledge were given credence by their elevated class positions and educational accomplishments. The rejection of professional training practices was sometimes benign, stated in terms of professional practices being inappropriate for higher-class people who were more sensitively attuned to the condition and demands of their bodies than plebeian wage-slaves. Others vitriolically rejected professional ways and ridiculed the trainers. What underpinned these ‘learned’ responses to professional training? And what clues do these responses provide about the interplay between science and sports training?

In the middle of the 19th century competitive body culture was still informed by professional practices. Some changes had occurred from the advice given by Sinclair and Thom (e.g., Craven 1855; Stonehenge 1864) but these were modifications, not a questioning of premises. Trenchant criticism, on both sides of the Atlantic, came only when amateurs, for social reasons, repudiated professional training practices. Aspiring English amateur athletes were advised by Wilkinson (1868: 79) to avoid professional trainers who, “are too often apt to train by a stereotyped code of rules, without studying the peculiarities of each constitution”. Class differences were explicitly raised by the advocates of the new system of training. Wilkinson (1868: 71) claimed that the strict system of the professional trainer may have been required to resolve the effects of dissolute plebeian lifestyles. The ‘old’ rules of training, according to White (nd[c1900?]: 1025), came from the professionals being “as a class, free livers and heavy beer-drinkers”, but such rules were not necessary for the ‘gentleman’, who already had “good blood in his system … [and thus] a sound foundation on which to commence [training]” (Wilkinson 1868: 71).
The training manuals written for amateurs were unwaveringly critical of professional practices, describing the trainers as ‘empirical’, ‘practical’ people who were ignorant of the scientific knowledge about the body, its functioning and the effects of different foods (eg Cortis 1887; Hoole 1895; Pollard 1882). A gulf developed between the amateur and professional sportspeople that matched the social distance between their class origins. The often pretentious criticism of the professional trainers by the advocates of amateur sport gave away their class biases. For example, Hoole (1895: 7-8) wrote that the professional trainer did not owe their position,

… to the development of his intellect (for in education and general knowledge he is far inferior to the ordinary mechanic) … and the little experience he has gained while practising his calling he ekes out with the legendary lore which has descended by word of mouth from previous generations of trainers … from the very nature of their occupation and origin, it is impossible for them to record their knowledge save by spoken language.

The attack on the professional trainers assumed that their practices lacked physiological understanding. Harrisson (1869: 85) observed that training had,

...arisen amongst us without any relation to physiological science, and it was founded upon the observations and experiments of totally uneducated men, whose deductions were generally vitiated by prejudice, and whose maxims were only preserved by tradition.

Westhall (nd [1863]: 23, 25) noted that professional athletes were bound to the trainers’ directions and restrictive practices, which they accepted because it ensured their subsistence. Conversely, the professional regime was overly onerous for amateurs, pushing them to reject the trainer’s instructions. Doubtless the trainers had a doubly difficult task when dealing with amateurs: they were trying to whip them into shape, but remained in a socially deferential position.

The amateurs’ ideological revulsion with professional sport provided a difficult barrier to their acceptance of established training procedures and this was exacerbated by the social distance between them and the trainers. Moreover, training is body culture: different methods of preparation develop different body shapes. Accordingly, higher class people training in the ways of lower class body culture would have produced body
characteristics that were incompatible with their social position. It was unacceptable for the amateurs to acquire the bodily characteristics of the lower classes (cf Bourdieu 1984). So the emergence of amateur athletics required a different preparatory regime. But this new system of training needed to draw from some relevant body of physiological knowledge, which is where the burgeoning experiment-based biological science of the 19th century became so very important.

Medical practitioners numbered appreciably among the writers on the new system of training, which provided important support for the ways that science was pressed into the service of the higher class athletes (eg Cantlie 1883; Chambers 1875; Cortis 1887; Harrisson 1869; Hoole 1895; White nd[c1900?]). A clear link developed between the medical profession and physical activity. Once running had become a respectable sport for the higher classes, athletics clubs were formed in medical schools (BMJ 1865: 515). These developed rapidly over the following two decades and advances in medicine and science were associated with “the successful cultivation of physical training” (BMJ 1886: 471). An intersection occurred between class, education and occupational standing that served to legitimate the knowledge interpreted and applied as a new system of training by those men who formed the vanguard of amateur athletics. Their newly-formed preparatory practices were based on and justified by the anatomical and physiological knowledge that characterised mid to late 19th century medicine.

Bio-medical know-how was interpreted from the perspective of higher class lifestyles to legitimate the amateurs’ new training practices and separate their sporting styles from the professionals. This interpretation was predicated on the participation of wealthy men in athletics as athletes. Gentlemen worked considerably less at developing their physical prowess than professionals – it being well recognised that the latter underwent a more rigorous and intensive preparatory program (Wilkinson 1868: 71-2). Preparation, Wilkinson (1868: 74) opined, should fit with the athlete’s normal living practices. A “healthy and moderate life”, provided for Dawson (nd [1906]: 30) the basis for training. But, exercising appreciably less than professionals – informed by the need to avoid the alleged dangers accompanying ‘over-training’ (Mewett 2002) – amateur performances remained behind those of the professionals.
Training manuals proliferated from the 1860s, and some drew attention to athletes unable to devote the whole of their time to training, because of other demands on their lives. Sportsman (1889: 65) distinguished between amateurs and professionals, assuming the former to be engaged in daily paid employment, affecting the time and timing of their training. Michod (1874: v) explicitly directed his book to people in businesses or professions with limited time to give “to the cultivation of health and strength by bodily exercise”. He emphasised the need for regular habits, a disciplined diet and attention to exercise without acceding to the extremes of professional training practices: the “rules frequently advanced by older training authorities as indisputable truths, are now either greatly modified, or altogether abolished” (p.5). Harrisson (1869: 89) commented that a closer fit to “physiological truth was made when large numbers of gentlemen … began to train”. He claimed that the advice he proffered was based on his own training experiences and was “consistent with the most recent physiological discoveries” (p.90). Two decades later, Morden (1887: 9) noted that training had been “under the consideration of men of science” for several years and this had shown “a non-professional training” to be the best mode of preparation. This theme persisted into the twentieth century. Abrahams (1911: 437) still thought it necessary to debunk the ‘old’ training practices and argued that,

> [M]edical men should be in a position to utilise the weight of our authority to introduce rational physiological principles in place of an absurd medley of traditional follies and so to prevent many opportunities for abuse.

An important feature of amateur preparation was that higher class people were believed to enjoy a more sensitive appreciation of their bodies than the crude, dulled senses of the lower classes could achieve. The somatic sensitivity credited to amateurs enabled them to judge the effects of training regimes and make the adjustments to exercise and diet best suited to them as individuals, therefore. Workman (nd [1906]: 16) noted that, subject to observing certain “fundamental rules”, a person was well able to train theirself.

> One learns by experience; that is, providing a man has both keenness and common sense. If a man takes the trouble to study himself, to my mind no one should be able to train him half so well as he can do himself, or to advise him how to win a race any better than would naturally occur to the man himself. (Workman nd [1906]: 16)
Larrette (nd [1906]: 53) added that anyone who “wishes to get the most enjoyment out of physical exercise must make a study of what suits him best, and act on his own initiative”, and Michod (1874: 10) advised the amateur tyro to, “if anything, incline to the individual taste, for taste may often be taken as a guide to what agrees best with the system”. This being so, amateurs could self-direct their training, whereas the professionals required trainers’ directions because the cruder sensibilities of lower-class people meant they were unable to discern the effects of the inputs into their preparation. Rippon Seymour (nd [1898]: 14) commented that gentlemen regulated the amount of exercise that they did and that they observed “the necessary rules of hygiene, of food and rest”, whereas the labourer works physically hard but “sleeps too little and feeds himself, let us say, unwisely”. Such points had become axiomatic by the turn of the century.

The development of a new system of training by amateurs was required because of the sharp social rift between them and professional sportspeople. The training of professionals required dedicated trainers, who invariably were of much lower social class than the amateurs, and it developed body shapes not in keeping with higher class positions. Instead, amateurs established a training system congruent with upper class lifestyles and body shapes. Evoking knowledge generated in the bio-medical field, amateurs legitimated their new training in terms that contested professional practices and valorised upper class lifestyles. Knowledge, power and the social capital of amateurs meshed to constitute exclusionary practices that reflected and reproduced, within the field of sports, the class divisions of mid to late 19th century British society.

Footnotes
1 I do not imply that present-day sports training has been freed from issues of legitimacy and ideology, only that how science is now used in sport differs from earlier periods.

References
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