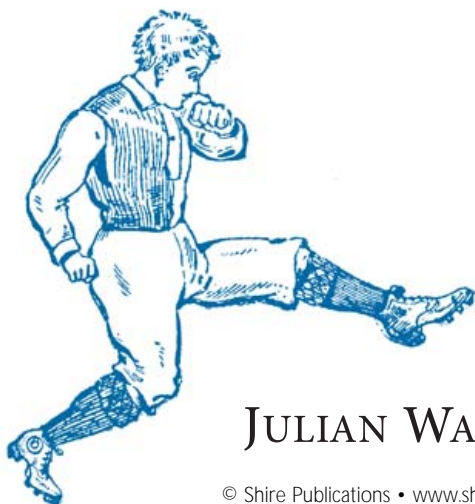




# TEAM TALK



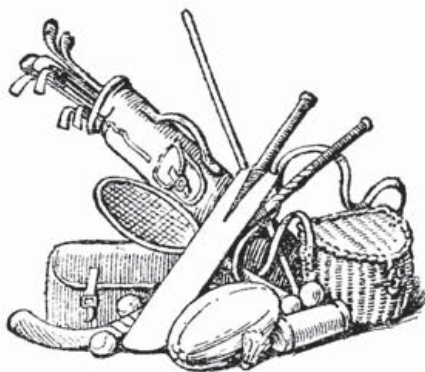
Sporting words  
and their origins



JULIAN WALKER

# TEAM TALK

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SHIRE PUBLICATIONS

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# Sport and language

## **The antiquity of sport and sporting language**

Words are essential to competitive sport. The simplest running race between children involves the words 'race', 'win', 'beat' and 'lose'. A competition organised so that it can be repeated under the same conditions involves more words – 'track', 'start', 'finishing line' – for only in this way can all parties agree upon the boundaries of what is and what is not allowed. Further along, a 'starter' is required, and probably a 'referee' and a 'prize'. Even the runner running alone against his or her own expectations has the concept of 'faster' or 'slower' somewhere in his or her head, and, before that, the awareness of 'running' or 'competing'.

On an Egyptian burial chamber at Beni Hassan, built about four thousand years ago, there is a depiction of a series of pairs of men wrestling, using a large variety of holds. Wrestling in this form would have required a declared space, a judge, and recognised stopping and

releasing terms; a number of the holds would presumably have had names. Wrestling and racing feature widely in the legends of the ancient Europeans. For example, there is a Greek myth of Atlanta, a fast runner who was prepared to take notice of Melanion only if he beat her in a race. The Roman writer Ovid tells how as she drew ahead of him he threw a golden apple in front of her, three times, which allowed him to beat her. Ovid states that there was a 'starting line', with the signal given by trumpets, a 'victor' and a 'prize'; he does not relate whether she cried 'foul' or accused him of 'cheating'. Horse-racing features in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, and according to Henry Alken's 1821 *National Sports of Great Britain* the French king Hugh Capet sent 'running horses' to Athelstan, the king of England, as part of a tenth-century marriage deal (though in fact Hugh was not born until the year Athelstan died).

Our knowledge of sport in the medieval world comes from sources such as national and local legal documents, which often record prohibitions or limitations on sports; illuminated manuscripts, which show telling details; and court records containing information on payments for goods or services that occasionally give glimpses into how sports were played. Illuminated manuscripts from the twelfth century onwards show scenes from rustic sports and pastimes, and much of our knowledge of medieval sporting activity comes from statutes of prohibition and records of purchases. The cost of a 'running horse' during the reign of Edward III (1327–77) was £13.33, which in modern terms would be not far from the cost of a thoroughbred now. An item in the expenditure of Henry VII in 1498 is for 'threepence, for lost tennis balls', while the early-fourteenth-century Luttrell Psalter has a margin illustration showing archers shooting at a target. From the twelfth century systems of privilege were applied to sport; while the government deemed sport for the poor as a distraction from work and from training for the defence of the realm, it conceded that activities that were the basis of

gambling for the wealthy were untouchable. Joseph Strutt in *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (1801) relates how a statute of Richard I banned gambling for those below the rank of knight, and concerns and statutes of the reign of Edward III specify time-wasting as a reason for condemning ‘the throwing of stones, wood and iron; hand-ball, football, club-ball; cambucam’. In Edward IV’s reign ‘coits, closh or claish, kayles or skittles, half-bowl, hand in and hand out’ were banned, and in the reign of Henry VIII ‘bowling, logging, tennice, dice, cards, and backgammon’ were circumscribed. In the sixteenth century you could build a tennis court on your land freely – if you had an income of over £100 a year.

One way to get round these restrictions was by the use of language. A sport banned by printed statute could be renamed, and Strutt reports how the justices of the peace had the skittle-frames in London destroyed. The game was instantly revised and renamed ‘bubble the justice’ (to ‘bubble’ meant to ‘cheat’).

In English the development of sporting language is clearly documented from the medieval period. In 1801 Strutt wrote that ‘there was a peculiar kind of language invented by the sportsmen of the middle ages, which it was necessary for every lover of the chase to be acquainted with.’ These terms included the names of groups of animals, the names of animals’ hiding or resting places, the actions of hiding, resting or running, the young of animals, and parts of the animals. Many of these terms are established within English and have become separated from the awareness of their origins. We speak of someone having ‘gone to earth’, of ‘giving chase’, and of a ‘flock of geese’ rather than a ‘flight of geese’. Books on grammar still contain ‘proper terms’ (that is ‘specific to the creatures’) for animals: the 1998 edition of *Fowler’s Modern English Usage* has a page of these, including ones in common use such as ‘a pack of dogs’ and ‘a litter of pups’, but also less used terms such as ‘a siege of herons’ and ‘a sounder of wild boar’.

Other sports of the period evolved from concepts of conflict and developed their own terminology. Thus tennis, which was imported from France, brought with it many French terms that were to varying degrees anglicised: 'dedans', 'tambour', 'hazard', 'grille', 'racquet'. These developed into phrases such as 'the boasted force into the dedans' and 'laying down chase better than two', which are meaningless, but somehow attractive, to those who know nothing of the sport.

## **The role of language in sport**

Current sports-writing uses specialised language just as much as huntsmen and tennis players did in the sixteenth century. Ken Jones, a leading sports journalist, complained of footballers and football writers who

never fail to convey the impression that football is an art so involved and technical as to be removed from ordinary knowledge and understanding. In their eagerness to pose as experts they fill the air with fashionable theories and jargon, ignoring an unassailable truth, which is that sport is best served by uncomplicated conclusions... Corners and free kicks have long since become dead-ball situations, and forwards who run intelligently into space are said to be probing the gullies.

This is a fair point, but it deserves more consideration. We have to acknowledge that football is paid a considerable amount of attention, both by the media and by the game's followers. It is a fairly simple game, which can be described in terms of 'A kicked the ball to B, while C tried but failed to stop him from doing so'; or 'A passed to B, avoiding C's tackle'; or 'A's dropped shoulder sold C a perfect dummy

and released B'. All of these describe a passage of play, but the third would be intelligible to only a limited group of people. In a sense, it is the simplicity of the game that requires the florid language to ensure that we find new ways of saying the same thing. Equally, we can say that a sport must have its jargon, its specialist terms, to allow aficionados to know exactly what they are talking about – a 'dead-ball situation' is as clear to a football follower as a 'form' was to a medieval hunter. The vast amount of written and broadcast text that sport requires provokes inventiveness in language.

More complex sports require different levels of terminology. Kayaking is a sport that requires distinct kinds of terms that the practitioner acquires as part of the process of learning the sport. These range from simple terms to do with the equipment, parts of the boat, the paddle, and so on, and then terms specific to the sport, the 'spray-skirt' (watertight skirts) and 'throwbag' (bag for floating rescue-rope), and then to terms required to become skilled in manipulating these in the environment of the sport – manoeuvres, such as 'duffek turn', and kinds of water features, such as a 'smoker'.

The more specialist the terms, the less likely they are to be known to the layperson. It is of the nature of jargon that it excludes, and in doing so it creates a group identity. This language-based identity is reinforced by mistakes and differences – the use of 'free shot' instead of 'free kick' marks the outsider, the person who does not know; and the selection of 'goal-tender' rather than 'goalkeeper' by the pioneers of ice-hockey deliberately marked their identity as separate from football. However, the waters can be muddied by the metaphorical deliberate mistake of the professional writer or broadcaster who describes a free kick as a 'free shot'. As people who 'speak the language', we know he knows.

Broadcast sport disrupts this hierarchy of language, showing the highest practitioners in action, mediated by the television commentator. Thus terms such as 'Salchow' or 'Axel jump' are



routinely served up every four years to television watchers who have never been near an ice-rink; every summer armchair Wimbledon watchers appreciate ‘passing shots’, and many who enjoy the cultural contribution of cricket and the chat of BBC Radio’s *Test Match Special* rarely stop to wonder what a ‘cover drive’ really is. Television’s ability to show the intricacies of sport via replay and slow-motion creates experts out of those who might otherwise have little interest in sports.

## What is sport?

In the examination of the role of language in sport, a contentious starting point is to define what we mean by ‘sport’. The problem is as follows: snooker is a game, but we might be uncertain as to whether it is a sport; we ‘play’ a ‘game’ of snooker; it would not be out of place in a television programme covering sports, and historically a great amount of sporting money was hazarded on the outcome of particular games; however, it is not a sport included in the Olympic Games. So, we ‘play’ a ‘game’ but what do we ‘do’ as regards a ‘sport’? Do ‘game’ and ‘sport’ overlap, and how do we distinguish between them?

The status distinction in English between words deriving from Old English and those deriving from Anglo-Norman French is fairly clear in the words ‘game’ (from the Old English *gamen*, meaning ‘play, pleasure, pastime or sport’) and ‘sport’ (from the Anglo-Norman *disport*): ‘game’ implies something less serious, possibly amateur rather than professional, something done for fun – one ‘plays’ a game, but not a sport. In late-medieval times ‘games’ were associated with the words ‘glee’ or ‘solace’, so with a sense of fun. ‘Sport’ at that time might be any kind of diversion (the first documented sport in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is ‘redynge’ – reading, 1425), or the aristocratic delights afforded by hunting. The *Boke of St Albans* (1496) contains a ‘Treatise of Fyshynge’, which describes angling as one of a number of ‘good dysportes and honest gamys’: no distinction

- GAME.** *f.* [*gaman*, a jeft, Islandick.]
1. Sport of any kind. *Shakespeare.*
  2. Jeft, opposed to earnest. *Spenser.*
  3. Insolent merriment; sportive insult. *Mil.*
  4. A single match at play.
  5. Advantage in play. *Dryden.*
  6. Scheme pursued; measures planned.
  7. Field sports: as, the chase. *Waller.*
  8. Animals pursued in the field. *Prior.*
  9. Solemn contests exhibited as spectacles to the people. *Denham.*
- To GAME.** *v. n.* [*gaman*, Saxon.]
1. To play at any sport.
  2. To play wantonly and extravagantly for money. *Locke.*

there. By 1755 the overlap was confusing – Johnson’s *Dictionary* gives for the first definition of ‘Sport’, ‘play; diversion; game; frolic and tumultuous merriment’; and for ‘Game’, ‘sport of any kind’. By the mid-nineteenth century, the terms were more or less synonymous.

It may help if we turn the question around from ‘What is sport and what is a game?’ to ‘Is this activity a sport or a game?’ Is a certain level of physical activity inherent to a ‘sport’? When the Sports Council withdrew its support for darts in 1996 on the grounds that it was not physical enough, critics with some justification complained that a similar case could be made against the Olympic sports of archery and shooting, which had wealthy and officer-class associations. The claim was that the discrimination was essentially one of class, with the British Darts Organisation asserting, ‘They’re really saying that they don’t want to be associated with fat blokes with fags in their mouths, but that is such an outdated image of the sport’ (*The Guardian*, 14 February 1996). Pigeon-racing, one of Britain’s most popular sports for a long period, involves little exercise at all. Definitions based on

ideas of movement or endurance or competition or management of equipment make it difficult to delineate the boundaries of sport or game or pastime. *Competitive Sports in Schools and Colleges* (1951, New York) included picnicking among its 'natural activities'. Are hiking or mountain-climbing sports? Are parkour, bungee-jumping and hang-gliding (all of which can be found in *The Sports Book*, 2007, Dorling Kindersley)? If motorsport is a sport, is it largely about the skills of the car designer as much as the driver, and, if this is a stumbling block, then how do we view the role of the racehorse trainer, or the gymnastics or tennis coach?

Historical developments all tend to confirm a distinction between what we might call the 'deep' meanings of the two terms (not an etymological root but that which helps us decide whether to use the word 'sport' or 'game' in any given situation), though we may still find that it is a distinction that we recognise but cannot define. The Catholic Church in Renaissance Europe came to accept and manage sports, seeing them effectively as games, largely because they were pointless and served no purpose other than entertainment. The Protestants, however, saw their value as pragmatic, a training of the body and the spirit for work, and later the development of a team ethic that could have several applications, from military to industrial. To this the word 'sport' seems more applicable.

Studies in 1984 of how professional footballers and cricketers viewed their status indicated that the respondents thought their professions had a reasonably high status, but specifically they stated that 'the drive for success had also driven the pleasure and the play element out of sport' (quoted in John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, 2005). The idea of 'sport' having any elements of 'play' might seem a little naïve now; but did 'sport' ever involve 'play'? Was it not always essentially to do with 'competing'? But how do we factor in all the variety of connotations deriving from the word 'sport' – a 'good sport', a 'sports car', a 'sporting act', 'sportsmanship'?

In American English a further development comes into play. In the late 1860s sport was dominated by baseball, football, shooting, boxing and racing (foot and horse), but there was also a large following for blood sports – cock-fighting in particular. Henry Bergh, who founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, recommended ‘healthful and invigorating sports’, which would replace the blood sports. In this context there grew a distinction between ‘sport’, meaning lower-class rowdy fighting-based activities – prizefighting, dog-fights, ratting, cock-fights – and wealthy-class ‘sports’, those which were based on pushing the human frame to high levels of athleticism. ‘Sports’ meant training and participation; ‘sport’ implied betting and spectating. And ‘sports’, as it is used now in North America, is a singular noun.

So can we say that sport is more ‘work’ than ‘play’, and that a ‘game’ is more ‘play’ than ‘work’? In the seventeenth century Robert Boyle noted that tennis was ‘much more toilsome than what many others make work’, and the appeal of sports to the nineteenth-century educationalists was the way that work and leisure could be synthesised. Several writers have noted that the history of sport from 1700 is one of growing seriousness, and that it was the introduction of the Protestant work ethic that turned the whole business from ‘games’ to ‘sport’.

For Norbert Elias in *An Essay on Sport and Violence* (1986) one key element is the idea of ‘pleasurable excitement’; elsewhere he notes that sport is a process of the gradual control of violence. Controlled danger offering high excitement is expressed in Ellis Cashmore’s definition of sport as something that ‘offers people the liberating excitement of a struggle involving physical exertion and skill while limiting to a minimum the chance that anyone will get seriously hurt’ (*Making Sense of Sports*, 2001). Hargreaves proposes a number of elements that serve to make up ‘sport’: a ludic impulse, the need to do an activity which serves no purpose other than doing it itself; the

development of this into a formalised structure, where everybody knows that there are rules, and people have a fairly good idea of what they are; and the concept of some kind of contest, either between participants or against some abstract competitor – time, distance, weight, number, previous acts or calculated possibilities; and perhaps an existence beyond ‘play’, some feeling of seriousness. Further contributory elements may be a sense of theatre, the development of ritual practices, and symbolic portrayal of power structures. It will be noticeable that the progression of these ideas gradually tightens the boundaries of ‘play’, reducing the things that a participant can do; the tennis player has to hit the ball into a particular place, the slalom skier cannot go off amongst the trees, and the footballer cannot pick up the ball and run with it, without forfeiting a foul or a penalty or disqualification. The higher up the scale of amateur or professional achievement the player has reached, the greater the disgrace such an action would entail. It would be ‘not being serious’, it would be ‘playing’; not so long ago it would be ‘not playing the game’.

The idea that sport and games are essentially about nothing but themselves is echoed by many sportswriters, keen to assert that sport is not a metaphor for life. Joyce Carol Oates, in her masterly *On Boxing* (1986), states that boxing is ‘a unique, closed, self-referential world...’, and later, ‘Boxing really isn’t a metaphor, it is the thing in itself.’ While sport may give rise to metaphors about conflict and hunting, and while it may derive from conflict and hunting, and while it may depend on and generate vast amounts of money, it is not anything else but itself. As Simon Barnes says in *The Meaning of Sport* (2006), ‘Sport is not supposed to be real life.’ It has no terms of reference outside itself; its influence on actions outside are constructed; its structures and mores sit uncomfortably on other fields of activity.

And yet it seems at times impossible not to see sport as a metaphor. Barnes proposes that all non-confrontational sports –

pole-vault, diving, horse-riding, javelin-throwing – are about flying. And all other sports can be seen as metaphors – rugby and football for territorial battles, horse-racing for evolution, tennis for duelling – ‘its metaphorical nature is what gives it meaning.’ The words of sport – ‘win’, ‘beat’, ‘smash’, ‘lose’, ‘champion’ – what do these say about the meaning of sport?

Dr Thomas Arnold, who has been portrayed historically as a pioneer of modern sports, was the headmaster of Rugby School from 1828 to 1841, when the ethos of the public-schools curriculum was beginning to give more weight to sport than academic learning, famously paraphrased later by Kipling as ‘the flannelled fools at the wicket, and muddled oafs in goal’. For Baron de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympics, Arnold gave English schools ‘the precise formula for the role of athletics in education’. Yet, in George Orwell’s estimation, ‘Dr Arnold ... looked on games simply as a waste of time’, and, though there is evidence of his having occasionally watched, his reputation as a promoter of school sports derived mainly from the fictional *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*. Occupying no space but their own space, any relation sports have to the rest of life, for example the self-esteem of a school dependent on its basketball team’s successes or failures, is a constructed meaning. As Barnes says, ‘perhaps sport matters because it doesn’t matter’; if it matters whether someone scores a goal, wins a race or scores a point, it only matters because we make it matter. For Don DeLillo in *Underworld* (1997), ‘The game doesn’t change the way you sleep or wash your face or chew your food. It changes nothing but your life.’ For Nick Hornby in *Fever Pitch* (1992), ‘Football was life, and I am not speaking metaphorically.’

What are the processes by which ‘sport’ becomes detached from ‘play’? C. E. Green, elected president of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) in 1905, complained that county cricket had become too serious. R. Holt in *Sport and the British* (1989) quotes him as saying ‘There is very little sport in it now’, suggesting that the meaning of

'sport' here is 'pleasure'. This was from a period when a gentleman sportsman felt that training produced an unfair advantage. Sport in this environment meant a pitting of natural skills, wits and abilities, and produced contests that were not unlike hunting, natural man against natural man. Clearly connected to the arrogance of those born into wealth, its results reinforced that arrogance, for how could the loser be in any way at fault if it was clearly fate that had decided the outcome of a match? This attitude lasted for several decades among the leisured classes after the fee-paying schools and the universities assumed the mantle of the organisers of sport, in the mid-nineteenth century. As Holt puts it, 'Gym was for Germans. Britons played rather than exercised.'

Rather than reading sport as a metaphor for other activities, we might ask what other activities can be used to explore how we understand sport. The model of ritual activity fits easily on to sport. The way clothes developed over the twentieth century, particularly in sports such as American football, snooker, cricket or figure-skating, shows such processes as accentuating or extending parts of the body, using deliberately antiquated costume (the nostalgic 'baggy green' Australian cap), or the pretend revealing of more flesh; all of these are as much to do with constructing a ritual costume as the performance of the activity. Rituals around championships include the curious curtailment of excitement at the end of Wimbledon after the singles finals while the carpets are laid on court and royalty or their representatives 'come down' to present the prizes, at which point the ecstasy revs up again. Regular sporting events such as the Boat Race, the Grand National and the World Series become ritual events in a national calendar, creating 'Wimbledon fortnight' or 'Cup Final Saturday'.

The introduction in the 1860s of coaches made explicit the application of a work ethic to sports; together with the idea of 'muscular Christianity', promoted by young university graduates going to teach in boys' schools, this led to a dissemination of the idea of

athletic prowess as an aspect of religious conformity. This sat comfortably too with the amateur mentality, the idea of doing sports for the sake of something other than money. Several studies of sport highlight the relationship between the rituals of religion and those of sport, and the pervasive view that sport has replaced religious faith in terms of providing what people want, ranging from hope and communal ecstasy to a year's calendar. Other models range from Desmond Morris's view of football matches as 'symbolic events of some complexity' that combine elements of mock-fight, status display and act of faith, to the Marxist view of sport as combining drama, displaced violence and a narcotic effect in a social opiate similar to religion.

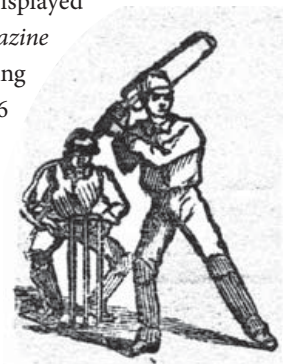
Sport as a whole was seen by some quarters in the nineteenth century as class-conciliatory, a rallying point for local patriotism that could unite worker and employer. While some have managed to maintain the paternal view of the nineteenth-century organisers of sport, that sport binds people together in some Olympian family, others have read sport as a great divider. George Orwell saw the visit of the Moscow Dynamo football team to Britain in 1945 (for a series of 'friendlies') as an example of sport as 'an unfailing cause of ill-will'. He felt that it was just possible to play without this emotion so long as no local patriotism was involved, but that 'serious sport is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boasting, disregard of all rules ... People want to see one side on top and the other side humiliated.' In *The Football Man* (1971) Arthur Hopcraft wrote about the 'rancour of the game', and how a referee 'can watch the bitterness develop in a match'.

The idea that sport neutralises or channels conflict is hardly borne out by the intense rivalry between the England and Australia cricket and rugby union teams (at least as it is encouraged in the press), between England and Scotland at football, England and Wales at rugby union, the Canada and United States ice-hockey teams, geographically close football teams, and any number of international pairings in most sports. It is a far cry from the Olympic ideal of the



glorification of some kind of disembodied athletic body, whose goal was primarily to extend the achievements of the human frame. But the potential for bonding that sport offers, particularly in the structure of the family or same age/gender group, can be seen as bonding through success or adversity. The most noticeable form of this bonding is in the appropriation of sport in the building of national identity, as a team comes to stand for the nation. By no means a post-1966 notion, this was developing in the period before the First World War, as dominant groups looked to sport as a way of holding together an increasingly disparate Britain – largely successfully as witnessed by the extreme nationalism seen at the outset of the war.

‘Science’ and ‘art’ are both used to describe sport. C. B. Fry in *The Book of Cricket* (1899) described George Gunn’s method of batting as ‘in every way scientific’, while ‘Captain’ Stevens in 1845 described swimming as both an art and a science. Boxing in particular provides this dualistic terminology, in its traditional description as ‘the noble art of self-defence’ and the term used by Pierce Egan in *Boxing: Sketches of Modern Pugilism* (1818), ‘the sweet science of bruising’. For Egan boxing was both ‘the art of self-defence’ and, in the sense of the application of skill and ability, a ‘science’ requiring ‘level-headedness’. ‘Much science was displayed on both sides,’ wrote *Baily’s Monthly Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* in 1836 of a wrestling match, and *The Preston Chronicle* of 26 August 1837 noted of a cricket match between Preston and Kirkham that ‘it was generally expected that the superior science of our townsmen would prevail’. A. J. Liebling’s 1956 book on boxing, *The Sweet Science*, is still the best-selling book on sport.



Given the extent of conflict-based violence in sport (attack, defend, hit, beat, shoot), how integral is violence to sport, and how is it sublimated? One interpretation of horse-racing is that it is a deliberate attempt to recreate the excitement of the hunt. The concept of 'pleasurable excitement' mentioned above derives from hunting and its development through the vicarious thrill of watching animals kill each other, to the vicarious pleasures of watching people fight in a controlled way (boxing, wrestling), or in a symbolised and ritualised way (rugby, football), which might involve the attacking or defending of territory, real or symbolised (basketball, netball, cricket, tennis). At times the attempts to control violence in sport give way. American college football in the later nineteenth century incorporated violence, both within and around the game, and regular spinal injuries and occasional deaths were seen as a necessary sacrifice in the game, which encouraged survivors to greater violence. Off the field, the naming of Harvard's football ground as 'Soldiers' Field' forged the link between war and football, as sporting violence became a forum by which young men could assert their interpretation of 'manliness'. In the period 1880 to 1914 football in the North of England was markedly more aggressive than in the South, and when the two regions met the distinctions were clearly visible; the Cup semi-final between Swindon and Barnsley in April 1912 was marked by the deliberate injuring of the Swindon captain. The *Daily Express* commented that 'to stop an opponent by maiming him is not football as understood in the south. It is certainly "not cricket"'.

One curiosity is fox-hunting, which was permitted while other blood sports were banned in the nineteenth century; the elaboration of rules in fox-hunting (the clothes, delayed starts) served to delay the finish, which was carried out at one remove – the killing being done by dogs. The civilising process of making a sport removes or controls the violence, which is often downplayed when it erupts – rugby broadcasters refer to it as an 'outbreak of handbags'.

But boxing, which is effectively the ultimate concentration of sport, one human contesting against another to see which body is stronger, is, despite the science and the art, violence. ‘A lot of white men watching two black men beat each other up’ – Muhammad Ali’s assessment shows it to be violence on more than one level. Oates’s *On Boxing* includes the words of a trainer telling a young boxer: ‘You gotta want to hurt him, because he’s sure going to hurt you.’ *Fistiana, or The Oracle of the Ring* (1845) reported that the prize money was called ‘battle-money’, and contests were ‘battles’ not ‘bouts’. And yet Sugar Ray Robinson, once welterweight and middleweight world champion, could say with all honesty ‘I ain’t never liked violence’. Oates viewed it as occasionally bewildering:

There are times when you risk moments of animal panic when watching something that is very ugly, and that ‘by watching it, one is an accomplice’... At such times one thinks: What is happening? Why are we here? What does this mean? Can’t this be stopped?

## **Sport and conflict**

A number of early sports-like activities, which developed not so much for fun as for military training, used the terminology of organised conflict, much of which is retained today in sports. The chivalric codes that grew out of military training were fully expressed at the tournament, a sporting display of ‘feats of arms’ carried out on horseback or foot. But in the late-medieval period archery, for example, was not seen as a sport that could be applicable to military training: it *was* military training, and became a sport only when rendered obsolete by effective handguns. Towards the end of the nineteenth century it was felt by many that too much sport had

distracted young men from the things that really mattered – making money, expanding the Empire and winning battles. It is probable that public health did not benefit from increased sporting opportunities as much as had been hoped by those who proposed that regular sport would drastically improve the nation's health. A far wider perception was that absenteeism was crippling industry at the time of sporting events, that army recruits and industrial employees were unfit and underdeveloped, and that over-indulgence in sport was distracting those who should be leading the nation. It is even likely that the games ethos did adversely affect the attitude to professionalism among the officer class at the beginning of the twentieth century. Of course, at the beginning of the First World War, the same British officers were bound to claim that the honourable British gentleman's love of sports would bring a swift victory, and even at the end of the war there were those who continued to believe that it was the officer class's love of sport that had brought victory through team spirit and dedication to the cause.

The relationship between conflict and sport has been seen in a range of ways. Words in regular use – 'attack', 'defend', 'shoot', 'target', 'battle', 'captain', 'defeat', 'hit', 'rearguard action', 'penalty shoot-out' – create a structure where aggression is normal and necessary. Stronger pressures on the professional urge the player to 'humiliate' the 'opposition', to 'thrash' them, to 'hammer away' at them. Football fanzines talk up rivalries between Manchester United and Arsenal, Everton and Liverpool, talking about teams being 'dead and buried', 'thumping' the opposition, 'killing them off'. In fact, 'kill' alone is seldom heard in sport, as if there is a general awareness that this word goes just too far and takes sport to a place where we know it should not go.

Fouling (originally ramming your boat into another in a race) and hacking (kicking your opponent's shins) were gradually removed from sports in the nineteenth century, to the disgust of some of the

administrators. In the case of rowing, it was the professional watermen who protested most against the removal of 'fouling', but amateur clubs supported its retention too. 'Hacking' was the matter most discussed in the football meetings in the 1860s and 1870s that resulted in the separation of codes. There is a suggestion that as part of the long process of civilisation through sport the tools of war have been sublimated into rackets, bats and clubs; some argue that the larger ball (football, volleyball, netball, etc.) is a symbolic head, and that the smaller one (hockey, cricket, baseball) is a symbolic fist. There is documentation of a head used as a football: that of Jeremy Bentham, founder of University College London, was reportedly used as a football by students in the 1920s – it had been preserved and kept on display, in accordance with his wishes.

But the 'civilising impulse' can have effects the opposite of those desired. The controls on boxing – the gloves and the headguards – actually allow greater violence. The 16-ounce glove massively increases the force of the fist, allowing the boxer to go on hitting without damaging his fist, while the headguard makes his head a larger target. The head is hit more, and with greater force, than is the case in prizefighting (bare-fist fighting), and probably more boxers die now than did nineteenth-century prizefighters. The unprotected fist can stand only so much punishment, and is likely to come off worse against the bones of the head, while the gloved fist can pummel the head for hours, with little distinction as to the damage it does to the brain whether the head is unprotected or protected. Boxers do die in the ring or because of it, the structure of the fight and the importance attached to will ('bottle', 'spirit', 'guts') being such that there is little incentive for the boxer either to surrender or to know that he is being irreparably damaged.

In the United States a supposed linguistic difference between football and baseball emphasised the military nature of the former ('bombs', 'hits', 'helmets', 'territory') against the more comfortable

terms of baseball ('parks', 'pastures', 'home', 'base'). From the outset, college football was run on a semi-military basis, to the extent that in 1905 the President of Harvard stated that football was 'a fight, and its strategy and ethics are those of war'. Harvard's football team at the beginning of the twentieth century used to dip their shirts in animal blood before a match. During the 1970s violence became associated with both football and baseball, with incidents on and off the pitch; but these only echoed regular incidents reported from a hundred years earlier.

When organised sport and organised conflict do meet the results are perplexing. There are several reported incidents of footballs being kicked to signal an attack during the First World War, the best-known being when Captain W. P. Nevill of the East Surrey Regiment ordered four balls to be kicked forward on the first attack of the Battle of the Somme. This, rather than the Christmas truce matches between opposing soldiers in 1914, was more typical of the way the establishment viewed sport at this time; though there was much recruiting at football grounds, it was felt appropriate to shut down the Football League from 1915, along with county cricket and amateur athletics meetings and the Boat Race. Robert Graves reported playing a game of cricket with improvised equipment (including a bird cage) during the Battle of Vermelles in 1915, and, a century earlier, officers of the Brigade of Guards played cricket before the Battle of Waterloo. There is even a report of a British officer arranging a cricket match to divert a conflict between opposing forces in Afghanistan in the 1930s.

## **Sport and hunting**

The Salish, a people of the north-west coast of North America, were reported in 1909 as playing a game that consisted of shooting an arrow through a rolling hoop. It would be difficult not to see this as

training for hunting, but sport and hunting have a much more complex relationship.

For centuries the word 'sport' was synonymous with hunting. The persistence of this idea can be seen in the large number of books published before 1940 with titles like *Sport* or *The Language of Sport*, which deal exclusively with fox-hunting, fishing, shooting, and so forth, more recently described as 'field sports'. For example, the introduction to *The Language of Sport* by C. E. Hare, published in 1939, contains the following:

The term 'sport' is here used in the modern sense of 'field-sports', connected with the (killing or) hunting of animals. It is not concerned with organised games, horse-racing or the prize-ring.

But animals shot as 'sport' were 'game', shooting large animals was 'big-game hunting', and fishing for large seafish is 'game-fishing'; in 1674 *The Compleat Gamester* described cock-fighting as 'a sport or pastime so full of delight and pleasure, that I know not any game in that respect is to be preferred before it ...' *The Compleat Sportsman* (1718) is a book entirely about hunting, in which all animals are 'game', whether edible or not. In the nineteenth century Russian adopted the English words 'sport' and 'sportsman' to apply to the contexts of hunting and fishing.

Any survey of the culture of sport must address blood sports, since for hundreds of years these were for many people the primary experience of what historically was called 'sport'. By the end of the nineteenth century three-quarters of each monthly issue of the *Badminton Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* was devoted to various forms of removing animals from their natural environment dead or alive. For hundreds of years up to then cock-fights, bull- and bear-baiting, ratting and dog-fights attracted vast numbers of spectators,

and betting at ruinous levels. Though banned in the early nineteenth century in Britain and the United States, many of these activities continued – cock-fights and ratting were especially popular, and dog-fighting continues; the use of the term ‘dog-fight’ for ‘aerial combat’ in the two World Wars no longer depends on the metaphorical association with dogs fighting, indicating how the term has become part of mainstream English.

Many of the terms used in blood sports cross over into ‘legitimate’ sports, particularly when those sports share aspects with or developed from the blood sports. Greyhounds racing round a track now chase an ‘electric hare’; for centuries greyhounds were set to race after a live hare in such coursing competitions as the Waterloo Cup, whose results were regularly reported in the national press. The ‘ring’ by 1400 was the term for a circular space for display or sport, applicable later to both bull-baiting and boxing. The Luttrell Psalter (1330) shows a bear being baited by four dogs; the dogs were expendable, while the bear was not, so this would have been a highly managed spectacle. The bear-handler is equipped with two sticks, one of which is being brandished at a dog, while his other hand is laid gently on the bear’s back. The *Boke of St Albans* (1496) shows fishing to have been highly developed at that stage; reels were not in use, but the description of how to tie distinct and carefully described flies indicates a set of skills that would have been desirable and honed through practice. ‘Bait’ itself as ‘food used to entice prey’, used in fishing from the early fourteenth century, derives partly from the Old Norse word *beita*, meaning ‘to cause something to bite’, which developed into bear and bull ‘baiting’. ‘Sport’ itself can still be used to mean ‘teasing’ or ‘tormenting’, or watching this activity.

The Cruelty to Animals Acts (1835 and 1849) put an official end to blood sports (though not fox-hunting); and certainly cruelty had been the driving impulse behind much of the baiting and setting animals against each other. At the time, dog-fights and cockmains were



advertised in *Baily's Monthly Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* (1829). Wild shooting and hawking, which had been supplements to the food supply, had disappeared, and, as the urban middle class exercised its power, those who lost out in these matters were the rural working class and aristocracy. It must be remembered that in the eighteenth century it was felt that animals that died in pain provided more tender meat; bull-baiting was required by law in some areas, to improve the meat. A red mist seems to have descended over people's eyes when it came to relations with animals. The phrase 'cock-shy' comes from the habit of tying to a post cocks that would not fight, and stoning them to death. Horse-racing retains the name 'National Hunt' racing for races with fences or hurdles, in memory of its origin in fox-hunting.

Boxing's detractors regard it as a controlled blood sport (the term dates from 1895), on the grounds outlined above. Newer combat activities such as martial arts, cage-fighting and kick-boxing hover near the limits of acceptable violence. Greco-Roman wrestling is an Olympic sport, while professional wrestling, particularly in the United States, is more to do with entertainment, performance and partisan support.

Cashmore gives a model for understanding sport as a way of reconciling the speed of humankind's mental and social evolution with that of our slower physical evolution, the pleasurable excitement of 'artificial hunting' satisfying the need to hunt for food. The answer proposed by this model is that sport is a development of the interim idea of hunting for its own sake, 'having no purpose apart from its own existence'. Sport, Barnes suggests, is not an urge to recreate the hunt, but to tell the tales of the hunt.

## Winning

The control of competitiveness was a long-held tenet of amateur British sport. Within the context of colonialism, competitiveness was

seen as less important than perseverance, team spirit, resoluteness and discipline. The concept of 'fair play' and 'playing by the spirit of the game' (now enforced negatively by charges of 'bringing the game into disrepute') was intrinsic to the gentlemanly nature of the way amateurs approached all sports at the end of the nineteenth century. The process of writing rules that kept competitiveness in check was seen by many as an affront to the amateur sensibility, an explicit acceptance that there were people who did not know how to behave or to limit aggression and the will to win. C. B. Fry, a major sporting figure of the early twentieth century, complained in 1911 about the assumption, implicit in rules against those who would 'trip, hack and push their opponents and behave like cads of the most unscrupulous kidney', that sportsmen would need to be told how to behave. Despite the supposed 'gentlemanliness' of rugby union, the rules are enforced ruthlessly, as maybe is the 'gentlemanliness' itself: obedience to the referee is maintained by moving penalty kicks forwards by 10 metres if they are disputed. There is an inference here that this level of 'sportsmanship' has to be maintained through a kind of punishment that would be interestingly inflammatory in football.

By the time of the 1932 'Bodyline' cricket series, when English bowlers were directed to bowl at the Australian batsmen rather than the wicket, the concept of competitiveness was at the heart of this most mannered of sports. The Australian popular press left its readers in no doubt that the tactic was 'not cricket', and that the 'win at all costs' mentality was not appropriate to the nature of cricket.

Extreme competitiveness is often thought of as a modern aspect of sport, absent in an earlier age when sport was more concerned with skill, finesse and spectacle based on 'playing the game well'. Derek Birley, writing in 1979 about the myths of cricket as portrayed in cricket writing, contrasts the 'display element that was once greatly admired in cricket and team games but nowadays tends to be subordinated to competition and excitement'. This would seem to

imply that something has been lost, that a golden age of sport depended on love of the game rather than love of winning. In this context, trying to win competitions came to be described as mere 'pot-hunting'. In American sports history, argue Gorn and Goldstein (*A Brief History of American Sports*, 2004), the need to win has always been inherent in organised sport, far stronger than ideas of sportsmanship, recreation, or even patriotism. Money has often underlain this, but the idea of 'making a good game' rather than going out to win has never been a major impetus in American sports.

And yet public perception of 'the win' in the past sometimes shows a difference from the present; England's World Cup win in 1966 was not the major headline in the following day's *Sunday Telegraph* and occupied no more than a quarter of the front page of *The Guardian*; Chattie Cooper is said to have cycled home after gaining one of her five Wimbledon championships, to be ignored by her brother, who went on cutting the hedge.

Historical post-match activities and pre-match agreements indicate the degree and nature of competitiveness and its relation to building a culture of sport above the details of winning and losing. International club matches are still often preceded by the exchanging of club pennants, there is a strict protocol for creating a channel of applause for opponents to pass through at the end of a rugby match (winners applaud first), and hands are shaken all round and shirts exchanged. In the seventeenth century it was acknowledged that the winners of a tennis match would pay for the use of the court, firewood, assistants and the post-match drinks. To a certain extent these customs ritualise checks on the all-out desire to win.

But of the first sixty-two cricket matches between Oxford and Cambridge, in the nineteenth century, only three were drawn, and these because of rain. Despite there being different rules for declaration and following-on, this would seem to indicate that players generally went for the win. In cricket there are definitely

complications – ‘going for a draw’ may mean avoiding defeat, which in ‘saving the match’ can be a turn-around in the direction of a match, which feels as good as a victory.

The growth between 1920 and 1935 of non-competitive sports – hiking, cycling and rambling – echoes the early organisation of hockey in the late nineteenth century. In 1892 the Hockey Association decided that there was no room in the sport for leagues, competitions or prizes. The magazine *Hockey* approved of this move as one which would ‘save hockey from disaster and being sacrificed upon the altar of popular, but ruinous, competition’. International matches continued in a spirit of ‘gentlemanly friendliness’ and seem to have been modelled on the idea of making a good spectacle based on intelligent placing of the ball, rather than tactics that would stop the opposition from scoring.

An alternative, more cynical – or realistic – approach embraces the rules and the role of the referee in the tactics of playing the game. In football there are ways of moving or putting special pressure on a team, particularly near the goal, that can draw an opponent into fouling; when done successfully, it is often described as ‘winning a penalty’. Inducing your opponent to foul is not seen as cheating unless there is a clear pretence of having been fouled. For the person who is induced into fouling, the opponent is suddenly not the other team but the fooled referee. Compare this with the way referees ‘manage’ rugby matches, talking to the players, warning them that they are in danger of being caught off-side, and telling them to stay on their feet.

For the individual competitor, at crunch time competitiveness may have to be left aside, its frenzy left to the spectators. Egan’s point about the ‘science’ of boxing was that the boxer depended not on his emotion so much as what he knew about how to defend himself and overcome his opponent’s defences. If a player ‘cares’ too much, emotion can be a cause of mistakes, ill-judged moves and bad timing. Competitiveness in this case becomes more about calculation and

judgement than an all-out will to win. Though some competitors, especially teams, may be deliberately fired up before a match, for the individual the desire immediately before the event is often to be alone and empty of emotions to do with competitiveness. The racing driver Jackie Stewart said: 'By race time I should have no emotions inside me at all – no excitement or fear or nervousness ... I'm drained of feeling, utterly calm.' Boxers since Muhammad Ali have proved the exception to this, to the extent that the competition starts long before the fight proper. Whipping up feeling seems to be more directed at the spectator, who has no outlet for it other than making noise; for the partisan supporter, the 'result' governs the experience of the match. From the beginning of the twentieth century football results newspapers began to be published in the early evenings, encouraging the viewing of sport as a matter of results, to be pored over and compared; many of the papers contained advertisements for pubs, obviously keen to attract a clientele whose Saturday evening conversation would be based on the day's sports results, despair and elation being equally strong incentives to the consumption of alcohol.

Early on in the documented history of sport in England, William Fitzstephen wrote in Latin of a game, *lusum pilae*, being played regularly. At the heart of organised sport lies the fact that winning a contest is not the end of the matter. A club may walk off the field of play holding a cup, but at the beginning of the next season it has to start again. The triumphalist 'We are the champions', sung at football cup finals, is balanced by the tradition since 1927 of singing the funereal 'Abide with me'. The Olympic champion starts on the same line as everyone else for the next race, the champion skier must race against the same stopwatch, and the winning horse emerge from a box like every other horse. Sporting triumph is a plateau, at the top of the hill, but with another hill beyond. And there is an element of self-destruction in the process. Professional footballers look old before their time, sports injuries cripple athletes for life, while concussion and brain

injuries are common in boxing and American football. For the fan, every success is tinged with the promise of future failure, while being a football supporter can be having a companionable forum within which to contain disappointment. Add to this the desire for the press to create and destroy heroes, and the fact that for every person who succeeds in professional sport many fall away early on, and it is possible to read sport as a quest for success with the inevitability of failure at its core: failure in victory, victory in failure, a fate deeply seated within the nature of sport. Captain Matthew Webb's victory was the source of his ultimate failure. He was the first person known to have swum the Channel, which he said left him with a feeling similar to that which he might feel after the first day of the cricket season; but he was condemned by his success to a career of exhibition swims till he died trying to swim across the pool of Niagara Falls in a bid to make enough money to be able to give up swimming professionally.

The fugitive present and uncertain future compare poorly against the myth of the golden age in the past, the so-called 'glory days' of all football clubs, and most other sporting groups, from school netball teams to national Olympic teams. The term 'glory days' in a sporting context appeared just a few months after England's World Cup win in 1966. Al Silverman in *The Twentieth Century Treasury of Sports* (1992) saw two 'golden ages' in twentieth-century American sport, the 1920s and the 1960s. Single achievements stand out from months of mediocrity and in doing so raise the status of the past; sport is a fertile field for nostalgia and, but for today's winners and their supporters, resentment of the reality of the present.

## **Money, money, money**

From the seventeenth century money began to play a major part in organised sports. Robert Burton in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) noted that horse-racing and its variations were 'good in themselves,

though many gentlemen by that means gallop quite out of their fortunes'. Betting put greater pressure on the need to win and increased cheating, which in turn caused the decline and reinvention of a number of sports. Though prizefighting was declared illegal in 1750, there were too many of the great and the good who were financially involved, and it continued until 1820, when a number of thrown fights brought about a collapse in confidence among backers and punters. A collapse in the world of betting threatened to bring down horse-racing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and cricket around 1825, until the MCC banned betting from Lord's Cricket Ground (the *Laws* published in 1774 included rules for betting, and in 1835 a rule was introduced forbidding betting by umpires). In the late eighteenth century the cricket matches played at the Hambledon club were being played for £500 a side, a vast sum for the time; side-betting would have raised more money. For the betters and bookmakers there were fortunes to be made by paying players to throw matches, and the decline in cricket during the first part of the nineteenth century was largely due to this. From this time and this

culture come many slang terms – ‘pony’, ‘punter’, ‘bookie’ and ‘leg’ – some of which are still in use.

Money underlay both amateur and professional sport, as prizes were usually low compared to the quantities of cash that changed hands between punters and bookmakers. But the idea of open payment for performance was anathema to the amateurs, who felt that as soon as money was involved there was a possibility of the 'purity' of amateur sports being



tainted. Payment for performance drove a wedge between professional and amateur that lasted till the end of the twentieth century. Professionalism became increasingly linked to betting, to 'thrown' matches and underhand tactics. In March 1906 the *New York Times* reported that J. E. Sullivan 'has induced several of the best men to go [to an international tournament] who could ill afford to spare so much time for such a trip, and, what is more important, he has prevented the attendance of some who, while they might have been athletically capable, bore reputations none too savory for pure amateurism'.

To add to the mix, the long-lasting link between sport and betting was reflected in the use of the word 'sport' to mean 'bet'; for example, Pierce Egan in *Boxiana* (1821) writes of one early-nineteenth-century prize-fight that 'it is reputed that not less than twenty thousand pounds were sported on this occasion'. And current terminology applies 'gaming laws' to the world of legalised betting.

The introduction of charges for football spectators in the 1880s coincided with the decline of the hopes that sport would create a more healthy and relaxed working class. 'Spectatorism' (used from 1889) exasperated the gentlemen amateurs at the same time that increased consumerism in other fields of entertainment was disappointing social reformers and socialists who hoped for the working class to be more involved in activities that affected them.

The need to make sport attractive as a commercial commodity has led to changes in rules – notably the 1925 change to the off-side rule in association football, but also the number of tackles rule in rugby league, the various forms of limited-overs cricket, and the penalty shoot-out and the 'sudden death' ends to cup-ties in association football (though 'sudden death' in games has been in use since the 1830s). The commodification of sport can be seen not just in the way the state buys into its potential for making money (witness the ruinous scramble to hold regular international events), but also in the ways that sports clothing is widely accepted outside the



sporting arena, and the emergence of such concepts as ‘guerrilla advertising’ at sports events, and the consequent ring-fencing of phrases (e.g. ‘London Olympics’) for the benefit of official (i.e. fee-paying) sponsors, with threats of fines for unauthorised usage.

A number of thrown prize-fights and some corrupt financial deals led to a loss of faith in the sport by punters after 1820 and again in 1840, and, as it declined, so did the language attached to it. When the sport was revived, with gloves and rules, it was no longer ‘prizefighting’, the word ‘milling’, meaning ‘fighting’, had largely disappeared, and ‘the Fancy’, the social group made up of the followers and financiers of the sport, had dispersed.

## Writing the rules

The stages of the development of sport in Britain up to 1914 can be divided roughly into the following general stages:

*Up to 1600:* rural games, military training, courtly sports including tennis, tournaments and hunting.

*1600 to 1750:* competitive games, and the beginning of organised cricket, horse-racing and foot-racing.

*1750 to 1830:* the development of prizefighting, cricket and the emergence of public-school sports and governing bodies.

*1830 to 1870:* public-school and university sports, writing the rules, the emergence of amateurism.

*1870 to 1914:* divergence of codes, decrease of popular professional sports.

Between 1850 and the First World War the culture of sport in Britain was extensively transformed. During the preceding hundred years watching and playing sport had been common to all classes, but the numbers were erratic and attendance was localised. From the middle

of the nineteenth century the number of people involved in sport increased dramatically. As the *Madagascar Times* put it in 1885, 'the nineteenth century amongst its numerous developments has produced nothing more extraordinary than the extension and generality of our out-door sports.' There was less interest in some sports – rowing, shinty, pedestrianism (professional running) – but their places were taken by sports that had greater potential for participants and spectators, particularly fee-paying spectators.

In this environment codification and writing the rules assumed considerable importance. The writing of laws for sports had begun before 1800: in bowls from 1670, cricket from 1727, golf and prizefighting from the 1740s, curling from 1795. Governing bodies existed too – the Jockey Club from 1751–2, the St Andrews Society of Golfers (later the Royal and Ancient) from 1754, the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) from 1787. Modifications were made: the rules of cricket were formalised to ensure parity in determining the outcome of matches, but they were revised in 1744, and again in 1755.

Sport had been practised in schools before the nineteenth century: school football dates from the seventeenth century, and cricket from the eighteenth century, with inter-school matches from the 1780s. Between 1830 and 1860 the attitude towards sport in public schools changed, from indifference and antagonism to support and incorporation into the school curriculum and ethos. The codification of football emerged from the public schools, with several schools playing their own codes in the early nineteenth century. By 1846 it was clear that the Eton and Rugby codes were incompatible, and that this reflected a conflict between the aristocracy and the wealthy bourgeois class. As a result of a series of meetings at Cambridge University the followers of the Rugby code became isolated in 1848. But it was 1857 before a football club was established, at Sheffield, outside the public school/university environment, using primarily dribbling rather than handling.