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# PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE GOLD MEDAL

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Alumni. Commencement, 1894.

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*PHILOSOPHY ON THE BLEACHERS.*

IN this early summer there is always an answer ready for the man who asks you, "Why do you go to games, why do you waste your time upon the bleachers?" The balm of the air, the lazy shadows of the afternoon, when it is too warm for a walk and too early for dinner, the return of the slack tide between lectures and examinations—all form a situation in which the path of least resistance often leads to Holmes Field. But although these motives lie ready as an excuse, and we may find them plausible, there remains a truer and less expressible interest behind. Motives are always easy to assign, unless we wish to get at the real one. Those little hypocrisies of daily life by which we elude the evils of self-analysis can blind us to our most respectable feelings. We make ourselves cheap to make ourselves intelligible. How often, for instance, do people excuse themselves, as it were, for going to church; the music is so good, the parson such an old friend, the sermon so nearly a discourse of reason. Yet these evasions leave untouched the ultimate cause why churches exist and why people go to them—a cause not to be assigned without philosophy. And it seems to me that similarly in this phenomenon of athletics there is an underlying force, a power of human nature, that commonly escapes us. We talk of the matter with a smile as of a fad or a frolic, a meaningless pastime to which serious things are in danger of being sacrificed. Towards the vague idea of these "serious things," which might upon inspection be reduced almost without a remainder to the getting of money, we assume an attitude of earnest concern, and we view the sudden irruption of the sporting spirit with alarm and deprecation, but without understanding. Yet some explanation of the monster might perhaps be given, and as I have here a few pages to fill and nothing of moment to communicate, I will allow my pen to wander in the same direction as my feet, for a little ramble in the athletic field.

If it is not mere indolence that brings the spectators to our games,

neither is it the mere need of healthy exercise that brings the players. The least acquaintance with them or their spirit is enough to convince one of this truth; and yet both friends and enemies of athletics are sometimes found speaking of them as a means of health, as an exercise to keep the mind clear and the body fit for work. That is a function which belongs rather to gymnastics, although the training for games may incidentally accomplish it. If health was alone or chiefly pursued, why should we not be satisfied with some chest-weights in our bedroom, a walk, or a ride, or a little swimming in summer? What could be gained by organized teams, traditional rivalries, or great contests where much money is spent and some bones possibly broken? It is amusing to hear people who are friendly to athletics by instinct or associations labouring to justify them on this ground. However much one may love buoyancy and generosity, and hate a pinched and sordid mind, one cannot help yielding the victory to the enemy when the battle is waged upon this utilitarian ground. Even arguments like those which the *New York Nation*, a paper often so intelligent, propounded not long ago on the subject of foot-ball, might then seem relevant, and if relevant conclusive. We should be led to believe that since athletics outrun the sphere of gymnastics, they have no sphere at all. The question why, then, they have come to exist would then pertinently occur, and might lead to unexpected results; but it is a question which the *Nation* and those of like mind need not answer, since to be silent is an ancient privilege of man of which the wise often avail themselves.

Now athletics have a higher function than gymnastics and a deeper basis than utility. They are a response to a natural impulse and exist only as an end in themselves. That is the reason why they have a kind of nobility which the public is quick to recognise, and why "professionalism" is so fatal to them. Professionalism introduces an alien and mercenary motive; but the valetudinarian motive is no less alien, and only harmless because so limited in scope. When the French, for instance, shocked at the feeble health and ugliness of their school-boys, send commissioners to England and America to study athletics and the

possibility of introducing them into France, the visitors return horrified at the brutality of Anglo-Saxon youth, and recommend some placid kind of foot-ball or some delightful form of non-competitive rowing, as offering all the advantages of fresh air and exercise, without the dangers and false excitements of the English practices. And gymnastics, with or without pink tights, the French may easily introduce; they are no whit inferior to other nations in this field, as the professional circus can testify. But to introduce athletics into France there must be more than a change of ministry: there would have to be a change of ancestry. For such things are in the blood, and the taste and capacity for them must be in-born or developed by national experiences.

From a certain point of view we may blame athletic enthusiasm as irrational. The athletic temper is indeed not particularly Athenian, not vivacious, sensitive, or intelligent. It is rather Spartan, active, courageous, capable of serious enthusiasm and more ready to endure discipline than to ask for an ultimate reason for that devotion. But this reproach of irrationality ultimately falls upon every human interest, since all in the last analysis rest upon an instinct and not upon a rational necessity. Among the Greeks, to be sure, games had a certain relation to war; some of the contests were with weapons, and all were valued for developing martial qualities of soul and body. The relation of athletics to war is intimate, but it is not one of means to end, but more intrinsic, like that of the drama to life. It was not the utility of athletics for war that supported the Greek games; on the contrary, the games arose from the comparative freedom from war, and the consequent liberation of martial energy from the stimulus of necessity, and the expression of it in beautiful and spectacular forms. A certain analogy to war, a certain semblance of dire struggle, are therefore of the essence of athletics. Like war, they demand an organization of activities for the sake of victory. But here the victory is not sought for the sake of any further advantage. There is nothing to conquer or defend except the honour of success. War can thus become a luxury and flower into artistic forms, whenever the circumstances of life no longer drain all the energy native



to the character. For this reason athletics flourish only among nations that are comparatively young, free, and safe, like the Greek towns and those American and Australian communities which, in athletics as distinguished from private sport, bid fair to outdo their mother country.

The essential distinction between athletics and gymnastics may help us to understand some other characteristics of our sports. They must, for instance, be confined to a few. Where so much time, skill and endurance are required, as in great athletic contests, the majority is necessarily excluded. If we were dealing with an instrument of health, a safety-valve or balance wheel to an overstrained system, the existence of an athletic aristocracy would be an anomaly. But the case is otherwise. We are dealing with an art in which only the few, the exceptionally gifted, can worthily succeed. Nature must be propitious, circumstances must be favourable, patience and inspiration must not fail. There is an athletic aristocracy for the same reason that there is one of intelligence and one of fashion, because men have different endowments, and only a few can do each thing as well as it is capable of being done. Equality in these respects would mean total absence of excellence. The analogy of moral and practical things would mislead us in this sphere. Comfort or happiness would seem to lose nothing of their value if they were subdivided, and a proportional fraction given to each individual: such an equal distribution of them might even seem a gain, since it would prevent envy, and satisfy a certain sense of mathematical justice. But the opposite happens in the arts. The value of talent, the beauty and dignity of positive achievements, depend on the height reached, and not on the number that reach it. Only the supreme is interesting: the rest has value only as leading to it or reflecting it. Still, although the achievement is rare, the benefit of it is diffused; we all participate through the imagination in the delight and meaning of what lies beyond our power of accomplishment. A few moments of enjoyment and intuition, scattered through our lives, are what lift the whole of it from vulgarity. They form a background of comparison, a standard of values, and a magnet for the estimation of tendencies, without which all our

thought would be perfunctory and dull. Enthroned in those best moments, art, religion, love, and the other powers of the imagination, govern our character, and silently direct the current of our common thoughts.

Now, in its sphere, athletic sport has a parallel function. A man whose enthusiasm it has stirred in youth, has one more chamber in his memory, one more approach to things, and a manlier standard of pleasures and pains. An interesting task for somebody with adequate knowledge of antiquity would be to trace the influence which athletics had among the Greeks; I fancy it might be shown to permeate their poetry, to dominate their sculpture, and strangely to colour their sentiment. And this influence would come not chiefly from the practice but from the spectacle of games, just as the supposed brutalizing tendency of bull fighting is not conceived to stop with the performers within the ring, but to cross the barrier and infect the nation. Athletic sports are not children's games; they are public spectacles in which young men, carefully trained and disciplined, contend with one another in feats of strength, skill, and courage. Spectators are indispensable, since without them the victory, which should be the only reward, would lose half its power. For as Pindar, who knew, tells us:

Success  
Is half the prize, the other half renown.  
Who both achieves, he hath the perfect crown.

A circumstance which somewhat perplexes this whole matter is the prevalent notion that athletics have a necessary relation to colleges. They have, indeed, a necessary relation to youth, because the time of greatest physical pliability and alertness is soon over; and as those of our youth who unite leisure with spirit are generally at some university, it happens that universities and colleges have become the centres of athletic interest. But this is an accident; a military or local organization of any sort would be as natural an athletic unit as a college. That athletic teams should bear the name of an institution of learning, and

materially influence its reputation and fortune, is at first sight very strange; but the explanation is not far to seek. The English academic tradition, founded upon the clerical life of the middle ages, has always maintained a broad conception of education. All that an aristocratic family might wish to provide for its boys, that the schools and colleges provided. They contained the student's whole life, and they allowed a free and just development to all his faculties. The masters' province did not stop in the schoolroom, nor the professors' in the lecture hall. When possible they shared in the social and athletic life of the boys, and when not possible they at least gave it their heartiest support, making every reasonable concession to it; or, rather, not feeling that such friendliness was a concession at all, since they did not undertake merely the verbal education of their pupils, but had as broad an interest in their pursuits as the pupils themselves, or their parents. I remember a master at Eton, a man of fifty and a clergyman, running along the tow-path in a sweater to watch the eight, a thing considered in no way singular or beneath his dignity. On the same principle, and on that principle alone, religious teaching and worship fall within the sphere of a college. To this system is due that beauty, individuality, and wealth of associations which make English colleges so beloved and venerable. They have a value which cannot be compensated or represented by any lists of courses or catalogues of libraries,—the value of a rounded and traditional life.

But even in England this state of things is disappearing. If we renounce it in this country, we need not suffer a permanent loss, provided the interests which are dropped by the colleges find some other social embodiment. Such a division of functions might even conduce to the efficiency of each; as is observed in the case of the German universities which, as compared with the English, are more active in investigation and more purely scientific in spirit, precisely because they have a more abstract function and minister to but one side of the mind. The real loss would come if a merely scientific and technical training were to pass for a human one, and a liberal education were conceived to be

possible without leisure, or a generous life without any of those fruits of leisure of which athletics are one. Plato, who was beginning to turn his back upon paganism and held the un-Greek doctrine that the body should be cultivated only for the sake of the mind, nevertheless assigns in his scheme of education seven years to the teacher of the arts and seven to the athletic trainer. This equality, I fancy, would seem to us improper only because the study and cultivation of bodily life is yet a new thing among us. Physically we are barbarians, as is proved by our clothes, our furniture, and our appearance. To bathe was not Christian before this century. But the ascetic prejudice which survives in some of our habits no longer governs our deliberate judgments. Whatever functions, then, we may wish our colleges to have we shall not frown long upon athletic practices altogether. The incoherences of our educational policy cannot permanently alter our social conditions or destroy the basis which athletics have in the instincts of the people.

Into physical discipline, however, a great deal can enter that is not athletics. There are many sports that have nothing competitive in them. Some of them, like angling, involve enough of mild excitement and of intercourse with nature to furnish good entertainment to the lovers of them, although not enough to amuse a looker-on. The reason is that angling is too easy: it requires, no doubt, a certain skill, but the effort is not visible and glorious enough, it has no relation to martial or strenuous qualities. The distinction between athletics and private sport is that between an art and an amusement. The possibility of vicarious interest in the one and its impossibility in the other are grounded on the meaning which athletics have, on their appeal to the imagination. There is in them a great and continuous endeavour, a representation of all the primitive virtues and fundamental gifts of man. The conditions alone are artificial, and when well combined are even better than any natural conditions for the enacting of this sort of physical drama, a drama in which all moral and emotional interests are in a manner involved. For in real life the latter are actually superposed upon physical struggles. Intelligence and virtue are weapons in life, powers that make, as our



Darwinian philosophy has it, for survival; science is a plan of campaign and poetry a cry of battle, sometimes of one who cheers us on, sometimes of one who is wounded. Therefore, when some well-conceived contest, like our foot-ball, displays the dramatic essence of physical conflict, we watch it with an interest which no gymnastic feat, no vulgar tricks of the circus or of legerdemain, can ever arouse. The whole soul is stirred by a spectacle that represents the basis of its life.

But besides the meaning which athletic games may have as physical dramas, they are capable, like other tragedies, of a great æsthetic development. This development they have not had in modern times, but we have only to conceive a scene at Olympia, or in a Roman amphitheatre, to see what immense possibilities lie in this direction. Our own games, in which no attention is paid to the æsthetic side, are themselves full of unconscious effects, which a practiced eye watches with delight. The public, however, is not sufficiently trained, nor the sports sufficiently developed, for this merit to be conspicuous. Such as it is, however, it contributes to our interest and helps to draw us to the games.

The chief claim which athletics make upon our respect remains yet unmentioned. They unite vitality with disinterestedness. The curse of our time is industrial supremacy, the sacrifice of every spontaneous faculty and liberal art to the demands of an overgrown material civilization. Our labour is servile and our play frivolous. Religion has long tended to change from a consolation into a puzzle, and to substitute unaatural checks for supernatural guidance. Art sometimes becomes an imposition, too; instead of delight and entertainment, it brings us the awful duty of culture. Our Muse, like Donna Inez, makes

Her thoughts a theorem, her words a problem,  
As if she deemed that mystery would ennoble 'em.

One cannot read verse without hard thought and a dictionary. This irksome and cumbrous manner in the arts is probably an indirect effect of the too great prevalence of practical interests. We carry over into our play the principles of labour. When the stress of life and the

niggardliness of nature relax a little and we find it possible for a moment to live as we will, we find ourselves helpless. We cannot comprehend our opportunity, and like the prisoner of Chillon we regain our freedom with a sigh. The saddest effect of moral servitude is this atrophy of the spontaneous and imaginative will. We grow so accustomed to hard conditions that they seem necessary to us, and their absence inconceivable, so that religion, poetry, and the arts, which are the forms in which the soul asserts its independence, languish inwardly in the midst of the peace and riches that should foster them most. We have regained political and religious liberty, but moral freedom—the faculty and privilege of each man under the laws to live and act according to his inward nature—we scarcely care to have. The result is that while, in Greece, Sparta could exist beside Athens, Socrates beside Alcibiades, and Diogenes beside Alexander, we have in the United States seventy millions of people seized with the desire of absolutely resembling one another in dress, speech, habits, and dignities, and not one great or original man among them, except, perhaps, Mr. Edison.

It may seem a ridiculous thing, and yet I think it true, that our athletic life is the most conspicuous and promising rebellion against this industrial tyranny. We elude Mammon only for a few years, which the Philistines think are wasted. We succumb to him soon after leaving college. We sell our birthright for a mess of pottage, and the ancestral garden of the mind for building lots. That garden too often runs to seed, even if we choose a liberal profession, and is overgrown with the thistles of a trivial and narrow scholarship. But while we are young, and as yet amount to nothing, we retain the privilege of infinite potentiality. The poor actuality has not yet taken its place, and in giving one thing made everything else for ever unattainable. But in youth the intellectual part is too immature to bear much fruit; that would come later if the freedom could be retained. The body alone has reached perfection, and very naturally the physical life is what tends to occupy the interval of leisure with its exuberances. Such is the origin of our athletics. Their chief value is that they are the first fruits of that

spontaneous life, of which the higher manifestations are not suffered to appear. Perhaps it is well that the body should take the lead, since that is the true and safe order of nature. The rest, if it comes, will then rest on a sounder basis.

When I hear, therefore, the cheering at our great games, when I watch, at Springfield or at New London, the frenzy of joy of the thousands upon one side and the grim and pathetic silence of the thousands upon the other, I cannot feel that the passion is excessive. It might seem so if we think only of what occurs at the moment. But would the game or the race as such be capable of arousing that enthusiasm? Is there not some pent-up energy in us, some thirst for enjoyment and for self-expression, some inward rebellion against a sordid environment, which here finds inarticulate expression? Is not the same force ready to bring us into other arenas, in which, as in those of Greece, honour should come not only to strength, swiftness, and beauty, but to every high gift and inspiration? Such a hope is almost justified by my athletic philosophy, which, with little else, perhaps, to recommend it, I herewith submit to the gentle reader. It may help him, if he receives it kindly, to fill up the waits at a game, while the captains wrangle, and to see in fancy greener fields than Holmes's from the bleachers.

*G. Santayana.*

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*RIVER SONG.*

A RED-NECKED turtle on the warm bank  
Dozed in the living light;  
In the glimmering water rose and sank  
The wavy grasses bright.

The red-necked turtle woke on the bank,  
Woke at the heron's flight;  
In the ruffled water he dropped and sank  
Deep under the grasses bright.

*H. C. Greene.*