

THE POLITICS OF THE  
MALE BODY IN  
GLOBAL SPORT

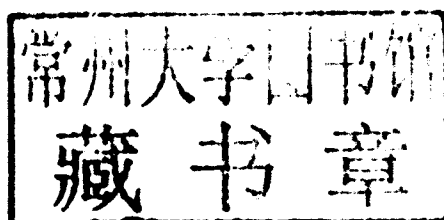
THE DANISH INVOLVEMENT

Hans Bonde

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On 1st January, 2010 Sport in the Global Society, created by Professor J.A. Mangan in 1997, was divided into two parts: *Historical Perspectives* and *Contemporary Perspectives*.

These categories will involve predominant rather than exclusive emphases. The past is part of the present and the present is part of the past. The Editors of *Historical Perspectives* are J.A.Mangan, Mark Dyreson and Thierry Terret.

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J.A.Mangan  
Mark Dyreson  
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*Dong Jinxia*

# ABSTRACTS

## **1. The Time and Speed Ideology: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Industrialisation and Sport**

Around 1900 there was a revolution in the Danish sportsman's pattern of movement with the transition from the elegant figure skating to the race against the clock that is speed skating. We can note a trend in which the male ideal, in parts of the bourgeoisie, changed from having been 'the elegant man' – which in turn was based on the standards of aristocratic exercises – to being 'the fast man'. Concepts such as grace, style and perfection of form, which had been central ideas in the Northern European nobleman's dance, fencing and horse riding, became much less important in male bourgeois culture but partly carried on in new forms as a specifically female culture. Working-class men were not much drawn to the time sports, favouring instead power sports such as weightlifting, wrestling and boxing, in which the ideal was the strong man, and where the experiences of sweat, close bodily contact and direct physical struggle, man against man, were central.

## **2. Political Assertion: Rural Revolutionary Gymnastics**

The Danish Grundtvigian spiritual and national revival in the decade around 1900 contained a high degree of enthusiasm and a strong collective feeling, which was demonstrated not least through gymnastics displays where young farm-lads' and girls' teams marched into and out of the arena singing patriotic anthems, led by a gymnast carrying a huge Danish national flag. Through gymnastics rural ideas and values were dramatized and embodied, making gymnastics a dynamic part of the overall transformation of Danish society around 1900. This peculiar Danish bias towards the straightened and enlightened farmer was the result of an independent tradition of a voluntary gymnastics culture practised in the countryside, the equivalent of which cannot be found in other European countries, where the tendency, on the contrary, was towards an undermining of the rural population's position.

## **3. From Hygiene to Salvation: I.P. Muller, International Advocate of Gymnastics**

The internationally renowned Danish gymnastics pedagogue and hygienist I.P. Muller became a propagandist for the blessings of water, air and light at a time when these concepts were gaining an increasingly important role in the emerging science of medicine. He spread the evolving medical profession's gospel of hygiene and purification to the broad public by his own example and his simple ritualistic scheme of gymnastics. In his writings and in his agitation he always fought against the cramped life of the growing cities and for the blessings of the open-air life which made him become an icon of beauty and health for the evolving Continental movements that praised the concepts of nudity, healthy food and the liberation of the body from Victorian dogmatism. In 1912 Muller had achieved such international recognition that he was able to settle in London, change his name from Müller to Muller and open the very successful Muller

Institute at 45 Dover Street, which was frequented by ailing members of the affluent classes, including the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII.

#### **4. The Devil in the Flesh: 'Captain Jespersen', Preacher of the Pure Body**

In the history of Danish radio broadcasting the founder of Danish radio gymnastics, Captain Jespersen (1883–1963), stands out as a charismatic figure who still today appeals as an intriguing voice from the past. After some dramatic falls from his horse Captain Jespersen was injured several times, but through the personal experience of a religious call he felt obliged not only to seek recovery himself but to spread the message of human perfection through self-discipline to the whole Danish nation. During morning gymnastics in the radio, he tried to awaken Danish radio listeners not only by means of some rather rigorous schemes of gymnastics and the use of military-like commands but mainly through encouragement to spiritual transformation, often deriving from Martin Luther and St Paul, which sometimes even resulted in the domestic performers standing still and freezing for an extended period of time. Though Captain Jespersen advocated 'a healthy soul in a healthy body', to him the religious spirit of man should take control over the sinful body. This could be done by a lifelong conduct of self-control developed through gymnastics every morning.

#### **5. The Gymnastics 'Sexual Revolution': Niels Bukh, Male Aesthetics and Homophilea**

Niels Bukh became a key exponent in Continental Europe's attempt to maintain gymnastics' precedence over British competitive sport. His revolutionizing concept of male gymnastics mainly gained its fame through its effects on the male sex role regarding norms for touching other men, for the rhythmic expression of the male body and for the exposure of the naked and sensual male body in public. These features of Bukh's gymnastics broke with existing norms for the disciplined and correct male demeanour and would still be seen as rather daring today. In addition, it is difficult to understand the popularity of Bukh's new gymnastics for male heterosexual youth without including his own homosexual orientation and personal interest in the aesthetics of the male body.

#### **6. Nationalism in the Age of Extremes: Taking Danish Gymnastics to the World**

The inter-war period was characterized by the intense struggle for supremacy between communism and fascism with the seemingly fragile democratic states being increasingly involved in the confrontation. In 1931 at a 'world tour' of Danish gymnastics the great globetrotter Niels Bukh landed right in the middle of these political antagonisms. In the Soviet Union, around 1931, the authorities initially showed an interest in Bukh's rural gymnasts, who resembled the powerful, dynamic ideal workers of agitprop art rather than the worn-out, starving Soviet rural class-comrades that Bukh and his young lads and girls met during their tour of the USSR and who suffered the brutal consequences of forced collectivization. The extensive differences of opinion between Bukh and the Soviet authorities may have had an influence on his gymnastics' achieving only a relatively limited currency in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, Bukh and his gymnasts applauded a Japan which at the time was in the process of invading Manchuria. He allowed his troupe to be

used in the Japanese military's propaganda offensive both in Manchuria and Korea, which had been under Japanese control from 1910.

### **7. The Struggle for Danish Youth: Fascism, Sport, Democracy**

This article demonstrates the potential fascination of Nazi ideology outside Germany's borders in a country declared by the Nazis to be a friendly and racially pure zone and with the celebration of the athletic body as the common denominator. The article also shows that the use of sexuality as a political weapon is not a new phenomenon invented by modern American politics. The great paradox of the life of the internationally renowned Danish gymnastics innovator Niels Bukh is that he created a liberating male gymnastics but tried to use it for totalitarian purposes. Nazism's enormous gravitational pull stemmed from an extremely competent aestheticization of politics. Without a realization of the power that a cult exerts, it is impossible to understand, let alone resist, the appeal of Nazism to the human subconscious. Bukh was a master at playing on exactly these emotional strings. And this was why the Nazi authorities were so pleased with Bukh that they invited him to present displays in the Third Reich, rushed off to Bukh's little cult refuge in the North and introduced his gymnastics into German sports education. For the Nazis, Bukh's gymnasts were the incarnation of a perfection of the Aryan race.

### **8. Danish Sport and the Nazi Seizure of Power: Indoctrination, Propaganda and Confrontation**

At the Berlin Olympics in 1936 Danish sports officialdom in its near entirety mustered and could report on the series of impressive German victories and the organizers' fantastic ability to create an atmosphere and sense of unity at the most grandiose Olympics up until that time. Only among Danish Communists, cultural radicals, workers' sports movements, Jewish sports and in the social-democratic press was there resistance to a racist, military regime being allowed to hold games in the name of peace and understanding between peoples. Increasingly through the second half of the 1930s Denmark's small size as a nation state and its vulnerable position owing to its common border with an aggressive and armed German nation gave Danish responses to German sport their peculiar touch. First, in Nazi mythology, Denmark was defined as a pure Aryan zone and therefore was to be treated in the best manner possible. Second, it was possible in a direct geographical sense to link Denmark to Germany through women's distance swimming between the two countries and through events such as the three-day Berlin to Copenhagen stage race. As a consequence of all this, Denmark was the sole nation among the European democracies to continue cooperation on the sports field with Germany after the Second World War had broken out until the occupation of Denmark on 9 April 1940.

### **9. Revolt: Danish Resistance to Sports Collaboration with Nazi Germany**

The Danish 'peace occupation' meant that, initially, the German sports propaganda was most successful in Denmark, when compared with other German-occupied countries. Therefore, a full-scale sports exchange with Germany (and Sweden) could take place. The Danish case, on the other hand, also demonstrated the vulnerability of the German strategy of a flourishing and to some extent voluntary sports exchange with an occupied

nation. This became quite obvious when in June 1941 the Austrian football club *Admira Wien* demonstrated great German superiority by beating a select team from Copenhagen 4–1. The Danish, normally quite calm and non-violent supporters, simply dropped the pretence of sporting relations, pouring scorn on the political gestures of the guests and humiliating off-duty but uniformed German soldiers among the crowd with verbal and physical assaults. It was resistance to occupation from below at the football stadium, therefore, that caused Danish-German sporting relations to shake and even resulted in the dismissal of the Danish Minister of Justice who had long been a thorn in the side of the occupying authorities.

#### **10. Turn of the Tide: Nordic Ideological Change**

During the German occupation of Denmark the arch-rivalry on the football field between Denmark and Sweden was transformed into an atmosphere of fraternal neighbourliness from 1940 to 1943 because of the pressure of occupation and war. However, the intense Swedish-Danish sports cooperation during the first years of the Second World War was not just a neutral exchange but was embedded in a close triangular collaboration with Germany. Attempts by the Danish Sport Federation (DIF) to avoid sports encounters with Nazified Norwegian sport were not effective, as the DIF would not challenge the German authorities by issuing an outright ban on collaboration with Norwegian sport. After the war sport was again heavily politicized, but now to demonstrate Danish inclusion in Allied circles. The DIF now permitted unrestricted politicization, with marches on the pitch by resistance fighters, sabotage team matches, English military bands, the exclusion of German spectators and Danish competitions against foreign soldiers – but of English, not German origin this time. The political symbolic value of the Danish encounter with world-famous British players was evidenced when a select team of British professionals would play at the national stadium in Copenhagen against a select Danish team in July 1945 in the presence of the British commanding officer, Major General Dewing.

#### **11. Return of the Ritual: Martial Arts and the Young's Revolt Against the Youth Rebellion**

In this essay I want to demonstrate that not only male competitive sport in general but the Oriental martial arts in particular show that female dominance in the education of modern boys is not at all total. In Oriental martial arts we find a number of rituals and a kind of manhood test where boys and young men are taught masculine codes of behaviour. In our non-sensuous, highly technological society it seems that young people and especially young men have a strong need to experience the limits of the body and the importance of pushing the limits of daily life. But it makes it even more important that within the framework of the ritual should be found people who have themselves experienced this fascination and still preserve a humanistic, ethical perspective. Going in for rituals and authority, martial arts may be seen as young people's revolt against youth rebellion, but also against the paucity of sensuous experience and against the cultivation of literary and verbally abstract abilities in our modern society. Nonetheless, martial arts also contain elements familiar to youth rebellion such as an interest in the Far East and in meditation.



## **12. The Great Male Cycle: Sport, Politics and European Masculinity Today**

Sport today is one of the few areas where men can meet without women. In the workplace, and from the church to the pub, the sexes mix. Therefore contemporary sport has become extremely overloaded, as the field designated to bear a large part of the male project, to identify what is masculine in relation to other men. However, today a chasm has appeared between a group of highly-trained body-conscious men and the broad majority suffering under welfare society's lack of physical demands. Many male politicians today use sport and physical charisma to boost their career. The cult of the body typically belongs to a view of the world in which the strong leader's own body or ability to control the bodies of others forms a platform for propaganda. Populist politicians from Berlusconi to Sarkozy and Putin use sport as a political backdrop to give their control a festive glory. Conversely, sports stars from Pelé to Schwarzenegger tend to first develop their own sporting abilities and popularity and, taking that as their starting point, then seek to win political terrain.

## **13. Sport, the Olympics and Politics: European Responses to Beijing 2008**

The broad base of sporting activity in China functions as a hatchery for an elite, by which is generally meant the Olympic elite since China commits itself with full force to those Olympic disciplines that have the most medals and which are easiest to win. For the leaders of the Chinese state, the primary aim of the Beijing Olympic Games was a facelift that would demonstrate that the country had finally become a modern superpower. All opening ceremonies are, of course, a form of cultural propaganda on behalf of the host nation. However it is also something unique that a one-party state with serious humanrights issues and with severe ethnic border conflicts is given the right to make use of the Olympic opening ceremony, especially since it seems that the games, contrary to promises by the Chinese sport authorities, did not result in improvements in human rights or any relief for the Tibetans. In Denmark the Beijing games aroused controversies because of the presence as head of state of the Danish Crown Prince Frederik, who in October 2009 at the prestigious Olympic Congress in Copenhagen is almost certain to be elected as a member of the International Olympic Committee.