

# **Sport As a Key Partner in the “Big Four’s Reign” in the Western World?**

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**Note: This statement is made for the consideration of those scholars who concern themselves with the so-called social science of sport, as well as with sport philosophy. It is at heart more of a brief exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of sport and developmental physical activity for present life. I state boldly first as a given that sport has obviously become an extremely powerful social force in society. If we grant that it now has such power in our culture—a power indeed that appears to be growing steadily—we can also recognize that any such social force affecting society can be dangerous if perverted (e.g., positive nationalism to blind chauvinism;; normal commercialism to excessive commercialism; wholesome sport competition to “own-the-podium mentality). Assuming the rationale behind these assertions, I believe that, while sport has grown as an important social force, it now also appears to have become a societal institution with an inadequately defined theory.**

**Within this presently muddled situation in regard to sport's role in society, I feel that most people—including the writer as a person concerned with the social-science and philosophic aspects of sport—are like the proverbial blind person attempting to describe an elephant using the sense of touch only (i.e., here a trunk, there a tusk, next four leathery pillars, etc.). Even though we humans have sight, we are akin to a person attempting to assemble a jigsaw puzzle without first seeing the complete picture on the cover of the box. This had led us into developing warped or truncated ideas about the big picture of sport we should be assembling in a presumably forward-looking society. Resultantly,**

this causes us to ignore concomitant benefits attained from participation in, or observance of, competitive sport activities, as well as in more basic exercise and expressive movement.

The “big four” named in the title of this brief statement are “ruling” the Western world. First, *Democracy* is promoted vigorously as the most desirable type of political institution. Second, *economic capitalism* is being promoted as the most worthwhile social institution, albeit with certain reservations by a significant minority. Third, nationalism is promulgated as important “love of country” vital for a country’s development in an uncertain world. Now, fourth, and most interestingly, *competitive sport* during the 20th century somehow has also become *a fourth important social institution* promulgated for “best interests” of humanity. The implication is, of course, that democracy, capitalism, nationalism, and sport should continue as is and brought to play vigorously in the twenty-first century. It is evidently believed that each “force” singly will bring about more "good" than "bad." Finally, the ongoing contribution of each to the whole will lead to “a good future” for humankind on earth. (How this will play out for so-called “third–world” countries will be a theme for another day...)

However, in each case, we are finding this assumption is being challenged. In North America, the percentage of people voting in elections has decreased steadily. The top officials are acting increasingly as “czars.” Somehow, although all citizens

“have the vote” and could potentially “be involved” positively, things aren’t heading in that direction. At the same time, in the United States, for example, in the year 2000, it was reported that—although 600,000 Blacks were in university, some 800,000 were being “warehoused” in prisons. Simultaneously, in 2010, there are at least 20,000,000 illegal immigrants in the United States, and the gap between the rich and the poor is increasing at a most alarming rate. What will this mean as we move along in the 21st century? Will capitalism be made more “palatable” by adding just enough “socialism” so that we can claim with certainty that the “total package” will produce more “good” than “bad”? If you saw Michael Moore’s startling 2009 film titled “Capitalism: A Love Story, you’ll concur with me that we should not bank on it...

Division #3 of the “Big Four’s reign” is nationalism. Whereas patriotism might refer to "love of country," nationalism could be considered as the blending of patriotism with an accompanying consciousness of nationality. It is a political philosophy in which the good of the nation is supreme, thus leading to an almost unbridled state at its extreme. The word "nationalism" itself might apply to a feeling, attitude, or consciousness that persons might have as citizens of a nation—citizens who hold a strong attitude about the welfare of their nation, about its status in regard to strength or prosperity. Thus defined, nationalism (the third social force discussed here) has been evident throughout the history of civilization from the relatively simple organization of the tribe to the complex nation-states of the modern world.

Statesmen and politicians have been quick to seize upon presumed love of country to “drag people along” to do things that “in the light of day,” they subsequently regret. However, this does appear to be exactly what is happening today as nationalism is “merged” or “meshed” with the social forces described as democracy and capitalism.

The fourth division of the “Big Four’s reign” in North America especially is here designated as “commercialized sport.” The development of what has now become a social institution involving highly competitive sport, for example, has reached the point where a claim can be made that it may be doing more harm than good—albeit that such involvement soundly enhances the effort of economic capitalism within the “Big Four.” Oddly, the totality of the Western world seemingly has no awareness of this contention and permits sport’s ongoing expansion without question. The conventional wisdom appears to be: “Commercialized sport is good for people, and the more spectator involvement there is with it the better.” (Shades of Ancient Rome...)

Conversely, and concurrently, the large majority of the population in the so-called developed world is getting *inadequate* involvement in developmental and recreational *physical* activity. Resultantly, it has even been argued recently that the coming generation will be the first to die before their parents. Obesity “reigns” at all periods of life! And yet the truth is that we in the

field of physical activity education (and related health education) know that—well taught!—such involvement can be a wonderful, health-producing, educational/recreational experience for a young person. Hence, we can only *recommend strongly* that all boys and girls should have a required, regular, excellent, graduated program—including related health & safety education. This overall program should include intramural sport competition up to high school graduation.

As it has developed, the problem is that the United States (and Canada too) as democratic countries have typically “got it backwards.” Whatever “bona fide,” educational/recreational experiences are “out there” are *not* typically made available to ALL children and youth. Hence we must *demand* that those experiences deemed essential for “the finest life” in a democracy be mandated regularly up through high school graduation for all to the extent that each person is capable of being involved. In addition, fully qualified, full-time teacher/coaches should be available to provide these educational experiences.

When these curriculum needs are met, if funding can be made available, ALL children and youth should be able to choose to get involved with **EXTRA-CURRICULAR OPPORTUNITIES** in (1) physical, as well as in (2) social, (3) communicative, (4) aesthetic & creative, and (5) “learning” recreational interests. Whether these opportunities are made available through public education OR public recreation should make no difference theoretically.

We can grant that some parents are in a position financially to provide additional experiences for their offspring. Additionally, if "government" chooses to get involved in the promotion of any of these educational and recreational experiences for youth, that's fine too. However, it must be understood that such should occur *only if the basic* curriculum needs listed above—for all have been met!!! "EXCELLENCE" should be the goal in *extramural* or *varsity* sport, but it should come "from the ground-up", *not* from a "top-down, own the podium, subsidizing mentality" anxious to prove that "WE ARE THE GREATEST!...".

Further, it is ironic that almost all of the others in the "under-privileged" nations of the world are typically getting too much physical labor and accompanying inadequate, unhealthy nourishment. In addition, these "first world" people are ironically being urged daily to pay increasing amounts of money to watch "skilled others" play competitive games.

The basic problem here in the words of the eminent sport philosopher, Robert G. Osterhoudt, is that "we are fashioning an *instrumental* view of sport, a view that misses sport's basically human (its intrinsic) merits, and thus likewise misses the significance of providing the experience of authentic sport to all people (men and women, young and old, rich and poor) in all nations." Only in such terms may sport justifiably claim itself essential to a good life and as such justifiably claim

itself promoting the good of each and all. The world must figure out the ways and means of avoiding the current, zany excesses of “First-World cultures” and the unacceptable deprivations of those cultures designated as “Third-World.”

In conclusion, I am forced to ask “*Exactly what is it that we are promoting, and why are we doing it?*” Frankly, I greatly fear the answer. Maybe it’s my age, but, frankly, I am "running scared"! It can be argued that this plight has developed because we haven't created a theory of developmental physical activity including sport that permits us to assess whether sport, for example, is fulfilling its presumed function of promoting good in a society. In addition, why do most sport philosophy and social-science scholars assiduously avoid scholarly consideration of exercise and dance as part of their domain? At present these scholars tend definitely to be elitist with their “heads in the sand.” Wittingly, or unwittingly, they are seemingly playing ball with and abetting the forces of the “Big Four” explained above. Sport is not serving society anywhere well nearly as well as it might...