

The European Sport Space: Circulations, Organizations, and European Identity

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the European space saw the early development of sport exchange, and played a pioneering role in the international organization of sport. The homogenization of practices and the implementation of continent-wide competitions, a process that began during the interwar period and expanded after the Second World War, helped to establish a European space of sport. Involving both elites and the masses, and the product of intense media coverage, sports have had an impact far beyond stadiums, one that has enabled Europeans to meet and become better acquainted with one another.



Clubs competing in the second edition of the European Champions Clubs' Cup (1956-1957 season). Source : Official UEFA Newsletter, November 1956 (no. 6), p. 3.

As the focal point of the birth of modern sport, the European space was the setting for the early development of sport exchange in this field, and played a pioneering role in its international organization. How did sport, which has been booming since the nineteenth century, engender its own European space, and what impact did it have on European populations? Did it contribute to the emergence of a common awareness and even a sense of being European, or did it simply reinforce national identities?

The Appropriation and Homogenization of Sport Practices in Europe

The sports invented in nineteenth-century England were diffused across the continent at the turn of the twentieth century at the contact sites represented by ports, capitals, and high schools inspired by England's public schools. This process was facilitated by the English diaspora on the continent—sailors, merchants, students—and the return of continentals who had studied in or emigrated to the British Isles. The Anglomania of European elites drove the continental appropriation of practices such as rowing, equestrian sports, golf, and tennis. The enlightened aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie played a crucial role as conveyors in this process, concretely working toward the implementation of the first clubs. However, practices from England did not arrive on virgin territory. For example, fencing, horse riding, as well as military, patriotic, and hygienic gymnastics developed in Central and Northern Europe, while the hiking movement and societies for archery and swimming helped to put bodies in motion and to popularize physical activity. The popularity of weights and dumbbells in Central and Eastern Europe, along with wrestling matches, boxing bouts, and bicycle races provided Europeans with an early taste of sport events. Finally, resorts near hot springs, the seaside, and the mountains saw the active participation of hoteliers in the development of bicycling, driving, skiing, luge, and bobsledding, whose sporting aspect gradually took hold.

These practices experienced a rapid and considerable rise among the population, because they responded to the political, economic, social, and recreational issues of the first half of the twentieth century. Modern sport was driven by the affirmation of national identities, the militarization of societies, social distinctions during a time of expanded citizenship in numerous countries, control of violence, and the invention of free time. However, the motivations of those who diffused sport varied, as did the sociopolitical contexts, which included national claims, competition between secular and religious actors, youth supervision, the growing social role of doctors, and the multifaceted mobilization of sport for paternalist, hygienist, and advertising purposes.

Expanding sport exchange gradually created the need for a common codification, which prompted club managers to collaborate and create national and international federations. As promoters, and acting as interest groups with political authorities, their primary goal was to schedule matches, but also to sometimes plan competitions and establish uniform rules. The managing elite of these organizations were akin to missionaries who wanted to develop international sport exchange, and who believed that sport created bonds of friendship between peoples. The geographic proximity between European representatives as well as their belonging to shared circles of sociability, promoted Europe's overrepresentation in the first global federations and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), founded in 1894. In the early twentieth century, international sport was first and foremost European sport, even though a few modern sports also spread in Latin America and colonies.

Other forms of sport internationalism emerged in Europe at the same time, as federations of Catholic, socialist (Socialist Workers' Sport International), and communist (International Association of Red Sports) allegiance opposed the capitalist and competitive model promoted by sport-specific federations and the IOC. In opposition to these dominant organizations, so-called "affinity" federations emphasized the moral and educational aspects of sport, which could sometimes bring liberation or initiate social changes. Affinity sports strengthened pre-existing, religious, or political solidarities on an international scale. Governing bodies advocating for the rise of women's sport were created in the aftermath of the First World War, driven by pioneering women such as the Frenchwoman Alice Milliat, who founded the International Women's Sports Federation in 1921.

Promoters, auditorium owners, riding school operators, journalists, and hoteliers also understood the profits they could generate from media coverage of matches, growing audiences, and codified opposition between champions. Sport centers emerged in the early twentieth century in both cultural capitals (Budapest, London, Paris, and Vienna) and tourist resorts (seaside, hot spring, and mountain). Competitions attracted international participants and created a market for European athletes, which was also built by the expansion of communications and transportation. At the same time, the sport industry created the first sport “professionals”—champions, coaches, organizers, doctors, architects, and sport journalists—who were sometimes part of international associations, and whose active transmission of sport culture contributed to European standardization and harmonization (game strategy, training methods, sport accounts).

However, there were major disparities within the European space with regard to sport practice, the status of athletes, and infrastructure, which were gradually erased during the Trente Glorieuses. The example of football stadiums reflects to this process. While different models existed (an oval stadium with a track in Italy, Germany, and Soviet bloc countries; a square stadium with terraces but no track in Great Britain and Benelux countries), new media, commercial, and safety standards led to architectural convergence. This was also true of stadiums for basketball, ice hockey, and volleyball.

The Emergence of European Organizations: Sport, Economic, and Political Considerations

Although Europe was not always the geographic scale envisioned by promoters of international sport organizations, universalism was often confused with the European territory until the 1930s. The men’s football world cup held in 1934 and 1938 were, in practice, tournaments that essentially included the national teams of Europe.

For all that, it was during the interwar period that the first competitions exclusively reserved for Europeans were held. In 1926, a number of sporting leaders founded a European swimming league to organize a European championship every four years in alternation with the Olympic Games. A European committee was established at the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) during the 1930s. The first European basketball championship was held in Switzerland in 1935.

The process increased in scope during the 1950s with the creation of continental organizations. For example, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) founded in 1954 consisted from its very foundation of over thirty national associations. It planned a number of events in which clubs from cities across Europe—divided at the time by the Cold War—played against each other, with national teams following suit. Sporting leaders tried to limit external influence, especially of a political kind—as well as the influence of internal factions and alliances between journalists and club managers, some dating back to the mid-1950s—in order to create European club competitions. A certain shared expertise emerged from joint discussions regarding refereeing, tactics, and management. The example set by football was followed in other sports, as a European competition for basketball clubs was launched in 1957, and a European Volleyball Confederation was founded in Bucharest in 1963.

The emergence of a “Europe of sport” was nevertheless influenced by what was happening in (other) cultural, economic, scientific, and technical areas. Beginning in the 1950s, the popularity of sport on the continent began to interest political and economic organizations, which were working toward the rapprochement of Europeans (for instance the European Movement or the European Cultural Centre). However, sport organizations jealously guarded their prerogatives, demanding political neutrality in exchange for intrusion by these external actors. The first major agreement between two European organizations was the one signed between the UEFA and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), and then with the Eastern organization, the International Broadcasting Union (IBU), during the 1960s to broadcast European club and national matches.

Still, when European Community institutions were created, they did not mention sport at all. When promoters of

the European cycling tour turned to the ECSC in the mid-1950s, the institution symptomatically encouraged the initiative, but rejected the request for a subsidy. While neither the ECSC nor the EEC were interested in sport, the Council of Europe (CE) quickly took the initiative. This institution also developed the notion of “sport for all” in 1966, and later conducted the fight against doping. In 1975, a number of European sport ministers adopted a “European Sport for All Charter” that laid the foundations for European sport policy. In the atmosphere of détente fostered by the Helsinki Accords of 1975, awareness of sport as a way of resolving health problems among the population (stress, obesity)—and the growing issues that professional sport raised for the health of high-level athletes (injury, doping)—became shared topics of discussion. In the early 1980s, the European Parliament made proposals to create a European identity through sport practices. Powerful ideas were proposed, such as the creation of a European sport team, the adoption of an EU sport emblem, and even the use of the European flag during the opening ceremony at the Olympic Games. The European Sports Conference (ESC), bringing together federation directors and sports ministers, was created in the same spirit in 1973. However, this platform, which traversed the Iron Curtain, proved more a space for exchange (with the implementation of commissions, such as sport for youth) than the implementation of policies.

With the expansion of its duties, the European Economic Community (EEC) in turn began to take an interest in the field of sport. The Single Market cups proposed by sport promoters at the turn of the 1970s in various sports (such as tennis) were followed by efforts to develop a European sense of identity through sport, as suggested by the Adonnino report in 1985. The EEC began to take measures at the instigation of the Delors Commission, and funded events in cycling (Tour de l’Avenir and Women’s European Commission Tour), sailing (European Sailing Championship), and tennis (The European Open). It also planned to create the European Community Games. The actions taken in the field of sport by governing bodies—the European Community which became the European Union (EU) in 1992—was especially legal in nature, as demonstrated by the Bosman ruling in 1995, the result of dialogue between the Commission and various sport organizations. It broke the gentleman’s agreement that had existed up to then between UEFA leaders and the EU, and required actors in football to accept the free movement of athletic workers. The social aspects of sport were subsequently taken into consideration, as the field of sport fell under European jurisdiction after ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. The EU promoted sport not only as a way of fostering physical well-being, but also as a conveyor of social cohesion and educational values.

Sports and European Identity: Conditions and Limits

While the European space for sport was indisputable, doubt was cast on the argument that sport plays a role in developing European identity, primarily due to its role as a conveyor of and fertile ground for local and national identities. It is nevertheless possible to evaluate the effects that sustained exchange in sport between European countries over the last decades has had on their inhabitants and sense of belonging to Europe.

International sport events—which affected elites and the masses in different ways, and enjoyed broad media coverage—expanded and became subject to the trials and tribulations of the geopolitical context. While Euroscepticism grew in scope, the existence of sport exchange between Europeans has almost never been in question. For example, at a time when the British are imagining leaving the European Union, three of Great Britain’s four football associations (England, North Ireland, Wales) have passionately participated in the 2016 European Football Championship.

Continental exchanges in sport have been standard for a long time, and have made the relations between Europeans and Europe into a commonplace. While it is difficult to identify the effects that sport has had on the creation of European identity, two elements bear mentioning. First, due to expanding media coverage, continental sport exchange has enabled Europeans to travel by proxy. During the Cold War and up through the Helsinki Accords, sports journalists had the privilege of following their teams beyond the Iron Curtain, and informing their readers about both sporting events and lifestyles in the countries visited. Similarly, through the mediation of

transnational television networks (Eurovision and Intervision), many viewers discovered the continent's geography on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This mediated relation to the European space became a direct relation, as the gradual democratization of transportation from the 1970s to the 1990s allowed thousands of fans to follow their team to the four corners of Europe. However, empirical studies have yet to be conducted to determine how these travels influenced their relation to Europe. Second, with their share of drama and emotion, these exchanges created genuine European "memorial sites." The passes of the Tour de France, great European stadiums, prestigious ski slopes, and mythical basketball stadiums became familiar to a large number of Europeans. Some of them even became sites of pilgrimage, such as the Superga hillside where the Torino AC plane crashed in 1949. In short, sport allowed Europe and its inhabitants to meet and experience emotions together.

This has prompted some authors to argue that a "European public sphere of sport" exists. Yet it is important to remain cautious regarding the role of sport in the emergence of a European identity or awareness. Broader studies are needed to assess the relations that practices, events, and shared spaces have had with a collective sense of belonging. The international sport system still reflects and reinforces the vision of a world that is divided into competing nation states. Twenty-first century champions remain first and foremost national champions. Aside from a few sports such as golf (Ryder Cup, Royal Trophy) and tennis (Laver Cup), the absence of a "European" team—which was nevertheless imagined by European politicians in the 1980s—demonstrates that a genuine European "sport nation" does not exist. For that matter, sport drives multiple and combined identities (local, regional, and national as well as social, gendered, and corporative), and the pleasure of sport also resides in confrontation, which can prevent a collective European vision. This is no doubt a sign that Europe and Europeanism are still evolving, and should not be thought of as a nation or a nationalism on a different scale. Seen through the highly illuminating medium of sports, Europeans nevertheless share practices, competitions, and mobilities. What they have in common goes even further, as they collectively possess a multifaceted and shifting territory and history, which have been surveyed, invented, and ceaselessly rewritten.

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