
SPORTS AND MODERNITY IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY IN URUGUAY: A STUDY BASED ON SPORTSMAN MAGAZINE (1908)

ESPORTE E MODERNIDADE NO URUGUAI NO INÍCIO DO SÉCULO XX: UM ESTUDO A PARTIR DA REVISTA *SPORTSMAN* (1908)

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RESUMO

Este trabalho teve como objetivo analisar como o esporte se relacionava com a sociedade uruguaia no início do século XX. Foi realizado um estudo pautado na história cultural. Como fontes utilizaram-se 26 números do semanário *Sportsman*, publicados em 1908. Na análise dos documentos, foram evidenciadas duas unidades temáticas: 1) “O papel do esporte na construção da nação civilizada”, que identificou aspectos relacionados à prática esportiva como elementos importantes no desenvolvimento da civilização/nação e; 2) “Esporte e saúde da população”, que evidenciou registros sobre o esporte e sua incidência na melhoria da saúde e da raça. Conclui-se que o esporte colocou-se como prática social relevante para os redatores e leitores da revista *Sportsman*, sendo fundamental na construção de uma nação civilizada.

Palavras-Chave: Imprensa. Esporte. História cultural.

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the relationship between sports and the Uruguayan society in the early 20th century. It was conducted on the basis of cultural history. As sources, 26 issues of Sportsman magazine published in 1908 were used. For document analysis, two thematic units were evidenced: 1) “The role of sports in building a civilized nation”, which identified aspects related to sport practice as important elements for the development of civilization/the nation, and 2) “Sports and the population’s health”, which provided records on sports and their positive impact on health and race. It is concluded that sports stood as a relevant social practice for the copywriters and readers of Sportsman magazine, being fundamental in the construction of a civilized nation.

Keywords: Press. Sports. Cultural History

Introduction

Bearing in mind how sports spread around Uruguay in the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, the role played by clubs with British characteristics stands out. This phenomenon reached other countries¹, and the influence of British immigrants on associations formed in Uruguay as of the mid-20th century was relevant. They were composed of groups of gentlemen that gathered together with common purposes, including literature and sports².

Reisch³ states that the growth of these clubs and their increasing contact with varied segments of the population was relevant for sports to start being seen as an important practice by the Uruguayan nation, considering that said practice was tied to another nationality. Over the years, sport activities at those British clubs integrated with the routine of many Uruguayan cities, in a moment when the Uruguayan State itself was consolidating. This reinforces the impacts of sports on the institutional transformation/modernization of that context.

According to Barrán⁴, from the second half of the 19th century, Uruguay saw the rise of a new “civilized sensibility”, through which the elites disregarded leisure practices linked to the Spanish culture, promoting ideals that were typical of the Anglo-Saxonian puritanism, of the praise of labor, and of parsimony. The Spanish leisure would represent “barbarian” practices in which individuals were limited to enjoying their impulses, something problematic for the civilizing impetus that was installing. In contrast, on the side of sports, Barrán⁴

highlights the education reform led by José Pedro Varela (1845-1879, author of the General Bill on Common Education)⁵ in 1876, as indicative of the fight for new civilizing ideals. In favor of them, means were sought to foster the sociability necessary to put Uruguay on the way of the desired progress. Dogliotti Moro⁶ mentions Barrán's studies (1994, 1995), showing that the period between 1880 and 1920 was characterized by the importance given to bodily education at the core of sport expansion and educational expansion, phenomena herein taken as basal to the modernization of Uruguay.

To address the expansion of these ideals and these practices concerning the diffusion of sports, this study highlights the role played by the press in Uruguay in the first decade of the 20th century. At the core of this process, in which sports were being associated with a desired modernity, football was gaining space and importance⁷. It is in this context that *Sportsman* magazine was created, in the city of Montevideo, in May 1908. In its first editorial, it revealed the intention of filling an existing gap in the coverage of sports and horse racing in the national press, providing its readers with news about sports. Thus, the magazine placed its editorial focus on sports, with the “national football” as priority, although mentions of horse racing and other sports that were popular among Uruguayans were common, such as rowing, tennis, cricket, polo, *pelota*, fencing, gymnastics, etc.⁸

When considering sports in the early 20th century in Uruguay and the treatment given by the printed press to this phenomenon, the following question arises, which will be further analyzed herein: How did sports connect with the civilization process of the Uruguayan society, based on said magazine?

Methods

This research is based on cultural history⁹. We will study the cultural dimensions of sports in the early 20th century, assuming that:

Sports, from a historical perspective, arise in this scenario as the main lenses for analyzing relations established in society. Endowed with their own meanings and, at the same time, flooded with a pedagogical and potentializing dimension of questions, sports are seen as a cultural element that allows understanding social structures, for carrying marks and reflections of the context that creates and sustains them.¹⁰⁻³⁹³

The documental source used was *Sportsman*, a journal available at the website of the *Facultad de Información y Comunicación* of *Universidad de la República* (UDELAR), based in Montevideo – Uruguay. Its covers reveal that it was a “weekly, illustrated magazine”, with the first issue published on May 24th, 1908.

Out of all 30 issues, 26 were used (1 to 26), all digitally available. Four were excluded because, as of issue 27, the magazine had its name changed (to *Casos y Cosas y Sportsman*), as well as its graphical project, in addition to having broadened the scope of their subjects, comprehending news in a more general way. There is no information about the printing of other issues of *Casos y Cosas y Sportsman* magazine.

At UDELAR's website, it is made clear that the physical material that was scanned was unduly cut during the binding process. Overall, the issues have between 16 and 20 pages, with approximately ten articles/news stories/highlight notes and ten comments/letters to the editor/curiosities/match or tournament results, smaller in size. The period comprehended between the first and the 26th issues makes up six consecutive months.

The magazine management and direction board was located at what is now the historical center of Montevideo, in the *Ciudad Vieja* neighborhood, at Juan Carlos Gómez street, in front of the Constitutional Square. To ensure their economic viability, the magazines

included several advertisements, a means that seemed to be efficient to meet this need, although the first issue had blank pages due to lack of advertisers.

To analyze the sources, we encoded the texts considering the research objective¹¹. The study thematic units emerged after exploration of the material, following the thematic analysis, in which encoding units were identified (words, meaningful phrases, themes, characters, events reported as relevant), established during the pre-analysis of the material. Afterwards, we counted the frequency of mentions of encoding units, then classified and gathered data to choose the thematic units. Thus, two thematic units and their corresponding encoding references were: 1) The role of sports in building a civilized nation (matters concerning behavior/respect for the rules of the game; sport activity related to the development of civilization/the nation; importance of sports in forming the youth of the nation, and female participation in sports); 2) Sports and the population's health (sports and health improvement – hygienism/eugenism; sports for physical education/bodily education; sports and their influence on intellectual formation, and female participation in sports).

The “female participation in sports” encoding reference was evidenced as part of both thematic units because some encoding excerpts relate the participation of women in sport activities to the construction of a civilized nation and, others, to improvement of the population's health/race.

Results and Discussion

The magazines allowed distinguishing some characteristics of processes described in the historical contextualization we provided about sports in Uruguay in 1900. The sport modalities of greater evidence in the articles, news stories, columns and letters to the editor/columnists were: football (130 references), followed by horse racing (61 references), several sports (18 references), fights/weightlifting/boxing (14 references) and bullfighting (14 references), besides other modalities displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of sport modalities covered on Sportsman magazine

Sport Modalities	Number of Articles, Notes, News Stories, Letters to the editor/columnists	Number of Covers and Back Covers	TOTAL
Football	130	09	139
Horse racing	61	12	73
Several sports	18	04	22
Fights/Weightlifting/Boxing	14	--	14
Bullfighting	14	--	14
Cycling	08	04	12
Rowing	06	03	09
Gymnastics	06	02	08
Tennis	08	--	08
Fencing	07	--	07
Shooting	04	02	06

Source: The authors

Equally, we observed that horse racing and football stood out on the magazine covers and back covers, which displayed personalities and figures that represented said sports (horse racing: 12 covers; football: 9 covers) (Table 1).

The presentation of renown people in the political and cultural scenario of the Uruguayan society of that age was just as common. According to Luzuriaga², many of them were members of different clubs and played a variety of sport modalities, with highlight to

William Poole¹², who brought football to Uruguay; Claudio Williman⁸, UDELAR's provost in the years of 1902-1904 and 1921-1916 and President of Uruguay between 1907 and 1911; Manuel Quintela¹³, dean of UDELAR's College of Medicine in the periods of 1909-1915 and 1921-1927, in addition to having been president of the *Sociedad de Amigos de la Educación Popular* in the years of 1905-1911 and 1915-1919; and others.

The prominence of football may be related to its alignment with the hygienistic discourse of that period, although it was equally represented as source of some ludic freedom for popular segments². Additionally, Bayce¹⁴ described that, until 1930, football was one of the practices used for the quest of an independent national identity, monopolizing this role after that year. On the other hand, bullfights (typical of the "Spanish idleness") are less frequently reported compared to other leisure manifestations, since they started to be questioned in 1888 and finally banned in 1918¹⁵.

Analyzing the content published on Sportsman magazine, it was possible to group the addressed subjects into two analysis thematic units: 1) The role of sports in building a civilized nation and 2) Sports and the population's health (Table 2). Both analysis thematic units manifest the credibility and hope attributed to sports for the development of the nation.

Table 2. Frequency of mentions of the main subjects by analysis categories

Subjects	Number of mentions
Thematic Unit: The role of sports in building a civilized nation	
Matters of behavior/respect for the rules of the game	34
Sport activities related to the development of civilization/the nation	19
Importance of sports in forming the youth of the nation	13
Sports linked to citizenship actions	11
Female participation in sports	07
Thematic Unit: Sports and the population's health	
Sports and health improvement (Hygienism and Eugenism)	14
Sports for physical education/bodily education	14
Sports and their influence on intellectual formation	13
Participation of females in sports	05

Source: The authors

Thematic Unit 1: The Role of Sports in Building a Civilized Nation

To start the discussion, we will approach the matter of sport activities related to the development of civilization/the nation (19 mentions). Sports are frequently referred to as being a consequence of the need for living in a civilized society: "[...] *Athletic games are present in all civilized countries today...*"^{12:10}. In an article promoting an athletic tournament to be organized by the magazine itself, we read:

[...] yes, as it is to be assumed, if our tournament succeeds as we are expecting, we will feel satisfied to have contributed, to the extent of our modest strengths, to this goal toward which the eyes of civilized peoples converge, and which is tied to the education that feeds our spirit: the physical culture, savior of the decay of the race, that which promises vigorous and intelligent generations.^{16:04}

This close relationship between sports and civilization is what Elias¹⁷ suggests when describing that the formation of the modern States in Europe was related to changes in the social code of conduct and feelings that were being constructing since the 16th century. In the case of the development of sports, there was a global evolution of a code of feelings and conduct in the same direction. Mainly, when comparing the evolution of *pelota* games in the Middle Age and early Modern Age, with both branches of the British football (soccer and

rugby), Elias¹⁷ perceives an increase in sensibility when it comes to violence. From this perspective, the sportivization of hobbies in the English society and their export to almost the whole world are examples of the civilizing effort. The same author described that the rise of the sport as a form of physical “fight”, considerably less violent, was related to the development in society of a decrease in violence and the end of religious wars.

Along with sports, education also played an important role in the analysis context. In 1876, José Pedro Varela insisted on the need to educate the people in the sense of building the Uruguayan nationality and the legitimacy of the country as a State. Although the independence of Uruguay was declared in 1825, threats to the sovereignty of the newly-formed State were still constant in the second half of the 19th century. This produced revolutions of *caudillos* (colonels from the country’s inland cities) who campaigned against the political power installed in Montevideo, hindering the desired social, political and economic progress of the country. For this reason, Varela saw in education for the entire population a way of moving closer to modern nations, overcoming internal problems¹⁸.

Quintela¹⁹ values as cultural milestone what historians Barren and Nahum call *El Uruguay del Novecientos*. In this process of cultural changes, these authors highlight a moment, namely, the start of José Batlle y Ordoñez’s mandate as president, in 1903. According to them, Montevideo presented a new population reality, with many foreigners that needed to incorporate their new nationality. Thus, José Batlle y Ordoñez carried out reforms that proposed an urban-industrial development model based on a cosmopolitan nationalism.

Quintela¹⁹ discerns the intention of leaving behind the “barbarian easterner” of the civil wars of the 19th century. The exaggerated manifestation of the body, typical of this “barbarism”, should be overcome by a new paradigm based on discipline, guilt and shame, making a prominent room for the rational care of the body. All this brought about new bodily practices in replacement of the “backward” manifestations of the previous century. For comparison purposes, Aisenstein²¹, analyzing the content of *Revista de la Educación Física*, second issue of 1909, observed that, in Argentina, civilizing discourses aimed at the building of the nation by putting society in a new direction were being spread as well. The magazine stressed the need for physically educating the people and their leaders as parts of the prevalent modernizing drive.

Matters of behavior and respect for the rules of the game (34 mentions) was another recurrent subject on Sportsman. Several articles shed light on the difficulty that football players and, especially, referees had to learn about and respect the rules of the game. For instance, the “*Tribuna libre*” column describes:

*A strong campaign has been started against this violent game being quickly developing in football matches. Referees have received strict orders on how to repress anything that may degenerate the sport in a physical fight, because it is clear that every day the brutalities and excesses that start from said physical exercise are growing.*²²⁻⁰⁹

In this sense, we found references to the social conduct accepted in sports, in which competition would be present, but without violent attitudes that could (seriously) hurt competitors¹⁷. Rodríguez Gimenez, analyzing morals in José Pedro Varelo’s piece of work, states that the proper exercise of morality was where the precise point to bridge physical strength and intellectual development lied, which consequently allows building, without risks, a civilized society.

This finding helps us understand the fact that we also found references to the importance given to sports in forming the youth of the nation (13 mentions):

[...] we need to have our youth applying for physical education centers at the same rates as for intellectual education centers, so that they become healthy, strong, robust men that dignify and defend their country [...].^{13:14}

This highlight moved beyond the physical formation of individuals to touch the formation of a desired character for the population of a country walking toward progress:

[...] The City Stadium project represents an efficient progress because, when we have it, we will be able to say that we have incorporated into our environment what constitutes a need for all peoples concerned about their youth [...].^{23:8-9}

This same interest in the younger generations seen in Uruguay within the analysis context was detected by some studies^{24,25} that refer to the first years of the 20th century in Argentina. The concern about the bodily formation of children and youths aimed to impact their moral and intellect, because physical education, besides changing bodies, changed people's lives²⁴. A study on shooting and scouting in the north of the Argentinian Patagonia in the early decades of the 20th centuries helps us think about the Uruguayan context, as it describes that the political heads of that time bet on the comprehensive formation of children and youths, with the certainty of building and perpetrating their nationalism²⁵.

Another subject worth underscoring is that of sports being linked to citizenship actions (11 mentions), stressing the participation of people in different sport associations and making room for questions about the possibility of having sports reach the entire population so that they were no longer exclusive of the national elite. An example of that is the criticism of fencing, meant for privileged social classes. This would have caused its decline in relation to other practices, especially gymnastics:

The art of fencing has always been the sport of the aristocracy, and between us, of those who can afford to spend some money on hiring a teacher or have access to the armories of social centers.

Though possible, no one wanted to make it democratic, somehow creating obstacles to its popularization, consolidating its benefits for the enjoyment of the upper classes of society. It was all a matter of selfishness or also matters of physical presumptuousness.^{26:10}

It is worth emphasizing that the presence of immigrants in Uruguay led to a raise in the number of adepts of different sport modalities. The immigrants brought with them then-recent cultural transformations of Europe, incorporating them into the day-to-day of the country. Unions were created, as well as societies for health coverage and to meet their leisure and socialization needs (by founding clubs and sports centers)³. In this sense, we highlight the expansion of public schools and, consequently, of literacy. Reading became an ever-common reality, which enabled a public life marked by the circulation of cultural goods, especially of printed press (which grew considerably), favoring a flow of ideas that addressed the country's problems²⁰.

To a lesser extent, but also eloquently, female participation in sports (07 mentions) was relevant in the civilizing drive of Uruguay in the first decades of the 20th century. However, it is worth pointing out that most mentions of female presence in sports begin with tennis. According to Anderson²⁷, at that time, there was a concern about practices considered as beneficial for women. Tennis was not a recommended sport because, for being played with only one arm, it caused an asymmetrical muscle development and, consequently, an aesthetical loss in women. It is important to note that, on the magazine pages, this practice was referred to as a female activity.



Figure 1. Tennis techniques portrayed by images of women

Source: Sportsman^{28:8}

Comparing this reality with the international context, we find that Wright²⁹, when describing bodily education in Australia between 1870 and 1910, states that doing sports was a practice supported by the feminists of that time, since it contributed to advancing the conquests of women in society. The discussion around traditional roles assigned to men and women, which was broadened by sports, increased the importance of problems already approached in the Uruguayan history. According to Larrobla³⁰, soon in 1869, in Uruguay, José Pedro Varela was holding a conference at *Universitário* club named “*De los derechos de la mujer*” [On women’s rights]. That is, since that period, it was vehemently defended that there was a need to educate women, evoking their importance for the construction of a “civilized” Uruguay.

Thematic Unit 2: Sports and the Population’s Health

In Uruguay, late 19th century, medicine begins to have a relevant role as a legitimate and legitimizing instance in bodily knowledge, to the detriment, for instance, of educational discussions. Analyzing “*La Legislación escolar*” by José Pedro Varela, we see a concern about hygiene with examples of the Germans and Anglo-Saxons, in which body aesthetics would represent the triumph of the nation: a strong body as the image of progress, and a weak body as the opposite of the development of nature. Physical exercise becomes an investment on the future of the country. Health is linked to what is good, to the development of an idealized nature, free of diseases, associated with racial enhancement, as well as economic and social progress⁵. For this reason, we find excerpts approaching the subject of female participation in sports (05 mentions) with this sense, as it is the case of the article about *Sociedad de Gymnasia L’Avenir* (founded in Montevideo in 1892 and still operating to the present day):

At L’Avenir, in addition to special courses, you have: one dedicated to girls and young ladies, and another one to boys younger than 15 years of age, many of whom are true examples of excellent physical transformation achieved by means of well applied gymnastics.^{31:10}

Analyzing female participation in sports in the early 20th century was the concern of other South-American countries. According to Anderson²⁷, the engagement of women in sport activities in the first half of the 20th century in Argentina, besides the observation of sport performance of women, aimed to justify the importance of their involvement with sports through the optimization of their reproductive capacity. Moderate physical activity, controlled, guided and supervised by experts, would help improve the psychological and physical health of women and the development of the “Argentinian” race. Sports and maternity were closely related. For many specialists, the promotion of physical exercise among women was more important than it would be to man. Scharagrodsky³² reinforces the idea that female incorporation in bodily practices was justified by maternity, the image of women as “guardians of the race” (p. 87). Several excerpts from the magazine point out the relationship between sports and health improvement (Hygienism and Eugenism) (14 mentions):

[...] Favoring intellectual activities solely, to the detriment of physical activities, when it comes to our youth, means disregarding the principles of the physiological science, which stand as the savior measure for the future of the species [...].^{23:9}

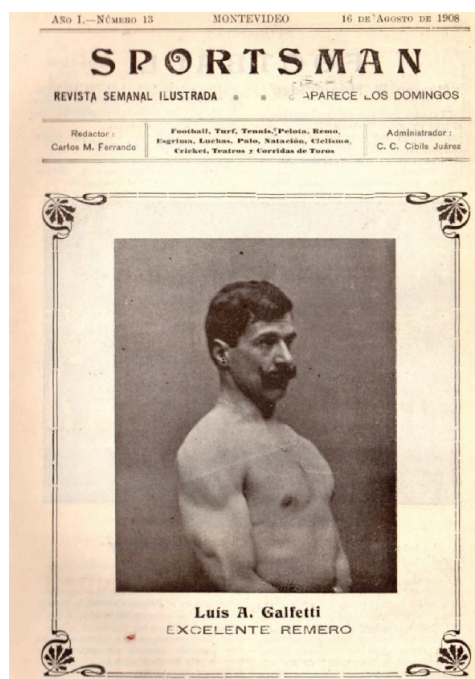


Figure 2. Back cover of Sportsman magazine

Source: Sportsman^{33:sp.}

At the same time, we point out the imbrication between these hygienistic ideas and eugenism, which was identified by Francis Galton as the science of influences that improve the innate qualities of a race. These influences, to Galton, would raise the average quality of the nation to the level of its best fraction. Thus, the ideals of this new “scientific religion” confounded with the general notions of physical wellbeing and health³⁴.

Anderson²⁷ also stresses this close relationship between sports and the eugenic and racial discourse, present in the end of the 20th century until the mid-1920s in Argentina. This relationship is present in the analyzed magazine in several articles, columns and news stories, as illustrated below:

Our first construction authority should build a Stadium, with equipment intended for all types of physical sports that contribute to developing one's body, aiming to strengthen the race.^{13:14}

To Reisch³, in the 20th century, Uruguay possessed some social, cultural, political and economic conditions that allowed it to support and develop an advanced and singular sport movement and the installation of a physical education system. Thus, the pages of the magazine revealed the importance that was given to sports for physical education/bodily education (14 mentions), as argued by gymnastics teacher Pablo Lebed in his column: “[...] *It is known that, without hygiene, without a method based on a healthy experience involving these exercises, opposite results are achieved*”^{35:05}.

For this reason, we see a pronounced concern about the need to evaluate sport practices on the basis of rationalization and control. In this sense, Dogliotti Moro³⁶, when referring to Alejandro Lamas's discourse (1871-1936, dentist and gymnastics teacher, author of pieces of work such as “*Educación Física y Primer Manual de Gimnasia Escolar*”, “*Maternología*”, “*Elementos de anatomía, fisiología e higiene*”, and others), in 1912, evidences that physical culture provided other modes of relationship with the body. According to the author, gymnastics and pedagogy were considered as sciences, and were based on the biological sciences. In this context, she quotes Lamas's speech, from 1921, in which he praises the use of the scientific method based on the biological laws, and psychology, on gymnastics and pedagogy, which would allow these practices to act rationally on the “human nature”.

Another subject evidenced in several moments on the magazine was that of sports/physical exercise and their influence on intellectual formation (13 mentions). In this sense, Anderson²⁷ describes that, in Argentina, in the early 20th century, there was also the idea that sports favored the development of psychological, moral and spiritual characteristics. This view is portrayed in the following excerpt from the analyzed magazine, which describes the benefits of gymnastics at *Sociedad de Gymnasia L'Avenir*:

*Well known is the beneficial action or influence of gymnastics on our entire organism, with remarkable moral and intellectual repercussions. For it to be deemed useful, we need a center with the same characteristics as “L'Avenir”.*³¹⁻⁹

At the same time, Rodríguez Giménez³⁷ argues about the presence of a causality between anatomical characteristics and human intelligence that contributed to increasing the presence of sports in several spaces in the Uruguayan society. Therefore, as it has been evidenced in the analysis of Sportsman, the ideals of modernity related to health improvement and national progress by means of sports permeated the content about sports in all different articles, news stories, columns and letters to the editor/columnists of the magazine.

Conclusions

When historically approaching Sportsman, a weekly illustrated magazine, we contemplate the importance of sports to its copywriters and readers. They were analyzed as participants of social, cultural and political ambitions, which, aimed at the construction of a “civilized nation”, attributed to sports a great value for the Uruguayan society. Sports and leisure manifestations on the magazine evidence this transition between games and customs inherited from the Spanish (colonizers) in favor of practices brought by English immigrants.

Sports in Uruguay was treated as a cultural element widely disseminated and promoted in the early 20th century, be it for their hygienistic benefits, or the intellectual and moral improvement of future generations that they would promote. In this process, we saw the first

mentions of football as a manifestation capable of aggregating the “Uruguayan nation”, which, decades later, grew immensely popular in different social strata.

Another impact of this relationship between sports and modernity in Uruguay is the cultural consequence of an increasing female participation in sport activities, something often observed on the magazine. Indeed, the expansion of sports created a space of tensions when it comes to the existence and overcoming of traditional socio-cultural roles assigned to women and men and that marked the routine of a changing socio-political reality.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that further researches supported by the same empirical basis will benefit from more information about the editors of the magazine and their editorial procedures. This will allow for other inferences about the cultural history of sports, focusing on the editorial line of the publication in relation to other journalistic means linked to the expansion of sports and of other bodily practices in Uruguay in the first decades of the 20th century.

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