

Sample Translation

By Jefferson Chase

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The struggle to be allowed to participate shapes sports to this very day. It can only be an improvement if sports become more democratic and diverse.

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

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Preface

Sports are part of life. Of my life definitely, although most likely I'm not alone in that. I'm a sports journalist, and I used to be a competitive swimmer and a coach, although I don't have any great triumphs to brag about. I still enjoy jogging, hiking and climbing, I get around town by bike, and whenever I see a swimming area, I still jump in the water more often than not. Sports have the capacity to enrich and even improve human beings. This is true not only for people who do sports themselves, but also those who watch others competing – that, too, is a thrilling and beautiful pursuit. I enjoy spending an afternoon in a soccer stadium or cheering on marathon runners from the side of the road. At the same time, sports deserve careful consideration. They are something unavoidable, like wasps on a piece of sugary cake or Bayern Munich hosting the German Bundesliga trophy every summer.

Why is that? When we talk about sports, we mean the gigantic social phenomenon that evolved, first and foremost in Britain, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Gentlemen founded sports clubs and established competitions and leagues. Sporting achievements were measured in centimeters, grams and seconds and could be compared across national borders. World records were officially registered. The staging of the first modern Olympic Games in 1896 in Athens confirmed that sports was now a global phenomenon. The idea was for the youth of the world to convene for an athletic competition. But when we take a closer look at the “youth of the world” that made the pilgrimage to Greece at the end of the nineteenth century, it was a very small group. Female athletes weren't allowed to compete because sports were considered unseemly for women. Working-class sportsmen were often excluded using the argument that their work was a form of training for which they received payment, thus violating the principal of amateurism. Blacks and other people of color weren't allowed to compete because the powers that were in sports at the time didn't want to meet them on equal footing. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and members of other religious communities were at best a tiny minority and were subjected to vitriolic hostility, as the Jewish-German Olympic gold medalists Alfred and Gustav-Felix Flatow found out to their dismay. Representatives of African and Asian countries were equally unwelcome since they were considered inherently incapable of understanding the true spirit of sports. Olympic organizers completely ignored the handicapped since no one believed they would be physically capable of competing. And queers were banned per se since homosexuality was illegal.

All these groups had to triumph over massive resistance to earn the right to compete. How did it happen that a system that claimed to be open to all excluded so many people – and continues to do so? How can it be that the organizers were and are celebrated

for staging sporting festivals in which everyone is purportedly treated equally, but which are actually relatively closed events? Which groups have had to wage which battles to open up sports – and what struggles are still ongoing?

My research took me everywhere from marginal, niche pursuits to the absolute summit of professional sports. There, I encountered not only legends like Muhammad Ali, Billie Jean King, Diego Maradona and Serena Williams but also relatively forgotten figures like the world's first Black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, and completely obscure athletes like Alfonsina Strada, the only woman ever to take part in the Giro d'Italia, one hundred years ago in 1924. We will also look at contemporary athletes like Colin Kaepernick, who was blackballed in the NFL for kneeling during the Star Spangled Banner to protest against racism, World Cup winner Megan Rapinoe, who courageously took a stand on just about any issue you care to name, the female soccer players of Afghanistan, who dared defy the Taliban, and many others.

If I were to tell the history of sports chronologically, it would seem like a success story in which discrimination continually diminished. But that would obscure the fact that sports continues to function much as it did at the end of the nineteenth century – as an elitist social phenomenon to which many social groups still have to fight for access today. Thus, instead of arranging this book chronologically, I have organized it according to major issues of exclusion and participation, discrimination and acceptance: social class, racism, gender, the handicapped, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and post-colonialism.

This structure means that my readers don't have to follow this book linearly from the front to the back. If they want, they can simply pick out one of the many aspects and dive in. Every part, indeed, every individual chapter can stand on its own.

I consulted, evaluated and analyzed a variety of sources for this book, as I hope is evident, even though I have forgone a cumbersome list of potentially intimidating references and footnotes. All sources, notes, explanations and supplemental remarks can be found on the websites www.martinkrauss.de/dabeisein-literatur and www.martinkrauss.de/dabeisein-anmerkungen.

A couple of remarks concerning the terminology: The word "Black," capitalized, is used to signify a social group, as in the phrases Black people, Black clubs and Black leagues. The term doesn't designate any particular skin color, but rather refers to the social situation in which some people discriminate against others.

I haven't used hateful pejoratives, including what is now frequently known as the "n-word," in anything I've penned but I have retained them, for reasons of historical accuracy, in quotations and proper names despite the offence they cause. I hope I have put them in

sufficient historical context. Spellings have as a rule been updated, and I have translated foreign language quotations, sometimes with the help of artificial intelligence.

I have used the generic masculine both for reasons of readability, but also make the point that sports are still something of a “man’s world,” in which men and boys are drastically overrepresented. In the case of those exceptions where women and girls predominate, for example rhythmic gymnastics or synchronized swimming, the tables are turned. And in Part C of this book, which is devoted to women’s sports, I of course use the generic feminine.

Enough of the prefacing remarks. I very much hope that this book helps to make sports, which I love, more democratic, open, diverse and ultimately better. We can only win if it does.

Martin Krauss, Berlin, November 2023

Part A: Class and Politics

Chapter 1 “I’d like to go to Athens” – Why Carlo Airoldi wasn’t allowed to compete in the 1896 Olympics and what the Greek crown prince had to do with it

Carlo Airoldi was unable to win the first Olympic marathon in Athens in 1896 because he wasn’t allowed to. The Italian was one of the greatest long-distance runners and walkers of his day, but the organizers of the event in the Greek capital banned him for being a professional athlete.

Airoldi’s sport was called pedestrianism, a mixture of running and walking quite popular at the time. The first-ever competitive marathon in modern history was a very attractive prospect to a professional pedestrianist, as Airoldi immediately realized. Born in 1869 to a family of small farmers in the Lombardian village of Origlio, he ran his first race at the age of 22. He also appeared as a wrestler and weightlifter at village festivals. The more success he had in his athletic pursuits, the more he could afford to neglect his job in a chocolate factory. In 1895, after winning the twelve-stage Turin-Milan-Barcelona race, he received a prize said to be worth around 100,000 euros in today’s terms.

Sponsored by the Italian newspaper *La Bicicletta*, Airoldi travelled on foot from Milan to Athens for the 1896 Olympic Games, covering 1338 kilometers in 28 days. When he arrived in the Greek capital in early April of that year, he was received with the enthusiasm and respect befitting a top athlete. Two members of the Olympic organizing committee even took him to meet the body’s president, Crown Prince Konstantin. The prince asked him about his achievements and whether he had been paid for them. Airoldi answered truthfully – whereupon Konstantin told him that this made him a professional and that he would thus be prohibited from taking part in the Games.

Perhaps Konstantin was put off by Airoldi’s great popularity and self-confidence. The previous year, in 1895, he had challenged the American show cowboy William Frederick “Buffalo Bill” Cody to a race. Cody was touring Italy at the time with his Western circus, and Airoldi proposed a 500-kilometer race, with him on foot and Cody on horseback. The American refused the challenge, insisting that he be allowed to use two horses.

The popularity of pedestrianism was one of the main reasons that the first modern Olympic Games featured a race from the village of Marathon to Athens. Precisely because it combined modern sports with the Antique myths of a Ancient Greek soldier who ran as fast as he could over that distance to bring news of victory on the battlefield, only to collapse and die, the marathon would play a central in establishing the Olympic Games against a host of competing events. Ironically, the father of the modern Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was hesitant about accepting the race, with its historical connections

as a discipline, even though it was the brainchild of his friend, the Parisian philologist Michel Bréal. A race from Marathon to the Athenian hill of Pnyx, Bréal argued by letter, would “underscore the Antique character” of the modern Olympics. But Coubertin remained unconvinced so that the first marathon winner was given a trophy donated by Bréal and not a gold medal.

Only seventeen runners assembled on that sunny afternoon of April 10, 1896 at two PM in the village of Marathon – a mere four of them from outside Greece. After setting off in front of hundreds of spectators, the competitors ran on unpaved streets and paths along the coast. Spyridon Louis was the first participant to reach the Olympic stadium. He did so in the middle of the pole vault competition, which was then temporarily suspended. Crown Prince Konstantin and King George personally ran over to Louis and accompanied over the race’s final meters. It is said that when Queen Olga learned that Louis was but a humble laborer, she gave him the rings on her fingers.

Born in 1873 in the small town of Marousi near Athens, Louis was in fact a day laborer, who worked with his father transporting kegs of water from local springs to the Greek capital. He was handsomely rewarded for his victory. In addition to the victor’s trophy, the king is said to have given him a horse and carriage so that he could more easily transport water. He also received the equivalent of 75,000 euros in today’s terms. But life wouldn’t ultimately prove all that easy for the Olympic hero. In 1926, Louis was imprisoned for forgery, although he was later found innocent of that crime. In 1936, he also made a dubious appearance at the Olympic Games in Berlin as a guest of honor of the Nazi regime. Wearing national garb, he presented Hitler with an Olympic laurel wreath. He died at the age of 67 in 1940.

Airoldi quickly realized that nationalist scheming had played a role in his being banned from competing in Athens. “They want the victor of the Marathon-Athen race to be a Greek, whatever the cost,” he fumed, claiming that he had only been excluded “because they feared I would be too strong a competitor.” The fact that he had not been allowed to run the first Olympic marathon was the biggest disappointment of his life. In the aftermath, Airoldi repeatedly challenged Spyridon Louis to a race – in vain. Wherever anyone would listen, he claimed that he would comfortably beaten the Greek, who had needed 2hours, 58 minutes and 20 seconds for the 40-kilometer marathon route. Airoldi successfully continued his athletic career, but he never landed another big sensation, either in Europe or in Brazil, where he sought to make his fortune for a time. He died in 1929 in Milan.