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## Amateurism

The word 'amateur' is French in origin and derives from the Latin word for 'love' – the same root that gave us the English word 'amorous'. It was therefore used originally to describe someone who pursued an activity solely for the love of it. Amateurism is generally seen as an English phenomenon (Allison, 2001: 10).

Few people today would understand the word 'amateurism' as primarily denoting love. In the modern world it usually signifies incompetence. Which of us would wish to be identified as one of 'a bunch of amateurs'? Chances are we would far rather be recognised as 'professional' in our approach, professional being for much of the history of modern sport the widely despised antonym of 'amateur'. These days, in sport as in the wider society, there can seldom be enough 'professionalism'.

The history of amateurism in sport is the history of claims about the respective behaviour of different groups of sportspeople and few of these claims stand up to much scrutiny now, if, indeed, they ever did. Amateurism was increasingly recognised as some kind of organised hypocrisy within the administration of sport, as indicated by the increased currency given to the term 'shamateur'. This may make the subject of amateurism difficult to discuss dispassionately. However, a means to sensible discussion is provided by the writer Lincoln Allison (2001: 20–4), who suggests that there are three, often intertwining, ways of defining amateurism:

- (a) Social Definitions. In practice, when amateur hegemony in the stewardship of sport was at its height, amateurs were often defined simply in social terms. This was typified by the so-called 'mechanics clauses' adopted in British sports such as rowing and athletics in the late nineteenth century. Here an amateur was said, in effect, to be someone who was not a manual worker – labourers, mechanics, artisans and, in the case of the Amateur Rowing Association, people 'engaged in any menial task' being specifically excluded. Prohibitions such as this led the rowing historian Christopher Dodd to observe: 'Rowing people, in common with other sportsmen, were very good at determining what an amateur was not. But deciding what an amateur is has eluded them' (Dodd, 1989: 281).
- (b) Ethical Definitions. Here the amateur was defined by the values that s/he held and, it was assumed, expressed in the sporting arena. In this context, the word approached its true meaning, since: it defined a person who played sport for pleasure; was comparatively careless of the outcome of sport encounters; played fairly; accepted both the decisions of officials and the results of contests with a good grace; and gained no extrinsic reward (usually wages or compensation for loss of earnings) for playing. It goes without saying that people who played sport with this philosophy could not, or should not, logically have been confined to one particular social group.
- (c) Bureaucratic or Financial Definitions. These arose when governing bodies wished to use either of the first two kinds of definition as a

basis for excluding and/or controlling groups within a particular sport. Both exclusion and control were widespread. In 1895, for example, the Northern Union (the forerunner of Rugby League in the north of England) disengaged from the Rugby Football Union over the issue of 'broken time payments', which the latter body refused to condone. These payments were also a matter of contention in the Olympic movement during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1882 the Amateur Athletic Association actually set up a fund to finance prosecutions of athletes falsely claiming to be amateurs according to the AAA definition; some were subsequently found guilty of fraud and sentenced to six months' hard labour (Crump, 1989: 51).

The most cursory examination of the history of amateurism as a concept suggests that it has often worked as a metaphor for the British upper classes and as an ideological rendering of their actions, objectives and self image. It was rooted in the cult of games which developed in the British public schools in the mid- to late nineteenth century. During this time athletic pursuits, and the body itself, acquired a newly exalted status. Part of the ethos that surrounded these games was that the people who played them played fairly. The amateur ideology was subsequently often deployed in a way that suggested that players from outside this social world – the working class and foreigners, for instance – could not be relied upon to play as fairly as the public school 'gentleman'. The invocation of amateurism thus became a means of defining the Other in sport.

The sporting metaphor and the notion that the British had a special facility for playing, fairly strongly characterised the British Empire. The rivalry between the British and Russian empires, for example, was frequently referred to as 'The Great Game' and colonial (and postcolonial) sportspeople (Pakistani cricketers, for instance) were often styled as cheats. At the same time in British colonial territories – in Australia, the East Coast of America and elsewhere – anglophile elites emerged that dedicated themselves to upholding the mythical values of fair play. Bill Woodfull who captained Australia in the 'Bodyline' cricket series of 1932–3 is reputed during one Test Match to have said 'There's only one side out there playing cricket – and it's not England'. These historic (and highly questionable) notions still have a strong resonance in state politics. For example, on a visit to Africa in January of 2005, the then British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown said:

The days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over. We should talk, and rightly so, about British values that are enduring, because they stand for some of the greatest ideas in history – tolerance, liberty, civic duty – that grew in Britain and influenced the rest of the world. Our strong traditions of fair play, of openness, of internationalism, these are great British values. (*The Guardian*, 1 March 2005: 24)

‘Fair play’, as the historian Richard Holt (1989) has suggested, was the watchword of the upper-middle-class gentleman amateurs and there’s little doubt that many of these men lived and played according to the amateur ideal. The football club Corinthian Casuals, for example, founded in 1882 by ex-public schoolboys and taking their name from a city state in Ancient Greece, were pledged never to train or to compete for trophies. After the penalty kick was introduced into association football in 1891, they withdrew their goalkeeper on conceding one: the very idea of trying to save the kick, and thus profit from a foul, was anathema to the gentleman footballer.

The point, though, is not that ‘true’ amateurism never existed – that it was wholly ‘ideological’ – but that it could not be confined to a specific social group: ‘gentlemen’. History suggests that ‘amateurism’ was a response to the rise of ‘professionalism’. Certainly the latter term came into popular usage later, ‘professionalism’ being in currency in the 1850s and ‘amateurism’ not until the 1880s. The popular suppositions that seemed to define the amateur – that he was careless of the result of the game, that he played fairly, that he disdained material reward and so on – were all incompatible with the evidence. England’s most famous cricketer Dr W.G. Grace, for instance, played as an amateur but is generally held to have played hard, with scant regard for fairness, and to have pocketed £9,000 (a very large sum at the time) from a benefit awarded to him by his county Gloucestershire in 1895 (Grace, 1999). Similarly, members of the Amateur Rowing Association, arguably the most exclusive of all Britain’s sporting bodies, had no qualm either about rowing for trophies or about training for races (Wagg, 2006). Conversely, a number of professionals – the cricketer Sir Jack Hobbs, the tennis player Rod Laver, the footballers Bobby Charlton and Gary Lineker, and legions more – have been acknowledged as chivalrous, self-deprecating players – fair in the amateur mode. Amateurism has to be seen therefore as a means through which to exclude and/or to control working-class sportspeople. Indeed some sports governing bodies voted to ban ‘artisans, mechanics and

labourers' from membership. In British rowing the phrase 'or is engaged in any form of menial duty' was added. Amateur hegemony grew often in relation to the success of working-class and professional players (not always the same thing) in various sports: rugby players in the North of England, for example, and watermen, many of whose families had worked a river for generations and who dominated the early boat races.

Behind the growing militancy of the gentleman amateur lay the ongoing political and social wrangle between the entrenched landed classes, finance capitalists and Southern-based professionals and the rising Northern and Midlands-based industrial middle class, with their ethos of openness, competition and free trade. As Allison puts it, 'there were two conflicting tendencies in the society of the time, one which saw the commercial possibilities of urban markets and the other which abhorred those possibilities' (Allison, 2001: 18). A number of reforms, notably those giving the vote to male men of property in 1832 and to the skilled male working class in 1867 are indicative of this social change. In the realm of sport the Southern, gentlemanly elite and its class allies around the country wished to conduct matters on their own terms and to keep notions of competition and markets at bay. Traditional hierarchy sought to rebut (qualified) equality of opportunity.

Neither of these major social class groupings, however, was especially sympathetic to professionalism or to the growing working-class power of which it was a symbol. What emerged are two ways of dealing with professionalism and/or working-class sportspeople.

One amounted essentially to exclusion and the maintaining of separate spheres. The Amateur Rowing Association, based on elite clubs and stretches of river, excluded lower middle-class and working-class rowers from prestigious regattas, such as the one held annually at Henley. A separate rowing organisation – the National Amateur Rowing Association – was founded in 1890 and catered to the merely amateur, as opposed to gentleman amateur, oarsman. Similarly Northern rugby players were effectively expelled from the Rugby Football Union in 1895 for receiving 'broken time payments'. Likewise amateur footballers seceded from the FA in 1907, returning only in 1914.

The second strategy was founded on the notion of getting professionalism into the open, making it easier to control. In cricket, for example, amateurs and professionals played together, but, until the 1960s and 1970s, this was in circumstances of secure amateur hegemony, both on and off the field. A similar political strategy informed moves to form the Football League in 1888: Northern administrators thought a better way of containing professionalism was to make it legitimate.

The late nineteenth century is widely seen as the 'golden age' of the amateur sportsman. In the twentieth century the term became progressively discredited and the word 'shamateurism' was widely preferred. One by one, bodies of sport governance abandoned the distinction between amateurs and professionals, beginning with English cricket in 1962 (Smith and Porter, 2000). In 1980 the International Olympic Committee, for so long a bastion of amateurism, and latterly 'shamateurism', effectively endorsed professionalism when its president, Juan Antonio Samaranch, declined to offer a definition of amateurism, delegating this responsibility to national Olympic committees.

The term survives now in common parlance only as a denotation of incompetence.

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