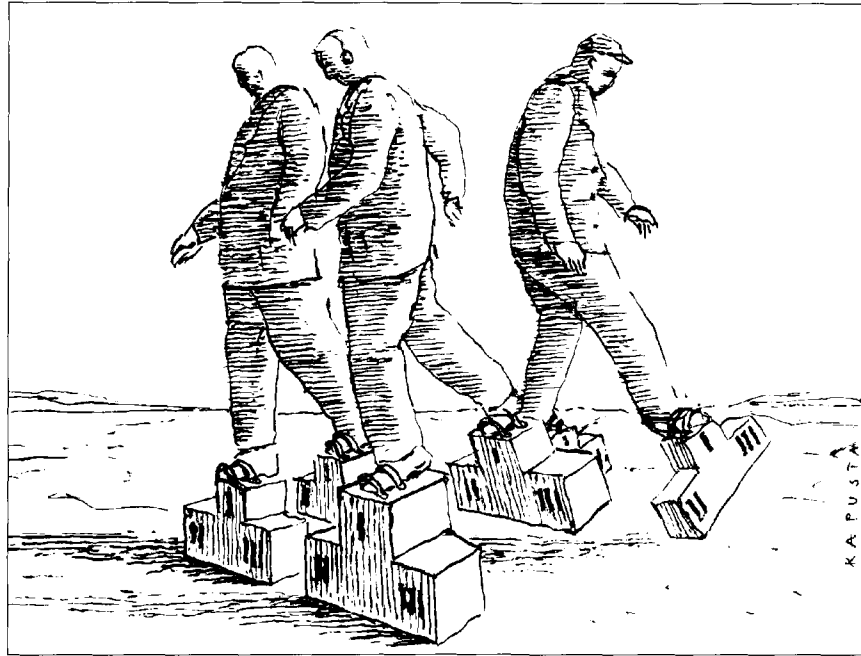


Games and the Man

by Harold O.J. Brown

*"Remember thou, that it is better far
To pull a poor oar in the third boat
Than to be captain of the basketball team."*



Spoken by the editor of the *Harvard Lampoon* at freshman orientation, those words had life-changing impact on a certifiable high-school nerd from the far South. In the Dark Ages, Harvard College required that every freshman be able to swim 100 yards—not so hard for a Florida boy—and participate in athletics a minimum of three days a week. Basketball—indeed, anything that required a ball and a fair amount of coordination—being very unpromising, the poem so dramatically delivered by John P.C. “Choo Choo” Train seemed to suggest a better alternative. Unfortunately there was the dread “Step Test,” officially known as the Physical Efficiency Test, which required freshmen to jump up and down on a bench for five minutes. Those who failed the test were sent, ingloriously, to the Indoor Athletic Building to do Special Exercises until they could pass it or graduated, whichever came first. This took place under the watchful eye of Norman Fradd, inventor of Fradd Ball, a kind of dodgeball played with a medicine ball for comic relief at the end of Special Exercises.

Having determined to try out for a seat in at least some freshman boat, I was subjected to the ignominy of being ordered to Special Exercises. Freshman crew was not considered an acceptable substitute for one who had failed the Step Test, so my name was pulled from the check-in board at the Newell

Boat House and placed on the board in the Special Exercises Room. No, the Athletic Association had no objection to one rowing in addition to Special Exercising. Of course, it would have been highly embarrassing *not* to give one's name to the checker at the boat house as all the other freshmen out for crew were doing. Fortunately, a kindly Mr. Getchell at the H.A.A. was willing to place a duplicate name on the board at the boat house, thereby tactfully concealing the fact that this candidate was officially involved in Special Exercises.

The balance of freshman year was a passed Step Test and a seat in the not so glorious third boat. Sophomore year brought a seat in the first boat, a position that was jealously guarded through three varsity years, one victory over both Yale and Princeton (as well as one loss to each), and at least a second place in the Eastern Sprint Championships. Our coach in those years was the legendary H.H. “Bert” Haines, who had been a British sergeant-major in the Gallipoli campaign and who never subjected his crews to any verbal affront more abusive than, “Oh dear, oh dear, what idiots I have to contend with!” Bert once insisted on giving *our* racing shell to the visiting Elis, saying “You wouldn't want to win by taking unfair advantage.” Whether we would have or not (we would have), the time that we gave them our shell was the one time we beat Yale for the Goldthwait Cup.

For me, this was the end of nerddom (to use a modern expression not in vogue at the time) and the beginning of a long involvement in coaching: several entries in the Henley Royal Regatta—two of them victorious—and even a couple of futile

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efforts at the Olympic trials. In those days, participants had to swear the Olympic Oath, promising never to go professional, i.e., to take money for sport. Something of the atmosphere of rowing is reflected, *mutatis mutandis*, in the movie *Chariots of Fire*: one wanted desperately to win, but of course not to give the impression of being overly concerned. Competition in track meant entry to the British upper class for the Jew Harold Abrahams; a way to glorify God for Eric Liddell. For both—and for the others—it was also something in itself.

Those amateur days, days of what former President Bush might have characterized as “kinder, gentler sport,” are now gone. The Olympics no longer bring merely the coveted gold, silver, or bronze medals, but immense winner’s purses and life-long advertising contracts. Avery Brundage is dead, and with him the spirit of the modern Olympics, which Pierre Coubertin thought that he had faithfully reclaimed from ancient Hellas. There, too, the “laurel wreath games” (*agones stephanitai*) were not enough: there had also to be games with valuable prizes or purses of money as rewards (*agones thematikoi* or *chrematitai*). Sport did not long remain entirely amateur, even among the Olympians, and there are complaints about professionalization as early as the fifth century B.C.

Games for fun—*ludi*; contests to test the absolute limits of one’s strength—*agones*; sport for laurel wreaths, for gold, for medals, for money, for fame, for girls, for advertising contracts, for any or all of these reasons: all have been a serious preoccupation of boys, men, and even senior citizens from the earliest of days. Though women were involved in sports, too—as they were in Greece, although their participation is far less fully documented than men’s—athletics historically play a far more central role in the life of boys and men than of girls and women, and they do so even now, although the infamous Title IX of a benevolent and all-wise government is seeking to change things. Relatives and students involved in high school and college coaching tell me that four times as many men volunteer for sports as women. But Title IX regulations are forcing schools to equalize men’s and women’s sports, which means that a fair number of men have to be banished from participation and a large number of women lured into it, with potential, long-range consequences for the self-image and self-esteem of various members of one or the other sex. The evidence is fairly clear, however: left to their own inclinations—whether these inclinations are by nature or by conditioning—the boys and men of the late 20th century, like the boys and men of the 30 recorded centuries past, find something fascinating and compelling in sport, both as *ludus* (game) and as *agon* (struggle).

Why are males fascinated with game and struggle? It has often been postulated, or perhaps even claimed as proven, that a woman’s essential character is hers by nature, while a man’s must be acquired. Whether or not this slogan is true of women, it definitely is true of boys and men that almost all of us must *do* something before we can *be* anyone or anything. Something hard, something at least a bit dangerous at times, something that enables one to define oneself in the company of one’s peers.

Boys and men fight—dangerously—more readily than girls and women. Is this innate or conditioned? Whichever it is, it is a fact. Fighting, whether successfully or unsuccessfully, certainly defines a boy or a man; but serious fighting, not to mention war, is a costly way to gain definition, as it produces as

many losers as winners, and given the nature of male strength, a high number of casualties. There is no slogan in modern warfare, “It matters not whether you win or lose, but how you fight the fight,” to parallel the familiar “It matters not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.”

Good male friendships may develop in a variety of ways, but one of the most tried and true is when men are united in a struggle against a common enemy. It is seldom that good male friendships develop without a shared task, or, even better, a shared foe.

Sport has frequently been a way of training and preparation for military service and thus primarily a male concern. Indeed, in the Greek city-states, proficiency in sport was one way that a young man from a lower class could gain entry into the military and ultimately into a higher social status. Some events clearly have military utility, such as the javelin. Nevertheless, sport from the beginning has gone far beyond direct military utility. Although the Olympic Games included events that could be dangerous—such as the *pankration*, an “anything goes” fight—most events left the losers as well as the winners intact—exhausted, perhaps, but intact.

At least from the well-documented early days in Greece, most male sports require far more effort—sweat, tears, and occasionally blood—than any tangible profit from them can justify. The coveted laurel wreath of the Olympic victor could hardly become a keepsake or family heirloom. Of course, some events did bring a profit: a record from the fourth century names 50 amphoras of oil as first prize in a stadium race (about 400 yards). But most events did not, and, as even that early Christian sports commentator St. Paul wrote, “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize?” (I Corinthians 9:24). Yet all ran, and still run. How many foot-pounds of effort are expended by the tens of thousands of runners of all ages in marathons across the country, most of whom receive only a T-shirt for their efforts?

There seems to be some truth in the idea that a woman knows by nature what she is, while a man must measure himself. The goal of Greek education was to help a boy grow up *kalos kagathos* (beautiful and good), and the idea that one should cultivate a fine character to match a well-honed body was taken seriously, if not always followed. The Greeks of Homer’s day competed clothed, but by the fifth century athletes, at least the males, competed naked (the girls and women usually wore something). Whatever the function of nudity in competition may have been, it seems to symbolize the idea that in a race or match the man is revealed for who he is as well as for what he can do.

The stylized sabre-duels still fought in German student fraternities are lawful, because the law does not define them as "duels with deadly weapons," which are criminal. The German word is not "*Duell*" (which could be deadly), but "*Mensur*," from the Latin *mensura*, or measure. In some sense participation in a *Mensur* measures the man, and although blood is frequently shed, the outcome is far less deadly than the "sport" of boxing, or even football.

Some sports involve actual combat, hardly more ritualized or potentially less painful than the stylized *Mensur*. Other sports, such as basketball, permit an individual to become a star, a celebrity, a folk hero: *vide* Michael Jordan. In some sports, the contestants on the field frequently outnumber the spectators. In some, such as crew, there is no possibility for an individual to stand out at all. All must "swing together," in the words of the Eton Boating Song, or the boat will not go. It might seem that the differences between these varieties of sport are greater than the commonalities, but every sport does something to define the man. Athletes—lettermen on the college scene—have something in common, whether the letter is from football or lacrosse, track or crew (sailing, riflery, and chess fit in less well). Even our most eminent political leaders like to be seen taking part in sport, from touch football (the Kennedy brothers) and skiing (Ford) to jogging (Carter, Clinton). They win neither laurel wreaths nor gold medals in the process, but they do show that they have something elemental in com-

mon with the rest of the male half of the human race. And, of course, most sports are fun—at least much of the time.

Good male friendships may develop in a variety of ways, but one of the most tried and true is when men are united in a struggle against a common enemy. It is seldom that good male friendships develop without a shared task, or, even better, a shared foe. War is an extravagantly costly way to build friendship, although it demonstrably does that—sometimes even among military enemies. Sport can do it as effectively, less painfully, and without loss of life. Men often find it easier to fight with each other than to express love for one another, but they need to love one another, and not only the women and children in their lives. The appropriate word here is *philia* rather than *eros*, although the boundary between them is not always clear.

"Male bonding" is much talked about these days, but it existed long before the word became a catch phrase. It exists in noble and in perverted forms, and while sport is no guarantee against the kind of *eros* that Scripture condemns and tradition brands unnatural, it does offer a realm for the development of male affection that can be both deep and noble. That is a rather oblique way of saying that friendships made in sport can be among the richest and best that men can know.

Sport does not necessarily make the man, but for much of history men have hardly been made without it.

—C

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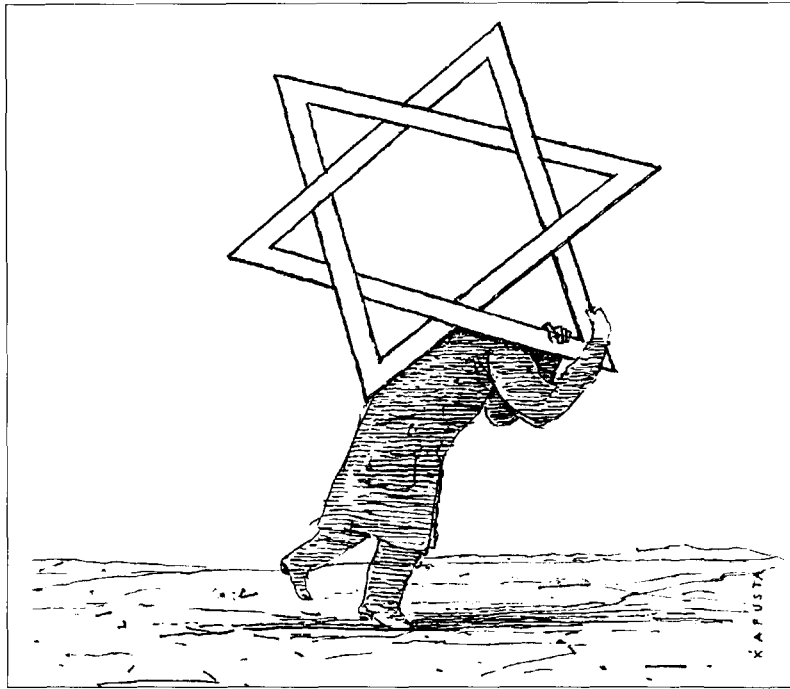
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Toughs, Softs, and Jewish Masculinity

by Paul Gottfried



Jewish stereotyping is an activity in which Jews and their enemies have both engaged. Among the self-images that Jews have popularized is that of the bookish Jewish male. The medieval biblical commentator Rashi depicts the patriarch Jacob as a scholar and homebody, “in the tradition of Shem and Eber,” Jacob’s two Semitic ancestors to whom his qualities are also ascribed. Jacob’s brother Esau was a “cunning hunter and man of the field,” and he came to represent for rabbinic commentators the hostile Gentile whose way of life was decidedly non-Jewish. The contrast between Jacob and Esau was already critical for the later prophets: Malachi, for example, states that God “loved Jacob but despised Esau,” who received desolation as his inheritance. The impetuous, blood-thirsty Esau became a symbol of what the descendants of Jacob were to fear, and the rabbis saw that enemy as variously incarnated in Israel’s Edomite neighbors to the South (supposedly descended from Esau), the Roman Empire, and the medieval Church. All of these groups were identified with the color red, going back to Esau’s association with the pot of lentils in return for which he sold his birthright to Jacob. (The Hebrew word for lentil, *adom*, can also mean red.) All of Israel’s political foes, moreover, were seen as sanguinary and unreflective, in contrast to Jacob’s scions, who were shown cultivating sedentary, domestic virtues.

The Jewish self-image is of course tied to the stifling of Jewish masculinity that was evident by the Middle Ages. The received view, which the Zionist movement has stressed, is that Jewish manhood was stunted by the restrictions that a hostile Christian world placed on Jewish society. This view is partly correct. The prohibitions imposed on Jews in medieval Eu-

rope—against owning land and bearing arms—prevented Jewish men from tilling the soil, practicing self-defense, and engaging in other manly pursuits. In the proverbial Jewish family of the Eastern European ghetto, the wife ran a business and the husband pored over Talmudic texts. This division of labor was both the product of prolonged social discrimination and a creative adaptation to an unfriendly environment.

But that family pattern, as Jacob Neusner demonstrates, was already there, at least embryonically, centuries before, in the Talmudic reconstruction of Jewish culture. In the face of successive defeats—the destruction of the Second Temple and of the Jewish Commonwealth and the rise of an ungrateful daughter religion—the authors and redactors of the rabbinic texts shifted the emphasis in Jewish life from national resurrection to the study and performance of detailed rituals. As this became the focus of Jewish life, it was also necessary to recreate biblical role models: thus the warrior King David is depicted as a proto-Talmudist, like the son of Noah, Shem, and Shem’s grandson Eber. Anything orienting Jewish life toward military affairs is kept out of the Talmudic prescriptions: King Messiah, for example, is exalted as a future respondent to legal conundrums but never as a warrior.

These interpretive traditions are critical for understanding modern stereotypes (and self-stereotypes) of Jewish masculinity. The polarity constructed between Jacob and Esau returns in a provocative fashion in Nietzsche, for whom Jews became the destined priests of slave morality. Unlike the joyous warrior who innocently and instinctively vents hostility, Jews, Nietzsche explains, have learned to fight by cunning. They manipulate the “bad conscience” of others, which they have shaped by introducing “guilt,” “sin,” and other servile concepts. Jews are accused of making the West ashamed of the Hellenic worship of physical beauty and of supplanting a virile civilization with the

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