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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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7.3.1 Sports and Leisure in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Sonja Kleij and Tomáš Masař

Introduction

In many respects, across different eras, the ways in which people spend their free time has not changed. Although sports and leisure activities were far less organised, commercial, and international in the early modern period compared to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people of all social strata did enjoy exercising together, playing games, meeting with friends and family, or watching entertainment. Whether rich or poor, they could participate in various activities after their daily work, during work, and sometimes even as their work. Although the forms of activity differed across time and space, the concept of people relaxing and enjoying their time while practicing some kind of sport or leisure was known in all cultures across all continents. Whether they were physical, intellectual, or spiritual, there were many activities that people undertook to entertain themselves.

This chapter presents a range of these activities, including the performing arts as well as games and sport, with an eye to several particular aspects. One such aspect is the role of social status in shaping access to and pursuit of leisure. While social status constrained the sorts of activities in which one might be able to engage, the choice was still varied. Some types of sports and games were restricted just to upper classes. Hunting—for instance—was a leisure activity for the nobility, while other activities like theatre and music were more popular and accessible forms of entertainment. Additionally, the early modern period saw the emergence of new sports and the transformation of older ones: several modern sports began to take their current form in the early modern period. Other overarching aspects this chapter will examine include the transfer of leisure activities across cultures and the many roles of leisure beyond amusement.

Performative Arts as Entertainment

Storytelling is probably the earliest form of entertainment. Expressing oneself through creative means is a fundamental human need. Performance through such mediums as music and theatre is an important way of telling stories and expressing oneself in front of an audience, or—from the other perspective—of being entertained and moved emotionally by performers. In Europe, the roots of many performing arts can be found in antiquity. In Ancient Greece, the arts were considered so important that each major art form was given its own goddess, representing one of the seven muses. Euterpe is the muse of music, while Melpomene is the muse for tragedy, the dramatic genre which—for Aristotle—held the highest esteem. The purpose-built *theatron*, where plays were performed during festivals (among other occasions) to honour the gods, would later inspire the spherical shape and layout of early modern theatre buildings.

Theatre continued to be a major form of entertainment during the Middle Ages and was a popular leisure activity in the early modern period. Depending on the place and occasion, performances could take place at court, in purpose-built theatres, makeshift stages on market squares, town halls, churches and more. Performances were fairly accessible. In England, for example, theatre became a commercial enterprise as early as the sixteenth century. The aim was to attract a large audience and therefore the cost of admission was staggered, with the cheapest being standing places in front of the stage. A general labourer could afford to see a play fairly regularly—about once a week. In countries such as England, France and Spain, scripted theatre became common practice as early as the sixteenth century. But in other regions *Commedia dell'arte*—which combines script with improvisation through the use of stock characters—prevailed. This was a major form of professional theatre in Italy that remained popular from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

Writing drama could also be a form of leisure. In the Low Countries, most cities had a *Rederijkerskamer*, a 'Chamber of Rhetoric'. These were literary societies where merchants and other fairly prosperous men gathered to discuss topics of interest, (local) news, and to write songs, poems, and plays together. These plays were often performed within the society's own premises or, on special occasions, on market squares, at the invitation of the municipal government. These works were often published under the motto and name of the chamber rather than individual members; but over time, as ideas of authorship started to change, more space opened up for individual names. During the golden age of the chambers in the sixteenth century, regular competitions took place for chambers from multiple cities. At these competitions, they would respond to questions or statements in a creative and

persuasive manner. These spectacles were entertaining for both the performers and the audience, which often consisted of members of other chambers, and citizens of the host city. If there was an entrance fee, the profits would usually go to charities, such as orphanages.

Large, purpose-built theatres were mostly reserved for capital cities. But if someone lived outside of the capital, they might still have the opportunity to see a drama when a theatre company went on tour to perform in local town halls and churches: Italian *Commedia dell'arte* troupes, for example, would often travel from city to city. In the Holy Roman Empire, German plays were performed by touring companies along with translations of Dutch, French, and English plays. Theatre was thus both a local and individual experience of entertainment, while it also served as a 'transnational' space, facilitating the exchange of stories across different nations, regions, and languages.

Performing and listening to music was another popular form of leisure that was enjoyed by all social strata. The lute, the harpsichord (an early form of the piano), drums and the flute were popular instruments, though some of these were more accessible than others, depending on price and space requirements. Singing, however, was free and this activity had a prominent place in daily life. In many Western European countries, people used broadsheets—single-page sheets printed with lyrics—which were sold cheaply by street vendors and thus reached a wide audience. Songbooks were also published. The Low Countries in particular saw a lively trade in such publications, which were affordable for most labourers. These songbooks would often have a theme: for example, love songs were used for courting, or religious songs were used to express faith. Singing was thus not only practised in church. People would sing together at social gatherings, in the street, in the tavern, during work, and at home.

Writing *contrafacta*—applying a new text to an existing, often well-known tune—was a lively practice in the early modern period. It eliminated the need for printing sheet music (which could be more expensive to produce due to the need for specialist printing tools) and it also eliminated the necessity of reading sheet music, a skill which a majority of the lower classes did not possess. Another benefit was that it was possible to write a new song fairly quickly. Producing *contrafacta* thus also became a way to report and respond to recent news or to create new material for festivities or other occasions. An example of such a tune was 'Fortune my Foe', probably the best-known secular melody in early modern England, where it first appeared. The tune was prominent in all layers of society in England, and was played in taverns as well as court (and even at executions). The tune also travelled abroad. For instance, in the Low Countries, it was known as 'Engelsche Fortuyn' (English Fortune), acknowledging its place of origin. Based on a search of the Dutch

Song Database, at least 223 songs were written to this melody. Both composers and playwrights used the song to write new pieces about love or morality, or to express some misfortune. Its prominence in song culture started in the 1560s and would continue into the eighteenth century, and it can thus be considered an important song in the soundtrack of the early modern period.

Sports and Games

The roots of sports and athletic competition are almost as old as mankind itself. The first evidence of these pastimes, in the form of cave paintings, hails from the Palaeolithic era. Among the first fields of athletic competition were several forms of martial arts with or without arms, shooting or throwing any kinds of missile, horse riding, and chariot racing. All of these skills were useful for warfare and combat. From incidental contests in daily life several kinds of organised competitions developed, like the ancient Olympic Games, or gladiator battles and chariot races all over the Roman Empire. The latter two of these practices were denounced and abandoned by the emergent Christianity of late antiquity. Christian warriors nevertheless created their own culture of knighthood and chivalry, which peaked in the High Middle Ages. These cultures came to an end with the appearance of professional armies, which led to a decline of armoured cavalry.

Fencing and sharpshooter competitions, as well as horse racing, survived as legacies of the earlier era, and all of these sports were favoured by the aristocracy. Various forms of equestrian racing and competitions were practised across Europe and also beyond in the early modern age. In Italy, for instance, several kinds of *palios* (horse races) were commonplace, with *Campo* in Siena being the most famous. The tradition of horse racing was very long and rich in England as well. During the Commonwealth (1649–1660), it was temporarily abolished by Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) in his position as Lord Protector, since horses were needed for his New Model Army. But after restoration of the monarchy, Charles II (1630–1685, r. 1660) took on the tradition of his Stuart predecessors and became one of the greatest equestrian enthusiasts, making Newmarket Racecourse one of the cradles of modern horse racing.

Boxing, too, has its roots in ancient forms of fighting and wrestling. In contrast to sports practised mostly by aristocrats, boxing was practised mainly by poor and underprivileged people. Developing from local fights and brawls, where strong men fought each other, it evolved in early eighteenth-century England into a sport with a standardised set of rules, organised tournaments, and widely recognised champions. Famous champions were not only able to earn money, but also ran boxing schools, teaching their boxing techniques to curious young aristocrats. These new participants, in turn, changed the sport

from a violent means of entertainment for the poor into a fashionable sport for 'gentlemen'.

Many modern sports and games originated in the late Middle Ages and early modern times. As suggested by the etymology of the word *sport*, coming from Latin *deportare* meaning 'to enjoy' or 'to relax', they were intended as an opportunity for people to enjoy their free time. Some of them were simple pastimes enjoyed—usually on Sundays—by peasants and the labouring classes, since that was often the only day when they were not forced to work. This custom was often regarded with great dismay by church officials, who thought that Sundays ought to be dedicated exclusively to God. This changed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when several monarchs started to officially license spaces where people were allowed to engage in early forms of organised sport and games.

As England (later Great Britain) became the leading economic and political power in Europe, the British Isles became the cradle of many modern sports. The British nobility and gentry used their wealth to amuse themselves with many diverse activities, including sport and games. Hunting and falconry were forms of entertainment reserved for the aristocracy, where noblemen exhibited their ability to ride and use weapons. In England, as well as in most other European countries, it was strictly prohibited by law for the lower classes to hunt game. This aristocratic affection for the sport also gave the word *game* new meaning. In most medieval Germanic languages it was usually connected with expressions of 'joy', 'pleasure', 'amusement' or 'merriment', but in modern English it can also refer to any kind of hunted animal—in addition to its typical sense of a form of amusement.

Games like cricket, golf, or curling have their roots in medieval times, but they really started to flourish during the early modern period. Several references to cricket come from English written sources of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which mention the game's rules and record its first matches. Since the late seventeenth century, cricket grew very popular across the whole of England and spread quickly to its colonies as well. It became another favourite game of the aristocracy, and even some members of the royal family were enthusiastic players—for example Frederick, Prince of Wales (1707–1751), who was supposedly killed by an injury caused by a cricket ball. With regard to golf, in 1502 Scottish King James IV (1473–1513 r. 1488) overturned a ban issued by his grandfather, James II (1430–1460 r. 1437), which had prohibited golf from being played in the kingdom. It soon became very popular among Scottish people, with the Old Course at St Andrews considered the oldest known golf course in the world. Like golf, some claim a Scottish origin for curling, although the Dutch claim to have invented this sport as well. We can see depictions of people playing early versions of curling, for

example, in the paintings of the Dutch master Pieter Breughel the Elder (c. 1525–1569).

Frozen lakes, ponds, and canals were also ideal for skating. Moving on ice with wooden or bone blades was already popular in prehistoric Scandinavia, but it was the introduction of metal blades in the Low Countries that transformed the practice from a form of transportation to leisure. As with skating, skiing was most probably invented by the ancient inhabitants of northern Europe, and instances of it can be found in Norse mythology. It was not only the easiest means of travel during winter—as illustrated in the famous story of Birkebeiners rescuing infant King Haakon IV Haakonson (1204–1263, r. 1217) from his assassins—but also gradually became a popular recreational activity in Nordic countries.



Fig. 1: Hendrick Avercamp, *A Scene on the Ice* (first half of the seventeenth century), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hendrick_Avercamp_-_A_Scene_on_the_Ice_-_WGA01076.jpg.

There were many other popular ball games aside from cricket. Russian sources mention a game of bandy in the eleventh century, but it was in the age of Tsar Peter I (1672–1725 r. 1682), that this became truly popular and was played on frozen ponds and rivers with sticks and skates. Similar games were also played in Scandinavia and the Low Countries. The Irish played a game called hurling for centuries, but the eighteenth century—when the gentry formed local teams that competed at the county level—is considered the golden age of this game. So-called ‘royal tennis’, which originated in France became popular among the English nobility, and even monarchs like Henry VIII (1491–1547 r.

1509) or Charles I (1600–1649 r. 1625) enjoyed playing the game. As the most popular and widespread modern sport, football also has deep historic roots. Almost every ancient culture has some evidence of a game that involved kicking or hitting a round-shaped object or ball (often made from inflated animal bladders). Several countries claim to be the birthplace of football. Some sources mention the so-called ‘mob football’ in medieval England and Ireland. Around the same time, the traditional *Calcio Fiorentino* was played at Piazza Santa Croce in the Italian city of Florence. There are even reports that Alessandro de’ Medici (1510–1537), the Duke of Florence, sustained a minor injury while playing football with some servants. But it was English public schools that laid the foundations for modern football, establishing most of its codified rules.

Another game enjoyed mostly by the nobility was billiards, or similar games where the aim was to hit balls with a cue (to carambole them, or to shoot them into pockets). Several versions of cue or billiard sports with different rules and apparatus were played all across Europe, mostly by the rich and the aristocracy. Versions of billiards played on the ground, the precursors to modern croquet, emerged in Italy and France and swiftly spread to other European courts, where they became a favoured leisure activity of royals and nobles.

Other forms of popular amusement included many different board and card games. As with sports, evidence of card and board games can be found in most ancient civilisations. Chess, originating in sixth-century India, came via Persia and Arabia to early medieval Europe. Spanish and Italian merchants spread it across the continent, with France becoming the centre of European chess during the eighteenth century, attracting the greatest masters and theoreticians of the game. Other board games like backgammon, draughts, and dominoes had their roots outside of Europe as well, hailing mostly from the Middle East. Cards also came to Europe from the Middle East during the fourteenth century, apparently from Mamluk Egypt. Playing cards became popular and widespread with the invention of the printing press, and were one of the first products to be made by printing companies. Assimilating the original Mamluk tradition, European card sets maintained four suits of colours with thirteen cards per set. Tarot cards increased the size of a set up to seventy-eight cards. Various games, such as Triomphe (also known as French Ruff), Ombre, Whist and Piquet developed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, using the standard deck of cards with four colours.

With the growing popularity of sports and games, gambling became more prominent. Card games were often played for money and betting on the winner or the result of the game became very popular. This brought increasing amounts of money into the sport environment, which radically changed the

way it was perceived. For many people, sport became not only an activity for fun and leisure, but also a means of earning money: playing sports emerged as a profession. As early as the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, professional boxers, jockeys, or cricketers were hired to fight or compete not only for prizes and rewards, but also for regular salaries.

With the increasing competitiveness of sports, the meaning of terms such as 'measuring' or 'recording' shifted, due to their use in the sporting context. Rather than viewing competition as the main feature of sports, some humanist philosophers such as the Czech thinker John Amos Comenius (1592–1670) emphasised its pedagogical capacities. In works such as *Schola ludus seu Encyclopaedia viva* (1656) or *Orbis pictus* (1658), Comenius emphasised that physical activity and game-playing were important not only for physical development, but also for intellectual development (see also Chapter 6.4.1). Games were an integral part of education, permitting children (under a teacher's supervision) to acquire new knowledge faster and more easily. On the other hand, Comenius always saw sport and games as a means of education and relaxation; he never considered them the most important or fulfilling part of life. This contrasted with the competitive or combant attitude to sports, which emerged in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Conclusion

Sports and leisure activities changed considerably during late medieval and early modern times. Many of them grew from local forms, whose performance and practice were restricted to particular regions, to widespread pastimes, crossing national and cultural borders. The growing interconnection of the world during the early modern period allowed particular musical instruments, theatrical forms, games, and sports to spread and gain popularity across the globe. For the same reason, particular tunes and plays became popular across various countries as well. Physical activities that had their origins in combat and war were increasingly reinvented or reshaped as sporting activities, with the new goal of leisure and recreation instead of conquest. As sports and entertainment became more commercial, these activities were professionalised, with actors and athletes earning their income by providing spectators with their moment of leisure.

Discussion questions

1. How did social status shape the ways people in early modern Europe spent their leisure time?

2. What was the role of economics in the spread of sports and entertainment in early modern Europe?
3. How were early modern leisure practices—such as sports or card games—political?

Suggested reading

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