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## The Sports of All Sports: Skiing as National Panacea in Finland at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Winter sports has been a prime source of national pride and fame – occasionally of shame – for the Finns ever since it became a vehicle of national mass movement and one of the building-blocks of the nation since the end of the nineteenth century. Cultured echelons of the Finnish society, representatives of science and arts in particular, were called to the service of nation-building and they made Finland internationally recognized<sup>1</sup> whereas the winter sports remained quite self-contained until its outbreak of into the wider world in the winter Olympics after the First World War. Consequently, I have deemed it not altogether amiss to inquire what meaning the winter sports had for the Finnish sports elite in their inward-looking stance towards their hobbyhorse.

In comparison to this year's centenary, over one hundred years ago when the Finnish sports movement gathered momentum on all fronts but there was not yet a national league or a union for skiing, the world looked very different in the eyes of Finnish sports leaders. In times of wholesale European imperialism, they saw both external and internal threats which made

them envision the future of the Finnish nation in widely used biological-anthropological terms of survival or death. On one hand, there was the plan of imperial integration of the Grand Duchy to the Russian Empire, declared by Tsar's February Manifesto in 1899 aiming at unifying the laws of Finland with the Russian legislation in affairs that were in imperial interest. In the process of unification, many Finns feared that the nation would gradually be assimilated in the Slavs. On the other hand, there loomed even more dangerous internal threat, grave symptoms of physical and mental degeneration observed in the Finnish 'race' itself. European-wide fears and anxieties of such 'racial' decline or degeneration<sup>2</sup>, were acutely felt in Finnish sports circles and voiced with alarmist tones in the Finnish Sports Journal (*Suomen Urheilulehti*) established in 1898.<sup>3</sup> For the journal was the only Finnish-speaking organ of sports at the time, I focus my attention to the messages it sent to the Finns.

The Chief Editor of the sports journal and leader of the Finnish gymnastics movement, Ivar Wilskman (1854–1932)<sup>4</sup>, declared in the first issue that it was high time for the Finns to realize that experts in European sports and medicine had found out that not only mental but also physical stamina and its development were vital for every nation in the competitive modern world. As his concern encompassed the entire nation, he vehemently opposed professional sports – “second-sports” he called it – as one-sidedly individualist, self-seeking and maverick trophy-hunting undermining collective efforts of Finns.<sup>5</sup> In the same spirit of muscular nationalism<sup>6</sup>, another Editor reminded his readers of the deleterious impact of the pressures of modern intellectualism on sports: too much brain-work, mental exertion damaged the nerves of young sportsmen and -women.<sup>7</sup> Sitting in offices and lecture-halls caused atrophy of the limbs and muscles which had to be resuscitated by winter sports. He made his message more striking by condemning those who defended hard mental and intellectual work in tones of almost inevitable 'racial' decay:<sup>8</sup>

How devious such a way of thinking really is and how harmful its consequences are can be seen in people's sickliness, general degeneration (in Finnish: *degeneraatio*) against which the best prescriptions, summertime baths and travels abroad etc. are very weak medicine.

In the same vein, the modern lifestyle in cities (Helsinki) caused “weakness of nerves” (neurasthenia), yet another symptom of dreadful degeneration.<sup>9</sup>

What would be the remedy if the science of medicine could not heal the weakly nation? There were doctors in Finland who had since the 1880s advocated mental and bodily hygiene, the health-care methods of which complemented the advice-kit of the sports experts<sup>10</sup> but the sports elite carved a niche of their own knowledge claiming that natural ways to combat degeneration were the most effective. Even if in Finland “bread did not grow in trees” or “wine in bushes”, it was the “promised land” of winter sports because *in* winter there was a lot of snow (Helsinki excepted!<sup>11</sup>), on which “the tracks were slippery” inviting all to skiing. Finland was geographically in a very favorable position, and it was not enough that leading skiers of the times (Aitamurto, Ritola et al.) broke records on snow; it was the biological, ‘racial’ duty for every Finn to take to skiing, and if there was no snow, at least to skating.<sup>12</sup> However, it was only skiing that could “settle strained nerves, make blood run fast and cheeks red, the chest swallow, legs steel and improve appetite” and most importantly, enhance ability to work. The panacea of skiing was all the more effective as it was performed among the beauties of winter nature with its airy pine forests and hill slopes which invited challenge all dangers of falling. All this effort would strengthen “will power” and ‘racial’ stamina, increase self-confidence as the skier became gradually the master of his stronger and more flexible body. Even the fatigue caused by long distance cross-country skiing was “balsam for the body”. Every Finn should find couple of hours per day for it.<sup>13</sup>

The dicta of contemporary view of heredity were introduced to support the message of healthy skiing: it could eradicate such degenerative dispositions in man as “clumsiness” and “feebleness”, and if young people could be enticed to skiing, the next generations would be physically more developed and healthy in these respects. It was hoped that in the future Finns would not need any “doctors of nerves” at all and that they would be able to carry “heavier burdens” than their forefathers. Nevertheless, there was much skiing to be done since Finns were not unfortunately for the experts of the sports journal “ideal” in bodily (‘racial’) form but “small and weakly built”. And what worse, they were morally low, e.g. heavy drinkers. This meant that the enlightenment for sports and especially for skiing had to become nationwide, all useless entertainments like “silly

plays and clownery” had to be abolished otherwise Finns would remain a nation of periphery without any foothold in the world.<sup>14</sup>

In a few years’ time the sports journal reported of sudden rise of skiing in Finland, in Ostrobothnia in particular, the province which produced the best cross-country skis in the world at the time, exporting in tens of thousands as far as Australia.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in Oulu in 1898 60 skiers took part in 30 km’s cross-country skiing, and it was told that there was a doctor present measuring their pulse. Without inhibitions it was emphasized that skiing had now with its developed methods of taking care of the skis, regulating ‘right’ speed and attire become “the sport of sports” which hardened muscles, strengthened the lungs, increased courage and elevated the mind” thus becoming “rational” (in Finnish: *järkiperäinen*) exercise surpassing other winter sports.<sup>16</sup> This evaluation had a current political import: in times of imperial pressure from St. Petersburg, it was skiing that hardened and kept the nation together.<sup>17</sup>

It did not take long when also doctors were involved in boosting the winter sports with their up-to-date scientific views. One specialist in neurasthenia referred to the natural law of degeneration as opposed to evolution and progress stressing that every limb or propensity which is not being constantly exercised is prone to wither away or become slack. Sluggishness was “conservatism” leading to decline. The doctor was especially worried about the bodily condition of the spectators of sports who watched the professional sports – a totally wrong constellation in his opinion. His rather radical solution was to gain resources for mass sports from the state. The lesson of history was that only such states which supported sports succeeded in the struggle of supremacy among nations, ancient Rome and modern Britain being the paragons. He also criticized some of his colleagues who had argued that sports leads to “vice and is useless waste of time” and encouraged also overstressed sportsmen not to give up sports because in doing so they would become “melancholic, too hygiene-oriented, unemployed” and finally burden to the society. Doctor’s quite utilitarian, high-bourgeois ideology demanded useful movement from everybody so that they would become “joyful, frisk and useful” citizens. The role of doctor was to “control, give advice, evaluate and prescribe” certain limits of exertion suitable for every sports. The co-operation of sports leaders and doctors special-

izing in sports medicine would result in building a new Finnish nation which could bear “the greatest of hardships and trials”.<sup>18</sup>

The same doctor paid a lot of attention to winter sports, to skiing and skating – and he weighed skiing as the best sports in giving health and working stamina. He tried to put in his popular science language some romantic content:<sup>19</sup>

We as skiers can freely hasten over plateaus and hilltops and with dizzying speed ride down the hills and mountains. We can calmly move through scenting fir forests and ski among the great columns of pine-trees.

Such exercise, performed once a day would free the Finns from all the modern temptations and vicious enjoyments. However, this was not all: the doctor laid out rather detailed instructions to skiers. Most of them must be quite familiar to all us Finns: for skiing one should not clad oneself too heavily, too warmly, not wear a fur hat, one’s long johns should be light. One should eat both meat and vegetables, and decrease smoking, coffee- and alcohol-drinking to the minimum (one glass of wine was allowed). The mode of skiing should not be too straining to heart and nerves but rather moderate for long stretches, and during it one should practice the so called stomach breathing. Having performed the daily portion, one should harden oneself by washing upper body with wet towel, then take an air-bath, perform some gymnastic movements and finally drink some Vichy-water. All this amounted to aesthetically deep refreshment to the mind crowned with after-ski bath and laying in rest.<sup>20</sup> And there was also the lesson of sexual corrective: if skiing became regular to a person who had fallen in the unsportsmanlike sin of masturbation and so “spoiled oneself”, he/she would recover aided with massage and baths.<sup>21</sup> What more, a Finn skiing in winter nature would forget all “lowly, brutal” things in life, find new ideas and innovations while realizing that he/she could sacrifice his/her life to the fatherland.<sup>22</sup> The ultimate goal was collective: every Finn should become a useful, nation-building citizen and have a communion-spirit with the imagined mega-subject of nation. This collective would manifest in regular sports jubilees in which all social classes could participate.

The sports journal was not alone in promoting winter sports as prophylaxis and cure of ‘racial’ degeneration in the long term. Among sports leaders there were radicals who regarded sports, and again skiing

in particular, as panacea of, for example, all mental disorders and toyed with ideas bordering to eugenics and ‘racial hygiene’.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

For the sports elite, it was not at the turn of the twentieth century topical to pay much attention to wide-spread social problems (landless, poor crofters, mass emigration) in Finland, and the only occasion when, for example, working-class conditions were being mentioned was when one columnist exhorted workers to skiing in order to straighten up their ‘wrong’ working positions which caused unequal development of body-parts. What may have affected the lower classes more exhaustively was the demand for skiing competitions for school-children to arouse early collective, national sentiments. In this way working-class children could arise above the dire conditions of their families.<sup>24</sup> Seen from the horizon of bourgeois sports elite, the Finnish society and nation should have featured cohesion and harmony in the future when the dreams of independence were envisaged to come true. It was as if their muscular nationalism lacked real political power which was compensated by gaining hold of the masses through sports, skiing in particular. Consequently, it is highly debatable whether the threats they saw around in Finland were very real or their comprehension of the state of Finns reflected social realities. In any case, their goals encompassed the entire nation on a pseudo-anthropological level which pre-excluded other approaches. Still in the 1910s the message remained quite the same: if the great majority of a nation becomes physically and mentally weak, it was “doomed to death”.<sup>25</sup> The world-view of sports leaders was impregnated by dystopic qualms about a world filled with rivalling nations eclipsed and possibly overrun by expansive empires – in this context their desperate vision of Finland was mirrored in alarmist sports messages. The hope for a better future was made depended on how massively the Finns would take on skiing and other winter sports to improve the national stamina. This would succeed with other forms of physical exercise, gymnastics, in particular.

## References

- 1 Kerstin Smeds, *Helsingfors-Paris: Finlands utveckling till nation på världsutställningarna 1851–1900*. Ph.D.-thesis. Finska Historiska Samfundet, 1996, passim.
- 2 Daniel Pick, *The Faces of Degeneration. A European Disorder c. 1848–1918* (C.U.P.,1989). On the uses of the idea in Finland, see Anssi Halmesvirta, *Ideology and Argument: Studies in British, Finnish and Hungarian Thought*. *Studia Historica*, vol. 73 (SKS: Helsinki, 2006),120–161.
- 3 One of the oldest still published in the world.
- 4 Anssi Halmesvirta, “Building the Élan Vital of the Finnish Nation: Ivar Wilsksman’s Ideology of Gymnastics”. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 26, no. 5 (April, 2009), 621–639.
- 5 I.W.[Ivar Wilksman], ”Lukijalle”. *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1898), 1–2; ”Mikä on oleva päämäärämme”. *Suomen Urheilulehti* 3 (1905), 131–132.
- 6 For a definition of nationalism; see Anssi Halmesvirta, *Aatehistorian harjoitus*. Jyväskylän Yliopistopaino: Jyväskylä, 2012, 57–70, the gist of which is: instead of seeing the demand of national independence a central feature of national movement in Finland at the turn of the century, it is to be *stressed that it primarily represented the members of the nation in the name of shared material (physical) and cultural interests*. It called Finns to subjugate their interests in class, religion or party to the advantages and interests which they shared with fellow-citizens and made demands to protect and promote them up against others (Russians, the Swedish-speakers), p. 60 and 63.
- 7 For women’s role, see Anssi Halmesvirta, “Emancipation through Sports: Doctors and the Rise of the Female Body in Finland c. 1900–1920”. In book *Sport and Emancipation of European Women. The Struggle for Self-fulfilment*. Editors Gigliola Gori & J.A. Mangan. Routledge, London & New York, 10–25.
- 8 A.J.S. [A.J. Sarlin], ”Talviurheilun alalta”. *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1898), q. 56–57.
- 9 Heikki Klemetti, ”Urheilemaan nuoriso”. *Suomen Urheilulehti* 4 (1905), 526.
- 10 Anssi Halmesvirta, ”Lääketeiede ja urheilu Suomessa sata vuotta sitten”. In book *Jukolan rasteilla*. Suomen Urheiluhistoriallisen Seuran vuosikirja 2010. Editors Heikki Roiko-Jokela & Esa Sironen. Saarijärvi 2010, 61–70; *Ideology and Argument: Studies in British, Finnish and Hungarian Thought*, 120–161.
- 11 In Helsinki skiing was often impossible because of lack of snow. For a local enthusiast of skiing, it was ”one of the most disgusting cities in the world”. The attitude of advocates of skiing to skating came to the fore when he castigated it because it provided opportunities to soliciting and masquerading under lighting in mass-skating events. Sport and sex should not be mixed. See *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1904), 60; A.J.S. [A.J. Sarlin], ”Talviurheilun alalta”. *Suomen Urheilulehti* 2 (1898), 123.

- 12 Heikki Klemetti, "Urheilemaan nuoriso". 525; A.J.S. [A.J. Sarlin], "Talviurheilun alalta", 57.
- 13 A.J.S. [A.J. Sarlin], "Talviurheilun alalta", 57.
- 14 Klemetti, "Urheilemaan nuoriso", 526–528.
- 15 The journal reported from yearly ski-exhibitions from Oulu and advertised Puolanka and Kuortane skis. About ski-factories/workshops in Finland, see Timo Siukonen, *Puusuksia Suomesta*. Docendo, Jyväskylä, 2016.
- 16 A.J.S. [A.J. Sarlin], "Talviurheilun alalta", 122–123; "Suksien hoitamisesta". *Suomen Urheilulehti* 5 (1898), 313–315. It was later, c. 1905 that hill-jumping was mentioned as another, even better sports as it combined the powers of thought, eye and nerves, see *Suomen Urheilulehti* 3 (1905), 165.
- 17 A.J.S. [A.J. Sarlin], "Talviurheilun alalta". *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1899), 101.
- 18 Karl V. Hällberg, "Sananen urheilusta arvosteltuna lääkärin-urheilijan kannalta". *Suomen Urheilulehti* 3 (1899), 143–146.
- 19 Karl V. Hällberg, "Talviurheilusta". *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1900), q. p. 71. Cf. Emil Wartiainen's "Hiihtämään" eulogy of the Finnish winter nature in *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1903), 53–54.
- 20 Ilmari Calamnius added to this the 'Hymn for Skiers' ending with the note: "My soul craves for winter snow". See *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1901), 100. The idea of training (in Finnish: *treenaus*) was not yet so actual.
- 21 See Anssi Halmesvirta, *Vaivojensa vangit*. Atena, Jyväskylä, 1996, 221–242.
- 22 Eliel Wartiainen, "Hiihtämään". *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1903), 55.
- 23 Anssi Halmesvirta, "Sports as Medicine: Public Health, Hygiene and the Rise of the Sports Movement in Finland, 1880–1920". In book *Proceedings of the 6th Congress of the International Society for the History of Physical Education and Sport*. Budapest, 2002, 171–179.
- 24 P.S. Friberg, "Koko kansa voimistelemaan ja urheilemaan". *Suomen Urheilulehti* 5 (1903), 472; *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1904), 67–68.
- 25 Wilskman in 1910. In: Anssi Halmesvirta, "Kansan elinvoimaa kokoamassa – Ivar Wilskmanin voimistelun ja ruumiinhoidon ideologiaa 1870–1920". In book *Suomen urheiluhistoriallisen Seuran Vuosikirja 1995*. Edited by Arto Nevala. Joensuu, 1995, q. p. 26.