

FROM COLOSSEUM TO WEMBLEY: ECHOES OF ANCIENT THOUGHTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SPORTS IN MODERN FOOTBALL

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Abstract. *Background.* The remarkable popularity of sports competitions is not just a feature of the contemporary times. By studying the past, no matter how distant, it can be observed that sport has always been an integral part of human life, and played an essential role in shaping social, cultural and political landscapes. Today, football has emerged as one of the most popular sport, being played, watched and analyzed every single day worldwide, and has a similar impact on society as the gladiatorial combats had in Antiquity.

Objectives. The main goals of this essay are to explore the connections between ancient writings about sports competitions and the implications that football has on contemporary life, and to highlight the similarities between the both cases.

Method. Regarding the method, there were selected three ancient authors, Aristotle, Juvenal and Suetonius and then there were analyzed some of their writings and beliefs about sports and physical activity that can be linked with football. These authors have been chosen because they were citizens of international and influential powers, they had different professions and they were deeply interested in the nature of sports and its impact on individuals and societies.

Results. The study reveals several important similarities between ancient thoughts on sports competitions and the modern relevance of football. Aristotle's philosophical works focus on the physical and moral benefits of sports, Juvenal's satirical writings highlight the social impact of athletic competitions and Suetonius's historical descriptions shed light on the political significance of sports in ancient times. All those ideas can be linked with modern football, considering the health benefits associated with this sport, its social impact and its relation with the politics fields.

Conclusion. This essay demonstrates that ancient ideas about sports continue to resonate today in modern football. Many of the ancient sports aspects are still relevant in the contemporary era. Through this study, can be encouraged the further reflection on the massive significance of sports in human culture.

Keywords: history, society, culture, sports, football.

Introduction

The massive popularity of sports competitions is not just a feature of the contemporary era. Through studying the past, no matter how distant, it can be observed that sport has always been an essential reality of human life. In the time of Antiquity, the Greeks had their Olympic Games, which were their most important sports competitions, held in honor of Zeus every four years at Olympia. Those games had religious, social and diplomatic importance and they were such a vivid reality of Greek culture that ancient historians used their dates to create a new chronological system. The ancient Greeks thought that sports competitions were an essential part of a complete education. They



valued physical exercise and athletic competition as highly as intellectual pursuits. This kind of attention to sports could also be observed in the Roman world. As an imperial power, Rome spread its values throughout all the provinces it conquered. Millions of people became Romans by adopting the lifestyle of the inhabitants of the Eternal City. Over time, being a Roman came to mean living like a Roman, which included a special attitude towards sports competitions. Every Roman city had circuses and amphitheaters in addition to temples, basilicas, baths and aqueducts. These even dominated the urban landscape because they were not just simple centers of entertainment, but also symbols of Roman power and prestige, with a massive propaganda role.

The ancient Greeks and Romans philosophers, historians, poets or physicians were deeply interested in the nature of sport and its impact on individuals and societies. From Aristotle's emphasis on developing virtues through practice to Suetonius's descriptions of gladiatorial combat, these thinkers explored the many dimensions of sports competitions which are still a global phenomenon, with a strong social, cultural or political impact.

In the past, gladiator games were widely practiced and loved by the people. Today, football has become the world's most popular sport, with millions of people playing, watching, and analyzing the game every single day. Considering the widespread attention that people all over the world give to football, the implications that this sport has in various fields can be observed, such as in international relations and diplomacy, education, the promotion of national stereotypes or political ideas.

Objectives

This essay will draw connections between the writings of the ancients about sports competitions and the implications that football has on modern societies. Ancient authors such as Aristotle, Juvenal and Suetonius explained the profound meanings of sports in their communities, and their mentalities, opinions and experiences can be useful in understanding the dynamic, complex and global phenomenon called football.

The ancient method of analyzing the implications of sports on communities can be adopted today in the case of football. Each of the three authors mentioned earlier will be a case study in this text, and their representative writings about sports will be connected to modern football.

Methods and Results

Aristotle had some interesting ideas about sports that can be linked with modern football. Aristotle wrote about the fact that sports competitions were essential for developing virtues such as perseverance, courage or teamwork. He believed that an individual could complete its education and personal development through excellence in sports. The Greek philosopher argues in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, that virtues are not innate qualities, but rather are developed through repeated action and habituation. He said: *becoming just requires doing just actions first, and becoming temperate, temperate actions*¹. He suggested that virtues are not just something that humans possess, but something that they do. Football provides a special opportunity for individuals to develop virtues through repeated action. The players must constantly practice their skills through repetition which means they are perseverant. Furthermore, football requires individuals to have courage by taking risks such as injuries or pushing themselves to the limit. This sport demands an impressive level of both physical skill and mental toughness. Both players and fans are usually motivated by the desire to win and the pursuit of excellence, because the competition is at the center of this sport.

Aristotle believed that sports can have important social benefits by promoting qualities such as cooperation, friendship, and a sense of shared purpose among athletes and the public, philosophy that can easily be linked with modern football because it has a massive social component, with players coordinating the strategies with their teammates and fans coming together to support their favorite teams. Around football is created an entire community. This sport has an important social role also by promoting values such as fair play and respect even beyond the playing field. With the

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2000, p. 27.

virtues explained before, both players and fans develop in football terms but they also become better persons. The writings of Aristotle on virtue ethics and their intersection with modern football provides an interesting perspective on the potential for sports competitions to contribute to the development of positive character traits. By promoting virtues such as perseverance, courage or teamwork, football has a remarkable role in shaping the moral character of individuals and society as a whole.

Football has also an important role in International Development and Diplomacy and this can be linked with the ethical works of Aristotle, in which he pointed on the importance of social relationships and cooperation for the development of virtues such as justice and generosity. He said: *no one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all the other goods*². In other words, the wider the interaction in a certain field is, the greater the chance for everyone to evolve is and this idea can be applied to the international role of football. Through football international organizations or competitions there are promoted positive values including respect and peace on a global scale. For example, Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), relies on cooperation, friendship and social relationships among its member associations to promote sportsmanship, fair play and global football development. Another example is the international tournament called the World Cup which improves relations between nations and promotes diplomacy. In order to achieve positive outcomes worldwide, working together towards common goals is essential.

Football is an efficient way for many people to obtain pleasure. Aristotle's ideas emphasize the relevance of pleasure and play in human existence. He believed that pleasure and play are essential components of a good life and should be pursued in moderation. Today, football is a sport that can bring happiness for every person, regardless of age, ethnicity, social position or wealth. Additionally, football serves as a method of play, which is a fundamental aspect for a good life, according to Aristotle. The play allows individuals to develop strategies and skills, to form social connections with other people and to simply express themselves in a creative way. Football has the potential to contribute to the overall well-being of individuals and communities. In the XXth century, Johan Huizinga also wrote about the importance of play, emphasizing that it is not just a cultural phenomenon, but is deeply ingrained in human behavior and biology³. The play is an essential and natural part of human life.

The Romans had a similar attitude towards the importance of sports competitions in people's life. For them, sports was essential for everyone to achieve both physical and mental health, as the poet Juvenal wrote: *mens sana in corpore sano*⁴. In the context of modern football, the quote highlights the relevance of training not only the body but also the mind. The players should be capable of maintaining their concentration, controlling their emotions and making quick decisions under pressure. In the field, they must have both mental toughness and physical strength. In addition to this fact, it is also important to notice that sports are not only about winning or losing but they are about personal improvement as well.

Juvenal did not write only about the positive facts of sports. He was famous for his satirical works in which he often criticized the excesses of Roman society. The ancient poet wrote about the obsession of the Romans with sports competitions in his days, arguing that the achievement of physical excellence was often accompanied by immorality. He believed that the excessive love of sports makes people more interested in these pursuits than in their civic duties. Just as the circuses in Rome, football has become a real force in modern societies, with millions of people playing or following it. Like the gladiators combats in Rome, football matches are usually accompanied by a large amount of spectacle, hype or public attention and eventually this fact can distract people from more important problems.

Juvenal also criticized the social hierarchy of Rome which was based mostly on wealth. The poet denounced the greed, corruption and decadence of the Roman wealthy classes, and he highlighted the contrast between their extravagant lifestyles and the suffering and poverty experienced by the lower classes. Professional football can be seen as an example of social and economic inequality as well. The most successful teams and players have huge amounts of money

² *Ibidem*, p. 143.

³ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980, p. 1.

⁴ Juvenal, *Thirteen satires of Juvenal*, vol. I, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010, p. 52.

and power while leaving others behind. There are usually significant differences in wealth or power between the highest-paid managers, players or executives and those who are involved in lower-paying roles, such as security personnel, support staff or groundskeepers. This kind of gasps can be also observed in the comparison between different clubs as well. Just as Juvenal pointed out in his days, the wealthy and powerful structures always have advantages over those in lower social classes and this is a fact that exist even within the sport field.

Suetonius described the lives of the first twelve Roman emperors but those writings were not simple biographies but reflected the entire Roman society, recalling many activities that characterized it. He also wrote about the importance of sports and games in the Roman life. When he described the life of Augustus, he pointed out that the Emperor was very involved in the organization of the games and was attentive to every detail. For example, while attending the games, Augustus was never occupied with other business, such as reading or replying to letters or reports, because of his enthusiasm for sports competitions and his pleasure in watching them. A remarkable fact is that he encouraged the athletes and gave them rewards and prizes from his own funds. He used to reward *all the participants according to their merits*⁵. Suetonius highlighted the role of the emperor in promoting and participating in the sports activities. Augustus himself said: *Three times in my own name I gave a show of gladiators, and five times in the name of my sons or grandsons*⁶ and during those shows there fought about ten thousand men.

These facts can be linked to the modern-day role of political leaders and celebrities in promoting and participating in football. The involvement of the historical leaders in athletic activities reflected their political and social ambitions, a fact that has remained valid until today. Sports have always been used to promote social cohesion and cultural values. Football can bring together people from different cultures and backgrounds, fostering a sense of shared identity and community and it is important the political support for its development.

Conclusion

By examining the ancient wisdom on sports and how it relates to modern football, we will gain a deeper understanding of the enduring value and significance of sports in human society. All of those ancient perspectives analyzed in this text demonstrate that sports competitions have been an essential aspect of human life for millennia and it is no coincidence that the symbol of the Rome itself was and remains the Colosseum, while today, across the globe, stadiums like Wembley or Camp Nou are some of the most important, imposing and visited constructions of the cities.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have equally contributed to this study.

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⁵ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 68.

⁶ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, in "Velleius Paterculus: Compendium of Roman History and Res Gestae Divi Augusti", Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1961, p. 381.