

# GFL

*German as a foreign language*

## **Sport in German Culture: Introduction**

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## **Introduction**

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For some, sport has never simply been something that helps keep the waistline trim and the circle of friends tight. Politicians, businessmen, philosophers, artists and many others have analysed the relationship between sport and society, politics and culture through a variety of different prisms with the aim of teasing out some of the many deeper meanings that may underpin these particular relationships. Yet it is also true that one does not have to be an apostle of the exuberant American boxing promoter Don King – a man who once proclaimed that an Evander Holyfield versus Lennox Lewis boxing match had the potential to be “greater than life itself” – or of the former Liverpool manager, Bill Shankly (“football is not a matter of life or death, it’s much more important than that”) or even intellectual heavyweights such as French philosopher Albert Camus (who famously observed that all he knew about morality and obligations “he owed to football”) to realise that sport and politics have sometimes been decidedly uneasy bedfellows. Readers over the age of 30 will no doubt remember that successive Olympic Games through the 1970s and 1980s were boycotted by various sets of countries for overtly political reasons; the 1976 games in Montreal took place without the presence of 25 African nations that stayed away in protest at the New Zealand rugby team touring South Africa; the 1980 games in Moscow saw over 60 nations refuse to attend in support of the USA’s criticisms of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; in 1984 the Soviet Union returned the compliment, as it and 13 other (mainly eastern bloc) states stayed away from the Los Angeles games. Symbolism has also been overtaken by action on occasion, the most well-known example probably being the 1969 ‘Football War’ between El Salvador and Honduras. Although the conflict, despite popular belief to the contrary, was not actually caused by football (but rather by political differences, mainly around the issue of immigration, between the two states), riots at a series of football games did indeed do much to escalate tensions.

Germany – perhaps unsurprisingly – has been a country where sport has intertwined with not only politics but also larger questions of national identity, pride and self-understanding

rather more than most. The success of the Federal Republic's football team in the 1954 Swiss World Cup, for example, prompted not only the first genuine 'feel-good' moment in post-war West German history – as well as a hugely popular film entitled *Das Wunder von Bern* ('The Miracle of Bern') in 2003 – but also illustrated how sporting achievement can be a force for good in generating self-belief and bolstering battered confidence. Another German World Cup victory – in the summer of 1990 – was sandwiched between the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and Unification day 11 months later, again generating a feel-good factor the likes of which most politicians can only dream (and former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson would have wished wistfully for, claiming as he did that England's depressing exit from the Mexico tournament in 1970 did much to dampen the popular mood and prompt British electors to remove his government in the General Election that took place a few days later).

These incidences aside, it is clear that some of the more overt uses (and abuses) of sport took place on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in the GDR – and it is to one of these such issues that Mike Dennis refers in his piece in this volume on football behind the Wall. Dennis argues that despite the fact that football was the sport in which the masses in East Germany took the most interest, little systematic research has been done until recently as regards its contribution to system legitimisation and to the relationship between elite sport and mass culture. This has not prevented controversies from periodically erupting over the influence exerted by the central political and sports authorities on competitive football, the reasons behind the GDR's emergence as a world power in sport in general and also the relationship between sport and the socialist system it was supposed to be representing. Indeed, he points out that many East Germans had little time for their national eleven and much preferred to follow the fortunes of the BRD, on occasion travelling into eastern European socialist states to support the West German side (as well as various West German club sides when they played there). The world of GDR football was an abnormal one where parts of the state apparatus had strong allegiances to particular clubs and one team – Dynamo Berlin – benefited strongly from the partisan support of a group of well-organised SED members around Erich Mielke. As Dennis succinctly illustrates, a fascinating tussle took place with the GDR football world between the football clubs and their fans on the one side and the various central authorities and local power brokers on the other. Political elites

were not able to impose a single, unified system of control on the game and the rivalries between the mini-empires of army and state security were never far from the surface. Indeed, this perhaps surprisingly complex mosaic is a far cry from the notion of a unitary political system presided over by the SED Politbüro and Central Committee Secretariat.

Jon Hughes, meanwhile, looks at the relationship between sport more generally and cultural debates in an earlier era, that of the Weimar Republic. During this period, sport in all its facets underwent a fundamental overhaul, both in terms of the number of people who actively participated and also in the development of elite competition and the expansion of sport as a commercial interest. Although these general developments were not particularly unique to Germany, the movement away from appreciating sport as an expression of individualistic discipline to one of both active competition and an increasingly idealised notion of what Hughes describes as *Körperkultur* was exceptionally noticeable there. The political and social location of Germany during this period led many to claim that there was therefore something specifically German to the way in which sport was seen in the Weimar Republic. Hughes presents a fascinating survey of the discourses that surrounded developments in sport during this period and elucidates on the manner in which it can be said to reflect many of the cultural faultlines of interwar society in Germany.

Felix Saure's contribution has an altogether different analytical scope. Saure moves back further in time again, seeking to add an innovative historical dimension to debates on German attitudes to Greek ideals on the relationship between sport, nation and identity. He analyses the stances of the one of the most prominent supporters of Greek Olympian ideals in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Von Humboldt's analysis, claims Saure, remains true to his understanding of the importance of physical endeavour in stimulating intellectual thought and cultural awareness and much less on any sort of systematic empirical testing. Saure compares the positions of von Humboldt towards these classically Greek ideals with those of Schiller, Herder und Winckelmann, illustrating that Humboldt's notions are classically representative of the era in which he lived. Saure contends that the Greek games were seen as the representation of an entire nation portrayed as one cultural entity and that this form of national-cultural process of identity formation appealed to many Germans living in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

All in all, the three contributions in this section illustrate the complex and decidedly diverse nature of the relationship between sport, politics and society. They take different approaches and subsequently read quite differently. They all nonetheless illustrate that there is much to be gained from focusing on, and digging down into, this much under-researched area.

**Biodata**

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