There is absolutely no way to adequately understand sport philosophy in the western world without knowing something of nineteenth century Victorian “Muscular Christianity”. The concept of sport commercialism—so rapidly accelerated in the last half century—has seriously blurred the modern origins of the aristocratic cult of athletics. The English must surely take the credit (or blame) for grafting onto play, values and outcomes of the highest order, and rapidly placing compulsory participation in school competitive games among its highest priorities. Antecedents give way to antecedents in the rich, centuries-old history of British sport. But English public school history in the early nineteenth century seems an arbitrary and yet fruitful place to begin.

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Thomas Arnold—Fidelity and Fiction

The great headmaster, Thomas Arnold, did not initiate sport at the Rugby School nor did he directly impulse English public schoolboy preoccupation with football, swimming, hiking, cross-country running, and cricket.

It was a full generation after his death in 1842 that these ancient British sporting activities became so wonderfully popular among upper-class youngsters (“Barbarians”)—and rapidly evolved into the cynosure of national pride and then, widespread criticism. The athletic passion spread to the middle class (“Philistines”) and Arnold’s commanding figure played a role in this osmosis. Yet, as Mutimer says so well, “the emphasis on organized games and the athletic cult that grew throughout the second half of the nineteenth century were the result of societal forces which were beyond the scope of any one man to create or to control”. The Industrial Revolution, even greater affluence of the rich, rising expectations and nonconformist religious devotion among the middle class, were powerful forces that contributed to the English absorption with sport as a manly, moral, even mystical pastime. Still, Arnold must be given his proper place in the development of modern English athletics.

Thomas Arnold’s religion and philosophy regarding boys was to create in them a change of moral thinking—to substitute good interests for bad. Dr. Arnold tacitly approved of sports as one effective device in furthering his aim of making “Christian gentlemen” of his beloved Rugby boys. Thus, as A. P. Stanley noted, it was to theology that Arnold looked as the highest sphere of his exertions. All of Dr. Arnold’s efforts were directed toward one goal—obedience to God, to school, and to himself. He was able, through instruction in the classics and history, theological sermons,
and incidental athletics, to mold his students to an astonishing degree. Arnold had faith in the power of the mind to cope with human problems. He felt that the results of a classical liberal education were lasting and comprehensive, even if not completely understood and appreciated by the student. He was a scholar, a theologian, a historian, teacher, “affectionate father and a great mind”. Asa Briggs in his Victorian People summarized Arnold’s use of the school as character-forming rather than a strictly intellectual function. Arnold wished to make of every boy, 1) a Christian, 2) a gentleman, 3) an educated person—and in that order.

Although physically active as a youth and especially during school holidays, Thomas Arnold never overemphasized the role of school sports. The happiness of man, he said, deals more with his intellect than with his physique “and yet more in his moral and religious excellence than in his intellectual”². T. W. Bamford sums up by concluding that “Arnold gave the Christian-

Anglican spirit priority over all other studies”. Reverend Arnold was probably at his impressionistic best during the daily sermons in the Rugby Chapel. Legions of his students, including his son, Matthew, recalled those passionate admonitions to “follow Christ with a single mind and a single heart”³. Dr. Arnold’s intensity of moral purpose is reflected in his son’s famous poem, “Rugby Chapel”; the eulogy, written fifteen years after his father’s death, concluded:

*Then, in such hour of need of your fainting, dispirited race,
Ye, like angels appear, radiant with ardour divine!
Beacons of hope, ye appear! Languor is not in your heart,
Weakness is not in your word, weariness not on your brow...*

The commanding figure of Thomas Arnold—“that tidal force in early Victorian England”—did not himself loosen the tide of competitive schoolboy athletics, but his extraordinary presence so influenced Rugby graduates, school administrators, a great many theologians, intellectuals, men in government, that the evolution seemed inevitable. The advocates of manly exercise, metaphorically waiting in the wings, took up the banner of athletics with a zeal that would have been recognized, but not necessarily approved of by Arnold.

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Thomas Hughes—Angel of ‘Muscular Christianity’

Thomas Hughes (1822-1896) was the spiritual descendant of Dr. Arnold and through his engaging, important and overbalanced book, Tom Brown’s Schooldays (1857), made Rugby School famous throughout the world as the fount of Christian manliness and heroic athletics. In the decades that followed Arnold’s death, “the prestige of Greek fought a losing battle against the prestige of sport”. The fame of Arnold and Rugby School’s brand of football spread through much of the western world. William Blaikie, nineteenth-century physical educator, called Hughes’ book the single greatest influence on American sport ⁵. Hughes considered games far more important in the web of life than did his
teacher and idol, Thomas Arnold. The latter was credited for even more than the deserved honors bestowed on him. Tom Hughes was the real Tom Brown and sold the English-speaking world (and a great many elsewhere) on the developmental and restorative powers of vigorous athletic competition. Critics of Tom Brown’s Schooldays and critics of the Arnoldian legend were easily drowned out by the legions of converts to English intramural athletics during the second half of the century.

The wisdom of Arnold, the echoes of his admonitions, both real as well as the contrivances of his disciples, never left Thomas Hughes, and are epitomized in his works. Just before leaving for Rugby School, the local squire, turning over in his mind just what to say to young Tom Brown mused:

"Shall I tell him to mind his work, and say he’s sent to school to make himself a good scholar? Well, but he isn’t sent to school for that—at any rate, not for that mainly. I don’t care a straw for Greek particles, or the digamma, no more does his mother... If he’ll only turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman, and a gentleman, and a Christian, that’s all I want.”

At the very end of the book, Thomas Hughes speaking through Tom Brown about the untimely death of Arnold bids the great man farewell. “New men and new methods might do for other people; let those who would worship the rising star; he at least would be faithful to the sun which had set.”

Early Uses of the Term ‘Muscular Christianity’. England ushered in the nineteenth century with a heady mixture of a revolution in industry, a social and cultural upheaval, the literary and philosophical vision of the Romantic man, plus serious efforts to liberalize the established church. The bulk of the century, ill-defined as the Victorian Age, gave rise to a masculine concept of “a good sportsman” in the very largest sense of that phrase. It combined the widely accepted view of male physicality, honor, patriotism, religiosity, and a kind of Grecian discretionary balance or sophrosyne. The package might be called (and was so labelled) ‘muscular Christianity’. Voices from the previous century compelled man—at least those from the upper middle class and aristocracy—to a return to Nature which “speaks a moral language and her laws shine with a veiled spiritual light”. Luther Gulick perceived the life of Anglo-Saxon boys as “energetic and enthusiastic, and executive; he must do things, he must do hard things, he must do heroic things”.

The key decades in which the persistent English love of sport became a kind of “moral imperative” were 1840-1870. Prior to this period, as an article in The Edinburgh Review of 1810 states wryly: “There is a manliness in the athletic exercises of public schools, which is as seductive to the imagination as it is utterly unimportant in itself.” Something—many things happened in the collective psyche of most Englishmen of the next generation to nearly reverse this attitude. For sure, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) made an inestimable and lasting impression on millions of readers. Scott’s works, especially his Waverly Novels epitomized and glorified the natural man—the heroic, romantic Englishman—cheerful, healthy, athletic, courageous, and altogether vigorous. The code of manliness inherent in Carlyle’s lectures (1837-1841) titled, “On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History”, was a manifestation of his view of man’s goodness and divinity. The natural man, devout and unspoiled, was a physically robust man. A special kind of noble athleticism began to arise in England at
this time—a sporting psychology with a transcendent moral element. The significant educational reforms of Thomas Arnold, especially appreciated after his death in 1842, further contributed to a differing view of physicality. *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* preached a doctrine “described fairly and cleverly as ‘muscular Christianity’” 10. *Temple Bar*, a London magazine for town and country readers, extolled the physical and spiritual virtues of “Muscular Education” 11. Professor E. Knowlton, writing in 1869, reaffirmed that “we may, perhaps, be justified in using ‘muscular Christianity’ as a synonym for physical morality” 12. All forms of sport, he said, are “most efficient helps to virtue and most potent means of grace.” This “brotherhood of muscular Christians”, as Hughes called it in his *Tom Brown at Oxford* 13, was partly the vision of another remarkable English writer—Charles Kingsley—and it is to him that one turns for many early declarations on ‘muscular Christianity’.

Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), clergyman and author, was consistently credited with and often accused of creating the phrase ‘muscular Christianity’. He denied it and considered it “a clever expression spoken in jest by I know not whom... For myself, I do not know what it means” 14. He was physically vigorous and thought nothing of walking the fifty-two miles from Cambridge to London. Kingsley, deeply concerned with social problems, preached a Christian moral earnestness within the frame of an athletic body. This was his kind of ‘muscular Christianity’, and is reflected in much of his writing. Sir Amyas Leigh, Knight in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, hero of Kingsley’s *Westward Ho*, epitomized the kind of man rapidly gaining great admiration in Britain, on the Continent, and in the United States during the century’s mid-years. In his *Alton Locke*, Hughes reminded all that “the body is the temple of the living God”. This prop and stay of English pride, speaking in *The Massacre of the Innocents*, prayed for physical strength, beauty, intellect, and virtue in the nation’s youth. In his *Lectures Delivered in America in 1874*, the “full-blooded” Kingsley called for a renaissance of the ancient Greek hero—as whose duty it was “to assert in drama, lyric, sculpture, music, gymnastic, the dignity of man”... So too, in his *The Heroes*, Greek fairy tales for his children, we find the apotheosis of the strong, loving, reverent man—the doer of noble deeds. Kingsley may have been the first to widely popularize the position that the greatness and scope of the British Empire came from its sporting youth, who had:

“... the stuff which has held Gibraltar and conquered at Waterloo... colonized every quarter of the globe—that grim, earnest, stubborn energy, which, since the days of the old Romans, the English possess alone of all the nations of the earth.” 15

Kingsley’s 1866 *Hereward, the Last of the English*, was the epitome of ‘muscular Christianity’—“a champion in his own right—a hero of the heroes...”. To be weak is to be miserable, seems a Kingsley-like aphorism. His books revel in every species of athletic exercise and desperate strife; he “would probably have been a gladiator if he had not been a Christian” 16.

Both Lewis and Lucas have attempted to recreate the invasion of English sport to the United States—especially by those American ‘muscular Christian’ dis-
ciples. Yet the real story of this movement during the period 1850-1875 belongs to England. Organized games spread like wildfire throughout English secondary schools and universities. A reputable English educational historian called this spread of sport “possibly the most widespread educational revolution in the last hundred years.” Competition, the breathless victory, the essential element, were glorified to an extraordinary degree during this period. Sir Henry John Newbolt’s poem, “Vital Lampada” glorifies school sport and the winning edge—a bumping pitch and a blinding light, an hour to play and the last man in... ‘Play up! play up and play the game!’.

‘Muscular Christianity’ undoubtedly contributed to the oversimplification of the Christian faith during the second half of the nineteenth century. But its legion of defenders, both then and now, point out virtue after virtue. Sir Neville Cardus, music critic and cricket writer, passed away on February 28, 1975, at 85 years. He once said that cricket expressed the whole English character. “If everything else in this nation of ours were lost but cricket, it would be possible to reconstruct (from it) all the eternal Englishness which has gone to establishment of Constitution and the laws.” It is this kind of exaggeration that gave the English niagara of moralistic sports competition a uniqueness unparalleled anywhere else in the world; this same elasticizing of the truth also gave rise to serious criticism by the 1870s and 1880s. At the very moment that the 1864 Clarendon Commission ‘Report of the Public Schools’ saw in sports competition “some of the most valuable social qualities and manly virtues”, clouds of doubt gathered. A storm of protest, lasting well into the twentieth century, muted the English view of ‘muscular Christianity’, and in many circles made a 180 degree turn.

J.A.L.
(to be continued)