

Sport and Social Hierarchy in Medieval England

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One of the better-known indictments of industrial society is Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In that work, Veblen turned his ironic wit upon the mercantile magnates of late nineteenth-century America whom he assailed for a number of vices, including their devotion to sport. Sporting activity, in Veblen's view, has a dual function for the industrial elite: Not only is it the means by which the "predatory temperament" of this group is cultivated but also it provides an occasion for the invidious display of leisure status.¹ As Veblen informs his readers at the outset, the model for this critique is the behavior of the elite of feudal Europe, a group who raised the conspicuous display of leisure into an art form.²

Like many so-called "classics," Veblen's work is more often an object of distant admiration than of careful scrutiny. Clearly, his attempt to portray industrial life in terms of a pre-industrial model is a dangerous enterprise. Not only does the simple division between "leisure" and "industrious" classes disregard the complexity of the American class system; it also over-simplifies the motives of groups within that structure. Furthermore, there is a question as to whether Veblen's model even does justice to the motives and divisions of the medieval setting.

The Theory of the Leisure Class is not an example of patient and fair-minded scholarship. Rather it remains a classic because of its quality of insight, its moral vigor, and the challenges it raises for future scholarship. Among these challenges are Veblen's stimulating suggestions about the display functions of various social forms, including sport. Veblen realized that because sport is almost by definition separated from the world of practical or "productive" consequence, it may assume significant symbolic functions. As he phrases it:

Sports satisfy these requirements of substantial futility together with a colorable make-believe of purpose. In addition to this they afford scope for emulation, and are attractive also on that account. In order to be decorous, an employment must conform to the leisure-class canon of reputable waste.³

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In this sense, sporting activity may have specifically cultural implications (i.e., it may dramatize the values or ethos or a group). It may also—or instead—reflect more purely social concerns (i.e., it may illustrate the “invidious” position of that group in society). Finally, it may showcase individual status (i.e., the honor or prestige of a person within that setting).

Despite the promise of this approach, Veblen’s work is marred by its assumption that elite sports more or less *inevitably* function in the above ways. However, the error itself is instructive, for it invites the modern researcher to re-think two questions made pertinent by Veblen’s analysis: 1) How are invidious social distinctions maintained in the sporting world and 2) Under what conditions does sport become more ritualistic or display-oriented? In the current paper, these questions regarding sport and social hierarchy will be investigated in a return to the medieval context. More specifically, the paper will analyze military sports, hunting sports, and ball play within one society, England, from 1100-1500. After viewing the different histories of sports within these categories, the author will offer some generalizations about sport, both in its medieval setting and more broadly.

Military Sport

Few activities illustrate the development of ritualism and display better than the military tournament. Brought into England from France in the twelfth century, the early tournaments fulfilled a number of functions for the knightly class.⁴ They provided training for battle and an outlet for martial fervor between wars. They offered landless or poor knights the opportunity to win prestige and perhaps to attract the patronage of a superior. They provided the chance for economic gain through capture and ransoming. They were a pretext for the gathering of influentials, who might parade their strength or seek allies. Gradually, the event left behind most of these purposes and assumed more strictly symbolic functions.⁵

The armies of Norman England were composed primarily of two groups, the feudal “host” (which consisted of mounted noblemen and their knights) and the old Saxon “fyrd” (an infantry of ordinary people summoned by the local sheriffs).⁶ As each nobleman brought his own supporters into the field and supervised their participation, there was little organization to the fighting. Instead, as equals, the knights fought in long lines across the front. This relative lack of organization was paralleled by the fyrd, whose amateurism made them particularly susceptible to the “shock troop” assaults of the armored cavalry.

As there was little organized training for knights, mock battles were an important way of honing military skill. As the twelfth century chronicler Roger of Hoveden puts it:

A youth must have seen his blood flow and felt his teeth crack under the blow of his adversary and have been thrown to the ground twenty times. Thus will he be able to face real war with the hope of victory.⁷

The clearest picture of these events at this time comes from the biography of William Marshall, an originally landless knight, who through his skill in tourneying and talent for social contacts, ultimately gained both land and a celebrated position as guardian to the heir to Henry II.⁸ From this, it is clear that there were minimal rules (covering such issues as time of fighting, types of weapons, etc.) that organized the activities of two or more groups of knights. The contest was generally the “melee” in which all the knights took part at once; and the fighting might range over an area of several square miles.⁹

In the jaundiced view of his biographer, Marshall was more interested in chivalric glory than in any economic rewards which might derive from his skills.¹⁰ Others seem to have taken a more business-like approach. In 1176, for example, Marshall and his newly-crowned protegee, Henry III, encountered the tactics of the Count of Flanders, who waited until the other combatants were exhausted from the melee and only then dashed in with his supporters to capture them. Not only does Marshall gain a bit of revenge on the Count; he later teamed with another knight, Roger of Gaugi, a rather profitable alliance which netted them over 100 captives in ten months. At any rate, it seems that the twelfth-century tourney was something of a free-for-all, with both landless knights and grandees struggling to augment simultaneously their reputations and pocketbooks.¹¹

Greater formality emerged during the thirteenth century.¹² This development was accompanied by a change of setting—from open fields to the confines of city streets or castle yards that would be filled with gaily colored tents and crowded spectators. In London, for example, a favorite site became Cheapside, one of the widest streets.¹³ The new accommodations for spectators, as well as the presence of judges and noble women, mark an important change in the character of the event.¹⁴ Emphasis was shifting from the rude effectiveness of a knight in garnering prisoners toward the display of individual heroics.

The new formality may also be attributed to the French fashions of chivalry and courtly love, which were popularized during the last quarter of the twelfth century.¹⁵ In England, this was combined with the imagery of the Arthurian legend. In 1252, for example, Matthew Paris first mentions a “round table,” presumably a military game with blunted weapons which was held along with other exercises, like skipping or throwing stones.¹⁶ The knight of the later Middle Ages wished to exhibit allegiances (to family, order, and estate) and also to receive individual honors at the dances and festivities which became increasingly important parts of the event.

Another source of the movement toward formality was the intervention of both church and king. Since about 1130, the church had railed against tournaments—enforcing its disapproval with threats to excommunicate participants, to confiscate their lands and goods, and to treat those killed in the events as suicides.¹⁷ Partly in response to this clerical pressure but also in recognition of the inferiority of English knights to the French, Richard I in 1195 tried licensing the events as a means of controlling them. Henceforth, such affairs were to be conducted at five sites south of the Trent River (the North being somewhat less predictable in its loyalty), with fees ranging from twenty marks for an earl to two marks for a landless knight.¹⁸ Beyond this, steps were taken to prevent misbehavior by participants or rioting, concerns which continued throughout the period.¹⁹ Thus, the relationship of the medieval ruler to the tourney was an ambivalent one. Tournaments were potentially dangerous events in that they brought together large numbers of armed men; so the English kings before Stephen (r. 1135-54) prevented them. However, later rulers tended to follow a policy of control rather than prohibition—permitting some as a means of generating both revenue and military zeal for some foreign adventure.

Changes were taking place in the nature of warfare, however; and these undercut the significance of the tourney as a military event. Oman has argued that the decisive advantage of armored cavalry had passed by the end of the fourteenth century.²⁰ It is worth remembering that the great victories of the English over the French in 1346, 1356, and 1415 were dependent on the superiority of the longbow rather than on cavalry charges. With the increasing deployment of trained infantry—as pikemen and gunners—the decline of the knight as a military vassal was hastened further.

A new theatricality developed. Froissart records an event at Smithfield in 1343 where knights came into the lists dressed as the Pope and his cardinals.²¹ Similarly, he comments on a tourney in 1386 at the same location where the knights were led into the lists by ladies leading them on silver threads.²² By the fifteenth century, these elements were predominant. Now it was only the king or the wealthiest nobles who sponsored such events; and the events themselves became simply additions to the festivities surrounding weddings, coronations, or great victories. On such occasions, it was common for the hosts of the event to assume the personage of characters in fairy stories and to defend castles or mysterious passes from invited challengers.²³ So diminished were the military habits of the old order that a book printed by Caxton in 1484 could claim:

Alas, what do ye, but sleep and take ease, and are all disordered from Chivalry? I would demand a question if I should not displease—How many knights be there now in England that have the use and exercise of a knight? That is, to wit, that he knoweth his horse, and his horse him . . .²⁴

Corresponding to these changes was the popularization of the joust, the regu-

lated combat between two mounted performers. Jousting seems to have become fashionable during the thirteenth century, and it developed as an increasingly artificial contest by which one gained individual renown and the approval of the ladies.²⁵ By the fourteenth century, plate armor—of heavy construction and calculated to deflect an opponent's blows—made the feat of unhorsing an opponent by horse alone difficult. Thus, during the first few passes, the contestants contented themselves with breaking their lances on the opponent's armor. If the lances had been broken and both remained mounted, the fighting continued on foot with blunted swords. Around 1400, in response to accidental (and sometimes intentional) collisions of the horses, a tilt or barrier was added.²⁶ This was clear concession to the demands of sport rather than war; and this theme is illustrated further by the scorecards which emerged about this time.²⁷ Emphasis was given not only to the number of lances broken but to the ways in which they were broken as well.

Thus, to return to Veblen, the increasing formality and display of the tournament seems to have been encouraged by a number of factors: the separation of the tourney from its military applications, the periodic hostility of the church, the efforts of monarch to regulate potentially hostile subjects, and the popularization of courtly love. A final element is the changing nature of the elite itself. The later feudal period saw an increasing use of *scutage*—literally “shield money” which could be paid to escape knight service.²⁸ With this disinterest in taking knightly vows and assuming the dangers of war, there was a need to promote knighthood as the honorific and romantic status it had been before.²⁹ The later tournament then became a ritual of group identification or pageant which gathered together the greater leaders of the country within the old traditions of military duty and fealty to the king.³⁰

Hunting Sports

In a society based largely on subsistence agriculture, land was a dominant source of wealth and prestige. As landholders parcelled out acreage to their social inferiors, an interesting question arose: Which of the several layers of tenants should have rights to the wild beasts residing on those lands? Hunting privileges thus became a way of illustrating the superiority of station. Indeed, the history of hunting in England is anchored about the twin concepts of exclusion (by means of forest, chase, park, or warren) and poaching.

Before the Norman conquest, freeholders generally were permitted to hunt upon their own land.³¹ However, the Conqueror was intent on dramatizing his new status as tenant-in-chief. Therefore, he extended the “king's forest”—i.e., those areas within which game could be taken only by his permission. Young has estimated the new areas of royal prerogative ultimately reached as one-fourth of all England; and this extension was resented not only on principle but because it sometimes, as in the case of New Forest in Hampshire,

involved the de-population of villages and hamlets.³² Furthermore, it was a hardship for those remaining in or near the forest because now any use of the land, such as “assart” (i.e., growing crops), “waste” (removing wood for lumber and fuel), and “purpresture” (raising fences to keep animals from cropland) was prohibited along with hunting. Such prohibitions may seem arbitrary, but the kings’ favorite prey required deep woods and therefore any encroachment by the populace was seen as a threat. Beyond this, violations of these prohibitions were an important revenue source for the Crown.³³

The enthusiasm of the Norman kings for hunting and the ferocity with which they enforced their claims is well-known. Regarding the habits of William, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records:

He made great protection for the game
and imposed laws for the same,
That he who slew hart or hind
Should be made blind.
He preserved the harts and boars
and loved the stags as much
as if he were their father.
Moreover, for the hares did he decree that they should go free.³⁴

These early kings might sell off or relax their claims when they needed money or support (as did Stephen), but more typically their efforts were directed toward extension and harsh forms of deterrence (e.g., Richard I added castration to the list of punishments for forest offenses).³⁵

The forest reached its largest dimensions and most systematic administration in the reign of Henry II (r. 1154-1189) and then slowly diminished throughout the period. Three documents that indicate the shift away from monarchical prerogative are the so-called Forest Laws of Canute during the reign of Henry I (1100-1135), the Assize of Woodstock (1184), and the Forest Charter of 1217. The first is believed to be a concoction of the Normans which gave their own severe forest laws some bogus Anglo-Danish precedents.³⁶ Here penalties were differentiated between freeman and villein, with the latter receiving such punishments as the loss of a hand, plunging an arm in boiling water, or ultimately death itself. The second document, the Assize of Woodstock, is important for its preamble, which indicates that this was not an arbitrary act of the ruler but rather a joint act of King and Council.³⁷ It codified forest policy and checked some of the worst abuses of the forest officials. Finally, the Forest Charter ended the worst punishments, replacing these with fines, or for an offender unable to pay, imprisonment for a year and a day.³⁸ Furthermore, the process of afforestation was reversed, and magnates were granted limited rights to take beasts of the forest when traveling through the king’s preserves. As a political document, it is correlary to the new balance struck by the Great Charter of 1215.

Even though the kings were jealous of their hunting territories (a jealousy which extended to woods and wasteland they might never visit), one need not feel sorry for the knightly class. For the most part, they had their hunting. Such rights could be acquired in two ways. First, there were the rights by soil; freeholders (and this included yeomen farmers) could take game on their own land provided it was outside the king's forest. Second, there were rights by privilege; one could apply to the monarch for permission to hunt within the forest. These rights commonly were granted to the leaders of the clergy³⁹ and to the important citizens of the towns⁴⁰ as well.

Access to land was then a basic means of sporting discrimination. Beyond this, rights might be demarcated by the kind of animals which could be taken.⁴¹ A first category was the beasts of "venery" or "hunting". These included the red deer (both hart and hind), the boar, and sometimes the wolf and hare. They were so termed not only because they were excellent prey but because they slept during the day in the forest where they were roused and pursued. A second category was the beasts of the "chase," including the fallow deer (both buck and doe), marten, and roe deer.⁴² These creatures were more often chased in open country. For legal purposes, both groups might be combined as "beasts of the forest." When a person with the right of forest or chase was allowed to enclose an area for his own use, the result was termed a "park". Finally (and least prestigious) was the right of "warren". This permitted the pursuit of smaller game, such as rabbits, pheasants, and partridge, which would be caught in open wasteland. Warren seems to have been the privilege most commonly granted.⁴³

An important new element in the pattern of privilege and prohibition, however, occurred in 1389. In that year, the Commons complained to Richard II:

Foreasmuch as divers artificers, laborers, and servants and grooms keep greyhounds, and other dogs, and on holidays, when good Christian people be at church hearing divine service, they go hunting in parks, warrens, and connegries of lords to the very great destruction of same.⁴⁴

In response to this accusation, a property qualification was introduced to restrict those who could rightly keep hounds, ferrets, nets, or "other engines to take and destroy deer, hares, or coneyes, or other gentlemen's game." By this act (13 Ric. II, ch. 13), the qualification for keeping such instruments was forty shillings a year for a layman and a benefice worth ten pounds for a clergyman. The punishment for infraction was one year's imprisonment. This change seems to reflect the differentiation of ranks that was occurring during the late feudal period.⁴⁵ The decline of population during the plague years had made labor scarce and upset the old contracts between lord and peasant. New groups of unattached laborers were forming in the towns. The 1380's had thus been a time of political unrest, with the lower orders trying to rise against an elite intent on maintaining the old patterns of subservice. In this context, the Commons added fuel to their argument by insinuating that "some times under

such colours, they [the above-named artificers, laborers, etc.] make their assemblies and conferences and conspiracies to rise and destroy their allegiance."⁴⁶ One demand of the ill-fated Peasants' Revolt of 1381 had been free fishing and hunting rights; now such privileges were even more sharply curtailed.⁴⁷ So began nearly 440 years of property qualifications in England.

Hunting, then, illustrates some interesting mechanisms for maintaining invidious social distinctions in sport. Access to land (through tenancy rights or special privileges) was most basic. However, this system was refined by the delineation of rights to certain animals or (when this was not effective) by stipulations regarding the ownership of hunting implements. This elaboration of hunting as a distinctive pursuit of the governing groups was perpetuated as well by the development of formality.

Gautier has written of the feudal elite that their lives were ruled by three passions—war, hunting, and the tournament—and that the last two were preparations for the first.⁴⁸ This military emphasis was especially pronounced in the *par force* hunting of the stag, which the Normans popularized. An unsympathetic account of this is provided by John of Salisbury, writing about 1159:

In our time, hunting and hawking are esteemed the most honourable employments and most excellent virtues by our nobility and they think it the height of worldly felicity to spend the whole of their time in these diversions, accordingly they prepare for them with more solicitude, expense, and parade than they do for war, and pursue the wild beasts with greater fury than they do the enemies of our country.⁴⁹

The *par force* hunt began early in the morning when the forester with his lymer (or scenting hound) located the beast to be pursued. It was then the task of the huntsman to rouse the beast and lead the mounted hunting party in the chase. When the animal finally was brought to bay, it was the prerogative of the host or whomever he appointed to dismount, rush in, and slay the beast with his sword.⁵⁰

While it is difficult to know much of early hunting practices, the books which emerged during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries indicate a fairly elaborate body of technique and terminology. Of works directed toward an English audience, the first is *Le Art de Venerie* (1327), written in Norman French by William Twiti and dedicated to Edward III.⁵¹ This short work includes a discussion of the various beasts, their habits, the different horn calls to describe their movement during the hunt, instructions for flaying them, and the seasons when it is licit to pursue them. It concludes with rules for dividing the kill. By the time of the Duke of York's *The Master of Game* (1406-1413), it is clear that the hunt servants (unless they be royal servants) were on foot while the principals rode.⁵² The various horn calls are again discussed as are certain points of etiquette (e.g., it was always a servant who roused the game). Furthermore, there is a proliferation of terminology marking the experienced

hunter. For example, if one is dislodging an animal from its lair, it is proper to say that he is “unharbouring” a hart, “starting” or “moving” a hare, “rearing” a boar, “raising” a wolf, “bolting” a coney, “rousing” a buck or doe, etc. Likewise, it might be noted a group of hart or hind is a “herd,” that of hare is a “hushe” or “down,” that of boar, a “singular” (though for wild swine, it is a “sounder”), that of fox, a “skulk,” of wolf, a “rout,” etc. It is difficult to know the intended audience of these books. However, it seems likely that they were pitched to the new reading public—i.e., the citizens of the towns—who now had their sporting rights and who wished to emulate the landed class who had grown up with this knowledge. At any rate, the somewhat artificial restrictions and terminology suggest that there was an “elite” form of hunting which might be distinguished from the humbler forms.

As hunting was the “mystery of the woods,” so hawking was the “mystery of the rivers.” This was because wild fowl were favorite prey and because open flat land was needed to follow the course of the birds on horseback.⁵³ Until the perfection of the gun made it possible to “shoot flying” in the seventeenth century, it was the joy of both men and women of the elite to ride after their hawks, necks craned upward, watching the dizzying ascent of the falcon, its eventual stoop on the prey below, and the battle of attacker and attacked as they plummeted toward earth. So large a part of the life of the elite was hawking that Abram considers it the distinctive medieval sport.⁵⁴

The representations in the Bayeux tapestry of various mounted figures with hawks on their wrists and the pictures of May in illuminated calendars (with wealthy youth bearing hawks) suggest that the hawk may have been a symbol of rank at this time. During the Norman period, hawking was more or less restricted to the nobility, and the elite took their birds with them on journeys. The position of falconry as a high-status activity is emphasized by Frederick II in his great continental work on the subject, *De Arte cum Avibus* (1247):

Since many nobles and but few of the lower rank learn and carefully pursue this art, one may properly conclude that it is intrinsically an aristocratic sport.⁵⁵

In reference to the specifically English customs, Strutt argues that “no act could be reckoned more dishonourable to a man of rank than to give up his hawk.”⁵⁶

While the privileges of owning a hawk were extended to every free man by the Forest Charter of 1217, penalties for the theft of a hawk or destruction of its eggs remained quite strict. This use of law to articulate sporting rights is illustrated by a proclamation of Edward III in 1360.⁵⁷ By that proclamation, anyone finding a hawk of any description was ordered to deliver it to the local sheriff, who in turn would announce the find throughout the district. If the finder was not claimed within four months, the ownership of the hawk would

revert to the finder—if he was a gentleman. If the finder was not a gentleman, the sheriff could keep the hawk and merely recompense the finder.

Unlike hunting, hawking could claim little military relevance. However, it had certain advantages in that less time and space were required and gambling was possible when two birds were sent after the same prey. Furthermore, hawking, as opposed to hunting, was essentially a spectator sport. It was the training of the bird and the expertise of the handler which brought credit to its owner. Again, the aristocratic nature of the sport was almost guaranteed by the expense of the birds, their special diets, and the extensive training required.⁵⁸

The number and kinds of falcons owned was also a status symbol. The prize bird, according to Frederick, was the gerfalcon (which was imported from Norway), while the saker (from the Mediterranean) was a close second. Others in his list of “noble” birds included the varieties of peregrine (some from the British Isles) and the lanner (from the Mediterranean). In general, the true falcons (which have long or sharp wings) were considered socially superior to the shorter-winged hawks, such as the goshawk or the sparrowhawk. This preoccupation with status is given an interesting expression in *The Boke of St. Albans*, written sometime during the fifteenth century and reprinted more than any other text of its time, excluding the Bible. In that work, the author lists the various types of hawks considered appropriate for the different stations of life.⁵⁹

The eagle, the vulture,⁶⁰ and the merloun for an emperor.
The ger-faulcon, and the tercel of the ger-faulcon, for a king.
The faulcon gentle, and the tercel gentle, for a prince.
The faulcon of the rock, for a duke.
The faulcon peregrine, for an earl.
The bastard,⁶¹ for a baron.
The sacre, and the sacret, for a knight.
The laner, and the laneret, for an esquire.
The marlyon, for a lady.
The hobby, for a young man.
The gos-hawk, for a yeoman.
The tercel, for a poor man.
The sparrow-hawk, for a priest
The musket, for a holy water clerk.
The kesterel, for a knave or servant.

There is no evidence that such a listing was ever put into force. Rather, it is one illustration of the medieval propensity to define human activity by station.

Ball Play

There is no evidence that the military elite of Angl-Norman times were ball players. While there are some illustrations which suggest the importance of

ball games for women and children,⁶² the men seem to have preferred the vigorous pursuits provided by their horses, hawks, and dogs. Even by Chaucer's time, the "parfait knight" of his prologue is hardly a gamester.⁶³

During the fourteenth century, however, this indifference to ball play began to soften. The modification was due in part to French influence, for *jeu de paume*, an early form of handball, was played in the courtyards of castles and monasteries there. During this time, the first walled-in courts began to appear and *jeu de courte paume* became differentiated from *jeu de longue paume* (the outdoor game).⁶⁴ The former type (which became known in England as "real" or "court" tennis) combined the hazard of a net with the buttressed walls of cloister or courtyard. The French origin of court tennis is attested by the French terminology of the game (*dedans, grille*, etc.) and by the fact the earliest prosecutions of unlawful tennis in England came from towns near the French coast, e.g., Canterbury and later Lydd.⁶⁵ By 1370, tennis was entrenched enough that Chaucer could assume a general familiarity with the game in his *Troilus and Crysedes*:

But canstow playen racket to and fro
Nette in, dokke, now this, now that, Pandare⁶⁶

By the mid-fifteenth century, the demand for tennis implements was substantial enough that Edward IV was petitioned to prevent the import of tennis balls. In response, a monopoly was granted to the ironmongers for this purpose. From the *Register of the Ironmongers' Company* during 1454- 1533, it is apparent that they sold balls in large quantities throughout the period.⁶⁷ In fact, the size of some of the orders (ten gross, twenty-five gross, etc.) and repetition of certain names suggests that some of the sales may have been to the proprietors of tennis courts.

If the wealthy pursued the game within the closed quarters of their great houses or at the "public" courts in town, the poor did not have these possibilities. Like hunting and military exercises, tennis' history is a record of social discrimination. The first prohibition thought to be aimed at tennis (among other games) was by Edward III in 1365. That king forbade all able-bodied men under pain of imprisonment to "meddle in hurling of stones, loggats, quoits, handball, football, club ball, cambuc, cockfighting, and other games of no value."⁶⁸ Instead they were constrained to practice archery. This is repeated by Richard II in 1389. However, now there is a new element: "That no Servant of Husbandry, or Labourer, nor Servant [or] Artificer, nor of Victualler, shall bear . . . any Sword, nor Dagger."⁶⁹ Instead, they "shall have Bows and Arrows, and use the same on Sundays and Holydays" rather than pursue the above games. By 1410, Henry IV slapped a penalty of six days' imprisonment on the offenders.⁷⁰

During the fifteenth century, tennis rated more specific attention in these pro-

nouncements. In the *Proceedings of the Court of the Common Council* in London in 1476, one may read:

My lord the Maire chargeth and commaundeth that manner persone what degree of condicion he be haff suffer any temys playing, play at the Cloich [bowls] or the Cailles [nine-pins] to be used in his hous or his ground.⁷¹

By 1477, Edward IV proclaimed that no “person should use any unlawful Games as Dice, Coits, Tennis, and such like Games . . . upon Pain to have imprisonment of three years. . . .”⁷² In London, the Common Council in 1480 again focused this ordinance more specifically on laborers, servants, and apprentices.⁷³ This was continued by Henry VII in 1495 who proclaimed that

noon apprentice ne srvaunt of husbandry, laborer ner srvaunt artificer play . . . the Tenys Closshe Dise Cardes Bowles nor any other unlawful game in no wise out of Christmas.⁷⁴

The association of tennis with bowling and dice in these proclamations suggests strongly that tennis was a gambling sport at this time. Furthermore, the records of the Ironmongers make it likely that public courts (perhaps attached to inns) were now in existence. It is also apparent that the brunt of these attacks on tennis was directed at young laborers who presumably would be better off at archery practice or at work. The elite had their tennis⁷⁵—and the poor continued to play where they could. Often their playground was the street or churchyard as this complaint by the Bishop of Exeter Cathedral in 1417 makes plain:

Atte whych tymes, and in especial, in tyme of dyvyne service, ungoodly rules people, most customably yong people of the said comminalte, have exercised unlawful games, as the toppe, penny prykke, and most atte tenys, by the which the walls of the saide Cloistre have been defowled and the glas wyndowes all to brost, as it openly sheweth, contraries to all good and goostly gode-nesse.⁷⁶

This pattern of prohibition and permission then continued during the Tudor period when the popularity of tennis boomed.⁷⁷

Sport and Social Hierarchy

This paper was instigated by a desire to make some assessment of sport in medieval England and, on that basis, to draw broader conclusions about the nature and significance of sport in society. While it is clear from the previous summaries that each sport seems to have had its own pattern and pace of development, certain similarities do emerge.

Medieval sport is interesting because it showcases what might be called “cultural” discrimination.⁷⁸ In this pattern, an elite (or some other group with power to enforce its ambitions) attempts to reserve an entire category of activity for its exclusive use. As has been indicated, the prominent members of

society had their jousting, their hawks and hounds, and later tennis. The lower orders were directed away from these activities toward archery practice; furthermore, they possessed their own traditions of mass peasant games.⁷⁹

Such a scheme is difficult to enforce, particularly amidst the shifting conditions of the Middle Ages, when new types of free men were becoming powerful in the towns. Since a broad category like hunting could not be reserved, it was more practical to specify the conditions under which one could hunt or detail the kinds of hunting permissible. A basic method of discrimination then was to limit access to land, with the further proviso that only certain animals could be taken. Another effort was to limit the possession of the implements by which game could be taken. At points during this period, villagers were forbidden to possess a bow with sharp arrows near the king's forests or to own large dogs which had not been hobbled.⁸⁰ Attempts to prevent the possession of ferrets, nets, or "other engines" have been noted as well.

With this reference to the difficulties of enforcement, it is time to comment more clearly on the first of two questions posed by Veblen's analysis: How is social "distance" or discrimination maintained in the sporting world? The medieval materials suggest the importance of at least four different kinds of mechanisms by which people may be excluded from an activity. A first is *wealth*. Only great wealth could have outfitted the participants in the later tourney and supported the magnificent displays which surrounded it.⁸¹ Wealth was a necessity to falconry, and land ownership was a basis of hunting rights. Furthermore, it was central to the development of court tennis, where access to a large room with certain characteristics was required. Of course, economic criteria remain as important mechanisms in the modern world; a poor person simply cannot assemble the implements pertinent to yachting or polo.

A second criterion, which was more important during the Middle Ages than today, is *knowledge*. A person cannot embark upon an activity in its proper form because he does not know how. During the Renaissance, the explosion in book production (including how-to sporting manuals) meant that middle-class people now had access to the intricacies of upper-class life. During the Middle Ages, such knowledge still depended on socialization and oral transmission. Thus, the amazing welter of terminology (often French) and technique which surrounded hawking, hunting, and real tennis (which is among the most complicated ball games in the world) guaranteed that practitioners of these arts could keep them safe from imitations.

A third factor (which also seems to have been more important then than now) was *status* or *prestige*. Certain activities simply were deemed unsuitable or inappropriate for certain groups.⁸² Because of the smaller number of occupations, the role of guilds in defining the duties of each group, and the restrictions on mobility (both from place to place and up and down the status sys-

tem), relatively clear portraits of the various ranks of life might be etched. Medieval society was a web of corporately-situated individuals. Differences between these groups might be expressed in terms of dress, weapons owned, titles or names, punishments under the law, language spoken, etc. In this context, sport (and leisure more generally) was not a sidelight but rather a fundamental way of expressing group membership.

Normally, these three criteria work together to keep an elite version of an activity distinctive. However, during times of social change or disagreement, other mechanisms may be required. In this regard, *political power* is the ability to call upon others (especially the state) to enforce one's ambitions. During the Middle Ages, sport became a subject for law. Hunters without a certain property qualification might be punished for overstepping their rights as might the tennis-playing apprentice or the poor man who kept for his own the hawk he found. Thus, most of the sporting proclamations came after the mid-fourteenth century—when new categories of free men were deviating from the proprieties of the old rural order.

The second question posed by Veblen's analysis concerned the causes of formality and display in sport. In essence, this has meant the proliferation of normative elements (i.e., rules and values) for an activity and the ostentatious performance of individuals within this context. The player not only tries to win; he tries to win in a courteous or socially graceful manner. To some extent, this growth of "artificial" challenges or obligations is related inversely to political or economic consequences of the sport. As the medieval materials show, the early tourney highlighted both military training and economic rewards; the free-wheeling battles of that time stand in stark contrast to the regimented individual displays which pertain after the event lost these characteristics. Likewise, both falconry and tennis were activities which had little economic or military relevance; hence, they developed in fairly formal ways.

In general, formality and display are characteristics which reflect the superiority of the group over the individual. The former is produced when individuals submit to a collective framework of values and norms; the latter, when they orient themselves toward gaining the regard of that group. In this light, regulations may be enforced by the group leader. In the late medieval case, this leader was often the king, who wished to control the behavior of his subordinates. The kings' regulation of the military tourney was motivated by a desire to manage potentially hostile groups of armed men, to gain some revenue in the bargain, and to reaffirm a secular ethic (i.e., military chivalry) in the face of Church prohibitions. These are fairly specific concerns; however, Weber suggests that this interest in formality and the inculcation of values was a general characteristic of the patrimonial ruler.⁸³ This emphasis was opposed by his vassals, who yearned for individual exploits. Just as the de-centralized aspects of feudalism bred a competition among the elite and a glorification of

the game, so centralized authority imparted formality upon these competitions. This theme has been treated as well by Elias, who argues that it was this ultimate centralization that led to “courtly” or “civilized” manners in general.⁸⁴

Finally, the development of formality may be related to a group’s need to solidify its identity (i.e., its social position and ethos). McFarlane has argued that this need existed for the elite during the late feudal period.⁸⁵ It is his thesis that between 1300 and 1500 there occurred a stricter definition of the ruling group and a greater differentiation between its members. In 1300, a dozen or so earls shared their nobility with perhaps 3000 lesser landowners; by 1500, a small and graded class of fifty to sixty was predominant.⁸⁶ This growth of a hereditary peerage was accompanied by a general diminution of the knight (what McFarlane calls “bastard feudalism”), by a proliferation of the gentry, and by a more aggressive attitude toward agriculture. In the case of the tournament at least, this intra-class differentiation promoted greater exclusiveness and formality. It may also have been pertinent to the increased sophistication of hunting or tennis. Under such conditions, sport for the elite was as much a ritual of group solidarity (vis-a-vis contending elements of the gentry or bourgeoisie) as it was an occasion for competition with the group itself.

To return to Veblen, it seems that ritualism and display are not “natural” conditions of elite sport; rather they depend on special circumstances. Furthermore, it appears that the two questions which have been posed here may be related. As cultural discrimination became more difficult to enforce (due to the new categories of freemen with time and money), formality and display became more exaggerated. Thus, if *The Theory of the Leisure Class* finds any parallel to feudal life, it is in the later Middle Ages. It is at that time that the new categories of free men with money and time, the taste for luxuries, the solidification of a noble class, and the general status-striving made conspicuous display and formality an important part of hunting, ball play, and military sports.

Notes

1. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, 1899 (New York: New American Library, 1953), pp. 161-182.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

4. See Stephen Hardy, “The Medieval Tournament: A Functional Sport of the Upper Class,” *Journal of Sport History* 1 (Fall 1974): 91-115.

5. The best treatments of the tournament are still Francis Cripps-Day, *The History of the Tournament in England and France* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1918) and R. Colman Clephan, *The Tournament: Its Periods and Phases* (London: Methuen, 1919).

6. For a description of the feudal army, see Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), chapter 1.

7. Quoted in R. Ewart Oakeshott, *A Knight and His Horse* (London: Luttesworth Press, 1962), p. 203.
8. Jean d'Erlee, *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal, Comte de Striguil et de Pembroke, Regent d'Angleterre de 1216 à 1219*, 3 vols. (Paris: Paul Meyer, 1901). The English version is Sidney Painter, *William Marshal: Knight-Errant, Baron, and Regent of England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1953).
9. Painter, *William Marshal*, chapter 3.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
11. See K. G. Webster, "The Twelfth Century Tourney," pp. 227-234 in *Anniversary Papers by Colleagues and Pupils of George Lyman Kittredge* (Boston: Ginn, 1913).
12. See Moe1 Denholm-Young, "The Tournament in the Thirteenth Century," in R. W. Hunt et al., *Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948).
13. Alec Reginald Meyers, *London in the Age of Chaucer* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), p. 174
14. F. Warre-Cornish, *Chivalry* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1901), p. 101.
15. See Leon Gautier, *Chivalry* (London: Phoenix House, 1959), pp. 9-31.
16. Discussed in Clephan, *The Tournament*, p. 3.
17. The clerical prohibitions have been collected by Cripps-Day *The History of the Tournament*, pp. 39-40. They ended when Pope John XXII needed knights for a crusade in 1316.
18. Raphael Hollinshed, *Chronicles*, 6 vols. (London: n.p., 1807,2:253
19. These issues are detailed further in the Statute of Arms by Edward I in 1295. See Coltman, *The Tournament*, p. 20.
20. C. W. Oman, "Military Archery and the Art of War," pp. 58-89 in Francis Barnard, ed., *Companion to English History: The Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902).
21. Discussed in Hollinshed, *Chronicles*, 2:627.
22. Jean Froissart, *The Chronicle of Froissart*, 6 vols., trans. by Sir John Bouchier and Lord Berners (London: David Nutt, 1902), 5:422-425.
23. These are described in Clephan, *The Tournament*, pp. 45-61.
24. Raymond Lull, *Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry, or Knyghthoode, Translated oute of Frensshe into Englysshe at a requeste of a gentyl and noble esquier by me William Caxton* (1484), quoted in Cripps-Day, *The History of the Tournament*, pp. 92-93.
25. Richard Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry* (Ipswich, England: Boydell Press, 1970), pp. 171-178.
26. Coltman, *The Tournament*, pp. 39-41.
27. These are collected in M. Foulkes, "Jousting Checques of the Sixteenth Century," *Archaeologia* 63; also Viscount Dillon, "Tilting in Tudor Times," *Archeological Journal* 55: 296-321.
28. Doris Stenton, *English Society in the Early Middle Ages: 1066-1307* (London. Penguin, 1965), pp. 70-80.
29. See Stephen Jeffreys, *Tourney and Joust* (London: Wayland Publishers, 1973), pp. 29-35.
30. See Diane Bernstein, *Mirrors of Courtesy* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), p. 17
31. See Charles C. Trench, *The Poacher and Squire: A History of Game Preservation in England* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1967), chapter 1.
32. Charles Young, *The Royal Forests of Medieval England* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), p. 5.
33. An account of the depopulation of villages is in Ralph Arnould, *A Social History of England: From 55 B.C. to A.D. 1215* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), p. 287.
34. See Stenton, *English Society in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 108.
35. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (New Brunswick: New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1961), p. 165.
36. Roger Longrigg, *The History of Foxhunting* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 23
37. Trench, *The Poacher and the Squire*, p. 22.
38. The articles of the assize are summarized in Young, *The Royal Forests*, pp. 28-29
39. The Forest Charter is reproduced in John Manwood, *A Treatise and Discourse of the Lawes of the Forest*, 4th ed. (London: N.P., 1717), pp. 402-406.
40. See Chaucer's description of the sporting cleric for whom "Hunting a hare or riding at a fence was all his fun he spared no expense," *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Nevill Coghill (Baltimore: Penguin, 1951), p. 24.

40. See O. G. Tomkiewff, *Life in Norman England* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1966), p. 85.
41. See William Twiti, *The Art of Hunting*, ed. Bror Danielsson (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wikell, 1977). Also Patrick Chalmers, *The History of Hunting* (London: Seeley, Service, and Co 1936), chapters 10 and 11.
42. The roe was sometimes demoted to the status of warren because it disrupted the feeding of the more prestigious kinds of deer.
43. Stenton, *English Society in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 105.
44. Reproduced in A. L. "Recreations," in Poole, ed., *Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 619.
45. See K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).
46. "Forest Laws," *Chambers's Journal* 43 (April 28, 1866): 262.
47. For a discussion of the Peasant's Revolt, see Michael Brander, *The Hunting Instinct* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), chapter 3.
48. Gautier, *Chivalry*, p. 268.
49. John of Salisbury, *De Nugis Cuiuslibet*, quoted in Joseph Strutt, *The Sports Pastimes of the People of England*, ed. J. C. Cox (London: Methuen, 1901), p. 4.
50. This type of hunting receives a colorful description in the fourteenth century poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. James Rosenberg (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), pp. 39-67.
51. William Twiti, *The Art of Venery*, ed. Bror Daniellson (Upsala: Almqvist and Wikell, 1977).
52. Edward, Second Duke of York, *The Master of Game*, ed. W. A. and F. Baillie-Grohman (London: Ballantine, Hanson and Co., 1904).
53. Harding Cox and Gerald Lascelles, *Coursing and Falconry* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1892), p. 218.
54. Annie Abram, *English Life and Manners in the Middle Ages* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1913), p.230.
55. Frederick II, *The Art of Falconry Being the De Arte Venandi Cum Avibus of Frederick II*, trans. and ed. Casey Wood and F. Marjorie Fyfe (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1943), p. 5.
56. Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, p. 21.
57. See G. C. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), p. 594.
58. See Robin Oggins, "The English Kings and Their Hawks: Falconry in Medieval England to the Time of Edward I" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1967), chapter 3.
59. Juliana Berners, *The Boke of St. Albans* (1486) reproduced and translated in Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, p. 29.
60. In the original, the term here is "bantere" or "vantour"; this may be a vulture.
61. A reviewer informs me that this refers to a cross-bred falcon.
62. See Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, chapter 3.
63. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 24.
64. Malcolm Whitman, *Tennis: Origins and Mysteries* (New York: Derrydale Press, 1932), p. 36.
65. Lord Aberdare, *The Story of Tennis* (London: Stanley Paul, 1959), p. 44.
66. Quoted in Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, p. 83.
67. Extracts of this are found in "Appendix" of Julian Marshal, *The Annals of Tennis* (London: n.p., 1878), pp. 210-212.
68. Quoted in A. L. Poole, "Recreations," p. 625.
69. 12 Ric. 2, c. 46. Reproduced in "Appendix" of Marshall, *The Annals of Tennis*, p. 210.
70. Aberdare, *The Story of Tennis*, p. 44.
71. Reproduced in "Appendix" of Marshall, *The Annals of Tennis*, p. 212.
72. 17 Edw, 4, c. 3. Reproduced *ibid*.
73. *Ibid*.
74. 2 Henry 7. c. 2. Reproduced *ibid*.
75. See Hollinshed's account of Henry V's receipt of a gift of tennis balls from the French king. Hollinshed, *Chronicles*, 3: 64.

76. Quoted in H. A. Harris, *Sport in Britain: Its Origins and Development* (London: Stanley Paul, 1975), p.24.

77. Aberdare, *The Story of Tennis*, p. 47.

78. Other levels here include "social" discrimination (i.e., exclusion from social circles) and "organizational" discrimination (i.e., exclusion from prominent positions in such groups).

79. The best collection of early football references is Francis P. Magoun, "Football in Medieval England and in Middle English Literature," *American Historical Review* 35 (1929-30): 33-45. Also, see his "Shrove Tuesday Football," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 12 (1931): 9-46.

80. See, e.g., 13 Edward I, c. 6 discussed in Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, p. 43.

81. Denholm-Young has calculated that a good charger along cost the knight of 1300 as much as 100 pounds, equivalent to the cost of a light tank in 1939. Noel Denholm-Young, *History and Heraldry: 1254-1310: A Study of the Historical Value of the Rolls of Arms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), chapter 11.

82. When elite activities are aped by the lower orders, they are described typically in comic terms. See e.g., a peasant tournament in Gilbert Pilkington, *The Tournament of Tottenham* (London: John Norton, 1631). For "jousting" from boats by the citizens of London, see Fitzstephen's account in John Stow, *A Survey of London* (n.p., 1603), chapter 11.

83. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 3 vols, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 3: 1106.

84. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978).

85. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*. See also his "Bastard Feudalism," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 20 (1945): 162-63.

86. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, p. 268.

