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A Brief History of the Swedish Sports Movement : from the 19th Century to the Present

Une brève histoire du mouvement sportif suédois du XIX^e siècle à nos jours

ABSTRACT : This article sketches the development of voluntary organized sports in Sweden from its establishment in the late 19th century to the present, using the concept of “popular movement” as a theoretical framework. Important questions are: when and how did sports actually adopt the forms of a popular movement? Which criteria were first fulfilled and which ones took longer to complete? Finally, will sports in Sweden retain its character of a popular movement in the future?

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article analyse le développement du sport organisé en Suède depuis ses origines, à la fin du XIX^e siècle, jusqu'à nos jours. Il utilise le concept de « mouvement populaire » à titre de cadre théorique. Les principales questions qu'il pose sont : quand et comment les sports ont-ils adopté les formes actuelles d'un mouvement populaire ? À quels critères correspondaient-ils et lesquels mirent le plus longtemps à être remplis ? Les sports, enfin, conserveront-ils en Suède à l'avenir leur caractère de mouvement populaire ?

KEYWORDS : Sports Movement, Popular Movement, Sweden, History

MOTS-CLÉS : Mouvement sportif, mouvement populaire, Suède, histoire

Sport is one of the most prominent elements in modern Swedish society. Studies have shown that close to half of Swedish citizens between the ages of seven and seventy are members of one of the country's 70 sport federations and nearly 20,000 sport clubs. To this may be added the innumerable numbers engaged in fitness and sport without belonging to any association – on jogging tracks, at school, on bikes or in the gym. A further indicator is that the sports movement currently includes about 600,000 voluntary leaders. In addition, the sports movement receives extensive subsidies. Support from municipalities, county councils and the government amounts to about 650 million Euros per year. Finally, there are the vast resources received from the market sector in the form of sponsoring, audience revenues, player sales, etc.¹

From a historical perspective, the development of sport and the sports movement in Sweden is remarkable. A phenomenon that at the start of the 20th century appeared as a strange spectacle restricted to a small crowd of “sport maniacs” over the years turned into a firmly grounded element in Sweden's social and cultural life. How can this story of almost uninterrupted expansion be explained?

The sports movement's path, from nothing to one of Sweden's largest organized leisure activities, is the result of a number of interacting societal factors. To begin with, the development of sport was favoured by profound changes in western societies such as urbanization, industrialization, increased leisure time, higher standards of living, improved communications and mass media development. Also important was the development of a specific Swedish welfare policy characterized by far-reaching state ambitions concerning citizen's wellbeing and high standard of living.² To this should be added all sports-related explanatory factors such as the inherent attractiveness of sport, international sport exchanges, and the growth of national leagues.

The breakthrough of sport in the 20th century is not unique to Sweden; this was a process that many countries experienced during the globalization of modern sport. What is more unique to Sweden, however, is that sports took the form of a “popular movement.”³ This concept may be defined in various ways, but in this

¹ SOU 2008:59, *Föreningsfostran och tävlingsfostran. En utvärdering av statens stöd till idrotten. Betänkande från Idrottsstödsutredningen* [Club Fosterage and Competition Fosterage. An Evaluation of Government Support to Sports], Ch. 5.

² Bergsgård, Nils-Asle & Johan R Norberg, “Sports policy and politics – the Scandinavian way”, *Sport in Society Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, Vol. 13, nr 4, 2010.

³ For a discussion of the popular movement perspective in Swedish sport research, see Norberg, Johan R, *Idrottens väg till folkhemmet. Studier i statlig idrottspolitik 1913-1970* [Sports road to the welfare state. Studies in Swedish government policy towards sport 1913–1970] (Stockholm: SISU Idrottsböcker, 2004) Ch. 2.

context there are two primary aspects to consider. The first is *organizational*. One essential characteristic of a popular movement is its democratic corporate structure whose base is made up of individual members in non-profit associations, which in turn are linked together into large, uniform, national federations. The other aspect concerns the *composition* of the membership of a movement, the idea being that a popular movement should be marked by its breadth in its members' gender, socio-economic status, geography, age, ethnicity, etc.

This article focuses on the character of Swedish sport as a popular movement. The aim is to sketch out the development of voluntarily organized sport from its establishment in the late 19th century to the present, using the above-mentioned popular movement criteria as a starting-point. When and how did sports actually adopt the forms of a popular movement? Which criteria were first fulfilled and which ones took longer to complete? Finally, will the popular movement character of sport survive?

It must be underlined that an article like this is, strictly speaking, impossible to write. Even though sport history research has made great progress in recent decades, there are still a number of gaps in our knowledge that must be filled. This account must therefore be considered as a summary of the state of current research and an attempt from an overall perspective to sketch the main lines of development.

The Formation Phase (1880-1918): The Establishment of the Swedish Sports Movement⁴

At the end of August 1901, Ivar Berger, police-court judge in Gothenburg, wrote a letter to the Stockholm officer Viktor Balck. Both had leading roles in the budding sports movement at the turn of the century. Balck was a teacher in Swedish gymnastics at the Royal *Gymnastics Central Institute (GCI)* in *Stockholm*. While travelling abroad in the second half of the 1870s, he had discovered Anglo-Saxon competitive sport and had since worked with great zeal for its establishment on Swedish ground. He had introduced sporting elements into his teaching, arranged the country's first sport competitions and invited foreign instructors. He had also spread the gospel of sport in speech and writing, not least as editor and co-author in the *Tidskrift för Idrott* (a sports journal started in 1881) and the important handbook *Illustrerad Idrottsbok* ('Illustrated Book of Sport', published 1886-1888). Balck had also been the driving force behind the establishment of a number of early sports clubs such as the

⁴ For the most detailed account of the growth of the sports movement in Sweden, see Lindroth, Jan, *Idrottens väg till folkerörelse. Studier i svensk idrottsrörelse till 1915* [The Road of Sport to Popular Movement. Studies in Swedish Sports Movement until 1915] (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 1974).

Stockholms roddförening ('Stockholm Rowing Club') 1880 and *Stockholms allmänna skridskoklubb* ('Stockholm General Skating Club') 1883.⁵

Similarly, Ivar Berger belonged to the first generation of sports leaders in Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city. Among his merits were leading positions in *Göteborgs velocipedklubb* ('Gothenburg Bicycle Club') and *Göteborgs idrottsförbund* ('Gothenburg Sports Federation').

Formally, Berger's letter to Balck was a call for improving the cooperation between two competing sports organizations: the Stockholm-based *Svenska gymnastik- och idrottsförbundet* ('Swedish gymnastics and sports federation') on one hand and the Gothenburg-based *Svenska idrottsförbundet* ('Swedish sports federation'), in which Berger was active. Actually, the letter contained much more far-reaching plans. Even though the police-court judge was not yet willing to publicize his ideas, he admitted to Balck that he hoped the two organizations would soon join into "a big and powerful federation."

To understand the importance of Berger's proposals to Balck, one must consider the structure of Swedish sporting life at the very beginning of the 20th century. Despite the intense propaganda carried out by Balck and other enthusiasts, sport was still fairly anonymous. Sports facilities were few and often simple. Newspaper coverage of sport was sporadic and laconic. Competition sport was largely unknown to most people and very few had tried it. There are no certain figures of the total number of associations, but a cautious estimate suggests approximately 200-300 clubs including about 20,000 members.

Nearly all the existing sports clubs were localized in Sweden's major cities. Sport was also a socially exclusive activity. Studies of the early Gothenburg sports clubs have demonstrated that their members were mainly recruited among the middle classes, especially minor civil servants and industrialists. Artisans, workers and students did participate, albeit not to the same extent.⁶ Corresponding studies of sporting life in Stockholm have shown that the sportsmen of the capital, too, chiefly belonged to the upper and middle levels of society, although the working-class element was growing and a wider social distribution could be discerned. Furthermore, sport was a young people's movement, dominated among the active

⁵ For Balck, see Lindroth, Jan, *Idrott för kung och fosterland: den svenska idrottens fader Viktor Balck 1844-1928* [Sport for King and Country: the Swedish sport father Viktor Balck 1844-1928] (Stockholm: SISU Idrottsböcker, 2007).

⁶Janzon, Bode, *Manschettyrken, idrott och hälsa. Studier kring idrottsrörelsen i Sverige särskilt Göteborg, intill 1900* [White-collar Professions, Sports and Health. Studies of the Sports Movement in Sweden especially Gothenburg, next to 1900 Göteborg] (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 1978) Ch. 4-5.

sports enthusiasts by the 15-24 age group. Finally, the female element was small, both among the active and the board level.⁷

A further characteristic of turn-of-the-century sporting life was the lack of efficient organizational leadership at the national level. No organization was strong enough to gather the local sports clubs under one and the same roof. On the contrary, development had proceeded in the opposite direction: towards thwarting competition between different but equally weak forms of association.

The worst situation prevailed in athletics (at the time usually referred to as “general sports” and containing a broad spectrum of sporting activities from today’s athletics to football, tennis, wrestling and weight-lifting). As early as 1891, Balck had contributed to the inauguration of Svenska *gymnastikförbundet* (‘the Swedish gymnastics federation’). As the name indicates, the association had national ambitions with gymnastics as its main focus of interest. However, the programme also included sports “of a gymnastic value,” especially athletics. The federation was localized in Stockholm. With a large number of military officers in leading positions as members and in addition the Crown Prince as its protector, the organization ranked high on the social scale. In spite of this, the association did not greatly expand. At the turn of the century, the number of associated clubs was modest and their activities were, on the whole, limited to recurrent gymnastics festivals with certain sports ingredients.⁸

As the interest in sport grew during the 1890s, the federation’s declared gymnastics profile began to be considered a hindrance compared to more direct sports clubs. In Gothenburg, this dissatisfaction resulted in the creation of Svenska *idrottsförbundet* (the Swedish sports federation) in 1895, which became a rallying point for pure competitive sport. Another characteristic feature was its more non-military leadership, headed by Wilhelm Friberg, a bookkeeper. However, by the dawn of the new century, not even this association had managed to gain any substantial national following.⁹

It is obvious that there was animosity between the two organizations. In the official publication of the sports association, the *Start* journal, Friberg often conducted violent polemics against the competitor in the capital; it was accused of being too ‘military,’ of not treating “free sports” as an independent phenomenon on a par with gymnastics and of neglecting provincial and Gothenburg sports clubs in favour of sporting life in Stockholm. The latter party responded to the criticism by

⁷ Yttergren, Leif, *Täflan är lifvet. Idrottens organisering och sportifiering 1860-1898* [Competition is life. The organization and sportification of Sports 1860-1898] (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 1996) 77-92.

⁸ Lindroth, *op. cit.*, 1974, 96-100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 100-103.

extending its sporting activities. Furthermore, it decided to change its name into *Svenska gymnastik- och idrottsförbundet* ('the Swedish gymnastics and sports federation') to further mark the new, broader profile. This name change brought the two associations' conflict to light. Now there were two federations openly competing for the organizational leadership of athletics.¹⁰

Alongside these rival federations, there were a number of other national organizations with varying degrees of sport orientation. Within some sports, the first special federations had appeared. The oldest national federation for a single sport, *Svenska hjulförbundet* ('the Swedish wheel association'), from 1888, is to be found within cycling. This was a blend between an interest organization for the growing number of cyclists and a more competition-oriented sports association. Around the turn of the century, representatives of other sports also began to show an interest in forming national federations. Most of these initiatives – within skating and swimming, for example – petered out, with one exception being *Svenska bollspelsförbundet* ('the Swedish ball sports association'), formed in 1902, which had national ambitions but lacked the capacity to expand much beyond the Stockholm area.¹¹

An entirely different type of organization was made up of the national associations that did not intend to bring together the clubs from all over the country but were instead built on individual membership. They included *Föreningen för skidlöpnings främjande i Sverige* ('The Association For The Promotion Of Skiing In Sweden') formed in 1892 and *Svenska livräddningssällskapet* ('the Swedish Life Saving Society'), formed in 1898.

In this organizational category, particular mention should be made of *Sveriges centralförening för idrottens främjande* ('the Swedish Central Association for Sports Promotion'). This association was formed in 1897 with the purpose of advocating sport in general and supporting various kinds of sports. Under the leadership of Viktor Balck and with Crown Prince Gustav (later Gustav V) as chairman, it managed to assemble considerable grants for sporting activities in a very short period of time. The organization also lay behind a number of one-time sport ventures, such as arranging the Nordic Games (as from 1901) and the building of the Stockholm

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100-105. See also Persson, Lennart K. & Thomas Petterson, *Svensk friidrott 100 år* [Swedish Athletics 100 Years] (Stockholm: Sellin & partner, 1995) Ch. 1.

¹¹ Lindroth, *op. cit.*, 1974, 94-96, 108-110 ; Lindroth, Jan, *Från "sportfäneri" till massidrott. Den svenska idrottsrörelsens utveckling 1869-1939* [From 'sportfäneri' to Sports for All. The Development of the Swedish Sports Movement 1869-1939] (Stockholm: HLS, 1988) 46. For the growth of football, see Andersson, Torbjörn, *Kung fotboll. Den svenska fotbollens kulturhistoria från 1800-talets slut till 1950* [King Football. The Culture History of Swedish Football since the end of the 19th century to 1950] (Eslöv: Symposium, 2002).

Stadion prior to the 1912 Olympic Games. The Central Association became an important power centre in the budding sports movement, not least through its good contacts with government and industry. However, its primary interest was devoted to major festivals and propaganda projects. The association had no ambition of being in charge of everyday sports activities, which explains why it never took the initiative to gather the local sports clubs beneath its organizational umbrella.¹²

In summary, Swedish sport around the turn of the century was characterized by a large number of different organizations with national ambitions but without much power for expansion. The consequences for the local sports clubs were far from positive. The development of national competition was limited by the lack of general competition regulations and uniform amateur rules. Another problem was how to solve sports disputes, how to ascertain that the regulations were followed and how to develop productive international sports exchanges. Moreover, in athletics, the main sports field, there were two rival associations without any capacity for cooperation or constructive dialogue, with double championships and tough competition for the favour of the local sports clubs as a consequence.

Against this background, Berger's letter to Balck must be seen – at least from the Gothenburg horizon – as a fresh breeze signalling greater willingness to compromise. In addition, only after a couple of weeks Berger informed Balck that his own association had obtained a new chairman – J. Sigfrid Edström, a young engineer – who also supported greater cooperation or, preferably, a straightforward merger of the two associations.

The first concrete manifestation of the new climate of cooperation was the arranging of a joint athletics championships in Jönköping in 1902. On the last day of competition, a breakfast meeting was held where negotiations for a new federation were broached. A joint committee was formed and at the beginning of 1903 a statute proposal was presented. In March, the country's gymnastics and sports clubs were invited to participate in forming the new organization, *Svenska gymnastik- och idrottsföreningars riksförbund* (the present Swedish Sports Confederation, RF).

On May 31, 1903, a constituent meeting was held in the headquarters of GCI in Stockholm. The negotiations, led by Balck, were attended by representatives from 35 sports organizations. Typically, the meeting coincided with a big gymnastics and sports festival. Thus the formation of the RF – one of the most significant events in the history of Swedish sport – was completely overshadowed by an ongoing competition. After the proposed statutes had been quickly accepted and an

¹² Lindroth, Jan, "Centralföreningens historia", *Hundra år i idrottens tjänst. En jubileumsbok för Sveriges Centralförening för Idrottens Främjande* [A Hundred Years in the Service of Sports. A Jubilee for Swedish Central Association for the Promotion of sports] (Vällingby: Strömberg, 1997).

interim board had been appointed, the negotiations broke off so that those attending could proceed to the current sports competitions. The choice was between formalistic paper-pushing over organizational issues on the one hand and watching ongoing sporting activities on the other. Obviously, the decision was not hard to make.

The Swedish Sports Confederation

The future prospects of the Swedish Sports Confederation (RF) were uncertain. All previous attempts at uniting the incipient sports movement had failed. In addition, the organization was small. When formed in 1903, it consisted of only 35 associations and about 2,000 members.

However, during the following decade, the confederation grew rapidly. In 1914, RF consisted of 600 clubs and as many as 63,000 members.¹³ This was concrete evidence that RF had succeeded in taking up a central position in the quickly growing sports movement. The more clubs that joined the confederation, the harder it was for others to remain on their own. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that sport still lay far behind its predecessors among popular movements, such as the temperance movement and the trade union movement. Its breakthrough as a mass movement was still to come.

Before following the sports movement's continued expansion, a closer study of the new confederation will be useful. As mentioned above, RF came into existence as a result of sport practitioners' own need for uniform regulations and a joint organization. Not surprisingly, the first years were primarily devoted to developing amateur, record, and championship and competition rules. These were the areas where the problems were the greatest and the needs the most urgent.

Which sports activities did RF intend to organize? There is no doubt that it had broad intentions. The major part of Swedish sporting life was to be included. However, there were exceptions. The way the confederation statutes were formulated, RF was to comprise clubs and federations devoted to gymnastics and such sports "which neither required expensive equipment nor demanded joint equipment." This paragraph fulfilled several purposes. First, a natural demarcation line was set up between sport and the closely related Rifle Association. Secondly, this was a way of signaling that RF wanted to champion "everyman's sports", i.e., not accepting sports whose equipment was so expensive that less well-off groups were

¹³ RF's club and membership development can be followed in its annual, *Svenska gymnastik- och idrottsföreningarnas riksförbunds årsbok* [Yearbook for the Swedish Confederation of Sports] (from 1912 under the main heading of *Svensk idrott*).

excluded from participating. In concrete terms, the paragraph entailed that motor sport and typically upper-class sports such as horse-riding and sailing were excluded.

Organizationally, RF elegantly solved the incompatible interests that had characterized Swedish sport at the turn of the century: on the one hand, the individual sports with their specific needs and requests, on the other hand, local clubs with their manifold activities. The result was an organizational division along two main lines: a *vertical* division into sections (special sports federations) responsible for different sports, and a *horizontal* division with regional associations for joint sport issues within various geographical areas (district federations). Among the first special sports federations, we find, for example, athletics, football, fencing, golf, gymnastics, canoeing, rowing, swimming and skating. After a couple of years, one further tier began taking shape, special district organizations, when the Swedish Football Association divided the country into football districts.

The local sports clubs which had joined RF thus obtained double organizational affiliation, both in district federations and in the various special federations responsible for such sports that were part of the club's programme.

The internal decision process within RF was based on traditional association democracy principles, i.e., the idea of member self-government. The highest authority was the annual federation assembly, the so-called *idrottsriksdagen* ('sport parliament'). In between, assemblies acted as the sports movement's own "government", the Supreme Board, consisting of 30 personally elected members. Responsibility for everyday work rested with an administrative committee – in many respects RF's real power centre.

To reflect further, it is noticeable that in its very first years RF obtained an organisational form that still remains. A few minor changes have admittedly taken place. It may be mentioned, for example, that the supreme board was replaced by today's Executive Committee of the Swedish Sports Federation, and that the assembly now only meets every second year. This does not mar, however, the general impression of remarkable stability. One important explanation may be that right from the beginning, RF had an organizational form with good expansion and development possibilities. As new sports emerged or were introduced into Sweden, they could be smoothly brought into the RF fold. Established regional activities could easily be channelled into new district or special district organizations.

The "Small" Popular Movement, 1903-1914

Swedish sport grew quite rapidly in the years between 1903 and 1914. Its activities began to spread across the country — albeit slowly. It was in small town places that sport grew the fastest, especially industrial and railway communities and

the sites of military garrisons. In the true countryside, sport still remained a rather unknown phenomenon. Thus, the predominance of cities is obvious.¹⁴

Who were active in or the members of the sports movement? As in the late 19th century, the overwhelming majority were upper and middle class. Workers were scarce and the rural population practically nonexistent. This socio-economic unbalance may be largely explained by the strong bourgeois character of the early sports movement, ideologically stamped as it was by values like nationalism, royalism and character education and formation.¹⁵ In addition, the activities were primarily conducted by people anchored in the military, industry and civil service sectors. This certainly contributed to the fact that many practitioners came from the same levels of society.

An attendant question is what kinds of activities the clubs were engaged in. Giving a complete picture of the broad sporting activities of the local clubs is not easy. An enumeration of RF's special federations shows neither the diversity nor the extent of early 20th-century sporting life. As mentioned above, some sports remained outside the RF organization, such as sailing and equestrian sports. Furthermore, the clubs were often typical jacks-of-all-trades, willing to test various sports on a smaller scale without trying to apply for membership in the relevant special federation.

Keeping these reservations in mind, a few sports should be highlighted as being especially popular. A study of the affiliation of RF clubs with various special federations in the years 1905 and 1914 shows that athletics held a special position. In both years, nearly 75 per cent of all RF's clubs had athletics in their programme. Football and skiing came in a strong second. The popularity of these three went far beyond that of other sports.

It is not surprising that sport in the first decades of the 20th century was primarily devoted to such activities that could take place in simple facilities or outdoors. One reason was that the clubs' financial resources were limited. Preparing a serviceable piece of ground for football or athletics could alone constitute a precarious and expensive business. Thus, most clubs preferred activities that did not require advanced facilities. For those who – contrary to expectation – had heard of bowling, around 1914 there were only four alleys in the whole country.

How thus can one explain the expansion of the sports movement from the turn of the century to the breakout of the First World War? It is clearly a question of

¹⁴ Lindroth, *op. cit.*, 1974, 72-76 ; Lindroth, *op. cit.*, 1988, 37-40.

¹⁵ See e.g. Sandblad, Henrik, *Olympia och Valhalla. Idéhistoriska aspekter av den moderna idrottsrörelsens framväxt* [Olympia and Valhalla. Ideological Aspects of the Emergence of the Modern Sports Movement] (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell international, 1985) 317-392.

several interacting processes. On a structural level, ongoing industrialization and urbanization of Swedish society is related. Sport had its largest basis in areas with a big population and good communication infrastructure, that is, cities and industrial communities. In other words, a process involving an increasing number of people moving from relatively isolated rural areas into population centres increased the possibility of these people being acquainted with sport as a phenomenon and of getting a chance to try out its various forms.

On the ideological level, the nationalist movements and political climate of the turn of the century are likely to have favoured the development of sport. Even though modern competitive sport had been imported from England, it was often linked to the mother country and its military defence capacity. Thus, the dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway 1905 worked in this direction. Through victories in international competitions, the supporters of the union could compensate for the loss of prestige due to Norway's liberation.

Government support, too, had a positive impact. Through a lottery granted by the government in 1908, the sports movement received the financial means to organize the Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912. The following year, the sports movement was granted permanent and annual government grants by the Swedish parliament. This government support strengthened the legitimacy of sports and increased the movement's possibilities for development.¹⁶

The Breakthrough Phase (1919-1939): Swedish Sport In Between The Two World Wars

Although the sports movement had acquired a stable organization by the turn of the century, activities were far from developed before the outbreak of the First World War. In membership and number of clubs, RF still lay far behind its predecessors in the popular movement sphere. Furthermore, the proportion of workers was moderate – women and provincial youth forming a glaring minority. Sport was still a new and relatively unknown metropolitan phenomenon in a country where the rural population still made up two thirds of the population.

Between the wars – in the years 1919-1939 – there was a change of scenery. The sports movement experienced an extraordinarily rapid increase of both members and clubs. By the end of the period, the movement had surpassed both the nonconformist and temperance movements in size by a wide margin. Parallel to this, it spread more and more geographically. At a time when large population groups

¹⁶ Sport's path towards government support is described in Lindroth, *op. cit.*, 1974. See also Norberg, *op. cit.*, 2004, Ch. 2.

migrated to the cities, sport was spreading in the opposite direction. In 1910, only a third of RF's then 570 clubs had been located in the countryside – by the end of the interwar period, over half of the confederation's 5,790 associations and 390,000 members lived and worked outside the cities.¹⁷ Sport's definite breakthrough as a popular movement had now become established.

Parallel with the spread of sport from the cities into the rural areas, there was social broadening of its membership, as evidenced by the great increase in RF membership between 1919 and 1939. The rather limited social recruitment basis that had characterized the early sports movement would never have managed the fast membership growth alone. Moreover, there is evidence that the resistance both from the rural population and from the workers' movement was declining. As regards the former, it is reasonable to assume that sport's "entry into the village" was of great importance, since it enabled more and more of the rural youth to see and to experience the attractiveness of sport. Correspondingly, the weakening resistance to "bourgeois sport" from the working classes followed in the wake of the reformist ideology of the Swedish Social Democrats.

Although the sports movement expanded geographically as well as socially, it was still primarily directed at young males. The proportion of women was strikingly small. Notwithstanding the lack of exact information, it is estimated not to have exceeded ten per cent of the total number of active sports practitioners. When *Nordisk familjeboks sportlexikon* – an encyclopedia of sport – wrote in 1941 under the heading "women's sport," it was asserted that it still played "a very insignificant role" in Sweden despite the fact that the country had developed into one of the world's leading male sports nations and that women's sport had had its international breakthrough back in the 1920s.

Although women's participation in competitive sport was modest, it was much higher in gymnastics. Since the very first decades of the century, the Swedish Gymnastics Federation had started working for a broader influx. Features of military exercise were toned down in favour of a broader national health profile and a more varied programme. With the creation of special women's gymnastics, space was taken by women who did not wish to participate in competitive sport. The women rallied quickly – from 1920 to 1939 their membership in the Gymnastics federation increased from 5,000 to over 37,000.

A closer scrutiny of sporting life in the interwar period shows a rapid growth of diversification: ice hockey, table tennis, bowling, badminton and orienteering are

¹⁷ For the development of the sports movement between the wars, see Lindroth, Jan, *Idrott mellan krigen. Organisationer, ledare och idéer i den svenska idrottsrörelsen 1919-39* [Sport in Between the Wars. Organizations, Leaders and Ideas in the Swedish Sport Movement 1919-39] (Stockholm: HLS, 1987).

only a few examples of sports that developed in the 1920s and 1930s and gained organizational stability in their own special associations. A comparison between the membership size in different sports shows that the highest figures were to be found in athletics, football, skiing, gymnastics and bandy.

A somewhat different picture emerges if one instead looks into which sports the viewing public wanted. Apart from athletics and football – two popular viewing sports – public interest was largely directed towards two minor but more spectacular sports: boxing and motoring. The breakthrough of boxing in Sweden occurred in the early 1920s. This was a sport practised by few and too controversial to be allowed into RF, but it drew huge audiences. Without doubt, the foremost boxing champion in Sweden, Harry Persson, was one of the greatest sports heroes between the wars. The heyday of motoring took place in the 1930s. A major breakthrough was the Saxtorp Grand Prix motorcycle race in Skåne, introduced in 1930 and grew into a recurrent event with crowds of upwards of 100,000 -150,000 per race!

How can the development of the sports movement into a mass movement in the interwar period be explained? On a social level, continued urbanization and industrialization naturally played an important role, as did improved communications and citizens' increased leisure time created through legislation about shorter working hours. To this, we may add long periods of recession and high unemployment with the effect that large groups of citizens – and young people in particular – had leisure time imposed upon them, and therefore time that may be used for sports. Furthermore, a not inconsiderable part of the government's unemployment policy consisted of reserve jobs of various kinds, including the very building of sports facilities and bathing places. Finally, the pool money should also be mentioned. By government decision, *A.B. Tipstjänst* (the Swedish Football Pools Service) was established in 1934. The original idea was that the entire annual surplus of this gambling company should be set aside for sport purposes. The result was that government sports grants rose dramatically in the 1935-1939 years, before the outbreak of the Second World War forced the parliament to put an end to the "pool gold" of the sports movement. By then, however, a large number of new and renovated sports facilities had already come into existence.¹⁸

The great upsurge of sport in the interwar period must also be set in relation to more sport-related factors. During this period, sport experienced its final breakthrough in mass media. In January 1920, *Dagens Nyheter* was the first daily paper

¹⁸ For the link between the sports movement and the gambling market, see Norberg, *op. cit.*, 2004, Ch. 4. See also Norberg, Johan R., "Idrottens spelberoende. Tre tillfällen då spelmarknaden förändrat svensk idrottspolitik", *Idrott, historia och sambälle* [The Gambling Addiction of Sports. Three Times When the Gambling Market Changed Swedish Sports Politics] (Stockholm:SVIF, 2010).

to introduce a whole page every day containing sports news (earlier on the press had dealt with such news more casually and spread all over the paper). Pure sports magazines had existed for quite some time. The dominant one – *Idrottsbladet* – came out twice a week and had, by 1920, managed to reach an impressive circulation of 20,000 copies. A few years later, in 1925, the Swedish broadcasting service, *Radioj nst*, was introduced and from the start, sports was already a natural ingredient of their programming.¹⁹

The period between the wars also witnessed sport’s commercial breakthrough. Within athletics and football, at least, public competitions began to provide incomes to those clubs which were able to promote prominent teams and elite sportsmen. For smaller clubs, finances were a common problem, which meant that plenty of time had to be devoted to various kinds of entertainment like open-air dances or dance pavilions, bazaars and lotteries to gain money, to the detriment of active sport practice.

The Broadening Phase (1940-1969): Sports in the Welfare State

When peace came at the end of WWII, social development in Sweden entered a new period characterized by economic boom, sinking unemployment and improved living conditions. The domestic scene was dominated by the Social Democrats’ long position of power and welfare policy. A large number of social-political reforms were introduced, such as raising national basic pensions and the introduction of basic child allowances and national health insurance. At the same time, the population’s leisure time increased as a result of legislation on shorter working hours and longer vacations.

The rapid expansion that the sports movement had experienced in the 1920s and 1930s showed no sign of slowing down during the decades following the Second World War. In RF, membership figures more than tripled from just above half a million in 1945 to as much as 1.7 million twenty years later. The number of associations increased in the same period from around 7,700 to 11,300. This growth must primarily be attributed to the babyboom in the 1940s and 1950s.

Parallel with the expansion of the sports movement, sport broadened as a social phenomenon. Of special importance to this process was the definite

¹⁹ The historical development of Swedish sport radio is described in Dahl n, Peter, *Fr n Vasaloppet till Sportextra. Radiosportens etablering och f rgrening 1925-199* [From Vasaloppet to Sportextra. The Establishment and Branching of Radiosporten 1925-1995] (Stockholm: Stiftelsen Etermedierna i Sverige, 1999).

breakthrough of recreational sport.²⁰ One step in this direction involved the broad popular fitness events arranged by different sports federations during the Second World War. For example, public health walks under the auspices of the Swedish Walking Association drew over two million starters during the years 1940-1946. Parallel to this, the number of inter-company clubs increased rapidly and in 1945 *Svenska Korporationsidrottsförbundet* ('the Swedish association of inter-company athletics') was founded.

The growing interest in physical exercise and health was linked to the development of society and especially to the changed conditions of working life. Factory and office jobs in crowded cities were seldom able to satisfy the need for exercise and recreation among the gainfully employed. Compensation had to be found in their spare time – through inter-company associations, company gymnastics and outdoor activities. New ideas about fitness and health also received strong encouragement from public institutions.

This growing fitness and health interest among the adult population meant that sport was no longer synonymous with youth, scoring goals, being the fastest runner or highest jumper. Sport instead became an umbrella term for a variety of activities – from elite-oriented competitive sport to recreational sport and open-air activities. Sport's original character as fostering youth was thus complemented by a broad physical activity and health perspective which enabled people of all ages to participate and exercise on the basis of their own goals and conditions.

While the increased interest in physical activity furthered sport availability for adults, other processes increased sporting activities among younger age groups. Important in this context were new government subsidies directed to child and youth activities. With new subsidiaries in sight, RF and its special federations soon increased their efforts to organize and develop sporting activities among children.

Finally, the decades following World War II were also affected by the expansion of municipalities and county councils and their increasing responsibility for the development of local and regional sporting life. The years 1955-1965, in particular, saw the genuine municipalization of sport where the overall responsibility and management of sports arenas and other sports facilities were largely taken over by municipal bodies, after having previously been a club responsibility. This process

²⁰ The development of recreational sport in Sweden in the post-war period is described in Bolling, Hans, *Sin egen hälsas smed: idéer, initiativ och organisationer inom svensk motionsidrott 1945-1981* [Their Own Health Blacksmith: Ideas, Initiatives and Organizations in Swedish Recreational Sport 1945-1981] (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 2005).

meant that the major sponsors of the sports movement were now the municipalities, whose support widely surpassed that of government grants.²¹

With a strong backing from government and municipalities, the sports movement also made great efforts to improve and develop its youth activities. Government support enabled RF to employ consultants with special responsibility for youth issues. The confederation also set up a youth committee. In the special and district federations, too, permanent organizational forms for youth issues were established. In the mid-1960s, one half of RF's 44 special federations and two-thirds of its 23 district federations had organized their own youth committees.

The breakthrough of recreational sport and special efforts aimed at young people broadened the age profile of the sports movement both upwards and downwards. Successively, the proportion of women also increased. Despite scarce information, it was noted as early as the 1950s that, in relative terms, women's involvement increased more than men. Of the total membership, however, they made up only a modest 15 per cent. According a study from the mid-1960s, 33 out of RF's current 44 special federations included women members. The largest share of female participation was found in gymnastics. The study also indicated that women were successively gaining ground in various team sports.²²

A further sign of the transformation of sporting life was the continued emergence of new sports. In 1945, RF comprised 27 different special sports federations; in 1970, the figure had risen to 53. New sports like squash, basketball and volleyball gave further testimony of another process: the beginning of indoor sport.

A Phase of Stagnation? The Sports Movement from the 1970s until Today

Swedish society underwent great changes in the last decades of the 20th century. The long boom the country had experienced after the Second World War was followed in the 1970s by recurrent periods of financial problems, high unemployment and inflation. On the national political level, the Social Democrats' long possession of government power was broken in 1976, followed by recurring government changes between the two political blocs. New ideas and political ideals grew strong – there was less talk of previously cherished concepts like “welfare

²¹ For the development of municipal sport policy, see Sjöblom, Paul, *Den institutionaliserade tävlingsidrotten: kommuner, idrott och politik i Sverige under 1900-talet* [The Institutionalized Competitive Sport: Local Authorities, Sports and Politics in Sweden during the 1900s] (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 2006).

²² SOU 1966:47, *Ungdomens förenings- och fritidsliv. Organisationer och medlemmar* [Youth Clubs and Leisure. Organizations and members].

state” and “consensus” and more about “market adaptation”, “privatization” and “decorporatization.” Other transformation processes included increasing internationalization (most clearly manifested when Sweden joined the EU in 1995), the avalanche of information technology, and the increasing variety of mass media.

As Sweden entered a post-industrial phase, a great many of the traditional popular movements began to experience problems in member recruitment and commitment. A similar tendency could be discerned among the political parties. For the young, especially, the traditional association model seemed increasingly outdated, while “action groups” and loosely connected networks were found to be more attractive. The question now remains how the sports movement has responded to these challenges during the eventful decades from 1970 until today.

First, the sports movement has continued to grow: from about 2.2 million members in 1968 to 3.2 million today. Parallel to this, the number of clubs has increased from 12,000 to approximately 20,000. Growth was especially noticeable in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas in the last few decades no major change has taken place.

Table 1. The development of The Swedish Sports Confederation 1968-2008

Year	Membership	Clubs
1968	2.2 million	12606
1978	2.5 million	15692
1988	2.5 million	20272
1998	3 million	21859
2008	3 million	20164

The information above shows that the sports movement in the framework of RF has continued to grow, albeit at a slower rate than before. There has been no major change, especially not in recent years. Membership figures have stayed rather firmly around three million. What may be the reason? Is there an upper limit to the possible number of organized sports practitioners in a country? If so, has that limit been reached in Sweden? Or do the figures suggest that, like many other voluntary organizations, the sports movement has entered a phase of stagnation?

So far, there is no reason to describe the state of sports in Sweden as grim. Among the young, in particular, sport is still one of the most popular leisure activities. Thus, it is likely that the diminished growth rate is to be found elsewhere. It is important to note that there is now a wider choice of sporting activities. To many Swedes, jogging tracks, company-run gyms and commercial training facilities

are adequate alternatives to club sport. What characterizes the last few decades is thus that the traditional popular movement model has been exposed to increasing competition not only from other leisure activities but also from new organizational forms of sport.

It is also clear that a great deal has happened in recent decades as regards female sports participation. Today, nearly 40 per cent of active sports practitioners are women. This is a considerable levelling out compared to the mid-20th century, as well as an expression of the development of the sports movement into a real popular movement even with regard to gender distribution. However, it cannot be denied that the distribution of women and men in leading positions still leaves a great deal to be desired. In the 68 special sports federation boards, women make up about 27 per cent. Moreover, only ten special sports federations (15 per cent) are chaired by women. The sports having the greatest share of women are horse-riding, figure skating and gymnastics (85-86 per cent). There are considerably fewer women – a bare three per cent – in ice hockey.²³

The sports movement today consists of young and old alike. Among active sports practitioners, about 31 per cent is children up to the age of 12, 23 per cent being young people (aged 13-20) and the remaining 46 per cent are people over 20 years old. Not surprisingly, young people tend to prefer physically demanding sports like swimming, basketball and ice hockey, whereas the proportion of grown-ups is considerably higher in golf, curling and boules.

Sociologists and educationalists have long been interested in how the choice to participate in sport and physical exercise and the way this is done are affected by social class as well as economics and educational level. As early as the 1950s, a Swedish study stated that Social Class I was more active in sports than Social Class II, which in turn did more sports than Social Class III. This observation has been confirmed by many later studies, such as the educationalist Lars-Magnus Engström's comprehensive longitudinal study of citizens' sport and physical exercise habits. Engström's study started in the late 1960s by mapping the sporting habits of over 2,000 school-children in eighth grade. Since then, he has followed this group for a considerable number of years, which has enabled him to ascertain how exercise, sport and leisure habits change with increasing age.

On the latest measurement occasion, the group investigated had passed their 40th birthday. As in previous studies, Engström discovered that the highest proportion of people participating in exercise was found among the upper social classes – this was especially apparent among men. Engström was further able to state that exercise habits are unstable: having been an active sports practitioner when

²³ SOU 2008:59, Ch. 1 and 8.

young is no guarantee for doing exercise in adulthood. According to Engström, the most reasonable explanation is that youth sport and grown-up people's exercise habits represent entirely different cultures. Among young people, physical exercise often appears as a game or fight, or like competition and ranking. Once you have reached middle age, the supply of exercise activities has changed. In other words, it is far from self-evident that somebody who has grown up as a football player will, when getting older, automatically feel at home in a gym with its totally different ideals and meanings.²⁴

In sum, it can be stated that during the 20th century, the sports movement has broadened considerably – from a predominantly male youth activity for those better off to an activity for everyone regardless of age, sex and socio-economic conditions. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that factors like social class, economy and cultural habits still affect the choice to do sports – and in what forms.

If we now turn to look at the development of individual sports after 1970, certain changes stand out. A number of new sports have emerged and established themselves, sometimes within their own special federations (as in the case of Frisbee, land hockey, floor bandy and American football) and sometimes within already existing associations like snowboard within the Ski Association. In RF, the number of special sports federations has grown from 53 to 70. The biggest special sports federations today, by membership, are football (approx. one million members), athletics (600,000) and golf (550,000).²⁵

Finally, let us briefly describe sports development linked to the development of society. The 1970s may be characterized as a period of expansion. As a consequence of a parliamentary sports policy decision of 1970 entitled “Sports for all,” the sports movement received increased financial resources which enabled the movement to carry out extensive development including, for instance, the expansion of facilities and special efforts aimed at neglected fields like disability sport, research, and leader education. For the development of elite sport, the first national upper secondary schools with an emphasis on sport were established in 1982.

Parallel with the government offensive, the professionalization of sport began. This process has set clear mark on elite sport clubs, especially within football and ice hockey. Here, development involves paid coaches, market salaries, and board members with special competence in business and law. Growing mass media coverage has also entailed the commercialization of sport with sponsors, advertising and TV rights becoming more and more important. For the elite clubs, financial

²⁴ Engström, Lars-Magnus, *Idrott som social markör* [Sport as a Social Marker] (Stockholm: HLS, 1999).

²⁵ *Uppföljning av statens stöd till idrotten 2011* [Evaluation of Government Support to Sports 2011] (Stockholm: Centrum för idrottsforskning) 55.

turnover has increased drastically. The selling of a good footballer may today generate millions for a club. It is not surprising, then, that the traditional association model has in certain cases been supplemented by sports companies – a not altogether uncontroversial process, since it has challenged the solidarity of the sports movement within the organizational framework of a popular movement.

It is not only the conditions of elite sport that have changed. The public offensive that characterized the 1970s was followed in the 1980s and 1990s by recurrent periods of weak government finances. The impact on sport was manifested by periodically frozen government grants and municipal developments whereby more and more clubs were forced to take back responsibility for certain sports facilities. This development forced a great many clubs to increase their degree of self-financing, for example, through lottery sales and increased membership fees.

Conclusion

The development of voluntary sport in 20th-century Sweden is remarkable. From a modest and hesitant start at the beginning of the century, sport has developed into an established and comprehensive phenomenon in society. Sport – both as activity and as entertainment – has grown to become one of the greatest leisure interests of the Swedish population. At the same time, the sports movement has developed into a sizeable popular movement.

As shown in this article, the development of the sports movement into a popular movement has gone through a number of phases. Interestingly enough, the organizational criterion was met first. RF was formed as early as 1903, at a time when sport was still an unknown phenomenon to most citizens. Only several decades later, in the interwar period, did the breakthrough of the sports movement as a mass movement take place. With a big influx of working-class and farming youth, in particular, sport was now established as one of the country's biggest voluntarily organized movements. In the second half of the 20th century, the sports movement broadened in terms of gender as well as age. The previous resistance to female sports participation was successively broken and was ultimately confirmed with women's entry into team sports like football and basketball. Parallel to this, the earlier predominance of youth was challenged by an increasing interest among the Swedish population in fitness and health. Thus the sports movement became a movement where all people could participate on the basis of their own interests and circumstances.

To conclude, the development of the Swedish sports movement during the 20th century can best be summarized by the term “continuous expansion.” The number of clubs and members has grown continuously – and so has the number of

sports under the organizational umbrella of the National Sports Confederation. This expansion has also affected the composition of the movement. Although factors like gender, age, ethnicity, etc., still influence people's choice to participate in sport – and in what forms – a big step has been taken from the upper and middle-class, male, metropolitan youth movement which constituted sport a century ago.

After more than a hundred years of sport, there are no signs that the Swedish people's interest in sport will wane in the foreseeable future. So far, the typical Swedish “popular movement model” stands firm, even though the increasing commercialization and professionalization in the long run may challenge the present uniformity of organization. This historical account has shown that sport is changeable and that its forms of expression are always intimately connected with the development of society.

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