

The role and place of gymnastics in United Italy: From the Renaissance to the beginning of the 20th century

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Abstract. During the unification of Italy, physical education made a vital contribution to prepare the new citizens of the new nation in terms of their moral, ethical, and ideological character, not to mention their physical aspects. However, it was not until 1878, that the De Sanctis law made it a compulsory subject. Throughout this text it will be easy to see how the transfer of the new capital from Florence to Rome entailed many problems regarding sport facilities and difficulties for promoting physical activity not only in the capital but also in the whole nation. By the end of the 19th century, the creation of Normal Schools to train physical education teachers and the foundation of a number of Federations and Societies reflected the interest in promoting sport; nevertheless its introduction was still a long time coming in comparison with other European countries such as Germany, France or Switzerland.

Key words: Gymnastics, physical education, sportization, associationism, Italy

Résumé. Rôle et place de la gymnastique dans l'Italie unifiée : de la renaissance au début du xx^e siècle.

Au cours de l'unification de l'Italie, l'éducation physique a fait une contribution essentielle à la préparation des nouveaux citoyens de la nouvelle nation en termes de caractère moral, éthique, idéologique, y compris les aspects physiques. Toutefois, il a fallu attendre la loi De Sanctis en 1878, pour qu'elle devienne une discipline obligatoire. Tout au long de ce texte, sera présenté comment le changement de la nouvelle capitale de Florence à Rome entraîna de nombreux problèmes concernant les installations sportives et la difficulté de promouvoir l'activité physique, non seulement dans la capitale mais aussi dans toute la nation. À la fin du 19^e siècle, la création des Écoles Normales pour former des professeurs d'éducation physique et la création d'un certain nombre de fédérations et associations témoignait de l'intérêt quant à la promotion du sport, mais son introduction était encore loin de celles d'autres pays européens comme l'Allemagne, la France ou la Suisse.

Mots clés : Gymnastique, éducation physique, sportivisation, associationnisme, Italie

1 The ideological matrix of gymnastics¹

The origins and nature of body culture in the form of *gymnastics* as designed in a modern form throughout Europe are linked to national demands, and are intertwined with the ethical-political ideology of the Renaissance. Even in Italy, gymnastics took its first steps supported by strong patriotic feelings, being recognized as a vehicle of important values for the education of the citizen-soldier. By the 1850's a gymnastic associationism had arisen as an educational instrument of the national sense of belonging in the unredeemed and dominant territories of

the Austro-Hungarian Empire (*i.e.*, Friuli Venice, Giulia, Dalmatia, Trent). This phenomenon was the forerunner of the Venice Gymnastic Federation, founded in 1869.

Shortly after the creation of national unity, the popular male classes approached sports culture through the promotion of associations, although there were still very few as compared to those already present in Germany, France and Switzerland. They had, however, some influence on mentalities and collective behaviour, and despite being declared apolitical, they were characterized almost entirely as sharing monarchist, liberal and secular feelings, far from Masonic and anti-clerical circles.

¹ Frasca (2006, 2010).

Both, the National Gymnastic Federation and the Federal Society, which arose as a result, would host a growing number of members. They were not always aware of the original patriotic connotations, as the events were recreational/gymnastic/competitive to spread and celebrate cultural nationalism, which would be experienced by the different social strata – nearly all were involved – according to their respective specific characteristics. For example, in Milan a social middle class would prevail, while in Rome the reins of the gymnastic movement linked to associations would be held by a group with aristocratic connotations. This group, as will be explained, would determine the choice and designation of various federative head offices. In any case, the stated intent of various corporate statutes and federative regulations was to stay away from religious and political issues and work instead to strengthen body and character with the common goal of better serving their country. That was, at least, during the first decades.

In spite of the marked heterogeneity among the various associations and clubs scattered around the peninsula, although generally highly homogenized from a social point of view, this implied and still implies a long-term distribution of geographical and mental space for meetings and recreational events for people who took up their long heritage of traditional games, and – contrary to what had already happened in other places, especially in England – had not yet been absorbed and integrated into the phenomenon of mass *sportization* (Maguire, 2007). Later, the phenomenon would spread like wildfire all over the country, but at different moments, mediated by the socio-cultural and economic conditions of the states that constitute the territorial fabric of the united nation. Its bond of inspiration would be – mainly but not exclusively – the theory that physical education could make a vital contribution to preparing the new citizens of the new nation in terms of their moral, ethical and ideological character, not to mention their physical aspects. With these assumptions/expectations, the gym was set up, even on a symbolic level, as a laboratory and proud exhibition of an ethnic group that wanted to distance itself from the Germans. Therefore, gymnastics was interpreted and prescribed as a sort of social medicine.

For women, being a member of a Gymnastic Society represented a conquest, as for a long time women had been excluded or, if admitted, had been marginalized from the management and characterization of the exercises. The Renaissance's legacy and the difficult acceptance of women gymnasts meant that gyms were born with masculine connotations which tended to remain, and they would only open their doors officially to women at the end of the century. Meanwhile at the beginning of 1900 in various parts of Italy they organized themselves; for the most part – as in the case of Rome – following the leadership of intrepid ladies, and opened Gymnastic Societies for women only. These societies would play an important role, alongside other forms of associations of the fair sex, for various reasons and with very different

objectives, some to educate themselves and others to achieve moderate forms of emancipation. The sharp increase of women in the teaching profession, and specifically in physical education, was the cause and effect of all this.

It is not the purpose of this paper to talk about the development of gymnastics and sports among women in Italy, or their social and cultural rights in a broad sense, which is a complex topic and would need a great deal of space. Therefore, let us reflect on the male population.

Statistically speaking, who were the Italians scattered all over the peninsula which had become a united nation, and what were they like? About 70% were farmers, 18% worked in industry and crafts, and only 12% were employed in the service sector. In the decades between 1861 and 1901 their average height (aged from 15 to 35 years-old), was 162 cm (Papa, 1992, p. 16), they were rather weak, a large percentage was unfit for military service due to endemic diseases, and they were still deaf to the siren songs of modern *leisure* sport that were enchanting the industrialized countries.

During those years a curious phenomenon took place, which situated post-united and pre-fascist Italy against the current, so to speak, as compared to more advanced Western countries in terms of industrialization. In fact, the spread of Anglo-Saxon sports on the one hand, and the Swedish type of physical culture focused on health and hygiene on the other, gradually transferred people from practicing indoors to outdoors: to stadiums, waterways, golf courses, tennis courts and skiing tracks. In Italy, the population, which for centuries had satisfied its recreational needs under the sun, now seemed to prefer indoor practice, rediscovering the gym.

And about the same time – even in the midst of strong contrasts and contradictory attitudes – a renewed pedagogical sensitivity timidly opened the classrooms doors to physical education (in the years between 1860 and 1870, and until 1878, when the De Sanctis law made it a compulsory subject); while for decades countries such as England, France, and Sweden, not to mention the United States, had been making outdoor facilities for school gymnastic practice.

In a peninsula shaken by revolutionary movements, and a strong need for qualified militarization, outstanding efforts were being made in the Savoy State, with Turin as the capital of gymnastics. It was there that they multiplied the initiatives to support physical activity, paving the way for an interest in gymnastics, even outside the military. That is the reason why the date of the foundation of the Gymnastic Society of Turin (1844) marks the beginning of the official history of sport in Italy and the establishment of the first real gymnasium in the Peninsula. The Piedmont cultural environment created the necessary political conditions – albeit in a climate characterized by lively discussions between the ministers of the Kingdom – for physical education to finally achieve a place in the school, and gymnastics was given a space in the lifestyle habits of civil society.

2 Urban culture and leisure spaces, at the dawn of Unity

If the development of gymnastics and sport post-unification are related – as is known – to the social and cultural phenomena of industrialization, its roots can be detected earlier in the *humus* of urban culture. It was between 1750 and 1800 that urban culture developed several games that would evolve into a number of modern sports. It is in the fabric of urban areas that recreational/exhibition elements are ideally located from a geographical and ideological viewpoint, to build a modern relationship between the government and the population. Compared to the past, in modern times there has been a de-deification of collective space, although symbolic and religious values still remain. Much of what in ancient cultures was attributed to the divine, modernity has recovered and transferred to the secular sphere. Nowadays as before, certain areas of community life remain as places in which to celebrate forms of expression and intensive social communication because they permeate a kind of secular sacredness that expresses – and at the same time is the expression of – their own culture; a culture that in the industrial age is in fact urban culture.

In Europe, the Italy of those days was distinguished by the number and quality of urban spaces, and by the diffusion and internalization of an urban culture. Municipalities generally showed interest in the opportunity to use these recreational activities to build new ideologies, new rituals, and renewed collective forms of education, to promote the development of an urban society appropriate to modern times. The body and gymnastics – understood as its discipline – became the privileged field for the ideological construction of the new nation, where many intellectuals and scholars from various disciplines (*e.g.*, historians, educators, parliamentarians, doctors, etc.) competed for access. The gym became the metaphorical and practical place for a laboratory of collective action, so to speak, to exercise the moral, social, political, and also military aspects of the “new citizen”.

However, paradoxically, the political class, which alternated power in liberal Italy, betrayed its convictions, and did not meet the needs created and propagated with enough sports facilities. That is, they introduced and established the need for a product but then had difficulty in supplying it, especially in the capital.

3 The urban structure in the transition from Papal Rome to Rome as the capital of United Italy

When on September 20th 1870, troops of the United Kingdom of Italy arrived at Porta Pia, the unavoidable transfer of the capital from Florence – chosen as the provisional site – to Rome caused a series of

logistical problems that would have to do with the backwardness and stasis of the old metropolis. In the early 1970s, it was still a very small town, enclosed by walls with 18 gates, which had 340 churches and 135 palaces (Casetti & Spegnesi, 2004). These palaces were mostly the headquarters of the public administrative structures in an area of the Mars Campus, between the Pantheon and the Tiber. The Ministry of Education was located at St. Ives, while the cultural facilities for higher education were concentrated at the Roman College Complex and the University of *La Sapienza*; there were nine theatres (Alibert, Argentina, Metastasio, Politeama, Capranica, Valle, Valletto, Corea, Tordinona), and eight libraries (Angelica, Barberini, Casanatense, Chigi, Corsini, Vatican, and two at the Lincei Academy and the San Luca Academy) (Càpici, 2005; Elias & Zanella, 1984; Isnenghi, 2004; Story, 1868).

The unification of Italy would create a real disruption in the urban development of the pre-existing Rome to adapt it to its new role as capital. The establishment of the Government and especially the transfer of the official venues of national representation came about with the urgency of finding a suitable place and appropriate administration for the state. If the settlement of the king in the Quirinal Palace was immediate, hampered only by the desperate search for a locksmith to open the doors, as Pope Pius IX had left the residence taking the keys with him, it was much more difficult to find a place for the representatives; and even more problematic to find a place for the flood of public servants and employees and their families, forced to descend en masse from the north, and particularly from Piedmont, who had made an intermediate and provisional stop in Florence. Soon came professionals, traders, speculators, and businessmen (who, along with numerous labourers coming from almost all of southern Italy, and shopkeepers and craftsmen from various provinces, would be welcomed by the “Romans of Rome” with a proud and often hostile attitude, and labelled in general with the term “*buzzurri*”).

It was necessary to deal with an unprecedented rapidly growing population: the papal city, which in 1871 boasted a population of 213 633 inhabitants, was expected to double in the space of thirty years, reaching a total of 424 943 people in 1901 (Nicolini, 1980).

The urban transformation of Rome in the early years of its rise as the capital suffered from contributing factors like the exacerbated – and in many ways savage – building speculation and mobility generated by strong urbanization, in which a new emerging political class had decided to dissolve the old aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The socio-political evolution of those difficult years was the scenario in which the design of the new town-planning was decided on, the result of a difficult balancing act among private interests and public administration, the political, bureaucratic and financial bourgeoisie, and between the aristocracy and clergy. Worthy of mention of the contribution of these last two was the decision to parcel out the *Prati di Castello* (then simply called *Prati*),

with advantageous results for both (Accasto, Fraticelli, & Nicolini, 1971; Bartoccini, 1985; Borsi, 1966; De Angelis D'Ossat, 1942; Piacentini, 1952).

As a result of this parcelling, and related building, structures were created that would be unsuitable for residential use, and would be used as recreational space, as we shall see; although only a small part of the projects would be implemented.

Until it was selected as the capital of the new Kingdom, the Eternal City could boast only of the remains of its ancient buildings: magnificent, monumental, but of no use to meet the rising aspirations of a population that started to be sensitive to the song of the modern sirens of *leisure*, due to the addition of immigrants from all over Italy that converged there, as we have seen, as the result of the government and its needs; because the true “Romans of Rome”, were still slumbering in this regard. There were people from diverse business activities, but also from different cultural regions: from the north – especially Piedmont – they were most advanced and already accustomed to exercise and to practice some kind of fun and recreational activities; others were from the more recalcitrant central and southern regions, but all these people together, in their diversity, helped to change the pace and lifestyle of the former papal Rome. To them, the capital offered only squares and plazas, dusty roads, and adjacent rural areas in which to vent their desire for moving and playing. It began to be seen that, if it was true that the modernization of Italy also meant renewed lifestyles, it should come about not only through the education of mentalities and habits, but also through adjustments in logistics.

The adjustment to the new requirements for exercise, not only in Rome but in various parts of the peninsula, is by no means a trivial matter in the context of the role it played in building Italian unity, although it has still been the subject of few studies in this respect during the country's uninterrupted 150 years of life.

4 The training of physical education teachers

The inclusion of physical education as a compulsory school subject made the problem of recruitment and qualification of teachers in this discipline more urgent. In Turin, training courses had already begun in 1861, but in the twenty years that had elapsed since the promulgation of the De Sanctis Law, fewer than five hundred teachers had qualified, and nearly a hundred of them had obtained a degree in similar courses started in Genoa and Naples. The De Sanctis Law expressly stipulated norms for the accelerated training of teachers through free courses frequently promoted for a small economic profit over a period of five years. This training included teaching courses in pedagogy, anatomy and methodology. The first one started in September 1878 in all provincial capitals with enough sport facilities and instructors for this purpose. From 1878 to 1882 there were 933 courses – 517 for male

teachers and 416 for female teachers – in 69 provinces. Teacher from the whole peninsula obtained the degree, albeit with a strikingly uneven distribution, but 27% of the total could not finish it. For them a three-way solution was found: 1) a one-year extension of the course where there were more requests and, of course, a situation which could suit their needs; 2) the establishment of courses approved by local prefects; and 3) the opportunity to take a private examination in regular schools and universities. As is evident, this set of rules developed into a botched solution to the stark contrast between the dictates of legislation and the real possibility of putting them in place.

From 1879 on these training schools were set up at the *Scuola Magistrale*¹ of the most important Gymnastic Societies in Italy (*i.e.*, Bari, Bologna, Catania, Florence, Naples, Padua, Palermo, Turin and Rome). During these two courses, students were simultaneously educated, on the one hand, in pedagogy, anatomy and technique; and, on the other hand, in scientific and military training. In 1882 a *Scuola Magistrale* for women opened in Naples, as a result of the first course in special gymnastics established in Turin in 1867 and then moved to Florence in 1880. In Turin, the *Scuola Magistrale* for women was reactivated in 1885. Thanks to the initiative of Felix Valletti, appointed Inspector for Physical Education and as such responsible for checking the activities of these schools, the Normal School of Rome was established in 1884. Before this, the designation of gymnastic teachers and the duration of their employment depended on local authorities and the Provincial School Board, and in the absence of a legal status, they lived in an absolutely precarious situation, and often almost in destitution. In 1909 the Rava Law decreed the transformation of the Gymnastic Normal Schools of Rome, Turin and Naples into Institutes of Education for certification to teach physical education in male and female schools (Bonetta, 1990; Santoni Rugiu, 2006).

5 Finally something began to move

In 1876 there was an important event: Rome was chosen to host the Annual Italian Congress of Gymnastics, then in its seventh edition. This event was used as an opportunity to build a gym with more than 500 m², at the Caelian Hill, close to the Botanical Garden. During the Congress, the adjacent areas were also prepared for displaying apparatus and works on gymnastic art. The next year, the city was also equipped with a National Society of Gymnastics, Fencing and Shooting, locating its headquarters on the ground floor of the Palace in *via S. Cesarini Nicola*.

In 1890, Rome was also provided with a Gymnastic Society, two years after the founding of the Italian National Federation of Gymnastics (itself formed by the merger of the existing Italian Gymnastic Federation and

¹ High schools specializing in education.

the Federations of the Italian Gymnastic Society). In a burst of autonomist aspirations this Society claimed the management of all physical activities that took place in the Capital, a power that belonged instead to the National Society designed by the Government to serve political and ideological purposes. Therefore, to carry out its tasks – those which it held as a subsidiary affiliation, and those that it wanted to usurp – the Gymnastic Society of Rome adopted as its gym, on a provisional basis, the seat of the Normal School that was founded in 1884, in analogy with what had happened in other Italian cities (*e.g.*, Bari, Bologna, Catania, Florence, Naples, Padua, Palermo and Turin) after the promulgation of the aforementioned De Sanctis Law². In 1894 it started the construction of the Velodrome in Rome, where the III National Gymnastic Competition would take place the following year. The planned facility, which had an access from *via* Isonzo and another from Villa Borghese, was lauded by the press of the time that described it as the best that the requirements of modern sport³ could need, and adapted to accommodate various types of sporting events. The last years of the old century and the early years of the new one passed without evident changes in building policy trends in favour of mass sportization, while there was a continuous growth of the phenomenon of associations linked to it even in Rome. The vitality of this trend is reflected in the appearance, one after another, of numerous associations: Borgo Prati Gymnastic Society (1899), Lazio Athletic Society (1900), Audacious Sporting Club (1901), and Cristoforo Colombo Sports Society (1905). Despite the above-mentioned events which constituted a veritable earthquake in the generally sedentary habits of the Italians, the traditional immobilism of school and pedagogy, and the neglect of urban housing initiatives meant that Italy still lagged far behind as compared to other European states. According to 1908 data, the number of affiliates to Gymnastic Societies was around 12 000; while in Germany there were 770 000, in France 250 000 and 50 000 in Switzerland (Toschi, 1992).

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² In 1909 with the Rava-Daneo Law, the Normal Schools of Rome, Turin and Naples would become Institutes of Education for certification to teach physical education in schools.

³ *Il Popolo Romano*, 18th November 1894.