

Sport and Alcohol

Torbjörn Andersson

Malmö University

If there is one issue where Swedish sport has long stood out from the sports of many other countries, it is in distancing oneself from alcohol. If you focus on the connections between sports and alcohol in the UK and Sweden, it appears that we are dealing with two completely different sports cultures. This can be established after reading Tony Collins and Wray Vamplew's book *Mud, Sweat and Beers. A Cultural History of Sport and Alcohol*, which is an attempt to link a holistic approach to the relationship between sport and alcohol in the UK. To begin with, it can be stated that the study is both beneficial short, just over 100 pages, and easy to read. What the authors have done first and foremost is to combine the already existing research on the role of alcohol in the world of sports with the research that has been done on the alcohol industry. To this brew, they have added a lot of their own source research in the archives of various breweries and sports clubs. In this way, the wider connections are clearly clarified, such as that the breweries have deliberately started to sponsor the sport at a time when beer consumption has dropped drastically - a strategy that has definitely been successful.

For a Swedish reader - with his often pre-programmed attitude that sports and alcohol are two incompatible quantities - the study is both interesting and useful. Here, in fact, the obvious alcohol craze that has existed in British sport appears to be both at times quite sympathetic and fully understandable. The story includes so much more than all the reports about drunken English football players at training camp, which are regularly and with some indignant joy reported by the Swedish evening press.

First of all, one can ask the question whether our modern sport existed at all if alcohol did not exist. The authors show how interconnected the old games of folk culture were with both alcohol and games. From the games came modern sports and surprisingly often alcohol still had a prominent place. The pub became the

connecting link between old and new, the pub which in the 19th century was a broad social institution and which thus had an absolutely central place in the local life of the people. The pub functioned as everything from sponsor to organizer, meeting room, changing rooms and competition arena for the local sport. The pub owner not only wanted to sell more beer to the guests, but he also had an almost obligation to assist the local community, much like many mill patrons had in Sweden. The effect was that surveys in the 1930s could show that up to 40% of the conversations in London's pubs revolved around sports!

What then happened was that the pub's anchorage in the local area was gradually lost. During the interwar period, the pubs quickly lost ground to the private clubs, which could take advantage of the more liberal alcohol legislation that applied to them. The pub crawl continued and it is estimated that 20,000 places have disappeared in Britain since the 1950s. In parallel with this development, the pubs have largely stopped brewing their own beer and large breweries have taken over almost the entire pub stand. The social role of the pub - not least as a sports patron and organizer - has disappeared and instead the pub has simply become a drinking place, much as it is now in Sweden. Of an original production of values, most consumption has remained, which of course feels like a sad development.

In any case, the intimate connection between sports and alcohol, especially after competition, has remained. This is noticeable not least in accepted terms such as the 19th hole for golf and the 3rd half for football. When Sunday football (an equivalent to our raven football) started in earnest in England in the 60's, they made sure that the matches ended exactly when the pub opened. In this way, the patterns of behavior have not changed much since the time before the breakthrough of industrialism. What is consumed, however, has changed. In fact, lager beer, where Carling and Carlsberg have successfully created their brands through major sponsorship efforts in the sport, has increasingly turned out to be more traditional beers (of the bitter type). And this is not a bad bet as Collins and Vamplew state that Brits have traditionally been as local patriotic in terms of the local football team as the local beer.

In general, the same globalization process has sparked interest in both many smaller football teams and unique beers. Interestingly, the same thing does not seem to have happened in Sweden. As far as beer is concerned, one can actually see an opposite development, where many small breweries in an increasingly liberal Swedish alcohol climate are fighting their way into the market by allying themselves with football's growing supporter clubs. In general, it is clear that the links between the sport and the alcohol industry are now growing stronger in Sweden, but that the development is nevertheless partly different from the British one. To that extent, the impression remains that Swedish and British sports culture are still quite different from each other.

Copyright © Torbjörn Andersson 2004