



Niels Kayser Nielsen

BODY, SPORT
AND SOCIETY
IN NORDEN

Essays in Cultural History

AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS

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By *Niels Kayser Nielsen*

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Niels Kayser Nielsen

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INTRODUCTION

This book comprises a number of cultural-historical and ethnographic studies of the history of sport in Scandinavia. The studies examine the contribution made by sport to the development of Scandinavian nationalism in the nineteenth century, and analyze the ways in which sport became interwoven with the social life of citizens in the various Scandinavian countries in the twentieth century. The main focus of this volume, therefore, is not on the organizational history of sport, nor is it on society vis-à-vis sport – i.e., sport as a reflection of a certain societal constellation. Rather, what is of interest is sport in society, and therefore the book aims to illustrate the ways in which sport has been used and has served to help explain and understand Scandinavian society types.

This endeavour is also related to the history of the social classes. In the nineteenth century, while both sport and nationalism were primarily of importance to the bourgeoisie and – in part – the aristocracy, in the twentieth century both sport and nationalism became a matter for wage-earners and salaried employees. It could be expressed as follows: Nationalism – the strongest “ism” of all the political “isms” in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – succeeded, through the medium of sport, in reaching all levels of Scandinavian society in the twentieth century. Sport was at the service of nationalism, but the opposite was also true. Sport also made its own contribution to nationalism: It peacefully and symbolically played a significant role in helping to close the gaps that existed between the social classes in Scandinavia, with working class and peasant being able – through sport – to demonstrate their equality with the other classes in society. In this way, it can be said that sport has also contributed to democratizing the Scandinavian nations.

On the whole, Scandinavian countries were stable and solid societies in the twentieth century. This was, above all, due to the circumstance that they were all characterized by a strong democratic tradition that resulted in part from a sympathetic reform monarchy, and in part from the “association autocracy” that was created in the second half of the nineteenth century. Here people were schooled from childhood in democratic leadership principles, whereby – thanks to the elastic membrane of dialogue and practical