

# SUMMARY

## A COMPETING NATION.

### SPORTS AS CHANNEL AND SOURCE OF NATIONALISM IN FINLAND 1900–1952

The main objective of my thesis is to analyse the significance of sports as a channel and a source of nationalism in Finland. I have traced people who have utilised sports in the production of nationalist discourse and searched for their objectives, both stated and unstated. At the same time I have looked for changes in the types of nationalist discourse produced at different periods of time. In Finland as in other countries the relationship between nationalism and sports has been built on successes in international competitive sports. As a result the focus of this study lies on the Olympic Games, which became a recognised yardstick in comparing nations over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The “objective” material provided by medal counts and placement point tables gave Finland a clear advantage in this comparison. Between 1912 and 1936 Finnish athletes won a total of 142 medals at the Summer Games (50 gold, 45 silver, 47 bronze) and 24 medals at the Olympic Winter Games.

As the main source material of my thesis I have used newspaper writings during the Olympic Games between 1908 and 1952. The sample covers eight Finnish newspapers published in various parts of the country and reflecting different political opinions. I have also analysed the writings on nationalism in Finnish sports magazines during the entire period of study. Contemporary literature complements the source basis. On the basis of international literature I have placed Finnish nationalist speech into a comparative cross-national historical and ideological framework.

The time period of the thesis spans from 1900 to 1952. Around 1900 the use of gymnastics and sports as an instrument of Finnish nationalists increased under the pressure of Russification measures. At the same time international competitive sports were entering a period of rapid development. The Finnish nationalistic sports project culminated in the Helsinki Olympic Games of 1952, which marks a natural end to the period of study. The long time span gives an opportunity to study the changes in connections between nationalism and sports over the years.

The theoretical starting point of the thesis is provided by previous research in the fields of history of ideas and sociology with a critical view on nationalism. Nationalism does not develop in the soul of a nation by itself. Instead, it is a conscious creation of the social actors in a given time period. However, nationalism is not based on any particular philosophy created by a great thinker. It can be characterised as a simple and consistent world of beliefs that is based on apparently irrefutable evidence on the particularity of a nation and its right of existence. I have based my work on the thoughts of Benedict Anderson, Michael Billig, Craig Calhoun, Ernest Gellner, Montserrat Guibernau, Eric Hobsbawm,

John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, who have studied the many facets of nationalism from differing points of view. In the analysis of the complex societal manifestations and effects of nationalism I have found it more fruitful to use many theories instead of just clinging to one overlapping explanation.

In my thesis I have studied the relationship between sports and nationalism by using the methods of historical research and cultural studies. This brings forth different aspects in the discussion of sport and nationalism. The connections where things are re-articulated bring sharply into focus both the old and the new. The study of history gives a clearer view of the surrounding context than cultural studies, which tend to focus on individual phenomena.

My study shows that the portrayal of Finland as a unique sports country and the Finns as an exceptional sports nation have been an important way to build Finnishness. The Olympic Games have offered Finland and many other small countries a chance to manifest their existence both internationally and internally. The newspaper *Turun Sanomat* wrote at the start of the Antwerp Games of 1920: "Victories are all the more important to small and remote peoples in order for them to stay on the list of the nations of the world." Large states are visible and influential by virtue of their size, but even for them international sports success has instrumental value as a national show of force.

In my study I have traced sports-related narratives that have maintained and re-enacted Finnishness and have crystallised into historical myths. Sports has both refined old myths and created new ones. One of the most essential myths features sports as a fresh source of healthy Finnishness. The myth has emphasised sports as an antidote to many different vices and obligated sportsmen to act as exemplary figures. Sports has helped maintain a bifurcating notion of Finnishness: we are capable people in many ways but there are underlying unpredictable forces in us that have to be kept in leash.

The story of the flag incident at the Stockholm Olympic Games of 1912 has time and again resurfaced in Finnish sports writing as a proof of Russian oppression. The treatment given to the story in different contexts neatly illustrates the nature of a historical myth. Later narrators interpreted the incident freely according to the own agenda. The removal of the gymnastics club flag carried by the Finnish team at the opening ceremony was transformed into a desecration of the flag of Finland with the acquiescence of the Swedish organisers who bowed to the demands of the Russians. These interpretations failed to mention that the Finnish Olympic team and at least the most informed part of the audience were well aware that the Finnish team did not have permission to use national insignia of its own. Many post-independence texts also overlooked the fact that Finland did not even possess an official national flag until 1918.

The myth of the exceptional innate talent of Finnish long-distance runners grew into full proportion in the interwar years. The story survived the Second World War, until it was undermined by a new wave of foreign runners led by Emil Zátopek of Czechoslovakia. The runner myth highlighted the characteristics of an ideal Finn, such as selfless patriotism, tenacity and modesty. In describing the heroes sports writers and sports casters employed the national romanticist imagery inculcated at primary school.

The two most famous champion runners Hannes Kolehmainen and Paavo Nurmi represented different aspects of Finnish heroism. Kolehmainen was a typically national romanticist hero, well in keeping with the idealistic picture of Finnishness cherished by the Finnish-speaking elite. Nurmi represented the Modern times with his clockwork precision and cold calculations. On the other there was a tragic streak in Nurmi – by his very uniqueness he was condemned to loneliness, which associated him with the mythical heroes of Ancient Greek tragedies. The myth of the fate-forsaken hero was complete when Nurmi was banned from crowning his career with Olympic victory in the marathon in 1932. This was seen in Finland as a malignant ploy by envious Swedish sports leaders. The international banishment elevated Nurmi into an embodiment of all the wrongs committed against the Finns as a nation.

The myth of Finland as a great power of sports, track and field athletics in particular, had a firm basis in the medal tables of the Olympic Games of the interwar years. Finns were flattered to find the only comparison for their athletics team in the United States of America. The great power myth became problematic over the years by building excessive expectations. The dwindling medal success after the Second World War could be partly explained by the heavy casualties of war, but soon enough it called for a reappraisal of the idea of Finnishness.

Sports has also played an important part in the formulation of the myth of *sisu*, the gritty tenacity supposedly innate in the Finnish people. This mythical life force was seen to include a dangerous untamed primordial streak. The notion of Finnish *sisu* was present in racial parlance of the period. The mysterious ingredient and the superior achievements of Finnish athletes were seen as evidence of the special life force of the small nation, and not only in Finland. On the other hand, both factors could be employed as evidence for the claim put forward in Sweden and the Anglo-Saxon world in the interwar years that Finns were related to the Mongols, notion not welcomed by the Finns. The concept of *sisu* has been readily used by Finns as an explanation for their sporting achievements, and after the war for the lack thereof. The notion of losing *sisu* or, worse, losing it to other peoples, reflected the general mood of post-war incertitude. *Sisu* has been a useful concept in being succinct, easily recognised and sufficiently undefined to allow different articulations.

The notion of the Helsinki Olympic Games of 1952 as the “last real Olympic Games” has grown into mythical proportions in Finland. The ingredients of this narrative are the “human-size” scale of the Games, the knowledgeable of the Finnish sports audience, the warm welcome given to all foreign visitors, the emphasis on participation and fair play instead of winning, the friendly relations between athletes from different nations and the uniting purpose the Games gave to all Finns irrespective of political persuasion. The successful Games gave an honourable farewell to the myth of Finland as a great power of sports by offering in its place a myth of Finns as a sports nation possessing a special Olympic spirit: a small nation that could organise something unique. Symbolically the Olympic year of 1952 brought Finland back to normality from the post-war times of emergency.

Observations made by the means of articulation theory bring to light the changing interpretations given to the same historical material over the years. Anti-Russian sentiment that had developed during the Russian rule grew after Finnish

independence into national hatred encouraged by the White Finnish establishment. One of its ingredients was the supposed uncivil character of Russians as a people. Among the strongest proofs was the Russian insistence on denying Finland the right to use national insignia at the Olympic Games of 1912 and the suppression of Finland's right of separate Olympic representation induced by Russians in 1914. The cancellation of the 1940 Olympic Games in Helsinki was portrayed by Finnish war propagandists as a prime example of Soviet barbarism, whereas Finnish top athletes were presented as elite soldiers capable of superhuman feats. Hate-mongering parlance had to be abandoned after the war. Emphasising the success of Finnish athletes at the 1912 Olympic Games in "putting Finland onto the map of the world" became a more subtle way of reminding of the tortuous history of Finnish–Russian relations.

The official interpretation of the significance of Olympic victories that was created by the Finnish-speaking elite was not without its rivals. This became particularly clear in the aftermath of the Civil War of 1918. According to the interpretation of the victorious Whites, new victories on the battlefields of sports proved that the core of the Finnish people was still healthy, even if a part of the common people had proved rotten in 1918. The supporters of the White ideology hoped that sports victories under the new blue and white colours would help diminish the influence of the labour movement and reintegrate the nation in the desired way. The labour movement sought to deny the value of Olympic success, but could not prevent many leftist people also feeling pride for Finnish medals. Olympic victories did thus have to a certain degree the effect desired by the elite, but they could also be interpreted without the enforced rhetoric patriotism, as an expression of the capabilities of ordinary Finnish people. In people's own interpretations sports built a positive, vital self-image of Finnishness that offered a more realistic alternative to the elite's image of the people, which was either negative or overflowing idealistic.

The White elite and the labour movement also had different opinions on the meaning of the national stadium built in Helsinki between 1934 and 1938. For the elite the stadium was to become a symbol of the nation's freedom and independence, a suitable venue for the Olympic Games. The labour movement co-operated in the building project, because it wanted to host the Workers' Olympiad in Finland. In its inaugural year of 1938 the Stadium had already become a symbol of national reintegration, a notion which was further enhanced when the Olympic Games of 1940 were transferred from Tokyo to Helsinki later in the same year.

The two Olympic hosting projects of 1940 and 1952 demonstrate how the political atmosphere of a period can affect nationalism. The seemingly similar projects were in fact strongly embedded in the different political realities of their times. The preparations for the 1940 Games took place in an atmosphere of national reconciliation and reintegration, even if this interpretation was not fully accepted by the political right until the Winter War of 1939–40. The spirit of the Helsinki Games of 1952 was affected foremost by post-war reconstruction and temporary suspension of political conflicts in the name of national interest. After the Games the harmony rapidly receded and the old sports political polemics were resumed with full vigour.

In the 1920's sports became an instrument of linguistic politics. The Finnish-speaking extremist "True Finns" used sports-related quarrels against Sweden and Swedish-speaking Finns to further their own political agenda. Urho Kekkonen, as president of the Finnish Athletics Association the most visible sports leader of the time, was counted among them up until the mid-1930's. In the first years of independence the True Finns questioned the loyalty of Swedish-speaking Finns to the Finnish state. Athletes with Swedish surnames were asked to change their names into Finnish ones, so that their achievements would not be counted for Sweden by mistake. Sweden became Finland's new symbolic main enemy after Russia had disappeared from international sports.

Swedish sports leaders were often presented in Finnish-language publicity as malignant schemers who sought to prevent Finnish success at the Olympic Games by non-sporting means. Evidence seemed to be abundant: the IAAF led by the Swede J. Sigfrid Edström removed from the Olympic program events that had traditionally yielded success for Finland, allowed women to compete at the Olympic Games to the chagrin of the Finnish sports establishment and banned Paavo Nurmi from competing at the Los Angeles Games of 1932. Confrontational attitudes towards Sweden had to be abandoned in the late 1930's when Finland needed support for its Olympic bid as well as political allies in the increasingly tense world situation. After the Second World War Sweden had to unknowingly serve as a surrogate conduit for Finnish nationalistic pressures that could no more be openly targeted against the Soviet Union. These pressures often surfaced as increased tension at the annual athletics matches between Finland and Sweden.

Analogies between sports and warfare were more common than ever before or after in the 1920's and 1930's. The elite drew a parallel between self-sacrificing bravery of soldiers at war and the motivation of Finnish top athletes. The ideal Finnish athlete was supposed to be ready to put his health at risk to defend the honour of his country at an international sports competition. This kind of hero worship did not stand the scrutiny of thousands of real war casualties in the post-war atmosphere. Sports heroism shed some of its mythical content. A fitting hero for the new age was Tapio Rautavaara, the Olympic javelin throwing champion of London 1948, a popular singer and war veteran who had risen to stardom from the ranks of the common people. The explanations given to Finnish sports success also changed: the myth of Finnish athletes' special innate talents disappeared. The success of Finnish cross-country skiers at the Olympic Winter Games in Oslo 1952 was mostly explained by their hard training regimen.

The way of speaking about sports also changed over the time period of the study. A part of the elite strived to prevent the "contamination" of sports language by ingredients of popular culture that had begun in the 1920's, while some intellectuals sought to adapt to the change by uniting new elements with exalted features of the old culture. The elite's definitions of the nation and the people's new interpretations, created on the basis of the "official" sports discourse on the one hand and their own experiences on the other hand, met in the field of sports in an interesting way. The bourgeois daily and periodical press was able to unite these strands on its sports pages and accommodate its ideological objectives to its circulation needs. By the same token the opportunities to spread the accepted

message of Finnishness to the lower classes were improved, as many working class men were interested in sports news.

Major sports events and their subsequent victory celebrations have been seen as rituals of nationalism as the citizen's religion of the modern times. The Olympic Games in particular are a veritable trove of quasi-religious rituals and symbols. In the creation of Finnish national identity sports has unquestionably played a prominent part as producer, propagator and guardian of symbols. The Finnish nature of these symbols has been enforced by strongly nationalistic media coverage of sports events, especially of the Olympic Games.

The dividing lines of sports affiliation in Finland were drawn in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century more by class and language than by regional sentiment. The years both immediately preceding and following Finnish independence in 1917 saw strong propagation of unified Finnish national identity over and above regional divisions. Many citizens could accept this identity only partly. The members of the working class who felt loyalty towards the Finnish labour movement could naturally rejoice over the achievements of Finnish athletes, but that did not mean that they embraced the Finnish identity offered by the White establishment of the interwar years in its entirety.

According to Eric Hobsbawm the power of sports lies in that it helps build a bridge between the private and public realms, thus enabling everyone to identify themselves with the nation. The appeal of sports is increased by the fact that elite athletes are young people, who by their youth symbolise the capabilities of the nation. In Finland sports has been connected to both ethnic and citizen-based nationalism. Swedish-speaking Finns have a strong separate identity but they also feel committed to the Finnish nation. Sports has been a convenient way for them to express "blue-and-white" Finnish national sentiments.

Sports has also symbolically served Finnish nationalism by illustrating the dangers that threaten the nation. In the eyes of the Finnish-speaking White establishment of the interwar years the Finnish nation had to be reunited to face its and external and internal enemies, the latter consisting of "the Reds" and the Swedish-speakers. The most dangerous foreign enemy was the Soviet Union, but in the field of sports the recognised enemy was Sweden. Anti-Swedish sentiments of the Finnish-speaking middle class were shared by a large part of the working class and all sections of rural dwellers.

Sports nationalism has often evoked strong sentiments when employed as a yardstick for comparing nations. Sports achievements have been used as evidence of the capabilities of nations, but they have also reinforced national prejudices. Finland's position as a great power of sports had to be defended at every Olympic Games. Every citizen could take part in the defence by donating money to the Olympic team. Politicians often talked about the importance of sports success, but the role of state funding in Finnish sports was relatively small in the interwar years. This actually reinforced sports-related nationalism by investing it with a popular aura, as something initiated spontaneously by the people. The role of sports as transmitter of male cultural values has also played a part in the process of identifying with the nation. Young boys were inculcated by sports to the ideal image of a Finnish man, who ought to be honest, tenacious and unpretentious.

Sports-related ceremonies, such as prize-givings, flag raisings and parades, made the blue-and-white colours a natural part of the life of Finnish youngsters.

Olympic sports success has sometimes been used in Finland as a substitute for the lack of a glorious political history. The significance of sports in this respect diminished after the war years. To a certain degree it was replaced by the more powerful myth of the “miracle of the Winter War”, which extolled the unforeseen sense of national unity in the face of a mortal external enemy. The bourgeois elite sought to present the Olympic hosting project of 1952 as a sort of continuation of the miracle of the Winter War, proving that Finns were still capable of rallying under the same flag. The notion could not be articulated openly, as that would cause a reappraisal of Finland’s relations with the Soviet Union, which happened to participate at the Olympic Games for the first time in Helsinki.

Sports has offered political instruments for national states to practice cultural and linguistic unification. Athletes must be prepared to compete for the united nation at all times. In Finland the “True Finns”, who called for a unilingual nation, remained influential until the Second World War. The Finnish Olympic Committee was led by Swedish-speaking sports leaders, whereas the largest central sports federation SVUL was dominated by Finnish-speakers. The permanent tension between the organisations eased only after the leadership of the Olympic Committee was changed in the late 1930’s. Because of the great symbolic value of sports athletes were often targeted in Fennification campaigns. Many athletes adopted a Finnish surname just before representing Finland at the Olympic Games.

The preparations for the Helsinki Olympic Games of 1952 involved a continual process of redefining the content of Finnishness, culminating during the two weeks of competitions. Strict uniformity was demanded from the entire nation: it was everyone’s duty to ensure that the reputation of the nation did not get a single blemish while the attention of the whole world was directed to Finland. According to the elite’s interpretation the Games proved that the Finns were after all a civilised nation. This notion was based on the successful organisation of the Games, not to medal success, which had been the only criteria deployed in the interwar years.

Sports nationalism is in many respects alike in different parts of the world: explaining the national significance of international sports success. It receives local variation from the cultural practices and political situations of the surrounding society. Finnish sports nationalism has long been solemn and reverent by tone. Certain carnivalistic features were present in the victory celebrations of the 1920’s and 1930’s, but after the war years rigidity tended to increase again.

An exceptional feature of Finnish sports nationalism in international comparison is the dominant position of track and field athletics, an individual sport, in building national identity. Athletics was well in keeping with the image of an ideal Finn cherished by the elite. The prominent position of athletics in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also played a significant part: Finns were flattered to be compared in athletic prowess with the most powerful nation of the world. With the exception of pesäpallo, team sports did not feature as significant components in Finnish national identity. The notion of the innate prowess of

Finnish athletes in individual sports may even have slowed the development of football in Finland. The “national sport” myth spun around pesäpallo is an example of the significance of a unique and autochthonous sport as a source of national identity.

Another interesting feature of Finnish sports nationalism is the competition-oriented and nationalistic character of the Finnish workers’ sports movement, evident as early as the 1920’s. The Finnish Workers’s Sports Federation TUL had to develop its program of competitions in order to keep its best athletes in its ranks. The nationalistic persuasion of the Finnish worker athletes often caused bewilderment among their Central European comrades. The sports nationalism of Finnish bourgeois women was entrusted to their own gymnastics movement and strictly isolated from male sports. The nationalism produced by sports has consequently been pronouncedly masculine by character. Yet Finnishness has been presented as a seemingly genderless thing.

In Finland as elsewhere sports achievements have quite easily become a part of the national cultural heritage. National identity is a modern phenomenon, by nature flexible and liable to change, always ready to incorporate new factors that are concerned positive for the nation. The success of Finnish athletes has helped build a positive, vital image of Finnishness. Sports discourse has produced Finnishness ever since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and still keeps adding new layers to it. Hannes Kolehmainen and Paavo Nurmi may be eventually be forgotten but the image created of them affects how modern Finnish heroes of rally driving or Formula One racing are being portrayed.

The heroic stories told of Finnish Formula One drivers still emphasise on the one hand their character as ordinary fellows and on the other hand their special skills based on their Finnishness. Hard work as a precondition of success is a vital ingredient in the long tradition of presenting Finnish heroism. The achievements of the Formula One world champion Kimi Räikkönen are further enhanced by his modest family background. His distant and introvert “Iceman” image is reminiscent of Paavo Nurmi’s way of handling publicity. Räikkönen’s case differs from those of his predecessors in that nowadays a successful athlete has a permission from the Finnish public to lead a luxurious life as a just reward for the years of sacrifice.

Another relatively recent development is that team sports can also produce heroic stories even in Finland. The success of Finnish ice hockey players has been interpreted as evidence that Finns have learned to become team players. Ice hockey has been elevated to the status of the new national sport in Finland. As a tough and tactical team sport it can even be said to reflect the present social realities in Finland. In spite of the present high status of Formula One driving and ice hockey the traditional sports of pesäpallo, cross-country skiing and athletics still carry weight as components of Finnish sports nationalism.

Sports still has an important effect in the conception of history of many – especially male – Finns. Stories of great victories and defeats serve as fixed points in organising one’s own life history and making sense of the world at large. The history of sports is an inexhaustible fountain of stories, which is attested by rich sports literature. A special characteristic of sports is that it produces well organised

and frequently utilised traditions. Almost any detail can be chosen from the vast array of history and traditions and put to use to bring forth a sense of community in the present and with the past. Reminiscing of significant events such as the Helsinki Olympic Games or the Finnish victory at the World Ice Hockey Championships of 1995 creates an imagined community in a sense coined by Benedict Anderson. The events in sports history can also be exploited in the service of contemporary needs. As an example, in connection of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Olympic Games of 1952 the Finland of the 1950's was portrayed as an idyllic country, whose people worked selflessly for the common cause of organising successful Olympic Games.

Sports served as a building block of Finnishness in a way desired by the intelligentsia long into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was facilitated by fact that sports leaders and journalists kept the authority of its interpretation in their hands. Very few comments by athletes themselves were publicised in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sports-inspired nationalism was located in the intersection of the nation created from above and the Finland imagined by the people. Sports converted the solemn concept of the nation into something that ordinary people could understand. Today sports nationalism is produced in a less formal way as a dialogue between commercial media and the sports-interested public, fuelled by national stereotypes and confrontations appealing to negative emotions: in the field of sports the nation is still engaged in symbolic competition with other nations. Notions of Finnishness are still being constructed in battles between "Us" and "Them".

Sports has retained much of its nationalistic appeal, even if the achievements of today's athletes tend to become quickly forgotten under the overflowing supply of sports news. Subscribing to the Finnishness represented by sports reflects a sort of yearning for stability in a rapidly changing world. Most concerned about the lack of stability are the common people, who have by now learned to live as Finns, in a Finnish way, as once taught by the elite. The elite itself has already moved on, but its new ideals of globalisation and European unity have remained distant for ordinary people. Sports makes it still possible for people to attach themselves to Finnishness and symbolically declare that not everything that is national should be so easily abandoned.