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The social victories of sport:  
social impact and the role of women.

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## Introduction

The origin of the word “sport” derives from the English language and is rather recent: it appeared for the first time in 1532, to indicate a fun recreational activity, a “hobby”. According to philologists, the word “sport” is an abbreviation of the ancient French word "*desporter*", from which also derives the Spanish word "*deporte*", in Italian "*diporto*" (leisure)<sup>1</sup>. The use in Italy, in fact, dates back to the XIX century, and the word is still associated with its original meaning: that of “having fun”. Furthermore, its use may be applied also to ordinary life, such as when one says, "doing something for sport", that is, for entertainment.

The concept of sport, in the true meaning it subsequently acquired, of something that engages physical and mental energies and takes shape in competition, is naturally more remote and dates back to the early stages of society.

The idea of physical activity as a pillar of society and as something fundamentally engrained in life dates back to the Homo Sapiens: in order to survive they had to walk, hunt, gather, and defend themselves by animals and enemies. Perhaps, therefore, it is not a coincidence that the oldest competitive practice in the world seems to be the man-versus-man battle, the most primitive form of sport and what today we know as “boxing”. Evidence of this is found in numerous cave paintings of Lascaux, in France, that date back to approximately fifteen thousand years ago<sup>2</sup>. Other examples that show how sport is rooted in the ancient depths of society may be found in yoga, a similar yet profoundly different (both physically and symbolically) discipline that originated in India in the X century BC, and in Kung Fu that originated in China in 2500 BC<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, around 1800 BC, in what today we call Ireland, the Tailteann Games gained a lot of popularity. These competitions were held in the city of Tailteann (modern day Teltown), in honor of the Goddess Tailtiu<sup>4</sup>. They consisted in a series of competitions such as athletics, jumping and launching, and included other activities with carts and horses. Similar events, along with a form of boxing, took place in the New Kingdom of the Egyptians, around 1500 BC<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, in the same period, in Crete, the Minoan civilization held wrestling and boxing competitions and practiced “taurocatapsia” (bull-leaping) with profound enthusiasm, and whose origin is strongly linked to the legend of the Minotaur<sup>6</sup>.

1 Wordinfo.info. (2019). *Sport - Word Information*. [online] Available at: <https://wordinfo.info/unit/303>

2 Roma, G. (2017). Alle Radici della Ginnastica e dello Sport. *Italian Journal of Sports Pedagogy*, pp.26-35.

3 Martial Net. (2019). Dalle origini delle arti marziali al Tempio Shaolin. [online] Available at: <http://www.martialnet.it/arti-marziali/origini-delle-arti-marziali/>.

4 Tailteanngames.com. (2019). Tailteann Games. [online] Available at: <http://www.tailteanngames.com>

5 Mark, J. (2017). Games, Sports & Recreation in Ancient Egypt. In: *Ancient History Encyclopedia*.

6 Encyclopedia Britannica. (2019). Minotaur | Greek mythology. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Minotaur..>

These examples, therefore, show how sports have always represented a strong pillar of society, and date back to when civilization was primitive, and society was structurally different than how we know it today. In fact, it could be emphasized that this enhances the idea that the symbolic meaning of the early presence of sports shows that it represented a way for the population to gather together and share moments of collectivity and support for their favorite athletes, which furthermore strengthens the ties within society, creating a sense of unity.

Nonetheless, although sport activities were present right from the beginning of ancient societies, it was the Greeks, a few centuries later, who went even further by systematizing the idea of sports, transforming it into one of the most indispensable and essential human activities. Sport was thus used as an instrument to feel healthy and to be healthy, to improve physical stance, to relieve stress and to exercise the mind.

In ancient times wars were extremely frequent and the idea of practicing sports was also seen as a way to acquire more confidence and strength in the battlefield: “training and discipline” was considered a formative motto that could fortify not only the body but also the mind. This idea, in fact, was the necessary background for the myth of the “Kalos Kagathos”, the "beautiful and good", one of the main foundations of Greek culture which nonetheless takes a military perspective. The myth of “Kalos Kagathos” unites physicality with spirituality and encompasses the virtues of being muscular and of having a good soul, of being a “gentleman”<sup>7</sup>. Another characteristic of the "beautiful and good" is the desire, passion, and motivation that these individuals found in competition: they liked to challenge themselves, to excel. Perhaps it could be argued that it is also for this reason that the Olympics were created: to give an adequate theater to the excited athletes and to provide society with entertainment and common interests. The word “athletic”, in fact, derives from the Greek word “*athlos*”, which means “competition”, demonstrating that sports for the Greeks have always represented a way to measure themselves not only amongst others but also amongst themselves.

The first Olympic game originated in 776 BC and the establishment of these competitions, fixed every four years, immediately produced a positive result within society. In fact, the games were widely acclaimed and praised, and they represented a moment of collective entertainment, producing sentiments of fraternity, community, and excitement. In fact, this feeling of serenity and tranquility that reigned and spread throughout the Olympics can be proven with the fact that during the games all wars were to be suspended, a first success of which the effects are still celebrated

<sup>7</sup> Bifani, F. (2016). Kalòs kai agathòs. [online] Corriere della Sera. Available at: <http://italians.corriere.it/2016/06/13/kalos-kai-agathos/>.

today, when we refer to the "Olympic peace". The Olympics, and therefore sport, thus become an instrument of peace, a symbol of friendship.

War and sport, however, maintain a sinister contiguity, so much so that it will be the battle of Thermopylae to generate, in fact, the most traditional yet challenging race, which still today concludes every Olympic: the marathon. The name of this well-known competition comes from the Battle of Marathon (490 BC), where the Athenian and Persian Empire fought relentlessly. The legend narrates that to announce the victory of the Athenians, the soldier Fidippid ran incessantly from Marathon to Athens and once he arrived the fatigue killed him. To celebrate this brave endeavor, more than two thousand years later, a 42.195 km race was instituted, representing the distance between Marathon and Athens. Its debut occurred in 1896 in Athens, during the first edition of the modern Olympic Games.

The Romans too played a significant role in the history of sports. In fact, in the first century AD, the poet Juvenal's theory "*mens sana in corpore sano*"<sup>8</sup> fully grasped the true essence of the meaning of sport. Such theory was and still is extremely influential, becoming the motto of numerous sports societies of modern times. Nonetheless, more than two thousand years ago, in his satires, Juvenal showed himself in opposition with statements that exalted courage as a virtue to be exercised in battle. His theory was subsequently supported by many studies. In particular, Lisa Flook and Rena L. Repetti of the University of California of Los Angeles, in collaboration with Jodie B. Ullman of the California State University of San Bernardino, in their study *Classroom Social Experiences as Predictors of Academic Performance*, have strongly ascertained that in the contemporary world "from the psychological point of view, physically active individuals report high levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety" (Flook, Repetti and Ullman, 2019). The utilitarian conception whereby sport is intrinsically related with "battle" was absent in Greece, where a more spiritual vision of sport triumphed, based on moral growth and the pursuit of glory. On the contrary, Rome ascribed to sport a purely entertaining meaning. In fact, the idea of sport as a brutal amusement and as a violent spectacle prevailed: sport was considered almost a tool of "political marketing", to gratify the people as well as to maintain social consensus. It could be stated, perhaps, that it is for this reason that in ancient Rome, the most violent disciplines, fighting and boxing, were also the most acclaimed. The extent of this theory is such that, according to Wolfgang Decker and Jean-Paul Thuillier in their book, *Le sport dans l'Antiquité*, "the Romans ... have perhaps created modern

<sup>8</sup> Fornara, P. (2013). Maratona, la battaglia dove nacque la civiltà occidentale. E il mito della più classica gara delle Olimpiadi. *Il Sole 24 Ore*. [online] Available at: <http://Maratona, la battaglia dove nacque la civiltà occidentale. E il mito della più classica gara delle Olimpiadi>.

<sup>9</sup> Juvenalis, D. and Viansino, G. (2001). *Satire*. Milano: Mondolibri, p.356.

sport, with its mass shows, its powerful clubs and its colossal financial problems" (Thuillier and Decker, 2004).

The significant differences between Greek and Roman culture also emerge in the artistic depiction of athletes. The ideals of "beauty and goodness" were the fundamental features of the Greek culture, whereas robust and sometimes ungraceful characters were those representing the Romans. In fact, this can be seen in the mosaics of the Baths of Caracalla, which are now preserved in the Vatican Museums.

Nonetheless, although it is true the violent shows held in Rome were popular amongst society, they did not please everyone and not few criticized them. Taking the opposition into account, the Emperor Augustus decided to attempt to introduce the Greek games in Rome, an ambition at which the Emperors Silla, Pompeo, and Caesar had failed at previously, especially because the aim was to ensure that the competitive spirit prevailed and that the race "served to strengthen the body, not to destroy it"<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, such effort proved to be a fiasco: the ruthless and ferocious taste of the Romans had not been eradicated and was thus expressed in the gladiator battles in the Coliseum and near its surroundings. The same amount of scandal that had stemmed from the habit and tradition of the Greeks to perform naked was reflected in the appreciation of the cruel struggles between men and wild beasts. The archaeologist Aristide Calderini, disappointed, stated: "certainly the Greek agonistic world would have had more support and more glory during the Empire, if only the agonists and musicians had not been replaced in the public's taste by circus games" (Calderini, 1929). Even then, an exaggerated hunt for consent eventually led to questionable decisions.

<sup>10</sup> Carcopino, J. (1983). *La vita quotidiana a Roma all'apogeo dell'impero*. Roma: Laterza.

## Chapter 1

### The beginnings.

Moments of glory and passion are perhaps the expressions that best describe and summarize the emotions that sport sparks in both its protagonists and its spectators. Despite the violent conception of sport that has accompanied its manifestations throughout the Roman Empire, the spectacularization of competition has been a constant over the centuries. The Olympics, for instance, have always been a huge show, representing a moment where the five continents come together as one. In fact, the "Olympic peace", the moment of truce of all wars, was brought forth with the idea of unifying different communities, societies and cultures, without conflicts or tensions, thus representing a moment that valorized the true values of a united society and, perhaps, world. Sport, therefore, becomes a tool of universal brotherhood. The five colored rings of the Olympic flag, first introduced in 1913, represent the five continents that take part in the Olympics, and previously each had a color representing it. Black was for Africa, red for America, yellow for Asia, green for Europe and blue for Oceania. Nonetheless, today the colors represent the world as a whole and there is no particular color is associated to a continent anymore, a decision that was made by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) because of debates on whether the association of a color to a continent could be discriminatory or not. The strength of the symbolic meaning that lies beneath the depiction of the Olympic rings can be found in rule 8 of the Olympic charter: "The Olympic symbol expresses the activity of the Olympic Movement and represents the union of the five continents and the meeting of athletes from throughout the world at the Olympic Games" (International Olympic Committee, n.d.). The standard order of such rings is to be (from left to right): blue, yellow, black, green and red, with the blue, black, and red rings at the top and the yellow and green rings at the bottom. The idea of universality between nations emphasized by the symbolic meaning of the Olympics is also shown by the image produced by the five intertwined circles, which could perhaps be interpreted as hands that grasp each other<sup>11</sup>.

During the numerous debates that have accompanied the growth of the sporting dimension, and therefore also of the economic business attached to it, many have argued that sport generally fails to affect and influence society and can only reflect it. However, if one ponders on the relationship between what were once called human races, it could be stated that it certainly helped to change the world by significantly improving it.

During the eve of the First World War, in the beginning of 1914, at the IOC congress in Paris, Baron Pierre De Coubertin officially presented the proposal to create an Olympic flag. Those were

<sup>11</sup> Young, D. and Abrahams, H. (2019). Olympic Games. In: *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.



difficult years, marked by great international tensions and strong nationalisms, and that the five continents could appear to be linked to each other, even if only on a simple flag, was a strong representation of hope for a better and more united future<sup>12</sup>.

Unfortunately, the aspiration of a peaceful world was betrayed: reality was tragically different and did not reflect the high hopes that had sparked a promising future. The outbreak of the First World War caused the Olympics to halt, contrary to what would have happened in ancient Greece, where truce during the games was obligatory.

Berlin had been chosen as the host city for the 1916 edition of the games, but German responsibilities and reparations in the war led to the exclusion of Germany from the IOC.

Nonetheless, in 1925 it was readmitted, and the 1936 Games were once again assigned to Berlin, although this occurred in 1931, when Germany was still a democratic republic. Meanwhile, Hitler had taken over the country<sup>13</sup>.

The clean and honest ideals of fairness, honor, value and brotherhood that had always characterized sport were swept away and replaced by representations linked to National Socialism, starting with the party's ideas on the primacy of the Aryan race. In sport, real differences in athletic abilities have always emerged, and normally so. This can be seen in the short distance runs, such as the 100 and 200 meters, where black athletes tend to dominate the scene, whereas in swimming, on the other hand, they do not normally emerge. Today, the debate is still open as to whether it is because of genes or disparities in social conditions. What is certain is that sport, in the twentieth century, began to represent a possible and concrete solution for those with difficult backgrounds, an important road to redemption to be undertaken with honesty, commitment, dedication, effort, and with the will and maturity to make sacrifices. In a word: with training. Although, for instance, black immigrants in America did not encounter too many difficulties to train for athletics since the equipment necessary was neither complex nor reserved for privileged classes, access to the pool was something that they could not afford. Furthermore, it could perhaps be stated that the natural path for underclass African-Americans was boxing in a ring, a sport that was seen as nothing more than the continuation of matches fought in the street, which more than often unfortunately saw young adolescents as protagonists, forced by their unchosen fate to seek fortune on the street and in any way possible. Yet, in these cases, also boxing assumes a positive role, representing a discipline that teaches both young gangsters and law-abiding citizens the true value and meaning of respect.

<sup>12</sup> International Olympic Committee. (2014). *100 Years of the Olympic Flag!*. [online] Available at: <https://www.olympic.org/news/100-years-of-the-olympic-flag>.

<sup>13</sup> Historyplace.com. (2001). *The History Place - Triumph of Hitler: The Berlin Olympics*. [online] Available at: <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/triumph/tr-olympics.htm>.

Hitler's Germany turned the 1936 Olympics into a frightening propaganda operation. His organizational system invented the journey of the Torch, symbol of the Games, lit in Olympia and transported by numerous torchbearers to the city of the event. The flame is one of the ancient symbols of the Olympics: the fire, pillar of life and instrument of the gods, was kept lit for the entire duration of the Games, just like the flame that burned perpetually in the temples of ancient Greece.

### **1.1 The Berlin Games of 1936 and the Owens case.**

The Berlin Games of 1936 have earned a particularly special place in history for the “Owens case”. Jesse Owens was an African American born in Alabama in 1913. He was an extraordinary athlete who won four gold medals in Berlin in the 100 meters, 200 meters, long jump and 4x100 relay. It was both stated and subsequently written that Hitler did not want to recognize his victories because of the color of his skin. Nonetheless, just as Jesse Owens himself describes in his memoirs “The Jesse Owens Story”, while passing under the tribune of honor he was greeted by Hitler with a gesture of the hand to which Owens himself replied. A further confirmation also came from Eric Brown, pilot of the Fleet Air Arm, who in 2014 declared in a BBC documentary: "I actually witnessed the handshake between Jesse Owens and Hitler, who congratulated him on the results achieved".

This in no way diminishes the gravity and the senselessness of Hitler's and the Nazi's madness and the tragedies they provoked. It must, if anything, make us reflect on how, sometimes, both the press and historiography reconstruct episodes that might differ from the actual course of events.

The Owens case is paradigmatic in the history of sport, especially with regards to how the social context and origins of an individual are decisive for both the birth and growth of his development into a champion. In fact, Jesse's real name was James. “Jesse” was the nickname that was given to him by the teacher who could not understand him when he spoke: he had a strong southern accent and to the question "what's your name?" he simply replied “JC” that pronounced in English sounds “Jesse”<sup>14</sup>.

Owens had a difficult background: he was born in a poor family and lived a life of misery and deprivation. He found work in a shoe store and he spent his free time doing what he was most passionate about and what ultimately made him feel free: running. It was, additionally, a sport that finally made him feel equal to the others, as both the starting point and the starting time were the same for both him and his adversaries, and yet he arrived first. This, therefore, entailed no discrimination: not for the color of his skin, and not for his strange accent. He was like the others,

<sup>14</sup> Owens, J. and Neimark, P. (1970). *The Jesse Owens Story*. Putnam Pub Group.

and ultimately better than most. Because he was faster. In 1933, at the age of 20, he participated in the student championships and astonished every spectator and athlete with the incredible quality of his performances. He was admitted to the University of Ohio and it was then that he began to devote himself entirely to athletics, which led him to the Berlin Olympics.

Jesse's impact in history was not solely limited in athletics: he became an important figure and symbol also outside the sports fields. The year that resembles the apex of his fame is 1936, when he was awarded the silver medal of the Olympic Order, the highest award of the Olympic Movement, given to individuals who have made outstanding achievements. Furthermore, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, an extreme honor for an American civilian. When he handed it to him, US President Gerald Ford exclaimed: "Owens has overcome the barriers of racism, segregation and bigotry, showing the world that an African-American belongs to the world of athletics"<sup>15</sup>.

A film entitled "Race, the color of victory" is dedicated to his life. It was released in 2016 and directed by Stephen Hopkins. Victory is symbolized by the colors of the Olympic flag, and therefore by all the colors of the world. Owens' triumphs come together in one great, fundamental, victory: that of having succeeded in demonstrating that there must be no barriers or obstacles in the race for equality, that all men are equal and are entitled to the same possibilities. The son of an underprivileged African American family had finally become a champion and a symbol of equality, of freedom.



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<sup>15</sup> Thelivingstonpost.com. (2017). *Decency, justice and the Michigan-OSU rivalry: The story of Jesse Owens and Gerald Ford* —. [online] Available at: <https://thelivingstonpost.com/decency-justice-and-the-michigan-osu-rivalry-the-story-of-jesse-owens-and-gerald-ford/>.

<sup>16</sup> Rare Historical Photos. (n.d.). Jesse Owens wins gold in Nazi Germany, 1936. [online] Available at: <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/jesse-owens-wins-gold-nazi-germany/>.

The road that leads to sport success is long and tiring. The primary elements needed to achieve such ambitions are not always available to everyone: health, courage, determination, passion, time, hunger for success. Perhaps this is also why it is rare that an individual born in a rich family is also a champion. It is possible to find an educated athlete, but not a millionaire. If anything, it is the hope of becoming millionaires that portrays sport as a tool to accomplish that aim. Sport is effort, sacrifice, it is commitment and daily dedication, a sense of responsibility towards oneself, the team members and the coaches. It is the will to succeed, to not disappoint your loved ones. Yet, as everything that is worthwhile, sports do not produce success immediately- and surely not to everyone-: in order to obtain and grasp the first medals and to hold the first cups, a long and strenuous preparation is needed. The first sacrifices are made as children: when peers go to the cinema, the real champion is headed to the gym.

Coubertinian rhetoric is based on the motto "The important thing is not winning but participating". Yet, in most cases, for those who invest their past, present, and future training for a goal and sweating to reach an accomplishment, only participating is possibly not enough. Winning, perhaps not only against others but also against one's personal record, becomes a moral imperative driven by the desire for redemption, encouraged by the possibility of raising one's stance and value in society: as an individual, but also as a community.

## Chapter 2

### From the “hero-champion” to the social function.

There have been sports events that have marked history and transformed its protagonists into authentic myths and romantic heroes comparable to Aeneas or Ulysses, with their commentators and journalists almost representing modern Homers. The figure of the champion-hero, or hero-champion, if one prefers, not only belongs to sports historiography but with the turning of the centuries has become a pillar of the representation of humanity. The role of sport within society has profoundly increased, especially thanks to the business and turnover that has been created around each discipline. Furthermore, there has been an exponential growth in the spectacularization of sports that ultimately has been followed by the development of architecture dedicated to it. There are constructions and compositions which have become key attractions for many metropolises as well as places of interest for tourists, such as “The Spirit” statue in Chicago in honor of Michael Jordan, the “Rocky” statue in Philadelphia for Sylvester Stallone, or the famous “Discobolus of Myron” now found in the British Museum in London.

Dorando Pietri is one of the most exponential figures of what can be considered a hero-champion, and he made his first mark history in 1908 in London. At the end of a three-hour-long race, he entered the White City Stadium and, surrounded by tens of thousands of people, he realized an epic undertaking. Destroyed by fatigue and almost arriving at the conclusion of the strenuous race, he fell. Nonetheless, he got up again, fell again, and got up once more, for five times in a row.<sup>17</sup> When he rose from the ground for the last time, confused by exhaustion, he headed towards the wrong way: he dragged himself towards the opposite direction of the finish line. Nonetheless, the judges alerted him, so he was able to get back towards the right path. In the meantime, his main rival, the American John Hayes, was catching up. Hayes was not able to surpass him and Pietri cut the finish line first, before collapsing the ground. He was disqualified because the judges had physically supported him for a few meters. Officially, John Hayes was the true Olympic champion, but he wasn't the hero who fell and got up five times not allowing himself to surrender to exhaustion. Pietri proved the world that sometimes, with enough determination and willpower, the mind is able to control the body. Therefore, although Hayes was the true winner of the race, nobody remembers him, yet everyone remembers Pietri, the baker of Carpi and the symbolic picture of him

<sup>17</sup> Il Post (2018). Dorando Pietri, che arrivò primo ma non vinse. [online] Available at: <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/07/24/dorando-pietri-maratona-londra-1908/>.

with his knees bent, ready to fall. A hero.



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## 2.1 Aborigine pride: Cathy Freeman.

Individuals need role models and reference points, sometimes even to find their identity and to shape both their character and personality. To such extent, it can be stated that the reality of sports, especially when projected to a global spectrum, creates an enormous impact and brings extreme attention to the individual around which it revolves. Therefore, the characteristics of such a protagonist, his way of behaving, what he says and does become fundamental and have profound consequences, especially due to the impact they will have on society and on the fans. In fact, it could be argued that it is exactly from the charisma of the hero champion that descend a whole series of effects that can have both positive and negative repercussions on society: they can become instruments of sensitization and even of change. It is the combination of various factors, the very context in which the sports enterprise takes place that determines the transition from a simple champion to a hero.

This, in fact, is the case of the sprinter Cathy Freeman, an Australian aborigine, winner of the 400 meters at the Sydney Olympics of 2000 and world champion, twice, in the same distance<sup>19</sup>. Both woman and black, her accomplishments sparked the attention of her nation, an Australia that still struggled to achieve true integration and cohesion between the descendants of the original inhabitants, the aborigines, and the great-grandchildren of those who arrived in Oceania from Europe. A profoundly attentive diplomatic and marketing strategy ensured that she was the one chosen to light the Olympic flame in the great stadium of Sydney. The aim of such stratagem was the will to symbolize the closeness between the natives of Australia and all the other populations,

<sup>18</sup> Il Post (2018). Dorando Pietri, che arrivò primo ma non vinse. [online] Available at: <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/07/24/dorando-pietri-maratona-londra-1908/>.

<sup>19</sup> Audisio, E. (2019). Cathy Freeman: “Il mio oro libero non è servito agli aborigeni”. *La Repubblica*. [online] Available at: [https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/intervista/2019/02/17/news/laureus\\_atletica\\_cathy\\_freeman\\_400\\_metri-219405752/?refresh\\_ce](https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/intervista/2019/02/17/news/laureus_atletica_cathy_freeman_400_metri-219405752/?refresh_ce).

but above all the successful reconciliation with the Europeans. "Reconciliation was the theme of this long, almost epic opening party", the newspaper *La Repubblica* wrote in the chronicle of September 15th of 2000, "a historical reconciliation between the Aboriginal civilization and white colonizers. Reconciliation in view of the modern, and especially of the future: a mixture of the most diverse cultures... the message that comes out of this celebration... is that of a desire for peaceful and constructive coexistence among all peoples. Despite the differences and indeed, thanks to these".

More than four billion viewers virtually attended the opening ceremony and, in fact, the Aboriginal case regarding Cathy Freeman escalated globally. It could be stated that the event produced so much success and curiosity because Freeman not only represented an Olympic champion but also a culture, a population, and a long-standing tradition. In fact, the symbol of diversity yet inclusion that her victories provoked sparked the interest of commentators from every television and of every country. Furthermore, it could be argued that this was especially so because the reality of those days in Australia was still extremely dramatic. The aborigines were alienated from society and this caused them no choice but to live in the outskirts of the city or, even worse, in natural reserves delimited by gates. They were partially sustained by unemployment benefits that, nonetheless, often, unfortunately, ended up in bottles of beer. Their cultural richness was exploited even in their splendid figurative art, with paintings that were purchased by gallery owners for a few dollars and were resold on international markets with prices that were a thousand times higher. Nonetheless, through the achievements of Freeman, the aborigine population found the strength and deepness of its pride, and mostly rediscovered confidence in its future. The land of the aborigines, in fact, as Bruce Chatwin wrote in his book *The songlines*, was totally composed of "dream tracks": it was a world made of idols and magic, but a world in need of freedom and space. They still practiced the "walkabout", did "a ride around", and many of the aboriginals that were arrested, perhaps due to alcohol issues, ended up letting themselves die in prison because they could not survive in such closed space, they needed nature.

The Australia that today is considered more than civil and modern, for many years, tended to ignore the native populations but was subsequently forced to recognize these peoples as the property holders of some portions of land, for which it also provided compensation. In addition, the Australian government had the faces of several prominent aboriginal figures, some of which were also elected in Parliament, printed on banknotes. Another measure taken in order to include the culture of the Aborigines within society and to respect their religion was to prohibit tourists to climb on the Ayers Rock, the largest monolith in the world, which for the aborigines represented a symbol of profound sacredness and holiness, a site that was not to be contaminated.

With her victories, Cathy Freeman certainly turned the attention to her people and their unique stories: it was thus learned that her grandfather had been denied a passport, that his parents had to respect the prohibition imposed on them to talk to the whites, and most importantly these facts helped remember that in the 19th century the aborigines were killed with immoral impunity by the colonizers. For all these reasons together, immediately after her victory in the 400s, Freeman wrapped herself in two flags, the Australian and the Aboriginal one, before running barefoot in the stadium to collect the affectionate applause of the public, covered in an extremely tight green jumpsuit that also covered her head. The journalist Emanuela Audisio, in her book *Bambini infiniti*, dedicated to Freeman one of the most moving passages of sport biographies: "She reached the finish line with a dry throat and tongue. With big eyes, big mouth, big teeth. She knelt down, and stayed there for a while because getting up again meant taking her world once again on her shoulders. And she was tired. She wanted to say, look at me: I'm Australian, I'm Aboriginal, I'm a champion. These are three things at once, three things that no one believed possible, but that's enough. 'Cos I'm free'", a phrase she also has tattooed on her shoulder.



This is the story of Cathy Freeman and her 400-meter run as symbol of a country and of a bright future or. Her mother had to leave school when she was twelve years old to work as a telephone operator for 3 dollars per week and she could not travel without a government permit, forced to spend her life fleeing from injustice and police harassment. Her grandfather was never granted a passport or permission to speak to whites, and her family had been unjustly deported because it represented a union that was too politically active and therefore posed a threat. Clearly, therefore, Freeman was not running alone but for her mother, her grandfather, for herself, for the 400,000 aborigines left who were once 2 million, for their 57 years of average life expectancy against the 79 of the rest of the population.

<sup>20</sup> ALLSPORT (2000). Cathy Freeman. [image] Available at: <https://www.gettyimages.it/detail/fotografie-di-cronaca/cathy-freeman-of-australia-shows-off-her-tattoo-fotografie-di-cronaca/1019574>.



At the starting blocks her emblematic race Cathy looked straight ahead, and the only thing she had to do was what she knew how to do best. To encourage her was the memory of her history and of her population, a desperate need for identity that sports helped her consolidate and shape, tied with the symbol of her reality. Her mother was present at the race, dressed only in a jacket, reminding her that one should never forget his or her origins.

In 1994, after winning the Commonwealth games, six years before the emblematic Olympic games, Freeman wrapped herself in the Aboriginal flag and someone from her delegation had protested: "How dare you?" She dared, and repeated that gesture once again in Sydney, giving sports the responsibility to transmit her message and to prove her dedication. In fact, her grand gestures and the symbolic importance of inclusion and integrity that lie beneath her victories certainly helped improve the life and consideration of the aboriginal people of Australia, although still today not all problems have been solved. She was a hero, a champion, what we may consider a hero-champion: one of those protagonists that history remembers. Freeman had accomplished a mission: she strengthened the sense of belonging and of pride of the aborigines, which for an ignored and abused population meant the rediscovery of identity as well as the profound sensation of feeling honored of being part of that community.

## **2.2 A champion but not a hero: the case of Maradona.**

Although sport gives the instruments to achieve what Freeman was able to accomplish, the opportunity of exploiting the fame obtained by an important victory in order to attempt to change the world and improve those linings that represent great injustices in society, this opportunity is not seized by everyone. Armando Maradona is an example of a champion that was not a hero. His talent was unbelievable and unquestionable to such extent that for some sport experts and commentators he was one of the strongest soccer players of all time. Nonetheless, he committed an endless series of mistakes that still today make him a bad example, both on and off the field. In the quarter-finals of the 1986 World Championship, he scored with his hand without admitting it: he justified himself by saying that the strike was the "mano de Dios" ("the hand of God"), he made an excessive use of alcohol and drugs and he also evaded taxes. Certainly, he was not a virtuous example: he was champion, but not a hero<sup>21</sup>. Nonetheless, although his personality, as well as his symbolic figure, were questionable, he did not lose neither the affection nor the esteem of many of his fans, especially in Naples. Perhaps this is because it was the team in which he contributed decisively to the conquest of two championships, one in 1987 and another in 1990. The considerations that were

<sup>21</sup> *Maradona Story*. (2010). [video] Rai sport.

brought forth by Vittorio Dini and Oscar Nicolaus, in their *“Te Diegum”*, is that “the sportsman is a democratic myth, as it lays its foundations in the common people: it is in fact representative of the people and its values”. An affirmation that is partly acceptable but that certainly cannot include every single one of the Neapolitan fans: not everyone made use of cocaine nor had anything to do with his unlawful choices. However, true adoration remains for a person who had allowed an entire city, albeit with its illicit and illegal behavior, to redeem itself from an extremely bad national and international reputation through football.

In fact, the football record that the team was able to obtain twice, in two separate seasons, gave Naples a different image: its light-hearted cheerfulness was now combined with the realized accomplishment of being able to triumph in a difficult championship. Naples was now associated with both genius and recklessness, reflecting the image of Maradona.

Nonetheless, sports practice has other, extremely different, values than the ones Maradona represents. Therefore, even if, for the most part, the public forgave the goal scored with his hand, and perhaps pretended to forget about his drug addiction as well as his other illicit behaviors, Maradona remains wrapped in an aura of "irregularity" that keeps him at the edge of the true sports elite. We cannot ignore those virtues that in every discipline must be present and strongly emphasized, those virtues that even Pope Francis wanted to underline: "honesty, inclusion, respect for all... support (for) the integral development of the person..."(Vaticannews.va, 2019). It could be argued that, although a great soccer player, Maradona never knew the true meaning of sport, and for a champion, this is a serious fault.

Although the meaning of a “champion” may be undoubtedly linked with successes and victories, being a hero, or a hero-champion, takes much more than being talented: it takes sacrifice, moral values, and a strong ethical commitment to attempt to break down the walls of injustice and inequality that are present in society.

## Chapter 3

### Beyond Victory.

#### 3.1 Individual vs team sports.

The difference between individual and team sports exists, and it is evident: they are worlds apart. Sometimes it is only by chance that one prefers one to the other, yet other times it is exactly the awareness of competing alone rather than in, and for, a group that determines the preference. Furthermore, social psychology attempted to analyze the causes and effects of the different approaches, claiming that team sports ultimately tend to protect individuals by minimizing anxiety. In fact, it is argued that in individual sports this feeling is accentuated because of the fact that the final responsibility of the result falls only on the individual itself. The group, as always, is seen as a nucleus that protects and accepts. According to Fulvio Tassi, a psychologist and professor of the University of Florence, “team sports tend to enhance the dimension of the game whereas individual ones emphasize the dimension of discipline” (Tassi, 1993).

Nonetheless, there are also other aspects that from a psychological point of view seem to have an important relevance. One of the main distinctions that can be made is between the “side by side” and the “face to face” interactions, with further differences within each of the two branches. “Side by side” sports are those that take place with opponents physically apart, therefore without them having any real contact during the competition. Sports that fit in this category are, for example: athletics, swimming, skiing, and cycling. In these types of sports, furthermore, the competition can be “parallel”, meaning that several athletes compete contemporarily as in cycling, running, or swimming; or they can be “deferred”, when the performance of each contestant occurs after that of the others, as in skiing, diving, or gymnastics.

In the “face to face” category, we can further distinguish two types of sports: “mediated” and “contact” sports.

In the mediated type, the interaction between opponents is not direct: a medium is used, which can be the sword or foil in fencing, or the racket and the ball in tennis. Conversely, in “contact” sport, the interaction between opponents involves real physical contact, as happens, for example, in boxing<sup>22</sup>.

These differences play a decisive role in the choice of a sport, which is usually a decision that is taken very soon in the life of an individual. From a parent’s side, there is always the attempt to acknowledge and favor the desires of the youngster, yet very often there is also personal decisive

<sup>22</sup> Michele, S. (2019). *Psicologia dello Sport: Sport di squadra vs Sport individuali*. [online] State of Mind. Available at: <https://www.stateofmind.it/2013/11/psicologia-dello-sport-squadra-individuali/>.

contribution in the final choice. The task of mothers and fathers, perhaps, should be that to orient and encourage, without forcing. The repercussions of an extreme push by part of a parent are evident, for instance, in former tennis champion's, Andre Agassi's, autobiography, where he writes: "I lived with the fear of my father (a former Iranian boxer), who wanted me to be a champion at all costs". His father Mike was obsessed with tennis, not only because he loved the sport itself, but also because he wanted Agassi to acquire the economic stability that he himself had fought for but had never achieved. This strong desire for his son's success dates back to the first days of life of Agassi: on his cradle he hung a tennis ball as a symbol and also as a premonition of what his future would have been. The following passage shows his obsession: "my father says that if I hit 2,500 balls each day, I'll hit 17,500 balls each week, and at the end of one year I'll have hit nearly one million balls. He believes in math. Numbers, he says, don't lie. A child who hits one million balls each year will be unbeatable" (Agassi 2015, p. 28). Nonetheless, Andre Agassi's father was not able to transmit to him the same profound passion he had for tennis. In his autobiography, one of the numerous confessions he makes is: "I hate tennis, hate it with all my heart, and still I keep playing, keep hitting all morning, and all afternoon, because I have no choice. No matter how much I want to stop, I don't. I keep begging myself to stop, and I keep playing, and this gap, this contradiction between what I want to do and what I actually do, feels like the core of my life" (Agassi 2015, p. 27).

### **3.2 Team spirit and social cooperation: "*e pluribus unum*".**

The decision of what sport to practice is often biased. In fact, one could argue that external factors such as friendships, family, access to facilities, costs, and prejudices significantly contribute in the choice of what path to take in this respect. Nonetheless, it could also be stated, perhaps, that individual sports are those oriented towards greater discipline and thus may prove to be more suitable for those who have already built solid confidence in themselves, while team sports could be useful to those that have a less aggressive attitude towards life. Nonetheless, these may also be viewed as too far reaching simplifications (and as such they may be neglected), because the opposite may also be true: individual sports may contribute to improving those sides of the character of an individual that may need more strength, and team sports may teach respect and responsibility. However, what could be stated almost with certainty is that team sports contribute, more than individual ones, in building a strong and profound team spirit as well as in strengthening interpersonal skills and bonds between members of the same group. "Teamwork", in fact, is a widely used expression, even in the language of politics, precisely to indicate, and sometimes invoke, the strength of the group.

Team spirit is conceived with such great importance in modern day society that in fact it is perceived as the ultimate key to success, especially due to the tendency of a group to remain united no matter the obstacles faced in order to achieve a goal. The concept of a “united team” has ancient roots and comes from the Latin phrase “*e pluribus unum*”, attributed to Virgil. In the poem *Moretum* (1<sup>st</sup> century BC), Virgil writes “*color est e pluribus unus*”, and uses this metaphor to explain that, by mixing different colors at the same time, the final result obtained is a single and unique color. Nonetheless, although the original phrase is related to art, this expression was adopted as a motto by the United States in 1782 and in particular resembled the Great Seal, although it was replaced in 1956 with “in God we trust”, and is used specifically to emphasize that the origin of the unitary state derives from the small group of the Thirteen Colonies, dependent on the British Empire, which ultimately formed the first nucleus of the United States. The motto contains the fundamental elements of a team, such as cohesion, sense of belonging, respect, willingness to sacrifice oneself for the others and mutual help. Although it could be argued that they are not enough to guarantee success, it is also true that they are indispensable tools as well as attitudes that can surely and significantly contribute to reaching it. In fact, the extent to which this is true is reflected even in the business world, which has borrowed this philosophy in the well-known and popular practice of “team-work”, the construction of the “work group” capable, therefore, of “teaming up”. Marcello Lippi, former head-coach of the Italian soccer national team, especially when it won the world-championships, has placed the term “work group” at the very center of his statements, stressing the importance of “forming a team” and in particular of the importance of “leadership at the service of the collective”<sup>23</sup>.

The essence of teamwork represents a principle that can be the accurate model to imagine a society based on solidarity and mutual help. Although this must not be confused with the repressive collectivism of many totalitarian regimes, it must be considered as the sharing of effort and strength to reach the maximum goal.

In some areas where the lack of water and the difficulty of irrigation can create enormous problems, not only for cultivation but also for survival, creativity and in particular necessity have certainly helped find solutions. In terrace cultivations in Bali, for instance, getting water to the highest and most distant fields has always represented a problem, solved by choosing to assign the irrigation management to the owner of the farthest field because he would be the one most interested in the perfect functioning of the canals. Thanks to this solution, instead of the usual two harvests a year,

<sup>23</sup> Treccani.it. (2019). *fare squadra in Vocabolario - Treccani*. [online] Available at: [http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/fare-squadra\\_%28Neologismi%29/](http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/fare-squadra_%28Neologismi%29/).

the rice paddy fields of Bali guarantee three<sup>24</sup>. A similar success can be seen in Oman: another story, another religion, and yet another geographical latitude. Here there is the fight against the scarcity of water – contrary to Bali, the struggle is not that to make it reach the top, but to guarantee to those who are downstream, in the middle of the desert, a sufficient quantity for cultivation. Centuries and centuries ago, a network of canals, called “falaji” were created, which the UNESCO included in the World Heritage Sites<sup>25</sup>.

It is not only the genius behind these resolutions that captures one’s attention, but also, and perhaps above all, the “team spirit” implemented to obtain a result in favor of the common good.

Being part of a group protects, helps, support, includes. It becomes easier to face an opponent, a difficulty, even a ruthless enemy, like a complicated background, a violent family or a disease. Even the horrible prejudices with which some judge people based on skin color, country of origin, religion, or even home address, are attenuated with the support of a group. Sport makes everyone equal and knows no discrimination: the starting point and finish line are the same for everyone. Furthermore, it can be an extraordinary tool for social inclusion, where everyone brings their own individual heritage, their culture and their experiences. In an increasingly globalized world, diversity becomes a further richness. Differences amongst one another must not represent a challenge but must serve as a further asset. This means not overlapping those differences that make each of us unique, not choosing one as the dominant, but supporting them all and thus enriching and making interesting any type of human landscape.

### **3.3 Immigrants in sport: the story of Klaudio Ndoja.**

Sport becomes a social levy needed to destroy injustices that always affect the weakest and most disadvantaged sections of the population: street children that were neglected or abandoned by their families, children and women victims of abuse and violence, immigrants, and refugees. There is a dramatic universe of extremely complex situations to which sport can offer, if not a solution, at least an aid and an escape from a tragic reality.

The story of Klaudio Ndoja, in this sense, is truly emblematic. Klaudio Ndoja is a basketball champion who arrived on a rubber dinghy from Albania<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Ruggeri, C. (2013). *La mia Asia*. 1st ed. Rome: LT Editore, p.180.

<sup>25</sup> Centre, U. (n.d.). *Aflaj Irrigation Systems of Oman*. [online] Whc.unesco.org. Available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1207>.

<sup>26</sup> SPORTFAIR. (n.d.). *Basket, il racconto shock di Klaudio Ndoja: "arrivato col barcone rischiando la vita, in campo mi insultano perchè non capiscono"*. [online] Available at: <https://www.sportfair.it/2019/01/basket-klaudio-ndoja-barcone/864995/#2f6aBgiyrLWbdXEM.99>.

Ndoja was born in Scutari, a city in Albania, in 1985. In 1998 his family decided to attempt to go to Italy, as Albania's social and political situation was chaotic and unsafe. In those years there was the "Albanese anarchy", which represented a threat to the population and created strong instability within society and all other aspects related to it, such as the economy. Most importantly, the tense situation in the nation represented an extremely dangerous condition for the population. In an interview, Klaudio stated that "there was a curfew and if you left home you risked dying from stray bullets. One of them one day wounded my sister while we were playing together, so my father decided it was time to leave" (Ndoja, 2019). Six thousand were able to get into a boat of illegal immigrants. "I was traveling sitting on a load of cocaine. The smugglers used us children and women as shields for their trade. When we reached 40 meters from the shore, they threw us into the water, we had to swim on, but there were those who, like my little sister, could not swim. My father took her in his arms, and we were able to reach the shore" (Ndoja, 2019). Ndoja and his family arrived in Puglia and began a new life, a life that seemed better and improved significantly also thanks to basketball.

Klaudio began to play in a parish church not far from Milan, where he moved with his family. His physical stance fitted very well with the sport that he would have excelled in: he exceeds two meters in height and weighs one hundred kilos, so he easily stands out in the field. Fifteen years after landing on the Apulian coasts, Klaudio became captain of New Basket Brindisi, where he collected many successes. During the summer of 2012, he joined the Albanian national team. Ndoja's nickname is "Gladiator", not only for his physical features, but especially for the courage and loyalty that characterize him. His compelling story has inspired a book written by Michele Pettene: *Death is certain, Life is not – the story of Klaudio Ndoja*. A passage that is particularly striking is the following: "when the water is safer than the land there is something wrong. Basketball has been a form of integration" (Pettene, 2015). Nonetheless, even today, many years later, when Klaudio plays in other Italian basketball structures, it is not rare that he is insulted for his Albanian origins. Racism, once more, is present not only within society but also within the sports sphere. And yet, sport itself is one of the highways that should not only defeat, but also permanently erase all forms of discrimination. Equality should be the primary aim: before the stopwatch, before the final result, equality in the field where players are united by their jersey and by the respect of the rules. The champion that embodies the traditional values of loyalty and commitment, of sacrifice and dedication, altruism and honesty, is in itself a flag, a kind of Olympic banner without nationality, a figure that unites and never divides, representing both an example and a hope of a future that can always be better than the present.

### 3.4 Eric Moussambani: the worst swimmer of all times.

The story of Eric Moussambani, a young swimmer from Equatorial Guinea, seems quite paradoxical. At the age of 22, in 2000, he was able to qualify for the Sydney Olympics thanks to a special program of the International Olympic Committee reserved for athletes from developing countries. In fact, Equatorial Guinea is a small and restless state of central Africa, victim of numerous authoritarian political tendencies, with one of the highest per capita GDP of the whole continent but with 60 percent of the population, almost entirely of Bantu ethnicity, in conditions of extreme poverty. Eric was born in the most “fortunate” area of the country, where individuals have the “privilege” to study. In fact, he will later become an engineer and even play sports. The discipline he was truly passionate about is volleyball, but in order to participate in the Olympics he adapted to a discipline that was not his own: swimming. Before the Sydney Olympics he had never seen a 50-meter-long swimming pool and had learned to swim only eight months before. He was the coach of himself and trained in the small pool of a hotel in Malabo, the capital of his country. For the IOC this is enough: “this is the true Olympic spirit”, said the leaders, strongly supporting the participation of Moussambani.



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The day of the race, his rivals in the 100 meters freestyle were the Nigerian Karim Bare and the Tajik Farkhod Oripov who made a false start and were disqualified. Eric, therefore, competed alone. His first strokes were not great, the fatigue soon overcame him and he finished the race with great difficulty. Nonetheless, the audience applauded him, encouraged him, and accompanied him through his torment. In order to breathe better, Moussambani competed with his head out of the water and soon could not take it anymore: his legs were heavy and his strokes always shorter. Nonetheless, the swimming stadium resounded with chants and screams of encouragement all for him, for this brave African who, without paying any attention to the performance, slowly advanced towards the conclusion of his race. His final time was 1'57''52, the Olympic record for the slowest

27 Montague, J. (2012). 'Eric the Eel' dreams of Olympic return - CNN. [online] CNN. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/31/sport/olympics-2012-eric-eel-moussambani/index.html>.



swimmer in the history of the Games, with an overall time that is more than twice that of a mediocre athlete. Yet, this does not matter, he made his own Olympics. In an interview, he stated: “I have never been so tired in all my life, everyone was rooting for me and it was like winning a gold medal” (Il Post, 2012).

Moussambani became one of the protagonists of the Olympic games of 2000, not for having excelled in his performance but because of his character and, above all, for his courage. According to the International Olympic Committee, he was able to correctly interpret and put into action the Coubertinian spirit as well as the idea that “the important thing is to participate, not to win”. He was given a nickname, “Eric the eel”, because of his particular way of swimming, which despite everything was not exactly an example of style and elegance. He became so popular that the organizing committee of Sydney assigned him an interpreter in order to facilitate him during interviews by journalists and televisions from all over the world: in only a few days, he received more than one-hundred requests for interviews. Nonetheless, it has to be mentioned that some journalists exaggerated and indeed somewhat ridiculed the whole situation. However, Eric was able to grasp the best out of his experience in the Olympic games and from the success that he was able to obtain. He traveled the world sponsored by Speedo, one of the most popular swimming brands. which, aside from providing him a professional bathing suit, hired him for a promotional campaign that took him for a year around Europe, where Eric had never been.

Even after the Olympic games in Sydney, Eric remained a protagonist in the sports world. In fact, in 2001 he received the honor of being the standard-bearer representing Equatorial Guinea at the Fukuoka Swimming World Championships in Japan, although again with rather poor results. Today he is 40 years old, an engineer, and made other apparitions in the Olympics but as a coach of the national swimming team. Great achievements were realized thanks to his undertaking and to his fame: in Malabo, a 50-meter swimming pool was finally opened where his team trains four times a week. Much more is needed, but indeed significant accomplishments have been made since Moussambani entered the scene. His story has a strong significance and importance in the world of sports as a whole, demonstrating that it is ultimately attitude that determines success. Furthermore, he has earned the respect of the entire world, and it is only thanks to him that today his athletes are able to train in a proper swimming pool where a true team is coming to life.

### **3.5 The importance of a role model: when parents are a bad example.**

Venaus is a small town in the province of Turin that has less than a thousand inhabitants. Each Saturday, two amateur football teams meet, where the oldest players are 12 years old. The children play with their parents watching and cheering, assisting the game on the sidelines. The

match that is going to be analyzed is that of Venaus-Lascaris. A father sitting on the bleachers exclaims to his son: “break his legs”. The man continues in his delirium, insulting the referee, the linesman, to the point that the coach of the opposing team decides to withdraw his players from the game in order not to participate and assist to that instigation to violence.

This episode, which surely is not the sole in world of soccer, sheds light on the fact that it is football, more than other sports, that has to deal with the violent fringes of parental support. It is not uncommon, unfortunately, to see quarrels in the stands between supporters of the two teams, and to witness to incitements to “break the legs” or to “hurt” the opponents. A statement from Dr. Maura Manca, Clinical Psychologist and Psychotherapist the developmental and juvenile age, and President of the Observatory on National Adolescence, ponders on what reasons may lie behind such attitudes and also ironically states: “we wonder why the boys are so violent and aggressive when it is the parent himself that transmits models based on destructiveness and violence”, and adds “the adult has an educational role and children do not learn only from words, but also by observing the behavior of adults” (Manca, 2018).

Sport teaches many precious lessons, like how to cope with difficulties and fatigue, but also to understand that a result is the mirror of what is done by the individual when no-one is watching, it is the reflection of training and sacrifice. Sport teaches to face life, to be altruistic. Perhaps one can also see an excess of rhetoric, in what Filippo Galli, former coach of A.C. Milan’s youth sector, states: “the boys must also be taught that allowing a teammate to score is much more satisfying than dribbling an opponent”, a concept that does not differ much from the principle indicated by Jesus in the Bible, according to which “there is more joy in giving than in receiving” (The Holy Bible, 1986).

Young people who approach a sport need the support of adults who know how to accompany them. Football seems to have become a terrible gym, precisely because it is the adults, in this case the parents, who have turned soccer fields into combat arenas causing children to feel ashamed by the behavior of their fathers and mother who insult referees and linesmen, and sometimes even other children or parents, even if they are women or minors.

A situation analogous to the one previously described occurred in Arezzo in April 2018, at the conclusion of the games of the “*giovanissimi*” category between the Junior Castello Soccer team and Bastia<sup>28</sup>. The father of a boy from the latter team was outraged because the referee admonished his son. After the match, he threw himself against the door of the locker room of the referee, a

<sup>28</sup> Il Messaggero (2018). Perugia, giovane arbitro ferita nello spogliatoio: daspo a papà "hooligan." [online] Available at: [https://www.ilmessaggero.it/umbria/giovane\\_arbitro\\_ferita\\_gara\\_figlio\\_perugia\\_daspo\\_papa\\_hooligan\\_questura-3540291.html](https://www.ilmessaggero.it/umbria/giovane_arbitro_ferita_gara_figlio_perugia_daspo_papa_hooligan_questura-3540291.html).

young woman of only sixteen years of age. The door collapsed and crashed into the terrified referee. The immediate intervention of the staff and managers of Città di Castello was fortunately able to avoid serious repercussions. The man has been sued for injuries and was also banned from any sports competition for three years, provisions that one may also argue to be too bland, because of the consequences of his actions towards the young referee and because of the bad example set in front of young children as well as the emotional harm provoked to his son.

Cheering for children and their teams is not only a matter of supporting one's offspring, but it is a set of ambitions, expectations, and hopes, especially in an era of golden professionalism: some parents may believe that their own personal and sport failures may be erased with the successes of their children. Perhaps it is for this reason that some coaches have even proposed to prohibit parents from participating to the matches of their children. Ultimately, this could possibly represent a good solution<sup>29</sup> to avoid that children witness the wrong behaviors of bad-mannered and offensive parents. Furthermore, it could help prevent that they are prone to a silent consensus of these conducts.

### **3.6 Sport as an instrument to fight social inequalities.**

#### **3.6.1 Cassius Clay: his endless fight for minorities.**

After a life of victories in which he jumped around the ring like a powerful gazelle, to see him tremble and move with great difficulty is painful for many faithful fans and not only. Cassius Clay was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1984, four years after his retreat from boxing, and perhaps was the only thing that was able to defeat him. He died 32 years later, in 2016, after leading a life as a real champion, also known as "The Greatest". According to many, Clay was not only the best at boxing but also represented one of the most distinguished athletes in the history of sport. He was a man with an extraordinary charisma and a complex personality, both inside and outside the ring. Furthermore, he understood the importance of the media and exploited it very well, comprehending that the cult of personality was not something to ignore in order to gain a strong following. He was a leader, even in his social commitment. In 1967, when he had already won a world title, the American boxing commission withdrew his license because he did not want to participate in the Vietnam War. His joke remained historic: "I have nothing against the Vietcong. They never called me a 'nigger'" (Clay, 1967). Like most boxers, he had a difficult background and was born in a poor family. Many writers state that he "fought his age", especially with regards to the fight against racism. He grew up in a segregationist America, where being black was a fault and

<sup>29</sup> Cremona, I., Sport e resilienza, u. and Il bambino Dop, e. (n.d.). *Quando lo sport diventa veicolo di inclusione sociale / Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*. [online] Cattolicaper lo Sport. Available at: <https://www.unicatt.it/cattolicaperlospor/sport-impatto-sociale-quando-lo-sport-e-veicolo-di-inclusione-sociale>.

a crime. He felt the contempt and hatred of whites on his own skin, when he was only a child, when a shopkeeper in Louisville (Kentucky), refused to sell him a small bottle of water. A year later, with his brother, he joined the protest against the murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy who was brutally tortured and killed in Mississippi, only because of the color of his skin. Clay, his brother, and a small group of friends participated in the violent demonstration that took place in Kentucky and devastated the Louisville station<sup>30</sup>.

It was a Louisville policeman, Joe E. Martin, who introduced Clay to boxing. During a street fight, where Clay railed against those who had stolen his bicycle, the agent advised him to learn how to throw punches before hurling himself at someone, and took him to the Columbia gym, where he began his career<sup>31</sup>. Clay wanted to change the world, and he helped improve it. Not only in the aesthetics of a violent sport like boxing, through his swift movements on the ring, the speed and accuracy of his punches, his tactical intelligence, and the almost mocking impudence towards the adversary yet always accompanied by a strong respect towards him. All these elements led him to become an unforgettable icon that has made gestures that have remained in history.

During the Rome Olympics in 1960, Clay was eighteen and won the gold medal in the heavyweight category. He later threw that precious medal in the Ohio River in protest against the racial discrimination that was still poisoning the United States.

Clay's life has always been characterized by a strong sense of sport and civil commitment<sup>32</sup>.

Through boxing he was able to pose a spotlight on the world's main controversies. Boxing has always been a tough, harsh, and violent sport. In America it was at the center of polemics because of the mafia's attempts to organize matches and conduce bets. It also symbolized the cruel stage representing the world of black men born in difficult contexts with the desire and implacable need to change their destiny. Boxing guaranteed huge profits and for many it was the ruthless and brutal shortcut to a better life. Sonny Liston, Joe Frazer, Ken Norton (also known as the Black Hercules), and George Foreman are only some of his main opponents: a black community of brave giants, protagonists of matches that still today remain engraved in the history of boxing but also in that of epic achievements. Boxing is cruelty turned into sport, it is one of the oldest and simplest competitive practices, and still today it remains at the core of many debates. In fact, boxing divides those who appreciate it for the courage that characterizes its athletes and those who claim that the fact that two men fight each other with all their strength until one destroys the other by making him fall to the ground with a knock-out blow is cruel and barbaric. Ultimately, this is what happened

<sup>30</sup> Gorn, E. (1997). *Muhammad Ali*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp.76-77.

<sup>31</sup> Ali, M., Bottali, G., Bingham, H. and Ali, H. (2005). *Con l'anima di una farfalla*. Roma: Fazi.

<sup>32</sup> Sportmediaset.mediaset.it. (2016). *La carriera di Muhammad Ali: i numeri e i successi* / News - Sportmediaset. [online] Available at: [https://www.sportmediaset.mediaset.it/altrisport/altrisport/la-carriera-di-160-muhammad-ali-i-numeri-e-i-successi\\_1101846-201602a.shtml](https://www.sportmediaset.mediaset.it/altrisport/altrisport/la-carriera-di-160-muhammad-ali-i-numeri-e-i-successi_1101846-201602a.shtml).

during what is considered to be one of the most violent and, in its own way, spectacular matches that has ever been fought.

On October the 3rd of 1973, in Kinshasa (the capital of Zaire, today's Congo) took place a match that was called "The Rumble in the Jungle". Cassius Clay, who had meanwhile converted to Islam by taking the name of Muhammad Ali, was competing against Joe Frazier. It was a real battle. Frazier was the favorite, but Ali was able to successfully regain the world title he had previously lost. The audience was all for him, they praised who they considered to be an authentic hero-champion and paladin of the African American community, and they firmly believed that, much more than his colleagues, he represented the true flag of redemption although they were black just like him, champions just like him, fierce just like him, but not a symbol to be inspired from. Just like in his personal life, in the ring Clay never pulled back, not even in front of most violent matches.



33

Ali and Jo Frazier have been the protagonists of another famous match that has remained in history because of its extreme violence. Perhaps it may, in fact, be considered the most violent of all times. The fight was called "Thrilla in Manila", because it took place in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1975<sup>34</sup>. Ali won because his opponent abandoned the match: seeing his exhausted athlete arriving at the limit of what he could physically bear, Frazier's coach threw a towel in the ring at the beginning of the fifteenth round, a gesture that meant it was best he retired from the match.

His physical and moral strength, his empathy with the public, his genuine commitment to every cause that he considered right, created a strong consensus around Ali. He used this popularity to

33 Leifer, N. (1965). Muhammad Ali. [image].

34 Scanzi, A. (2010). Ecco "Thriller in Manila" L'autopsia di un match. *La Stampa*. [online] Available at: [https://www.lastampa.it/sport/2010/05/30/news/ecco-thriller-in-manila-br-l-autopsia-di-un-match-1.37015789?refresh\\_cel](https://www.lastampa.it/sport/2010/05/30/news/ecco-thriller-in-manila-br-l-autopsia-di-un-match-1.37015789?refresh_cel)

make the world aware of injustices and issues such as racial segregation, redemption of blacks, and social justice that for him were extremely important.

Ali's toughest personal battle was perhaps the fight against Parkinson's disease. The world was greatly touched to see him light the Olympic flame with trembling hands in Atlanta, in 1966. In sign of great respect, the IOC decided to hand him a reproduction of the gold medal that he had won in Rome in 1960, the one he threw into the Ohio River in sign of protest against racism. Cassius Clay, or Muhammad Ali, never hid in the golden bubble of fame, as many champions did, but he tried, through sports, to improve the world. Sometimes, with questionable behaviors, choices that may have always been accepted by everyone, but history indeed has recognized him a leading role in the contemporary world.

### **3.6.2 Rugby: the importance of the third half and autism as a challenge to overcome.**

Many consider rugby to be one of the most violent and dangerous sports. Even only the "scrum" (when eight players bind together and push against the other team's members with the aim of conquering the ball), or the "maul" (also known as "tackle", when players of the opposing team attempt to steal the ball away from the athlete who has it), seem to represent some form of combat, and ultimately this may not just be an impression. Rugby is a rough discipline; nonetheless, it brings with it the founding principles of sport: loyalty, respect, courage, and passion. Ultimately, these may be considered the rules of the soul, which are seen both in the field and also at the end of the game, when the players of the two teams come together in the "third half", a tradition that subsequently became a ritual<sup>35</sup>. While the aftermath of many sports is often characterized by endless discussions on who should have won and why, which sometimes unfortunately ends in violent fights between factions, in rugby the players gather together to eat, drink, have a conversation and laugh: overall, to have a good time in the true spirit of sport, and perhaps all other disciplines should take this habit.

The third half represents a moment of social collectivity that erases the boundaries of different factions and promotes the healthy values of sport. Although, due to organizational issues, it happens rarely, even the fans can and should participate in the celebration. Nonetheless, it is not infrequent that opposing supporters, too, come together in breweries or bars to sing and have fun. The message that comes from the players is strong and clear: we were opponents in the game but we respected each other and the rules, and now we come together to celebrate after having faced each other with honor and sportsmanship.

<sup>35</sup> Catalano, G. and Pacini, D. (2005). *Il fango e l'orgoglio*. Roma: Nutrimenti.

Rugby has its own rules and for novices it is not always easy to understand them. The Italian writer, Alessandro Baricco, explains the intrinsic and complex dynamics of rugby: “It is a primary game: to bring a ball into the heart of the enemy’s territory, but it is based on an absurd yet wonderfully perverse principle: you can only pass the ball backwards. The result is a paradoxical movement, a continuous doing and undoing, with the ball flying continuously backwards like a fly stuck in a running train: even by flying backwards it still arrives at the final station” (Baricco, 1995).

For many aspects, rugby is also an example to follow, even with regards to the public: “Stadiums are colored by cheerfulness and respect”, writes Valerio Vecchiarelli in the preface of “*Il fango e l’orgoglio*” (“Mud and pride”), a book on rugby written by Gregorio Catalano, “and you can recognize rugby players in every corner of the planet based on their strong sense and desire to create an extended family. At the stadium there are no fences or huge lines of police and the referee is always sacred: the crowd waits and accepts his decision in silence” (Catalano and Pacini, 2005). Nonetheless, virtues do not come without vices. In this sport too there are fouls, irregularities, a few barred shots, and sometimes even quarrels – although it is rare. In the history of rugby, the third time blossomed spontaneously after the matches between small clubs: after being rivals in the field, it was time to eat and drink all together. Tradition has strongly held, and from a local event it has become a habit that also involves national teams. Over time, it has become a beloved and indispensable ritual, to the extent that many players have repeatedly stated that “without the third time” they would not have played neither the first nor the second halves.

It is the idea of “being together”, the feeling of fraternity and of being tied by the passion for rugby that appeals to the players. Therefore, it is no coincidence that this discipline was chosen as the preferred practice to support and help improve young people with autism in the social battles that this condition imposes. The reason why rugby, in particular, is a sport that effectively helps children with autism is because it is a discipline that is based on physical contact, which those with this condition often reject and refuse. By coming together as team members, it is achievable and possible to reproduce physical contact more easily in everyday life. “Socially integrating adolescents and young autistic adults means helping them find their special way of relating to others, and sports are certainly one of the best tools to get them involved” (Di Renzo, 2014), explained Magda Di Renzo, head of the service Therapies of the Institute of Ortofonology (IdO) of Rome that has been partner in one of the aid programs.

Amazing things happen, like the story involving Alessio, an eighteen-year-old young man from Vicenza, a town in Italy. He is a colossus of 1.90 meters and weighs more than ninety kilos. Besides being extremely robust, Alessio is the son of a former rugby player. “Alessio’s father came to us”, explained Fabio Coppo, the technical director of the club Rangers Rugby Vicenza, to the Italian

Press Agency Dire, and added “he told us that his son is autistic and asked us if he could play with us”. The response was obviously positive: rugby is “an all-inclusive sport”. Encouraged by his father and by his teammates, Alessio was an example for everyone: he was disciplined, serious, and never missed a workout. In all sessions he worked hard. One day, his sacrifices and efforts effectively paid off, and a special convocation arrived for a very important match. The Venetian manager, again, stated: “we brought him to the bench and in agreement with the referee and with the Bassano team, we asked for and were granted a sort of extra time”: after the official end of the game “we started again with a scrum. The ball arrived to Alessio who, with a good technique, made a touchdown. They all embraced him, and his father cried with emotion” (Gasperetti, 2019). “Diversity - added Fabio Coppo - is a value, not a limit”. At least in sports, at least in rugby.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Women: the marathon for emancipation.**

According to a strictly Christian vision of creation, women were born out of a men's rib and were destined to obey them. This can be noted in the following passage of the bible: "for the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior" (Holy Bible, Ephesians 5:23). Through time, this notion has fortunately lost its value, but the debate between the most conservative male chauvinists and the supporters of a new form of equality is still profoundly animated. In his book *Women will inherit the earth*, the Italian journalist and writer Aldo Cazzullo brings forth the idea that this century will be "the one of overtaking (of women)". In fact, he writes "women are better than us... We know it very well, and for thousands of years we have organized ourselves to make you submit to us...but that time is running out... The time in when women will take power begins now" (Cazzullo, 2016), underlying the fact that both politically and socially the mechanisms of society are changing, and equal gender rights are becoming an issue of central importance.

This theme, in addition, dates back to centuries ago. In fact, in Greek mythology the myth of Atalanta is significant in this context. Atalanta is a heroine that is considered the fastest woman of ancient times. She was deemed guilty of being born female because her father wanted a male son. Another peculiarity of Atalanta is that she did not want to get married yet, fearing of provoking another disappointment to her father, she agreed to do so. A competition was organized to find the man who would prove to be faster than her, and one of the rules of the race was that the losers of the challenge would be killed. Hippomenes arrived supported by Aphrodite who gave him three golden apples, which he used to slow Atalanta's run. This proved to be a successful tactic, because she stopped to pick them up, and this allowed him to win and ultimately to become her husband<sup>36</sup>. Perhaps, the myth of Atalanta could be considered the point in history in which the "race" of women in the world of sport began. The effort that characterizes women in the conquest of the right to even compete is strenuous and continuous. It was only in the Olympics in Paris of 1900 that women started to make an appearance: out of 1470 athletes, only 229 were women (one every six males).

Maria Canella, professor at the State University of Milan and curator of the book "Donna e Sport" written by Franco Angeli, states: "In reality, in restoring the Olympics to the end of the nineteenth century, the French baron Pierre De Coubertin had in mind to hinder female participation in any way possible. In his vision, women had to play a strictly choreographic role and, like the vestals in ancient Greece, their task was that of celebrating and crowning the winning athletes. He believed

<sup>36</sup> Treccani.it. (n.d.). Ippomene nell'Enciclopedia Treccani. [online] Available at: <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ippomene/>.

that women's sport was scarcely interesting... and impractical". His presence in the International Olympic Committee (IOC) until 1924 caused women's participation in the Games of going from a minimum of 0.94% in 1904 to a maximum of 4.39% in 1924. It was necessary to wait for the Atlanta games in 1996 to have an almost significant participation of 33.98%<sup>37</sup>.

#### **4.1 Victory is female.**

If we look at the developments of modern-day Olympics, it was only in 2012, at the London games, that female athletes of Qatar, Brunei and Saudi Arabia were able to participate for the first time. And yet, if one goes back to Greek mythology, the goddess of Victory, the winged Victory of Samothrace, also known as the Nike of Samothrace, is really a woman, considered both a symbol of agonistic and military victory. In fact, the goddess of Victory is depicted on the palm of Athena's hand in a statue in the Parthenon in Athens and on that of Zeus in the sculpture found in Olympia. Nonetheless, the most famous sculpture of the goddess of Victory is the Nike of Samothrace, a splendid marble statue of two and a half meters of height, which today is present at the Louvre in Paris. The sculpture is attributed to Pitocrito and dates to around 200 and 180 BC. It was originally created to commemorate a victory of the Delian (or Athenian) league.

If we turn our attention to the modern world, the connection between the Greek goddess Nike and Nike intended as the United States' sports manufacturer, is evident. Although the pronunciation of the word is different, Nike's logo (called "swoosh") depicts, even if in a very stylized way, the wing of the original Nike.

The Canadian writer and journalist Naomi Klein, in her book *No Logo* claims that Nike's swoosh is the most requested tattoo by young Americans<sup>38</sup>, standing not only as a symbol of a brand, but also contributing to represent a strong movement of ideology and pride.

Nike, the American brand, strongly stands and fights for the rights of women. In fact, it has recently created an exciting and motivational commercial, "Dream Crazier", promoting equality and underlining the strength of character of women not only in life but also in sport, especially to shed light on and to fight the prejudices on this matter that are unfortunately still present in our society. In the spot, there are images of triumphs, hugs, tears of joy and despair, and champions such as the gymnast Simone Biles, fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad, former WNBA player Lisa Leslie, snowboarder Chloe Kim and many others appear, while the narrative voice is that of the tennis champion Serena Williams, also known as the "The Queen". One of the most significant passages that is heard in the spot is the following: "If we want to play against men, we're nuts. And if we dream of equal

<sup>37</sup> Canella, M. and Giuntini, S. (2019). *Donna e sport*. Franco Angeli.

<sup>38</sup> Klein, N. (2010). *No logo*. [Toronto]: Vintage Canada.

opportunity, delusional. When we stand for something, we're unhinged. When we're too good, there's something wrong with us. And if we get angry, we're hysterical or irrational or just being crazy." The ad goes on: "coaching an NBA team? Crazy. A woman competing in a hijab? Crazy. Changing her score, landing a double cork 1080°, or winning 23 Grand Slams, having a baby, and then coming back for more? Crazy, crazy, crazy, and crazy and still crazy... then show them what crazy can do" (Nike, 2019).

The message that stems forth from this commercial also strongly links with Nike's motto, which in fact is "Just do it". The spot is profoundly emotional and is the perfect testimony of women who challenged both themselves and the prejudices that were supposedly meant to set boundaries for them, overcoming physical, social and cultural limits, and sometimes also religious ones. In this regard, Nike has always been the protagonist of a series of production choices that have caused discussions and debates. For instance, Nike was the first major international brand to launch a line of Hijabs, the traditional Islamic headgear for women, with the collaboration and support of famous athletes such as the weightlifting Olympic champion of the United Arab Emirates, Amna Al Haddad and other Muslim athletes as the skater Zahra Lari and the German Muslim Boxer, Zeina Nassar.

The choice of Nike to include a line of hijabs has produced approval but also criticism<sup>39</sup>. While taking into consideration different cultures and traditions, it also shows attention for the emerging Islamic market, which is estimated to amount to around 5 billion dollars a year. It could also be argued that this decision suggests a certain commercial and marketing strategy that nonetheless seems to support what many may be considered one of the main religious habits that still, in a way, undermines women. On the one hand, behind the decision of Nike lies the respect for different religions and for traditional cultures, demonstrating the honest and sincere aim to ensure and facilitate the practice of sports for Muslim women athletes. However, on the other hand, it could also be considered a form of cynical marketing policy. Today, the debate is still open.

Women's race for independence, the long marathon towards total emancipation, has always been marked by the encounter of many obstacles. Nonetheless, the march against exclusion of women has been and still is fought with great pride and passion.

#### **4.2 Extraordinary women who made history in sport.**

In order to grasp the true meaning of today's movements against repression we must take a step back and analyze the pioneers who wrote the history of emancipation in the race fields,

<sup>39</sup> Dawling, E. (2018). The sports hijab dividing opinions. [online] BBC. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20180110-the-sports-hijab-dividing-opinions>.

defeating the prejudices that men and society imposed, overcoming the "virilization" of the woman as well as the ideology of the Church that saw "secular modernity" as something that would have erased those that were considered to be the principal feminine virtues, such as "purity and devotion" (Canella and Giuntini, 2019). It could be argued that this masculine ideology was brought forth not for any ideological reasons regarding the true spiritual entity of women, but only as an excuse in order to keep women where they had always been forced to be, subjugated by men, imprisoned in the family environment that obscured and restrained their ambitions and qualities. Until some years ago, the extent of such reality was such that it was also stated that feminine prerogatives such as the care of the body and the pursuit of beauty would have been thwarted by those women that dedicated themselves to sport practices. Furthermore, it was argued that such disciplines would have altered the balance and harmony of their bodies and faces, as if sport were the enemy of femininity. Fortunately, surrender by those who were convinced of these bigot ideas took place, leading these prejudices to, if not fall completely, offer an opportunity for those women who wanted to compete, and today beautiful women champions shine. There are wonderful women capable of exceptional performances, such as the Croatian basketball player Antonija Misura, the tennis player Maria Sharapova, the Paraguayan javelin player Lerin Franco, or the Italian swimmer Federica Pellegrini. Alpha women, they call them, with a word that wants to indicate intelligence, courage, determination, ability to endure and much more.

Nonetheless, all women and men, either athletes or not, owe a debt of gratitude to those who have paved the way for women's participation in competitions of all kinds. At the 1900 Olympics in Paris, the English Charlotte Cooper was the first woman to win the title of Olympic tennis champion. She wore neither gloves nor a hat, although they were part of the uniforms of her colleagues<sup>40</sup>. Perhaps, this non-conformism was already a manifestation of the desire of having more rights and, especially, freedom.

The first Italian woman to participate in an Olympic was the tennis player Rosetta Gagliardi, born in 1895: she played in Antwerp in 1920, where she was also the flag bearer of the Italian team. Another significant athlete for Italian history is Ondina Valla, the first Italian athlete to win an Olympic gold: she won in the 80 meters obstacle course race in Berlin in 1936 and her record remained unbeaten until 2004<sup>41</sup>. Valla contributed significantly, with her victories, in shattering, worldwide but particularly in Italy, the belief that success in sport was a male prerogative. To a certain extent, fascist Italy welcomed this innovation, encouraging girls to try their hand at various

<sup>40</sup> Ripa, Y. (2017). Women and the Olympic Games | EHNE. [online] Ehne.fr. Available at:

<https://ehne.fr/en/article/gender-and-europe/gendered-body-expression-european-identity/women-and-olympic-games>.

<sup>41</sup> Regazzoni, M. (2015). Storia delle Olimpiadi: il mito di Ondina Valla. [online] OA Sport. Available at:

<https://www.oasport.it/2015/11/storia-delle-olimpiadi-il-mito-di-ondina-valla/>.

sports: the regime exploited those successes, which it used as propaganda to support the value and prestige of the "Italian race". Although it had by then become clear to almost everyone, Valla's performance then confirmed that sporting success can have important effects on the entire society and that an athlete's achievements can turn into propaganda for an entire nation. Nonetheless, for Mussolini's regime, the effects this provoked were not always positive because the increased consideration of the role and potential of women caused a widespread desire for greater freedom and female independence that hardly suited a decisively male-dominated dictatorship<sup>42</sup>. Therefore, while on the one hand Valla represented a symbol of gratification and national pride, a flag to wave in favor of independence, on the other it also represented a potential danger, almost a threat to social stability and as such, especially in a regime, it was to be controlled: beyond a certain limit of emancipation, women were not allowed to go.

### **4.3 Gender disparities: differences in income and performance.**

According to a recent World Bank study dated February 2019, true gender equality has been achieved only in six countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Latvia, Luxembourg and Sweden. On a social level, women receive  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the rights recognized to men, and among these differences there is also a lower wage for women who perform the same work as men. Italy, in 187 countries, ranks 22nd, but is among the worst in Europe and better only than Hungary, Germany, Cyprus and Slovenia<sup>43</sup>.

In sport, another kind of equality is being pursued, an investigative ideal rather than a real objective. Breaking down limits and barriers also means trying to dissolve the doubt about whether and when it will be possible to overcome that boundary that still seems insurmountable, but that could also be defeated in the future: the homologation of the performance of males and females. It is questioned whether it is possible to make them equal in terms of minutes, seconds, pounds, and centimeters. What technicians call "performance difference" is caused by a series of elements such as anthropometry, meaning the stature and length of the limbs, weight, body composition, muscle tissues, strength, oxygen consumption, and many others. This subject has always fascinated both scientists and researchers, and one of the most complete investigations was carried out in 2010 by the Israeli scientist Ira Hammerman who "analyzed the results in 82 different sports, from swimming to athletics, from rowing to cycling, noting that the relationships between women's and men's records are all very near, around 90%. Fluctuations are rather small: all 82 pairs of records

<sup>42</sup> Carioti, A. (2017). Il fascismo non voleva donne atlete Ma Ondina fece ricredere Starace. Corriere della Sera. [online] Available at: [https://27esimaora.corriere.it/17\\_febbraio\\_23/fascismo-sport-donne-olimpiadi-valla-testoni-starace-47288d04-f9fe-11e6-9b43-a08eac6546a0.shtml](https://27esimaora.corriere.it/17_febbraio_23/fascismo-sport-donne-olimpiadi-valla-testoni-starace-47288d04-f9fe-11e6-9b43-a08eac6546a0.shtml).

<sup>43</sup> World Bank. (2019). Gender. [online] Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender>.

were in a ratio of 84% and 94%. The conclusion was that "such a clear regularity can hardly be accidental"<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, to the question of whether women could ever achieve the same results of men, Hammerman suggests two answers. The first is simple and perhaps rather banal: no. The second forces a reflection, as Robinson Meyer, the journalist of *The Atlantic* explains:

"Hammerman claims that women have already captured men: today's swimmers make the same time in the 100 dolphins that the legendary Mark Spitz did in 1967" (Meyer, 2012).

The gap is reduced but not canceled. And the fascinating challenge continues.

#### **4.4 The bitter punches of Sadaf, the girl who boxes for Afghanistan.**

Sadaf Rahimi is a female boxer born in Afghanistan. According to her story, her talent was evident even before becoming an athlete. In fact, in an interview she states: "the first time I hit someone, he was in my village. He was my 18-year-old cousin. We staged a fight and he told me I would become a good boxer"<sup>45</sup> Rahimi was the first female boxer from Afghanistan that was only one step away from competing in the Olympics. Her presence in the London games of 2012 (the edition that marked the debut of the women's boxing in the games) seemed official, definite, and organized for London 2012. Sadaf would have participated thanks to the "wild card" that the IOC puts at the disposal of those nations that have not been able to perform for the qualifications. Suddenly, Sadaf's presence was revoked: the gap between Sadaf and the other athletes was deemed to be too evident, and this technical difference could have also put the safety of the young Afghan athlete at risk; therefore, she was forced to stay at home<sup>46</sup>.

Notwithstanding these and many other difficulties, Sadaf has not stopped fighting, neither in the ring nor in life. She lives in a difficult and tormented country, devastated by the wars and cruelties of various regimes that have succeeded each other. Her culture is characterized by a strict Islamic tradition, and a strong Taliban influence prevails sometimes even in the mentality of the Afghan society. These elements, alongside the suffering of her family, sparked her desire to practice boxing. Her inspiration was Muhammed Ali, "The greatest", who visited Kabul in 2002 with a UN delegation. Sadaf was only eight years old yet remained impressed by Ali, not only by his physical stance but also by his personality. Above all, Sadaf remained mesmerized by Laila, the daughter of the champion, who, like her father, had embarked on a boxing career: Sadaf wanted to become like

<sup>44</sup> Bersani, A. (2016). Uomini e donne nello sport, sessismo e differenze - Scientificast. [online] Scientificast. Available at: <https://www.scientificast.it/uomini-donne-nello-sport-sessismo-differenze/>.

<sup>45</sup> Saner, E. (2012). I'll proudly fight for women and Afghanistan'. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2012/mar/11/sadaf-rahimi-afghanistan-woman-boxer>.

<sup>46</sup> Nick Paton Walsh and Mitra Mobasherat, C. (2012). Afghanistan's first female Olympic boxer eyes London dream - CNN. [online] CNN. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/03/world/asia/afghan-female-boxer/index.html>.

Laila, a professional female boxer. Thanks to the help of an NGO operating in Afghanistan, a project was initiated, and two Afghan coaches were sent to Sadaf's school where they organized an experimental women's boxing team to which Sadaf participated despite her father's opposition which was still tied to a male-dominated vision of the family. In his vision, woman and sports could not be correlated and it was impossible for him to embrace the idea that his daughter would have fought in a ring: it was considered "men's stuff".

Sadaf enters the ring every day with her head covered by a bandana, as a sign of respect for her religion. She shares helmets and gloves with the other girls, despite it not being hygienic, because there are not enough for everyone. Sadaf is committed, fights hard and improves. It is for this reason that the "wild card" of the Olympics suddenly seems to be an achievable goal. Thanks to her story and talent, she obtained a certain fame and started to give interviews, even on popular magazines such as the Time and it is precisely in an interview for this magazine that, before her exclusion from the Olympics, she stated: "I'm tired of feeling that the world looks at Afghan women as victims. By fighting I want to send a message to the world: Afghan girls are not victims. Whether I win a medal or not, I will become a symbol of courage as soon as I get into the ring" (Rahimi, 2012). Sadaf was not able to participate in the Olympic games, but she certainly represents a symbol. Her dream was shattered, but her courageous example will serve to many. "I would like to open a gym - she stated - but above all to make everyone understand that there are no differences between men and women, in life and in sport". Nonetheless, unfortunately this is still not completely true. Only recently, another woman boxer, the Iranian Sadaf Khadem, was indicted for going into the ring in shorts and a tank top<sup>47</sup>. She had fought and won in France and was the first Iranian woman to win an international meeting. "I fought in a meeting in France. But as I was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, which is absolutely normal all over the world, I upset the rules of my country", Khadem told the newspaper L'Equipe. "I wasn't wearing a hijab, I was trained by a man, and to some people this would seem to be bad" (Khadem, 2019). Instead of receiving appraisal, she got an arrest warrant. This ultimately shows that, unfortunately, although there are starting to be some important changes, there is still a long way to go to achieve true universal equality.

<sup>47</sup> Now This (2019). Iranian Woman Sadaf Khadem Makes Boxing History. [video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-8U4SUG3Rw>.

## Chapter 5

### Money, money, money...

"The important thing is not to win, but ...". If we were to choose the missing word, today society would say "to earn". This mentality has spread also to the sports world. In fact, by taking into consideration the reality revolving around it, it could be stated that sport has become a real industry. Indeed, according to some, it is one of the most profitable businesses of the third millennium. The champion is no longer considered the solitary hero who competes against a chronometer or the aggregation of talents committed to defending the honor and prestige of their flag: today there are teams of scientific, financial and legal experts that have the responsibility of taking care of athletes and who manipulate them in making the most profitable decisions. This multitude of prosecutors, agents, communicators, and also sport fashion experts aim for overall excellent results, and this serves not for the personal satisfaction of the athlete but for strictly economic purposes. These managers administer the millions of euros and dollars that stem forth from wages, prizes, awards, percentages, television and image rights.

In the annual list published by Forbes of the top one hundred richest athletes, that shows remunerations between June 2017 and June 2018, a total collection of 3.2 billion euros (+ 23% compared to the last edition) are found. These numbers almost reflect those that would be expected by multinational companies. Nonetheless, a striking element of this research is the fact that there is a lack of female athletes, showing yet another gender gap. In the first place of the list lies the now former US boxer Floyd Mayweather Jr with a total of 242 million euros, of which 233 million were earned thanks to matches. Mayweather is followed by Leo Messi, an Argentinian soccer player currently playing for Futbol Club Barcelona, who earns 94 million euros per year (of which approximately 23 million earned from sponsors) and Cristiano Ronaldo, with a total of 81.7 million yearly (again, almost 40 million derive from sponsors)<sup>48</sup>. In the list of the top 100 athletes who earn the most there are 66 American athletes, five are from the United Kingdom, and three are from Spain and the Dominican Republic. There are no Italians in this list.

The list by Forbes covers eleven sports. In terms of salaries basketball dominates, with 40 athletes as representatives, all remunerated by NBA franchises. This significant boom in the basketball industry may be considered to be strongly linked to the NBA's new television contract of 2.6 billion annual euros. On the list there are also 18 athletes from NFL football, 14 from baseball and 9 from soccer. Again, it is important to state that in this list there are no women, although the tennis stars

<sup>48</sup> Badenhausen, K. (2019). The World's Highest-Paid Athletes. [online] Forbes.com. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/athletes/#6d6310c155ae>.



Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova had appeared in the previous rankings. It is important to reflect on the social reasons that cause this gender vacuum, and whether (and if so, why) male athletes are more followed than women.

### **5.1 Sport as a business: positive and negative aspects.**

It is interesting to consider whether all this money in the sport industry is good or bad for the image and true meaning as well as value of sport. It could be argued, by taking a microeconomic perspective, that it is the market demand that ultimately decides the amount that circulates within the sports industry. According to an investigation by The Daily Telegraph carried out in 2015, it was estimated that in the United Kingdom soccer creates 62,000 jobs. Additionally, if one also considers sports shops, betting stations, bars and the restaurants or retails of each club during a match, the number would surely be greater. It could be argued that the proportion of money that is distributed in each sector depends on the market forces and consumer preferences. Overall, the enormous amount of money that circulates within the sport industry may be both positive and negative: without money an economy cannot progress, but the risk is that the quest for large numbers overcomes everything else, including the joy of practicing sport for the simple passion tying the athlete to his discipline. The reason why the exaggerated strive for money could become detrimental for sports is that there is an intangible side in sport that in some way guides the soul of those who compete, which ultimately nurtures the satisfaction of the athletes who improve themselves, allowing them to obtain the long pursued results aimed at during the strenuous training sessions. This side of sport is not interested in money but in personal and team satisfaction. The imprint of sport and the extent to which its role is founded within the consumerism of society can be seen also in clothing, in globally famous brands such as Nike that encourage a healthy lifestyle and use world champions to promote their brand. Ultimately, it could be stated that what an individual wears in some way shows a silent approval as well as consensus of the values shared by the brand.

Today sport may be considered a planetary show, possibly the greatest in the world, where flags of states, which for centuries have been the symbols of the fatigue and glory of every country, are starting to lose their value and importance. In fact, sports nationalism no longer has the strength it once had: in the years of the Cold War, for instance, when the world was divided into two blocs (on one side there was the United States and on the other the Soviet Union) even an Olympic medal was considered a sort of extension of the territories of control. Today all this seems outdated, the athlete amazes and is admired for his results regardless of his or her origin. Additionally, what has contributed in erasing the boundaries of what team or who to cheer for is the ease, for instance, with

which the strongest players are “bought and sold”, moving from one team to another. It could perhaps be stated that today we are starting to observe an end in the meaning of flags, and what is emphasized is not much where an athlete comes from but the values he shares and the choices he makes in order to be a good example to the world.

## **5.2 The organizations: UISP, ARCI, and others.**

In the past years, society has been marked by several important changes, and these transformations have also contributed into modifying certain dynamics of sports, especially with regards to rules and habits. For instance, accessibility is no longer reserved to a lucky elite that can withstand additional expenses such as entry fees for pools or gyms and costs of uniforms or equipment. This societal improvement is in part thanks to the phenomenon of sporting associationism, which has succeeded in favoring widespread access to sport as well as the growth of young people, stimulating them to socialize and promoting constructive confrontation. In Italy the “Unione Italiana Sport Popolare” (UISP), in English “Italian Union of Popular Sport” is an exemplary case of how an organization is able to evolve by adapting its activity to the mutating demands of society<sup>49</sup>. The UISP was born in Rome in 1948 as the product of two political parties, the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), being the Italian Communist Party, and Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI), the Italian Socialist Party. The Unione Italiana Sport Popolare, since the beginning, was characterized by having a profoundly strong appeal to the Popular Front, as it had been the product of the political alliance in the elections of April 1948 between the PCI and the PSI (subsequently defeated by the Christian Democrats). The original purpose of the UISP was to promote the culture and practice of sport with a series of facilitations for the popular classes, for those that had fewer economic possibilities. Nonetheless, already in the mid-fifties, the UISP chose to free itself from the suffocating hold of the parties and to play an autonomous role in the sports universe, so much so that in 1974 the Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano (CONI), the Italian National Olympic Committee, recognized it as a Sports Promotion Body. Although the acronym remained the same (UISP), the name changed to “Italian Union of Sports for All”. The new UISP supported a vision of sport based not on competition, but on participation extended to all without discrimination of gender, age, nationality, solidarity and respect for the environment. It could also be stated that by widening the range of the practitioners there is also a higher possibility of having more talented young promises that can excel in their discipline. In any case, with the increasing number of athletes sometimes also extremely young, that are thriving, also the audience of spectators is growing, and this causes an increased turnover. Although the UISP has never had any

<sup>49</sup> Di Monte, B., Giuntini, S. and Maiorella, I. (2008). *Di sport, raccontiamo un'altra storia*. Bari: La meridiana.

profit-making purposes and never attempted to earn money from its own activities, sports clubs of all kinds and levels, except for those regarding amateurs, have always tried not only not to have passive balance sheets, but also to earn as much as possible.

### **5.3 Buying success: forms of doping.**

In the third millennium, sport may be considered a combination of money and results. Although an achievement or a success cannot be bought, unfortunately there are both legal and illegal measures that are sometimes taken in order to manipulate the results of an athlete: doping (the use of chemical substances that increase the strength and capacity of an athlete), for instance, is a reality that, despite the periodical tests that athletes are obliged to take, still exists. This has caused a very high level of alert and attention, especially in disciplines where there have been the most cases of doping, such as cycling. In fact, a very high use of performance-enhancing substances such as erythropoietin (EPO), diuretics, or other stimulants, has led to continuous and meticulous as well as very rigid searches. Athletes are obliged to take blood or urine tests both prior to or after races, sometimes also without notice in order for the results to be more accurate. Furthermore, the World Anti-Doping agency provides a list of prohibited substances “in and out of competition”, which are divided in categories such as steroids, stimulants, and gene doping<sup>50</sup>. The negative consequences of doping involve serious legal repercussions but are also detrimental and dangerous also for the health of an individual. In fact, doping substances, also if taken occasionally or not in a quantity that corresponds to an overdose, cause serious and permanent damages to the heart, the liver, and to the nervous and reproductive system.

Overcoming one's own limits becomes a categorical imperative, for individuals and for large organizations, but also for science, which is constantly engaged in expensive and refined technological research aimed at optimizing the use of materials in order for athletes to excel even more. For instance, there are competitive swimsuits (called “jammers” for males), made with a very specific material such as nylon or spandex that by reducing resistance in the water help athletes drift better, allowing them to gain several fractions of seconds. In 2009, the LZR Pro and LZR Elite lines (manufactured by Speedo) were launched. These swimsuits were fabricated in such a way that they compressed the body and trapped air. The effects of these new costumes were quite surprising. In fact, during the December 2008 Short Course European Championships in Croatia, seventeen world titles were defeated, and the International Federation for Swimming (FINA) deemed it necessary to modify the rules regarding these new swimming gears and even stated that they represented a sort

<sup>50</sup> Viberti, G. (2019). L'ombra del doping si allunga sul Giro d'Italia. La Stampa. [online] Available at: <https://www.lastampa.it/sport/ciclismo/2019/05/15/news/l-ombra-del-doping-si-allunga-sul-giro-d-italia-spunta-il-nome-di-petacchi-la-rai-lo-sospende-1.33702035>.

of “technological doping”, because of the extent to which they affected performances<sup>51</sup>. In a meeting in Dubai in 2009, the main changes that were agreed by the committee were the following: “swimsuits should not cover the neck, must not extend past the shoulders and ankles” (Gomes, 2009), and limits on their thickness were also imposed<sup>52</sup>. Professional swimsuits initially arrived up to the ankle of the athlete, but the new rules made it mandatory for them to not exceed the knee. In order not to manipulate the technicality of the costumes, FINA decided to intervene not on the materials used but on their length. Nonetheless, more changes were to come. In fact, during a FINA congress in 2009, it was decided that body-length costumes were not allowed anymore and that, for men, “swimsuits may maximally cover the area from the waist to the knee, and women's counterparts from the shoulder to the knee” (BBC, 2009). Decisions were taken also in terms of the materials used to fabricate these swimsuits, which must mandatorily be “a textile or a woven material” (BBC, 2009).

A similar evolution can be seen in other sports where tools are used in order to accompany the discipline, such as pole-vaulting, where the so-called pole is used as the main equipment. Initially, during the first stages of the discipline, the pole was essentially a tree stick. Subsequently, wooden poles were replaced by bamboo ones, and after the Second World War aluminum was used. The real improvement was brought forth during the 1950s, when fiberglass was introduced. Today the pole is made of both fiberglass and carbon fiber, ensuring both a greater flexibility and, most importantly, speed.

The scientific and technological evolution that has affected sport, perhaps, has also contributed into changing the perspective with which sport is seen. In fact, it could be argued that the idea of sport that may be defined as “romantic”, where the core of it is “purity and heart”, to a certain extent does not exist anymore. Today sport is a show, and this is demonstrated by the birth and prosperity of television networks dedicated only to sport where programs such as Sky-Sport news, in Italy as in many other countries of the world, offer 24-hour sports news, turning great matches into planetary events. The first issue of the Italian newspaper “La Repubblica”, on January 14<sup>th</sup> of 1976, was published without any page dedicated to sports<sup>53</sup>. Nonetheless, this decision was later modified precisely because of the importance that the sport was gaining in contemporary society. Today, aside from there being pages of the main national newspapers entirely dedicated to sports news, there are also magazines and newspapers entirely sports based. The great value that sport has gained

<sup>51</sup> Crouse, K. (2009). Swimming Bans High-Tech Suits, Ending an Era. The New York Times. [online] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/25/sports/25swim.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Gomes, A. (2009). Fina makes changes to swimsuit rules. [online] Gulf News. Available at: <https://gulfnews.com/sport/fina-makes-changes-to-swimsuit-rules-1.57706>.

<sup>53</sup> Il Post (2016). Com'era fatto il primo numero di Repubblica, uscito 40 anni fa. [online] Available at: <https://www.ilpost.it/2016/01/14/primo-numero-repubblica/>.

within society is based on different levels, such as a way to improve one's social and economic status. Furthermore, sport is also considered a stage for great universal themes such as anti-racism, equality, redemption and respect for athletes with physical handicaps (rights that were brought to life thanks to the para-Olympics). Essentially, sport is now seen both as a physical and mental necessity for the well-being of every individual.

#### **5.4 Aggregations and degenerations: hooligans, violence, and criminality.**

In addition to the intrinsic value it carries it also represents amusement and entertainment and contributes in establishing a sense of belonging and of adoration towards particular teams or athletes. Unfortunately, this theme is quite difficult, because it has since always also seen actions of violence and fierceness.

A strong capacity for aggregation carries with it the risk of a degenerative phenomenon, typical of some sports such as soccer. In fact, in this context, it remains the worst example, for the number of people that it is able to mobilize, for the interests it moves, and for the culture with which it grows both on the pitch and in the stands. This is seen, for instance, with clashes between supporters and the police, the mingling of ultras and organized crime, and also bets. It could be argued that it is a reality that, although not generated directly by organized crime, ends up meeting with it and sharing its responsibility in criminal episodes, which at times have tragically ended with the death of fans or police. Italy and England, for instance, are countries that have always struggled to tame the situation and perhaps should have played a better and more decisive role in countering violent groups of fans. Ultimately, supporters follow their team around Europe during international cups, and this has caused accidents between supporters of different groups, significantly contributing in increasing terror. Fortunately, throughout the years, a combined action of greater education and serious control managed to put an end, for instance, to the 'hooligans' phenomenon, which for many years had impressed and worried Europe. Unfortunately, in fact, there have been more than a few matches that have culminated in the death of supporters and of policemen, some due to fights between factions and others due to other reasons. An example of the latter is what today is known as the "tragedy of Hillsborough" that occurred in 1989 in the stadium of Hillsborough (Sheffield) during the final of the FA cup between Liverpool FC and Nottingham Forest. In this event, almost one hundred supporters lost their lives and eight hundred were injured. The main cause of the tragedy was an extreme congestion outside the turnstiles, which led to the police chief to deem it necessary to open another exit in order to let people in and preventing them to get injured<sup>54</sup>. This

<sup>54</sup> CNN. (2019). Hillsborough Stadium Disaster Fast Facts. [online] Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/25/world/hillsborough-disaster-fast-facts/index.html>.

decision was fatal: the influx of people entering the stadium from the gate that was opened was so great that supporters were crushed. According to CNN, “3,000 fans were funneled into a standing-room-only area with a safe capacity of just 1,600” (CNN, 2019).

It is important to ponder on the significance of events such as this, where the number of tickets sold exceeds the capacity of a stadium. Furthermore, it could be argued that in most cases money is the origin of many problems, and this is seen also in very different topics.

### **5.5 Sports marketing.**

A research conducted by the Nielsen Agency has ascertained that in less than ten years the volume of sponsorships in the sports world has almost doubled<sup>55</sup>. Viewers and spectators are also consumers and therefore are encouraged as well as driven towards the purchase of certain products that they associate to their favorite athlete or team. The brothers Adolph and Rudolph Dassler, who invented spiked shoes for athletes running on the track, understood this prior to anybody else. In 1924, their company was called “Gebrüder Dassler Schuhfabrik”, but in 1949 the name was changed to Adidas. With its already good reputation, Adidas produced the shoes that Owens used in the Berlin Olympics and those worn by Ali and Frazier in the 1971 match for the world title. Only one year later, Adidas was the official sponsor of the Munich Olympics. Nike arrived years later, but the turning point, the decisive moment in which sport became a tool to make money, may be related to a spot made by Andre Agassi who himself never hid his passion, not for tennis, but for money. The tennis player, sponsored by Nike, in 1990 and at the age of eighteen, was the protagonist of a spot for EOS Rebel, a Canon camera. In the commercial, he stated: "Image is everything"<sup>56</sup>. According to many, it would be right then and there, in that representation of sport that annihilates the sense of performance and fatigue, the beginning of what is considered a kind of degeneration of sport.

"Sport allows freedom, because it serves no external purpose" (Bueb, 2010), wrote the philosopher Bernhard Bueb in *In Praise of Discipline*. For about 30 years, Bueb was headmaster of an elite college in Germany, the Salem School. Like many intellectuals of the 1960s, he was a supporter of the so-called "democratic" education, convinced that greater responsibility for children, in study as in life, the idea of "letting them grow" would naturally lead them to self-discipline. Nonetheless, it is with great disappointment that he discovered that this was not the case at all, and he changed his position on the matter completely. Instead, he later argued that children have the "need" of discipline, and that this must be proposed "with love", by families and teachers, who are their

<sup>55</sup> Nielsen. (2018). Sponsorship sportive: sempre un goal. [online] Available at: <https://www.nielsen.com/it/it/insights/report/2018/sports-sponsorship-always-a-goal/>.

<sup>56</sup> Canon (1990). Image is everything. [video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpuFEpbE0d0>.

closest behavioral models. "Discipline - he wrote – when combined with true love and passionate dedication to the education of young people, frees our children from the difficulty of having to repeatedly choose whether to wash, to tidy up the room, to study, to respect the rules" (Bueb, 2010). Bueb brings forth the example of commitment and even blind obedience to the coach's orders, a requirement for who is part of a team. "The boys accept all these things with enthusiasm, aware of their need for a goal" (Bueb, 2010). It is the path of sport, once again, that educates and grows. And "allows freedom, because it serves no external purpose" (Bueb, 2010).

## Conclusion

Perhaps it could be argued that being a true champion means to be the bearer of those values that contribute to the construction and consolidation of a society founded on the universal rights of freedom, equality, respect, without any distinction of sex, religion or skin color and where success is the fruit of commitment and effort, in the absolute respect of the rules. Sport must be considered a joyful instrument to ultimately achieve what the Constitution of the United States recognizes as one of the fundamental goals of humans: the search for happiness. Furthermore, the practice of sport is able to effectively lead to the growth and improvement of an individual because it brings forth a continuous challenge in search of the best that one can accomplish, a quest for unprecedented performances in the belief that the Absolute will never be achieved. The limits pursued are those that are assumed not to exist, because otherwise the effort would cease, the motivations would fail, and it would no longer make sense to be committed and to make sacrifices. Performing well may not be enough, and even those who play better can sometimes lose, but whoever wins by playing badly will not go down in history. It is said that "the best is the enemy of good", but in sport it is never true. The goal is to work for the best, for what comes next, and the pursuit of happiness ends on a podium.

It is important to understand the boundaries that both the passion for a sport and sport itself is able to destroy as well as the opportunities that it creates within society, erasing limits that could be either cultural, religious, or physical, such as the case of Bebe Vio, an Italian Paralympic, world and European champion of individual foil. In fact, one could ponder on the circumstances that led her to pursue her goals notwithstanding the obstacles that stood in her way. Her determination and passion for fencing pushed her to completely annihilate the limits imposed to her by the disease she was struck by at only eleven years of age that caused both her arms to be amputated. Nonetheless, she continues to pursue and succeed in fencing, a sport that involves the use of a foil, which in her conditions is extremely challenging. Another example of a daring athlete that did not stop in front of a serious difficulty is that of Alex Zanardi, an Italian racing driver who lost his legs after a frightening accident. He was able to re-emerge from the emotional void caused by the accident and became one of the leaders of Paralympic sports. The extraordinary meaning and purpose of sport is seen also in these circumstances and teaches individuals how to build "moral muscles", allowing them to become symbols and examples of a society that tries to improve everyone's conditions. Today, athletes are considered heroes when they are able to have a strong impact on society, when they know how to defeat prejudice and use the instruments they have to do so, when they erase inequalities, and break barriers, even those imposed by the media. The recent women's soccer world championships have been a resounding television success, with millions of fans who have



witnessed female matches rich of extreme technical and tactical capacity as well as a furious and competitive passion. The contrasts within sport created by an ancient division of the world between hypothetical categories, such as race or gender, seem to be almost finally over. It could be argued that it is also thanks to these evolutions in the sports world that civil society has advanced, allowing the fight for equality for those who do not have the same skin color, for who practices a different religion, or for who is of a different sex, to be spread in depth between different social areas, not only in the gym but also in the streets. If one looks back to when women were not allowed to participate in the Olympics, for example, it is obvious that an incredible progress has been made, yet there is still room for more. The strong role played by women in sports shows how society is coming to terms with the importance of equality. Although in certain aspects they are, still today, overshadowed by male athletes, victorious and talented women pave the way for total equality with regards to income and fame. This battle is accompanied by world famous brands such as Nike that aim at spreading and delivering a strong message to defend the importance and value of women in sports, spurring them to continue pursuing their goals and dreams and to prove the still retrograde portion of society wrong. Another recent issue involving the progress of society regards the “outing” of homosexual champions, which in some respect is a more complex argument, because sexual preferences are part of a very intimate and delicate part of a person’s world, it is not a characteristic that stands out when an athlete competes, as is, for example, being white or black or being male or female. Therefore, it could be argued that there would be no need in making a sexual preference something of public dominion, but sport becomes, once again, a preferential way to launch messages that can have global resonance and thus make communication easier and more direct, allowing old taboos to be accepted and considered normal. Nonetheless, there still exist boundaries such as religion that in some countries are real obstacles for who practices sport, especially for women.

Sport has proved to be curative for those adolescents born in difficult realities and with problematic backgrounds, giving them the opportunity to redeem themselves within society, giving them voice to fight for their rights and to demonstrate that minorities are just as important as those who are more privileged. In fact, being born rich is just a matter of luck, whereas in order to be a champion there are a series of fundamental elements that are needed, such as motivation, passion, sacrifice, determination, patience, and many others. There are numerous touching stories of people born with nothing who not only become champions, but also heroes, and it is important to reflect on the difference in meaning of the two terms.

Sport also means coming together between individuals or groups who share the same passion and who support the same team. A strong aggregational force caused by the fervent support

for an athlete or a club has both positive and negative consequences. As we have seen, aside from creating a sense of collection and therefore of bonding and union, it may also lead to violence and criminality. Nonetheless, there are cases such as the third half in rugby, where a strong union has proved to be effective in creating a good atmosphere based on the true values of sportsmanship.

A champion does not make a hero, such as the case of Maradona: although a phenomenon in the pitch, he cannot be considered a carrier of the true values of sport that reflect honesty and good behavior. In virtue of this argument it could also be stated that the example received may ultimately affect the behavior adopted. It is precisely for this reason that, situations similar to that of the father setting a bad example during the soccer practice of his son, should be avoided at all costs and coaches should necessarily implement strong rules in order for children to develop the sense of competition in a healthy manner. The way a child approaches competition, in fact, is an element of extreme importance in his or her personal growth because it will dictate how he or she will practice sport in the future. Considering the universal desire of making the world a better place, and using sport as a key instrument to do so, it is imperative that children know how to respect each other regardless of their differences, that may lie in the color of their skin, their social class, their hobbies, interests, and later in life in sexual preferences.

In conclusion, it could be stated that sport is now a fundamental element in society, deeply engraved in the habits and passions of individuals. It is important to understand its relevance and the extent to which it can help erase any type of boundary as well as the extent to which it gives a voice to minorities, attempting to create universal equality. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that, if practiced with the true values that characterize it, sport can give voice to minorities and help defend as well as pursue the rights of every individual, teaching respect and solidarity in and out of the gym as well as promoting healthy competition. Although sport offers an opportunity for the coming together of fans, thus creating a sense of union and solidarity, it may also be stated that aggregation may have negative effects such as violence. Nonetheless, it is important to underline that sport should be a pillar of the life of every individual, especially children, teaching respect and those values that distinguish a hero from a champion. Lastly, borrowing a phrase from the past and disturbing Cicero who referred to history, we could say that sport is really "magister vitae".

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## Riassunto

Lo sport ha sempre avuto un ruolo fondamentale nella mia vita. Sono stata un'agonista di nuoto, mi allenavo sei volte a settimana e nei periodi festivi, quando i miei coetanei andavano in vacanza o passavano le giornate in compagnia di amici, io mi allenavo due volte al giorno. Ho imparato, fin da piccola, il significato della parola "sacrificio", e sono grata allo sport per avermi trasmesso tutti quei principi che ad oggi reputo indispensabili. La mia tesi, dunque, riflette la passione e il rispetto che nutro nei confronti dello sport in generale, e ha come obiettivo quello di approfondire alcune delle tematiche ad esso legate, soprattutto quelle che riguardano il progresso e il riscatto sociale che si possono ottenere proprio grazie allo sport.

L'elaborato si basa su cinque capitoli, e per ognuno di essi sono stati inseriti degli esempi concreti per rafforzare l'argomento trattato e anche per rendere più interessante e coinvolgente la lettura.

L'introduzione spiega l'origine dello sport, partendo dalla semplice etimologia della parola, che in italiano significa "diporto, svago". Dopo aver spiegato, brevemente, le primissime discipline che venivano praticate nei primi secoli Avanti Cristo, come la "taurocatapsia", vengono analizzate le differenze tra l'approccio Greco e Romano, due visioni totalmente diverse dello sport. Se da una parte i Greci vedevano lo sport come un modo per esaltare "il bello e buono", legati dal mito del "kalòs kagathòs", i Romani lo utilizzavano come strumento di cruda e violenta spettacolarizzazione.

Il primo capitolo illustra i principali valori dello sport, che oggi sono racchiusi nei principi del Comitato Olimpico Internazionale. Il tema delle Olimpiadi si lega con l'origine della cosiddetta "pace olimpica" che consentiva ai popoli in guerra di sospendere le battaglie per rendere omaggio a un momento di tale importanza sportiva. Ciò nonostante, durante la Prima Guerra Mondiale le Olimpiadi vennero, purtroppo, sospese e posticipate al 1916. La Germania fu esclusa dai giochi olimpici fino al 1926, a causa delle sue responsabilità politiche e militari. Nel 1936, quando Hitler era al potere, le Olimpiadi si tennero a Berlino, ed è proprio trattando questo argomento che incontriamo il primo "caso", ovvero quello di Jesse Owens, un atleta di colore americano nato in Alabama. Si disse che Hitler non volle riconoscere le sue vittorie proprio perché nero, ma tale gesto fu smentito da Owens stesso nella sua autobiografia. Questo non sminuisce affatto la gravità e l'insensatezza della follia nazista e delle tragedie che ha comportato. Deve, semmai, far riflettere su come, a volte, sia la stampa che la storiografia, ricostruiscano episodi e avvenimenti a prescindere dal reale svolgimento dei fatti.

Il secondo capitolo ha come obiettivo primario quello di sottolineare la differenza tra l'eroe ed il campione. Infatti, tra i due termini ci sono enormi differenze. Come esempio è stato riportato il caso di Dorando Pietri, un panettiere di Carpi, che durante la maratona alle Olimpiadi di Londra, nel

1908, per la fatica cadde e si rialzò cinque volte consecutive. Alla fine della gara, due giudici lo sorressero per aiutarlo ad arrivare al traguardo, ma per tale motivo fu squalificato. Non fu lui il campione né il vincitore ufficiale della maratona, ma fu un eroe che compì un'impresa straordinaria. L'eroe si distingue dal campione per i valori che trasmette alla società, per l'esempio che dà, e per il sentimento sportivo e pulito che lo contraddistingue. Un altro eroe, o meglio eroina, che viene citata è Cathy Freeman, un'aborigena australiana e campionessa Olimpica nei 400 metri di atletica leggera, che lotta per l'eguaglianza e per due bandiere: quella del suo popolo, della sua famiglia, e quella della sua nazione. Un esempio di eroina che vuole conciliare due mondi diversi, il vecchio e il nuovo, senza mettere nessuno dei due su un gradino superiore all'altro, fiera delle sue origini ma senza il timore di abbracciare una realtà diversa dalla sua. Il campione, invece, può avere un talento raro e fenomenale, ma se non incorpora né possiede le caratteristiche imprescindibili di un eroe, non può essere definito tale. Nell'elaborato, per rafforzare tale concetto, è stato usato l'esempio di Maradona che tuttora è considerato uno dei calciatori più forti del mondo. Nonostante il suo talento e la venerazione che i tifosi del Napoli nutrono nei suoi confronti, per colpa delle sue scelte di vita, la sua dipendenza alla cocaina, e per i gravi errori commessi non solo nel campo ma anche fuori (come l'evasione fiscale), può essere definito solamente campione e non eroe. Il secondo capitolo sottolinea l'importanza della funzione sociale dell'eroe, al contrario del campione che alimenta un tifo popolare e idealizza il soggetto.

Il terzo capitolo evidenzia due tipologie di sport molto diverse tra loro: lo sport individuale e quello di gruppo. In uno sport solitario come il nuoto verranno stimulate la riflessione e la pazienza. Al contrario, in uno sport di gruppo come può essere il calcio o il rugby, l'individuo dovrà affrontare il senso di responsabilità, la cooperazione, e lo spirito di squadra. Guidare un bambino nella scelta dello sport che più lo rispecchia diventa fondamentale affinché esso possa godere a pieno delle opportunità e del potenziale di sviluppo non solo fisico ma anche psicologico che offre la disciplina da lui scelta. Sia gli sport di gruppo che quelli individuali possono essere suddivisi in diverse categorie. La distinzione è tra il "fianco a fianco" e il "faccia a faccia", con altre differenze all'interno di ciascuna categoria. Gli sport "fianco a fianco" sono quelli che si svolgono con gli avversari distanti fra loro, senza che nessuno possa avere alcuna interferenza fisica nella prestazione dell'altro, come accade nell'atletica leggera, nel nuoto, nello sci. In queste pratiche, però, le prove possono essere "parallele", ossia quando le prove sono contemporanee (ciclismo, corsa, nuoto) oppure "differite", quando l'esecuzione di ciascun atleta è successiva a quella degli altri. Nei "faccia a faccia" si distinguono gli sport "mediati", in cui l'interazione tra gli sfidanti non è diretta, ma è, appunto, mediata da un mezzo, la spada o il fioretto nella scherma, la racchetta e la palla nel tennis. Viceversa, negli sport "di contatto", l'interazione tra gli avversari prevede un vero e proprio

contatto fisico, come avviene, ad esempio, nel pugilato. Lo “spirito di squadra”, in ogni caso, serve per ottenere un risultato che è il “bene comune”. Lo sport rende uguali, non conosce discriminazioni, il blocco di partenza è allo stesso punto per tutti e può essere uno straordinario strumento di inclusione sociale. In un mondo sempre più globalizzato, infatti, la diversità diventa una ricchezza ulteriore. Per sottolineare questo aspetto, è stato usato l’esempio di Klaudio Ndoja, arrivato in un gommone dall’Albania e che oggi è un campione di pallacanestro. Purtroppo, soprattutto quando è in trasferta, gli succede di essere insultato per le sue origini albanesi. Eppure, proprio lo sport, è una delle strade maestre non solo per sconfiggere, ma per cancellare definitivamente ogni forma di discriminazione. Il campione che incarna i valori tradizionali della lealtà e dell’impegno, del sacrificio e della dedizione, dell’altruismo e dell’onestà, è di per sé una bandiera, una figura che unisce e mai divide, esempio e speranza di un futuro che possa sempre essere migliore del presente. Un altro esempio presente in questo capitolo è quello di Eric Moussambani, considerato il peggior nuotatore di sempre. Nato in Guina Equatoriale, un piccolo e irrequieto stato dell’Africa centrale, prima delle Olimpiadi di Sidney del 2000 non aveva mai visto una piscina lunga 50 metri e aveva imparato a nuotare soltanto otto mesi prima, da solo, allenandosi nella piccola vasca di un albergo di Malabo, la capitale del suo paese. Per il Comitato Olimpico Internazionale quello era il vero spirito olimpico. Moussambani gareggiò solo, perché i suoi due avversari vennero eliminati per falsa partenza. Fece il record olimpico per la prestazione più lenta di sempre. Diventò, però, un personaggio, proprio per il coraggio e soprattutto per aver saputo interpretare correttamente il vero spirito sportivo e olimpico.

Per sottolineare la netta differenza tra un atteggiamento sportivo e un comportamento inaccettabile e sbagliato sempre però in ambito sportivo, è stato riportato il caso di un padre che, mentre era sugli spalti ad assistere a una partita di calcio del figlio ancora bambino, urla frasi come “rompigli le gambe”, costringendo la squadra avversaria a ritirarsi per protesta. Un cattivissimo esempio per il proprio figlio, ma soprattutto il totale opposto di come dovrebbe essere inteso e praticato lo sport. Nel terzo capitolo sono state approfondite anche le imprese di Cassius Clay, noto come Muhammad Ali, uno dei pugili più famosi di tutti i tempi, che impose il pugilato come ribalta per le controversie del mondo. Sport e impegno civile sono andati sempre di pari passo nella vita di Clay: la forza fisica e morale, l’empatia con il pubblico, l’impegno autentico per ogni causa che riteneva giusta, crearono intorno a lui un forte consenso che utilizzò per sensibilizzare il mondo su temi come la segregazione razziale, il riscatto dei neri, e la giustizia sociale.

Un ultimo caso che è stato analizzato nel terzo capitolo è il terzo tempo del rugby così come l’uso di questa disciplina per cercare di attenuare i sintomi dell’autismo nei giovani. Nonostante sia considerato uno degli sport più violenti, il rugby è forse lo sport dove, più di tutti, vigono il senso di

squadra e di coesione. Infatti, in questa disciplina è fondamentale l'usanza del terzo tempo, ovvero un momento dopo la partita dove i giocatori si ritrovano per mangiare e bere insieme, fare quattro chiacchiere, ridere e scherzare, in segno di vero spirito sportivo. Spesso, sfortunatamente, in altri sport il fine partita è un momento caratterizzato da scontri tra ultras e polizia. Il rugby, infatti, diventa un esempio che tutte le discipline sportive dovrebbero seguire. Non è un caso che tale sport sia stato scelto come pratica d'elezione per sostenere i giovani affetti da autismo. Questo perché è una disciplina che si basa sul contatto fisico, che spesso gli autistici rifiutano. L'idea del gioco lo rende praticabile e consente di riproporre con maggiore facilità la vicinanza fisica anche nella vita di tutti i giorni.

Il quarto capitolo approfondisce un tema estremamente attuale ed importante, ovvero quello che concerne la parità dei sessi. Le donne hanno dovuto lottare per molti o quasi tutti i diritti che all'uomo sono sempre stati garantiti, come ad esempio quello di poter gareggiare. Tale possibilità, infatti, fu concessa alle donne solamente nel 1900, alle Olimpiadi di Parigi. Nella visione maschilista che dominava ancora il mondo intero, la donna era considerata subordinata all'uomo ed il suo valore era puramente estetico. Infatti, il timore della società era che lo sport potesse alterare i tratti femminili della donna. Questo cumulo di bugie altro non era che il sistema organizzato per tenere le donne dove erano sempre state costrette, soggiogate dall'uomo, recluse nell'ambito familiare che ne oscurava e ne imprigionava ambizioni e qualità. Si giunse perfino a dire che una prerogativa femminile come la cura del corpo e le ricerche della bellezza, sarebbe stata vanificata da chi si fosse dedicata a pratiche sportive che avrebbero alterato equilibrio e armonia di fisici e volti. Eppure, si potrebbe dire che la vittoria stessa è donna, come dimostra la Nike alata di Samotracia, fonte di ispirazione per una marca americana famosissima, chiamata per l'appunto Nike. E' stata proprio quest'ultima, infatti, a lanciare un emozionante spot su quella che in una concezione maschilista viene considerata la "follia" delle donne nello sport. Ci sono immagini di trionfi, abbracci, lacrime di gioia e disperazioni, compaiono campionesse come la ginnasta Simone Biles, la schermitrice Ibtihaj Muhammad, l'ex giocatrice della WNBA Lisa Leslie, la snowboarder Chloe Kim e molte altre, mentre la voce narrante è quella della campionessa di tennis Serena Williams. La corsa delle donne, la lunga maratona verso una totale emancipazione, non si ferma, incontrando di volta in volta ostacoli diversi. Un'autentica e lunga marcia, dalla vergogna dell'esclusione all'orgoglio del riscatto. Tutt'oggi, nonostante ci sia stato un progresso enorme verso la parità dei sessi, c'è ancora, purtroppo, un divario di salario importante anche in ambito sportivo. In questo capitolo è stato analizzato il caso di Sadaf Rahimi, una giovane pugile Afghana che si era qualificata per le Olimpiadi di Londra del 2012 ma che è stata, alla fine, costretta dal Comitato Olimpico Internazionale a rimanere a casa, poiché il divario tecnico tra lei e le sue avversarie era

troppo grande, e avrebbe rischiato di farsi del male. Ciò nonostante, Rahimi continua ad allenarsi e non perde la speranza, fiduciosa che un giorno anche lei riuscirà a far parte delle tanto sognate, sudate, e desiderate Olimpiadi. Soprattutto, Rahimi lotta per l'uguaglianza, poiché in Afghanistan ci sono, ancora di più che in altri paesi, tantissimi passi da fare affinché le donne possano avere gli stessi diritti degli uomini.

L'ultimo capitolo si incentra sull'aspetto economico dello sport, e sulle degenerazioni delle aggregazioni che spesso sfociano nella violenza. Si può dire che lo sport sia diventata una vera e propria industria dove gira tantissimo denaro. Nonostante sia il mercato che decide quando e quanto giri, è importante anche sottolineare che la commercializzazione dello sport non rientra nei veri principi di esso poiché esiste un lato intangibile nello sport che comanda l'animus di chi gareggia ed è la soddisfazione, impagabile davvero, di chi migliora sé stesso, di chi ottiene i risultati a lungo inseguiti e raggiunti dopo la fatica degli allenamenti. Oggi a prendersi cura degli sportivi ci sono team di esperti scientifici, finanziari, giuridici, uno stuolo di procuratori, agenti, comunicatori, esperti di look che mirano a risultati complessivi, compresi i conti economici. Gestiscono loro i milioni di euro e dollari che passano di mano in mano fra ingaggi, premi, riconoscimenti, percentuali, diritti televisivi e di immagine. Il tempo che corre ha fatto cambiare anche lo sport, modificando regole e abitudini. L'accessibilità, ad esempio, è diventata più semplice, non più riservata a una élite di fortunati che potevano affrontare spese aggiuntive: ingresso in piscina, divise, attrezzature. Questo grazie anche al fenomeno dell'associazionismo sportivo, che è riuscito a favorire accesso diffuso allo sport e crescita di giovani aperti alla socialità, all'aggregazione e al confronto, sportivo e civile. Una forte capacità di aggregazione porta con sé il rischio di fenomeni degenerativi, tipici di alcuni sport come il calcio che in questo senso rimane l'esempio peggiore. Sia per la quantità di persone che riesce a mobilitare che per gli interessi che muove. Un mondo che anche se non generato direttamente dalla criminalità organizzata finisce per incontrarsi con essa e dividerne la responsabilità in episodi delittuosi, che a volte si sono tragicamente conclusi con la morte di tifosi o di personale delle forze dell'ordine.

In conclusione, l'elaborato vuole dimostrare come lo sport sia un elemento fondamentale per migliorare la società, uno strumento che consente il riscatto sociale, elimina barriere e pregiudizi, e aiuta, senz'altro, a costruire un mondo migliore.

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*"fa quello che te fa' felice, perché tu sei er quadro no a cornice".*

*- Sora Lella*