

Paul Christesen, *Sport and Democracy in the Ancient and Modern Worlds*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xvii, 309. \$103.00.

A decade and a half ago my wife and I went on one of our weekly jaunts to see our son play soccer. That day's match was at a field we had not visited before. So we stood on the sidelines and were met by unwelcoming stares from other parents. We had situated ourselves on the other team's sideline – and we were so informed by several parents. As we prepared to cross the field to go to the correct side, I asked these parents which school(s) their children represented. The blank stares turned to hostile reactions and the question: “Why do you need to know this?”

I then started to rethink an argument I had made in an essay published in 1999, “Democracy and Social Capital” (in Mark Warren, ed., *Democracy and Trust*). I argued, “Sports build social capital because they build self-confidence and respect for rules” (146) – and this distinguishes sports from other forms of civic activity. That fall day convinced me that sports build more in-group trust than generalized faith in others. And when I conducted a more sophisticated statistical analysis for my 2002 book, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge), I concluded (201): “*Yet we cannot trace the decline of either informal or formal civic engagement to falling trust....In no case does any form of formal or informal participation lead to a decline in trust....As trust has gone down, we are more likely to play cards, eat family dinners together, go fishing, and, yes, go bowling*” (italics in original).

A decade later Paul Christesen has revived the argument that sports builds trust – and other forms of social capital, as well as serving to further the cause of democracy more generally. His book is both magnificent and disappointing. The discussions of the role of sports in ancient Greece and 19th century Britain are enlightening and worth the price of admission. The contemporary links between sports and trust and sports and democratization are unconvincing.

I am not in much of a position to judge Christesen's accounts of sports and democracy in ancient Greece. However, I found his accounts over three chapters to be enlightening. In a world in which status roles were strict, sports could serve as a mechanism for developing citizenship and greater equality. This is true for ancient Greece and later for 19th century Britain over four chapters. The narratives here are compelling. I do not understand why a solitary chapter on Germany breaks up the four chapters on Britain. This is a minor objection, however.

Granted these strengths in a remarkable book, I am puzzled as to why Christesen felt compelled to link sports with contemporary levels of trust or democratization. Consider democracy first. I understand how highly stratified societies of ancient Greece and even 19th century Britain could use sports as a mechanism for inclusion of more people into a society's social structure. But the world has changed dramatically now. Yes, democracies seem to have greater participation in sports. But this seems to be more of a function of how authoritarian states restricted almost all forms of voluntary associations

(see Marc Morje Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*, 2003) than of the blessings of democracy. John Mueller has convincingly argued that democracy is easy: All you need is the absence of thugs with guns (*Democracy, Capitalism, and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery*). Countries with weak civil societies under Communism continued to have weak civil societies when they became democracies. Democracies may have strong or weak civil societies.

Christesen recognizes that sports may not always be conducive to democracy (Chapter 6). But he does not pay enough attention, from my perspective, to the critical role of sports in building national pride – as in Hitler's Germany (discussed), but also in Communist Romania under Ceaucescu and China. Athletes get special treatment and are pressured to excel lest they lose their privileged status. Sports is antithetical to democracy under these conditions. Christesen does, to be sure, discuss the hierarchical system of sports participation in China, but his discussion would be more valuable if it were placed in a wider context of how nations often use sports to foster a sense of national superiority.

Christesen discusses the integration of baseball in the United States briefly (258–259), but he argues that the integration of major league baseball was instrumental in the civil rights movement. Maybe sports played some role, but the sorry history of segregated baseball isn't discussed. In the Negro Leagues the top players had to struggle to find accommodations for away games and salaries were low (if payrolls were even met). Racism hasn't been rooted out of professional sports: Jonathan Martin of the Miami Dolphins football team, an African-American, was subjected to racial harassment by at least one white teammate in 2013. He ultimately left the team as the white players rallied around the provocateur. Sports often reinforces nationalistic and ethnocentric attitudes at the expense of more universalistic values. Christesen does discuss the downside of sports and raises issues similar to these, but they are a small portion of his analysis.

Even today, sports is not an indicator of equality on campus in the United States. Inevitably, the highest paid university official is the football coach. Football and basketball players mostly don't graduate. Faculty members are instructed not to make life too difficult for varsity athletes. And my own university had to pay a huge fee to exit from the Atlantic Coast Conference athletic alliance to join the Big Ten, which historically has been based in the Midwest but admitted state universities in New Jersey and Maryland to capture more of the lucrative New York and Washington television markets. As the recent recession led to huge cuts in academic programs, the major sports teams prospered more than in the past. The *New York Times* estimated (December 1, 2013) that the University of Maryland's athletic program would receive \$100 million more in television revenue over the next six years from the Big Ten than it would have received from the Atlantic Coast Conference. I doubt that any of this will trickle down to faculty and staff salaries, which have been frozen (often with furloughs) for the past half decade.

Most problematic is the linking of sports with social capital and democracy.

Christesen is not a quantitatively oriented social scientist, so his own analyses are based on simple comparisons between democratic and non-democratic states. He pays particular attention to Norway, where trust, democratization, membership in voluntary organizations, and participation in sports all rank very highly. There is a considerable literature on trust and civic engagement in the Nordic countries – and I have contributed to it – that focuses more on the relative equality of these countries and especially the universal social welfare state that builds solidarity across class and ethnic lines.

Social capital is a catch-all term linking a variety of values and social ties that are often only weakly related to each other. To argue that sports builds social capital is not so informative, since it doesn't tell us what the causal connections may be – or even whether participation in sports is simply related to other forms of social connections (which is not in itself novel). To argue that social capital builds trust in people who are different from yourself is to ignore most of the literature on trust and civic engagement – in which scholars find no link between the two. Simply stated, you can't move from bonding ties to bridging ties. The causal links between them are weak (see *The Moral Foundations of Trust*, 38–42) and the empirical ties are even weaker (*The Moral Foundations of Trust*, ch. 5). Christesen is simply wrong when he states (83): “The capacity of horizontal sport to foster trust is beyond question.” A handful of articles support his claim. The overwhelming share of the literature on trust and civic engagement (including participation in sports) finds no link from social ties to trust.

Just as questionable is the link from sports to greater political trust or external political efficacy. Trust in the political system is largely shaped by national economic conditions, war and peace, perceptions of government performance, and partisanship. External political efficacy is defined by the perception that political leaders are responsive to public opinion and that they care about “people like you.” The connection of either trust in government or external efficacy to any form of participation or social ties, sports or otherwise, is unclear. Unfortunately, the sources that Christesen cites on both social and political trust as well as political efficacy are outliers in the literature.

I have dwelled on the links between sports and social capital because I have worked extensively on trust. My focus on what I see as the weak part of Christesen's book should not be taken as a sign that I believe that the historical treatments of sports in earlier periods – for the ancient Greeks and the 19th century British – are anything less than masterful. Overall, this is a major book that deserves to be taken seriously, both where it is off track and where its contributions are of great import.

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