



In 1912 Sweden arranged the Olympic Games in Stockholm and rather surprisingly came first among the participating nations. This event resulted in a patriotic fervour and outbursts of national rhetoric among Swedes. It was little David's victory over many Goliaths.

The cartoon above from 1912 depicts a golden Swede surrounded by trophies and a surprised John Bull and Uncle Sam in the background. The caption runs:

John Bull: Look out Sam, this boy may outgrow us.

Sam: Let's see if he doesn't shrink in 1916.

National Feeling in Sport

The Case of Sweden

Billy Ehn

Ehn, Billy 1989: National Feeling in Sport. The Case of Sweden. – *Ethnologia Europaea* XIX: 57–66.

The sporting world is a profitable field of cultural studies, especially when it comes to such subjects as *feelings* and *collective identity*. Considering its rich social life, its emotional expressions, and its most obvious nationalistic symbolism, sport should have a central place in the general research on nationalism and national culture. In this article the author discusses Swedish sports journalism as a symbolic transformation of sporting activities into national pride and disappointment. Most of the examples are fetched from the Winter Olympic Games of 1988 in Calgary. One general observation is that nearly everything that sporting personalities do, and journalists say or write, is in some way a contribution to the construction of Swedish national feeling.

Docent, fil.dr Billy Ehn, Institute of Ethnology, Stockholm University, Lusthusporten 10, S-115 21 Stockholm.

“My particular predilection for international matches is most probably connected with the fact that I am wholeheartedly Swedish. In my home in Norrland we learnt very early on to value and love our country. The Swedish flag in a foreign setting still makes my heart beat faster. (---) One never feels more strongly that one is Swedish than at that fantastic moment, when they play before a match *Du gamla du fria* (Thou ancient, thou free; the Swedish national anthem). One stands to attention, hearing how the expectant murmurs from the stands die away, seeing one’s friends’ strained faces, taken up by the feeling that one is standing precisely at the focal point of the whole event and that one’s fellow countrymen are hoping that one will make them happy”. (Nordahl 1954: 49)

This was how a Swedish football star wrote in the 1950s. And this is also the way sportsmen talk today when they are interviewed by journalists. Sport is nationalistic throughout the world (cf. e.g. Ball & Loy 1976, Eichberg 1973, Hoberman 1984, Lindroth 1979 and Sandberg 1985), and in Sweden there is hardly any other area of activity where expressions of love for

one’s country are made so strongly and so unanimously. Nowhere else can Swedes talk of how they feel “so wholeheartedly Swedish”, that they “value and love their country” and feel their “hearts beating faster” at the sight of the Swedish flag.

These official symbols of nationhood are not completely appreciated in Sweden. On the contrary, there are many Swedes who are embarrassed by such patriotism, because it is seen as exaggerated, too solemn and even hysterical, as something pre-modern which belongs to the dark past. Besides, history has shown the sort of catastrophes which can be caused by extreme nationalism. So *internationalism* has a higher value in many circles in Sweden.

But sport is exceptional in being a protected area as far as patriotism is concerned. Here it is quite all right to cheer for Sweden and to show strong feelings when Swedes win or lose. Nothing awakens Swedish national feeling so easily and so strongly (at least among men) as sporting success. Glorious history, royalty, a splendid army, democracy and the welfare system, ancient ideals and traditions, Volvo and other great companies – none of these things can measure up to sport in providing bonds of

national solidarity or in creating collective consciousness of one's country.

When the sports movement developed in Europe, during the 19th century, the pioneers spoke in patriotic tones similar to those cited earlier from our 1950s football-player. Listen to Victor Balck, "the father of Swedish sport":

"Our deepest aim is to foster a vigorous, hard-working, strong-willed and dutiful young generation, with Swedish temperament, for the benefit and safeguard of their country. This is therefore an appeal for the nation to rally, this is what it is about. It is a glorification of the patriotic ideal. – Not only can one acquire health and strength through sports training on one's own account as an individual, but as a Swede one also contributes to the health and strength of a whole nation". (Lindroth 1974: 191)

Such rhetoric would provoke ridicule if used literally in the Sweden of today, yet such grand, old fashioned words as "honour", "feat", "triumph", "hero" and "great achievement" have survived in a sports journalism that is significant and meaningful for great numbers of sports enthusiasts, but despised by the intellectual and socially responsible. Sporting discourse is charged with atavisms. When Sweden recently won a dramatic Davis Cup tennis match over Czechoslovakia a journalist wrote as follows:

"It was an absolute rescue of honour. (---) The 22-year old Smålander transformed himself in the nick of time into a wizard, a fighter in the spirit of Sven Dufva. (---) Swedish steel bites in times of dire need, and that is something those Swedes anxiously watching the match on T.V. probably all agreed on." (Dagens Nyheter 21.3. 1988)

The allusion here to well-known patriotic poems of the 19th century serves as a means of rating the national significance of the Swedish tennis victory. These pompous and archaic phrases are in fact an integral part of the wider Swedish sports movement and its accompanying Public Relations.

Creation of national feeling

In this paper I want to look at the way in which the special characteristics and practices of sport are transformed linguistically and symbolically into creation of national pride and disappointment, happiness and sorrow. How does this shaping of national feeling, which seems to bridge different classes, sexes, generations and geographical regions come about? By decoding (cf. Ehn & Löfgren 1982) some of the components in the construction I shall try to understand how it happens that sport voluntarily allows itself to be used for nationalistic purposes. Why has it such a symbolic power to call forth strong patriotism among people – and above all men – who for the rest of the time seldom show any feelings of national pride?

I will fetch most of my examples from the Winter Olympic Games of 1988 in Calgary, Canada. The Olympics constitute the very biggest and most important manifestation of nationalism in sport. Once, at the beginnings of 1960s, the then President of the Olympic Games proposed that research should take place on the interest shown by participating countries in order to diminish this nationalism, by, for instance, doing away with flags and national anthems (Ball & Loy 1976: 203). The idea was that the competitors should just represent themselves and not their countries. But the proposal got nowhere. On the contrary – nationalism in connection with the Olympics has become stronger than ever since then. And Sweden is no exception. Here both large business companies and the royal family are involved in supporting the Swedish Olympic team. As a consumer, the ordinary citizen can make his small contribution by buying various goods (eg. bread, furniture, toiletries); part of the profit going towards Swedish Olympic preparations.

The Olympic Games in Calgary were looked forward to with great expectation, particularly by those interested in skiing. The general opinion was that the Swedish long-distance skiers would take lots of medals. But the whole thing began badly. In the first event the best Swede came tenth. National mourning was proclaimed in the mass media:

"I have never experienced a worse Swedish sporting fiasco. We Swedes drew our winter caps over our eyes, ears, noses and mouths. We tried to look and sound like Finns, Norwegians or Russians. We crept along keeping near the walls of the houses on our way back home." (Expressen 16.2. 1988)

But then the set-backs were reversed and "the Swedish flag was eventually flying after all these sorrows and afflictions". First we got an unexpected bronze medal in alpine skiing. Then Tomas Gustafsson, the skater, won a gold medal in 5,000 meters. "Swedish Tomas – what a champion!" ran one headline. "When the flag is flying and they play the National Anthem it really feels as if one has done it for Sweden", he said in an interview. Swedish honour was saved for the moment. "Now we can bask in the sunshine of Gustafsson's gold", wrote one journalist. "His gold came as a sort of delivery for us Swedes", wrote another. When later Gustafsson also won the 10,000 meters and beat the world record he was nominated by the journalists as "King of the Olympics" and his future seen to economically assured by the sponsoring contracts he would now certainly obtain from Swedish business firms. In one photograph he is seen with the Swedish royal couple and the headline was: "Between us royals". Over and over again he has to tell the story of the long and laborious road to victory. He thanks his parents who have supported him. He describes his training in the woods and countryside around his home town and his message is that one must never give up, however tough the opposition may be. For some days this blond young Swede is at the centre of everyone's attention. He is interviewed on T.V. and his portrait adorns the front-pages of all the newspapers. One journalist describes him as "*nordiskt helyllepråktig*" and "*en sund och rask solstickepojke*" and as a "blond magnificent, fibre-eating Viking".

This is an example of how individual sports achievement can be transformed into a matter of national prestige. The sportsman becomes, simply, "Tomas" to the Swedish population. Millions of people are brought together via one

single person, who stands as a symbol for common values and attributes. Intrusive details from his private life – his family, his girl-friend and an interest in writing poetry – give this national feeling a clear and concrete personalised form, someone with whom one can identify. Even Royalty and the names of big business firms are illuminated by the brilliance of the star.

The mood of the country was no less chauvinistic at the revenge of the long-distance skiers when they won the relay race. "This was the great and wonderful day of revenge", wrote one journalist.

"The world's best national team was once again best, recapturing its greatness just as easily as it had lost it. The relay victory was a sign of inner strength – that famous morale which has provided Sweden with such great success in so many team events". (Göteborgs-Posten 23.2. 1988).

One of the four in the team was Gunde Svan, who is often described as a perfectionist, cold and rational – in this connection "typically Swedish". But after the victory he broke out in tears of joy, and this was observed by the journalists. Under a big headline "you can cry, Gunde, all is forgiven", was written:

"You saw and heard that Gunde wept, heavens, how he sobbed. (---) He has the right to be more emotional with the years, as all of us have. And he is also so fantastically blue and yellow (the Swedish colours). When he catches sight of the Swedish flag and hears *Du gamla du fria*, there is a pounding in his heart. He is so archetypically Swedish chauvinistic that one might almost believe him to be a Norwegian." (Aftonbladet 23.2. 1988)

A woman reporter got a hug from Gunde Svan and realized then that "behind that cold perfectionism exists a soul. A warm deep-seated soul". The same man also won the 50 kilometers and in a newspaper picture one can see him in his hotel bed with his eyes shut and

smiling happily, with the two gold medals on his naked chest. His fiancée leans over him and kisses his forehead. In an interview she says:

"He cries easily when things are going well for Sweden. He is sensitive and he loves Sweden. No, Gunde would never think of going to live abroad." (Aftonbladet 28.2. 1988)

It actually went rather well for Sweden in the Calgary Games, with four golds and a bronze and fifth in the national table. For more than a fortnight in February the mass media talked perpetually about Sweden as a nation, about our "blue and yellow feelings", about our great joy over Swedish victories and disappointment over defeats. T.V., radio and the papers bound the Swedes together as a people for hours and hours every day. And they actually talked about *feelings*, sentiments, just as much as about achievements. The Olympics became an arena for different ways of expressing Swedish national feeling – including everything from the flag and the national anthem, to the individual characteristics of the participants and their family backgrounds. It was a general mustering of Swedish patriotism on a massive scale, hardly allowable or even thinkable in any other area of society.

Symbolism and empathy

After the relay race victory the skiers painted the Swedish flag over the whole of each other's faces. A colour picture of their blue and yellow war paint dominated the evening papers. When Tomas Gustafsson won his first gold medal the Swedish flag was on the front page with the headline "Oh, so wonderful!".

National symbolism is over-explicit in connection with competitive sport: the team's uniform clothing, the flags, the national anthems, everything which emphasizes the differences between countries. International sport is often likened to "a war without weapons" (Dunning 1971: 11) and in competitions it is quite legitimate to hate other countries and see them as enemies. Both positive and negative stereotyped ideas about other peoples are common. For example, we have the American "fighting

spirit", Russian "team-machines", Finnish "sisu" (endurance and "go"), the "efficiency" of the Germans, and the English "sense of fair play". National feeling is always a matter of contrast; it presupposes other countries and peoples and their patriotism. Towards some there is a particularly antagonistic attitude, most often the neighbouring countries, those old "hereditary foes" – Finland in athletics, Denmark in football and Norway in skiing.

But this symbolism and these contrasts is only a superficial aspect of national feeling. The effectiveness and penetrative power of competitive sport as a medium for nationalism consists mainly in the fact that it appeals *directly* to the spectators' sense of collective belonging. In this "backbone nationalism" the rhetoric surrounding sport is primitive. The subject is us and them, winning or losing, fighting or giving up. This kind of talk is open to all and easy to understand.

When Swedes win a major competition they are always asked the question: "How does it feel? Can you describe your feelings?". And the answer is nearly always the same: "It was unbelievable, simply unbelievable. I can't describe it, you have to be there to understand what it's like. I am over the moon, that's all I can say". It is not necessary to say any more. One can hear or see their joy and it rubs off onto the involved spectator, just as does the nervousness beforehand and the tension during the actual competition. So national feeling is, in fact, a very concrete, a very physical experience, and has not really much to do with abstract concepts or questions as to what a nation really is. In sport the nation is held together by people's strong united desires, hopes and expressions of delight; but also by the bitterness of defeat which awakens the lust for revenge.

Millions of Swedes in front of the T.V. or listening to radio enter into their fellow countrymen's struggles and strains. They stare tensed up at a ski-track on a forest slope and wait for a Swede to turn up at just the right moment to stand a chance of winning. When a well-known Swedish name comes onto the screen, followed by the magic letters SWE with the digital timing, nationalism is actually a

live experience, something which exists just at that moment, in the body of the spectator. One can see this with the naked eye, since most people who are interested in sport show what they feel on these occasions. They jump up and down in their excitement, cheer on their fellow countrymen, bite their lips, close their eyes, thump the table with the fists and howl out their joy or disappointment. People are like madmen, is the usual comment about sports fanatics, and women stare in amazement at their otherwise sullen and quiet husbands, who suddenly clap them on the thighs or dance around the floor, just because Sweden has won.

Sport can therefore be seen in national terms as a story with a moral, via activities and concepts which do not in the least seem to have much to do with grand projects, but simply with well-defined solutions to problems in trivial situations: skiing as fast as possible, getting a puck or a ball into goal, jumping over a cross-bar placed higher and higher. Seconds and hundredths of a second can give millions of Swedes their strongest feeling ever of being one people and belonging to one nation. Looking at Björn Borg playing tennis or Ingemar Stenmark skiing downhill has been some of the peak moments in modern times for Swedish national feeling.

But without sports journalism and the rhetoric surrounding competitions, victories and defeats, this collective sentiment becomes quite incomprehensible. The special characteristics and significance of competitive sport have to be translated into non-sporting language in order to produce national joy or sorrow. The journalism describes and explains what happens on the pitch or on the slope, but it is also a *ritual magnification* of the emotions awakened by the competition. The sport in itself is about muscles, will and tactic, not about national identity. Sportsmen most surely do not strain themselves for their country in the moment of exhaustion. This sort of motivation is added on afterwards and gives meaning to the behavior. The competitors themselves concentrate on more practical tasks, the next slalom pole, the next ball, the next step. It is all about physique, pain and will-power, about loneliness and liability. But these simple things alone

cannot explain the national importance of victory and defeat. The sports journalist acts as a kind of mediating preacher, who translates the physical achievements into national symbolism, and national values back into sport. The *words* seem to be as important as the actions in this process of constructing national feeling.

National self-understanding

Sport is also a mirror for national self-understanding. Those things Swedes are regarded to value particularly highly are co-operation, discipline, purposefulness and self-control. The successes of sporting personalities contribute to the repetition of these values. At the same time their outbursts of joy, and even the reactions of the Swedish spectators, remind us of whatever we ordinarily are *not*. When Gunde Svan weeps in front of the T.V. cameras obviously no-one gets cross, not even the strictest of Swedes, but many probably cannot help squirming a little and being tremendously conscious of a culturally-drawn boundary inside themselves as to what passes and what does not.

And so it is that nearly everything sporting personalities do, and commentators say or write, is a contribution to this construction of Swedish national feeling. If a gold medalist weeps at the presentation ceremony and another shows not the slightest emotion, both reactions can be used symbolically to consolidate ideas of how Swedes are and what it is that singles out our nation. In this way Swedes' own imaginings about themselves are formulated via sport and its special language, not only in the competitive arena, but also in the personalities and private lives of the sports competitors themselves.

A telling example of this is the journalists way of contrasting the various Swedish sports stars with one another. During the last few winters it has been a matter of our "ski kings" Gunde Svan and Tomas Wassberg, who are described as two quite different types of Swedish personality. Gunde Svan is the perfectionist, who leaves nothing to chance, but trains with the aid of computers and has

freeze-dried food with him for the Olympic Games, a clean-living man, a mummy's boy, who is nice, but also intelligent, every mother-in-law's dream. In him one is able to recognize the Swedish political dream of the rational, perfect and decent society, where everything is under control down to the minutest detail in the best interests of the population as a whole. Tomas Wassberg, on the other hand, is described as a genuine, unpredictable, slightly indolent, eccentric, who does what he feels like, a child of nature, who skis as long as it is fun to do so. This is also a Swedish value: to live in harmony with nature and to follow the inclinations of one's own. Wassberg and many other Swedes like walking the dog, strolling alone in the forests and passing the time in silence at a lake-side, watching the fishing-rod.

But it is not only their personal characteristics which symbolize the different sides of the "Swedish national character". Even physically and socially both men provide different types of goods for this cultural construction. Svan is blond, blue-eyed and smiling, with a winning way and a Swedish fiancée. Wassberg is dark and bearded, really untidy, reserved and difficult to understand, and furthermore his wife is foreign. Of the two Tomas Wassberg is generally regarded as the one most beloved by the people.

With the aid of these two sporting stars I think many Swedes reflect more or less consciously on what it means to be Swedish. We recognize the different sides of ourselves and our society which are presented in a lot of other contexts, but not perhaps as clearly or with such strong feeling. To watch Svan and Wassberg when they are competing and to read interviews with them and descriptions of their personalities, is therefore, if this reasoning holds, a way of seeing and feeling one's own cultural duality and central conflicts in Swedish society. Everyday, people in Sweden discuss how much life should be planned, and how much freedom the individual should have. A lot of Swedes also argue about how far it is suitable to show one's feelings, how much strongheadedness and individuality can be allowed, and how far we should keep pace with the demands of industrial development. The

question of mixed marriages is also important in a society with more than half a million immigrants from different countries.

It is therefore possible to describe Sweden through the contrasts between these two skiers. But this national interpretation is most often unspoken. Reports and interviews appear to be solely about sport and individual character, not in the least about national culture or social tensions. It is, I think, just for this reason that they make a deeper impression and have a more general distribution as a symbolic and emotional means of relating to national themes, than they would have if this function had been verbalised and intellectualised. As long as one talks about a person and not about a nation Swedes do not need to defend themselves against the effects of greater patriotism, since that is a sensitive subject in a society with many immigrants and tendencies to enmity towards foreigners, and where the Swedish flag and national anthem for many people, in fact, symbolizes right-wing extremism (and sometimes even Nazism).

During the Olympics in Calgary Gunde Svan was once accused of being selfish and a threat to the morale of the Swedish team. The reason was his own food and the fact that he hired a car, instead of going by bus with his comrades. But this criticism made some journalists angry. They defended Svan, saying that they had themselves seen him being helpful and unselfish. To accuse someone of being disloyal is in Sweden, and maybe especially within the sports world, a serious thing. The ability to cooperate and to be a good team-member are highly valued qualities. Stars always make an obligatory bow to the team when things have gone well. "The strength of the Swedes lies in the team itself and in its morale", says an expert during an international ice-hockey match shown on T.V. He praised a number of players particularly for being "reliable, loyal players who sacrifice themselves for the team" or for being "useful". Discipline and team spirit are regarded, in this rhetoric, as especially Swedish qualities. Therefore the Swedes are at their best at "fighting as underdogs" and "helping each other", but rather bad at "leading the match".

Moral examples

Official Swedish values (those that are often articulated in schools, in working life, in day nurseries, in politics and the mass media) are also present in sport, both directly and indirectly. Many Swedes certainly recognize themselves in and identify with, for example, Swedish ice-hockey, when it is described as “mature, considered, planned, intelligent and tactical”. Similarly many Swedish sports stars are named as moral example. On the whole one gets the feeling that Swedes, as described in sports journalism, are finer, more honourable and purer in heart than people from other countries. Their fair hair, and being a *lintott* (“a flaxen-haired child”), is associated tacitly, together with light skin, with a lighter temperament and purer intentions. Swedes do not cheat, do not go in for doping and do not knowingly damage their opponents – according to a usual national self-image.

Sportsmanship and fair play are certainly also central to the values of other countries, and perhaps also associated there with national feeling. But in Sweden this means of identification is strengthened by other ideals which are ascribed to one’s own country: peacefulness, humanism, democracy, justice and equality. Swedish sport is described in a way that reflects and confirms this ideal picture, but not always without self-irony. When things went badly for the Swedes at the beginning of the latest Olympics it was blamed on wrong ski-wax, on high altitude, bad preparations, and on the fact that certain opponents probably were doped. At least one journalist reacted against the last “explanation”:

“I wonder what we would have said at home, in that place on earth where honour had its origins, if someone had asserted that our extreme successes earlier on in the year were due to our heroes having been on drugs.” (Aftonbladet 21.3. 1988).

Person, place, history

The rhetoric of national sports journalism is oriented towards the individual, the geograph-

ically concrete, and the past. When reports and commentaries are about the individual qualities of sports personalities, their character, family and home town, a tangible and emotional basis for national identification is provided. All due respect to the flag and the national anthem – but as a concrete source of national feeling probably Gunde Svan’s mother or Ingemar Stenmark’s home village, Tärnaby, have at least as strong an effect.

Since sporting stars come from a variety of larger and smaller communities across the whole country nationalism also acquires a multiplying factor in terms of place. The same reason which in national competitive sport leads to antagonism between different Swedes, i.e. local patriotism, contributes in international championships to a geographic concretisation of the abstract concept “Sweden”. Rivalry between clubs and local communities is set aside for the sake of one’s country. In the Olympics, in world championships and in international matches Stockholmers and Gothenburgers are united with Tärnaby and Skamhed (the home village of Gunde Svan). Villages which one had never before heard of suddenly become national cult-places. Towns acquire special character by being associated with one or the other national sport.

Another important aspect is the historical one. Those interested in sport are fanatical about result statistics, and are also history-conscious. They keep count on earlier competitions and the achievements of sporting personalities of 60, 70 years ago. One remembers and compares those “unforgettable moments”, those “historic victories”, “the classics” and “greatest competitors through the ages”. On T.V. and radio they rub in a historical consciousness of sport by showing or relating earlier Olympics, and by letting former stars describe how it was then and comment on their young successors.

Sport has many different faces. It is both attached to tradition and changeable, old-fashioned and ultra-modern, concentrating on development and on “beating the record” (cf. e.g. Brohm 1978 and Eichberg 1973). But through the respect shown to old or dead sporting personalities depth is given to contemporary na-

tional feeling. There is retroactive happiness, so to speak, over earlier victories, over achievements which have long since been surpassed. There is also a strong tendency to see the ongoing present as history in making, to designate matches and races as "historic" or "classics" whilst they are still taking place. This happened a number of times with Björn Borg and Ingemar Stenmark, and even now, when they have scarcely reached the age of thirty, they are talked of as "legends".

"Soon we shall be living on memories which can never be wiped out, which will be passed on from generation to generation. Between 1971 and 1988 we experienced the most fantastic years in Swedish sporting history. Sweden flew out into the big wide world and put its nose out of joint, bursting out: Come on then, here we are!" (Expressen 26.2. 1988)

Retrospectives are also a method of consolidating ideas about different national sports and especially "Swedish specialities". Those sports where Sweden has been particularly successful, distances such as the 50 kilometers skiing and the 10,000 meters skating, where there have been a number of golds "through time", are designated *Swedish*. The word *femmil* (50 kilometers) consequently evokes a special sort of pleasure, associated as it is with Swedish national pride, which, for example, the word "100 meters" does not in the least. In this way Swedes also work up a picture of themselves as tough and having stamina, resolute and long-suffering, a people who are able to endure long periods of solitude and who like being out in wide open spaces in all weathers. So that it is not only successes in themselves which activate national feeling, but also certain branches of sport and some distances more than others.

The Swedish Model

As is well-known, sport is used as propaganda for different ideologies and social systems. When Swedes win it often happens that journalists and politicians explain this by such factors as good organization, skilled leadership

and well-educated coaches. The emphasis is put on the structure of the Swedish welfare society, not only on the individual sportsmen.

"As a small country we have every reason to be proud of the large group of young people who are world champions in many areas of sport. Clearly they contribute to the impression that Sweden is a country which can foster their young to bring off sensational achievements." (A former minister for foreign affairs; in: Sverigebilder 1987: 101.)

Descriptions in the mass media of the home towns and family circumstances of gold medalists anchor these idolized victors in a Sweden which most of the inhabitants surely recognize and which can be associated with Swedish democracy, education, working life and social rights. Of course this is a one-sided success-story of a society almost without poverty, insurmountable class-differences, and political terror. Gunde Svan, Tomas Wassberg and the rest are, despite their individualism and different personalities, both representatives for and products of, a certain type of social system, with which sport, as a cultural medium, helps us – the Swedes – to identify. Perhaps even the most unpopular of decrees, e.g. high taxes and far-reaching state control, can in this way be more accepted through their association with gold medals and national pride?

Another aspect of this national identification via sport is the commercial one. Sport is nowadays part of business and industry, not an isolated play-activity. Top sportsmen themselves define their activity as work, as an occupation. The spectators are also never allowed to forget this connection with economic realities. The symbols and language of sport are in our time permeated by industrial metaphors and big business-interests (while the leaders in industry and politics like to talk of their own work in sports-language). Through the fact that many companies buy advertising space on the sports clothes of Swedish stars and on placards round the arenas, they are, or hope to be, more or less consciously associated with sporting successes. Concepts such as *Volvo*, *Spar-*

banken, Folksam, Wasa bröd and Kalles kaviar (different Swedish companies, producing cars, bread and caviar paste, or selling insurances) become an integral part of the whole victory message which the national designation *Sverige* (Sweden), with its occasionally magic golden power, brings forth.

Sporting personalities in practice do duty as billboards, both for "the Swedish Model" and for private industry. So different ideas about Sweden are amalgamated by virtue of the fact that sport, the state and the business companies of the country seem to share the same overriding goals as to how individual achievements can be transformed into collective profit and national prestige. By "concentrating on oneself" – as the current individualistic message goes in Sweden – one can also serve one's country. That is one of the nationalistic lessons which is given several times a week every year in T.V., radio and newspapers, reporting on sport in many different forms.

The penetrative power of national feeling

In this article I have discussed national feeling in Swedish competitive sport, mainly through the sports journalists' observations on the Olympic Games in Calgary. One theme has been old-fashioned and high-flown rhetoric, another the sporting world's own modernism in chasing after ever-improved methods and results (with the aid of the latest scientific knowledge and support from big business). The rhetoric is public and very well-known. It plays a central role in the general image of sport. But what actual significance has this formula-like nationalism in people's emotional life and daily practice?

We are all well aware that sport is a common subject of conversation in places of work, in schools, at cafés, and among groups of friends. In factories and workshops you still can see posters of Björn Borg and Ingemar Stenmark beside those of pin-ups. A lot of people, though mostly men, devote a lot of their time to sport, watching, reading or talking about it, or to their own sports activities, for which the national heroes are inspirational models. It would

therefore be very easy to assume that the national rhetoric of sports journalists is willingly received by millions of Swedes, who use it to construct a sense of collective identity.

But once again one must ask what penetrating power sporting nationalism has. It is too easy to exaggerate its importance, without checking it, since it is given so much time and place in mass media. In many respects sporting nationalism is, of course, a limited phenomenon with certain *emotional peaks*, above all, as I have said, in the category of men interested in sport, and perhaps especially men from the working class. In what way do these emotional high points permeate the rest of these men's lives, with their families, at work, in their other involvements in society? To what extent is this nationalism a *separate loyalty*, without any important spill-over into other areas of life?

I have argued, without being absolutely sure about it, that sport has a great national significance, even outside journalistic rhetoric. I have said that sport, at certain moments, turns millions of Swedes into one people, into one distinct, geographical and emotional *we* with a collective memory. I have also maintained that sport, however playful and trivial it seems – and standing outside really serious questions, at least in the moment of competition – still has great economic, political and, in very broad terms, educational importance. Finally I have suggested that there is no other social arena in Sweden – during peace-time – with such strong nationalistic symbolism and sentimentality.

These are of course hypotheses which can be tested empirically. Such research would provide an interesting opportunity for examining the "innocent" character of sport, i.e. how its strong concentration on *the body* hides deeper cultural and philosophical concerns. In its direct and unsophisticated manner, sport is a ritualistic dramatization of the relation between the individual and society. (cf. e.g. Novak 1983 and Blanchard & Cheska 1985), and it also clarifies the meaning of setting goals and straining oneself towards them. Both spectators and competitors can be seen as actors in an endless show, where small facts speak to large issues. This is why a study of sporting

nationalism does not necessarily have to start at the top level, at the international championships and its obvious patriotic rhetoric. Nationalism is in a way enacted just as much, although in a more disguised manner, at club competitions at the local level. This is so because sport, in all its aspects, is a preliminary exercise in nationalism, where young people, in an unproblematic and physical way, learn to transfer individual energy to collective goals. The club and the team is a miniature nation. This means that, in fact, every sports area, football pitch and tennis-court is an arena for *national micro-processes*. Every competition is a preparation for national representation. Furthermore, it is a part of the sport-world socialization into such values and qualities as loyalty, team-spirit, the will to win, courage, honour and pride. These concepts are then, without any opposition, elevated to the higher level of national identification.

The ground for national feeling is therefore already prepared at local level, although without any of the due symbols or patriotic rhetoric. On the other hand, one can observe today how national attributes are used in apparently non-national contexts. Before ice-hockey matches between Swedish teams the national anthem is often played, and cliques of supporters at football matches wave blue and yellow flags on which they have written the name of their team. In these situations the ordinary symbols of Sweden are used to celebrate local matches and teams, and to give them a more solemn framing. Of course they also contribute to blur the boundary between all-Swedish and international events. This example shows

again that sporting nationalism is an active and dynamic identity process, with a quite flexible construction and reconstruction of useful elements.

References

- Ball, D. W. & J. W. Loy (eds.), 1976: *Sport and Social Order: Contributions to the Sociology of Sport*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Blanchard, K. & A. T. Cheska, 1985: *The Anthropology of Sport*. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishing Inc.
- Brohm, J.-M., 1978: *Sport – A Prison of Measured Time*. London: Links.
- Dunning, E. (ed.), 1971: *The Sociology of Sport*. London: Frank Cass & Co.
- Ehn, B. & Orvar Löfgren, 1982: *Kulturanalys*. Lund: Liber.
- Eichberg, H., 1973: *Der Weg des Sports in die industrielle Zivilisation*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Hoberman, J. M., 1984: *Sport and Political Ideology*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Lindroth, J., 1974: *Idrottens väg till folk rörelse*. (Athletics Becomes a Popular Movement. Diss.) Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Lindroth, J., 1979: Idrott och nationalism. (Sveriges Centralförenings för Idrottens Främjande årsbok 1979).
- Nordahl, G., 1954: *Guld och gröna planer*. Stockholm: Bonniers.
- Novak, M., 1983: *The Joy of Sports*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sandberg, H., 1985: *Olympia och Valhalla: idéhistoriska aspekter av den moderna idrottsrörelsens framväxt*. (Sport and ideas: aspects of the rise of the modern sport movement. With a summary in English.) Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.
- Sverigebilder*. 17 svenskar ser på Sverige. SOU: 1987: 57.